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Unified variance in the local church : fostering the harmonics of difference by following Christ, valuing relationships, and rallying around a common mission

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

UNIFIED VARIANCE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH:
FOSTERING THE HARMONICS OF DIFFERENCE
BY FOLLOWING CHRIST, VALUING RELATIONSHIPS,
AND RALLYING AROUND A COMMON MISSION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

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The Scripture quotations contained herein are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, unless otherwise indicated.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Sarah in deep gratitude for her love and support through this near decade-long academic peregrination.

ABSTRACT

The art of pastoring a community of faith containing a wide array of theo-political perspectives is both enriching and daunting. Prayer and discernment are crucial for nurturing a climate of relational unity and robust mission that respects difference among Christians.

In order to address this problem, we will show that *a theologically diverse local church can experience and express unified variance by following Christ through collaborative relationships and context-appropriate mission, without mandating theological uniformity.*

Chapter one will introduce the promise and peril of unified variance in the local church. Chapter two will analyze case studies within the book of Acts that demonstrate God's work and mission is often enacted in the midst of seemingly irreconcilable differences. Chapter three will argue that the canon and the canonization process itself model how the body of Christ binds together the diversity of witnesses to the risen Lord. Chapter four will explore how authentic Christian unity is rooted in a Christ-following community, which also leaves room for a multitude of ways discipleship is manifested. Chapter five will explore how healthy relationships bond together a disparate group of individuals for a harmonious and engaging witness. Chapter six will suggest that the purpose of healthy relationships is to move the church mission-ward, which in turn deepens common bonds. Chapter seven concludes that following Christ together, breathing in relationships, and breathing out mission keeps the Body in step with the Spirit and one another, even in the midst of manifold social, theological, and political expressions.

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Introductory Statement

In a time of polarization in church and society, the people of God are summoned to rise above these divides and live into the reality that they have been made into a new humanity in Christ. Jesus provides the local body of believers the unified variance that has the latent potential to transcend (but not obliterate) differences so that new possibilities can emerge for enriched relationships and empowered mission to the glory of God. However, this miracle of unified variance that Christ gifts the church and world with must be actively sought after and lived into in order to be experienced and enjoyed. Unified variance in Christ is the path and prize that the gaze of this dissertation will be riveted upon.

Statement of the Problem

As a pastor of a community of faith with a wide spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives, I regularly grapple with how to foster an environment conducive to relational unity and mission. What are the paths that lead to unified variance within the local congregation? As the leader of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, I often find myself energized by this diversity, yet at the same time challenged on how to give room for Christ to hold together this diverse group of believers in creative tension for life together and mission.

Thesis

In order to address this problem, we will show that *a theologically diverse local church can experience and express unified variance by following Christ through collaborative relationships and context-appropriate mission, without mandating theological uniformity.*

Definition of Unified Variance

Unified Variance can be defined as the harmonious state of being and acting gifted by God and empowered by the Spirit where the people of God who represent a wide array of theological, political, and cultural perspectives are dedicated to honor and transcend their differences through Christ followership, healthy relationship between Christ followers, and the active pursuit towards a shared mission horizon for the purpose of glorifying God in all things. The focus of this dissertation is to explore how a climate might be fostered that might create advantageous conditions for a burgeoning unified variance to unfold in numerous contexts. This dissertation is rooted in praxis, but is not necessarily a nuts-and-bolts how-to manual with bullet points. The purpose of this work is to help local churches (with extended applications to governing bodies, denominations, and Christian organizations) to cultivate unified variance in the midst of a wide swath of perspectives. Theologian Shirley Guthrie notes that this can be accomplished by incorporating in an ecumenical and irenic fashion the best of Christian interpretation of the Scriptures, morality, and social activism in such a way that believers are united in

Christ Jesus, rather than in one uniform theology of Christ.¹ In the author's context, opportunities for unified variance are most often expressed in the arenas of immigration, sexual ethics, musical preferences, patriotic expression, and generational preferences. Examples of unified variance in these spheres will be found throughout the dissertation, rather than in one block or programmatic thrust. The narrative portion of the paper will now turn to an opportunity to exhibit unified variance in the local church.

Narrative

The setting of the narrative takes place in the pastor's study. This dialogue is a helpful case study on how unified variance might be applied to immigration, an extremely controversial issue in the church, state of Arizona, and country. At the time of the conversation, I had only been the pastor at Immanuel for several months. The Pastoral Nominating Committee (PNC) and the presbytery's Committee on Ministry (COM) have made me aware of a divisive situation that happened during the interim period before my arrival regarding the church's position on immigration. The narrative is a discussion between Mark, a retired professor and a well-respected member in the church, and myself.

Pastor: Mark, thanks so much for coming by to talk. What can I do for you?

Mark: Well John, I wanted to wait before talking to you so you can get situated at the church, but I thought now was a good time. My concern is that our church has become too inwardly focused and apathetic to the world around us these last few years.

Pastor: What is it that has led you to sense this?

¹ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Diversity in Faith--Unity in Christ: Orthodoxy, Liberalism, Pietism, and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 17, 36.

Mark: You have probably heard about how the blue barrel was removed from the front of our church by the Session after the petitions were signed.

Pastor: Yes, the presbytery has given me a little background on it. Humane Borders puts out blue water barrels filled with water to drink from in the desert for those who are crossing the border from Mexico to Arizona to find work. Many have died from dehydration trying to cross over and this is one way to help stop the deaths. I have been told that Immanuel put a blue barrel out in the front of the church as a symbol of our commitment to help those in need. But when the previous pastor retired, a group within the church spoke out about their problems with the blue barrel because they interpreted it to be a politically charged symbol.

Mark: It really disappointed me, John. I felt that the conservatives in our church took over. To me the blue barrel signifies Christ's love. We are called to offer a cup of water to those who are thirsty in the desert. Our calling as followers of Christ is to be like the Good Samaritan and help anyone in need, regardless of how they arrived in that situation. The Scriptures teach that we are to look out after the marginalized, including foreigners. There is a time when Christians have to speak out and act against unjust laws... and I would like to know what your position is on immigration and what you sense your calling is at Immanuel in this important area. Your sermons have been encouraging for me, but I just wanted to find out more. I think this issue is especially relevant to us because of our close proximity to the border.

Pastor: Mark, thank you for sharing your heart. I really appreciate your honesty and desire to talk with me. As you know, I am still getting my feet wet at the church and have so much to learn about the immigration issue. I am definitely looking forward to

learning more. In fact, I would love to keep the conversation going and learn more about your thoughts. A few other folks coming from more conservative viewpoints of immigration have also mentioned their concerns. What I am hoping to do is to get to know the congregation better and to develop trust. I know that there has been a lot of hurt as a result of the immigration debate here at the church. I hope that we can continue to heal and enhance our dialogue about this issue, rather than lob arguments back and forth against each other. I preach reconciliation by emphasizing that we can have peace with God through Christ and that the door of hope has been opened up to have healing in our relationships with one another, even across racial, theological, and political divides. I would like for us to eventually have Christian Education classes that make room to discuss issues like this one. We probably will never all be on the same page, but at least we can understand one another better and discern how to “do church” together in a way that can be more sensitive to both sides and make a difference in the world as we embark on mission together in a way that will unite us, rather than divide us.

Mark: I have taught Adult Education classes in the past on issues like homosexuality and family dynamics.

Pastor: Interesting... would you be open to teaching a class to facilitate discussions about the issue of racial reconciliation and immigration?

Mark: I have actually had an idea percolating in my mind as of late... what about a class where we tackle controversial issues each week? I'd like to co-facilitate with my friend Andrew—we are dear friends and quite on different ends of the political and theological spectrum. He can give his thoughts, I can give mine, and then we can have group discussion. What do you think?

Pastor: I think that is a brilliant idea...just what Immanuel needs. I think this can really move us forward. Let's keep talking. I can also talk to our Christian Education Director and our CE Elders regarding this possibility.

Mark: Great, let me get a syllabus together of some of my initial thoughts. This means a lot to me, John; I have not felt at home here for a long time because of the blue barrel stuff.

Pastor: Mark, we need you here. You are a kindred spirit. I am really looking forward to getting to know you more. Let's keep meeting. Shall we close in prayer together?

Mark: You bet, thanks John.

Semiotics

The history of Immanuel Presbyterian's life together in the midst of diversity can be described as a tale of two paired symbols in competition with one another and the one symbol that will hold the other four together: the flag and the blue barrel, the organ and the electric guitar, and the cross of Christ that alone can bridge the two.

The first symbol is the American flag. There are those in the church who have a military background (a military base is in close proximity the church). Many of these honorable members with a deep faith are veterans whose faith is closely identified with country, military, and good citizenship. For example, the founding pastor was a retired Navy chaplain and a current member is a POW from the Battle of the Bulge. Many from this persuasion would like to have the flag in the center of the sanctuary and to sing patriotic songs at each of the patriotic holidays celebrating the freedom of our country throughout the year. As two people mentioned to me, "If the church does not teach

patriotism, *who will?*” Another individual would like to see a permanent flag pole placed in the church’s outdoor memorial garden that would rise above the cross on the pinnacle of the building for all to see. The flag is a symbol embedded with political and theological undertones.

The second symbol is the blue barrel. At this time, immigration is one of the most polarizing issues in America, particularly in regions close to the border with Mexico. There are those in the Immanuel congregation who see the present immigration laws as unjust because of the amount of people from Mexico and other countries south of the United States of America that die in the desert attempting to cross the border to find work in the States. These church members sense the call of Christ to give water to those in need to prevent senseless deaths in the desert. One Christian humanitarian ministry in Tucson places blue barrels filled with drinking water in the desert to prevent dehydration of those passing through. Under the leadership of the former head of staff of Immanuel, a blue barrel was placed in the front of the church as a symbol of the church’s stance with those in need. Those in favor of this symbolic act viewed it as shaped by the Good Samaritan ethic. Once the head of staff retired, the church became divided on whether or not to keep the blue barrel as a symbol on the church grounds. There were some who felt that it encouraged civil disobedience against the laws of the land. Petitions were signed to have the blue barrel removed. Before being called to the church, the session eventually decided to remove the barrel to preserve the unity of the church. Since arriving to the church, various members from both perspectives have met with me sharing their concerns about the blue barrel. Some desire to bring it back while others desire to keep it barred from the premises. Like the flag, this is a charged symbol loaded with political and

theological messages. To this day, it is not known where the blue barrel that once rested in front of the church now resides.

The third symbol is the organ. For over forty-five years, Immanuel has prided itself in its traditional music led by an organ and now nearly fifty-member choir. A significant percentage of the church budget and facilities usage are invested in the traditional music program. There are definite elements of the church that look with disdain upon a postmodern worship expression because it is more vernacular in expression and perceived by some to threaten the credibility and preeminence of more classical music tastes that have defined this community of faith since its inception. This symbol contains powerful emotions of identity and cultural expression.

The fourth symbol is the electric guitar. Immanuel Presbyterian, like most mainline Protestant churches, is a graying church—with a significant percentage of the congregation over sixty years old. Studies of Immanuel have indicated that on any given Sunday, half of those who participate in worship are retired. One of the reasons the nearly half-century-old church felt called to have their third pastor be younger was to reach out to younger generations more effectively. Immanuel has a wonderful history of reaching out to youth, but the structures and styles of the church remained shaped by and geared towards older generations. The young were expected to fit within this structure and perpetuate the familiar expressions of church as they received them. Since arriving as head of staff, Immanuel has seamlessly incorporated technology into its vibrant classical worship. The leadership (the Session) recently voted to incorporate an alternative worship service on Sunday mornings as one way among other plans to connect with the emerging generation in new ways. At the time of this writing, the weekly alternative service has

been thriving for nearly two years. In the past, the traditional music style defined both Sunday morning services, but now the diversity of worship expressions has some members concerned that Immanuel will become “two churches” or that the legacy of traditional music will be disrespected or diminished. The alternative service has been incorporated into the life of the church and has been well-received, although a portion of the congregation remains uncertain how this new component of church life will impact their experience of the church they have become accustomed to. The electric guitar is a charged symbol of change, cultural shift, and the unknowns of the future.

The fifth symbol is the cross. The four previous symbols are in competing pairs that narrate a sampling of the church’s theological, political, cultural, and stylistic identities. However, the last symbol of the cross stands alone and is a symbol that every member has in common and is in desperate need of. In Immanuel’s sanctuary, a large cross is centered at the front of the sanctuary. The centrality of the cross is a theological reminder that the church is called to be centered in Christ and led by Christ inside the community of faith and out in mission. Each church participant is challenged to take up their cross and follow Christ. Differences will fracture the community if they are not bridged by and localized in the cross of Christ. This symbol of Christ’s unifying variance is the key to holding together Immanuel’s unity—taking up one’s cross, ever dying to self, following Christ, cultivating a community of disciples and missionaries who are sent out in Christ’s name to carry on Christ’s work in the world. Looking for unity in charismatic leaders, uniform worship expressions, politics, theologies, or ‘keeping to ourselves’ will ensure two possibilities for Immanuel—fragmentation or a slow death—but not a vibrant unity. However, the centrality of the cross of Christ is what alone will

unite and grow this community as the body of Christ to be sent out together in the midst of difference to share and show the good news of the living Christ. In fact, these differences can enhance the testimony of Christ's ability to reconcile divides for the purpose of relationship and mission. Christ's capacity to encompass difference can be seen as enacting "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."²

Pastoral Identity

One of the most critically acclaimed movies of 2008 was *Man on Wire*.³ With great suspense, the documentary tells the story about how in 1974, a Frenchman named Philippe Petit concocted an elaborate plan with an odd mix of people to stretch a high wire across the Twin Towers in New York in order to walk across the tight rope. His willingness to risk his life for his passion is tangible and inspiring.

As a pastor, I often feel a lot like Philippe. I have a passion and vision to conspire with a strange mix of folks called the people of God at Immanuel Presbyterian. The holy scheme is to grow in faith together and make a difference in the world in Christ's name. Like the tight rope walker, followers of Jesus are summoned to walk the straight and narrow. I am called to connect together these seemingly disparate views for the thrill of the tightrope walk of life and faith. The winds, distance down, and narrow rope can be precarious for the tightrope walker. The Christ road taken is hard and dangerous, but it leads to life. These lines of life that we walk upon should uphold and connect us, rather

² Eph. 4:13.

³ James Marsh, director. *Man on Wire*, UK Film Council, 2008.

than be divisive or function as a noose to hang others. The cross of Christ is the balancing beam that stabilizes the church. Grace is the safety net that catches the church when such things as sin, dysfunction in the community, or spiritual imbalance trip up the community. The challenge is that Immanuel has many different variations of what it means to follow Christ today on the straight and narrow. This variance can cause tension—giving the constant sense that the tight rope holding the church might snap and plunge the faith community (or the pastor) to their demise.

This tautness is felt in society on the political front between Red and Blue states and the culture wars. With heated debates over sexuality, marriage, immigration, and Christology, the (U.S.A.) Presbyterian denomination's unity is fragile at best. Tension is experienced at times at Immanuel regarding what it looks like to carry out Christ's mission, how reaching younger generations will impact how church is done, or when an idea is implemented in forceful or insensitive ways.

Despite these challenges, there is the possibility for something redemptive in this tension if it can be reframed as a *creative* tension. The challenge is to discern how Immanuel *does life, church, and mission* together faithfully in this creative tension. How can this creative tension be utilized without stretching it too fast or too hard so that it does not snap? An analogy from the arts might provide helpful insight to address this important dilemma. Sometimes in movies or music when one sole artist is the director, actor, and writer, the artistic product can become flat and two dimensional because *everything* is coming from one perspective. But when several sets of eyes are brought together—the unique perspectives of a different director, actor, and writer collaborating together on the same product— it can lead to a beautiful work of art, music, or film.

These coordinated juxtapositions can lead to creative tension. It is simultaneously exhilarating and maddening, but well worth it. For example, a wide variety of perspectives can lead to invigorating discussion in Sunday School or small group settings where the group's perspective on an issue is widened, yet in the real world when new legislation is introduced or church constitutional amendments are added, my e-mail inbox often will contain significantly more emotionally charged messages than normal. Despite the peril and the promise, different perspectives about Christ still have the potential to sharpen and enhance one's own perception of Christ, rather than merely diminish Christ. Unity in Christ with variegated views can lead to creative tension when community life is carefully and prayerfully tended to with sensitive, yet strong leadership. God's mission provides the *esprit des corps* for the local church that acts simultaneously as a relational bond in the community itself and functions as a catalyst for action in the world in Christ's name.

This ministry context is challenging to one's pastoral identity. As a pastor to the entire church, there is an expectation to create room for parishioners to have a spectrum of Christian views on any number of issues. The pastor is responsible to be descriptive in teaching and preaching by laying out the different perspectives available and empowering folks to choose what they sense resonates with their faith and the light they have. At the same time, I am challenged on how I might be true to myself and share my beliefs in sermons respectfully when there are many who will have differing views than mine on any given issue. I am stretched on how I might foster a collaborative environment where liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike can feel accepted, ministered to, and empowered to serve according to their gifts and carry out a common vision that is big

enough for all but also focused enough to keep the community sojourning in the same direction. I wonder how I might avoid mine fields that have the potential to explode church unity, while simultaneously having the courage to follow Jesus without watering down the message to the lowest common denominator or softening the prophetic nature of the gospel.

Survey of Research

Ephraim Radner coins the term *eristology* to challenge believers to study the role dissension in human conflict has played throughout church history to the present.⁴ Reflection upon church division and schism can help leaders face new challenges and differences with greater emotional intelligence and freshness than in previous efforts. Radner provides a helpful definition of Christian unity as “the sacrifice of oneself, in Christ, for one's enemy, and the church is the community of such self-giving as embodied and shared in Christ Jesus.”⁵ Radner makes the case that tension is the norm embedded within the church's unity because of the constant energy expended to keep differing perspectives in authentic relationship and respectful understanding. Radner notes that a “continual struggle both to be true to its form as a community of enemies in mutual self-sacrifice, and to being taken up, more fundamentally, by God's own sacrificial embrace in Christ, precisely because she cannot fulfill perfectly her life as such a community.”⁶ Radner argues that the rise of liberal political theory has been a key factor in church

⁴ Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco: Baylor, 2012).

⁵ Kathleen Mulhurn, “Shadows of the Deeper Realities: An Interview with Ephraim Radner,” Patheos, <http://www.patheos.com/Books/Book-Club/Ephraim-Radner-A-Brutal-Unity/Shadows-of-the-Deeper-Realities-12-01-2012.html> (accessed January 5, 2013).

⁶ Ibid.

disunity. For example, candidates and voters seek change through lobbying and campaigning. This effort may lead to a change in legislation or political philosophy. However, these attempts may be rejected by the people or public servants. Democracy honors the due process of law and election and submits to the will of the people, even if one is in disagreement with the decision when all legal avenues for change have been exhausted. Honoring this secular covenant of democracy is crucial for maintaining peace and freedom. This political process engrained in much of the Western psyche impacts ecclesiology, ecumenical endeavors, and local church dynamics. Despite the fragmentation that the ongoing possibility of change in liberal political theory creates, Radner argues there are benefits for healthy unity as well, namely that this political negotiation, struggle, and acceptance matures people to live beyond themselves and, in a small way, incarnate God's self-giving to human beings expressed in Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Shirley C. Guthrie wrestles with the question why people who read the same Scriptures, follow the one Christ, and worship in the same denomination or church, have difficulties relating well and witnessing to Christ in a unified voice.⁸ According to Guthrie, Christians express their faith in three manifestations influenced by their differing backgrounds and presuppositions: orthodoxy, liberalism, and pietism. His response is to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, with the hope that Christians will be enabled to see the limits of their own particular perspective and the strengths of differing views that might enhance their own views. Guthrie then concludes by attempting to weave together the best of each of the three views with the hope that in a

⁸ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Diversity in Faith — Unity in Christ: Orthodoxy, Liberalism, Pietism, and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

small way these composite views can bring differing approaches closer together than before. Particularly helpful is Guthrie's recognition of the different streams within Christianity, the analysis of strengths and weaknesses of each, and his concluding section that sought to synthesize the strengths of the various streams of Christian faith. This dissertation will seek to utilize this approach, yet take a more respectful tone towards those of more traditional theologies. At the end of the day, Guthrie's synthesis of the best of all the streams looked strikingly similar to his own liberal stream of faith expression. This dissertation will seek to be more aware of the author's own inherent bias. Richard Mouw's emphasis upon the Christian spirituality of civility in dialogue is a helpful addition to this topic of study.¹⁰ Mouw brings an important reminder for each individual to hold to personal convictions while also being open to the other in conversation. Mouw's approach stresses that God is honored when those created in his image are honored. However, the act of honoring does not necessarily entail agreement or even affection, but does require the commitment to see others who differ through the eyes of Christ. Mouw brings up an interesting question of what the relationship will look like after one has had civil dialogue and continues to disagree. This dissertation will explore this question further by putting a greater emphasis on self-differentiation while remaining connected to people who have different views. In other words, more weight will be placed upon relational unity in Christ instead of ideological identity.

In a similar fashion, Gilbert R. Rendle speaks of sacred manners in the local church, yet differs from Mouw by maintaining that retention of differences with integrity

¹⁰ Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010).

is more crucial than one particular view of truth holding sway in a community.¹² Rendle argues that reconciled difference provides the community greater creativity and insight into enriched responses to difficult challenges. In his estimation, behavioral covenants will deepen congregational fellowship and enable authentic witness to resound more in the community, despite the differences that inevitably remain. This component of Rendle's thinking has influenced the thesis of this paper, but his approach will be modified with a greater emphasis upon how theology shapes action. If Mouw tilts more towards orthodoxy, Rendle leans more towards orthopraxy. The goal of this dissertation is to keep orthopraxy and orthodoxy in more dynamic tension than these two authors.

Family Systems Theory (FST) has provided invaluable insight into the nature of relational dynamics in congregational life for this dissertation. The writings of Rabbi Edwin Friedman have been influential in showing the similarity between family systems and congregational systems.¹⁴ Friedman stresses that leaders can foster relational health in the community of faith by maintaining: a differentiated, non-anxious presence; refusing to enable or tolerate dysfunctional behavior; and utilizing systems thinking. Other proponents of FST such as Roberta Gilbert¹⁵ and Peter Steinke¹⁶ have specifically crafted Bowen's Family Systems Theory for clergy and church settings. FST has helped shaped the thesis because systems theory provides useful models on how to express both

¹²Gilbert R. Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1999).

¹⁴Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

¹⁵Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems, 2006).

¹⁶Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010).

individuality and connectedness in a group setting that consists of differing personalities. Steinke's *A Door Set Open* provides a unique addition to FST by incorporating mission and hope as key components to manage and use conflict to move the congregation forward and outward beyond themselves. This honed the dissertation's emphasis upon mission as a catalyst to unity in the local church.

David Brubaker utilizes and finds value in FST, yet limits the scope of its effectiveness in congregational settings to smaller sized faith communities (200 members or less).¹⁸ Brubaker's unique insight challenged the author to seek additional sources to supplement the FST framework. Brubaker's study of 100 Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches in Arizona is pertinent to this dissertation because Immanuel Presbyterian Church and the presbytery to which Immanuel belongs were a part of the study. Brubaker's main premise is that conflict is a natural component of church life, offering both promise and peril, depending on how the conflict or change is managed by the leadership. This solidified the positives of conflict and the vital importance of managing conflict in the local church in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. In other words, the process of change is more important than the change itself. In fostering unity in the midst of difference, the task of the leader is to discern underlying systemic issues, such as power or ritual, which could be creating friction rather than surface issues, such as homosexuality or immigration.

Pertinent business and leadership books are a helpful supplementary resource for Christian leaders seeking to nurture unified variance in the community of faith. Morten T. Hansen makes the case that collaboration should not be carried out for the sake of

¹⁸ David Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009).

collaboration.²⁰ In other words, bad collaboration can lead to high conflict and low results, and disciplined collaboration knows when the situation calls for collaboration and empowers parties involved work together for better results. Particularly helpful was Hansen's observations that collaborative leaders redefine the mission in a clear and broad understanding that a wider range of people can enthusiastically embrace. This can be adapted to the setting of the local church by finding ways to articulate the mission of Christ that resonates and inspires people of different theological and political persuasions.

Heifetz and Linsky address how the leader can survive and thrive in situations of conflict or opposition.²² Strong leadership is able to discern when a problem calls for a solution by utilizing the thinking that created it (technical challenge) or when an entirely different tack (adaptive challenge) is needed to address the issue. They also stress the importance of the leader's self-awareness, relational intelligence, and ability to manage the conflict in a self-regulated manner rather than becoming embroiled or the very embodiment of the conflict. Building upon Heifetz and Linsky's emphasis upon the leader, this dissertation will apply their principles to not only the pastor, but the entire leadership team and the congregation itself. Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja look to the biological sciences for leadership cues.²⁴ Their unique approach to conflict is that it is a natural and a healthy way to forge more nimble and savvy organizations. Their leadership philosophy encourages the leader to prudently seek out conflict because of the hope for

²⁰ Morten T. Hansen, *Collaboration: How Leaders Avoid the Traps, Create Unity, and Reap Big Results* (Boston: Harvard, 2009), 14-15.

²² Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Harvard: Boston, 2002).

²⁴ Richard T. Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing on the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* (New York: Crown Business, 2000).

the future that conflict offers. When the leader finds that sweet spot of being on the edge of chaos (without being engulfed by it), the organization is most apt to flourish rather than decline or die. Their philosophy in conflict is helpful, but needs to be contextualized and modified to suit the relational dynamics of the church, which is not a business seeking to make more money, but a body seeking to be more faithful relationally and missionally to God.

Resources that deal with paradox, polarity thinking, and both/and philosophy are also pertinent to cultivating reconciled difference in the leader and community. Fletcher and Olwyler argue that paradoxical thinking generates a fresh way of seeing and responding because it is committed to finding the upsides and possibilities from seemingly contradictory perspectives, rather than rashly dismissing them as incompatible.²⁶ The principles found in the book have helped cultivate a more patient and disciplined approach to seeming contradictions in the life of the church. Similarly, Parker Palmer argues that a key component of faith and healthy community life is the embrace of paradox, which opens the human soul to see and experience the connections of things and people that would otherwise be deemed fragmentary or disparate. Similar to Guthrie, Palmer's work contributes to the conversation, but appears to be adversarial towards those of a more conservative bent.²⁸ Both writers challenged the author to not expect those of a more traditional or conservative approach to be brow-beaten or the only party

²⁶ Jerry Fletcher and Kelle Olwyler, *Paradoxical Thinking: How to Profit from Your Contradictions* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1997).

²⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

expected to change. Barry Johnson²⁹ and also Oswald and Johnson³⁰ utilize polarity management to hold together seemingly contradictory truths to be a catalyst for organizational resiliency. This is done by pairing together polarities (i.e., tradition and innovation, management and leadership, ministry and mission, the one and the many, private and public, etc.) rather than separating or alleviating the creative tension between the pairs. The challenge is determining if the particular conflict is a problem to be solved, a choice to be made, a deeply held value or belief to be held, or a polarity to be managed. Not every situation in the church involves polarities or both/and responses found in the above authors. In those situations where one perspective is chosen over another (i.e., a particular curriculum or mission project), care should be taken to explain why something was chosen and how it will be beneficial, even if not everyone agrees with it.

Brian McLaren incorporates a constructive both/and approach to facing transitions and quandaries in the postmodern world by articulating what a “postliberal, postconservative, postsectarian, and postmodern approach might look and feel like.”³¹ His writings encourage both liberal and conservative alike to ask new and different questions which allow room for a new kind of faith to be born again in the new contexts of this point in history. Mystery, both/and thinking, and the quest for truth and relationship allow the Spirit to work in new ways that seemed impossible with old

²⁹ Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvables Problems* (Amherst, MA: HRD, 1992).

³⁰ Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010).

³¹ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind Of Christian: Ten Questions That Are Transforming The Faith* (San Francisco: Harperone, 2010), 10-11. See also his helpful book (and oddly long-winded title) *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am A Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-Yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2004).

paradigms. Yet McLaren, particularly in his writings after *Generous Orthodoxy*, appears to rename traditionally liberal, activist, and liberation perspectives as something new and different, when in fact they have been utilized for decades in the church.

In a warm and irenic tone, Richard Foster speaks of six expressions of worship and discipleship in the church as different streams that originate from the same source.³³ One can drink from and be spiritually slaked by these different Christian streams without abandoning or compromising one's own stream of faith. Differing perspectives can refresh faith rather than deprive it. Foster's devotional tone creates a safe and open environment for liberals and conservatives to be receptive to the Spirit's presence. This dissertation will seek to liberate Foster's tone from the individual prayer closet to the sanctuaries, classrooms, and mission fields of the people of God.

The thesis of this paper that *a theologically diverse local church can experience and express unified variance by following Christ through collaborative relationships and context-appropriate mission, without mandating theological uniformity* is a helpful addition to the conversation about unity in the midst of diversity. This approach believes that not every difference in a congregation needs to be solved, but it should be lived within a mature and discerning manner. If handled with wisdom, difference in the local church can be positive and function as a catalyst to creativity and fresh approaches to life in a changing and diverse world.

This paper uniquely emphasizes the importance of relational connection—with God and others. Room is provided for individual conscience and differentiation, while still remaining a part of the community. The Scriptures, the PCUSA Book of

³³ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998).

Confessions, and Book of Order provide guidance and boundaries for each person's beliefs about Christ. While flexible, there are boundaries for unified variance. James P.

Danaher notes:

Although the thing we seek to know is not an object but a subject, and our knowledge will be subjective rather than objective, our understanding is not wildly relative. As long as we stay in dialogue and allow the other person or their text to continually correct our understanding, we will be brought into an ever-greater personal knowledge and intimacy.³⁴

Guthrie lays out other helpful guidelines for faithful interpretation in the community of faith: Scripture interpreting Scripture, the Christological principle where one looks to Christ's actions and words to frame other Scripture passages, the law of love, the rule of faith, and awareness of literary and historical context.³⁵ Difference in areas not mentioned in those resources are addressed and managed in such a way that the community finds creative ways to continue life together with the difference still being present. Unified variance helps community participants hone the craft of discernment on when and where collective and individual preferences are to be exercised. Exposure to different perspectives helps sharpen the congregation's skill of being attuned to not only rights, but also responsibilities to one another.³⁶ Christ shapes and informs a relational and missional unity that is bigger than the very real differences that continue to be present in the community. The congregation has the integrity to recognize that society is in the midst of major shifts that not everyone will interpret in the same way. But when the community follows Christ, covenants to honor one another, and believes in the power of

³⁴ James P. Danaher, *Eyes That See, Ears That Hear: Perceiving Jesus in a Postmodern Context* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), 156.

³⁵ Shirley C. Guthrie Jr., *Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: WJK, 2008).

³⁶ Rendle, *Behavior Covenants in Congregations*, ix.

the Holy Spirit at work in and through the congregation, the differences can make the congregation enriched and stronger.

From this perspective, union is found within the person of Christ and with the quality of relationships with other believers in Christ, rather than a unity found in the same interpretation of Christ. This type of Christian variety within the local congregation testifies to the inexhaustible depths of Christ, rather than something that threatens or diminishes the church's witness to Christ in the world. The goal of this dissertation is to explore how an environment conducive to unified variance can be fostered and how possible viruses might be debugged that can sabotage this pursuit. This paper will explore how churches can stay together in healthy and God-honoring and people-honoring ways. The paper will not dwell on when and how best communities of faith should part ways because of irreconcilable differences, but that topic would be helpful in future research of this topic. The thrust of this dissertation is about Christians and communities of faith forging ahead together, rather than departing in separate ways. In addition, this paper will not focus on defining what issues are sin or heretical, even though it would be a helpful contribution to the topic. Rather, the dissertation centers upon contentious issues that likely will not be resolved, but only managed and learned to live with in churches and denominations (i.e., immigration, homosexuality, and worship expressions).

Peter's second letter says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance... Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as

salvation.”³⁷ An active and loving patience is needed to hold together and send out the body of Christ that has a wide array of perspectives and expressions in this liminal time in history. Rather than rallying around a particular theological or political issue for unity, the local church with a wide spectrum of theological and political views accepts that uniformity of thought will most likely not happen this side of heaven, but that peace should be strived after. Instead of rushing to a final judgment about controversial issues of the day (particularly immigration and homosexuality), the church is called to create a space where people of a wide array of views can come together, learn from one another, and let these views be respectfully hashed out in the context of worship, fellowship, discipleship, and mission. In this environment God is entrusted to bring about change and transformation in the church in his time.

It will be argued that the emphasis should be upon following Christ through individual and corporate: prayer; worship; Bible study; relationship building; service; and mission. These practices and commitments are more important than agreeing on the precise way they should be interpreted or enacted. The patience of God helps the community to be patient with one another in the midst of difference and ongoing discussion. With Christ as the Lord of the conscience and the church, individual members sacrificially lay their differences on the altar of God. This act of surrender frees the church to pursue Christ, breathing in relationships and breathing out mission in ways that honor the commonality and differences within the local body of believers.

³⁷ 2 Peter 3:9, 14-15a.

Summary of Chapters

The goal of this dissertation is to explore how Christ can be formed more fully in Immanuel Presbyterian Church and how this community can fulfill the body of Christ's calling to be the hope of the world. The possibilities come not so much in theological uniformity as in the nurturing of a healthy, relational environment where there is an openness to the Spirit to lead so that Christ's work might flourish, in the church and through the church to the world. The purpose of healthy Christ-centered relationships in the midst of difference is to empower the community of faith to venture out into God's mission horizon that Immanuel is being summoned towards. Rather than making central to the church specific stands on polarizing issues such as immigration, gay marriage, the relationship of church and state, or musical styles, this dissertation will explore the process, ethos, and relational connections that can be nurtured to empower a diverse group of folks to follow Christ together towards God's mission.

Chapter two will analyze case studies from the book of Acts to demonstrate that God's work and mission among and through his people have always been in the midst of variety. The early church found ways to creatively move forward (despite their differences) as the people of God in the midst of challenges and opportunities before them to continue in Christ's work and God's mission. Witness was more important than their various racial, cultural, and economic differences.

Chapter three will explore how the patient process of NT canonization, which varied by region, and the NT canon itself, hold together the unity and diversity of witness to the risen Christ. The canon thus models how the body of Christ binds together the diversity of witnesses to the risen Lord.

Chapter four will explore how true Christian unity can only happen when it is centered in the local church's commitment to follow Christ together. Yet as the church follows Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, not all interpretations of the one Christ within the community of faith will be the same.

Chapter five will explore how healthy relationships rooted in Christ bond together a diverse group of folks so that they can creatively and respectfully collaborate for an even stronger witness to Christ than if they all thought the same.

Chapter six will suggest that the goal of unity is not merely good relationships within the church community. Rather, good relationships empower and set the tone for the church to move outward in mission. The inward strength for outward mission keeps the community focused on a task and calling beyond itself to be true to God's purpose for the church—to impact the world in Christ's name.

Chapter seven will conclude the dissertation by making the case that faith is a verb, the church is a movement, and God is on the move. Just as each disciple is called to follow Christ, the collective church is summoned to follow Jesus to where the Spirit is leading. This perpetual state of seeking to catch up with Christ requires the church to be continually oxygenated by breathing in relationships and breathing out mission. The Spirit oxygenates the church body so that she might carry on the ministry of Christ as the gathered and scattered community. Following Christ together, breathing in relationships, and breathing out mission keeps the body of Christ in step with the Spirit and one another, even in the midst of different personalities and perspectives.

CHAPTER 2

UNIFIED VARIANCE IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Robinson and Wall note that the overarching theme in the book of Acts is “God’s resolve to form a people, to call into being a new community of people who will share life together.”¹ This chapter will seek to make the case that Acts provides helpful case studies on how a diverse group of believers, who were formerly defined most predominantly by race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, or gender, can be united in the risen Christ for Spirit-empowered fellowship and mission to the glory of God. This unity cannot be manufactured by human initiative alone, but does require a resolve to creatively collaborate with God’s Spirit, the Scriptures, and one another by living into the reality of God’s great grace that makes it possible for the church to be of one heart and soul.

An introduction to the Book of Acts will first provide context to the above assertion. Then specific case studies will be analyzed within Acts which describe the church collaborating and discerning together in the midst of difference to proactively face challenge or opportunity for the purpose of healthy community life and mission. It will be argued that Acts provides a helpful path for today’s church to experience unity in Christ in the midst of differing perspectives within the community of faith. This path enabled the church to assimilate a variety of perspectives as it crossed new cultural, geographical, social, and racial boundaries. Only in Christ would Spirit-empowered witnesses be

¹ Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 81.

unified to venture out to “Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” with the good news of Jesus Christ.²

Introduction to Acts

The events recorded in Acts occurred somewhere between AD 30 and 60. The dating of the composition of Acts is generally considered to be somewhere between AD 70 and 130, with the majority of scholars sensing the mid-dating range is the most reasonable possibility. Church tradition identifies Luke³ as the author of the third gospel and its sequel Acts. While the specific identity of the author is debated, most scholars hold that the author of both books was from a Gentile or proselyte background. The author of Luke-Acts seems to be bi-cultural because of his command of and sensitivity to the cultural diversity of Greek and Jewish backgrounds. He also most likely came from a cosmopolitan background, which would seem to give the author an appreciation of and sensitivity towards cultural and ethnic diversity in the church. The original audience of Acts was the individual Theophilus, which in Greek means *lover of God*. Acts may have also been seen to function more broadly as a catechism and guidebook for the larger church.

There is general agreement among scholars that the literary genre of Acts is ancient Greek historiography. However, there are two interesting differences between Acts and other Greek histories pertinent to this dissertation. First, ancient historians often speak of change as something inevitable that one must be resigned to. While elements of

² Acts 1:8.

³ Luke is mentioned in Col. 4:14, Philem. 24, and 2 Tim. 4:11.

predestination for certain events foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures are found in Acts (1:16, 24; 2:16; 3:18; 4:27b-28; 7:17; 9:15), there are scenes in Acts that portray change through God's intervention in history as something good, open, forward-moving, and that can be participated in, leading to possibility and hope for the individual and community to overcome adversity and conflict.⁴ In this unique understanding of the creative tension between providence and freedom, God in his sovereignty is free to call for a change of interpretation and application of his previous commands.⁵ A second point of departure is that the history of Acts was also broader in scope than Hellenized Jewish historiographers because Acts focused not on a sole people group, but was inclusive of and sympathetic to a wide variety of ethnicities and their inter-relationship with one another.⁶ This aspect of Acts is pertinent to the pluralistic culture that the North American church finds itself in.

The preface of Acts (1:1-5) provides a guiding purpose for the book, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is to spread through the apostles (and future believers) by the power of the Holy Spirit. The remainder of the book explains how the missionary message of the resurrected Christ spread from Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), to Samaria and Judea (Acts 8), and beyond Palestine (Acts 9-28). This thrust helps today's church to also keep mission at the forefront of the church's *raison d'être*.

Acts was also a mediating response to a theological crisis of Jewish and Gentile forces that, at times, found followers of Christ at loggerheads with one another.⁷ Stress,

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 12.

⁵ Acts 10:11-15.

⁶ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 35.

⁷ Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 20.

uncertainty, and anxiety were inevitable as the church became multi-cultural and had to address the realities of class conflict that were common in the Roman world.⁸ The author of Acts sought to legitimize and provide a broader, yet coherent, identity for Christianity that could hold together under a big tent the wide range of beliefs and practices of this unlikely heterogeneous group of Christ followers so they could live together, respectfully, in good conscience, and with a bent for mission. This would involve give and take for both Jew and Gentile, but ultimately, relational unity could only be possible through the grace of God manifested in a community committed to Christ-centered communal faith practices (prayer, worship, Scripture reading, fasting, eating together, sharing goods, laying on of hands) and the wisdom and empowerment of the Holy Spirit to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of the strikingly different Jewish and Gentile worlds.

Theology and Themes

There are a number of important themes regarding unified variance in Christ that permeate the message of Acts. First, God is the most active and involved character that guides and unifies his church through the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Someone bigger than anything human is inspiring and empowering the apostles and believers to join in a unified purpose and passion beyond their real differences and agendas.

Second, the message preached and witnessed to is the resurrection of Christ and forgiveness of sins for all people, no matter their background. A unifying factor for all

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 81.

humanity is the need for Christ. In Acts, Christ is powerful enough to incorporate a diverse group of people into the body of Christ. However, the focus is the reality of Christ's resurrection and its implications, rather than one particular theological articulation of this.

Third, the book of Acts plays an important role in holding together the commonalities and differences of the Old and New Testaments and Christianity and Judaism. There are thirty-seven direct quotes, plus many allusions, to the Hebrew Scriptures in Acts. These quotations function simultaneously in Acts as an affirmation and correction to Judaism. Christianity is to be affirmed because it is in a creative tension with Judaism and a fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. Acts functions as a bridge between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament and between the words and deeds of Christ in the NT gospels and the writings of the epistles. In essence, Acts affirms the entire biblical canon by "forging a dynamic, self-correcting apparatus that prevents its readers from theological myopia and spiritual distortion."¹⁰

This quality of Acts is helpful for the twenty-first-century church to also bridge its many internal differences. In Acts, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are central in the deconstruction and reformation of the traditional readings and interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, so that faithfulness to Christ may mean moving beyond traditional interpretation and application of Scripture. This component found in Acts provides a helpful model for the church to continue to ponder what Christ might be deconstructing and reconstructing today to overcome challenges to the church's unity and faithfulness in mission. Acts is a testimony to the centrality of following Christ faithfully in each new

¹⁰ Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 25.

context and can teach the church how all differences are relativized in their own unique way around the constant of the one crucified and risen Messiah.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit fuels witness and mission in Acts, indwelling Jew and Gentile alike to perform missional tasks that the church has been called to participate in with God. Both the third gospel and Acts emphasize that mutual joy is a fruit of the Spirit's activity that oxygenates fellowship and mission among followers of Christ. In addition, communal prayer is an important spiritual practice, particularly when the church is wrestling with important decisions. Prayer bonds the community of faith together by reciprocally seeking God's guidance and committing to uphold fellow believers before the Lord. These early communal practices found in Acts are crucial for today's church to continue to engage in for faithfulness and unified focus in mission and ministry.

Fifth, God's activity in Acts speaks not only of vertical peace with God, but horizontal human reconciliation, especially across racial and socio-economic divides. The tone of Acts is conciliatory and irenic in that it seeks to facilitate collaboration and reconciliation between Jew and Gentile while allowing both parties to maintain the integrity of their conscience. The book of Acts speaks compellingly to the Arizona context that both Latino and Caucasian are bearers of God's image and both have the potential to be filled with the Spirit and selected for God's continuing mission.

Sixth, the author of Acts emphasizes how growth happens in the midst of hardship and conflict because suffering for Christ and a commitment to dialogue keep the church in good relationship. This core value in Acts sets the tone for the possibility of growth and creative solutions in the face of communal discernment. The church need not experience dread or hopelessness in the face of obstacles; rather, Christians of differing

perspectives can experience a deep trust that God can better the church and create new solutions forward that have not been previously conceived.

Seventh, the church is the mission of God in Acts. The church is the people of God on a journey, followers of the Way, a movement of the Spirit. The church follows the Spirit; the Spirit does not follow the church. With the Spirit leading and the people following, the church is able to move together towards the same mission horizon. Ecclesiastical leadership is definitely present in Acts, but leaders are led by the Spirit into new territories, rather than seeking to preserve hierarchical church structures, hold on to power, or to advance lesser causes. The concept of church in Acts is relational, organic, less developed, and in process. The body of Christ is designed for flexibility to accommodate and embody a wide range of views and practices for the greater good of God's mission of the church.¹¹ This description of the church in Acts inspires today's church to be more nimble, open to the Spirit, and mission-oriented.

Eighth, Acts has an open-ended theology that gives room for a wide variety of interpretation within it. Barrett notes the book of Acts has a less narrowly defined theology by saying, "Luke has no theological doctrines that he wishes to commend beyond basic Christian conviction."¹² This theological climate enables a diverse ecosystem of beliefs to grow together in a symbiotic relationship, in the early church and in the church today that finds itself in a polarized and diverse cultural climate.

Finally, internal tensions within the church are a concern within Acts, but the author seems to indicate that outer witness and impact in extending mission outward

¹¹ C. K. Barrett, *Acts: A Shorter Commentary* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002), lvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, lxxviii.

trump the internal preferences within the church.¹³ For example, in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the guiding principle was how to facilitate and not impede Gentiles from coming to faith. This mission imperative was a non-negotiable at the end of the day. However, the church was committed to negotiate the *how* of doing this in a manner that would be sensitive to the entire community, namely the devout Jews with more conservative interpretations of the Law of Moses, who had the most to sacrifice in this missional core value. The debate headed in the direction of what needed to stay or be exempted from the law, not whether the Gentiles would be included or not in the growing community. While retaining their personal interpretations of the law (albeit modified ones), they were willing to allow the Gentiles to have a more relaxed understanding of the law due to their different life situation. The experience of the Spirit in the lives of the Gentiles bore witness to God's blessing upon this new mission endeavor. Like Peter, the church must always say, "who are we that we could hinder God?" This openness to the Spirit is crucial for creating an atmosphere of possibility and hope to overcome seemingly insurmountable or perplexing challenges to the church's unity.

Broadly speaking, the book of Acts has been neglected by the church throughout the ages, even to this day. Except for the liturgical season of Pentecost, Acts is strangely absent from the church lectionary. This chapter seeks to expand the exposure and influence of the book of Acts upon the church today. Acts is a treasure trove of wisdom for the church to draw from to supply discernment on how to move together in the power of the Holy Spirit to transcend the polarization and fragmentation in church and society that is so characteristic of the day.

¹³ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 248.

Case Studies Within Acts

... at the human level, Luke shows how difficult and intricate is the effort of the Church to keep up with God's action, follow God's initiatives, understand the precedents being established... With literary artistry and genuine theological sensitivity, Luke shows through the narrative itself how the diverse experiences of God's action by individuals are slowly raised to the level of a communal narrative, which in turn must be tested by the entire community in a difficult and delicate process of disagreement, debate, and the discernment of Scripture.¹⁴

Five case studies in Acts will be explored that highlight the process of the church's collaboration and discernment to face new seasons, identity challenges, and mission opportunities that jeopardize its peace and unity.

Case Study #1: Acts 1:12-26: The Election of Matthias to Replace Judas

Though not specifically dealing with conflict or disunity, the first case study deals with general group decision-making and how a community of faith can overcome anxiety and come to terms with its own identity after a traumatic event. This first case study models how the church might regroup (rather than splinter) for the purpose of getting back on track to most effectively accomplish the mission it is called to continue. This scene also demonstrates the careful process of selecting leaders in a way that would honor Christ, respect the candidates who were eligible for the vacancy, and continue the task of faithfully following Christ into God's ever-expanding mission field. A thorough study of the scene provides numerous lessons on how the community of faith might keep Christ at the forefront of the church's missional purposes while also going about it in a way that deepens relationships within the church.

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 5, ed. Daniel L. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical), 15-16.

The leaders assembled together (a common spiritual practice in Luke's writings) in an upper room of a house or apartment. The reader is like a fly on a wall observing the deliberations of the early church. The apostles began again the ongoing process of community growth after Jesus' departure by forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.¹⁵ The apparent first item on the docket was to discern if there should be an election of a new apostle to replace Judas for the purpose of replenishing the college of apostles.

Whenever the apostles and believers gathered, they made it a practice to constantly devote themselves to prayer. Prayer not only contributed to their unity but was also a byproduct of it. A total of 120 people were present, including the apostles (except for Judas) and certain women disciples (including Mary the mother of Jesus) who had accompanied Jesus in his ministry. Barrett utilizes later rabbinic sources that indicate one leader represents ten people in groups, thus possibly explaining the rationale for 120 present.¹⁶ Although there is debate if this was practiced in first century gatherings, it could indicate a desire for the leadership to have appropriate representation, including women, in this gathering of communal discernment. The inclusion of females opened up the possibility for new perspectives to be brought to the table.

Judas' actions and suicide naturally caused an identity crisis in the group.¹⁷ Through prayer, discussion, and quotations of Scripture, the apostles sensed Judas left a leadership gap that needed to be filled, not because of death, but because of betrayal. The

¹⁵ Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 24.

¹⁶ C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, 12.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 83.

apostles may also have seen themselves symbolically as the twelve tribes of the new Israel that needed to be replenished in order to be a fully representative witness to Christ who chose the twelve disciples. The community's emphasis on the importance of a complete witness to Christ in mission kept the fledgling group's collective eyes focused on the same goal of testimony to the resurrected Christ.

As often the case in the gospels, Peter took the initiative. He earlier denied Christ, but repented and, unlike Judas, was restored by Christ. The apostles and faith community honored Peter's reinstatement and brought him into full fellowship with them. As good spiritual leaders do, Peter stood and declared that Scripture spoke to their situation. The community did not brush under the rug the painful issue of Judas' betrayal and demise, but addressed it with candor. This relational honesty in the early church is an important practice for today's church to nurture healthy relational systems within the community of faith. Peter allowed this Judas experience to revise his interpretation of Scripture by deconstructing and reframing the Word of God to speak to this crisis in the church of "where do we go from here." Peter's example shows that experience should be permitted to add new insight into the reading of Scripture that was not present before the event occurred. Scriptures should be diligently consulted to prophetically speak to and provide direction regarding discouraging or seemingly impossible situations the community of faith is facing.¹⁸ The challenge is discerning what a fitting and responsible reframing of Scripture today is, one that keeps in step with the Holy Spirit. The community of faith demonstrated their responsibility of Scripture application by requiring strict qualifications for Judas' replacement, namely someone who had been present since John's baptism,

¹⁸ Richard I. Pervo, *Acts, Hermeneia*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 50.

through Christ's resurrection and ascension. Those present (not just Peter), proposed two candidates that fit the criteria in response to Peter's call to action. These options were made with fear and trembling because only Jesus could pick a disciple.

This sobering task required the community to fall on their knees in prayer. They prayed in unison (common in Acts 4:23-31; 5:29-32; 6:2-4; 14:14-17; 21:20-25). When there is continuous prayer in the third gospel and Acts, a significant act of God often transpires.¹⁹ Prayer is vital because it keeps the church looking to God for direction and a path forward, rather than mere human judgment. In church discernment, each believer must not only listen and look into each other's hearts, but the church must "listen up"—looking to and hearing from the God of heaven and following God's heart.

Communication with God, the hope of the resurrection, the power of prayer, and the voice of the Spirit can lead the church through leadership transition and new chapters of life together.

It is fascinating to observe how the church ultimately made their decision by casting lots. This practice was common in Judaism²⁰ and in the Roman world, but was the only time it occurred in the NT. Because it was a decision that only the Lord could make, the church leadership acted by avoiding the decision themselves and leaving it to God's hands by casting lots. The group is now ready to go about the sacred business they have been called to live in to—witness to the risen Christ.

¹⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Anchor Bible vol. 31* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 215.

²⁰ Prov. 16:33.

Case Study #2: Acts 4:23-31: Prayer for Boldness in the Face of Opposition

In this scenario, the church is faced with a quandary: should the apostles preach in Jesus' name when the religious leaders in Judaism are telling them not to? As soon as Peter and John were released, they went to the community of faith to share their story. Rather than worrying, the church raised their voices together to God in unison prayer, quoting the Spirit speaking through David in Psalm 2. Despite the opposition, they strongly sensed that God's calling upon the church to witness to Christ had not changed. They were to speak with all boldness as the resurrected Christ worked through them to heal and perform signs.

A key to unity and vitality is to follow Christ in the strength that Jesus provides working through them, which trumps the demands of lesser earthly authorities. When they had gathered together in prayer, the place was shaken and "the gift of Pentecost endured."²¹ God heard the church's prayer and empowered them for mission in the face of persecution. The church knew that witness was more important than opposition; indeed it was a part of it. Fitzmyer notes, "They do not selfishly ask for benefits for themselves, but for the grace to carry out what God has called them to accomplish in frankness and unity."²² The church faced this obstacle through prayer, Scripture, listening, and a recommitment to follow and witness to the living Christ. The primacy of mission helped the church to negotiate their next steps.

²¹ Pervo, *Acts*, 124.

²² Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 307.

Case Study #3: Acts 6:1-7: Addressing Socio-Economic and Cultural Tensions

As in any marriage or family, conflict is natural and inevitable. The core issue is how the impasse will be managed. The growth of the early church created challenges in the areas of leadership expansion, administration needs, cross-cultural relationships, community care, and the spread of the gospel. This particular case study is a pertinent example of the church proactively shaping relational friction into an opportunity for relational and missional enhancement.

Eating together is often a source of unity, but in this case it is a source of conflict.²³ Both the Hebrews and Hellenists in this scenario were Jewish Christians. Craig C. Hill defines a Jewish Christian as “one whose self-understanding, beliefs, and practices are substantively both Jewish and Christian.”²⁴ Despite this common background, the Hellenistic widows claim to have been slighted (either implicitly or explicitly) on a regular basis at the food bank, while Hebrew widows apparently were well-fed and taken care of. Both groups likely spoke Greek in varying levels, but it appears the Hellenists only spoke Greek because they lived most of their lives in Greek-speaking countries away from Palestine. Hebrew followers of Jesus were likely bilingual, conversant in both Greek (the *lingua franca* of the day) and Aramaic, so they may have held pejorative or suspicious stereotypes of the Hellenists for being less educated and schooled in the authentic Jewish way of life. This would be most publicly manifested in their likely choice of worship in Greek-speaking synagogues rather than in the temple

²³ Pervo, *Acts*, 157.

²⁴ Craig C. Hill, “The Jerusalem Church,” in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts*, ed. Matt Jackson-McCabe (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 46.

that solely used Aramaic in worship.²⁵ Because of the Hellenists' greater contact with Gentiles, they may have generally had a more lax application of the Levitical code in daily life than the Hebrews. This may have very well given rise to conflict between the two groups. Other more speculative theories that Hellenists were Gentiles or that this passage explained the rivalry between the twelve apostles and seven deacons have scant documentation for a compelling case.²⁶

The Hellenistic widows likely came from diaspora to die in the Holy City of Jerusalem and may have lived in ethnic neighborhoods that were more impoverished than the Hebraic neighborhoods.²⁷ Away from home, they might not have had the level of family support that the native Hebraic widows had. Instead of ignoring the complaints or letting the issue fester, the apostles summoned the community, listened, clarified the real issues, and commissioned additional leadership to meet the needs of the offended party. There was an openness to constructive criticism among the leadership and an admission that the twelve could not and were not accomplishing everything themselves. The disciples also empowered those who brought up the complaint to be involved in the solution, which pleased the whole group.²⁸ Six Hellenistic leaders of Jewish background and one Gentile convert were vetted, chosen, and prayed over to be deacons who would

²⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 82-83.

²⁶ Pervo, *Acts*, 154.

²⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 126.

²⁸ David R. Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), 108.

minister to the Greek-speaking Jewish widows.²⁹ The apostles could remain focused on their calling because they expanded the leadership to include culturally intelligent Hellenist deacons who could minister to the Hellenist widows' needs in a compassionate and understanding manner. The conflict birthed an additional form of ministry within the church known as the deacon. It is interesting to note that Acts goes on to describe the ministry of the deacons to also incorporate a significant amount of time to mission and evangelism, very similar to the apostles. This seems to point to the church's flexibility to be ever-adapting to new scenarios and opportunities for mission as the church expanded.

The scene concludes with one of six summaries found in Acts that explain how the church grew in numbers (before and after this conflict) despite internal and external challenges. The case study provides a helpful reminder for the church to be creative and proactive in tackling thorny issues and to incorporate multiple perspectives and critiques to address the challenges in a manner that is thoughtful to all.

Case Study #4: Acts 11:1-18: The Implications of the Conversion of Cornelius

The conversion of Cornelius is a defining moment in the book of Acts and for the church because her response will either solidify her status as an ethno-centric religion or give room to morph into a universal one. Peter's vision and encounter with Cornelius stretch the boundaries of unity, identity, and faithfulness to tradition and God's Word. Would God ever call his people to go against what he had commanded in the past? Will the church trust their leadership's observations of what God is doing? Will the church choose to see and embrace God's activity that transcends its present comprehension of

²⁹ The number seven is symbolic in that it is a number of completion and was the common number of Jewish leaders needed to form a board or complete a task.

God, or will it require that God continue to work within the church's old paradigm? Also, will the church see its posture to outsiders as exclusive and segregated, or integrated?³⁰ Could the church find a new and deeper source of unity than the comfort of time-tested traditions, such as negative attitudes towards those who are different? Pervo vividly described the ramifications of the church's embrace of Cornelius by saying the Spirit's activity had "burst the fence of Torah and the boundaries of Israelite observance."³¹

Cornelius was a God-fearing, uncircumcised Gentile who received an angelic visitation. The angel told him that God had heard his prayers and seen his righteous and generous living and instructed him to go to Peter for further directions. Meanwhile, Peter was having a series of visions of unclean animals coming down on a sheet from heaven that God commanded him to eat. Peter was puzzled by this and even rejected the voice from heaven because it appeared to contradict everything he was taught by kosher law. God responded by saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."³²

At that moment, the men sent by Cornelius appeared. The Spirit prodded Peter with this direction, "Go with them without hesitation for I have sent them."³³ Johnson notes that the Greek word for hesitation can also mean discrimination.³⁴ Peter obeyed, going with a Gentile without hesitation; he followed the clues even though he did not entirely know where this would lead. Leadership involves exploring and living with uncertainty and ambiguity as new directions from God slowly unfold, often at a slower

³⁰ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 91.

³¹ Pervo, *Acts*, 288.

³² Acts 10:15.

³³ Acts 10:20.

³⁴ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 92.

pace than human preferences. God's leading to Cornelius showed Peter that God was talking about more than unclean food in the vision. The real message of the vision was about people—who could be a follower of Jesus and how followers of Jesus should perceive and treat others. Specifically, God wanted to communicate to Peter and the church that no race is profane or unclean in itself.³⁵ The Spirit confirmed this by falling powerfully upon uncircumcised Gentiles, in the same manner that Jews received the Holy Spirit. This chain of events indicates that present experience further enlightens past interpretation of Scripture. The real factor is not becoming Jewish, but genuine faith revealed in a life of justice and mercy, no matter what one's ethnicity is.³⁶ Peter later explained to the church, "If God gave them the same gift that he gave us, who was I that I could hinder God?"³⁷ If God accepted Gentiles, the church must follow God's precedence. This opened the door for followers of Jesus of all stripes to eat together and be in relationship with one another because Christ transcends the differences that formerly brought division. Differences indeed remain, but they are no longer defining. The same God is God of Jew and Gentile.

Narration, story-telling, experience, and experiential learning are crucial to communal discernment in the church today. The apostles and believers eventually heard about the Gentiles who accepted the word of God and received the Spirit. News of this elicited debate and criticism, so Peter went up to Jerusalem to further interpret, step by step, his missional encounters. God was clearly at work by initiating the Gentile mission, but the author of Acts utilizes the next six chapters to demonstrate "the process of human

³⁵ Acts 10:28.

³⁶ Acts 10:34, "God is not a respecter of persons."

³⁷ Acts 11:17.

decision-making as the Church tries to catch up to God's initiative."³⁸ Opposition, debate, and questioning are important and healthy components of discernment in the church, even if unsettling at the time. This testing of one another and the Spirit broadens each perspective and sharpens it or exposes it as incomplete.³⁹ Being open to God's mystery and freedom, Peter and the believers responded to God's surprising activity with reverence—first with silence then with adoration, even though their familiar framework of faith had been dismantled by God's Spirit that was at work in the world. The implications for the church today remain. Following the Spirit's lead means that the church firmly holds to Christ, while simultaneously holding loosely to beliefs rendered obsolete by the new light that the Spirit sheds. This is a task fraught with challenges because on the one hand it is easy to assume that the Spirit will never contradict one's present assumptions, and on the other hand the believer runs the risk of assuming the Spirit is calling for change when in fact faithfulness is manifested by retaining present convictions of faith.⁴⁰ This new perspective revealed by the Spirit's activities and voiced by the formerly marginalized Gentiles helped the church see afresh the passages in Scripture that had spoken all along of God's impartiality. This reverent response to Cornelius by a smaller segment of the church would lead to the larger gathering of believers at the Council of Jerusalem.

³⁸ Johnson, *Acts*, 186-87.

³⁹ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 96.

⁴⁰ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith--Unity in Christ*, 33.

Case Study #5: Acts 15:1-35: The Council at Jerusalem

The role this biblical story best performs today is explaining rather than tempering the theological diversity found within the whole NT. The church that claims continuity with the apostles should tolerate a rich pluralism, even though it is sometimes accompanied by internal controversy and conflict. What is achieved at the Jerusalem Council is Christian unity rather than theological uniformity.⁴¹

Chapter fifteen is not only the most defining chapter in the book of Acts, but is also literally at the center of the book.⁴² The convocation in Jerusalem addressed crucial questions for the community of faith: What is necessary for inclusion within the people of God?⁴³ How does the church accommodate and respect the sensibilities of both Jewish and Gentile Christians while remaining true to her identity and purpose? There is considerable debate in scholarly circles regarding the relation of Acts 15 to Galatians 2 because both passages seem to be speaking to the same or similar events and themes, yet simultaneously the tone and detail of each is quite divergent from the other. However, a thorough treatment of this complex debate is unessential to this particular discussion.⁴⁴

Despite the clear sign of God's favor upon the Gentiles by the Spirit falling upon them, certain Jewish followers of Christ from more stringent interpretations of the Jewish law came from Judea to Antioch and insisted that circumcision was still necessary for

⁴¹ Robinson and Wall, *Called to be Church*, 25.

⁴² Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 439.

⁴³ Pervo, *Acts*, 372.

⁴⁴ The debate can generally be summarized by three perspectives. First, both passages describe the same event. Second, Galatians 2 describes Acts 11:30 rather than Acts 15. Third, Acts 15 is a Lucan creation that either conflates two separate events or summarizes what should have happened. The second position is preferred because it seems to answer the greatest amount of questions and create the least amount of new problems. The author holds this perspective with modest reservation, due to the gaps and discrepancies that bedevil all positions in this complex historical and theological conundrum. Laying aside these uncertainties, both passages attest to the early church's courageous decision to adapt, collaborate, and move forward in the midst of conflict and changing dynamics as the Spirit of Christ moved amongst the Gentiles. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts*, 269-70 provides a particularly helpful discussion regarding the complexities of interpretation.

salvation. A delegation from the church in Antioch was sent to Jerusalem for a council to address the issue. The debate can be boiled down to progressive and conservative approaches to the Jewish law and its application to daily living and relating. The conservatives were Christ-following Pharisees who believed that experience should bend to the law, in other words they were strict constructionists in their hermeneutic. The progressives, represented by Peter, were those who argued that the Law of Moses can be faithfully applied in a more flexible manner, depending on the situation. Their argument was that the Spirit's activity among the Gentiles testified to a more malleable application of the law than the conservatives allowed for. The moderates, represented by James, sought to facilitate collaboration and creative tension between the conservatives and progressives.⁴⁵

After much heated argumentation, Peter spoke out from his experience several years earlier with Cornelius by saying, "He has made no distinction between us and them."⁴⁶ The entire assembly then listened in silence as Paul and Barnabas also shared about their experiences where uncircumcised Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, made his debut in Acts as the appointed moderator and ultimate decision-maker at the council. His response was a measured one influenced by Scripture, experience, and compromise. Unity in Christ, commitment to relationships, and the mission to the Gentiles shaped his conclusions. He deemed salvation for both Jew and Gentile to be accomplished through Christ, not circumcision. He noted all things associated with pagan temple worship should be

⁴⁵ Pervo, *Acts*, 379.

⁴⁶ Acts 15:9.

avoided so that Christ might be at the center of everyone's faith. His conviction was that the mission of God to the Gentiles should not be held back by the church troubling the Gentiles with a burden that no one, even Jews, could carry. Yet at the same time, relationships in the body of Christ were to be kept strong between Jews and Gentiles. For this to happen, Gentiles should respectfully not partake of things repulsive to Jews when in their presence. This prayerful, Scriptural, and well-discussed response in community seemed good to the Holy Spirit and the church. The strict convictions of conservatives regarding Jewish law were now chastened and nugatory, limited as a secondary opinion among those of like mind, and no longer deemed universal in scope for Gentiles or Jews. In other words, the council discerned that the traditional Jewish view of the law was not binding or necessary for matters of faith and practice for any follower of Christ. The church created room for more progressive practices in this area because the action of the Spirit affirmed this broadened approach to the law. Despite ruling against the strict interpretation and application of the Jewish Law to Gentiles, the minority view was amended, but not eradicated. In the demanding and rewarding journey of unified variance, not every position can be victorious or preserved as it was in the past. Though moderated by the Jerusalem council, Dunn notes, "Jewish Christianity could take up a very conservative stance towards the law and a very antagonistic stance towards Paul and still be recognized as a valid expression of faith in Jesus the Christ."⁴⁷ The conservative Jews of the time are to be greatly commended because they felt most acutely the pain of unified variance. They submitted to the ruling of the council that required them to relent on some of their most cherished interpretations. There will inevitably be times where

⁴⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 283.

following Jesus will take the believer to a place of brokenness, loss of the familiar, and sacrifice. Hutchkiss describes this nature of sacrificial leadership as fiduciary, where the leadership body faithfully discerns for not just oneself, but to the interest of the other, even at personal cost or risk to the individual or group.⁴⁸ The pursuit of unified variance in Christ is to not only be magnanimous, but also for all sides to renounce a surrenderless Christianity and be willing to forsake all that is necessary to follow Christ and free others to follow Christ faithfully.⁴⁹

Yet the believer is promised not only a cross, but an empty tomb and new life. The church still gave room for the conservative Jews to retain their amended distinctives. They were also lovingly stretched by the faith community to grow, even if it might have been against their will at the time. Acts illustrates the realities of self-sacrifice and even loss for an authentic reconciled variance.

The inclusion of Gentiles in the church had the potential to derail this burgeoning Jesus movement. Thankfully, the church followed the leading of the Spirit and affirmed unified variance in Christ. More people could encounter Jesus than ever before. Praxis would not be uniform or constant in all contexts, but relationships between Jew and Gentile could be sustained because the commitment to honor table fellowship remained intact by the council. Though not all believers agreed, Christianity wrestled with and ultimately joined in with, rather than resisted, this watershed moment to include Gentiles. The church risked anxiety and conflict by making room for the incorporation of Gentiles *and* honoring pious Jews who had strict interpretations of the Law, even though they

⁴⁸ Dan Hutchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership*, Kindle Ed. (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2009), loc 1405.

⁴⁹ Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, 171.

were required to adapt their interpretation and application of the Law to non-Jews. Jew and Gentile did this through meetings, prayer, and being open to the leading of God's Spirit. The Jewish past was respected as well as the changing face of faith was recognized with the promised Gentile presence as foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This was not always accomplished seamlessly or even faithfully by the church. Eventually, there was a parting of ways between Christianity and Judaism, as late as AD 325 when Nicaea convened at the summons of the Roman emperor Constantine.⁵⁰ Bauckham disagrees with Dunn's understanding and timing of the parting of ways.⁵¹ In his estimation, the separation of Christian and Jew was brought about by the Christian understanding of itself, not the temple in Jerusalem, as the true temple of God. This in turn led to the parting of the ways when Christians beginning in AD 132 did not join the Bar Kokhba revolt to restore the temple. Either way, the reality of the split cannot be denied. Those who call Abraham their father can only wistfully wonder if there would have been a different outcome if those who followed Christ in the decades and centuries after the Jerusalem Council had also been committed to unified variance.

The tolerance and conciliatory spirit found in Acts can help and inspire the church to continue seeking unity in Christ across divides for the purpose of mission. This particular case study is concluded with the church successfully implementing conflict resolution in a profoundly deep issue of identity and practice in the church. Yet at the same time, the diversity within the unity of the church in Acts was not stifled by the leadership. Conservatives, moderates, and liberals were honored, even if more Jewish

⁵⁰ Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xxiv.

⁵¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 189.

expressions of Christianity diminished over the course of time in future debates in church history. Today's church would do well to revisit Acts and follow the lead of the early church leaders when tackling modern-day intramural theological controversies that beset the church.

Conclusion

Communities of faith today that have a wide spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives can learn from the early church's discernment process in Acts, which highlighted collaborative relationships rooted in Christ and context-appropriate mission. Throughout these five case studies, there have been commonalities in the church's mission: open dialogue in a public setting, communal prayer, regular study of Scripture, valuing relationships and experience through story sharing, having experience shape the interpretation of Scripture, and a commitment to witness to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁵² All of these tools were used to respond positively to negative or difficult situations that challenged the church. The church was able to rise to the occasion. The entire book of Acts is a rich resource for theologian and practitioner alike to work through difference in a way that honors God, the whole people of God, and those surprising people groups who may yet join in the church by the grace of Christ.

⁵² Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 88.

CHAPTER 3:

CHURCH HISTORY AND THOUGHT: UNIFIED VARIANCE IN THE NT CANON

The New Testament canon does not constitute the foundational unity of the church. On the contrary, as such, it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions.¹

Introduction to Chapter Aims

The purpose and the strategy of this chapter are to show both the unity and the variety in the NT canon itself and also the canonization process that the church engaged in throughout the centuries. A central teaching throughout church history is that the unity of the gospel is held together in the person of Christ. For example, Ignatius wrote, “But as for me, my charter is Jesus Christ, the inviolable charter is His cross and His death and His resurrection, and faith through Him...”² Similarly, Irenaeus wrote, “For Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field...the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ.”³ McDonald sums up the thinking of other church fathers by saying, “The earliest *regula* (canon) for the Christian community was Jesus himself, whose words, deeds, and fate were interpreted afresh in numerous sociological contexts where the early Christians

¹ E. Kasemann, “The New Testament Canon and the Unity of the Church” (1951); repr. in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964), 103 quoted in James D. G. Dunn, “Has the Canon a Continuing Function,” in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 563.

² J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, trans. “Ignatius to the Philadelphians 8.2,” in *The Apostolic Fathers* (White Fish, MT: Kessinger, 2011), 155.

³ Phillip Schaff, ed. “Against Heresies: Book IV,” *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vi.xxvii.html> (accessed January 7, 2013).

lived.”⁴ Patzia notes Jesus “was considered a ‘standard’ or ‘canon’ of authority long before his words were written down, collected and officially canonized by the church.”⁵ No portion of the NT was written before the resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁶ In other words, it is important to remember that the canon does not exercise authority in itself, but Christ’s authority is exercised through the NT canon.⁷

This passion and commitment to Christ unified the church in the midst of their differing understandings of what books should be included within the canon. Though not agreeing on everything, they could be on the same page because of the agreement that the purpose of the Scriptures was to point to Jesus and that he fulfilled the Scriptures. Jesus may have been explained from differing perspectives using a variety of terms, but the entire NT compellingly narrates the story of God’s activity revealed, unfolded, and explained—most clearly and definitively in the person of Jesus Christ.⁸ Kruger notes:

The unity between the Old Testament books and the New Testament books is such that they are not just a collection of individual stories on a variety of topics, but combine together to form one overarching story of salvation.⁹

This dedication to the genuine story of Christ helped those in the church to sift out books that did not faithfully tell Christ’s story as it was passed on by his closest followers. At the same time, this devotion to the gospel story aided those who had trouble

⁴ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 245.

⁵ Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text & Canon*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011), xi.

⁸ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 253.

⁹ Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 149.

with the gospel of John or Hebrews to still allow for these books to be included in the canon because others experienced the crucified and risen Christ through those writings.¹⁰

The process of canonization was a way of honoring the different stripes of faithful followers of Jesus. Leonard Sweet describes these glaringly diverse early Christians as having a “sound theology” with “the ability of many unique and colorful strands to be woven into a beautiful harmonic weave: it is the beauty of complexity and ecstasy that moves us beyond words.”¹¹ In those moments, the written word took the church to the living Word, Jesus Christ.

Definitions

The Bible is composed of Scriptures or holy books. Scripture is defined as written documents considered by the church to be of divine origin that communicate God’s desires and truths for the guidance, authority, and edification of the people of God, on both an individual level and a collective level.¹² NT documents began to be understood as Scripture when they were placed alongside OT documents.¹³ McDonald gives a helpful description of the similarities and dissimilarities of canon and Scripture by noting, “in a sense all of Scripture is canon, but a biblical canon is more specifically a fixed or selected collection of Scriptures that comprise the authoritative Scriptures for a religious body.”¹⁴

¹⁰ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 395.

¹¹ Leonard Sweet, *The Greatest Story Never Told* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 101.

¹² McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

The Greek word *canon* means “reed,” which came to be understood as any straight stick utilized for measuring. A canon came to mean a rule or standard that other things would be compared and judged by. In Alexandria, the Greek concept of canon was emerging around the time of the development of the NT and may have contributed to the Christian concept of canon. In Alexandria, a canon was a recognized list that acknowledged which Greek writings were deemed classics. The canon was open and additions and subtractions were debated. The Greek concept of canon noted a work’s quality rather than its status.¹⁵ There were Alexandrian canons for art, music, grammar, and philosophy that functioned as standard guides, rules, or ideals for any given discipline. In a religious setting, the canon was a standard or collection of writings (which varied at the fringes from region to region) that defined the faith and identity of a spiritual community.

Introduction to the Christian Scriptures

Bibles can be deceptive. Today they have soft leather covers, crisp pages outlined with gold, and a uniform font. But a book should not solely be judged by its cover. The process that led to the recognition of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we know it was a long and complex one. There is a unity and diversity embedded in the Christian Bible, which includes the OT and NT, that poses interesting challenges and opportunities for the church’s self-understanding and expression to the world. Muslims do not have the same dilemma regarding the relationship of different components of the Scriptures. Although Muslims recognize the holy books of Jews and Christians, the most

¹⁵ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: University, 2001), 453.

crystallized and supreme revelation of God is found in the Koran. The prophet Muhammad alone received the revelation of God, but according to Islamic tradition, none of the prophet's personality is contained in the Koran. The Islamic scholar Rumi notes:

Men have fashioned... on the banks of pools, men of stone or birds of stone, and out of their mouths the water comes and pours into the pool. All who are possessed of reason know that the water does not issue out of the mouth of stone bird: it issues out of another place.¹⁶

In other words, there is no human voice that intermingles with Allah's words in the Koran. The prophet is only a messenger who opened his mouth and God spoke. This gives the Koran a uniform expression and format that is very different than the Christian understanding of the Scriptures.

The word *bible* is derived from the Greek plural *ta biblia*, meaning little scrolls or books, and was first applied to the collection of Jewish and Christian Scriptures by John of Chrysostom.¹⁷ These books of the Bible also include within them a multitude of genres of literature that speak of the God of Israel and the person of Jesus of Nazareth, utilizing narrative, poetry, short story, reports, biography, legal codes, hymns, prayers, maxims, riddles, and apocalyptic writings. The people of Israel went through many cultural changes throughout the composition of the Hebrew Scriptures—traditions, government, land, exile, oppression, and diaspora. In addition, the Christian Bible recognizes two testaments: one in Hebrew (and also Greek from the Septuagint) from Judaism; and one in Greek that testifies to Christ and the Apostles' witness to the crucified and risen Jesus. The Christian canon thus honors the differences yet simultaneously functions as a bridge

¹⁶ A.J. Arberry, trans. *Discourses of Rumi* (London: Routledge, 1967), 51-52, quoted in Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian* (Oxford: One World, 1999), 83.

¹⁷ Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament*, 201.

connecting the two testaments as a two-part act within a greater story.¹⁸ Therefore, the Bible should be seen as both a unified book and a library of books. The NT recognizes both the singular (*scripture*) and plural (*scriptures*) aspect of God’s written word.¹⁹ The collection of Scriptures gathered together developed with advances in technology. A leather or papyrus scroll was usually twenty to twenty-six feet long and was able to only contain one book²⁰—in fact, even longer individual books had to be divided into two scrolls, such as the books of Samuel, Chronicles, and Kings. It wasn’t until later technological advancements with the codex that all the Scriptures could be placed in one book. The ability to have all the Scriptures in one anthology may have contributed to the church’s need to define which books should actually be included or left out of the codex.²¹ The concept of the Bible as “one book” and “many books” should be viewed in acquiesced tension, rather than a competing contradiction, because of the polarity of singular and plural dimensions of the Bible. Thus, to genuinely begin to understand the Bible, it is prudent to read it simultaneously as one book and multiple books in conversation with one another—a unity in diversity.

Not only is there a wide range of genres, authors, cultures, and time periods within the Scriptures, but the church had to discern which sacred writings were appropriate for public worship and could be beneficial theologically across time and

¹⁸ John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: WJK, 1997), 63.

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?: A History of the Scriptures Through the Ages* (New York: Viking, 2005), 45.

²⁰ Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 2190.

²¹ Robert A. Kraft, “The Codex and Canon Consciousness,” in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 233.

place.²² Even when the church agreed on a particular book, a different region often used a different textual variant from another church.²³ In this process, history leaves a positive record that the church carried this out in a measured, peaceful, and open-ended way that could live with the differences found in textual variants of the same books or at the margins of the canon. This patient process of canonization is an ancient, yet living, inspiration for today's church to remain engaged in conversation with one another in the midst of debate, even if not all communities of faith see every theological issue eye to eye.

Christians believe that the Scriptures (Old and New Covenant) are the Word of God and word of humans, God's Word given through personality and culture. The Hebrew Scriptures are a part of the Christian canon known as the OT and are also quoted within the NT. Several apocryphal books that were not themselves canonized are quoted within the NT (*Jannes and Jambres* in 2 Timothy 3:8, *Enoch* in Jude 1:9, possibly *Apocalypse of Elijah* in 1 Cor. 2:9).

There are additional contributions to the diverse flavors of the NT books in the canon. Each book was written for specific occasions, rather than solely for universal readership.²⁴ The early church also was also a movement in process during the composition of the Scriptures that reflect the different situations and settings of its audience, which can lead to apparently conflicting guidance in different situations. For example, Paul's argument in Romans 13 for obeying the laws of the government seem to

²² Harry Y. Gamble, "Canonical Formation of the New Testament," in *Dictionary of NT Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 193.

²³ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 361-62.

²⁴ Wall, "The Significance of a Canonical Perspective of the Church's Scripture," 534.

go against the Twelve's response towards government authorities in Acts 4 and 5. Paul's advice to the Corinthian and Roman churches regarding eating meat sacrificed to idols contradicts the Jerusalem Council's final decisions.²⁵ Baptismal formulas differ in Matthew 28 from several in Acts. A variety of church structures are described within the NT canon. Paul and James had different attitudes towards the law and works. Jesus in the book of Matthew seems to have a much different attitude toward the law than Jesus in Mark. Despite these differences, the canon functions as a holding tank to keep these various perspectives communicating and informing one another, rather than weeding out passages that seem to be in contradiction with one another. The early church saw the value of this varied collection of books that helped interpret one another rather than choosing a seamless internal consistency that weeded out this difference.²⁶

Criteria

The development of the NT canon is a complicated process and one of the most complex areas of study in church history, involving cultural, theological, and technological factors.²⁷ There has been debate in canon research whether the process of canonization was the church giving the authority to documents or the church recognizing the authority already present in the document.²⁸ It appears that canonization was a long

²⁵ C.K. Barrett notes in his commentary that this may either be due to Paul's lack of knowledge of the Jerusalem Decree or his belief that it was not binding upon Gentile churches. C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1968), 8.

²⁶ Barton, *Holy Writings*, 152.

²⁷ Harry Y. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 294.

²⁸ Kruger in *Canon Revisited* takes this self-authenticating approach which highlights the inspiration of Scripture as the most important component in the canonization process. Kruger notes

and patient process of discernment exercised by the church community to ultimately decide what texts were Scripture, with inspiration of the texts inherent in the document being a secondary factor in the process.²⁹ There were several elements to the selection process that deemed a book canonical or worthy of the status as Scripture. First, the church's regular use and wide acceptance of a writing for its spiritual nourishment for the community of faith. Second, apostolicity indicated that the document could be traced back to the twelve apostles or their circle of followers. With time, an apostle's name would often be appended to the document to lend credibility to its chances of being received as Scripture. If a document was written too far removed from the time of Paul or the disciples, it was more difficult to be received as Scripture. Third was the need for the letter to be in harmony with Church tradition and orthodoxy. The community of faith discerned through time, use in public worship, and a wide variety of settings if a writing aligned or not with the *rule of faith* or the *canon of truth*.³⁰ In many ways the canon functioned as the frame within which the art of God's word to humans could be focused within.³¹

The NT canonization process took place from the first through the fifth century, but not in an officially organized or coordinated manner. Canonization involved adding and sifting out books deemed sacred, but the course of action demonstrated by the church

inspiration of the specifically twenty-seven books is necessary for providing intellectually sufficient grounds for a rational faith. See pages 20-24.

²⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: University Press, 1987), 242-43.

³⁰ Lee Martin McDonald, "Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 422-23.

³¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (New York: Image, 1990), 40.

never reached a complete consensus on the exact same canon—which may be one of its greatest strengths, because a manufactured unity was not thrust upon all churches against their will.³² This may be due to the multitude of factors that shaped the canonization process, depending upon the locale. Certain texts were used longer and more often in particular regions, while different theological stripes leaned on specific texts more than others, and the influence of bishops or regional counsels impacted what texts each region gravitated towards. Churches in urban contexts generally had more contact with a variety of holy writings than remote rural areas, so faith communities in cosmopolitan contexts were often exposed to more books than areas with smaller populations.³³ The church made a conscious decision to honor these differing and apparently contradictory traditions, ideologies, and theologies by incorporating them into this single and singular book.³⁴ Canonization was a gradual communal decision and a grassroots and organic process whereby the church on many fronts through experience and time, rather than a decree or council, allowed the Spirit to speak in God’s timing. There was a willingness to leave the fringes of the canon open, while holding on to the core that was almost universally agreed upon. Bartow notes, “In cases where there was general doubt, patristic listings often allow doubt to remain. Thus where rulings are needed, none is offered.”³⁵ The local church had the freedom to incorporate or leave out certain books.³⁶ Churches did not agree on the canon simultaneously or acknowledge all the same books, but

³² However, Roman culture and the influence of Constantine were very real external pressures upon the church for uniformity in theology and canon. See McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 300 and 316.

³³ Harry Y. Gamble, “Canonical Formation of the New Testament,” 183-195.

³⁴ Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Study Bible*, 456.

³⁵ Barton, *Holy Writings*, 28.

³⁶ Metzger, *Canon*, 16.

variance was generally not regarded as a problem or threat to the church.³⁷ McDonald notes that the church was “not canon conscious.”³⁸ However, debated writings that contained Gnostic thought such as *Gospel of Truth* were not permitted to be included with or equated to Scripture among orthodox churches, so the elastic boundaries still functioned as boundaries in certain situations.³⁹ Latitude and a modified range of difference were allowed in the discernment process, which contributed to a very different tone from the orthodoxy and creedal controversies that were raging at the same time. The harmonization taking place in theology took a greater role than the harmonization of Scripture. It is interesting that no ecumenical council in the ancient church ever made a ruling on behalf of the entire church regarding the books composing the canon. In other words, the process of canon development is more about the history of worship than the history of dogma.⁴⁰ The process of canonization exercised by the church and the canon itself was a healthy model for unity in diversity. This might suggest to the church today to consider worship as an arena to work through difference rather than through church councils.

By the end of the second century, the four gospels, letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John generally had a very broad, well-used, and well-respected reputation, although the prominent theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia rejected James, 1 Peter, and 1 John. John Chrysostom (AD 347-407), who quoted expansively from the NT, never quoted from

³⁷ McDonald and Sanders, *Debate*, 10.

³⁸ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 214. However, for Kruger knowing that the exact twenty-seven books of the canon (no more and no less) is a profoundly important question for all Christians. See Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 11.

³⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make it Into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 115.

⁴⁰ Gamble, “The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis,” 291.

2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, or Revelation.⁴¹ Lists that limit the scope of the canon are common in the fourth and fifth centuries, but strict limitations or universal decrees on the contents of the canon were non-existent at this time.⁴² The content of collected sacred writings remained variable from region to region, reflecting the flavor of traditions in church worship and the preference of leaders in each particular locale through the third and into the fourth century.

If the canonization process had been rushed or forced, such books as *1 Clement*, *Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Epistle to the Laodiceans*, or *Didache* might have been included in the canon, while other books that made canonical status, such as Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John might not have been canonized because they were not well known or used by the church in the second and third centuries.⁴³ In this slow process, books such as *Shepherd of Hermas*, *I and II Clement*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Epistle of Laodiceans*, *Wisdom of Solomon* (occasionally), and *Apocalypse of Peter* were not admitted, but they also were not disqualified. They were allowed to hover for an extended time as the church could test them out in liturgical settings to see if these writings rang true with the canon of faith and edified the church's faith in Christ. Even after canonization took place, the contents of the Bible didn't absolutely freeze—a flexibility around the edges and fringes of the canon remained. In the seventh century, Jacob of Edessa said that fourth-century decrees against some certain

⁴¹ Metzger, *Canon*, 214.

⁴² Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," 291.

⁴³ Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 2190.

Apocrypha shouldn't be considered binding for all times and all places.⁴⁴ This humility and recognition of difference is a helpful posture for the modern church to follow.

The Canon and World Christianity

Within global Christianity today, the biblical canon is not uniform. There are sixty-six books contained within the Protestant Bible, the smallest canon in Christianity. The Ethiopian Orthodox church contains eighty-one books in their canon, the largest canon in Christianity. Portions of the Syrian church do not recognize Revelation as a part of the NT canon. Martin Luther had his own struggles with certain books in the NT canon. Although he considered Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation inferior, Luther still translated them and kept them in the canon, albeit grouped together last in the NT.⁴⁵ In addition to varying canons, different denominations and traditions have had different canons within a canon. Generally speaking, Roman Catholics gravitate towards Matthew 16:17-19 and the Pastoral Epistles to interpret other Scriptures. Protestants heavily utilize Galatians to formulate their theology, while Eastern Orthodox draw upon the writings of John, and Pentecostals dwell upon the book of Acts.⁴⁶ Other passages are interpreted through the lens of each canon within a canon. In addition, there are also different textual variants of certain passages recognized by different sects of Christianity.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ William Adler, "The Pseudepigrapha in the Early Church," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 228.

⁴⁵ Metzger, *Canon*, 242-43.

⁴⁶ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 409-10.

⁴⁷ Metzger, *Canon*, 269.

Important Figures and Documents in the Canonization Process

Irenaeus of Lyons regularly quoted from NT documents in his writings and referred to this body of writings as Scripture and used them in public reading for worship. By AD 180, he understood the canon of the four gospels to be closed.⁴⁸ Irenaeus vigorously defended the importance of these four gospels and rejected the possibility of other gospels to be added.⁴⁹ He argued that the one gospel in four forms was a necessary check against heresy. Parties who relied upon one gospel alone for proof of their position would often ignore the other three gospels. Irenaeus may also have taken this approach to ensure that his favorite gospel, John, would be included within the canon because Matthew was the most quoted in the early church. According to Irenaeus the Ebionites looked only to Matthew, Marcion relied upon Luke solely, docetists referred only to Mark, and Gnostics only emphasized John. The diversity of the four gospels was self-corrective and protected against erroneous teaching in the community of faith. Irenaeus also used numerology to honor unity in diversity by saying that the gospel is naturally fourfold—like the north, south, east, and west, or like the symbolism from Ezekiel of the Man, the Eagle, the Ox, and Lion demonstrates that we need the one gospel expressed four ways—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It opened up diversity, yet limited it, as many gospels were vying for sacred writing status by different communities.⁵⁰

Harnack posited that the NT canon was formed in the late second century in response to heresies by noting:

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁹ Everett Ferguson, “Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 314.

⁵⁰ Gamble, “Canonical Formation of the New Testament,” 185.

The simple and notorious fact that a new sacred collection was in existence among those heretics must have worked upon the Church as effectively as the composition of the Lutheran Catechism and of the articles and other professions of faith of the Reformers influenced the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century.⁵¹

However, it would be more accurate to say heretics, such as Marcion, helped accelerate, rather than create the canon.⁵² Heresies also challenged the church to articulate more clearly what their Scriptures were and what was orthodox belief. Marcion of Pontus was a wealthy and generous Christian ship owner who, in AD 144, shared before presbyters in Rome his shocking new teachings influenced by Gnosticism: throw away the Jewish writings and accept only the gospel of Luke and Paul's epistles. He was promptly excommunicated, but his heretical teachings tore through the church. Marcion sought to de-semitize the Scriptures by saying the Old and New Testaments were in contradiction to one another, and in fact spoke of two different gods. Jesus came to deliver humans from the evil Creator God of the OT. According to Marcion, even the Twelve Apostles misunderstood Christ and only Paul got it mostly right. Of the four gospels, Luke alone was retained, but even this gospel and Paul's writings were expunged of any references to the OT. The church discerned together that a larger canon was integral to her spiritual heritage and growth in Christ. The church saw the canon as a bridge between the monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Christianity. The God of Israel is the same God that Christians worship. The church needs both the OT and NT Scriptures in the canon. This diversity within the canon was integral to the peace, unity, and purity of the church. Other more developed forms of Gnosticism that came after Marcion played

⁵¹ Adolph von Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament* (New York: Williams and Norgate, 1925), 297.

⁵² Metzger, *Canon*, 99.

less of a role in the canonization process because generally Gnostics sought to change interpretation of Scripture with their speculations more than seeking to add or subtract books from the canon. The many voices within the canon help the church to be less likely to be led astray by the siren call of heresy.

If the church reacted to Marcion by protecting or enlarging the canon, the church reacted to the Montanists by entertaining the idea of subtracting books in the canon that were abused by them (particularly Hebrews and Revelation).⁵³ Montanus of Phrygia began gaining popularity in AD 172 with his teachings on prophecy, end times, and extreme asceticism. The Montanists appeared to confess that Christians could be inspired by the Holy Spirit equally with Scripture so that what they taught could challenge or even supersede the Scriptures or church tradition.⁵⁴ To defend against Montanism, the church developed a view of inspiration that was more situated in the past and in apostolic writings rather than in people. At the same time, the church retained the books of Revelation and Hebrews, rather than deleting them from use in faith and practice.

External influences of persecution and critique from non-Christians were factors in the development of the canon. Persecution helped speed up the process of canonization.⁵⁵ One of the ways Diocletian and other Roman emperors persecuted the fledgling Christian movement was through the burning of Christian Scriptures. Great debate arose in the church regarding what documents could be surrendered to authorities to be burned and what in good conscience could not be given over because it was holy

⁵³ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁴ David F. Wright, "The Montanists," in *A Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity*, ed. Timothy Dowley (Oxford: Lion, 1990), 87.

⁵⁵ Metzger, *Canon*, 107.

writ. The church had to decide what was acceptable and unacceptable to be burned, thus sifting and clarifying what was recognized as canon or not.

Attacks from opponents of Christianity, such as Porphyry regarding the contradictions of having four gospels, led to harmonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.⁵⁶ Opponents to Christians and even Christians themselves struggled to think of many gospels, which could infer that each one was insufficient or they were competing with one another, or just too confusing. Tatian's second century work *Diatessaron* (meaning "through the four") was not the first gospel harmony, but it was the most influential and pervasive in the church that was birthed out of the above concerns. With literary and satirical flair, Tatian incorporated rhetorical devices to his writings.⁵⁷ His harmony is an early witness to the standard place of four gospels in church life because no additional gospels were incorporated in it. For example, the four gospels are woven together to describe the scene leading up to Christ's betrayal in the garden:

And Judas the betrayer knew that place: for Jesus oft-times met with his disciples there (**John 18:2**). And when Jesus came to the place, he said to his disciples, Sit ye here, so that I may go and pray; and pray ye, that ye enter not into temptations (**Lk. 22:40a; Matt. 26:36b**). And he took with him Cephas and the sons of Zebedee together, James and John; and he began to look sorrowful, and to be anxious (**Lk. 22:40b; Matt. 26:37**). And he said unto them, My soul is distressed unto death: abide ye here, and watch with me (**Matt. 26:38**). And he withdrew from them a little, the space of a stone's throw (**Luke 22:41a**); and he kneeled (**Mk 14:35b**), and fell on his face, and prayed, so that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him (**Mk 14:36a**).⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 47.

⁵⁷ Kent L. Yinger, "Tatian," *The Encyclopedia of Christian Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. George Thomas Kurian (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2010), 586.

⁵⁸ H.W. Hogg, "The Diatessaron of Tatian," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf09.html> (accessed September 17, 2012), 186.

Yet in Tatian's mind, the four gospels were interpreted as a problem to be solved, rather than a rich resource to be enjoyed by the church. The church ultimately rejected Tatian's harmony and retained the four gospels in the NT. The church recognized with time that the manifold witness of four gospels deepened the church's experience of Christ, rather than fragmenting it. The life of Christ could be better understood when the four were read together rather than amalgamated into one. The church's solution of keeping four gospels in the canon had an "open-closedness" effect. Unity in the midst of local difference would come from a both/and solution rather than an either or neither approach.⁵⁹

Diversity of sources and the resistance to harmonize them also reveal the church's respect for the texts and their ability to address a variety of particular problems.⁶⁰ Many other attempts throughout church history have sought to boil down Christology into one smoothed over, binding interpretation that explains away the differences, rather than retaining them. Dean Flemming observes the problem of synthesizing the fourfold testimony of the gospels into a monolithic perspective by noting:

But compressing the Gospel writers' different renditions of the story into a single, generic tale defies the very dynamic by which the Gospels bear witness to and interpret Jesus for the church. . . the four Evangelists have narrated the story of Jesus according to their own theological and literary concerns and in light of how they perceived the needs of their readers. We might even say the four Gospels are four 'contextualizations' of the one story.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Everett R. Kalin, "The New Testament Canon of Eusebius," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 404.

⁶⁰ James A. Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 261.

⁶¹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 234.

The Muratorian Canon, probably written anywhere from the second to the fourth century, was first published by Ludovico Muratori in AD 1740. It is a list that functions as an introduction to what the church at the time deemed to be included in the New Testament. All books of the NT are mentioned as accepted by the church except 1 Peter, James, and Hebrews. It is also interesting to note that the Wisdom of Solomon and the Revelation of Peter (with some qualifications) are included as NT canon.⁶² In AD 240, Origen's *Homilies on Joshua* mentioned all the authors of the NT.⁶³ However, it is interesting to note that Origen recommended the reading of such books as Judith, Tobit, and Wisdom for new believers before reading the four gospels and epistles of Paul. Athanasius also advocated the use of the *Didache* and *Shepherd of Hermas* to instruct those joining the church.⁶⁴ Eusebius Bishop of Caesarea (AD 260-340) was commissioned by Constantine to provide information regarding the church's views about different sacred writings about Christ. Rather than using the word *canon*, he spoke of books that had become *encovenanted*. Viewing Scripture as covenantal books as a guide for community rule for God's people is helpful in fostering the relational component of Scripture for the church.⁶⁵ Eusebius wrote that twenty-two books were universally recognized by the church; five were disputed, but familiar to the church (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John); those that were rejected or spurious books (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Letter of Barnabas*, and *Revelation of John*—even though he also classified it as an accepted book); and those that were considered heretical and to be

⁶² Timothy Dowley, ed. *A Lion Handbook, The History of Christianity*, 108.

⁶³ Metzger, *Canon*, 139.

⁶⁴ Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 4th ed., 2189.

⁶⁵ Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 104.

avoided at all costs.⁶⁶ These conclusions indicate that the canon was not neatly organized or established. There was an ebb and flow of opinion about what was considered Scripture. This humility, caution, and open-endedness kept those fringe books in the conversation, rather than casting them away. Eusebius honored this spirit where Revelation could be viewed as acceptable “if it seems desirable” or simultaneously viewed as disputed or spurious “if this view prevails.”⁶⁷

Athanasius bishop of Alexandria was the first to use his position to take initiative to specifically spell out the terms for the NT canon consisting of twenty-seven books in his 39th Festal Letter AD 367. Being from Alexandria, where the Greek concept of canon was becoming increasingly popular and sophisticated, may have influenced his bold declarations about the Christian canon in his festal letter. But even then, not all the church was ready to entirely accept Athanasius’ catalogue as final. Gregory Nazianzus (d. AD 389) published his own NT catalogue before his death, which was the same as Athanasius’, except Revelation was not included in the canon.⁶⁸

After the Carthage Synod in AD 419 under the influence of Augustine of Hippo, the 27 NT books were determined and sealed for the Latin church. But the Greek church was slower to finalize the contents of the NT canon. The first Trullan Synod of Eastern Bishops of 691 in Constantinople made inconclusive and contradictory statements regarding the NT canon. Because different churches had differing opinions, they could live with the creative tension. The second canon of the Second Trullan Council of 692,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁷ Gamble, “Canonical Formation of the New Testament,” 189.

⁶⁸ Metzger, *Canon*, 212.

known as Quinisext, officially closed the canon for the Eastern church.⁶⁹ The boldest decision by a council was made 854 years later at the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546. It is interesting that the clear decisions pertained not to the NT canon, but the acceptance of the OT Apocrypha, which was made an article of faith and anathema for those who would reject it.⁷⁰ The openness and unified variance, at least in principle, of the NT canon was still honored.

Significance of the Canon for Unity and Diversity in the Church Today

The contradictions and discrepancies inherently imbedded in biblical literature testify in powerful ways to the canonical process itself, and can serve as its own self-corrective apparatus. . . . Acceptance of these tensions and antinomies would, one suspects, lead to a richer and more complex appreciation for the biblical canons by the faith communities within which they came into existence and still function.⁷¹

Some church scholars have argued that differing canons within Christianity and interpretive strategies foster disunity in the body of Christ. For example, Kurt Aland has suggested that 2 Peter and Revelation be expunged from the NT canon to promote Christian unity. Ernst Kasemann wanted to establish a canon within a canon to alleviate concerns over diversity in the Bible.⁷² However, this natural human tendency toward uniformity can repel what it seeks to attract. To remove certain canonical books would cut the off the church from other segments of the church that have found great value in them. The assumption that all the writers have to think alike to be included in the canon

⁶⁹ Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?*, 117.

⁷⁰ Metzger, *Canon*, 246.

⁷¹ Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," 261-62.

⁷² McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 3.

or that the canon has to be consistent in all its parts is a concept not necessarily rooted in Scripture or church tradition.⁷³ Two opposed views can be acceptable to God, serving side by side, just as the Scriptures are placed together side by side. In the same way, Christians who have different theologies or interpretations can serve side by side without one necessarily having to be right and the other having to be wrong.⁷⁴ This likens the church to a gospel synopsis or parallel. Rather than fused together in a Tatian-like manner, different theologies are placed in a looser unity side by side to be compared, observed, and discussed. Uniform perspectives actually might impoverish the church and ferret out legitimate perspectives that would otherwise enrich the church's faith in Christ. James Dunn notes, "To argue that only one development within the NT is canonical is to fail to recognize the diversity of development within the NT—to deny the canonicity of the NT."⁷⁵ There is even a danger that monolithic readings could detract from Christ's breadth and depth articulated in the Scriptures. Kruger helpfully notes the other equal danger of a "relentless (if not near-obsessive) focus on early Christian diversity."⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the canon sanctions diversity within the boundaries and center of Christ. Christ is the boundary and the center of the canon, but the NT writers articulate that reality differently. John Reumann notes, "Each book of the New Testament has a view of Jesus of one sort or another, but some are minimal (as in James), others unbelievably

⁷³ Metzger, *Canon*, 278.

⁷⁴ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 98.

⁷⁵ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 421. Dunn continues, "We dishonor the unique centrality of Christ when we demand a larger unity and refuse to acknowledge the diversity through which the commitment to Christ can be expressed." *Ibid.*, xxviii.

⁷⁶ Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 197.

high (as in John), and most somewhere in between.”⁷⁷ Honoring the difference in unity is part of faithful interpretation, rather than explaining it away or pretending it is not there. Taking seriously the canon helps train the spiritual ear of the believer to be attuned to the richness of reconciled difference and how these varied vocal parts use both harmony and dissonance or to resound the good news of Christ. The canon canonizes two things: the unity of the church and the diversity of the church. The Scriptures express unity in that they witness to Christ and diversity in how this is articulated. People will witness to Christ emphasizing different nuances of his saving work, but the same Christ is testified to. One may borrow from Paul’s thoughts in Philippians where he says, “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.”⁷⁸

Recognizing and honoring the theological difference within the canon itself will contribute to unified variance in the local and universal church. In the spirit of the canon, the task of the church is not to have uniform interpretation, but to join in the ongoing intramural conversation that the dialogical literature of the Scriptures have been engaging in amongst themselves through the centuries. Each book of the Bible can act as a bridge (rather than a party statement of competing factions) to various streams of Christianity.⁷⁹ The point and result of the debate should be a better understanding of how a person or group came to their particular interpretation from Scripture and how there is common ground in the midst of that. Differing perspectives stemming from Scripture provide

⁷⁷ John Reumann, *Variety and Unity in New Testament Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991), 29.

⁷⁸ Phil. 1:18.

⁷⁹ McDonald, “Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church,” 429.

constructive criticism for one another. Within the NT canon, Jewish Christianity, Gentile Christianity, and even Judaism remain in the picture and discussion.⁸⁰ The awareness of the particular and the universal keep in creative tension Scripture/Scriptures, Christianity/Christianities, and Judaism/Judaisms. The purpose of the canon is to ensure that the variety of books remain in conversation with one another—so that all are listened to and none are silenced. Creative tension is part of the DNA of Christianity because of the unified variance of the NT canon.

Or as James Dunn notes, “in order to *be* Christianity it has to be diverse.”⁸¹

Brevard Childs argues that Dunn overstates this diversity and writes that the canon provides the guidelines for how the differences are to be understood through the unity brought about by Christ.⁸² The strength of Childs’ approach is that he seeks to deliver the Bible from the academy back to the church in a more accessible manner. He values the encounter with Christ as a key element in the interpretive process, even for the OT. However, Childs’ preference for later versions of the manuscripts (which include greater elaborations and glosses) over earlier versions and his focus on the interpretation of the collective Scripture at the expense of individual Scriptures, risks a more ahistorical understanding of Scripture. His emphasis upon unity is a helpful corrective, but his approach often over-corrects at the expense of the variety found within the canon that should be listened to within the Scriptures, rather than muted.

⁸⁰ James D. G. Dunn, “Has the Canon a Continuing Function?” in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 576.

⁸¹ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 452.

⁸² Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 30.

Conclusion

John Reumann described well the church's interpretation of the Scriptures through the ages as a pendulum "swing[ing] back and forth in the study of the Bible between 'unity' and 'variety.'"⁸³ Certain periods emphasized one at the cost of the other. This chapter sought to demonstrate that the church is at its best when it recognizes the reality and importance of both and keeps unity and variety interacting, rather than competing or drowning one another out.

N.T. Wright navigates this dialogue well by noting the writers of Scripture were conscious of a unique vocation to write Jesus-shaped, Spirit-led, church-shaping books, as part of their strange first-generation calling, we should not doubt. This does not mean, of course, that all early Christian writers said exactly the same thing.⁸⁴

Instead of alleviating these differences, the NT is meant to be read together because there is a common thread that is greater than its diversity—the person of Christ. The NT is a book about Jesus (unity) and the people of God's responses to Jesus' call (variety). Reumann makes the case that the best way to articulate the polarity of unity and variety in the NT is to bring together Jesus and the church's faith in that same Christ as the center that holds the NT together.⁸⁵ Ultimately, Christ should be the canon within the canon. Christ is the principle of the Scriptures and the premier canon of the church because he is the head of the church that holds together the body of Christ.⁸⁶ Jesus as Lord is the standard and lens for the interpretation and use of the Scriptures by the early

⁸³John Reumann, *Variety and Unity*, 6.

⁸⁴Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 52.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 290.

⁸⁶McDonald, "Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church," 426.

church.⁸⁷ Just as the spine of the book holds together the Bible, so Christ not only holds together, but also embodies, God’s Word. By the miracle of God, the church is the Body of Christ in the world. All the Scriptures are united by Christ and point us back to Christ, just as the church is to point to Christ and be united in Christ. The purpose of the canon for the church is to facilitate the formation of Christ in the individual believer and in the church as a whole.⁸⁸ Luther described the Scriptures as *was treibt Christum* or “what promotes Christ.”⁸⁹ Christ is more than sufficient to bind together the theological, cultural, and literary diversity of the NT into a coherent whole.⁹⁰ Despite this unity, the canon of the NT ensures that there will be varieties and different perspectives of Christ. The diversity of the canon still speaks to its unity—the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. But as soon as the NT writers try to work out precisely how this unifying thread is singularly significant—diversity sets in and the similarities are blurred once again. Yet these differing expressions of Christ can help bring out the riches and depths of Christ. If today’s church applies this same outlook, varying views can be cautiously and judiciously observed with time rather than perceived as an immediate threat to the church’s unity.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3: 2-3, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone

⁸⁷ McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 14.

⁸⁸ Wall, *The Canon Debate*, 531.

⁸⁹ Daniel J. Harrington, “The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Early Church and Today” in *The Canon Debate*, 206.

⁹⁰ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, xviii-xix.

but on tablets of human hearts.” In other words, Christians are living epistles for the world to read by the grace of God.⁹¹ In many ways, the church can be likened to the canon. The canon holds together the different, at times seemingly contradictory, writings of Scripture in continual conversation with one another.

Similarly, the church holds together believers with different voices and perspectives in community and in conversation. Church unity in diversity calls for a broad attitude towards one another just as the Scriptures in the biblical canon interrelate with one another. If the church takes seriously the reality of the canon, the people of God have to take seriously the reality of manifold theological expressions that inevitably come from the variety of Scriptures.⁹² The Word of God is not possessed by the church. God’s Word in the NT canon speaks to God’s people and challenges them to look to God and to follow the person of Christ. It reminds the church that she is not the ultimate authority, but that all people live and move and find their being in God. Humans are the object, not the subject.⁹³ The Scriptures bring believers together and hold them together as each ideally seeks to keep in step with the Spirit of Christ. And together the Scriptures are read, interpreted, and re-interpreted. This takes time and patience, allowing for trial and error and observation to indicate if the application rings true or hollow with time, rather than rushing to judgment. And if the church is handling Scripture properly, it will point all to Christ, who is the canon within the canon, and it will challenge the body of Christ to continue Christ’s mission to the world. At the end of the day, the church must ask itself

⁹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson calls doing theology in the church as “reading the texts of human lives in a continuing process of self-revelation by the Living God.” Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 52.

⁹² Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 414.

⁹³ Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?*, 248.

the same question that the early church did regarding what books would be included in the NT canon, “does it point to Jesus as Lord?”

Differences will always remain within the church, but if the people of God follow the example of the early followers of Jesus in the NT, Jesus has the innate power to honor and encompass the people of God in a unified diversity and a variegated unity. Nathan Soderblom said it best in 1925 at the Life and Work Conference in Stockholm, “The nearer we come to Christ, the nearer we also come as Christians to one another. For Christ is the centre of faith and of the church. Every drawing near to Christ also draws us near to one another.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Quoted in Reumann, *Variety and Unity*, 291.

CHAPTER 4:

FOLLOWING CHRIST WITH UNIFIED VARIANCE

“Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’”¹

“The church is Christ existing as community.”²

The next three chapters will focus upon three crucial elements that contribute to unified variance: following Christ, cultivating relationships with Christ-followers, and a common mission to rally around. The first and foremost element in unified variance is Jesus and the individual and collective calling to be his disciple close behind his heels. This chapter will address how following Christ is central for the unity of the local church while simultaneously creating a spectrum of ways this unity is manifested. Andrew Walls notes this double movement:

Just as the indigenizing principle, itself rooted in the Gospel, associates Christians with the *particulars* of their culture and group, the pilgrim principle, in tension with the indigenizing and equally of the Gospel, by associating them with things and people outside the culture and group, is in some respects a universalizing factor.³

In other words, the gospel honors each unique culture as an environment to follow Christ, while simultaneously changing each culture by the constant engagement with Jesus of Nazareth and the God of Israel. There is unity in the one crucified and risen Lord who is the way to the God of Israel. The presence of the one Spirit binds together the

¹ Luke 9:23.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Hans-Richard Reuter, *The Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 111, quoted in Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 143.

³ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 8-9.

people of God. The Word of God functions as the compass that orients the church towards Christ on this journey of faith. Yet contained within this multi-faceted unity is a variance of how the living Christ informed by Scripture is experienced, understood, and applied to one's particular life and context. When the community of faith expects and treasures unified variance, the polarity of similarity and difference will be a compelling witness to the world of Christ's ability to hold all people together, even if they have strikingly different ways to manifest their faith in Jesus. Dwight J. Friesen notes this ministry and mission manifesto of unified variance in Christ:

I declare that embracing the complexities of contradictions, antinomies, and paradoxes of the human life is walking in the way of Jesus. The more we lean into the tension between competing truths, the closer we are to the heart of God. Territorial battles around theology cannot be seen as Christian work. Christianity is not a divine call to root out difference, nor is it a religion with the purpose of resolving paradox in a "once and for all" manner, rather the call of Christ is to live as a bridge, a link, a reconciling agent, rightly holding paradox with humility, faith, and love. Christ is the bridge not only between death and life but between black and white, male and female, Jew and Gentile, Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, modern and postmodern, I and thou. Wherever there is an impassible divide, we find Christ bridging the chasm with arms wide open; in just that place are followers of Christ, with their arms wide open as well.⁴

This chapter will attempt to distinguish the necessary harmonious and dissonant components of a theology and discipleship of unified variance in Christ Jesus.

Chapter two explored how the book of Acts might be seen as a repository of helpful case studies on how the church might collaborate to overcome apparently irreconcilable internal perspectives and external adversity that threaten the quality of community life and the furtherance of the gospel. When successful, the early church accomplished this by keeping Christ, the mission of God, and relationships in the community of faith at the forefront. Chapter three suggested that the prolonged process of

⁴ Dwight J. Friesen, "Orthoparadoxy: Emerging Hope for Embracing Difference," in *An Emerging Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 203.

canonization in church history provides a helpful example of the church practicing unity while allowing for a range of diversity within the canon. In both the church and the Scriptures themselves, the risen Christ is the unifying center.⁵ Just as the Bible, which consists of many books, is bound together by Christ, so the people of God who express a multitude of perspectives of Christ are bound together in the person of Christ. This dissertation will now grapple with the ways in which Christ-following leads to both similarity and dissimilarity.

Detours and Obstacles to Following Christ

In the book *unchristian*, David Kinnamen, president of the Barna Institute, did an extensive three year nationwide study on what young Americans (ages 16 to 29) think about Christianity. The results were sobering:

- * 91% of those surveyed viewed Christians as anti-homosexual
- * 87% viewed Christians as judgmental
- * 85% viewed Christians as hypocritical
- * 78% viewed Christians as old-fashioned
- * 75% viewed Christians as too political—either left or right
- * 72% viewed Christians as out of touch with reality
- * 70% viewed Christians as insensitive to others
- * 68% of those surveyed viewed Christians as boring⁶

A possible cause for these negative perceptions might be that the church has lost her moorings because she is following and tethered to something other than the person of Christ. There are many substitutes, some good (but not the best) and others more sinister, that sidetrack the church from following and accompanying the living Christ in ministry and mission. Politicization and polarization are two forces that can detour the church

⁵ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 458.

⁶ David Kinnamen, *unchristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 28.

down theological and ministerial rabbit trails away from unified variance in Christ. Passion for God can easily degenerate into dogmatism about one's assumptions regarding the world, with the expectation others must fall into precise agreement in order to be faithful to Christ. From the theological and political right, this may be manifested in the tendency to conflate God and country. Patriotism and support for the military are spiritualized and seen as part and parcel of Christian discipleship for all people. The support of the state or being against a common enemy of the state has on occasion been utilized as a rallying cry to bring the church together. This may be quite effective for like-minded folks (at least in the short-run), but conscientious objectors may be labeled unpatriotic, unchristian, or ideological outsiders who are to keep their convictions silent. However, discipleship that expresses unified variance in Christ is big enough to contain different political or theological views and unite those who hold seemingly competing perspectives. This chapter contends that Christ and Christians will appear less un-Christian and a great deal more Christlike to the world and the Church universal when there is a commitment to reconciled difference in the crucified and risen Lord.

From the left, liberation theology in the North American context often conflates the Democratic Party's social agenda with the good news of Christ. Those who do not embrace a more liberal perspective on social issues are considered against the cause of Christ, unenlightened, or bigoted. Both of these perspectives have a propensity to equate God with their brand of politics or theology. This confuses gospel with ideology and Christ with a cause.⁷ Unity can be created in this environment, but it is only with those who hold to the same view. One knows that if subversive questions about these liberal assumptions are asked, they will be discouraged or silenced. Those with more traditional

⁷ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith—Unity in Christ*, 58.

theo-political frameworks would also do well to hold their views more provisionally and humbly.

A healthy corrective to extreme left or right views is to understand the Christian faith is large enough to contain seemingly contradictory beliefs and believers. For example, one of the twelve disciples was the Jew, Simon the Zealot, who had strongly nationalistic feelings towards Israel and against Rome.⁸ At the same time, Jesus declared a Gentile centurion in the occupying forces of Rome as having a greater faith than anyone in Israel.⁹ Both of these men followed Christ faithfully within their very different worldviews. This paper makes the case that this same truth continues today. Christ is big enough to allow his followers to have differing interpretations. Christ is not so small as to require rigid uniformity on every interpretation. The legal maxim *de minimis non curat lex* means “*the law cares not for small things.*” In other words, the justice system ideally dismisses unworthy cases to prevent a backlog of inconsequential, distracting, time consuming, and expensive court cases.¹⁰ Similarly, Christians follow a just and merciful God who deems his people worth more than sparrows and knows how many hair follicles are on their head, yet at the same time is a *de minimis* God who is not embroiled in prosecuting trifle matters against his people. Those made in God’s image would enhance their humanity and humankind by being just and merciful *de minimis* disciples guided by the law of love. This would then free the church from being consumed and distracted by trifling matters at the expense of Christ’s ministry and mission to the church and world. Christ transcends differences and makes them lesser matters that can still be prescribed

⁸ Luke 6:15.

⁹ Matt. 8:5-13.

¹⁰ *The Free Dictionary Online*, s.v. “De Minimis,” <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/De+Minimis> (accessed January 5, 2013).

to, as long as they are submitted to Christ's lordship. The weightier matter is whether one is following Christ, not whether they have one particular political or theological view among many expressed in the Scriptures.

Whether traditional or progressive, issue-centered unity rather than Christ-centered unity in the church is a temporary cohesion because its source is something other than the life-changing good news of resurrection and forgiveness found in Christ for all. This pseudo-unity is often rooted in a law or legislation that is looked to for liberation rather than a living relationship with Christ. This tendency throughout history illustrates a confusion between the church's role of *following* Christ and *replacing* Christ. Sinful human nature is ever inclined to attempt to create God in human's image so that God and his message are in actuality a human message. To correct this propensity, true followership of Christ seeks to always return to Christ and other Christ-followers for constructive criticism and feedback regarding the fidelity of their interpretation to Christ.¹¹

Christ (Not Issues) in the Front and Center

The challenge for church leadership, particularly in a congregation that is composed of both liberal and conservative perspectives, is to love people with these perspectives, understand their world, and gently and lovingly point them beyond their agendas to the church's *raison d'être*—following where Christ leads. Being a Jesus-follower is much different from and more than being passionate about one's political persuasions that have become spiritualized. The centrality and Lordship of Christ in the

¹¹ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith-Unity in Christ*, 48.

believer means that one pledges ultimate allegiance to Christ above all other claims and that the individual dies to their preferences, assumptions, ideologies, and their very lives so that Christ might live through the individual.¹² Christ-followers receive their instructions from Christ, rather than telling Christ what the agenda will be. With Christ in the lead, the real issue is not so much if one is to the left or to the right theologically or politically, but if the church as a whole is moving forward toward Christ's activity, rather than backing away from what God is doing.¹³

Christ then provides guidance on “the how” of being a socially engaged Jesus-follower regarding issues that are controversial or debated. Jesus is not only the goal, but the way—the means—that the church follows. A person (Jesus), not a principle, is the *sectio aurea*, the “golden mean” for an authentic life of faith. Eugene Peterson notes, “The way of Jesus is the way we practice and come to understand the truth of Jesus, living Jesus in our homes and workplaces, with our friends and family.”¹⁴ The Lordship of Christ recalibrates, renovates, and reconfigures every aspect of the disciple's life, including his or her goals and the way in which they are arrived at. The way of Jesus guides followers of Jesus to relate reverently and humbly with others, to honor Christ rather than exploit Christ, and to give Christ room to continue his ministry of service through the church, which is the body of Christ. This all-encompassing allegiance to the crucified and risen Christ unites believers and absorbs them into the Jesus-like life, but does not necessarily create a uniformity of theology or politics on any given issue. After a

¹² See Gal. 2:20.

¹³ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto*, xiii.

¹⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 4.

presidential election, many members of Immanuel were profoundly discouraged with the results, while others rejoiced. I recognized and affirmed each of their political and theological perspectives, but called all to look to God for hope and to Christ for direction. This is the heart of a unified variance in Christ Jesus.

The letter to the Colossians notes that in Christ “all things hold together,”¹⁵ but this does not mean Christ makes everything the same. Following Christ entails the commitment to see others the way Jesus sees them. Abiding in Christ, the disciple has at the forefront of their mind that all people are created in the image of God and empowered by the Spirit; they seek to love others as Christ loves them.¹⁶ The daily practice of carrying one’s cross keeps the Christ follower humble, prayerful, regularly engaged with Scripture, and committed to the belief that God often leads good people in different directions.¹⁷ The follower of Jesus is not in the lead, rather, Christ is leading. As the Scriptures attest, Jesus’ actions and words were often confounding to the assumptions of the day. Peterson notes, “There are no experts in the company of Jesus. We are all beginners, necessarily followers, because we don’t know where we are going.”¹⁸ Rather than equating one’s perspective with following Christ, each person will seek to articulate how a Christ-centered liberal or Christ-centered conservative might respond in a given situation. With this perspective, the unifying factor is the living Christ who guides and

¹⁵Col. 1:17.

¹⁶ John 15:12.

¹⁷ Presbyterians articulated this in 1788 when the church stated that God is the Lord of the conscience and has left it “free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship. Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable.” *The Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* Part II 2009/2011 (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2009), G-1.0301 (1) (a-b).

¹⁸ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 12.

empowers God's people, rather than a single dogma or position itself being what unites believers in the Body of Christ. Sweet and Viola note:

That means, for instance, that two different followers of Christ who are both incarnating their living relationship with Christ may be fully in God's will while engaging in causes that may counter one another. For instance, one Christ-follower could be involved in a life of military service while a second Christ-follower could be engaged in aiding the very people the first is fighting.¹⁹

In other words, the person of Jesus is too infinite to be contained within any finite human schema. In a unified variance, all believers come to Christ for healing, teaching, and strength. Their differences remain as they respond to the grace of Christ in different ways, but their differences are reconciled differences in Christ Jesus.²⁰ The distinctive mark of the people of God is Christ, not a uniform human system that is universally prescribed to.

Following Christ is More Than Finding Lowest Common Denominator

Another deficient unifying force is an attempt to lower the bar of religion to appeal to a larger or dwindling audience. When a local church or denominational tribe is facing adversity, the leadership may be tempted to look to unity as the end goal rather than a byproduct of following Christ. The 21st century in the West is a post-denominational landscape where many denominations are eroding numerically and fragmenting theologically. Identities and systematic theologies which once united churches no longer have a cohesive or lasting bond. The church's unifying purpose can be diminished to survival or just not having to close the doors of the church. The least

¹⁹ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto*, 95.

²⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 457.

common denominator is sought, rather than Christ, for group cohesion. However, a “can we all just get along” practical theology does not provide the divine inspiration or impetus to venture out in mission for a purpose beyond the church’s existence. However, Christ is more than enough to provide the cohesion and mission to fuel the church’s unity. Biblical scholar James Dunn notes that the source of Christian accord can be none other than “the fundamental unity of risen Christ and shared Spirit.”²¹ Missionary E. Stanley Jones took a similar approach by describing true Christianity as Christ.²² In other words, Christ is simultaneously the bull’s eye, perimeter, and everywhere in between for the church’s unity and reason for being. For example a Sunday School class during the presidential election studied election in the Bible and theology. After exploring John Calvin and Karl Barth’s understandings of election, a ballot was given to each person. They could vote for John Calvin, Karl Barth, or that election is a mystery that can never be fathomed by the human mind. Ballots were counted with nine votes for mystery, six for Barth, and five for Calvin. I noted that we have our differing views, but no matter what our view, it is because of Christ that we are in relationship with God and that is the ultimate reality that makes us one, even in difference.

Images of Body and Baptism

The church’s unity flows out of God’s gracious re-creation of his people through baptism to be fashioned into the body of Christ. Baptism first involves the people of God’s death to not only their selfish ways and agendas, but their very lives. Baptism

²¹ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 458.

²² E. Stanley Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), 9.

secondly represents being raised from death into Christ's life. Baptism thirdly speaks of God's miraculous act of incorporating a people into the body of Christ. A whole new way of being human for human beings was opened up by Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. The Christ way makes possible for Christ followers to no longer be dominated by selfish desires or demands and instead to be filled with and guided by the Spirit of Christ. Baptism is a consecration to continue Christ's ministry and mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The body of Christ is at peace when there is an awareness that the church is one body that is composed of many parts. The wisdom of peace recognizes that while there are different body parts, the community of faith is more than a conglomeration of dismembered body parts. This means that followers of Jesus are attuned to the reality that difference is a connected difference rather than an isolated or competing difference. The church body will be in a world of hurt if the fist, elbow, or knee gets a mind of its own.²³ The church can be of one mind when it is cognizant that Christ is the head of the church. Rather than being at odds with itself, the body cares for itself because if the eye or the back hurts, the whole body hurts.

Unified variance is activated when the people of God live into who they are in Christ Jesus. Rather than something mustered up by human design or charisma, unity is an outside gift whose source is God. This bond is nurtured when Christians individually and collectively allow Christ to be formed and replicated within them by the Holy Spirit. In this spiritual formation differences among believers are not obliterated, but are

²³ Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 101.

transcended and considered a lower priority than Christ.²⁴ A loving and nurturing environment sets the tone for the church to grow up in Christ as they work in coordination together utilizing and honoring each member's unique gifting and outlook.²⁵ An example of unified variance around sexual ethics can be found in Appendix A. Although the author holds to a more conservative perspective on sexuality, the document is now used as a unifying statement on sexual ethics for churches within the presbytery that have a wide variety of theological perspectives about Christian sexuality.

Learning by Following Christ

When the church is in touch with her identity as the body of Christ, the people of God experience a greater awareness of their relationship with the risen Christ. The heart of faith is an experiential knowledge that is personal and intimate, rather than merely a cerebral exercise. Poet John Keats described the importance of personal encounter by noting, "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced — even a proverb is no proverb to you till your life has illustrated it."²⁶ Church leaders have a calling to persistently ask God to make Christ real in the gathered and scattered expression of the church. With this reality in the forefront of the church's experience, each person will have a greater opportunity to see their core identity as disciples and followers of Christ. Dietrich

²⁴ Gal. 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

²⁵ Eph. 4:15-16, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

²⁶ H. Buxton Forman, ed., *The Complete Works of John Keats, Vol. V: Letters 1819 and 1820* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1900), 38.

Bonhoeffer notes, “Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ.”²⁷ If the church ignores Christ, it cannot follow Christ and will be composed of non-discipled disciples who will lose their sense of identity and direction as the people of God.²⁸

Discipling the whole people of God in the way of Christ is therefore crucial for the unity, vibrancy, and faithfulness of the church to her calling.

Followership of Jesus involves relational engagement, experiential learning, and hands-on apprenticeship within the church and out in the world. Stradivarius described this education as “elbow learning.”²⁹ However, this learning through discipleship did not originate in Italy, but in the Middle East. The Hebraic way of teaching was open to heuristic learning that valued the cultivation of the art of living and relating well over pure content of knowledge. This wisdom more rooted in praxis than concept involved a patient commitment to gradual learning that incorporated feedback along the way, rather than the expectation that everything had to be correct before embarking on a trade. Translated into the church setting, discipleship involves the role of shepherding and the value of process rather than badgering with the expectation of immediate perfection or one way of ministering in Christ’s name.

The openness of Hebraic discipling practices involves an expectation of deep commitment. Jesus’ concept of discipleship was informed by the relationship between

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 59.

²⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 259.

²⁹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 53.

Elijah and Elisha, as described in the Scriptures.³⁰ After Elijah heard the still small voice of God, one of his commands was to anoint Elisha as the prophet who would succeed him. Elisha was working in the fields when he first encountered Elijah. Upon Elijah's invitation to follow, Elisha initially balked, but ultimately responded to the prophet's summons. Elisha slaughtered his oxen that were used to plow the fields. He broke up the yoke equipment and used it as firewood to boil the meat, which was used to feed his family and community. Elisha then followed Elijah and left his old life behind. This is what Jesus was likely alluding to when he said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."³¹ Following Christ is not merely a one-time act, but an ongoing determination of the community of disciples to stick to the chosen path of forsaking self and being yoked with Christ.

This daily commitment to discipleship keeps the church focused upon Jesus. In fact, the goal of discipleship is for Jesus Christ to be ever increasing in the disciple. This individual and collective way of life is central to unified variance in Christ. As Moltmann notes, the body of Christ discovers who Christ is by following him.³² Peterson also notes, "The practice of prayer is the primary way that Jesus' way comes to permeate our entire lives so that we walk spontaneously and speak rhythmically in the fluidity and fluency of holiness."³³ The primacy of Christ's life living in each believer keeps the church permeated in Christ, not only in theory, but in practice. Authentic Christ-unity is revealed

³⁰ Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewishness of Jesus Can Transform Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 57.

³¹ Luke 9:62.

³² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), xiv.

³³ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 217.

when Christ's humility, courage, peacemaking, reconciliation, service, healing, and acceptance are manifested through the lives of the people of God. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch describe this as the *participatio* of Christ where the church is not expressed as an institution, but rather a community of believers who are following Christ and continuing his mission.³⁴

In Judaism there is an ancient rabbinic blessing: *May you cover yourself with the dust of your rabbi's feet.*³⁵ This is a vivid image of discipleship where the pupil eagerly follows the Master Rabbi along the way of life, not just in the sanctuary, but through the roads and paths that extend into the world. Discipleship involves shadowing and staying as close to Christ as possible. Rather than following from a distance and shying away from Jesus, discipleship unabashedly gets in close proximity to learn from and observe him. One of the titles for rabbis in Judaism was, "My master teacher of great learning."³⁶ This learning attitude keeps Christ in the lead, where his disciples follow his lead together. Embedded within the word *discipleship* is the Latin word *disco*, meaning to "study."³⁷ The leadership's calling is to put the *disco* back into discipleship and to enlist for dance lessons, with Jesus being the lead instructor. As the church studies Christ's moves and follows the Lord of the Dance's lead, each disciple will be better coordinated to keep in step with the Spirit and less apt to step on one another's toes.

³⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 24.

³⁵ Brad H. Young, *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and Teaching of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 207.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

The Mission of Christ

For Christ to be the vocal and focal point of the church, it is crucial for the leadership of the church to deliberately keep Christ in the forefront of the mission, strategy, values, and dreams of the church. The mission statement of Immanuel Presbyterian Church is “*discovering and displaying Christ in here and out there.*”³⁸ The leadership deliberately chose to have Christ literally and figuratively at the center of the church’s mission and purpose. The mission statement reminds the entire church of its identity in Christ and how discipleship is a life of action and learning in the laboratory of the church and the world. The motto is also a reminder that church is not a building, but the people of God empowered by the Spirit to collectively and individually be embarked on a journey of communicating and providentially stumbling upon Christ’s activity in the church and world. Christ is the locus, the hub, and center of activity, attention, and concentration where everything and everyone is redefined by and redirected towards Christ. It is in this posture that the family of faith is best positioned not only for the Spirit to work through the community, but for Christ’s disciples to be unified and synchronized in their following, albeit in different ways.

Postmodern Assistance for Reconciled Difference

At the same time, a natural outflow of following Christ in mission will lead to difference. Believers follow the same Christ, but inevitably will manifest different renditions of how this is fleshed out because Christ is not bodily with us where believers

³⁸ The church leadership crafted this phrase by bringing together concepts found in Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2009) and Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

can literally eat with him and ask these questions. As a result, renditions, portraits, interpretations, and understandings of Christ will vary, even when they are informed by encounter with God, Scripture, and prayer. Yet all the while, the reality of Christ is infinitely vaster than the human words used to speak of his significance and how it is to be actualized in the world. James P. Danaher notes, “It will only be through such dialogic communication, and the subjective and perspectively relative theology it produces, that we will achieve the kind of unity that God intends for his people.”³⁹ In other words, good relationship in Christ and among Christians is authentic unity, not homogeneity of hermeneutic.

One of the keys to unified variance is to be mindful that the reality of Christ and the human concepts to describe the Christ encounter are not one and the same. The postmodern approach can be helpful in articulating unified variance in Christ because it is in many ways a return to a Christ-centered *aporia*, which is open and willing to marvel in and savor the bewildering riddles, paradoxes, and ironies of life and faith. From the postmodern vantage point, words are always understatements about God.⁴⁰ Caputo notes that this *docta ignorantia* is an ever-learning or enlightened ignorance that “knows that we do not know and knows that this non-knowing is the inescapable horizon in which we must act with all decisiveness, with all the urgency that life demands.”⁴¹ A postmodern web of belief is well-equipped to revel in the apophatic tradition that can live with paradox, uncertainty, and complexity of faith, rather than anxiously seeking to eradicate

³⁹ Danaher, *Eyes that See, Ears that Hear*, 158.

⁴⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 122.

⁴¹ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2001), 19.

mystery with timeless, once-for-all explanations of Christ. This awareness and appreciation of *aporia* enables the Christian to recognize that theology, including Christology, is a human and fallible discipline. As Marvin Wilson noted, “one must be prepared to write theology with pencil and eraser, not indelible ink.”⁴² Consequently, theological formulations can be open to fresh accounts and amendments as the Scripture and culture interplay. When the realization comes that there is no *one* correct way to understand Christ and interpret the Scriptures, one’s eyes are opened to the many ways that people across time and cultures can faithfully grapple with comprehending the infinite God manifested in Christ with culturally conditioned words. Richard Rohr notes:

Our faith is not a faith that dogmas or moral opinions are true, but a faith that Ultimate Reality/God/Jesus is accessible to us—and even on our side. Jesus was able to touch and heal people who trusted him as an emissary of God’s love, not people who assessed intellectual statements and decided whether they were true or false.⁴³

Every person has a dogma, but this does not require the need to be dogmatic.

Dogmatism is different from dogma in that it is the inability and refusal to see that one maintains a dogma or that their dogmas can receive constructive criticism.⁴⁴ Ideally, the believer humbly yields to the Spirit of Christ, who deconstructs and sifts out dogmatism from dogma in the area of human interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth from the Scriptures.

The true worth and best pursuit for faith is not to have agreed upon hermeneutical

⁴² Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Dayton, OH: Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1989), 323.

⁴³ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 117.

⁴⁴ Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 58.

strategies that lead to the same conclusions, but to foster God-honoring relationships within the community of faith as Christ is followed individually and collectively.

An important component of sustaining unified variance is to not lose sight of Christ. Roger Haight notes, “Jesus is the source and ground of Christology.”⁴⁵ A healthy boundary for authentically Christian Christologies is that they should all somehow speak of how God is manifested through the person of Christ.⁴⁶ Hans Frei noted that the person of Jesus, rather than a unifying scheme, ties together Scripture.⁴⁷ Following Christ is the crux of the matter for the community of faith because this keeps everyone on the same focal person—Jesus Christ. At the same time, each individual has a unique lens which filters how this same Jesus is perceived. As a result, there will invariably be difference embedded in this primal unity. Each Christian is shaped by different family backgrounds, ethnicities, life experiences, political or theological perspectives, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. Christ is bigger than these differences and through the Spirit can encompass, honor, and coordinate the body into harmonious difference rather than stale homogeneity. God’s passion throughout the Scriptures to bring together every tribe, tongue, and nation to worship God with one harmonious voice in varied dialects, tones, pitches, and styles.⁴⁸ As the church strives to follow Jesus together, the unified community has an opportunity to discuss and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each person’s interpretation and rendition of Christ. In that interaction amongst disciples,

⁴⁵ Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 202.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁷ George Hunsinger, “Postliberal Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge University, 2003), 49.

⁴⁸ Rev. 14:6.

a learning environment is created. Differences are better understood and new vistas are opened up for the possibility of an even richer testimony to the Christ whom the church entrusts itself to and lives out of. Shirley Guthrie describes this united difference by noting that

to be a Christian means by definition to belong to a reconciled and reconciling community in which all kinds of people who are otherwise strangers or enemies learn to know and care about each other, live together in justice and peace, and understand themselves as a people called to be agents of God's justice and reconciliation in the world.⁴⁹

These different perspectives and expressions of following Christ can be seen as rich traditions to learn and draw from, rather than a cacophony of competing and contradictory agendas. Christian unified variance is then sought in one Christ, one Lord, one Spirit, and one God and Father of us all,⁵⁰ rather than one particular theology. The diverse church has an enriched witness and followership of the risen Christ, who is big enough to hold the church together in the midst of difference.

To follow Christ, one must either implicitly or explicitly craft a Christology in order to make sense of the significance of Christ. The commitment to four gospels in the New Testament canon seems to indicate that since the beginning of the church, human grapplings with Christ have been varied. The diversity of interpretive strategies within Scripture and the church's interpretation of them lead to a necessary and robust variety of portraits of Christ. Those that did not tell Christ's story well were sifted out (i.e., worldviews that denied God was revealed through Christ or rejected Jesus' humanity, death, or resurrection). Yet even within these crucial Christ boundaries, a wide variety of

⁴⁹ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith--Unity in Christ*, 21.

⁵⁰ Eph. 4:4-6.

understandings of Christ were left intact within the canon. In this light, difference is in the DNA of the gospel and does not require that any instance of divergence or paradox be deemed problematic to unity. Christological difference informed by Scripture and church history can give breathing room for different cultures, personalities, and perspectives to follow Christ in an authentic way. Lesslie Newbigin affirms the reality and benefit of multiple renditions of Christ in Scripture as a testimony to God's desire for the gospel to cross new cultures.⁵¹ Newbigin notes:

It is important for a faithful doing of Christian theology that we should affirm and insist that the New Testament contains not one Christology but several. This is not an unfortunate defect to be regretted or concealed... The variety of Christologies actually to be found in the New Testament is part of the fundamental witness to the nature of the gospel: it points to the destination of the gospel in all the cultures of mankind. The unity of the New Testament, the fact that it contains not every Christology but only those that were judged to be faithful to the original testimony, reflects the origin of the gospel in the one unique person of Jesus.⁵²

If the church remains dedicated to Christ and devoted to Scripture, this variety provides a crucial safeguard against the idolatry of one particular Christology that might drown out the important and multiple nuances the others draw out.

This brings out the distinct possibility that not every church member will gravitate towards or primarily emphasize the same portraits of Christ or how Christ might be expressed through believers today. Progressives are often times drawn to more prophetic understandings of Christ influenced predominantly by Luke's gospel. Conservatives may gravitate towards priestly or kingly expressions of Christ in John's gospel. Those of Eastern or African backgrounds may gravitate towards more Semitic portrayals of Christ as found in Matthew. Each of these Christologies remains healthy by being in

⁵¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 156.

⁵² Ibid.

communication with one another. The difference can be complementary rather than contradictory because the crucified and risen Lord who believers follow is prophet, priest, and king revealed in all four gospels. Dunn further elaborates on the ability of Christ to keep Christological variety within the New Testament coherent and cohesive by noting:

The unifying bond of confessing ‘Jesus as Lord’ (or equivalent) should be sufficient to hold together the diversity of elaborated confessions, sufficient for the diversity to work together for the common commitment of serving that Lord... We dishonour the unique centrality of Christ when we demand a larger unity and refuse to acknowledge the diversity through which the commitment to Christ can be expressed.⁵³

Andrew Walls provides healthy boundaries and limits to unified variance that can be applied across time and place in the Christian faith. For him, there are four defining characteristics: the worship of the God of Israel; the ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth; that God is active where believers are; and that believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.⁵⁴ These are flexible, yet focused, spiritual guardrails to keep the community of faith on the Christ road. N.T. Wright also grapples with the importance doing all that the believer can to ensure that they are following Christ on the right track. He emphasizes the importance of keeping the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith talking to one another.⁵⁵ This is vitally important for Wright because he argues that Jesus reigns on the earth through his followers by the Holy Spirit. Faithfulness to Christ as revealed in the Scriptures is crucial to how people experience Christ today. Haight

⁵³ Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xxviii. Dunn goes on to say later in the book, “...these and other already traditional fragments embedded within the earliest NT writings are proof positive that belief in the resurrection of Jesus belongs to the absolute bedrock of Christianity. *The earliest Christian confession, properly so called, is the claim that ‘God raised Jesus from the dead.’*” Ibid., 438.

⁵⁴ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 23-24.

⁵⁵ N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), x. So too Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 308.

similarly describes the logic of Christology as engaging the person Jesus, how he mediated God in history, the historical experience of his disciples that witnessed his resurrection, the New Testament's interpretations of Christ's significance, and applying these truths to ever new contexts.⁵⁶ This ongoing calling of responsible and faithful unified variance involves daily prayer and following Christ, as informed by the Scriptures and study of the culture and times of the Bible. Wright also cautions against human pride that assumes it can easily and clearly interpret flawlessly Christ from the Scriptures by noting:

... we have simply a history book written forty or fifty years later... and a scattering of other material, bits and pieces, tracts, coins, letters, and so forth. Out of these very disparate sources we have to reconstruct the setting in which what Jesus did and said made the sense it did...⁵⁷

Just as the twelve disciples often misunderstood Jesus firsthand while he was on earth, so must Jesus' modern day followers be aware of this ever-present possibility. The best response is to be humbly and prayerfully ever learning and re-learning from the crucified and risen Lord, who never ceases to amaze, confound, and anger human beings by bringing together that which is in heaven and that which is on earth. While imperfect, the church must always struggle towards unity and growth in Christ.

Guthrie notes:

Authentic spiritual renewal comes only in the church's constant struggle to become a community of liberal, conservative, and evangelical men and women, with different racial, class, and cultural identities, who are liberated, reconciled, and transformed to establish a true 'communion of the Holy Spirit'—that exists not just for their own benefit, but in order to participate in the liberating, reconciling, transforming work of the triune God they confess in and for the world.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 55, 86.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Simply Jesus*, 21.

⁵⁸ Guthrie, *Always Being Reformed*, 87-88.

Conclusion

Just like Peter’s experience with the Gentile Cornelius, God continues to engage his followers around the world by shattering, revising, changing, and rebuilding their concepts of the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth. In this sacred deconstruction, the believer is made humble, open, and willing to die “to ourselves and our well-fashioned answers,” beloved systems, and preferences for how we would like Christ to be talked about and incarnated in our setting.⁵⁹ For Christians, truth is not easily outlined, mapped out, diagramed, or defined because the Truth is not a body of information, but a living body, Jesus of Nazareth, the roaring Lamb and bleating Lion who is unpredictable, undomesticated, and utterly unable to be pinned down. Unified variance in Christ comes not from uniform interpretations, but from the people of God engaging the Christ revealed in the Scriptures and sharing the experience of the Spirit. From this perspective, the body of Christ can be unified, even though their words to express their response to him will vary through time and place.

Twelve times in the Book of Acts, the church is spoken of as being “joined together,”⁶⁰ “with one heart,”⁶¹ or “in one accord”⁶² in Christ Jesus, even when they did not have the exactly the same perspectives. Eugene Peterson describes this unity as “the passion of a consensual, unanimous response to something that God does.”⁶³ This is the

⁵⁹ Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian’s Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 49.

⁶⁰ NIV 2011.

⁶¹ NJB.

⁶² REB.

⁶³ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 262.

passion of the crucified and risen Lord expressed through those who follow Christ in the power of the Spirit. The church is called to demonstrate and declare the good news of Jesus Christ by caring for the poor and vulnerable, going out to those who are trapped by sin and injustice, rescuing the oppressed, advocating for those who do not have a voice, investing in the next generation, comforting those who mourn, feeding the hungry, and caring for the sick. In God's grace and strength, the ministry and mission of Christ continues through the humble service of forgiven sinner-saints, no matter their particular theological stripe. Jesus was not only able to fulfill all that Israel was called by God to be, but he also sums up and carries out all of God's intentions and desires for humanity, despite ourselves and our differences.⁶⁴ This is the wonder and the miracle of the crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

The good news is that unified variance is not originated in human beings, but in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Larry Hurtado notes, "the expression of Christian unity means to live out, to actualize, the unity that is based in God. Believers are one in God and Christ; the question is whether we can find the readiness to reflect that in our engagement with one another."⁶⁵ Thus, unified variance is an act of faith that truly believes people made in God's image can in small and real ways experience the supernatural unity found within the Godhead, even in the midst of difference. Foretastes of this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace can be enjoyed in the present, with the assurance of hope that the unity of faith will be experienced in full at the consummation

⁶⁴ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography*, 309.

⁶⁵ Larry Hurtado, "You've Got to 'Accentuate the Positive': Thinking about Differences Biblically," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 30.1 (2012): 25.

of all things when every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Christ is Lord.⁶⁶ In the meantime, the church must look not to creedal statements or doctrinal formulations for unified variance, but to the Triune God, the source of eternal and lasting unity and variety. As Hurtado notes, “Christian agape is most fully expressed precisely by believers who care deeply about the matters over which they differ, but are also committed to finding what unites them as well as identifying their differences.”⁶⁷

This reality of Christian agape was experienced in an alternative worship service at Immanuel. The author requested that the worship team perform the Larry Norman song *Why Don't You Look into Jesus* as an offertory piece. The theme of the service was rooted in the Fruit of the Spirit of self-control. The song described well (with vivid language) a person living without self-control and their need for Jesus to supply what they are really searching for. The song resounded with my robust Christology—a Jesus who was not only divine but quite earthy and honest with human struggles. One member of the band refused to play the song and another requested that the song be played, but that the second verse be omitted because from their vantage point, the song's depiction of Christ was too earthy and disrespectful to Christ and the church. After considerable dialogue, the group opted to play the song, but left out the more graphic lines in the song. The leadership team was able to process the different understandings of Christ and move forward in a loving way that honored Christ and the relationships with one another. Ironically, the afternoon after the piece was performed, it was discovered that this same

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 29.

song several decades earlier was banned from play on many Christian radio stations.⁶⁸ In response, Larry Norman released another version of the same song with alternate lyrics that were less offensive to more conservative listeners. The leadership group at Immanuel was able to laugh together, with a twinge of wistfulness and gratitude that Christ's love kept them unified in the midst of difference about Christ.

⁶⁸ This information was obtained in a product review of Larry Norman's 30th Anniversary edition of *Only Visiting This Planet*, <http://www.amazon.com/Only-Visiting-Planet-Anniversary-Edition/dp/B000M69FR6>, (accessed October 8, 2012).

CHAPTER 5:
RELATIONSHIPS THAT EXHIBIT UNIFIED VARIANCE

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.¹

To embrace the gospel, then, is to enter into community. A person cannot have one without the other.²

Introduction

Chapter four examined the first element in unified variance, which is following Christ. In chapter five, we present the second element of unified variance: *breathing in relationships*. Relationship is the oxygen that helps the Body of Christ keep pace with Jesus' activity in the individual and the world. The very nature of the Triune God and human beings as bearers of the divine image reveal that relationships are built into the human spiritual DNA. The Great Commandment addresses the quality and authenticity of relating to the other—God and neighbor. This chapter will address the theological truths, relational values, and spiritual practices that can foster an ethos of relational unity, even in the midst of divergent views.

Human beings are created for relationship because of the inherent longing to love and be loved. People desire to have a sense that they are making a difference and living beyond just themselves. Men, women, and children also have a yearning to be welcomed and invited in by others. The deliberate commitment to nurture the sacredness of relationships can allow families, staffs, leadership teams, and churches to be places of

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

² Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches and Their Cultural Setting*, Rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 27.

belonging and nurture, even in the midst of imperfection and difference. Another way of saying this is that Christians are to be good and generous stewards of relationships.³ When this is practiced, the community will find itself in right relationship with one another, which is a key ingredient to unified variance. In other words, reconciled difference does not just happen. Like gardening, fostering the common bond of goodwill in Christ is an ongoing task and joy for the whole community.

This task of relational cultivation is particularly entrusted to the leadership. In the author's Presbyterian context, the dance of leadership involves the pastor, session (board of elders), staff, and board of deacons. In relationship to the staff, the pastor is the head of staff, which meets weekly. The pastor is also the moderator of the session, which makes the major decisions of the church during monthly meetings. The pastor has appointed the lay pastor to be the staff liaison to the board of deacons, who under the session's guidance are the point people for the ministries of compassion and mercy in the congregation and community.

Relationships with the leaders are regularly invested in by the pastor. This involves weekly face to face meetings with the staff collectively and individually. The pastor meets on a more informal level with elders as needs or ministry opportunities arise. The leadership communally engages in such spiritual practices such as Bible study, prayer, singing, book studies, continuing education, play, separate leadership retreats with staff and session, team building exercises, and movie discussions throughout the year to foster relationship, conversation, and collaboration for leadership decisions. There is also a concerted effort to bring together the church leadership to keep the

³ Sweet, *What Matters Most: How We Got the Point but Missed the Person* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2004), 93.

communication lines open. A yearly January leadership dinner banquet with a guest speaker brings together staff, elders, and deacons to celebrate and vision for the upcoming year. The Ministry Fair put on by elders where each team shares about their mission and ministry teams happens in conjunction with the Meet Your Deacon Sunday in March each year. Ministry night happens monthly where all the teams led by elders meet around round tables in one large room to not only plan ministry opportunities, but to coordinate with other teams around them. The pastor functions as a rover going from one team to the next throughout the evening. Leadership relationships must be lovingly cultivated and sustained in an ongoing process to shape an ethos of unified variance that extends out to the congregation as a whole. Relationships with the church as a whole are fostered through corporate worship, educational classes, fellowship events, mission events, potlucks, congregational meetings, and prayer meetings. In addition, because of the connectional nature of the Presbyterian church, there is regular fellowship with pastors and churches who are in the same presbytery. The goal of this relationship building amongst the leadership, congregation, and presbytery is to forge the bonds of love in Christ Jesus so that the church may be a greater blessing to God, one another, and the community beyond the church.

A crucial component to the active nurturing of reconciled variance is the awareness that conflict is a normal aspect of community life. Discerning how to respond to conflict in mature ways makes for peace without stamping out difference. In times of conflict, one can essentially choose three responses in relationships: turning toward, turning away, or turning against.⁴ The application of the following theological, relational,

⁴ John M. Gottman and Joan DeClaire, *The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 16-18.

and spiritual practices in the Spirit helps the community of faith to turn towards one another in healthy relationships. The church grows in relational health when the leadership, particularly the pastor, models self-knowledge, healthy church relationships, and a life beyond the church that includes family, friends, physical exercise, hobbies, and Sabbath rest.⁵

The Theological Practice of Seeing Others as Image Bearers of God

The awareness that all people are created in God’s image instills honor in the way that the community of faith relates with one another. The first heading in the first chapter of Book One in John Calvin’s *Institute of the Christian Religion* reads, “The Knowledge of God and that of Ourselves are Connected. How They Are Interrelated.”⁶ Without the knowledge of God there is no true knowledge of self or others—thus this knowledge of God, self, and others is a divine gift. The belief that all people are made in the image of God bridges knowledge of God and knowledge of others. When followers of Christ lose touch with the reality that the church is one body, an existential disconnection from God and others develops. Dishonoring God, self-hatred, or abuse sabotages the sacred connection between God and the people of God. Sin mars the image of God, which impairs the quality of human interaction. In addition, Christ has reconciled relationships with God and fellow people by restoring the *imago dei* tarnished by sin.

A return to a robust understanding that all people are God’s image bearers contributes to unified variance. While each person is unique, they also are mindful that

⁵ Oswald and Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, 93.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 20, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 35.

they are made in the image of the same God. Through justification and sanctification, Christ is formed in each believer more and more. In this ongoing process of Christian formation, each believer renounces his or her claims and lives by God's new way of being and relating that is selfless.⁷ To be in the image of God means mortals are not God or a god or goddess. God is God and human beings are not God. Yet at the same time, people are privileged above all else in creation. Humans have been given the ability to reason, have a conscience and personality, and encounter God through revelation given to human beings. Those made in God's image and likeness have a divine spark within that causes them to search for purpose, meaning, and influence—beyond the individual to the community and Creator. Or, as the prophet Micah famously says in profound and succinct fashion, “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁸ Jesus exhibits and explains most compellingly what being made in the image of God looks like fleshed out. This reality reminds the people of God that each individual is uniquely someone of dignity and worth. One's fellow human being (or oneself) is neither a worm nor a wretch—no matter their tribe, tongue, race, or theological or political stripe. Embracing the image of God in the individual and others will keep church relationships holy and humble. In a previous church, a situation developed that involved racial conflict. The leadership team called a meeting where the group involved gathered, ate soul food together, named the tension the group was experiencing, prayed, and discussed a book co-written by an African-American and a Caucasian. Not all of the misunderstandings were reconciled, but an

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 22.

⁸ Mic. 6:8.

effort was made to know one another better and to explore how Christ has the healing power to bridge racial divides because both white and black are made in the image of God.

The Relational Value of Self-knowledge in the Leader and Community

To know one's self does not mean to be self-centered, self-absorbed, self-seeking, or selfish. A healthy self-knowledge means that the individual is selfless, while never losing one's self. Self-knowledge modeled and taught in the community by the leadership plays an important role in weeding out immature relational patterns that often create disunity. Leadership involves not only following Christ, but also enhancing the emotional and interpersonal intelligence of self and others.⁹ This takes deliberate and thoughtful reflection in solitude and loving participation in community. Bonhoeffer notes, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone."¹⁰ The leader's commitment to self-knowledge provides an example for the church to follow and boundaries to guide relationships.

Nurturing healthy relational skills in the community begins with the leadership's ability to understand how people relate, work, and come together to accomplish things. Church consultants Sellon and Smith note that "Pastors who possessed strong relational skills and worked at establishing healthy relationships thrived almost anywhere they

⁹ "Emotional intelligence: abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope," in Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995), 34. Goleman also defines interpersonal intelligence as, "leadership, the ability to nurture relationships and keep friends, resolve conflict, and make social analysis." In *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 77.

went.”¹¹ Self-aware leaders are cognizant of how others and they themselves are a mixed bag of good, suspect, and neutral motivations and emotions. Emotional intelligence helps the leader to neither ignore nor cancel out the good and negative that happens side by side the church’s life together. A Christian manifestation of self-awareness can also be described as a godly wisdom or maturity where one has the mind of Christ and is Spirit-led in daily living and relating. Incorporated within this is the daily act of repenting and receiving and giving forgiveness. Christ helps the leader and the community to become more human and, as a result, becomes a reciprocating self and reciprocating community that is “fully and securely related to others and God.”¹²

It is a constant temptation for a leader in a theologically and politically diverse context to forget the importance of the reciprocating self and instead incorporate dysfunctional coping mechanisms to bring “cheap cohesion” to the community of faith.¹³ Friedman writes that when a leader who lacks self-awareness assumes this desperate posture, they become “a highly anxious risk-avoider, someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus...”¹⁴ Friedman further notes, “Leaders function as the immune systems of their institutions.”¹⁵ Immune systems do not always alleviate threats, but they do learn how to

¹¹ Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith, *Practicing Right Relationship: Skills for Deepening Purpose, Finding Fulfillment, and Increasing Effectiveness in Your Congregation* (Herdon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), viii.

¹² Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 9.

¹³ *Cheap cohesion* is a play on the phrase *cheap grace* made popular by Bonhoeffer.

¹⁴ Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury, 2007), 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

manage and co-exist with them in a proper relationship that reigns in poor behavior.¹⁶

Self-knowledge helps build a robust immune system in the community that is cognizant of the presence of danger and responds fittingly to the level of danger it poses. Thus the leader is realistic and ever-alert to personal, staff, and communal bright spots and blind spots. This adaptable optimism can look at situations with an honest and critical eye without being suspicious towards or disengaged from others.¹⁷ This self-awareness coupled with faith in Christ provides courage and hope for the leader to face what Karl Barth calls “the darker side of human existence.”¹⁸

Self-knowledge empowers the leader to remain true to individual and community purpose, values, hopes, and dreams in the midst of internal and external emotions that seek to side-track, sabotage, or derail possibility and growth. The leader can model healthy relationship by harnessing emotions, rather than allowing emotions to control the leader. Simultaneously, it is important for the leader to not repress these emotions, but rather to gain proficiency in identifying and articulating the emotions experienced. The community of faith has a tendency to observe and mirror how the leadership reacts because this tells them what is acceptable and valued in the community.¹⁹ Hutchkiss also notes that mature and self-aware leadership boards participate in iterative leadership and communal discernment that is open to extended rounds of revision as more insight is incorporated from the congregation, leadership discussions, or experience. This openness

¹⁶ Hutchkiss, *Governance and Ministry*, loc. 3093.

¹⁷ Steve Saccone, *Relational Intelligence: How Leaders Can Expand Their Influence Through a New Way of Being Smart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 165.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of Creation III.1*, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 372.

¹⁹ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: HBS, 2002), 9.

to be revised creates an environment of trust where the community of faith knows that their views are taken into account.²⁰ One helpful way to encourage mature and circumspect leadership is through the drafting and periodic review of session covenants.²¹ Appendix D provides an example of a session covenant for Immanuel Presbyterian Church that is reviewed several times a year by the active elders.

Thus, one of the leadership's crucial task is to set the stage for healthy relational patterns in the church by embodying them. When anxiety, anger, or any negative emotional energy are out of control in the leader, this same immaturity spills over into the life of the church. However, the leader yielded and yoked to the crucified, risen, and living Christ can by the grace of God retain the creative tension in the polarities of acceptance and challenge, justice and mercy, submission and prophetic resistance, empathy and responsibility.²² The leader is a visual aid for the congregation to replicate when disagreements arise—for good or for ill.

The self-aware, relationally savvy leader will give room for the community to disagree with his or her conclusions while still remaining engaged with his or her parishioners. The freedom to express personality and taste (in community-honoring manifestations) contributes to spiritual liberty and the flourishing of individual gifts crucial to unified variance. Yet at the same time, healthy leaders remain engaged and responsive to fellow leaders and parishioners when conflict or difference arise to help individuals or groups successfully navigate their differences. The strong leader has the aptitude to be self-differentiated, so that they do not function as an absorber who has a

²⁰ Hutchkiss, *Governance and Ministry*, loc. 2766.

²¹ *Ibid.*, loc. 2045.

²² Saccone, *Relational Intelligence*, 4.

propensity to take (or evade) responsibility for any negative occurrence within the community.²³ Healthy leadership promotes resilient communities that allow others to grow and provide loving space to honor the ebb and flow of closeness and separateness and similarity and differentiation that naturally occur in relationships.²⁴ Thus, the presence and the practice of the self-aware leader is ever training and mobilizing the congregation to successfully navigate difference and experience unity. On the other hand, the presence and practice of the leader who lacks self-understanding is ever apprenticing his or her community of faith in the ways of disunity and strife.

The Relational Value of Creating Room for Discussion

Permission and encouragement to have mature discussions regarding controversial issues at appropriate times and proper venues is essential for the relational health of a theologically and politically diverse congregation. According to a study done by John Gottman, 69% of marital conflict never goes away. The success of the marriage is dependent upon being able to live with that difference in a way that honors both parties. This is accomplished through ongoing conversation, respect, and give and take.²⁵ Church relationships have similarities to the marriage covenant. The local church seeks to foster an environment of trust where the people of God can encourage one another, discuss, interact, engage, and learn. In a church committed to unified variance, it is imperative to allow for outlets for discussion about issues, instead of having contentious

²³ Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 78.

²⁴ Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 12.

²⁵ Gottman and DeClaire, *The Relational Cure*, 207.

matters ignored or repressed. The provision of timely and appropriate venues for discussion set a tone for honesty, query, and dialogue among church participants so they can learn to live with those differences that cannot be resolved. The leadership has a central role in facilitating these interactions and reminding the community that, like in a healthy marriage, it is important to be on the same page and aware that difference is a natural and ongoing aspect of being a covenant community.

The leadership has an important role in reinforcing that the church is a learning community where people can be exposed to and spiritually curious towards new ideas and different vantage points without feeling threatened. One of the contributing factors to chronic conflict in relationships or communities is that the issues are not permitted to be talked about.²⁶ Lack of knowledge, unexamined bad habits, and unspoken issues can lead to heightened and unidentified anxiety that erodes the quality of community interactions. Forbidden discussion topics take up an enormous amount of individual and collective psychological energy. The departure of a leader does not necessarily mean that the problem will leave the community. Even if a new pastor comes into the church, unresolved or avoided issues will resurface and even be more acute than previous manifestations.²⁷ This means that the courage to discuss and process uncomfortable issues is crucial to unity. When important issues are ignored or avoided by leaders, the status quo is bolstered and change is resisted because problematic core issues are left intact and continue to actively function. The community's relational maturity is stunted which creates irreconcilable differences that fracture and fragment the congregation.

²⁶ Ibid., 82.

²⁷ Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 226.

However, an open learning environment sets the stage for identifying conflict and finding creative ways to address it.

Leadership in healthy church communities avoids passive relational patterns and proactively seeks to affirm and guide the individual and collective emotions of the congregation when dealing with challenging issues. Rather than dismissing and frowning upon member's feelings, leaders recognize, value, and help reframe emotions.²⁸ When people feel respected and listened to, they often can feel connected even if the church goes in a different direction in a particular area than their own personal views. In an atmosphere of trust, others have a greater sense of freedom to be vulnerable with their perspectives. A healthy practice is to have purposeful discussions that will only remain discussions, at least for the near future. This allows the leadership and congregation to be open and relaxed knowing that something will not immediately change as a result of the particular discussion.²⁹ See Appendices B and F regarding how the leadership and congregation of Immanuel go about discussion of the issues of sexuality and immigration without immediately taking official positions on divided issues within the congregation.

When perceptions are shared with openness and trust, others (even if they have a different view) feel more connected to that person who shared their story and are less apt to see them as the enemy. Also, by providing the community with positive outlets for discussion, the leader can "make the covert overt."³⁰ To articulate the reality of the conflict in an appropriate manner and place prevents it from festering into hostility. In these instances, the community is empowered to have the integrity and courage to grapple

²⁸ Gottman and DeClaire, *The Relational Cure*, 150.

²⁹ Hutchkiss, *Governance and Ministry*, loc. 2421.

³⁰ Goleman, *Primal*, 212.

with reality, rather than wishing it would disappear. Talking about challenging issues decreases the gap between the congregation's words and the actual feelings that are being experienced.³¹ Talking about conflict or controversial issues in a healthy manner is a pressure release valve for everyone. Prayer and ongoing conversation open up the possibility of a movement from "certainty to curiosity, from debate to exploration, from simplicity to complexity, from either/or to 'and.'"³²

A postmodern expression of Christianity can provide helpful ways to create space for discussion and difference because of the postmodern predisposition to revel in (rather than alleviate) the mystery and paradox of life and faith. This awareness and appreciation of *aporia* enables the Christian to recognize that the practice of being the church is a human and fallible discipline intermingled with God's miraculous guiding presence. When the realization comes that there is no *one* correct way to understand God and interpret the Scriptures, one's eyes are opened to the many ways that people across time and culture can faithfully grapple with comprehending the infinite God manifested in Christ with culturally conditioned words. This provides a larger trajectory for a multitude of limited ways that people across cultures can speak about God or not speak about God as they read the Scriptures, experience the Spirit, and follow Christ in the community of faith. When used judiciously and prayerfully, the postmodern worldview can set the stage for enlivening discussions rather than inciting vindictive debates.

At the same time, one must be aware of the shortcomings of the postmodern perspective that has a penchant for enshrining and mandating a predetermined diversity.

³¹ Stone et al., *Difficult Conversations*, 7.

³² *Ibid.*, 146.

This can be described as a “pseudo-pluralism” that does not genuinely allow for intellectual conscience or honest debate. In the name of pluralism, pluralism is actually stifled. In these situations one only has permission to agree with the perspectives of the latest academic fad or orthodoxy. Those that don’t hold the “correct” view are subtly ostracized or silenced. The leader must be attuned to the deceptions of a cheap pluralism that actually inhibits room for genuine discussion.

Room for discussion about difference is important, but it cannot be the sole topic of discussion. It is imperative to center the community’s mission on crucial issues that will unite the community, rather than divide. For example, focusing on poverty issues such as food and clean water that liberal and conservatives alike value is a wise step for a diverse church. More divisive issues of the day such as immigration, abortion, or homosexuality cannot be the centerpiece or main focus of a more moderate and diverse church. Yet, this is not to insinuate that these topics are ignored, evaded, or repressed. Although not central topics to the church, the church needs to have outlets and models that equip the congregation on how to talk about controversial topics in a Christ-like manner with others of opposing views. The church also should be a place that has something to say about controversial issues, even if there will not be a consensus about them. Learning about issues together as the church from a variety of vantage points enriches understanding and the depth of the local church’s faith expression.

The Reformed faith anticipates the importance of room for discussion by the tenet that Christ is the Lord of the conscience.³³ Good Christians who study Scripture, pray, and follow Christ will not always be led down the same road. Yet it is important to note

³³ *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II 2011/2013 (Louisville: Office of General Assembly, 2011), 11.

that not *anything* goes. Christ is Lord and Master, with all other claims being lesser. All will ultimately answer to Christ. One of the leader's tasks is to value and uphold this freedom of conscience from the doctrines and commandments of humans and to mentor the congregation on how to personally disagree and object in good conscience while still being a part of a community that thinks differently on certain issues. The challenge is to help believers see that being in relationship does not require acceptance of an entire set of monolithic views that others might have. A person can be welcomed while simultaneously thinking different or disagreeing with a particular set of issues within the larger whole. The goal is to enable each individual to prayerfully sort out the meat from the bones, without throwing out the entire turkey. In other words, a value for unity in diversity is that a person is "not guilty by association" with a group or church that has different stances on some issues. At Immanuel, people are free to say, "I like this about Immanuel, but I don't like this...but I can live with it and I love it this way." This perspective is fostered by exposing the congregation to the rich and varied tradition of Christian perspectives over the centuries. A sermon series focused on six streams of the Christian faith throughout history, pointing out the strengths and downsides of each. After a sermon on the social justice tradition, a conservative couple mentioned how they were uncomfortable with the topic of the sermon but by the end of the message they resonated with this stream of faith and could better appreciate their more liberal brothers and sisters on this issue.

The Relational Value of Recognizing Similarity and Variance

New Testament scholar James Dunn notes, "Christian liberty is a spectrum embracing a range of options, not all of which can be held by a single person, but all of

which may be held within a Christian congregation without destroying its unity.”³⁴

Similarly, Shirley Guthrie makes the case that the three theological streams of orthodoxy, liberalism, and pietism contribute to both the variety of faith perspectives and theological disagreement because they interpret theology, personal morality, social justice, and salvation with different filters.³⁵ All of these various traditions in the body of Christ—Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, and non-denominational—now can enhance faith and witness, even though historically they were divided. Being exposed to a variety of views can help Christians to see themselves from more angles than if they remained solely in one particular ideological camp. In other words, unified variance is more relational unity than ideological unity. Those in Christ experience and benefit from his forgiveness and love. Believers are bonded together as the body of Christ and are reconciled with one another through Christ. However, these realities do not mean that in every instance Christians will come to the same conclusions on how they are to be articulated or what will be emphasized.

One of the values and dreams for Immanuel is for the church to make room for others to belong, explore, ask questions, and hold a variety of Christian convictions. The emphasis is that grace gives room for variance. Grace protects the church from having an “other minds” dysfunction. This problem happens when someone assumes that if they like John McArthur or Barack Obama, everyone else should and must like what they like.³⁶ The church will find herself in trouble when she elevates taste and preference to

³⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 38b, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Dallas: Word, 1988), 834.

³⁵ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith, Unity in Christ*, 18.

³⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, *What the Dog Saw and Other Adventures* (New York: Little, Brown, & Company, 2009), ix.

essentials. A healthy corrective to the other minds mentality is provided in a quote attributed to Peter Meiderlin who noted, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”³⁷ In a similar fashion, Paul Tillich coined this discipline as the Protestant Principle: where “nothing finite should be given the authority of the Infinite and nothing relative should be given the authority of the Absolute.”³⁸ The challenge is in the definition and interpretation—what are the essentials? What are the minors? What are the possible ways of looking at a particular issue? The postmodern plea is for more nuanced, generous doctrinal formulations of Christ that can incorporate, qualify, recognize, and learn from others’ perspectives in a spirit of humility in the midst of difference. The household of faith can be envisaged as a living mosaic or a string of various jewels that are a reconciled diversity, a “unity in pluriformity,” and “difference in harmony.”³⁹

The art of life together is to celebrate common bonds and simultaneously live with difference. This takes patience and a commitment to learn from everything (including things one does not agree with), appreciate nuance, and to see variety, rather than homogeneity, as the spice of life. The community has a relational commitment to cultivate both/and thinking in as many situations as possible. Generally speaking, conservatives emphasize the individual—personal responsibility—and liberals emphasize the community—the collective. Creative tension says it is both/and, rather than either/or. In decision-making, it is possible to face two possibilities with the answer of, “yes to

³⁷ <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/quote.html> (accessed October 15, 2012).

³⁸ Hall, *Bound and Free*, 103.

³⁹ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 64.

both,” instead of “yes to one and no to the other.” Possibility and scenario thinking can help nurture this ethos. Instead of assuming views are always in competition with one another or diametrically opposed, possibility and scenario thinking can create out-of-the-box thinking, collaboration, and openness to the Spirit. Possibilities and options expose the community to new ideas or different angles that can help transform seemingly opposing views into dance partners, rather than competitors or arch rivals. This takes open liberals and open conservatives to make it happen. But when the community is composed of closed liberals and closed conservatives, disunity is sure to be close at the heels.

For example, in the last 100 years or so, there has been a divide in the American church. Conservatives have emphasized the Word through proclamation, evangelism, and preaching. Progressives have emphasized deed through social justice. Both are correct—Jesus was mighty in word *and* deed. Jesus both preached *and* healed. With creativity, there are often more win/win situations than we imagine; dances rather than duels, collaboration rather than competition, and relay races rather than a tug of war. In Christ, there is unity in diversity. There is a greater possibility of reality for this to happen if the emphasis is on becoming, journeying, learning, and being individually and corporately a work in progress and process. There are, of course, either/or situations that involve a problem to be solved, an issue to side with, or a choice to be made.⁴² The key is to seek both/and situations as much as possible and limit, but not alleviate, either/or situations.

⁴² Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, x-xi.

Recognizing the Values and Challenges of Conflict

The presence of conflict is not always a sign of disunity or dysfunction. If attended to with maturity, conflict can be a helpful indicator that people still have enough energy to care and remain emotionally invested in the community. Resistance gives penetrating insight into what the community deems of value.⁴³ If approached carefully and maturely, conflict has much to teach the leader and the church. Sellon and Smith note that:

Conflict is that moment where multiple ideas are present at the same time and bumping up against each other. That is the pool from which arises new thoughts, new ideas, and new growth. Conflict is that chaotic space in which God creates, so it behooves us to learn how to be present with conflict and even appreciate it.⁴⁴

However, because the people of God live on this side of heaven, there are times when the community must decide to follow one view over another that will lead to a parting of ways in varying manners. This might be on an individual level to leave a church or a denomination, or a church or group of churches might sense the need to differentiate or leave a denomination all together.⁴⁵ There may need to be a parting of ways for some, but graciously and prayerfully, not making a relational cutoff in an impetuous or immature manner. Despite the hope and aspiration for the church's unity, there will unfortunately be times when church separation or division is inevitable. This can be attributed to sociological, theological, political, or relational differences. Wildman

⁴³ Sellon and Smith, *Practicing Right Relationship*, 111.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁵ At the writing of this dissertation, the PCUSA is grappling with a split in the denomination over the ordination of sexually active homosexuals and non-married heterosexuals. Some individuals and churches are leaving the denomination altogether, others are differentiating in through several tiers in the Fellowship of Presbyterians, and others are staying within the PCUSA and either adopting the new ordination standards or crafting their own.

and Garner articulate that these last-resort solutions are often viewed in two ways, as either an amputation or a surgical removal of a cancer within the body of Christ.⁴⁶ Even though the human-made structures of the church are not necessarily equivalent to the body of Christ, nonetheless, relationships between Christians are reconfigured, often in a negative or at best bittersweet way. Although this is not a good witness, in an imperfect world, even the church will experience irreconcilable differences this side of heaven. There are times when schism may be a necessary evil to prevent either violence or a violation of conscience. Schism should never be relished or gloated over because it is a failure of Christian unity. When it does occur, it should be done with humility and grace, with the possibility that down the road, after a cooling-off period, there may be opportunities for reconciliation in various forms.⁴⁷

Practicing Healthy Boundaries

Cloud and Townsend describe a boundary as a fence with a gate that has the ability to keep in and allow in the good, while also being able to keep out and let out the bad in relationships.⁴⁸ Boundaries also remind individuals and institutions what is appropriate (healthy) and inappropriate (unhealthy) in relational interactions and expectations. Clearly and respectfully communicated boundaries honor the importance of relationships by: loving others the way Christ loves them; connecting behavior with consequences; helping needs while safeguarding against abuse; knowing when to take

⁴⁶ Wesley J. Wildman and Stephen Chapin Garner, *Found in the Middle! Theology and Ethics for Christians Who are Both Liberal and Evangelical* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), 103.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes and When to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 31.

ownership and when to abscond; realizing that humans are both free and bound in their common bond; sifting constructive from destructive criticism; establishing proactive, rather than reactive, relational practices; rejoicing in one another's successes; and discerning when to wait and when to act.⁴⁹ When leaders and the community of faith know who they are (self-knowledge and community-knowledge) the ways and means will be God-honoring and people-honoring.

Firm yet flexible boundaries are crucial to the unity of any church. Church consultant Peter Steinke notes, "A river without banks or a lake without borders creates a flood. Clouds, which have no membrane, dissipate into fog or haze."⁵⁰ Boundaries give guidance for the leadership and church for when to appropriately respond with a *yes* and when *no*. Boundaries are like bridge guard rails that help the church to focus on moving ahead rather than falling off relationally. Healthy boundaries foster cohesion, while the lack of boundaries creates turf wars and unnecessary conflict. Christian love is not an anything goes mentality. Bonhoeffer notes, "Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin."⁵¹ Loving relationships involve respect—of God, of one another, of oneself. Healthy boundaries protect members of the community from being abused or walked on. Healthy boundaries can help protect against bullying, over-functioning, triangulating, immaturity, fusion, or unresolved emotional

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84-102. This is a summary of what Cloud and Townsend describe as *Ten Laws of Boundaries*.

⁵⁰ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herdnon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 85.

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 107.

attachment.⁵² In addition, staying in good relationship with one's family of origin helps the leader to model healthy church relationships.⁵³ Healthy relational parameters promote unity and protect the sacred covenantal bonds that brothers and sisters in Christ have entered into.

Well-thought-out boundaries instill individual and corporate wisdom to know when to stop and realize when something or someone has gone too far. The psalmist prayed: "Lord, let me know my end."⁵⁴ In other words, "help me to know my place-- where I begin and where I finish." When leaders or congregants try to control, over-function, or play God, boundaries are needed for relational health on an individual and collective level. Bonhoeffer notes, "The individual must realize that his hours of aloneness react upon the community. In his solitude he can sunder and besmirch the fellowship, or he can strengthen and hallow it. Every act of self-control of the Christian is also a service to the fellowship."⁵⁵ Boundaries help leaders and members avoid a messianic complex or an Atlas Syndrome that tries to rescue everyone or do everything. Self-knowledge helps individuals within the community not to meddle in relationships, yet also to show appropriate care. The presence of boundaries keeps relationships channeled into life-giving practices that build unity, rather than detract from it. An awareness of boundaries help people realize when individual actions have interfered with or trampled on the boundaries of others. Self-knowledge has the boundaries to not permit

⁵² Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems and Making a Difference* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems, 2006), 65.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁴ Ps. 39:4a.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 88-89.

others to abuse or manipulate. At the same time, boundaries are not so high as to function as walls that distance relationships or make others walk on egg shells because of inordinate inflexibility. The lack of self-regulation in relationships leads to the perpetual invasion of space which drains people's energies, rather than being life-giving. Healthy boundaries can be a helpful guide for the Christian in community to be in tune with both their rights and responsibilities to their brothers and sisters. A good practice is to follow the Royal Law that says, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."⁵⁶ The love of neighbor means that they are released from personal control and coercion to be conformed to the individual's own image, and instead freed to be and live in God's image.⁵⁷ These boundaries aerate the soil, water the seed, and help shine the light of God's love in the life of the community. By God's grace, the fruit of the Spirit nourishes the community and creates bonds of affection.

On the other hand, if the leadership is too weak to speak to dysfunctional behavior, the virus of inappropriate behavior of the hostile and aggressive will be harbored and incubated within the church. With this mindset, ethics are sacrificed at the altar of "just getting along."⁵⁸ Healthy relational boundaries protect leadership from succumbing to in-groups who rule by favors and ego at the expense of the rest of the congregation. The leader has the responsibility to practice the art of upholding relational boundaries that honor God and the people of God, rather than denying, reacting to,

⁵⁶ James 2:8.

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 36.

⁵⁸ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space, and Influence* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2008), 144.

adapting to, or cowering from the presence of immaturity and toxicity in the community of faith.⁵⁹ Fear, comfort, and the desire to be liked are the idols that the leadership and community are tempted to cling to. But the wise leader will resist easy solutions and quick-fixes to the emotional intensity of the immature and rather take the time to address the heart of the situation with measuredness and insight that contributes to the health and honesty of relationships in the community.

The Practice of Good Communication

For the relationally intelligent leader, the *how* is just as important as the *what* in the community of Jesus followers. Good communication and process helps the leader and the faith community to be mindful that everything is connected. The church is composed of individuals in community—*communividuals*.⁶⁰ This begins with regular prayer and Scripture study. Chances are that if the leader is not hearing others well, they are probably not hearing God well either.⁶¹ The leadership communicates vision but also listens to what God is speaking through the community to the leader. Important decisions involve the congregation and all of the leadership so there is ownership and time to process change and new directions. There is a commitment to openness and transparency in the process so people do not feel hoodwinked or left in the dark. Thoughtful, patient, deliberate, and prayerful process protects against people being blindsided and the occurrence of hostile takeovers. Entrainment happens when clocks with swinging

⁵⁹ Friedman, *Nerve*, 2.

⁶⁰ This is a term the author coined, bringing together the words *individual* and *community*.

⁶¹ “We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

pendulums in close proximity synchronize their swings. This phenomenon happens not only in nature, but also in communities of faith that resonate with one another and become synchronized through regular communication.⁶² In other words, proactive communication fosters spiritual entrainment or unity in the church. Good communication helps the church to be more apt to tackle the problem, rather than tackling one another.⁶³

Reconciled difference in the church is attuned to controversial issues or denominational changes and recognizes that they should be communicated in a measured tone with the awareness that they can create undue additional conflict in the community if relayed or drafted in an insensitive manner. For example, a predominantly liberal or conservative church has more shared perspectives. If a denominational decision is made, a majority liberal or conservative church is, generally speaking, either glad together for a “correct decision” or angry together for an “incorrect decision.” But in a church containing a plurality of views, on any given decision, generally half the church is pleased and the other half is disappointed. In this setting, one must not gloat in “victory” or demonize the “victor” because the church shares together the ups and downs of life together. Immanuel church is presently retaining the old ordination standards of the PCUSA as the leadership waits to draft new ordination standards in light of the recent permission for churches or presbyteries to exercise local option to ordain sexually active homosexuals and unmarried sexually active heterosexuals. This is a profoundly difficult task because the congregation and leadership are virtually split down the middle on this issue. The leadership is patiently waiting for more direction to be revealed as the

⁶² Sellon and Smith, *Practicing Right Relationship*, 45.

⁶³ Gottman and DeClaire, *The Relational Cure*, 5.

denomination gains more time and experience with this change. When the time comes for the ordination standards to be drafted, whatever perspective is chosen will need to be crafted in such a way that both sides on the issue are respected and recognized, no matter which perspective is chosen. The vast majority of members have retained their membership, while several individuals have rescinded their official denominational ties, yet remain active in Immanuel Presbyterian Church because of their relationships. The leadership has sought to respect and communicate these individuals' consciences to other members who struggle with their decision. Living together in the midst of these differences has not been easy, but good communication has made the controversial issue manageable within the church.

Good communication seeks to faithfully respond to the challenge: *how can change be implemented sensitively and in such a way that those that disagree can live with the decision and feel their interests have been considered?* For a different example, if a church moves toward having an alternative expression of worship incorporated into Sunday mornings, the classic expression of worship that the church has known will not be replaced by the new one. Instead, a both/and decision is made where a new style is added to what is already known. Then those who have problems with more modern music can still enjoy the music they have experienced in the past in a different service. They may have to adjust the time that they worship on a Sunday morning, but it is still available for them. The key to healthy relationships is the ability to sacrifice for the other—to not deny others things they enjoy because one does not personally like it. In other words, church is not just about “me and my preferences.” The leadership has the important task of communicating the value of both expressions, rather than putting them

in competition with one another. When concerned parishioners share that they do not like “hand-clapping camp songs,” the leader can share how the church is becoming fluent in both worship languages. Each worship language has its own strengths and distinctiveness that the other cannot provide. It is important for leadership to communicate clearly the philosophy behind the change. In the case of alternative worship, the purpose is to resonate with more and new kinds of people than the church ever could with one singular traditional worship language. Appendix E lays out the discernment and communication process that the church leadership went through to implement an alternative worship service into a church that had only known a traditional expression of worship in their nearly fifty years of existence.

An important aspect of good communication in churches with a wide swath of views is to cultivate the discipline and art of descriptive thinking. Descriptive thinking is the commitment to learn and understand (not necessarily agree with) a multitude of perspectives—instead of creating a straw man or shooting down views that are different than one’s own. Then after seeking understanding, the leadership and congregation are free to be prescriptive—to humbly share why they sense at this time, with the light that they have, they have come to the view that they have reached. The discipline of engaging in descriptive thinking before prescriptive thinking builds the church’s trust that the leadership can be respected for their thoughtful conclusions. For example, there was a recent presbytery vote about ordination of unmarried sexually active church officers in the PCUSA denomination. The presbytery meeting happened to be hosted at Immanuel church. In the church newsletter, the writer sought to fairly explain both sides and the rationale for each view in this very divisive debate. It was then shared how the vote came

out in the presbytery and on a national level. Both sides were explained and helpful resources were provided from both perspectives. After this exercise, I communicated my personal perspective to the congregation. Members on both sides of the issue thanked me for how I broached this challenging issue.

The early church faced similar situations of difference. In the church in Rome, the Jewish believers were fearful that the old yardsticks for measuring their faithfulness to God were being thrown out. The Gentile believers were in danger of cutting themselves off from their Jewish spiritual heritage and insensitively imposing their freedom upon their Jewish brothers and sisters. Paul sought to honor both, by encouraging both to honor each other.⁶⁴ In many ways, these two groups are the traditionalists and the progressives today. Much can be learned by Paul's admonitions for each group to be fully convinced of their beliefs, while not being ostentatious with them around others who interpret the situation differently. This discipline of communication and process helps the church to more thoughtfully pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.

The Practice of Laughter and Play

Play engenders an environment of creativity, warmth, and trust where people are more apt to work together. Humor, irony, and appropriate silliness have a way of gently disarming and defusing mindsets and emotional systems that are stuck in ways of relating that are perpetually serious and pessimistic.⁶⁵ Celebration and breaking bread together

⁶⁴ "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand." Rom. 14:3-4

⁶⁵ Friedman, *Generation*, 209.

shape an environment of thankfulness and appreciation that enables congregants to see through each other's foibles and differences. The practice of holy hilarity can function as a relational grease that lubricates friction that the community might be undergoing. The commitment to levity is a relational investment that will be helpful to draw from when conflict is faced at a later time.⁶⁶ When individuals take themselves too seriously, relationships are often tenuous. Humor eases people and sets a tone where guards can be let down and the other can be encountered in relationship. Anthropologists speak of three modes of being human.⁶⁷ First, *homo sapien*—which literally means “wise man.” This is the thinking, rational side of our humanity. *Homo faber* is the second mode, which literally means “man the maker,” where humanity is expressed in work. Unfortunately, the third mode of humanity is often forgotten-- *homo ludens*, which means “man at play.” The church often dehumanizes the people of God by neglecting *homo ludens*. For the church to nurture not only the godliness but the humanity of believers, leaders must stay in touch with *homo ludens*—the human at play.

The author participated in a clergy retreat while a controversial denominational vote was taking place. The pastors were evenly divided on the issue, but in good relationship. The retreat concluded with a beautifully unique and moving time of extended prayer and laughter. Very different ministers literally prayed over one another with tears of sorrow and joy. When a community is laughing together, it is a helpful indicator of good relationship and emotional connection with one another. In a study of CEO leadership styles, the result revealed that outstanding leaders incorporated humor

⁶⁶ Gottman and DeClaire, *The Relational Cure*, 5.

⁶⁷ James H. Evans Jr., *Playing*, Compass Series: Christian Explorations of Daily Living, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 4.

three times more in their leadership than average leaders.⁶⁸ When timed well and used in a way that builds others up, humor is a crucial tool for unified variance in the local church.

Chronic anxiety is a major contributor to strife in the church. Play is effective because it loosens up anxiety. Anxiety hinders learning, craves certainty, contributes to the rigidity of one's views, constricts creativity and a sense of possibility, and can put one in a defensive posture.⁶⁹ A playful attitude has greatly helped Immanuel to remain in good relationship. Some specific ways this has been done is a few sermons given on the spirituality of play where members wrote confessions on paper, crinkled them up, and threw them like basketballs into garbage cans to remind them they were forgiven. During another service with an emphasis on play, the choir simultaneously threw forty paper airplanes at the pastor the first time he mentioned "play" in the service.⁷⁰ During a staff prayer meeting, members tossed a beach ball to one another with prayers written on the ball. This obviously must be done at appropriate times and in good taste, but it is a very helpful tool to keep laughing together, particularly in controversial or stressful times.

The Practice of Confession and Reconciliation

Confession and reconciliation set the stage for individual and collective healing that inevitably happen in a forgiven, yet still fallen Christian community. This is practiced in public and private settings. Reformed worship sets aside time in gathered

⁶⁸ Goleman, *Primal Leadership*, 34.

⁶⁹ Steinke, *Anxious Times*, 8-9.

⁷⁰ That event was one of the most exhilarating and memorable experiences in public ministry for me. At that moment I realized how well the congregation "got it."

worship for liturgical corporate and silent confession. Occasional services of healing and wholeness and individual services of repentance and forgiveness are helpful for mending and restoration of broken relationships when appropriate. The staff seeks to practice forgiveness by regularly communicating with other staff members and breaking bread together when misunderstandings or differences emerge. There have been times where the author has written notes or set up meetings if a hurt becomes known. Other members know that the pastor can be approached if a particular sermon or action offended them. In appropriate situations, the pastor has asked for forgiveness of a staff or congregant. Bonhoeffer notes, “In confession the break-through to community takes place.”⁷¹ Sin can impede, fracture, and alienate good relationship in the community if left unchecked. Yet by God’s grace, a penitent community makes space for a safe environment to admit one’s mistakes, oversights, failures, moments of weakness, and sins without fear of retribution. True forgiveness has the possibility of even deepening a relationship before the wrongdoing occurred. When differences are worked through, a new bond is developed because individuals and parties have honestly invested themselves in one another. Trust and mutuality open the door for the church to truly be the church by caring for and forgiving one another. Bonhoeffer again notes, “A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses.”⁷² Prayer for one another reminds the church that even one’s enemy is loved and forgiven by God, just as Christians are called to love one another. Joseph Myers uses a helpful metaphor for

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 86.

confession as being open to “life-editing” by Christ and one another.⁷³ Profound relational breakthroughs can take place when believers view their lives as rough drafts and open books that are ever open to being revised by the red letters of Christ. Confession keeps the Christian teachable and moldable. When the community individually and collectively asks for God’s loving correction and help to find their true voice, the church experiences a beautiful harmony conducted from above.⁷⁴

When the church accepts that all have weaknesses and shortcomings, that all have sinned against God and their fellow human being, and that Christ can forgive all for missing mark, the possibility of growth is opened up when each believer recognizes that they are both sinner and saint. Jean Vanier notes, “As long as we refuse to accept that we are a mixture of light and darkness, of positive qualities and failings, of love and hate, of altruism and egocentricity, of maturity and immaturity, and that we are all children of the same Father, we will continue to divide the world into enemies... and friends.”⁷⁵ Paul Tillich described this duality a number of decades ago by noting humans are “essentially good, but existentially estranged.”⁷⁶ But when this reality is surrendered to, each person experiences the divine breakthrough of communion with God and one another through the brokenness and healing of the crucified, risen, and living Christ.

⁷³ Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 139.

⁷⁴ “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” in Rom. 15:5-6

⁷⁵ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1989), 35.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 207.

The Practice of Collaboration

The commitment to teaming in the local church creates healthy interdependence. MaryKate Morse notes, “Power is a gift from God. Power used well is healing. Power used poorly is sinful.”⁷⁷ The abuse of power dehumanizes and corrodes healthy community. The miraculous happens when the church collaborates with God and one another by empowering and utilizing the spiritual gifts entrusted to the church. Dignity is bestowed upon each child of God. The people of God are encouraged, equipped, and expected to incorporate their Christ-flavored influence into the life of the community. All are welcomed and needed, rather than excluded or forgotten. Fellowship and power are shared rather than hoarded. Leadership is earned and also bestowed by those who follow. For different tasks different people take the baton of power depending upon their gifts and area of focus.⁷⁸ This involves what Hansen calls *disciplined collaboration* where, “The leadership practice of properly assessing when to collaborate (and when not to) and instilling in people both the willingness and the ability to collaborate when required.”⁷⁹ Collaborative leadership weaves together the insights and ideas from the community so that goals are bigger than the leader. The church is brought into the decision-making process—even those with divergent views. This shared stewarding of power brings a greater sense of ownership and involvement throughout the church. For example, the pastor shared with the mission team about developing an annual mission Sunday where the church would gather for worship, scatter for service in the community, and re-gather

⁷⁷ Morse, *Making Room for Leadership*, 39.

⁷⁸ Myers, *Organic Community*, 103.

⁷⁹ Morten T. Hansen, *Collaboration: How Leaders Avoid the Traps, Create Unity, and Reap Big Results* (Boston: Harvard Business, 2009), 15.

for worship, debriefing, and eating together. The mission team came up with a creative name and inspiring community mission projects. They also decided that the sanctuary chairs should be turned outward and that worship on that Sunday should be led from the back of the sanctuary as a visual reminder that the church is to be sent out to the world in mission. The team's different and extremely creative decisions were valued by the leadership. This ownership and collaboration inspired the team because it was not only the church's idea but their idea as well.

In another collaborative venture, an elder on session challenged the leadership to charter a 20/20 Vision Task Force during a session retreat. The group immediately resonated with this suggestion. Members of the task force (who were not session members) were eventually appointed by the session and commissioned in front of the congregation in both worship services. After several iterative rounds of visioning with the session, the task force was eventually honorably retired. From their hard work, the session developed seven initiatives to put into practice. When three of the seven initiatives received enough funding to act upon, the session called a congregational meeting and presented the plans of action and allowed for a question and answer time regarding a sanctuary refurbishment, purchase of a color electronic church sign, and a plan to bring on staff a youth pastor. Those who made the congregational presentation were two respected long-time members who did the last sanctuary redecoration twenty-five years ago, an electrician, a former CEO, a retired accountant, and a former youth group member who now is a commercial interior designer. The congregation responded enthusiastically to the leadership's venture of faith. This wide pool of leadership and

voice is crucial to bringing about systemic change in a way that resonates with the congregation.⁸⁰

Conclusion

The Scriptures describe Christ as our peace, individually and corporately.⁸¹ Jesus reconciles strife and contention in the community when individually and collectively the people abide in Christ and walk in the light of God's love towards one another. Christ supplies relational peace in good times, bad times, and hard times, which gives Christians a sense of hope and possibility about the future. When the church allows these hopes and dreams—God's dreams, other's dreams, one's own dreams—to converse, intermingle, and influence one another, life emerges; possibility and potential are generated to make a difference inside and outside.⁸² In other words, the church is like a choir composed of tenors, altos, basses, and sopranos all singing in melody and harmony. The people of God's voices are tuned to Christ. Each person's pitch and timber enrich God's song, rather than detracting from it. God conducts the church and the Spirit keeps the choir in rhythm. The living Christ lives and sings through the Body of Christ. When God looks at his people, he sees not only his beloved children, but individually his sons and daughters. God also sees Christ in his people.

Despite the church's divisions and faithlessness, by grace the church is forgiven, accepted, and embraced by the Creator of the Universe. Even better, those in Christ are a new creation. The church's task is to believe and live into who they are in Christ and

⁸⁰ Hutchkiss, *Governance and Ministry*, loc. 2588.

⁸¹ Eph. 2:14.

⁸² Sellon and Smith, *Practicing Right Relationship*, 36.

extend that to the world and one another. Imaging God, exercising self-knowledge, providing room for discussion, remaining connected yet self-differentiated, honoring boundaries, engaging in good communication, play and laughter, confession and reconciliation, and stewarding power through collaboration and teaming can all help the church live into healthy Christian community. Rather than being demanders of service, God's people are recipients of grace to be freely extended to others. All are welcomed, especially the weak, forgotten, unseen, and marginalized because they are Christ. The church must ever turn to Christ who alone can make this happen, as Bonhoeffer noted, "Christian brotherhood is not an ideal we must realize; it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."⁸³

⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

CHAPTER 6:
MISSION THAT MANIFESTS UNIFIED VARIANCE

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.¹

Introduction

Chapter four examined the first element of unified variance, which is following Christ. Chapter five explored the second element of unified variance, which is cultivating relationships with other Christ followers. Chapter six will now focus on the third element of unified variance, which is a common mission that the church can rally around. Just as relational inhalation is crucial to the oxygenation of the body of Christ, so is missional exhalation to the outward movement of the people of God who are seeking to keep in step with the Spirit as they follow Christ. A third critical element for unified variance in the local church is nurturing a common mission beyond the four walls of the church that the people of God of different theological stripes can rally around. The leadership has a calling to instill within the church a deep knowing that the church exists for the world, rather than the world existing for the church.² Pursuing God’s mission can take innumerable forms, depending upon the context and the collective personality of each community of faith.³ In the case of a theologically varied local church, unified variance emerges from not so much a monolithic theology, but from the diverse believing

¹ John 17:18.

² Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith—Unity in Christ*, 35.

³ Andrew Walls comments that “the faith of Christ is infinitely translatable.” Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 25.

community remaining focused on the same person of Jesus Christ and discerning in community and acting upon Christ's mission in the power of the Spirit.

Temptations and Pitfalls

There are temptations and pitfalls when Christ is separated from mission or when mission is avoided altogether because it may be viewed as a disruption for the community of faith's stability. The crux of mission is that it should be sustained from a relationship with Jesus Christ. Ultimately it is not a cause, but the living Christ that keeps the church properly focused and empowered to live into the people of God's calling. Joining in Christ's mission is a safeguard against devolving into a "play it safe" church. Mission helps to curb human nature's latent drive to preserve and protect in order to keep the peace and stability of the institution. When many perspectives are manifest within a community of faith, it is tempting to be so cautious that nothing is done and the goal becomes finding that non-mission lowest common denominator that all can subscribe to. Unfortunately, this point of standardized agreement does not provide enough adhesive for the church to be cohesive. In addition, this was not Jesus' *modus operandi* for mission and ministry. Jesus was a boundary-breaker and a person who could not be domesticated by human formulae or expectations.⁴ He repeatedly irked and mystified the religious elite by fraternizing with sinners, women of ill-repute, tax collectors, fishermen, and Samaritans. He would do the same today, spending time with modern day outcasts,

⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 30, 47.

saying to them, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”⁵ and “come, follow me.”⁶

The church, even a diverse church, has so much more of a calling than just getting along, avoiding issues, and not dying out. The church is the body of Christ and is called to continue Christ’s ministry, and to settle for nothing less. Mission draws the church into unique and challenging situations and increases the amount of good and exciting stories the church has to tell about the impact and difference they are making in the real world. A missional way of life thickens the skin and softens the heart of the community of faith by exposing it to the world’s needs. This outward relational direction fortifies relationships and keeps the priority on witness, rather than selfish preferences.

The warp and woof of mission is hearer-centered, rather than speaker-centered. This deliberate missional bent will forge the path for the local church to become more and more fashioned by the needs around them, rather than by the tastes or peccadilloes of congregants. Mission should inspire all believers to learn their neighbor’s language, walk in their moccasins for a mile, and ask questions about their perspectives and longings. To make the world rigidly change to the church’s way of doing things is neo-colonialism. But being hearer-centric can protect a diverse church from becoming ingrown or squabbling over the idolatry of form or ideology. This environment will give more breathing room for the mission of God to hold sway over secondary matters of difference in the community.

⁵ Matt. 3:2.

⁶ Mark 10:21.

Mission is crucial in this mix because it trains the participants in the community of faith to put Christ's example before selfish preferences. Authors Frost and Hirsch describe the counter-intuitive nature of embracing a theology of risk, adventure, and courage of which the outflow is spiritual resilience and deepened relational bonds within the community of faith.⁷ Mission puts the believer on the front lines for Christ and this exposure to the possibility of loss or unfamiliarity actually enhances, rather than diminishes, the faith community's quality of spiritual life together. This emotional investment and incarnated faith outside one's comfort zone nurtures the relational sturdiness and spiritual grit to work and play through challenges not only in the community outside, but in the interpersonal relationships within.

This primacy of mission and seeing the church as God's mission fashions a missional ethos that pervades the air that the church breathes.⁸ The church takes on a liberating climate where the people pursue God's peace and see their identity as that of peacemaker. Mission is understood as extending and offering God's peace that helps people and the world itself to become all that God intended it to be. In this passionate pursuit of peace, relationships are mended, hurts in the neighborhood become visible, and the people of God see themselves as God's selected instruments to bring wholeness and healing in Christ's name. The priority of peace is practiced by this outward movement of mission, rather than a sole focus on getting along well on the church grounds. The beautiful thing is that internal health and solidarity within the faith community are a spiritual byproduct of the church's faithfulness to their outward calling to the world. This

⁷ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure, and Courage* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 33.

⁸ JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 51.

is a collective application of Jesus' words that, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."⁹

Mission must still be discerned with great care. Rashly choosing controversial or politically charged issues to be the centerpiece or primary mission in a diverse local church can unnecessarily distract or even fragment good people. A mission chosen haphazardly or in a passive aggressive manner is disastrous for unified variance. The local church leadership can guard against this by the commitment to not be polarizing, political, or pandering in the *how* and the *what* of discerning God's mission in a particular context. A way for the church leadership to pastorally address controversial mission possibilities (i.e., border ministries in Arizona), is to make members aware of the many possible ways to serve in that area, even if they appear to contradict one another. The church can give room for affinity groups or small groups the freedom to pursue this particular expression of mission. The Scripture teaches that the people of God are to care for immigrants.¹⁰ God's directive to care for the immigrant is clear, but which policy best reflects that is less clear. For example, there are church members who have cared for immigrants in practical, personal, and sacrificial ways but have rather conservative convictions about immigration policy. A helpful solution might be to encourage church members to practice their preferred manifestation of mission to immigrants (i.e., housing undocumented workers, political activism, or filling water stations in the desert) either individually, with other organizations, or with secondary smaller networks within the

⁹ Mark 8:35.

¹⁰ Lev. 19:33-34 says, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God."

congregation. Immanuel might rather place the greatest emphasis, funding, and church-wide participation in ESL training of immigrants because this emphasis has a wide appeal among both conservatives and liberals at the church. This would focus as a centerpiece and vitally important mission that the church could rally around, no matter one's theological or political preference. For example, the pastor may invite members to a memorial service for those who have died crossing the border or make the church aware of the possibility to participate in a border immersion experience. A more missionally minded small group might participate in border ministry opportunities that are more progressive in approach. Members are given venues to explore the dynamics of immigration in educational settings and the various ways these needs can be attended to out of Christian love. But these types of outreaches might not be suited to be a cornerstone of mission because of the history of this issue as being a divisive one at the church. However, virtually everyone's conscience (liberal and conservative alike) would allow them to rally around an ESL ministry that would enhance the quality of life for immigrants in Arizona. Oswald and Johnson suggest a beautiful test to discern a unifying common mission by finding out who the congregation as a whole weeps over.¹¹

Conversely, an insensitive congregational push for everyone to participate in Humane Borders might cause liberals to rejoice, yet it would likely create animosity amongst the more conservative in the community who previously signed petitions against it on the church patio several years earlier. Another mission venture the church is launching is tutoring at risk youth in the congregation's neighborhood. A nearby elementary school has been unable to get volunteer tutors to commit to meet on a weekly basis with students who are struggling academically. Immanuel members will partner with an organization

¹¹ Oswald and Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, 118.

by being trained to help students with reading comprehension and forge healthy relationships with young people. This crucial neighborhood outreach transcends liberal and conservative agendas and enables left and right to make a meaningful difference in Christ's name.

This discerning approach engages Southern Arizona's vital mission context, but addresses it in a way shaped to the diverse Immanuel context. A more gentle approach may help those more entrenched against it to open up a little more than before. Nonetheless, a prayerful and thoughtful decision for how mission is to be expressed will not guarantee everyone will be enthused by the ultimate decision. In those moments, the leadership is to model a genuine and passionate focus upon Christ and the discerned calling to mission. In other words, pastoral moxy involves not only nurturing the congregation, but also challenging them in prophetic ways.¹² When people of influence within the church remain relatable, approachable, and steady in the midst of criticism, those who disagree will be more apt to remain connected to the church, despite the differences.¹³ This non-anxious presence modeled by the leadership will likely weather the criticisms and enable the mission calling to be enacted and be fruitful, as multiple views are engaged in a scripturally informed manner.

Another way mission can be sidetracked is by merely changing internal elements within the worship service or church campus in the name of making the church more contextual and missional, when in reality the church never really engages in mission in the world because all ministry remains sequestered within the four walls of the church

¹² Oswald and Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, 145.

¹³ Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Herndon: Alban, 2010), 120.

building. Newbigin describes this as when the church affirms “missions” but is not the mission itself.¹⁴ Yet one can go to the other extreme and neglect the internal health of the congregation under the banner of mission by being solely external, at the expense of communication and creating a welcoming environment conducive to good and respectful relationships. Wisdom helps to avoid the pendulum swing and to keep the internal and external components of ministry and mission in ongoing dialogue. In the pursuit of a good scattered church theology, the people of God cannot afford to neglect a good gathered church theology. The ministry opportunity is to keep the internal/external polarities intact, rather than making it an either/or choice.

The church’s purpose is not a self-serving one. Bromiley notes “the church does not exist for itself but for the discharge of a mission.”¹⁵ The people of God have a to and fro movement of expressing this discharge out in the world with Christ’s love and coming together to debrief and spiritually recharge for continued mission. This double-movement of gathering and scattering preserves the church from stagnation and fragmentation. Immanuel’s mission statement “*discovering and displaying Christ in here and out there*” deliberately seeks to keep the creative tension of teaching and learning and ministry and mission connected through the living Christ, who is the center and the circumference of the church.¹⁶

¹⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 2.

¹⁵ G.W. Bromiley, “Church,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Rev. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 695.

¹⁶ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 404.

The DNA of Mission

Uniformity of theology is not a prerequisite for unity in mission to take place, but there is a need for the local church to be on the same page and going towards the same mission horizon. Andrew Walls provides several guiding theological elements for the church universal:

1. the worship of the God of Israel
2. the significance of Jesus of Nazareth and the cross
3. the belief that God is active in the world and amongst those who believe in him
4. the people of God compose the body of Christ throughout time and space¹⁷

One might also add that the above beliefs should lead to Christ-likeness and continued mission to those who do not yet have a conscious awareness of the God of Israel or Jesus of Nazareth.

The church's context helps shapes how the above constants are to be communicated. An important question for the community to pray and ponder is *what would be good news for our city?* At its heart, mission is the inspired and expressed action of the church that seeks to be a blessing to the world. Deliberating this question together bonds the church and keeps at the forefront the important truth that the church does not exist for itself, but for the world. Mission expressed through believers committed to unified variance keeps going back to the question of how to keep a unity rooted in the person of Christ and his purposes rather than seeking a unity for the sake of unity.

An awareness that God is a missionary God and the people of God are a missionary people keeps the local church grounded in faith and rooted in relationships.

¹⁷ Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 24.

Men and women are made in the image of God. Since God is a God who lovingly goes out to the world, so his people who bear his likeness follow suit. Since God is active in not only the church, but also the world, the church must be continually focused and directed by this question: *is the church up to what God is up to?* The counsel of God testifies to God's desire to have compassion upon those in need. Therefore, mission goes in God's name to where there is need. Where there is hunger, disease, injustice, loneliness, or no knowledge of Christ—God beckons the church to be the church there. Thus the community's task is to discern and join in what God is already doing. Individual and communal prayer is central to giving the church eyes to see what God would have his people do. Prayer is vital in that it also energizes the church to continue and remain logged into Christ's ministry and mission. Shared worship and prayer experiences also function as relational glue within the community of faith that bonds them to God, one another, and the world.

In addition, it is helpful to train and remind the leadership of the responsibilities of their calling, which is to serve Christ, to love one's neighbor, and also act upon the particular mission that God has called the church to. The church's mission (i.e. in the case of Immanuel "discovering and displaying Christ in here and out there") guides the leadership in all decision-making. In other words, leaders are called not to just vote their conscience, but to vote for the mission and to seek in the power of the Spirit to join in and encourage others to participate in God's mission for the church and world.¹⁸

The holistic nature of mission involves spiritual, emotional, physical, individual, communal, proclamational, demonstrational, monetary, and hands-on components. When this thick mission is honored in the local church, it can bring together rather than exclude

¹⁸ Hutchkiss, *Governance and Ministry*, loc. 1432.

diverse theologies within the local congregation. Mission is unconditional in that the church is unashamed to invite all people to follow Christ and they are still loved even if they do not respond positively to the church. Mission is crucial because it trains the church in the practice of mutuality—where God’s grace is not only freely given, but also freely received from those encountered. Mission is not limited to people who are similar, it is extended to all and creates opportunities to broaden the church’s horizons and perspectives. The church learns, is blessed, and changed by being in relationship with a variety of people in the world. Mission is also creatively shaped by the gifts of the community so it should take on the personality of the community. Thus mission frees all participants in the congregation to ask this question: *how can I use what I’m good at, what I enjoy, and what I care about to do good and reach out to others who don’t have a spiritual home or are in need?* The act of mission draws people in to utilize their God-given and needed talents for the kingdom of God.

A lopsided emphasis upon one of these elements to the exclusion of the others will generally connect with only limited segments of the church. Holistic, multi-faceted, and biblical mission will be compelling to a wide variety of theological persuasions because a rich array of insights is incorporated into its formulation. This brings a depth to mission that might be lacking in congregations that emphasize witness only through word or only through deed. People realize their perspective is recognized and something new can be learned that they might not normally think about. As a result, mission is expressed through aid to displaced Syrians, support for Messianic Muslim communities, just coffee ventures in Mexico, assistance with clean water and medical clinic construction in Ethiopia, drives to provide printer paper for local public schools with reduced budgets,

and Sunday morning city cleanup days where Immanuel gathers for worship, scatters for mission, and re-gathers for storytelling and breaking bread together. People from across the theological spectrum can be involved and supported in these diverse expressions of mission.

A Common Mission Builds *Communitas*

Participatio Christi emerges when a common mission orders the community life of Jesus followers more than an institution.¹⁹ This means that fellowship blossoms not only when a community is looking inward, but when a community or a small group deepens friendship as they engage in mission together. Alan Hirsch describes this as *communitas*, which is a spiritual bond that springs up when people step out in faith and participate in the kingdom life that is greater than each individual.²⁰ Missional fellowship is open-ended and not limited to being a selfish endeavor with those who are already a part of the group. It can be a bonding experience while blessing others at the same time. Common mission gives the community something to rally around and creates an *esprit de corps*. As the group rises to meet needs that develop, a unity and kinship is forged that can be stronger than the differences expressed. Differences are honored and not deemed divisive. For example, church members not only enjoy making and delivering sandwiches to the homeless in our community, but talking amongst themselves over sliced bread, Velveeta, and bologna. In a different situation, a church member saw a young person playing basketball on the church grounds. He noticed that the basketball net was frayed

¹⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus*, 24.

²⁰ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 277.

and dangling. The next day he came by with a new net to install. It was great fun to install the net with this parishioner talking together on the ladder and looking forward to the young person's excitement at a new net on his next visit. These are two examples of how mission can create opportunities for relationship building within the church and outside the church. Mission stretches the individual and community, so that they depend upon God and one another in deeper ways, rather than confining fellowship to merely addressing the group's own preferences and needs.

A Common Mission Fosters Collaboration

Unifying bonds are created when folks come together to the table to collaborate and scheme about creative ways to participate in mission in a manner that bridges differences. This endeavor sharpens the practices of mutuality, discernment, and teamwork that simultaneously enhances the mission and bonds between those engaged in mission. For example, a congregant approached the Immanuel leadership about participating in a prayer service to be held in less than a week. Upon further research, the prayer service was found to also be directly connected with a political demonstration regarding immigration legislation in Arizona. The mission team and session sensed the importance of prayer regarding this issue, but also felt that the event was too soon to be appropriately interpreted by the leadership and the congregation as a whole before participating in it. Ultimately, the leadership sensed that the direct involvement with a demonstration could pose problems for a church such as Immanuel. Yet to stop there would be a failure of missional nerve. After discussions among leadership, members of a variety of political and theological stripes decided that the pastor would have a prayer meeting at the church at the same time as the prayer meeting and demonstration

downtown. This collaboration with all sides empowered a wide stripe of folks to address pertinent issues in the local culture in a sensitive manner. Some of the activists were disappointed that the church did not participate in downtown events, but they also knew that the church deliberated the issue and did in fact seek God in prayer—collectively in the church and as individual members who participated in the downtown prayer and demonstration event. Prayer reminds the church that it is more sail boat blown by the winds of the Spirit than paddle boat propelled by sheer human will for a specific destination.

Mission also collaborates with the immediate surroundings. Jesus of Nazareth was immersed in his home culture. He learned and communicated in the vernacular language with a thick Galilean accent, participated in community life and traditions, and used the immediate environs and encounters to communicate his teachings and parables, often extemporaneously.²¹ As a result, Christ's words and actions in the moment were prophetic, surprising, and uniquely personalized to each event and person he faced. If he had lived and ministered in a different setting, many aspects of his teaching most likely would have taken on the flavor of that context. Jesus' example of missionary practice frees the Christian to tailor and improvise his or her ministry and theology to new and different surroundings in the Spirit of Christ. Mission motivates the church to engage, learn, and care for their immediate relationships and surroundings in a deeper way. "The Word became flesh and lived among us"²² so that humans could understand and come to relationally know and see the actions of the Word of God, rather than just read God's

²¹ Clemens Sedmek, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, Faith and Culture Series, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 23.

²² John 1:14a.

Word in the Scriptures. This is the message of *missio dei*, the missionary God, who goes out to all of humanity. God calls his people to have the same mind as Jesus, who was born in human likeness, humbled himself, and obeyed the Father to the point of death on the cross.²³ Christians must have new and ongoing interaction and collaborative experiences with the world and the Word to keep the good news fresh, alive, and pertinent to each context. This exposure to new and different questions that each mission field emanates challenges the church to respond to previously ignored or unknown quandaries that arise from the new context.²⁴ The beauty of the incarnational nature of Christianity is that its “continuous translatability has left it as the only world religion that is peripheral in its land of origin.”²⁵ The gospel was designed for missional movement. Because God is omnipresent, the good news can be at home in any geographical place. This is an ongoing and dynamic process, where the context is respected, preserved, and renewed. Followers of the Missional Messiah go into every aspect of their world and society and partner with the already present God to give glimpses and appetizers of what God’s kingdom can be like.²⁶ In other words, “the church makes Jesus Christ visible in the world.”²⁷

²³ See Phil. 2:4-11.

²⁴ Andrew Walls notes that venturing out to new mission frontiers results in “developing a whole new Christian lifestyle for conditions that no previous believer had had to cope with. It meant facing a whole array of situations that simply had not arisen.” In Andrew F. Walls, “The Ephesian Moment,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 76.

²⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 4.

²⁶ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bas, 2009), 24.

²⁷ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 153.

In this environment the Spirit's work in the individual and community to self-theologize will provide greater freedom for the "other" to express their faith in their terms and cultural heart-language. Sanneh notes, "Only by continuing to express its [Christianity's] vision in continually fresh ways can Christianity avoid the idolatry of form."²⁸ Each time a person takes the gospel to a new context, the missionary's faith expression must be born again into the new world of the receiver's culture. This will likely cause some uncomfortable conclusions for non-natives, but if done faithfully, the new expression will become more nuanced with time and be coherent and fitting to the new context and much better suited than alien "outsider" theologies. Personal knowledge and interaction transforms ignorance and assumptions into friendship and deeper understanding of people groups and ideologies found in their missional environment.

A Common Mission Nurtures within the Community of Faith a Greater Self-Knowledge and Reason for Existence

The Christian's reality is that he or she does not belong to the world—rather each Christian belongs to God. This means that the believer is in the world, but not of the world. Mission redemptively motivates this "in-not-of" way of life because it helps Christians to purposely and lovingly relate with the world, without losing the identity of belonging and being sent by God, just as Christ was and is. Mission is a way of being, an identity, and calling that forms the people of a missionary God.²⁹ Yet the Christian must be ever alert to the dangers of a self-indulgent or self-congratulatory mission that demeans all involved. Mission should not be "done to" someone who is the targeted

²⁸ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 82.

²⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: Why It Matters, How To Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 45.

project,³⁰ but rather participated in alongside others in a way that honors the image of God in everyone. This missional spirituality cultivates an enacted awareness and an attuned practice of incarnating God's presence and love with those in the locale one is found.³¹ David J. Bosch notes, "To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love."³² The mission endeavor should not be denigrated to naval gazing or a way to appease a guilty conscience or feel better about oneself.³³ Rather, mission should foster humility, gratitude, relationship, and true blessing to all involved. Genuine mission fulfills the purpose of God's grand designs for all creation.

The act of mission deconstructs each church's rendition of the gospel as it enters a new and different setting. This means that the believer allows God to deconstruct his or her own assumptions and redirect them, leading to deeper knowledge of God and oneself. Deconstruction helps unmask how the local church's beliefs might not be a window to see God better, but a reflection of the individual or community in the water that they are narcissistically entranced by. Paul's assumptions were deconstructed on the road to Damascus by Christ³⁴ and in the course of his missionary encounters with Gentiles.³⁵ Paul deconstructed the Athenian's understanding of their poetry and the "unknown God"

³⁰ M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes A Difference in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 155.

³¹ Roger Helland and Leonard Hjalmanson, *Missional Spirituality: Embodying God's Love From the Inside Out* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 31.

³² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

³³ Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: Journey to the Center of the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 127.

³⁴ Acts 9:3-6.

³⁵ Phil. 3:7-12.

in light of Jesus.³⁶ God uses mission to teach the church about who we really are and prunes those false identities that keep the church from actualizing their identity in Christ Jesus. Most importantly, mission empowers the church to make a difference for good in the world. Mission is a gift from God to the world and to the church.

Conclusion

Discerning a common mission that God has called the local church to participate in makes the church look and act more like who they are: the body of Christ. Prayer not only binds the church together, but it fuels and propels the church into action out in the world. Mission challenges the church to depend upon one another and to engage the church's true place—the world. Mission is a severe mercy because it strips the church of unhealthy baggage that hinders its witness. A common mission opens up the people of God to the new things God is doing in the world and in the church. Mission strengthens the church and reinvigorates it to live for much bigger things than internal and secondary preferences. Mission forges a special bond because it reminds the church that Christ leads the church forward and that God's task for the church is much bigger than the church's differences. Mission reminds the church that Jesus loves not only the church, but also the world. Prayerful and discerning mission in a church composed of liberals, moderates, and conservatives nourishes a unified variance that blesses within and without the community of faith.

³⁶ Acts 17:22-31.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION

*Good leaders are seers of alternatives.*¹

Daniel T. Rogers, professor of history at Princeton University argues that Americans live in an age of fracture where thinking is “piecemeal, context-driven, occasional.”² This paper has sought to show that the strengths of more modest and local thinking can be combined with a robust faith in Christ that can foster unified variance, rather than fragmentation. In other words, *a theologically diverse local church can experience and express unified variance by following Christ through collaborative relationships and context-appropriate mission, without mandating theological uniformity.*

It is crucial for the church to pursue this unified variance because of the many explosive divides in the North American context over social and theological issues. The path of unified variance in Christ is pertinent because it seeks to engage in a fresh manner the new sociological realities of the day while striving to remain faithful to Christ, the Scriptures, and God’s mission in the world.

Jesus says, “The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”³ In order to experience and enjoy unity in Christ as a witness to the world, the church must listen to the Spirit with holy shrewdness rather than relying upon broken and outdated human methodologies to facilitate a synchronized testimony to Jesus. It is all too easy for church leaders to remain stuck in limited patterns that hinder the people of God from experiencing robust relationship with

¹ Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 156.

² Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2011), 10.

³ Luke 16:8b.

God and neighbor in this new world we find ourselves in. Spirit-led and Jesus-following leadership refuses to accept traditionally left- or right-leaning positions as the only tools available for the task of disciple-making and consensus-building. Possibility thinking always takes imagination and robust belief that Jesus is able to bridge and transcend the challenges and obstacles that church and society face. A passion for unified variance in Christ believes that previous ideological and theological impasses can be mended or prayerfully navigated around for the greater purpose of mission and fellowship.

To embark on the adventure of unified variance in Christ, the leader must know his or her audience, listen to and diligently study the various perspectives, inspire all sides to talk with one another, prayerfully discern alone and together how Jesus speaks to differing perspectives, and compellingly communicate this alongside the leadership and congregation for the purpose of moving beyond stalemates and forward into God's mission. Richard Rohr notes, "good leaders must have a certain capacity for non-polarity thinking and full-access knowing (*prayer*), a tolerance for ambiguity (*faith*), and ability to hold creative tensions (*hope*), and an ability to care (*love*) beyond their own personal advantage."⁴

Unified variance can be put into practice by a prayerful reflection on ends and means. Leonard Sweet has noted that the problem with politics is that it often absolutizes the means and relativizes the ends. Jesus reversed this order by relativizing the means and absolutizing the ends.⁵ Absolutizing the means is detrimental to unified variance because it mandates that all people have the same ideological perspective in order to

⁴ Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 158.

⁵ Leonard Sweet shared this at the George Fox University Doctor of Ministry Think Tank on March 18, 2013.

reach the ideal end. Unified variance slightly modifies Sweet's view by saying that Jesus inhabits both the ends and the means, which helps form Christ in the person more without forcing all followers of Christ into the same ideological mold.

Within the Way of Jesus there are many ways of Jesus that lead to Jesus. These Jesus ways are customized to each context (by divine and human partnership) to fuel and transport God's people to where they need to be in the journey of faith. Christ weaves together the how, the what, and the ultimate goal. For example, a trip can have alternate routes and means of transportation to bring various people from different places to the same destination. To reach Orcas Island, one may utilize a number of means or ways of transportation such as a car, rental car, plane, ferry, or ambulation. When properly utilized, these varied traveling routes and vehicles bring one to the desired destination. This multi-faceted use of transportation is endangered when people make mandates and say, "It is only permissible to get to Orcas Island in cars because I like cars and have a fear of flying on pontoon planes." In a similar manner, Jesus is able to appropriately craft varied and meaningful means and routes to journey with people that will help them cherish the journey and ultimately bring them safely to his desired destination and end.

Unified variance is also exhibited when the people of God honor God and those created in God's image in ways that are subjected to Christ. This mindset is different from such thinkers as Aldous Huxley who noted that politics or religion could never in any situation justify the means of war or violence to bring about the ends of peace.⁶ From this perspective, true religion would not permit a person to be a "hawk" or soldier and an authentic believer at the same time because they employed inherently bad means. Thus,

⁶ Aldous Huxley, *End and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 100.

for Huxley pacifism was the only acceptable means to peace, even in the time of Nazi Germany and the horrors of the Holocaust. Unified variance would make the case that this clinging to a singular ideal of what peace looks like in every situation, at the cost of millions of lives, rings hollow in the face of the brutal realities of evil in this world. In some situations, peace must have the muscle to protect life, and this on occasion requires the necessary evil of war. But this just war perspective can and has been abused when nations rationalize away or ignore evidence that might lead them away from war and to employ diplomatic means instead. The strength of unified variance is that it is less likely to allow a singular idea or means (i.e. pacifism or “just” war) to become an idol to remedy every situation. Unified variance also creates situations where a Christian or group of Christians are more apt to be prophetically challenged, instead of unreflectively affirmed in their assumptions. In addition to this accountability of multiple perspectives, all believers have need of the judging and nudging direction of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Unified variance holds that Christ is the constant means and ends in every context, perfectly relating to and addressing the need at hand in surprising and fresh ways that glorify God.

To use this thinking specifically to a controversial issue like immigration, unified variance would say that a Border Patrol officer and a Humane Borders activist can worship side by side. As long as they are both committed to the ultimate end of Christ’s peace (utilizing different, yet Christ-honoring means to get there) true unity in the midst of difference can be experienced. The beauty of unified variance is that both perspectives need one another to inform and sharpen one another. Both values are important, but they are also incomplete apart from one another. It is a spiritual discipline to stay in relationship with other Christians who think differently because Christians do not always

⁷ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith—Unity in Christ*, 38.

choose the right path in any given situation. It is not only humbling, but also enriching to see the full wealth of God's kingdom expressed in different approaches through Christ to help the body see things in new ways. In this way, Christ sanctifies and transforms both the means and the ends, even if they are apparently at odds from a superficial glance. Jesus honors, transforms, and transcends each person's *Weltanschauung*—as long as both the ends and means employed throughout life are relativized to and around Christ.

In sum, chapter two made the case that the book of Acts supplies helpful case studies on how a diverse group of believers, who were formerly defined most predominantly by race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, or gender, can self-sacrifice and be united in the risen Christ for Spirit-empowered fellowship and mission to the glory of God. The living Christ, mission, and loving fellowship were stronger and more important than real differences that emerged as the gospel crossed uncharted territories. This involved time, prayerful discussion, sacrifice, and the unshakeable conviction that Christ's mission was infinitely more important than petty or legitimate differences. This was most compellingly manifested in the Jerusalem Council, which found a creative way to honor the Spirit's inclusion of the Gentiles in the body of Christ in a way that also respected the Jewish community.

Chapter three argued that a prime example of unified variance in church history was exhibited by the canonization process and the canon itself. The communal discernment process was not rushed, but was permitted to be open-ended and variable from region to region, as long as the books testified to the crucified and risen Lord. Decisions on the precise contents of the canon were not made by church councils, but rather through the communal worship experience. Christian leaders made their case for

which books were deemed Scripture, but often with an awareness that not all practicing Christians agreed with those conclusions. Some books were sifted out by the church that did not faithfully communicate Christ, but many were added to the collection out of respect for those portions of the church that valued them. The canon itself is a powerful testimony to unified variance because it is simultaneously one book and a library of books. Though some are in apparent contradiction with one another, they were retained and held together in conversation. There is not one gospel book or one harmonized gospel of several gospels, rather the witness of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were placed together side by side as a synopsis of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the same way, the one Christ is the head of the Body of Christ who holds together the people of God.⁸ Jesus holds together those who trust in him but have differing conclusions on what that means exactly. The patient and collaborative process of canonization is a beautiful example and inspiration for today's church to follow regarding new challenges that the present context presents.

Chapter four explained that following Christ inevitably creates unity through the person of Jesus and variety of response as to how discipleship is worked out in the world. Meaning does not reside “out there” as much as “in here.” Each individual and people group has varying experiences and perspectives that color their particular portrait of the same Christ. These interpretations are bounded by the lines of the crucified and risen Lord, the testimony of the Scriptures, and the Spirit's activity in the world today. Christology and Christopraxis are not merely theoretical systems that scholars debate amongst themselves in ivory towers, but crucial tools that can either assist or hinder

⁸ Col. 1:17b.

fruitful ministry in the church and mission in the world. Unified variance is most compelling and authentic when it is rooted in the person of Jesus, rather than in one particular ideology that will inevitably alienate groups of people. This means that there is a priority on who is believed in (Jesus) over the specific details of what is believed in (i.e., hermeneutical assumptions or theological fine points). The experience and activity of following Christ is more important than precise verbal uniformity to explain the revelation of Christ.

Chapter five emphasized that relational gardening is central to the task of unified variance in Christ. Treasuring relationships, honoring the image of God in each individual, the maintenance of healthy boundaries, prayer, and play help foster and sustain Christ-honoring relationships that can weather conflict and smaller differences. The leadership models and mentors the congregation in the relational skills necessary to engage in dialogue that bridges divides and understands differences. When those in the community of faith have talked through tough issues, tackled challenges together, worshiped side by side, and laughed with one another, they have forged deep spiritual bonds that can equip them to face future disagreements in mature and healthy ways.

Chapter six claimed that discerning a common mission to rally around is also crucial to authentic unified variance in Christ Jesus. Just as Christ was sent by the Father, so the Body of Christ is sent by the Father and Son to continue Christ's ministry in the power of the Spirit to the world. However, in a church composed of conservatives, moderates, and liberals, it is necessary to find an appropriate mission that a large contingency of the church can be passionate about, rather than divided by. This involves gathering together a wide array of church participants to pray and discern what common

good God is calling the church to work toward. The challenge and opportunity is to discover the church's primary mission calling that makes a real difference in the community and as much as possible honors the collective conscience of the church. This task and purpose beyond the church keeps the community of faith engaged with the world and not ministerially embroiled in internal issues.

Outcomes

The fruit that will come from this commitment to unified variance in Christ is that Jesus will be front and center in all that the church does. Two primary questions will guide the church's worship, discipleship, mission, mercy, and hospitality—is Christ at the heart of it? Does it honor my neighbor? These questions will keep the church focused on the straight and narrow and avoiding the potholes and ditches of ideological bickering and jockeying. The world will see that Christians are seeking to be solutions rather than problems in the world today. This may draw the previously dubious to explore Christ and the church more.

Another outcome will be creative thinking that believes all things are possible in Christ Jesus. Instead of being mired in thinking that only harbors and sustains impasses, the church fixed on Christ will find a way to work and play together. They will be enriched rather than ostracized by lesser matters of importance. Rather than a toxic atmosphere, a love for Jesus and neighbor will inject the spiritual air with life and joy, enabling the community of faith to move forward in mission and across the sanctuary aisle. Knowing that fellow believers have differing views nurtures a spirit of humility in how one communicates controversial issues. This will not only deepen collaboration in the church, but help Christians model civility in public discourse.

The application of unified variance in Christ will empower the church to engage issues thoughtfully and be inspired to move forward in creative ministry and mission in the midst of difference. Both/and or polarity thinking will give leaders and church participants the tools to articulate and incarnate unified variance. However, Guthrie provides cautionary guidance on the dangers of safe, moderate, balanced, and both/and thinking that evades difficult issues or provides no practical ways forward.⁹ Ideally, the Christian uniquely transformed by Christ, positively influenced by fellow believers, and engaged with God's activity in the world will "seem too conservative to their fellow liberals or revolutionaries . . . [and] too liberal or revolutionary to their fellow conservatives."¹⁰ To foster this unique interaction with God, the church, and the world, the church will provide leadership summits, Sunday School classes, special seminars with guest speakers such as Leonard Sweet, and informal gatherings studying unified variance resources will empower the church to identify those truths that come in couplets. The appendices also provide examples on how the leadership, congregation, and presbytery can be trained in the way of unified variance.

Reflection upon such coupled truths as: the individual and collective; inward and outward, activity and rest; word and deed; past and future; tradition and innovation; content and process; and ends and means will train the church to appreciate difference rather than be threatened by it.¹¹ These gatherings will be a catalyst for new mission and ministry ventures to be birthed out of unified variance. There is a dire need in church and

⁹ Guthrie, *Diversity in Faith—Unity in Christ*, 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ Oswald and Johnson's *Managing Polarities in Congregations* provides a number of helpful examples of these paired truths and would be a helpful study resource for congregations seeking to learn more about unified variance.

society for people to gain appreciation of and discernment in truth and wisdom, not just information and knowledge. Pairing together the complexities of truth will keep progressives and traditionalists talking and experiencing a virtuous circle, rather than a vicious circle, as they live in community together.¹² Healthy congregations keep these polarities conversing with one another rather than seeking to alleviate them. The graceful to and fro between these polarities helps faith communities to course-correct and navigate life in a resilient and nuanced fashion. Unified variance will also empower brothers and sisters in the Lord to understand one another better and exhibit greater affection toward one another, even if they still hold differing perspectives. Inevitable conflicts will be managed in such a way that even if they are not solved, they will bond together the church because of the respect they have for one another. In a time of schism in many churches, unified variance may forge Christian unity instead of fragmentation or disillusionment with the church. Above all, the faith of believers will be enriched by the fullness of Christ that is experienced not only in their faith expressions they are accustomed to, but also by new perspectives they previously were sheltered from. Conservative evangelicals and social justice progressives, traditional choir members and electric guitar players, military leaders and humanitarian aid workers, will quite likely still disagree, but they'll talk, worship next to one another, and serve together in the world in Christ's name. We are not a collection of separate and isolated generations, but all believers are God's generation—ancient and future, left and right, young and old—connected and informing one another.¹³ This present unified variance in the crucified and

¹² Oswald and Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations*, 212.

¹³ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me.: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 202-203.

risen Lord is a small slice of heaven that all believers look forward to fully enjoying together in the not yet.

Further Research

Further research on the topic of unified variance might explore on a deeper level when a parting of ways is necessary within the body of Christ and how it might be carried out in as healing a manner as possible. Also, a deeper study could be conducted, which gauges what acceptable and unhelpful hermeneutical strategies in Scriptural or theological discussion are. Finally, a general criteria might be researched that could assess when the boundaries of Christology have been crossed or not. This is especially pertinent in situations where people of other religions follow Christ while retaining their religious affiliation with another world religion (i.e., Messianic Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.). In connection with that, a study of the boundaries of ecclesiology would be informative.

Concluding Remarks

God our Heavenly Patron has commissioned the collective people of God to creatively design an expansive mural depicting Christ across time and space. Each day, more and more individuals and new cultures in the inspiration of the Spirit contribute their artistic impressions (not erasing previous renderings or replicating prints of previous renderings) of what Christ looks like in action. By God's grace, this sprawling and imperfect masterpiece powerfully speaks and shows to a world longing for hope and beauty the inexhaustible depths of Christ to all people for the glory of God.

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APPENDIX A

A Statement on Sexual Ethics¹

This document is a guide that the presbytery expects inquirers and candidates to abide by and aspire towards throughout the care process. The Reformed perspective affirms that sex is a precious gift from God that is to be stewarded with joy and care within boundaries that are God-honoring and people-honoring. Yet we live in a sexually oversaturated culture that makes it challenging for people to live into this God-designed way of life. Society places a tremendous burden upon sex to deliver unceasing pleasure and worth physically, emotionally, existentially, and spiritually. In other words, the good gift of sex is one of the premier idols in America's pantheon of gods.

Sex isn't an idol or god for the follower of Christ—the Creator alone is to be worshiped. Sexual wholeness and holiness is a crucial pursuit for all Christians, especially those entrusted to shepherd God's people. The Christian's ultimate identity is not defined by sex, but that male and female—children of God—belong to God and are God's beloved.² As the Apostle Paul says, "we are not our own." Despite this glorious reality, all people, including Christians, are in need of sexual healing throughout their lives by God's grace. There is no room for pride among any of us, yet we must never give up the life-long pursuit of sexual character.

The calling for every Christian, particularly those called to the order of ruling or teaching elder, is to steward their sexuality in such a way that leads to not only sexual holiness, but also that their sexuality would bear the fruit of the Spirit, privately and in all aspects of ministry.

The body of Christ and the PCUSA in particular, including this presbytery, contains believers who hold a wide variety of views on a number of issues, including sexuality. There are good Christians who confess and seek to live by traditional Judeo-Christian sexual ethics that affirm the honorable nature of celibacy for the unmarried and faithfulness between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage. There are also good Christians who believe that traditional Judeo-Christian sexual ethics do not speak to all human relationships and should be supplemented in light of recent scientific research and sociological studies regarding contemporary sexual mores.

Despite these real complexities and points of difference within the church, there are crucial components of sexual stewardship on which this presbytery is in agreement. Every Christian, particularly those called to the order of ruling or teaching elder, should daily aspire by God's grace to exhibit sexual holiness in behaviors, choices, relationships, hopes, memories, marriage, health, fantasy, and desire in a way that honors God, neighbor, and oneself.³ Celibates are to be honored and encouraged in their commitment

¹ This statement was prepared by the author on November 6, 2012 for the "Committee on Preparation for Ministry," de Christo Presbytery, Arizona.

² Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 75.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

to be chaste for Christ. Elders are expected to be monogamous. Fidelity and chastity in marriage are positive virtues to be aspired to and celebrated. Sexual addiction is harmful to relationships and care should be sought for recovery. Sexual holiness pertains to all components of life: private, public, institutional, and global. Manipulative, violent, exploitive, trivial, voyeuristic, commodified, or promiscuous sex towards adults or minors must be resisted and repented of.

Thoughtful study of the Scriptures; regular prayer and worship; healthy Christian fellowship; professional help as needed; and reflection on the Book of Confessions, theology, church history, science, and experience are tools to help each Christian to make wise and discerning decisions in these arenas of life. Christian sexual holiness should be expressed in love, humility, and dignity to all.

APPENDIX B

A Letter to the Congregation Regarding Ordination Standard Changes in the PCUSA⁴

I'm a big Dr. Seuss fan. Dr. Seuss is just as much for “big kids” as “little kids.” One particular story has been speaking to me as of late—*The Zax*. The North-Going Zax collides with the South-Going Zax along the wide prairie of Prax. They bump into one another—toe to toe and face to face. They're both committed to their position saying:

*Never budge! That's my rule. Never budge in the least!
Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east!
I'll stay here, not budging! I can and I will
If it makes you and me and the whole world stand still!*⁵

The two Zaxes did stand still... *but the world didn't*. A city was built around them and the Zax Bypass Highway was built over them. Much of human history is the sad story of the Zax played out on many levels—internationally, in society, in politics, in homes, and yes, even in the church.

Our Presbyterian U.S.A. denomination, along with Episcopalians and Lutherans, are in a bit of a “Zax moment” regarding how we define sexual ethics. Many churches are in the midst of figuring out whether to change, compromise, or not budge on this issue. In July, prohibitions upon the sexual activity of ministers, elders, and deacons were loosened in the PCUSA. Each presbytery and church now has the local option to decide whether or not non-married sexually active heterosexuals and sexually active homosexuals may be ordained to church office. This means that a new threshold has been crossed in the 30+-year debate over how the Bible and Reformed theology inform and guide sexual behavior.

This change in ordination standards (plus other issues) has been the tipping point for a massive reorganization that's presently happening in the PCUSA. Some pastors and churches are in process of leaving the denomination altogether. An increasing number of Presbyterian denominations around the world are cutting ties in various degrees with the PCUSA, including the Presbyterian church in Mexico. A new Reformed Body under the umbrella of the Fellowship of Presbyterians will be constituted in January of 2012 for PCUSA churches to affiliate with on varying levels. The majority of churches will be staying in the PCUSA, but will decide on their own whether they will retain traditional Judeo-Christian definitions of sexual ethics (fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman/chastity in singleness) or adopt more progressive interpretations of sexual mores for church leaders.

⁴ This is an article that was published in the *Immanuel Dove* Newsletter in October 2011.

⁵ Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1961), 32.

So, where is Immanuel in all of this? Good question! We are committed to fully being within the PCUSA, as we have been since the 1983 reunion of Presbyterian churches. Our session had a special meeting Sunday, September 25th to begin dialogue about what Immanuel's ordination standards will be. We all are aware that this is a controversial and divisive topic—so we are approaching the issue with humility, prayer, honesty, and in a deliberately cautious manner. We voted on and approved this motion: *Immanuel will keep the previous ordination standards in effect until we come to a decision as a session regarding how we will craft our new ordination standards sometime in the future.* The session will take the needed time to study the many facets of this complex issue before arriving at a decision (i.e., Scripture, confessions, theology, science, reason, and experience). As of this time, we have not set a time-line for when a decision will be made. There will also be learning opportunities in the future for the entire congregation. Ultimately, the session votes on this issue, but we want to get feedback from the congregation regarding your perspectives to help inform the session in the discernment process.

So, back to the Zax. My prayer is that we learn *what not to do* from the Zax. That we acknowledge the inner-Zax in all of us. That we avoid the Zax' deadly sin of pride. That we change in those areas where we are stubborn, prejudiced, or unformed. And that we simultaneously honor our: conscience (which is under God's authority), ethics, moral principles, and summons from God to obedience. May we learn the art of compromise and collaboration where we can. May we have the wisdom to discern when to "agree to disagree" in a Christian way. Above all, may we not miss or be side-tracked from our participation in the kingdom of God and God's mission in the world that is going on all around—with or without us.

I leave us with Paul's words to the Roman church: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*⁶

⁶ Rom. 12:1-2

APPENDIX C

IPC New Elder Training Literature: Guidelines for Facing Conflict

One of the many great things that make Immanuel unique is that we have quite a broad spectrum of perspectives. Yet at the same time, this commitment can really stretch us when controversial topics come to the forefront in our church, country, or denomination. We have to put our brains and hearts together to be united when a friend worshiping in the pew next to us has a very different view from our own. Because of our commitment to giving room for a variety of perspectives, we have to creatively figure out how to be in community together when we all don't think the same way. *So, how do we do it?* I have it all figured out. Just follow my 11 Suggestions. OK, so maybe that's a stretch, but I think they're pretty helpful for all of us.

- 1.) **Be Christ-centered.** Christ is what we all have in common. Our understandings of what it means to hash out our faith in Christ in the real world may be different, but we follow the same Jesus and share Christ's table together. Jesus is bigger than and transcends our differences. And if God forgives and loves all of us in our differences, we're called to extend God's grace in our relationships with one another.
- 2.) **Follow the Royal Law.** James 2:8 says, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."
- 3.) Cultivate the discipline and art of **descriptive thinking**. This is the commitment to learn and understand (not necessarily agree with) a multitude of perspectives—instead of creating a straw man and shooting down views that are different than one's own. Research different perspectives, watch multiple news channels. Seek to describe "the other view" in a way that the other side would say, "Yeah, that's how I think about the issue." Then, you are free to choose the perspective you have with the light you have.
- 4.) **Be humble.** Realize that you could be wrong or that God likes some things that you don't. Accept that other good people might be led to a different perspective than your own. Don't club people with your arguments—take some time to listen too!
- 5.) **Pray.** Ask God to guide you into the truth, and to lead you away from falsehood. Realize the truth of the words of C.S. Lewis that the purpose of prayer isn't so much to change God, but for God to change *us*.
- 6.) **Be bathed in Scripture.** Plumb the depths of Scripture for guidance in your living and decision-making. Often times when we go to God's Word, we find amazing and surprising direction and wisdom that we never would have gotten on just our own thinking.
- 7.) **Christ is the Lord of the conscience.** This is one of the key Reformed beliefs. You are free... to follow what you sense Christ is calling you to do through

Scripture reading, prayer, life-experience, and community discernment. Even doing these things, people's consciences will lead them down different roads. Christ is our Lord and Master, all other claims are lesser—including our political party, denomination, or even as John Calvin noted nearly 500 years ago, the government. We all will ultimately answer to Christ.

- 8.) We have **relational unity, rather than ideological unity**. We are all in relation with Christ—we all experience his forgiveness and love. We are bonded together as the body of Christ and reconciled with one another through Christ. But we'll never have all the same perspectives or views. Unity ≠ uniformity.
- 9.) **Have a “meat from the bones” mentality**. It's OK not to agree with everything in our denomination or at Immanuel, while still being a vital part of our community of faith. You are free to say, “you know, I don't like _____ in our denomination or at Immanuel, but some people do. I don't agree, but I can live with it.” Or, “I really like what the pastor said about _____, but he was off his rocker when he said _____.” Enjoy and focus on the meat, and push aside the bones—and forget 'dem bones. And please don't throw any rotten tomatoes at your pastors!
- 10.) **Cultivate relationships and conversation**. A seasoned pastor once had a special event at the church where he served. The nation (and church) was in a hot debate about whether or not to go into war. Two speakers were brought in to the event. In one room, a Quaker spoke about pacifism. At the same time, another Christian speaker spoke about how this war qualified as a just war. The only requirement for the event: go and hear the speaker that represented the opposite view of your own. That exercise brought the church together in a meaningful way. At Immanuel, we want to create a safe place to ask questions, dialogue, and hear different vantage points. Another enriching practice is to cultivate some friendships with folks who think differently from you.
- 11.) **Join in a common mission outside of ourselves that unites us**. When we get too focused on internal debates, we become ingrown. But discovering a common mission that we all can be a part of unites us together in service of others and the world “out there.”

I'm realizing more and more that the “how” is just as important as the “what.” And that there are some things we'll never agree on. And I'm OK with that. All else pales in comparison to the love of Christ we've received... and offer to others.

APPENDIX D

Immanuel Presbyterian Church Covenant of Leadership for the Session

Our Promises to God

We promise to pray, alone and together, thanking God and asking for help in our lives, service, and ministry at Immanuel Presbyterian Church. We promise to listen to God's questions and answers to us. We also seek by the grace of God to give feet to our prayers and to grow in grace.

Our Promises to Our Church Family

We promise to demonstrate our leadership and commitment to our church by our example in service and generosity towards others in the strength of the Spirit. We promise to support our church's pastors and staff, so their efforts can be most productive. We promise to encourage and empower those who volunteer their service in the church. We promise to try to discover what is best for our church as a whole, not what might be best for us or for some small group in the church.

Our Promises to Each Other on Session

We promise to respect and care for each other, as Christ did for us. We promise to treat our time on the Session as an opportunity to offer an important gift to our church. We promise to listen with an open, non-judgmental mind to the words and ideas of the others in our church and on the Session. We promise to discuss, debate, and disagree openly and appropriately in Session meetings, expressing ourselves as clearly and honestly as possible, so we are assured the point of view is accurately stated and understood. We promise to support the final decision of the Session whether it reflects our view or not.

Our Promises to the Community

We promise to remember that we do not exist solely for Immanuel Presbyterian. We have also been sent by God to make a difference in our community and beyond by meeting the holistic needs (spiritual, physical, and emotional) of our neighbors in the name of Christ. We promise to compassionately reach out with the unconditional love of Christ and to create a welcoming and inviting environment for those who choose to visit us.

APPENDIX E

Congregational Letter Preparing the Church for a New Worship Expression⁷

Exciting changes are ahead for Immanuel! Our worship committee has been dialoguing about a new genre of worship on Sunday mornings for over two years. The last two years we have incorporated technology into our traditional worship services. Session has deliberated the pros and cons of an alternative worship service for several months before voting. When the time came for a vote, the session unanimously approved an alternative worship service a year ago, but not a specific morning time that it would be held. After this vote, a Dove article was dedicated to the rationale of an alternative worship service and commonly asked questions about what a service like this would entail. We then had two congregational information meetings about the alternative service in December of 2009 and had a church-wide survey about this service that was later published in the Dove.

After much prayer, discussion, and listening to the congregation, Session voted to have the alternative worship service with technology at 8:30 am and the traditional worship service with technology at 11:00 am. Last month, Session unanimously approved for the Personnel Committee to begin the search process to bring a candidate before Session to approve a part-time music worship leader in this new service. Our hope is to begin the alternative Worship service with the right music worship leader on the first Sunday of January 2011. Yet more importantly, we are willing to wait for God's person in God's timing.

Why are we launching an alternative worship service? The heartbeat of this new faith venture is mission. We know this service isn't a magic wand or a cure-all, but our desire is that this might be an additional way we might reach more kinds of folks and different kinds of folks with the good news of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul describes it this way: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."⁸

What is familiar about the alternative worship service? This service will be Christ-centered, multi-generational, reformed and reforming, utilize technology, hymns, liturgy, prayers, and basically the same sermon theme of the traditional service. I'll preach in both services.

What is different about the service? The alternative service will be more informal (I won't wear a robe), band-oriented in music style, and incorporate praise songs, multi-media, and multi-sensory teaching techniques more regularly.

Grace in the transition. Changes in worship style are one of the biggest changes a church can make. This new endeavor will take grace, a tolerance for something emerging and different, and a good dose of humility. Real Christian unity is not found in a particular music style or certain time of worship. Rather our unity is in the person of

⁷ This article was published in the *Immanuel Dove* in October 2010 Dove. The article explained the process of incorporating an alternative worship service into a traditional church seven months before the launch of the new service, which commenced in May of 2011.

⁸ 1 Cor. 9:22b-23

Christ Jesus and the shared experience of the Spirit that honors and transcends our differences.

You're invited to participate in whichever service you would like—invite your pre-Christian friends too! You're free to have your own preference of music style, but remember one genre is not better than the other—they're just...*different*. You're also free to not have to like *everything* at Immanuel. My prayer is that I'll overhear folks saying, "You know my favorite style of worship is _____. I'm open to the style of _____, but it's not my cup of tea. But I sure am glad we have it available for folks who do like it!" The key is that God would be glorified in our worship and in all that we do and say.

We all have a part to play in this exciting time of change. May we grow closer to God, to one another, and our mission to pre-believers in Tucson through this leap of faith! We'll be sure to keep you updated on the remaining process leading up to the launch date.

APPENDIX F

Congregational Letter Addressing Immigration⁹

The “I word.” The blood starts pumping faster whenever the “*I word*” is brought up these days. You know what it is, Immanuel--*immigration*. Right now immigration is *the* hot button issue in our country, in our state, and in our city. Many other countries are passionately debating this issue also. We even have a bit of a history with the “*I word*” at Immanuel. If you’ve seen *The Hurt Locker*, whenever the “*I word*” comes up, I feel like Sgt. William James whose job is to diffuse bombs in war zones! I’ve prayed much about this and feel called to walk gingerly where angels fear to tread regarding immigration.

First, studies in family systems theory indicate that one of the ways family structures become dysfunctional is when certain issues are denied, ignored, or avoided. In the same way, the church is also a family structure, just on a larger scale. Families and churches can achieve or maintain relational health only when they can respectfully talk about the elephant in the room—or in our case, the elephant and the donkey in the room! Similarly, one marriage study indicated up to 69% of conflict in marriage is never solved. The key for a successful marriage is for the husband and wife to learn to live with the conflict throughout their lives in healthy and respectful ways. Those marriages that are unwilling to do this don’t survive. I also think this applies to our relationships in the church. We’ve got to learn to manage and live with difference at Immanuel if we are to grow and flourish in Christ together.

Second, *as Christians our faith has to be shaped by Christ and the Scriptures*. I don’t think that the Bible lays out one clear and specific policy on immigration. However, I do believe that Scripture speaks to certain heart issues that apply to liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike regarding one’s view on immigration:

- 1.) *The sanctity of human life* (Gen. 1:27). Everyone—male and female, light-skinned or dark-skinned, is created in the image of God. We are commanded by God to show respect, dignity, and protect the human rights of all people--and yes, *even* people who have different political views than our own!
- 2.) *God is compassionate to the most vulnerable in society*—especially the fatherless, the widow, and the foreigner. Leviticus 19:33-34 says, “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat the alien. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” There are a range of perspectives that Christians can have on immigration, but mercy and compassion must always season whatever view is held.
- 3.) *Honor the creative tension between God’s laws with the law of the land*. Romans 13:1 says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Yet at the same time, Peter and the apostles say in Acts 5:29, “we must

⁹ This article was published in the *Immanuel Dove* newsletter in August 2010.

obey God rather than any human authority.” Good Christians will always differ on when to obey the law, change the law, or obey God rather than the law.

Nonetheless, I’m believing that a balance between the rule of law and compassion towards immigrants can be achieved with comprehensive immigration reform.

- 4.) *Christ transcends our differences and he is more important than them.* Galatians 3:28 says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” I might dare to paraphrase for today, “There is no longer conservative or liberal, there is no longer undocumented or citizen; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” We not only can worship side by side by folks of different ethnicities and socio-economic levels, we can even worship together with brothers and sisters in Christ who have different views on immigration than our own! This will only happen if we stay centered and rooted in Christ who is big enough to hold together our difference.

Third, *how will Immanuel respond as Jesus’ disciples regarding the immigration debate?* Session has and will continue to prayerfully discuss how to wisely approach this delicate issue in a way that is faithful to Christ and appropriate to the Immanuel DNA. As we’ve done in the past, we’ll offer an adult Sunday school class discussion series on immigration in January that will be respectful to different perspectives. Sometime in the future Immanuel will have our own special time set aside for prayer for immigrants, law enforcement officers, Mexico, wisdom for this major challenge in our society, and how we might tangibly make a difference in Christ’s name. Two helpful books for the Immanuel community to study about immigration from a Christian perspective are: *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, & Truth in the Immigration Debate* by Soerens and Hwang (IVP, 2009) and *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* by M. Daniel Carroll R. (Baker Academic, 2008).

Our goal is to grow in our mission outreach locally and globally by partnering with other cultures and people in Christ’s name. I would also encourage members to get to know faces of folks from different backgrounds to gain new perspective on the issue. Finally, your prayers, support, and input would be greatly appreciated for the session and myself on how to navigate wisely this very complex and sensitive issue in a theologically and politically diverse congregation such as ours. My prayer is that as we all at Immanuel wrestle with the “*I word*,” we would all be embraced by the one who is also the “*We word*” for Christian unity—Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, *Immanuel*, God with us.

APPENDIX G

Immanuel Presbyterian Church's Vision and Dreams

1. Christ is at the heart of all we do.
2. We make room to belong, explore, ask questions, and hold a variety of Christian convictions.
3. We creatively engage the culture without being political, polarizing, or pandering.
4. Our perspective is holistic—ministering to body, mind, and spirit--in word and deed to the individual, family, church, society, and world.
5. We're multi-generational.
6. We exist for and have a purpose beyond ourselves in mission, evangelism, and justice.
7. We strive to be generous and wise stewards of everything entrusted to our care.
8. We seek to incorporate healthy spiritual practices to help us grow in Christ (i.e. prayer, study, service, play, fasting, etc.).
9. We're open to change, innovation, and growth as the Spirit leads us.
10. We haven't arrived yet, but we're moving forward. We're a people in process and transformation into the likeness of Christ more and more.
11. We're shaped by the Triune God, Scripture, interactive prayer, the Reformed faith, and the collective wisdom of the church and culture over the ages that rings true with Christ.
12. Our programs and procedures are crafted to honor and foster healthy relationships.
13. We seek to equip, empower, and encourage one another in the work of Christ.