

# Keynote Address ACC Conference Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019

## Theme: For I am not ashamed of the gospel

*Romans 1: 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...*

It is interesting or perhaps surprising that Paul writes, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel.'*

Why not say positively, 'I am immensely proud of the gospel'?

But Paul does not say, 'I am immensely proud of the gospel', he says, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel.'

As we know, Paul of all people, had very good reason to be embarrassed and ashamed of the gospel. Not only that, but he had good reason to even abandon the gospel.

Why?

Because the gospel had been a source of suffering for Paul.

For example, Paul says in 2 Cor. 11: 23-28:

“..... I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move.

I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.

I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

But, despite the gospel being a source of 'suffering' for Paul, he does not see it as a reason to be ashamed or embarrassed, or a reason for distancing himself from the gospel.

Why?

Because Paul knows and has experienced firsthand the gospel as the *'power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes'* (Romans 1: 16).

It is why we hear Paul saying things such as (2 Cor. 4: 7-9):

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

We see suffering as such a negative thing in our Western culture today, but Paul says (Romans 5: 3-5):

but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

And, so despite the gospel being a source of suffering for Paul, it does not make him ashamed of the gospel; instead, it spurs him all the more into preaching the gospel as the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe.

The prophet Jeremiah similarly experienced the 'gospel', in terms of it being the Word of God - as a source of suffering.

In Jeremiah 20: 8, Jeremiah says that the:

'Word of the Lord has brought me nothing but insult and abuse all day long'.

And, he cries out to God:

'Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame? (Jer. 20: 18).'

At one-point Jeremiah wants to say:

'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name.'

But he finds out he can't:

But if I say, "I will not mention his word  
or speak anymore in his name,"  
his word is in my heart like a fire,  
a fire shut up in my bones.  
I am weary of holding it in;  
indeed, I cannot. (Jer. 20: 19)

That is, despite his personal feelings of wanting to leave the prophetic ministry because of the insults and the abuse that he was receiving for speaking out God's Word, Jeremiah says that he cannot:

The Word of God in his heart was like fire, so he knew that he could not contain it within his heart - it had to be released.

And so, Jeremiah, like Paul (and many others in the bible), in a paradoxical way, experienced the gospel and the Word of God as the source of their 'suffering', but, also, simultaneously, as the basis for them experiencing the power of God for salvation.

It is important to note that it is the gospel itself that is the source of our suffering. It is not 'us' as Christians per se. That is, it is not our method of delivery or our method of engagement, as such, that is the cause of our problems.

Of course, we know that if we are not loving and kind and compassionate to others, then, naturally people will hate us. But, the issue before us and the hate that we experience, for example, as the ACC, is not one in relation to 'method' or the way we go about our evangelism.

The gospel itself is by nature offensive and divisive.

And, this point is essential to understand. The gospel itself, even as the good news about Jesus as the Messiah the Son of God, is by nature offensive and divisive.

It is why Jesus said in these words (Matthew 10: 34 – 36):

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,  
a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—  
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”

Jesus also said (John 15: 18 - 19):

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. *That is why* the world hates you.”

We don't have to look for the reason why we are hated. Jesus makes it very clear. You are hated because I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Remember during the marriage plebiscite debate, we were hated before we even spoke a word.

We were labelled as homophobes and bigots just for holding to the view that marriage is between a man and a woman. And, it didn't matter how well or how nicely you tried to explain why you believe what you believe, you were just hated.

Simply to say, that it is not our method of engagement that is the issue. It is the gospel itself and the truth that is by nature offensive and divisive.

It is why it is likened to a sword in the bible.

Hebrews 4: 12 puts it well:

‘For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.’

Truth divides!

And, we are simply called to decide which side will we stand left or right; truth or falsehood; Christ alone or religious and ethical diversity.

Which side will you stand for?

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2018, the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Uniting Church adopted ‘religious and ethical diversity’ (R64) as the basis for redefining our biblical understanding of marriage, and then sought to try to sell it to the church under the deceptive label of ‘two integrities’. The Assembly of the Uniting Church says that it has ‘decided to hold two equal but distinct statements of belief on marriage’.<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible to hold two ‘distinct’ statements of belief on marriage under the ‘one’ Assembly?

Let me put the question in another way using an example that I used during one of our youth group bible studies:

If the game we are all engaged in now is ‘soccer’ and we are the Soccer Board, is it possible for us as the board to have two equal and distinct statements of belief in regard to the rule about ‘not using our hands in the game’?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://uniting.church/pastoralletter/>

For example, is it possible for us as the Soccer Board to allow some players to use their hands and other players to 'not' use their hands?

Or, is this specific rule about 'not using your hands' such a rule that we cannot allow for a diversity of opinion and practice on it because if we did, it would ultimately change the nature of the game?

Simply to say, that there are some rules we can change, but there are also some rules that you cannot change if you wish to maintain our **distinct** identity.

Those rules that you cannot change are rules that we would call, using Uniting Church Basis of Union language, rules that 'enter into the substance of the faith'. If you change a matter that enters into the substance of the faith, then, you change the very nature or the very essence of the faith itself.

In the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union*, paragraph 14 it talks about

'adherence to the *Basis of Union*' as being a "willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.

The ACC has already stated very clearly that Marriage is a matter that enters into the substance of the faith. Therefore, we cannot allow a diversity of opinion on this matter. Because if we did, it would change the nature of the Uniting Church. And, that is exactly what has happened.

The Tongans and the Samoans in the Uniting Church are particularly angry because we came into the Uniting Church believing that the game we are playing is Ruby Union, the game that they play in heaven.

But, now the nature of the game has been changed. The Assembly is now saying that Ruby Union must be an inclusive sport and that we must include soccer players and Aussie Rules players etc., all at the same time on the one field.

But we are like saying, hey, get off the field, go and play your own sport. If you want to play soccer, go and play soccer. If you want to play Aussie Rules, go and play Aussie Rules. But, stop trying to tell us that we are all playing the same sport using the same rules.

Two distinct statements of belief about a matter that enters into the substance of the faith, such as marriage, cannot both coexist within the one 'Assembly'.

Two distinct statements of belief must lead to two distinct Assemblies.

Note: the Assembly as a council of the UCA is the only council that can make determinations in matters of doctrine. Synods cannot. Presbyteries cannot. Congregations cannot. Only the Assembly.

It is why we chose the name 'Assembly of Confessing Congregations' to highlight the root of problem, as well as highlight the way forward in terms of a solution, that the matter must be tackled from an assembly level.

The Assembly of the Uniting Church I believe is ashamed of the gospel.

It is ashamed of the gospel, because Assembly wrongly thinks that to hold to the belief that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman excludes people from the church. It therefore preaches a gospel based on 'inclusion'.

Yes, the gospel is about inclusion, but it is much more than that. It is about repentance, transformation, being born again, holiness, righteousness, reconciliation and salvation.

To be able to continue to preach this gospel, our Assembly as the ACC must be distinct in its very nature, and in its very core in relation to what we believe and how we will move forward into the future. Otherwise, we will continue to live a life of contradiction within the Uniting Church.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide our conversations and our deliberations about our next step (just our next step – no more, no less) into the future.

And, may we never be ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Amen.

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