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A FORUM-ECUMENICAL REFLECTION ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Throughout the world, the question of “same-sex marriage” is becoming a heated topic of divisive debate. The Christian churches of Canada are not aloof from this issue; many of them are wrestling with it as we write. Far more than for civil legislators, the demand for a public position about “same-sex marriage” is a call to churches; it is an issue which fundamentally engages both doctrines of Christian truth and pastoral issues of care for God’s people.

The real issue here is what a church will sanctify, will declare is holy in the eyes of the world. Jesus instructed “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Marriage is one of the precious holy acts in human life which the churches sanctify.

In this situation, Canadian Christians might hope for a statement of position about same-sex marriage from the Canadian Council of Churches. But our only statement can be that at present no such pronouncement is possible, and none will be made.

The reason for this is inherent in the very nature of the CCC. The Council has defined itself as always operating in Forum, by which we mean that the member churches of the CCC come to the ecumenical discussion table with their own full and complete individual voices; each church accepts the worth of the principle that, before we can seek a common position among churches, each individual church must first of all arrive at the truth through its own self-recognized theology, and teach its doctrines by its own authoritative decision-making process.

Our ecumenical hope is that we frequently discover concord and consensus in the positions of all the churches; our ecumenical care for each other – the great treasure of Forum, which keeps the CCC together as a leading ecumenical body – means that, for some issues, we will have to respect the necessity of allowing churches to disagree, even to disagree strongly; in such cases, there can be no

“voice of the CCC”. The resulting separation and debate is always frustrating, and sometimes very painful, but it is honest and truthful, and it assists the churches in their historic mission to be both wise and humble at the same time.

The topic of “same-sex marriage” is one of those issues of painful separation. In this matter, what is at stake for Christians is to discern the Spirit of truth and to articulate God’s message of salvation so clearly that all may recognize and cling to the image of God. Churches which bless same-sex marriage have done this in their decisions; but that is also exactly what the “no”-deciding churches have done as well. All the member churches of the CCC have been equally sincere and equally prayerful in their quest for wise understanding of God’s Will in this matter.

Jesus instructed that we must “let your word be yes, yes, or no, no” (Matt 5:37). Some churches have opted for a “yes” to same-sex marriage in light of their reflections; the option for “no” by others comes from equally profound and prayerful reflection. No matter how much there will be debate about the correct and proper Christian Truth on the issue – and we all have much to learn by listening attentively to each other — the Godly sincerity of each in reaching a position must be respected with the same fraternal love that each hopes to receive (Matt 22:39).

We are all of us seeking to “enter by the narrow gate” (Matt 7:13). This needs to be said because the passionate temptation to pride generated by making a decision on this sensitive subject is enormous; all of us are tempted to think that the others must have this wrong, because we got it right. Worse yet would be the temptation to demonize opponents, to claim on the one hand that the decision to favor same-sex marriage is heroic and that opposition to it is cheap and easy, mere old-fashioned knee-jerk reliance on ancient prejudice, or worse.

On the other hand, the same temptation exists – and alas, is often heard — from those who make the opposite judgment, viz. that another church’s decision to bless same-sex marriage is merely a fashionable and easy accommodation to the mores of the times. The reality is that every church’s stand on this topic has come from much soul-searching and careful, profound study and reflective prayer. Moreover, the Christian anthropology of all of the “no-saying” churches in the CCC affirms the full and complete humanity of homosexual people, and eschews homophobia. It must be made clear that the debate between the churches is about the propriety, sanctity, and Godliness of homosexual marriages (and in most churches, of homosexual acts as well). On the sanctity of homosexual persons as individual human beings, bearer of God’s image, there is no debate and no dispute among member churches of the CCC.

A characteristic example is the position stated in 1997 by the Anglican Bishops of Canada: “We believe as Christians, that homosexual persons, as children of God, have a full and equal claim with other persons upon the love, acceptance, concern, and pastoral care of the Church.” The very nature of the Christian Forum that is the CCC urges us all to keep this reality in the foreground; as we explain ourselves to others and listen to them in return, we try to keep the “speck and the log” (Matt 7:3-5) always in conscience.

Triumphalism is a major sin. But the complete separation of the positions of the churches on this matter means that at this time there will be no single CCC statement about “same-sex marriage.” Given the wide spectrum of positions and theologies across the member churches, there is at present no possibility of consensus about same-sex marriage at the C.C.C., and therefore no “voice of the churches”. The present situation is that individual churches will each stand on their own in this, keeping faith with the Truth of their calling from God.

For an ecumenical organization whose ultimate goal is to encourage reconciliation among separated churches, this situation is a source of great pain at the CCC – as it is, of course, among all sincere and

faithful Christians. Despite our inability to reach a consensus statement, the CCC will continue to approach the topic in our Forum spirit, keeping faith with honesty and yet trying to be constructive. For the moment, we will promote the kinds of “realistic, possible action” characteristic of our Forum.

We have already facilitated frank and respectful theological debate between churches on the topic, and we will certainly continue to do so in the future. The ecumenical goal of such theological searching is not mere endless debate, but an ongoing search, working together as best we can, to see – at the very least – what we can learn from each other. Like all Christians, we hope that the future will reveal God’s light to all of us clearly, and for the present we accept that the final outcome of this pain is known only in the mind and heart of God.

And in the meanwhile, in the most constructive spirit of all – the care for others in which Christians recognize the Holy Spirit – we will continue to get on with the mutual good work on which we have already found a Christian consensus, continuing and furthering our achievements in world relief, peace-seeking, biotechnology and Christian anthropology, justice, disaster assistance, and so on.

Every decision about what is the God-like, holy thing to do about the pain being felt in regard to same-sex marriage carries with it huge costs; this is just as true and difficult for the “no-sayers” as it is for the “yes”-declarers. What we are doing – all of us, every one of us — by making decisions on the truth of this matter is “denying ourselves and taking up our Cross” to follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-36).

We must recognize that every Church, no matter what its position, is carrying the Cross on this subject. If we can love each other as we suffer through the struggle for Truth, we can help to carry each other’s crosses.

With trust and hope in God, I am, Professor Richard Schneider President The Canadian Council of Churches

For more information please contact: Professor Richard Schneider President The Canadian Council of Churches (416) 575-5488 (Mobile) (OR) The Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton General Secretary The Canadian Council of Churches Tel: (416) 972-9494, x22 (Business)

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47 Queen's Park Crescent East
Toronto, ON
M5S 2CS

www.councilofchurches.ca

T: 416.972.9494
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info@councilofchurches.ca

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