

A Resolution Urging Forbearance

Introduction

We find ourselves in a world where people are driven apart by deep differences. These divisions seep into the church, pitting us against one another in action and language. Yet God has entrusted us with a ministry of reconciliation.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, NRSV)

Historically Brethren have refused creeds because we are keepers of the large truths of the New Testament, and because we are seekers open to the promise of new insight through the Holy Spirit. Among us are Brethren who keep us true to the word, the law, and our traditions because God has spoken so powerfully there. Among us also are those who seek new light because God is still working and doing new things. The Bible holds both “keepers” and “seekers” in high regard. Jesus embodied both realities in his life and teachings. He came “not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it” (Matt. 5:17); and he said many times in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said...but I say to you.”

Each of us may at times be a keeper or a seeker. Keeping the truths of the New Testament requires the community of faith to study and discuss them together. Seeking and experiencing new light requires the community of faith to be open to listening and talking with one another. Whether we are keepers or seekers we need one another, and the Holy Spirit is in both our keeping and our seeking.

In the Bible and Our History

For more than a hundred years we have recognized that being open to the Holy Spirit sometimes requires us to accept differences in the body of Christ and to practice forbearance with one another. For example, to an 1883 query regarding footwashing, Annual Conference answered, “We desire very much to see a uniform practice in the church. But we see no way of accomplishing that object at the present time...” As early as 1888, just a few years after the major Brethren split, a controversial item came to Conference and the delegates could not reach unanimity. So their final action was to take no action but to “strongly urge forbearance with each other” (Minutes, 1888, article 12).

Forbearance is a biblical concept. The Greek words in the New Testament translated as forbearance carry meanings of patience, self-control, restraint, mercy, long-suffering, and the refusal to threaten (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13; Eph. 6:9, 2 Cor. 12:6). Forbearance does not jeopardize or denigrate individual *conviction*, but it

does place boundaries on the quality and character of individual *responses*. Forbearance does not require one to accept what another believes, but it does require one to listen and try to understand what another believes without demeaning, personal attacks, or acting to disenfranchise the other person.

Recent Practice

Brethren have grown in the practice of forbearance. We accept Annual Conference positions as invitations to agree rather than mandates to obey. For instance, we affirm that all war is sin (*see the updated Church of the Brethren Statement on War, 1970*) and that killing other human beings is unacceptable, but we are unwilling to weed out those who do not agree. We preach and teach peace without separating ourselves from those who choose military service.

Though Annual Conference approved the ordination of women as ministers (*Item 16, "Women in the Ministry," 1958 Annual Conference Minutes, pp. 61-62*), in the spirit of forbearance, we do not take punitive action against those individuals or congregations who refuse to follow that decision.

A good example is the 1979 Annual Conference paper on "Biblical Inspiration and Authority". Section IV affirms where we agree while confessing where we do not yet agree. Then follows section V entitled "Holding One another in Love and Fellowship". Among other things, it states:

"In spite of essential unity, diversity is God's pattern in creation....Conformity is humanity's pattern. It is the way of the world to try to force individuals into a uniform mold. Jesus denounced the Pharisees for doing this. The Pharisees showed their authority over the people by trying to enforce the minutia of every law without themselves lifting a finger to help. (Matt. 23:4)....Individuality requires freedom. Respect for freedom is seen in our traditional Brethren belief in 'no force in religion' and so we avoid patterns of enforcement which violate the freedom of individuals and local groups....However Christian freedom does not imply an unchecked individualism. Our Anabaptist heritage teaches that no one enters the kingdom apart from one's brothers and sisters....Jesus revealed in his life and teachings the way to freedom and at the same time life in community—the way to 'unity in diversity.'"

Our Gift

The Good Samaritan story teaches us that the measure of our faithfulness is not correct precept or behavior but loving action. It is not whether others behave or think in ways that are right in our eyes which makes them acceptable as our neighbors, but whether we prove to be neighbors to them. In the ministry of reconciliation we are called to love and care for each other before we are called to correct one another. Before we are conservative, liberal, evangelical, progressive, or any one of the many labels we put on one another, we are children of God and brothers and sisters in the church. We are people who love and follow Jesus. We seek to continue his work peacefully, simply, and together. This is what we have to

offer to one another and to the world. This is our gift as Brethren.

A Resolution

Therefore, as we celebrate our 300th anniversary, be it resolved:

- that we commit ourselves to forbearance which recognizes and respects differences of opinion and differing degrees of spiritual insight. We will show deference in disputable matters (Romans 14:1) while practicing prayerful study and conversation in core beliefs;
- that we agree to see our differences, not as discord, but as the blessing which can come when we openly discuss our disagreements, address our conflicts, and share our faith perspectives;
- that, with our forebears, we continue to treasure both faithfulness to truth and openness to new light;
- In all circumstances, we will embrace our commitment to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ as equally important to our other theological beliefs (1 Corinthians 13:1-8; Ephesians 4:32);
- that we pledge ourselves on matters where we are not of one mind to let the Holy Spirit draw us together to be of one heart.

Approved by the General Board
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