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A DECLARATION FOR FAITH AND LIFE

Many readers of this *Bulletin* will have some knowledge of the sharp debates within the Presbyterian Church (USA) on matters of sexual ethics. The controversy continues, and the 'Declaration' that is reprinted below is a significant contribution to it that deserves a hearing far beyond the bounds of that Church. It was signed at a meeting in January 1994 by leaders of eleven evangelical and renewal organizations in the Church, including, for example, Presbyterian Elders in Prayer, the PC USA Evangelical Pastors' Fellowship, the Presbyterian Lay Committee and the Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies.

The form of the 'Declaration' parallels that of the 'Barmen Declaration' of 1934 (which is a part of the *Book of Confessions* of the PC USA). Barmen was the response of the Confessing Church, drawn from Reformed and Lutheran traditions, to the synthesis of Nazism and Christianity promoted by the 'German Christians' who supported Hitler. It is widely regarded as one of the noblest of modern confessional statements. Its text can be found in J.H. Leith, *Creeks of the Churches* (Richmond, VA, 21973), W. Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics* (Edinburgh, 1962), and A.C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (London, 1966).

The drafters and subscribers of this 'Declaration' are not alone in discerning parallels to the German Christians' perversion of Christianity in the widespread tendency today to allow contemporary secular and pagan values to influence Christian ethics. Against such insidious trends this 'Declaration' sounds an essential protest.

D.F.W.

A Declaration for Faith and Life

I

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV).

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are our only authority for faith and practice. The written Word of Scripture mediates to us the living Word, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, who always speaks and works in congruence with the written Word. Handed down to us by the communion of the saints, summarized in our confessions of faith, studied and opened to us by teachers and preachers in the community of the Church, the Scriptures are ever trustworthy as we daily live by their truth. All that is necessary for faith and for life is either explicitly stated in Scripture or may be deduced from it, and we affirm that it provides its own interpretation. Because it is God's revelation, it is not bound by culture or by time. The Bible is thus the authority we are called to obey in every circumstance.

Therefore, we reject these false doctrines:

- that the meaning of Scripture is solely a matter of individual interpretation, separated from its interpretation of its own words, its historical context, or apart from the apostolic faith and the confessions of the Church universal;
- that because of historical, cultural, and scientific distance from our time the biblical Word is no longer applicable;
- that the Holy Spirit of the Triune God speaks contrary to Jesus Christ as he is mediated to us through the Word written in the Bible;
- that human conscience, feeling, wisdom, scientific inquiry, or medical, psychological and sociological knowledge are sufficient in themselves, apart from – or even contrary to – the Bible, to discern the will of God.

II

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (I Corinthians 6:19-20 NRSV).

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments teach that we belong – body and soul, in life and

death – not to ourselves but to God. God is the eternal Word by whom we were created. Jesus Christ is that Word made flesh, by whose sacrifice we are redeemed, and is the living Word who manifests the new humanity in his own life and ours. Though he was celibate, he lacked nothing necessary for full communion with God and with humanity. It is by the power of his Holy Spirit that we are enabled to follow him as obedient disciples, rejecting the passions of our sinful nature and choosing instead to live holy lives in our conduct. This Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is sovereign over all the circumstances of our lives, and only in communion with this God can we be made whole.

Therefore we reject the false doctrines:

- that we can claim autonomy and dominion over our own bodies;
- that sexual intercourse is necessary for whole personhood or full communion between persons;
- that it is not possible to control and discipline the expression of our sexual desires;
- that we can be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ apart from his Spirit's transforming power that enables us to follow his pattern of obedience to God.

III

[Jesus] answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate' (Matthew 19:4-6 NRSV).

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments plainly tell us that God in his love for us created us male and female, and that he pronounced his creation 'good'. Scripture tells us that God intended from the beginning, as he intends today, in spite of our sin and the fall of the whole creation, that our sexual desires be fulfilled solely within the context of the marriage of one woman and

one man in a faithful and joyful union of one flesh. Scripture tells us that the marriage of husband and wife is for the purpose of their mutual help, for the safeguarding, undergirding and development of their moral and spiritual character, and for the propagation of children and the rearing of them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Furthermore, God has expressly condemned sexual intercourse outside of the marriage covenant. This prohibition applies to married persons committing adultery, to sexual relationship between unmarried men and women, and, because God's order intends the sexual relationship to be between male and female, to homosexual practice, a perversion of God's created order.

Therefore we reject the false doctrines:

- that the body, the sexual desires of male and female for one another, and the institutions of marriage and family are extraneous to God's created order; that they are matters of indifference in our new life in Jesus Christ; and that we are entitled to alter or redefine them arbitrarily as suits our social circumstances or personal desires;
- that sexual relationships only require mutual consent, without regard to the scriptural bonds of marriage;
- that God intends for persons to engage in adulterous or homosexual or other non-marital sexual intercourse, and that God pronounces such intercourse to be a 'good gift'.
- that Christian compassion and justice require the Church to condone adulterous and homosexual and other non-marital sexual relationships among its members, and to regard those who engage in such practices as living a manner of life that demonstrates the Christian gospel and fits them for ordination as elders, deacons, or ministers of the Word and sacrament.

IV

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him [Jesus Christ]. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for

what has been done in the body, whether good or evil (II Corinthians 5:9-10 NRSV).

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments testify that we are all made in the image of God, responsible to him, that God is not mocked, and he holds all of us accountable to his will revealed to us in his Word. The Bible warns us that God brings his judgment, both present and future, upon those who defy him, but Scripture also promises that God forgives and transforms all who turn to him in repentance and trust.

Therefore we reject the false doctrines:

- that persistent, unrepentant sexual activity that is forbidden by Scripture is acceptable to God and free from his present and future judgment;
- that some practices, though they be contrary to Scripture, are so rooted in personhood that their expressions are inevitable and cannot be changed by the power of God.

We invite all those who affirm the truths and reject the errors put forth in this Declaration and who acknowledge these clear and consistent teachings of God's Word, to recall these teachings as they proclaim the gospel and live out their relationships in community. Let our purpose be that God's people may be instructed, warned and corrected, that they may grow into maturity of faith, and that they may live holy and blameless lives before our Lord in love.

Thanks be to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself up for us all, so that by grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are saved by faith.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it (I Thessalonians 5:24 NIV).