

Presbyterian - Say What???
“Controversies”
Matthew 10:32 - 39; Jude 1 - 4

So last week ago I talked about what it means to be part of the Presbyterian Church, and so I essentially talked about its beginnings; how it is a church that finds its roots in the Protestant Reformation, which was a longing to take the Church back to its Biblical foundation, solidly centred on Scripture and God’s redeeming work of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It found its way to our fair shores via migration in the 1800’s (my notes are available for those who would like them).

Today continues more of the story.

Now, I realise that the bulk of us here probably aren’t Presbyterian.

This is for you.

Then there are those of us who do identify in that way.

This is also for you.

You cannot talk about the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand without talking about its **controversies**.

We have to face the reality of our pasts.

What has gone before does shape who we are today.

They explain why we find ourselves where we do today.

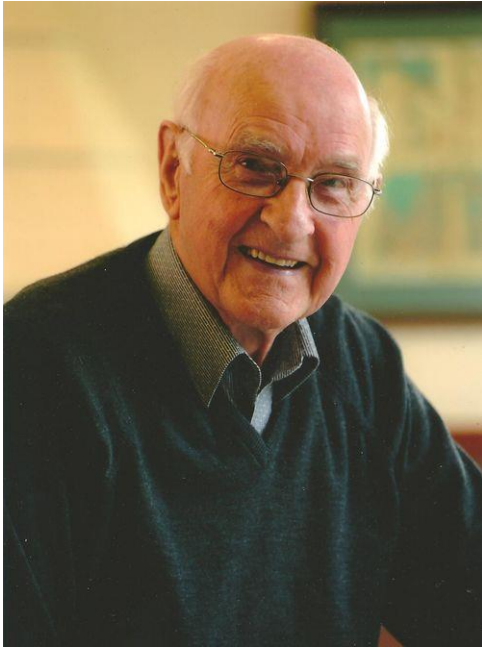
Controversies matter.

So my question to you this morning is this:

“From what you know about the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand¹, what controversies has it been affected by?”

And if we are going to talk about controversies, we have to talk about one person in particular:

¹ “Presbyterian Church” is shorthand for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.



Lloyd Geering.²

Capable, intelligent and a gifted speaker Geering ministered in a number of congregations and taught at Knox Theological college before he gained any notoriety.

By his own admission during and in public statements, Geering at this time had no sense of a personal God - God for him was distant and unknowable, the “ultimate mystery”.

In his own words:

“I was never a believer in miracles or supernatural things... I never thought of God in personal terms. I was never particularly happy about prayer. I participated because it was the thing to do, but I never practised personal prayer. Corporate prayer, intercessions, these had some meaning, but I never expected God to do anything.”

Geering quickly came to believe that the Old Testament as a purely human document, and reached the same conclusion about the New Testament very soon after.

Quoting another author he stated in a church magazine these words:

“We may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine.”

² Lloyd Geering’s story is well publicised and easy to access:

<https://donaldelley.wordpress.com/2019/11/22/professor-lloyd-geering-new-zealands-greatest-christian-heretic-speaks-at-pitt-street-uniting-church-in-sydney-australia-2/>

<http://ahnz.anarkiwi.co.nz/1967-the-heretic/>

Geering also stated in a lecture that humans do not have an immortal soul. It was in 1967 that he charged by the Presbyterian Church with “doctrinal error” and “disturbing the peace of the church”, which essentially a charge of heresy and denying the faith.

His denial of the resurrection was picked up by the secular media what was a Presbyterian debate so became one that captured the public’s imagination.

For example the New Zealand Weekly News:



A firestorm erupted. It was one thing for someone outside the church to deny the resurrection - but a pastor of the church and teacher of future ministers???

In short two people brought charges against Lloyd Geering and special General Assembly was held on Friday, November 3rd 1967

More than a thousand people had packed into the church, with an overflow into the hall. It was also covered by national television. Geering spent an hour and a half answering the charges.

Then with little debate, a motion was put to the House, and later carried firmly on the that “the Assembly judges that no doctrinal error has been established, dismisses the charges and declares the case closed.”

Geering continued to teach at the Knox theological college before leaving it four years after the trial.

The impact of Lloyd Geering on the Presbyterian Church can't be underestimated.

- The result: many made a vote of no confidence in the Church by voting with their feet.
Some found the excuse they needed to leave the faith altogether. Others joined other denominations, including many leaders. Time and time again I have had conversations with leaders from other churches who have stated that they brought up in the Presbyterian Church but left after seeing what was a betrayal of Biblical faith. And though it is contested, this added to the decline of the church.
- It also gave voice to others who, even though they rejected the central tenants of the faith, continued to be ministers in the Presbyterian Church and hold positions of influence. In essence they were atheists using God language in the pulpit.
- One other sad outcome of this is that even today many people from other churches view the Presbyterian Church with suspicion.

Another controversy that arose in the church is this one:

Infant Baptism



It probably seems strange to many of us but in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, the debate around infant baptism was a hot issue in some churches.

The Presbyterian Church has held that infant baptism declares the unconditional love of God.

Although an infant is too young to make a confession of faith the focus is on the faithfulness of God in Christ who has made a response of faith on the child's behalf 2000 years ago.

It also signifies the welcoming of the person into the body of Christ.

However this was challenged when a minister by a number of ministers. One in particular, after a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit, wanted to be baptized by full immersion but the local Presbyterian church refused. A New Life was happy to help.

He later felt a call and was accepted into pastoral ministry in the Presbyterian Church.

Then, after his study of the New Testament, that he could no longer baptise infants but only those who could confess their faith in Jesus Christ.

This resulted again in many, many emotionally charged meetings with many stating that to be a Presbyterian minister you *must* baptise infants.

Again, in short, the matter was settled.

Today ministers in the Presbyterian Church have the liberty of conscience on this issue.

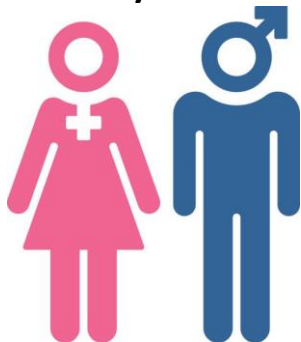
If a minister in good conscience cannot baptise an infant, they must make provision for it happening as a part of service of worship with another minister administering it.

And by and large I would say many congregations feel the same.

While the controversy around infant baptism was minor, there is one that dogged the Presbyterian Church for over 30 years.

It is controversy surrounding the

Sexuality debate



We cannot avoid talking about this as a church.

This is often framed as the “homosexual debate” but it is not just about same-sex relationship in the Church.

However, it came into focus when a person involved in a same-sex relationship applied for ordination in the church and was accepted.

This was a shock to the majority of churches who thought that this was clearly outside of what was acceptable.

To be clear, there are not two equal views on the issue.

There is the view, held by the Church from its inception and 2000 years, that sexual relationships are reserved for faithful marriage between one man and one woman.

The Church has never deviated from that view until very recently.

If that has been the churches view, then how do we find ourselves where we do today?

Where I’m up to is this: the core cultural moment was the 1960’s and the advent of the sexual revolution. It from this point that this has been contested.

The fruit of the sexual revolution was whatever boundaries we may have placed around sexual relationships these are no longer valid and must be removed.

What matters is whatever consenting adults agree to is okay.

Radical individualism and excessive self-love are now core cultural values in the West.

This has also meant that ‘Love’ has been reframed; love now means you must affirm my decisions and identity and if you don’t, you’re a hateful bigot.

Many in the church adopted this worldview.

So the Presbyterian Church has debated this on and off over many years.

It is important to understand that those in favour of people being in a sexual relationship outside of marriage between one man and one woman being

ministers and elders see this as an issue of justice, liberty of opinion, avoiding discrimination and keeping in step with and being relevant to culture.

The majority of General Assembly seemed to believe that in being faithful to Scriptural teaching in that God calls us to his standard for sexual relationships as within heterosexual marriage.

Now I realise that some here may not agree with where the church finds itself.

The thing is, all us – *all of us* – have a line we draw on this issue. Most would agree that adultery is wrong. Most would agree that incest between consenting adults is wrong. The difference is where that line is drawn

It is also important to remember though that this is addressing the *Presbyterian Church*.³

It is not telling the wider world how to live.

It also raises a whole lot of other issues.

***“For one, aren’t we all broken, faulty people and sinners?
Why make one dividing line over this issue?”***

***“And what about divorce and remarriage?
The Church has shifted on divorce and remarriage.”***

How would you respond?

To the first you could say, yeah you’re right. It shouldn’t be dividing issue and yet these have been thrust on the Church.

Another response is to say there is a difference between someone wrestling and anguishing over their sin versus someone who is relishing and affirming it.

There is a difference between someone who is contrite and broken and someone who sees no wrong in what they have done and actively pursues it. Martin Luther held that we simultaneously sinner and saint; we are redeemed sinners and saints in the making and that all of life is repentance.

³ It should be noted that in every case - *every case* - where a denomination has embraced, affirmed and celebrated ministers involved in sexual relationship outside of marriage - the denomination has gone into steep and even terminal decline.

To second the difference is this: we don't affirm divorce; we don't celebrate it.

We don't say it's a good thing you should embrace.

We (rightly) grieve and mourn over divorce; we see the damage it does, especially when children are involved.

And we seek to respond the pastoral compassion and care.

So what are the takeaways this morning and what does Scripture say?

Well for one, ***controversies aren't new.***

Jesus warned that following him would be a point of contention and even, at times, division with those we most closely bonded with.

Then we have this letter written under urgency called Jude.

It was probably a circular letter meant to be sent to all the churches under his care.

Jude writes that he had been planning to write to the churches about the salvation God has given, this awesome gift that Jesus has accomplished for us. However, he now he feels *compelled to urge* the church to *contend* for the faith that the Lord has once for all entrusted to us, his people.

In other words, Jude has other issues on his mind but like many Christians today the issue was thrust on him.

He *urges* the church to contend for the faith.

He *warns* that there will be people who seek to undermine the faith the Lord has entrusted to us.

And he couldn't sit idly by - the faith, the faith in Jesus Christ was at stake.

Controversies are not new and they are also so hurtful and damaging to the church - and yet controversies are so necessary.

They are ***hurtful*** in that they put relationships under strain and to the test.

As someone said, they are emotional and often torrid, leaving everyone feeling bruised.

It is hard to say to colleagues, who you admire and friends, “We are friends but on this issue I think you are utterly and completely wrong.”

Let’s be honest, the majority of us here dread the thought of being at odds with those around us.

We value community. We value good relationships.

We hate the thought of being at odds with those in our own family.

We fear the threat of social reprimand, this public shaming of people who don’t fit within cultural norms, especially among friends, and in the realm of social media and online platforms

Jesus said that following him would mean times when we feel the weight and pain of the cross.

Yet they are also *necessary*.

A church that will not or does not contend - fight, battle, compete - for the faith in Jesus Christ, ceases to be a holy church and loses its distinctiveness.

So we hold to the resurrection as a non-negotiable.

The Lordship of Jesus over our lives and over His Church is non-negotiable.

The Bible as the supreme standard of the Church is non-negotiable.

To live as Scripture calls us to live is a non-negotiable.

The reality is we may not have a Presbyterian Church today if it wasn’t for those who contended for the faith - Luther and Calvin, and even further back to people like William Tyndale who was executed for the faith he held to.

There is also a probability too that we wouldn’t have had Cromwell Church if again it wasn’t for those who prayed, struggled and debated with those who denied Jesus as Lord and Christ.

To be Presbyterian - to be a disciple of follows Jesus Christ of any brand - is to at times, contend for the faith.