

Reformed: Not 'What' We Are But 'How'

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Luncheon

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One of my favorite lines in the “Brief Statement of Faith” occurs in the last section on the work of the Holy Spirit. It reads: “In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage ... to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.” It was my great privilege to serve on the Committee of 15 that proposed the final version of the Brief Statement to the General Assembly and the church. I will never forget our discussion of that evocative sentence. The statement asserts that it is not only individuals but “peoples” ... groups or classes of people whose voices have not been heard. And it is not only that they have been silent – not speaking, but silenced – not able or permitted to speak.

As the committee debated that line, one member told a riveting story. Henry Fawcett is a long-time member of the faculty of Dubuque Seminary. He is a Native American from Alaska and a third generation Presbyterian. Some years previously, Henry’s father had died and as the oldest son, it fell to him to close up the family home in the village where he had been raised. As he worked his way through furniture and boxes long-stored away, he eventually came upon a trunk in the very back of the attic. On the top were old blankets and bedding. When he got to the very bottom, he found something else: a carefully folded, beautifully beaded ceremonial robe.

Henry knew immediately that it had belonged to his grandfather who had been the religious leader of the community. He had been among the first to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord,

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and he went on to raise generations of his family in deep Christian faith. But, as was the custom of the time, all who converted were instructed to burn all the costumes and paraphernalia of their former religious life. This robe escaped the fire and had been carefully preserved. Henry said that as he

put it on his own shoulders, he could hear his grandfather’s voice and the voices of those who had gone before him – voices once silenced that were silent no longer.

It has occurred to me this year, as we come to this General Assembly with all the troublesome issues before us, that it is not only people – human beings – that have been silenced down through the years. It is also the case the voices

from the tradition and even the Bible itself have been silenced and that it is the work of the Holy Spirit among us that gives us courage to hear those voices as well. Whenever we listen and really hear, we are led deeper into our discipleship of Jesus Christ.

I am convinced that one of the most important contributions of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church is found in a grid between lines 699 and 700. The section is entitled “Resources for Constructive Engagement.” Here (and in the wonderful background paper that accompanies it), the authors argue that Presbyterian life is held together by maintaining a dynamic tension between various theological principles or “points of balance.” At first glance, these ideas or principles may look contradictory or even mutually exclusive. But the genius of Presbyterian life and thought has been to see that truth often resides in more than one place at the same time. One of the hallmarks of our tradition has been to resist the simplistic either/or answers in favor of a more complex both/and.

So, in the examples from the Task Force Report, we believe that the community/the church together discerns God’s will and we believe that God alone is Lord of the conscience. We affirm that there are necessary beliefs and practices that make the church truly Christian and we respect freedom of belief and practice in nonessential matters.

Why is such an approach to Christian faith important? We live in a culture of either/or thinking – either you support the Chicago Cubs or the Chicago White Sox. Either the Palestinians or the State of Israel has justice on its side; but not both. Either you affirm the dignity and value of all human life or you acknowledge the possibility of abortion and end of life decisions. Either congregations and Presbyteries have the right and responsibility to ordain or there will be a national standard approved and followed by all. In these cases, either/or thinking is dangerous ... it does not lead either to unity or peace because the desire is for one side to impose its will on the other. It may end up with a kind of purity but it will be a purity of the like minded. In the long run, this kind of thinking silences thoughtful voices in the community. In doing so, it does damage to the truth.

The truth is that often, more than one thing can be true at the same time; in fact failing to hold various truth claims or ethical values in tension can lead to theological as well as ecclesial disaster. I am convinced that the Task Force did not invent this idea of theological “points of