

'The Dividing Church in Australia'

by Rev. Robert Griffith



I don't apologise for the provocative title of this sermon. It's an accurate description of our current reality nation-wide and a timely warning for the whole Church to cry out to God to save us from ourselves and bind us together once more in Christ. Unless God intervenes, our Church is about to tear itself apart over the issue of same-sex marriage. So I need to take this opportunity to address what has happened, what will be happening and what really needs to happen if God is to be glorified and our Church is to be healed, restored and become salt and light in a needy world. First if all, I want the Apostle Paul to remind us who we are and why we are here through this reading from Colossians 1.

"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation - if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."
(Colossians 1:15-23)

The three key truths in this passage I want us to remember today are these:

1. Christ is before all things
2. In Christ all things hold together
3. Christ is the head of the church

Christ is before all things. In fact all things were created in Him, by Him, through Him and for Him. He couldn't be any more 'before' all things if He tried! This whole world only makes sense in Christ. All of creation only finds its purpose in Christ. Our very existence only has meaning in Christ. Now because Christ is before all things, it only stands to reason that in Him all things hold together. That is literally true. It is because of Jesus that everything around us is holding together. It is because of Jesus that the world has not spun off its axis and hurled itself into the sun. It is because of Jesus that every cell in your body is operating in harmony right now to produce life, breath, intelligence, feeling, emotion, joy, pain, pleasure and spiritual awareness. Now if all things hold together in Christ, then that obviously has to apply to the Church He birthed, the community which bears His name: the Christian Church. That is why He is the head of the Church.

So with those foundational truths in the front of our minds, let me now explain what has happened in our Church over the past month in particular (but probably over the past 40 years), which has led to our current reality as *'The Dividing Church in Australia.'*

On Friday 13th July 2018, the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia resolved, by formal majority, to alter our Church's doctrinal position on marriage. What we once declared was a union only between 'a man and a woman,' has now been broadened to include a union between 'two people,' thereby changing our doctrine to allow for same-gender marriages to take place in the Uniting Church.

The original doctrinal statement on marriage was as follows:

Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of **a man and a woman** to live together for life. It is intended to be the faithful lifelong union of **a woman and a man** expressed in every part of their life together.

The Assembly Resolution 64 added the following statement alongside the existing one:

Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of **two people** to live together for life. It is intended to be the faithful lifelong union of **two people** expressed in every part of their life together.

Immediately after Resolution 64 was passed, effecting this doctrinal change, the Assembly discussed whether this issue was deemed to be 'vital to the life of the Church.' This was an important discussion because, if the Assembly resolved that this issue was vital to the life of the Church, then Resolution 64 could not be implemented until the Assembly sought the concurrence of Synods and/or Presbyteries and/or Congregations.

This whole discussion was made possible because of Clause 39 (a) of the UCA Constitution, which reads as follows:

- (a) On matters which, by a two thirds majority vote, the Assembly deems to be vital to the life of the Church, the Assembly shall seek the concurrence of Synods and/or Presbyteries and/or Congregations as the Assembly may determine;

If the Assembly deemed this matter to be 'vital to the life of the Church,' then the decision they had just made was at risk of being overturned if concurrence could not be achieved. It was no surprise, therefore, that the same people who just passed Resolution 64, chose to not open the door for that decision to be challenged. So the Assembly determined that altering our doctrine on marriage did not include a matter vital to the life of the Church. However, Clause 39 (b) of our Constitution, allows for Synods and/or Presbyteries to challenge a decision of Assembly. It reads as follows:

- (b)
 - (i) If within six months of a decision of the Assembly, or its Standing Committee, at least half the Presbyteries within the bounds of each of at least half the Synods, or at least half the Synods, notify the President that they have determined that in their opinion
 - a decision includes a matter vital to the life of the Church; and
 - there was inadequate consultation prior to the decision the President shall notify the Church that the decision is suspended until the Assembly has undertaken further consultation;
 - (ii) Following this consultation, the Assembly shall determine whether to affirm, vary or revoke the original decision and report its decision and reasons to the Church;

It is really important that we all understand why the above clause was inserted into our Constitution. This arises from the very clear mandate given to Assembly in *The Basis of Union*, which states in paragraph 15(e) that the Assembly is obligated to seek the concurrence of other councils of the Church on matters which are "of vital importance to the life of the Church." This wording could not be stronger or clearer. This is not optional.

Paragraph 15(e) of *The Basis of Union* states:

- (e) **The Assembly** ... It is obligatory for it to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the Congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.

The 15th Assembly determined that Resolution 64 did not contain a matter of vital importance to the life of the Church. If sufficient Synods and/or Presbyteries disagree with that assessment, then clause 39 (b) exists so the Church can challenge such a decision in a respectful, appropriate manner. Now it is unlikely that whole Synods will be recalled to discuss this matter. So if Clause 39 (b) is to be enacted, it will come from the Presbyteries, some of whom have already met for this purpose.

So if enough Presbyteries believe that, in their opinion, there was not adequate consultation prior to this decision and that, in their opinion, this is a matter vital to the life of the Church, then the Assembly is obligated to suspend the decision and undertake further consultation before making a final ruling on whether the original resolution should stand. What constitutes 'further consultation' remains to be seen. They may recommend we seek concurrence, but that's highly unlikely in the current circumstances. We really don't know yet what will happen if an appeal succeeds.

On Saturday 25th August, our Presbytery will be meeting and a proposal will be put which calls for us to inform the Assembly President, that in the opinion of our Presbytery, the decision of Assembly does constitute a matter vital to the life of the Church and that, in our opinion, there was insufficient consultation with congregations and Presbyteries prior to that decision. If that proposal passes, then the appropriate letter will be sent to the President of Assembly and we will then wait until the six months has expired (13th January 2019) to see if a sufficient number of Presbyteries have agreed with that view and have contacted the President.

Clause 39 (b) does not ask us to debate the actual issue embodied in the decision of the Assembly. That is, we will not be debating the pros and cons of same-sex marriage in our Presbytery meeting. Of course it will be mentioned and it is the issue beneath this entire process. However, a challenge under Clause 39 (b)(i) is not addressing the issue, but the process. So I would ask you all to be praying that those Presbytery members who gather in a couple of weeks really understand that.

This has already been a really difficult time for our Presbytery. There are a few strong supporters for the new marriage doctrine and there are many strongly opposed to altering such a foundational belief within in the Church. As Presbytery Chair I have been involved in extensive dialogue with a number of people, most of whom feel very strongly about this. I've averaged four hours sleep a night since Assembly, I've been attacked personally for highlighting the flawed processes which led to this decision being made and for even suggesting that this issue is vital to the life of the Church. It has been a rough ride and it will probably get worse before it gets better. So please pray for all the Presbyteries across our nation as they seek God's guidance at this difficult time.

Church Councils also have to make a decision soon, in consultation with their Congregations. Within Resolution 64 there was protection for Ministers who are not wanting to officiate at same-sex weddings and for Congregations who may not want to host same-sex weddings in their Church properties. The government legislation and our own UCA guidelines in this area allow for that freedom to be expressed. I have already indicated to our Church Council that I will not be presiding at same-sex weddings unless God changes my understanding of the Bible and *The Basis of Union*. At our meeting last week, the Lismore Regional Mission Church Council voted unanimously to recommend to our members that we not have same-sex weddings on any of the properties under our stewardship and care. Not all Church Council members oppose same-sex marriage. But all Church Council members believe this is not the time for our congregations to open this door, given the views held by many of our members.

Now the Church Council is required to make that final decision in consultation with the Congregation members. That consultation will occur on **Sunday 21st October** after our combined morning service and during our Annual Congregation meeting. Until that meeting, the Church Council decision will stand and there will be no bookings taken for same-sex weddings across our venues. The Church Council is very sensitive to the differing opinions within Lismore Regional Mission on this issue. Some of our members support same-sex marriage; some are not fussed either way and some are opposed to the concept do not support the Assembly decision to change our marriage doctrine. We will not be seeking agreement on the issue itself within the life of our Church. Rather, we will be asking our members to follow the lead of Church Council and make the most responsible pastoral decision for our whole Church at this point in time, given the members we have at present.

This is an incredibly difficult issue. I know of many members across our nation and in my own Congregation who have always embraced the traditional, Biblical view of marriage as only being between a man and a woman. However, because of personal circumstances within their own families and friendship networks, the issue has become very complicated as they balance their love for people and their long-established view of Scripture and marriage. So we need to be very conscious that in 2018 in Australia, this is not a simple issue for some people. It is intensely personal and can trigger strong emotions. Some people feel like they are being asked to choose between their faith and their family and that is incredibly painful.

There is great pain and division in our Church at present. People are leaving the Uniting Church every week. In fact, the moment the Assembly decision was made public, resignations from Ministers started flowing in and many Congregation members were just not at Church two days later and will not be returning. People have left in our Presbytery already and many more have said they will most probably leave if this decision stands, including Ministers, Pastors, Church Council members and people who have been in the same Church their entire lives.

This huge upheaval in our Church has taken many people by surprise. A lot of our members never expected our Church would move so fast after the change in law last December to embrace the views of the world around us and open the door for same-sex marriage within our Church. There was no proper consultation with Congregations. There was no consultation with our indigenous brothers and sisters and our many different cultural groups in UCA, for whom this decision was a huge slap in the face, given their cultural and spiritual views of marriage. There was no consultation with any other denominations, making a mockery of our commitment to ongoing unity and union across the Body of Christ. We have now raced ahead and nobody is following. This decision has caused major divisions within Ministers' Associations and many previously good relationships between Churches and Ministers have been decimated.

So what do we do now? Well, that brings me back to our passage in Colossians and to those three important things I suggested we needed to remember today, especially against the backdrop of this current issue before our Church.

1. Christ is before all things
2. In Christ all things hold together
3. Christ is the head of the church

Regardless of how badly we botched the process and how hard this is going to be for us now, we have to accept that Jesus was not taken by surprise. The One Who is before all things; the One in Whom all things hold together; and the One Who is the Head of the Church, knew this day would come and He knows what choices we all must make now in the days ahead if we are to see this part of His Church survive and thrive and impact the world with His Gospel.

So brothers and sisters, I exhort you all to be praying every day for God's Spirit to move like a flood across our whole Church and to bind us together in Christ. If left to our own devices, we in the Uniting Church, have proven that we can get some things horribly wrong in terms of communication, pastoral care and involving our whole Church in decisions which are important to us all. So all the more reason why we need a miracle from God right now so we can navigate our way through some very difficult terrain in days ahead. For decades now we have been told that our greatest strength in the Uniting Church is our diversity. However, it can also become our greatest weakness and the cause of incredible division and disunity within the life of the Church.

So my prayer for you and for all our Church is the same as the Apostle Paul's prayer all those years ago for the Church in Ephesus:

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:16-21)