

“How Much Should We Agree on in Church?” August 23, 2026
Philippians 2:1-11 Westminster, Greenville
13th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr

We are continuing our fall sermon series this morning, the title of which is “Christian Questions with More Than One Answer.” The questions that we explore together this fall may be current questions, ones that you or I might ask ourselves from time to time...or they may be ancient questions, questions which followers of Jesus have, through the centuries, answered in different ways...or the questions may be some combination of the two.

I submit to you that our question this morning is one of, if not THE oldest question that the church has asked itself.

“How much should we agree on in God’s church?”

So, if you’ll indulge me, I’m going to begin with a little history.

I’ve got a copy here of our denomination’s *Book of Confessions*.

It’s one of two books that form the constitution for our denomination. Does anyone here happen to know how many creeds, confessions, catechisms are a part of this book?

There are 12.

One of the longest confessions in this book, coming in at 58 pages in length, is the Westminster Confession of Faith, which has its origins in 17th century England, and was adopted by the Scottish General Assembly in 1647.

It made its way over to the colonies in America, and in 1729, the standards of Westminster were adopted by the newly organized

Presbyterian synod, and played a formative role in American Presbyterianism.¹

Why am I telling you this?

Because twelve years later, those Presbyterian colonists were confronted with our question for today. You see, in 1741, there were some people in our denomination who wanted to be ordained, but did not necessarily believe in every word of the Westminster Confession as it was written.

And this caused a division, a split in our denomination.

Those who said—you have to believe every word of the Westminster Confession in order to be ordained—they were called the “Old Side”.

What do you think those who disagreed were called?
“The New Side.”

How original.

It wasn’t until 1758 that the denomination got back together, came to an agreement that you could be ordained by taking a scruple to certain aspects of the Westminster Confession as long as whatever it was you scrupled was not...essential to the gospel.

How much should we agree on in God’s church?

The question came up again in the 19th century, when Presbyterians split during the Civil War. The southern branch became the PC(US), which is what many of you here at Westminster were a part of, in the 1950s and 60s and 70s...and the northern branch, which

¹ The Book of Confession, published by the Office of the General Assembly of the PC(USA), Louisville, KY, 2016.

became the UPC(USA), the branch into which I was baptized, and those two branches didn't get back together again until...do you remember the year?

1983, when we became the PC(USA).

How much should we agree on in God's church?

For well over half of the 20th century, women were not allowed to be elders in either branch of the Presbyterian Church or to serve as pastors in our denomination.

And it wasn't until the second decade of the 21st century that our denomination opened the door to ordination and to marriage in our churches for members of the LGBTQ community.²

Do you see why I've asked the question today?

“How much should we agree on in God's church?”

It's a question that keeps coming back, but it's not like Presbyterians are unique in this regard.

It's a question that was prominent for the early church.
The church in Paul's day.

Do you remember what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth?

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

² I am indebted to a sermon by the Reverend Tom Are for this summary of the different divisions that have occurred in the history of the PC(USA).

Why did Paul write those words?
 Because the church in Corinth was fighting with itself.
 It was NOT of one mind.

And you heard the same message from Paul in our second text.
 To the church in Philippi, he wrote:

“...make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

One mind.

Have you ever thought about this question here at Westminster?
 How much should we, at Westminster...be of one mind?

I think the first way that this question often gets answered is in terms of BELIEF...what do you have to believe in order to be part of the Presbyterian Church?

Well, in the PC(USA), there are ONLY two requirements for membership.

Do you remember what they are?
 Baptism...and a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

That's it.
 But is that it?

You see, each individual church typically has additional beliefs, beliefs that shape the nature and character of that church.

For example, I remember when I interviewed for this position with the Pastor Nominating Committee, and they were sharing a little Westminster history with me. They talked about a time in our church,

back in the 1970s, when an alternative worship service was started around here...

And they told me that it created two congregations.

People left Westminster.

Didn't like the division at Westminster.

And then the PNC said, "Ben, how do you feel about alternative worship?"

Now...I knew what the PNC wanted to hear.

And the truth is, I much prefer traditional worship.

Not about to start a praise band here.

But the reason is about much more than personal preference.

I believe our traditional worship service also gives us perspective.

It tells us every Sunday that we are a part of something much LARGER than ourselves.

For example, whenever we say the Apostles' Creed together, or the Nicene Creed on communion Sundays, we're not doing it to say that every single person in worship today needs to adhere to every single word of the confession.

No OLD SIDE/NEW SIDE...

We're doing it to remember our ties to those who came before us.

To recall our connection and indebtedness to the saints who passed the faith down to us. Saying the Creed together serves as a reminder that as followers of Christ, we don't create our own identity.

We are GIVEN that identity by God.

In our Reformed tradition, having faith, being part of this church community—these are NOT our own creation.

We believe they are gifts.

And our traditional liturgy reminds us of those gifts.

Do you believe that?

That our worship reminds us of who and whose we are...and are gifts to us from God?

If you believe that, can I get an “Amen”?

Look at that, we just agreed on something...

So...how much should we agree on in God's church?

The answer has something to do with what we believe.

But belief is only part of the answer.

You see, when Paul said “be of the same mind,” I don’t think he meant UNIFORMITY. After all, Paul also wrote that while we follow one Spirit, we have each been given different gifts by that same Spirit.

Look, just a few minutes ago, what hymn did you sing?

What was our opening hymn?

“The Church’s One Foundation,” good.

I hope you know that you sang that hymn with someone in this room somewhere...who holds a different view than you do about immigration.

And you sang that hymn with a brother or sister in Christ
who sees the question of universal healthcare
in a different way than you do.

You sang that hymn with someone who may believe that all the miracles in the Bible happened exactly the way the Bible says that they happened...

And you sang that hymn with someone who has questions, has doubts, takes issue with—every single miracle story in scripture.

All those different beliefs are part of the makeup of Westminster.

Which means our question for today—

How much should we agree on in God's church?

--it's not ONLY a question about belief.

It's also a question about belonging.

How do we live and remember and show—

that to be God's church means we belong to one another,
no matter our beliefs...

In one of my former churches, I recall there was a teenager who, in 9th grade, went through confirmation class. And when she got to the end of the class, she told her mom she had decided NOT to join the church.

Well...needless to say, it was not the answer her mother or her family was hoping to hear.

But her family respected her decision.

And we on the pastoral staff said: well, that's kind of the point.
This is her decision.

So the rest of the confirmation class joined as active members.

She was recognized for completing the class.

But she did not join the church.

Do you know what that young woman is doing today?

She's directing the youth ministry program at another Presbyterian church in our denomination.

You see, a year or two after her confirmation class, she decided she was ready to join the church, and she came before the Session, and I now wonder...

I wonder if perhaps, when her mom gave her the freedom to be herself in 9th grade, and the church didn't pressure her—I wonder if it helped lead her in some small way into the ministry in which she is engaged today.

What do we need to agree on in God's church?

That we belong to one another.

But even more, that all people belong to God.

A God who does not pressure people into faith.

A God who invites people.

A God who calls people.

A God who walks alongside people.

A God who suffers with people, no matter what they believe...

Can I get an Amen to that?

I mean, we're agreeing all over the place...

So...the answer to today's question has something to do with BELIEF, and something to do with BELONGING...but even more than all that, it also has something to do with BEARING WITNESS.

Let me get at it like this.

How many of you have seen *The Odyssey*?

Matt Damon plays Odysseus, who is a soldier in the Trojan War.

His lord is Agamemnon, and Agamemnon desires the city of Troy.

Wants Troy.

Sails to Troy.

Will do whatever it takes to obliterate Troy.

And while Agamemnon prays to his gods, in the hope of conquering Troy...his own nature and character is not too far from the character of the gods to whom he prays, gods like Zeus:

gods who take and acquire,

gods who trick and scheme,

gods who are intent on fulfilling their own desires.

Why am I mentioning this?

Because those gods were still part of the air being breathed in the Greco-Roman culture in which Paul wrote our words for today:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.... And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Do you hear the difference?

The difference between Agamemnon's gods, and the God of Jesus Christ?

Paul's point is that the God revealed in Jesus Christ did what was **UTTERLY INCONCEIVABLE** for a deity to do in Paul's day. Not to fulfill himself, but to empty himself. Not to strive for glory, but to end up on a cross.

And Paul says, if we're going to follow the God made known in Christ, we do the same thing.

Don't go up.
Go down.

Don't fill yourself.
Empty yourself.

Don't leverage your power or position for your own sake.
Take your power, possessions, and position...and give them away,
for your neighbor's sake.

Part of being God's Church means agreeing on that too!

I remember well the couple that stood before the church I was serving in Dallas, maybe 10 years ago now. That church was doing a capital campaign, like we're about to embark on one here...and a couple in the congregation, during the campaign, gave a Minute for Stewardship.

They began by talking about how they loved Colorado.
Colorado was their place to be at peace.
To relax, to go on vacation.

And for years, they had been saving and planning to purchase a second home in Colorado, a place where they could always get away to when they needed it.

Then the church's capital campaign came along.
And they got to thinking about what their church meant to them.

The church that they had been a part of for decades.

The church family in which their daughters were raised.
And then they told the congregation...it finally dawned on them
one morning.

They didn't need a second home.
Because they already had one.
It was their church.

Then they said they had decided not to buy that home in Colorado,
and to give the money that they had been saving for that home to the
church, so that the church could be a second home for all the generations
who would come after them.

Now what was that couple doing?

Not only believing.
Not only belonging.
They were BEARING WITNESS...
to the God whom Paul described today.

Did you know that there are plenty of ways that you and I can bear
witness this God?

- You can do it by forgiving the person who just this past week wounded you.
- You can do it by donating food for neighbors in Greenville who are hungry, and who live not very far from you.
- You can do it by carrying a stranger's cross, even if they do not know you.

You can do it, as Paul put it, by looking not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

And Westminster has a rich history of bearing witness in this way.
Can I get an “Amen” to that?

And God is calling each of you to be a part of that history.
Can I get an “Amen” to that?

Look at that.
All those Amens from you...
in one sermon!

Look at all that we agree on in this church...

(Amen.)