

A CONFSSIONAL APPROACH TO DISCRIMINATION

The introduction to the 1984 Confession of Faith states, *“There is a direct relationship between the church’s confession of faith and her life and witness as a people in covenant with God and each other. The faith of the church orders and shapes the life of the people of God . . .”* As part of the Presbyterian and Reformed family the Cumberland Presbyterian Church is a church based on a Confession of Faith. The Confession of Faith for Cumberland Presbyterians is not to take the place of Scripture but to give direction and guidance to our community. It exists to provide a framework upon which we, as a covenant community, can affirm our faith and have a basis upon which to bear witness to all of creation of the grace of God as it is displayed in the person of Jesus.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church formed itself around the idea that all people were free to respond to the call of the Holy Spirit and come into covenant relationship with their creator. The Cumberland Synod, meeting in 1813 set forth four points of dissent from the Westminster standards. The first point was, *“There are no eternal reprobates.”* By stating this dissent the founding fathers of our denomination made the bold claim that all people stood equally before God and were free to enter into relationship with God.

As we have journeyed from that original confession, our denomination has grown as a covenant community. We have wrestled with issues such as slavery and the ordination of women. The journey has not always been smooth and at times portions of the Church did not see eye to eye however up till this point the Cumberland Presbyterian Church has always come out on the side upholding the belief that there is dignity in every living creature and adjusted our practices accordingly.

Our society at the present moment once again offers our denomination a chance to affirm our faith in the light of our Confession of Faith and the scripture. We see the effects of racism and discrimination. Many of our brothers and sisters in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America have felt the effects of being profiled and suffered injustices at the hands of those in power. We also see states passing laws allowing discrimination based upon religious beliefs. We see the effects of these laws in the news on a regular basis. As a denomination who seeks to define itself based upon God’s unconditional love for all of humanity, the time is now for us to stand and confess our faith and stand against the domination system which seeks to oppress and exploit.

In this paper I propose three affirmations upon which to combat discrimination in any form. These affirmations are drawn from the 1984 Confession of Faith and the supporting scriptures. These affirmations build upon one another just as our Confession of Faith builds upon itself to tell the story of scripture. These affirmations seek to provide a position for the Church as she seeks to be a voice of witness to the love of Jesus for all people and to faithfully fulfill her calling to care for her neighbor.

THE DIGNITY OF ALL PERSONS

First and foremost the Cumberland Presbyterian Church Confession of Faith affirms the dignity of all persons as created being of God. Section 1.10 states, *“God is the creator of all that is known and unknown. All creation discloses God’s glory, power, wisdom, beauty goodness, and love.”* Cumberland Presbyterians believe that all that is made comes from God and that this creation is good. Throughout the first chapter of Genesis one sees the declaration that as God looked over creation it was declared good. This goodness which is inherent in all of creation on the basis that all things were made from God must be affirmed as a basis upon which we build relationships with others.

Section 1.11 states, *“Among all forms of life, only human beings are created in God’s own image. In the sight of God, male and female are created equal and complementary. To reflect the divine image is to worship, love, and serve God.”* Cumberland Presbyterians recognize that the human family has abused the freedom which was given to us as part of creation (Sections 2.01 and 2.02). We recognize that, *“In rejecting their dependence on God and in willful disobedience, the first human parents disrupted community with God, for which they had been created. They became inclined toward sin in all aspects of their being.”* (Section 2.03) We also confess in section 2.04 that *“this condition becomes the source of all sinful attitudes and actions.”* Cumberland Presbyterians understand and affirm the existence of sin but we do not affirm that this sin takes away a person’s humanity. Sin may de-face the image of God but it does not erase it. The church’s call is to help people to understand that in Christ this broken relationship has been reconciled and that there is healing for the broken image of God in all of us. However we, as the covenant

community, can only effectively accomplish this mission if we recognize that God's image exists in all people regardless of who they are or what their station in life is. The image of God is inherent in persons due to their status as created beings of God.

As Cumberland Presbyterians affirm the dignity of all persons then we will begin to see that the discrimination of any person for any reason is not only wrong but is a sin against the God in whose image that person was created. Understanding and affirming the image of God in all persons also helps to understand our belief in the all-encompassing care that God provides to creation.

THE EXTENT OF GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE

In recognizing that all persons are created in the image of God we also understand, as section 1.12 states, that *"the natural world is God's. Its resources, beauty, and order are given in trust to all peoples, to care for, to conserve, to enjoy, to use for the welfare of all, and thereby to glorify God."* God's creation was given to humanity for the use of humanity. Creation is not meant to be hoarded or accumulated for the use and benefit of only a few but the resources we have are to be used for the benefit of all. We must always advocate for the fair and equal distribution of resources for the benefit of those who do not have access to them.

This understanding of the proper use of creation and resources is mirrored in God's own providential care to creation. Section 1.13 states, *"God exercises providential care over all creatures, peoples, nations, and things. The manner in which this care is provided is revealed in the scriptures."* Matthew 5:45 which is used as a supporting scripture reference for section 1.13 states, *"For God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."* God's providence does not extend to a small few but to all of creation just as the benefits of the resources of creation also are to be used for the welfare of all.

This providence is for the purpose of setting creation free from its bondage to sin and death, and seeing it renewed in Jesus Christ (Section 1.15). Section 1.16 states, *"God never leaves or forsakes his people. All who trust God find this truth confirmed in awareness of his love, which includes judgment upon sin, and which leads to repentance and to greater dependence upon divine grace. All who do not trust God are, nevertheless, under that same providence, even when they ignore or reject it. It is designed to lead them also to repentance and to trust in divine grace."* This is an important confession for the church. This statement recognizes that God is present to all of creation and for the very same purpose. All of creation receives the benefit of God's continual and constant presence guiding and drawing all persons to trust in divine grace. This benefit is afforded to those who trust God and those who don't. God's providence is given due to God's unconditional grace and God's love for all of creation.

As we begin to affirm that God's providence extends to all people we begin to recognize our role in ensuring that resources are afforded to all persons and we do our best to advocate that this is done equally and justly. We begin to recognize that God is present even to those who do not recognize it and if God is present to them then so must we be. As we affirm God's all-encompassing providence then we also recognize any attempt to discriminate or withhold resources from another person is a sin. We are to care and serve all persons equally as created beings of God as each and every one is cared for by their creator.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION

We understand our mission as the church is *"...to witness to all persons who have not received Christ as Lord and Savior"* (Section 5.28). This however means much more than conversions and professions of faith. *"The church is called into being and exists to reach out to those who have not experienced God's grace in Christ and to nourish them with all the means of grace."* (Section 5.29). Having affirmed both the dignity of each individual and the extent to which God cares for all of creation, it is assumed that the nature of our mission, as the church, is to reach beyond the boundaries of our congregation and care for all of creation. What does this witness and nourishment look like in a society dealing with issues such as rampant discrimination and legalized marginalization?

Our confessional standards provide us direction in what this means in response to these challenges that we see in our present society. Section 6.30 states, *"The covenant community, governed by the Lord Christ, opposes, resists, and seeks to change all circumstances of oppression—political, economic, cultural, racial—by which persons are denied the essential dignity God intends for them in the work of creation."* This statement of faith is the natural and logical outgrowth of the basic affirmation from our Confession as stated above. If all people are created in the image of God and if all people receive the benefit of God's providential care then as God's people we are to bear witness to these truths through our own actions as the

covenant community.

Our work within society is spelled out even further in section 6.31. It states, *“The covenant community affirms the lordship of Christ who sought out the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the helpless. In her corporate life and through her individual members, the church is an advocate for all victims of violence and all those who the law or society treats as less than persons for whom Christ died.”* We as the church recognize the mission of Christ to those that society had deemed unworthy. Therefore since we are Christ’s body, we are called to continue that work. The confession calls us as the church to advocate for those marginalized and abused members of society. We as the church are their voice. We are the ones who come alongside of them just as Christ came along side us. We are Christ to them and, as their advocates, serve a prophetic role to our society.

Our confession, however, does not stop there. Section 6.31 continues by stating, *“Such advocacy involves not only opposition to all unjust laws and forms of injustice but even more support for those attitudes and actions which embody the way of Christ, which is to overcome evil with good.”* Our calling goes beyond merely opposing systems of injustice. We are called to support those attitudes which seek to witness to the way of Jesus. We are called to support vehicles of change. We must be involved in our community seeking ways to do good. This is a call to action. It is a call to not just be vocal but to be active. It is a call to actually do something as the church on behalf of those in society who are unable to do something on their own. Our mission as the church is not to just issue altar calls but to oppose any and all forms of injustice and seek to build a society based on the just and equitable treatment of all God’s creation. This is a society that is based upon the basic assumptions that everyone has dignity due to their status as creatures of God and that everyone is under the parental care of God.

We have been known as a church who avoids political situations. We maintained our unity during the Civil War by refusing to recognize the validity of abolitionists or their pro-slavery counterparts. During the civil rights era our church attempted to distance ourselves from those advocating for desegregation by refusing to recognize those engaging in civil disobedience. Our church has always taken the safe way of approving what was done in the past on our behalf rather than support and promoting it at the present time. If we are to be true to our confessional standards, then we must not be quiet any longer. We must address systems of oppression, injustice, and discrimination now. We cannot let another generation pass before we speak to these issues.

CONCLUSION

“God gives the message and ministry of reconciliation to the church. The church corporately and through her individual members, seeks to promote reconciliation, love and justice among all persons, classes, races, and nations.” (Section 6.32) This section of our confession reminds us of our mission and our calling to ministry that we have received in Christ as Christ’s church. It is an all-encompassing mission founded upon our foundational principles. All people have inherent dignity due to them being a creation of God. All people are under the providential care of this creator God. We, as God’s people, are called to uphold these truths in a society that all too quickly forgets this. In the beginning we advocated a gospel of “Whosoever Wills.” We still do, but the way that we bear witness to this gospel must change as we are faced with new frontier challenges.

Study Questions

- 1) Based upon an understanding of all people being created in God’s image how do we uphold the dignity of individuals?
- 2) How do we exercise stewardship in a way that honors the universal nature of God’s providential care?
- 3) Where are areas in society where you can see the unjust treatment of others? How can the church serve as a witness to the dignity of all living persons in these areas?
- 4) What are ways that we engage in the ministry of reconciliation within our particular churches, presbyteries, and synods?
- 5) How do our churches maintain our commitment to the “whosoever will” gospel and our belief that there are “no eternal reprobates”?
- 6) Do we, as a church, still avoid political situation? Is this an appropriate response in light of our confessional directives?