

## ***Holding Fast and Standing Firm***

by Rev. Robert Griffith

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Have you ever had one of those weeks where one disappointment after another brings you to a point where you just wonder why you bother? Well, I've had a number of weeks like that recently and it's a very painful place to be when your call to the mission of Christ is still strong. Contending for the faith in an increasingly indifferent, pagan world is a real challenge. However, contending for the faith within a seriously flawed institution we call 'the church' can be absolutely soul-destroying. When Paul warned Timothy all those years ago that in the last days we would battle false teaching and even doctrines taught by demons, he was not kidding! The extent to which many in the Church have now departed from our foundations and rejected the authority of the Bible is breathtaking.

So in my desire to seek solace in the Scriptures and to hear from God for this next season of ministry, the Spirit led me to a number of Paul's letters and to the book of Hebrews. Two phrases kept leaping off the page as my spirit was fortified and harnessed for the road ahead. They formed a constant refrain through those letters: 'hold fast' and 'stand firm.' Neither of these things can be done in private or in silence. Both of these exhortations require us to take up our position and make it clear to all where we stand and why we must hold fast and stand firm until the Lord tells us otherwise. So, brothers and sisters, here I stand:

Five months ago our National Assembly changed our marriage doctrine and opened the door for same-sex marriages to take place within the Uniting Church in Australia. In parts of our Church this decision has been warmly welcomed and celebrated. However, for a large number of UCA members, including many Ministers and Pastors, this decision, and the way in which it was made (only seven months after the law was changed and with no consultation with Congregations and Presbyteries) has caused enormous grief, sadness and even anger. Many members and a number of Ministers have already resigned and many more will follow if Resolution 64 from the 15th Assembly remains in place.

During this past year, as I have engaged with thousands of people across the country, two questions continue to emerge. From those who cannot accept this change in doctrine, I hear: *"How did we even get to this point?"* From those who don't see what the problem is, I hear: *'Why all the fuss about same-sex marriage?'* This paper is only one person's attempt to answer those questions but I know my words will resonate strongly with tens of thousands of UCA brothers and sisters, many of whom have spoken to me or emailed me in recent months and all of whom have been dismissed or demonised by Assembly leaders and some Synod leaders for having the audacity to question this decision. That is beyond disappointing.

For others, this will be a hard word which they may judge harshly and reject outright. That's because they come to this issue from a different perspective and the views expressed here will directly challenge that perspective. I acknowledge this tension, I respect those who disagree with me and I affirm their right to argue their position in an equally respectful way. Diversity is celebrated in the Uniting Church, but that diversity must always make room for rigorous, honest, respectful debate and discussion.

I also must acknowledge that expressing what I believe to be God's truth has and will put enormous pressure on relationships which I value. That saddens me, but I cannot control the way others respond. I can only ensure that my words are offered with love and respect, but always with an uncompromising commitment to the Biblical foundations which have served the Church well for over 2,000 years.

So how did we get to this place of tension and division? What some people see as a brave, pioneering move by the Uniting Church as we 'lead the way' into this new age of 'inclusion' - many others regard as a divisive, ill-timed, ill-informed decision, predicated on false teaching and supported by a minority of our whole membership and a much smaller minority of the whole Church in Australia. If we are truly 'leading the way' we will have followers. When nobody is following, we are actually 'breaking away.' Thousands of Uniting Church members do not want the Uniting Church to break away from other denominations. So this decision has brought incredible division into the Church.

To understand how we can have two clearly opposed positions on marriage, we need to examine the different starting points of those positions. Like any journey, where you end up is first and foremost determined by where you start out. For those who strongly support the long-established Christian doctrine that marriage is between a man and a woman, their starting point is the Bible and 2,000 years of established Christian doctrine. There is not one sentence in the Bible which normalises homosexuality and it is certainly never affirmed as God's creative purpose or intent for anyone. There is not one sentence in the Bible which supports the concept of same-sex marriage. All references in the Bible to marriage refer to a relationship between a man and a woman. This has therefore been the established position of the Christian Church throughout its entire history and this is the starting point for those who oppose same-sex marriage within the Church.

By contrast, those passionate advocates for same-sex marriage in the Uniting Church must start at a different place. They begin, not with the Bible and all of Church history, they begin in the 21st century social context of western society where the sexual revolution which started in the 1960's has evolved to the point where everything about sexuality, gender and marriage is now regarded as negotiable. Against that very different backdrop, orthodox Christian doctrine is seen as antiquated, culturally irrelevant and in need of revision, based on 'what we now know.' The result is that those who still embrace the truths of Scripture and the words of Jesus Himself are increasingly being labelled as 'fundamentalists' or 'conservatives' and seen as those who are out of touch with the modern, 'enlightened' understanding of humanity. Revisionist theology has now become the norm in many places.

This alternate view of marriage gained momentum some years ago when the narrative around homosexuality changed significantly and, I believe, deliberately. What used to be a discussion about behaviour, personal choice and lifestyle – became a discussion about personal identity. This new way of talking about homosexuality suggested that people are born homosexual and have no control over that sexual orientation or its accompanying lifestyle. Therefore, we are told, if you do not accept homosexuality as being normal, you do not accept those people who identify as homosexual. The term 'homophobia' then began to be thrown around whenever anyone even so much as raised a question about this issue. This view very quickly led to the conclusion that 'God made me this way.' The moment people shifted the responsibility for homosexuality to God, the whole debate changed overnight. It is really important we know why this happened.

Firstly, if someone's homosexuality is part of their innate identity – then the discussion becomes very personal and it's difficult for anyone to offer a contrary view without that person feeling judged or condemned personally. This effectively silenced the majority of our population and skewed every poll and survey done from that point on. None of us want to be seen as condemning or personally judgemental. So in spite of their personal convictions about homosexuality or same-sex marriage, many people have just remained silent as this tsunami of new-age thinking has crashed across our society and now into our part of the Church.

Secondly, as this 'God made me this way' teaching emerged, its supporters worked backwards in their deceived logic and reasoned that if God made people this way then God must be ok with same-sex marriage. They found all the references in the Bible which speak about God's unconditional love, inclusion, grace, not judging each other etc. and offered that up as 'Scriptural support.' In many parts of the Uniting Church now, this new position is accepted as truth, taught in many congregations and even taught in some Bible Colleges - in spite of what is clearly articulated in the Bible and by many experts in science, sociology and psychology.

This whole shift in the sexuality narrative over recent decades has occurred in spite of the fact that there is no credible scientific support, no Biblical support and no sociological data which would lead us to change the long-established view of marriage as being between a man and a woman. There have been many scientific studies done on sexuality and gender and one of the most widely respected institutions in this field is Johns Hopkins University in America.

Two years ago they published a report entitled, *“Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences.”* It was co-authored by Dr. Lawrence Mayer and Dr. Paul McHugh. Here is one really important statement from that lengthy report:

*“The belief that sexual orientation is an innate, biologically fixed human property - that people are ‘born that way’ - is not supported by scientific evidence. Likewise, the belief that gender identity is an innate, fixed human property independent of biological sex - so that a person might be a ‘man trapped in a woman’s body’ or ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body’ - is not supported by scientific evidence.”*

There are many leading psychologists, sociologists and theologians who agree with those findings. Even some prominent homosexuals, who are experts in their field, agree that homosexuality is not an immutable human trait from birth. Here are just two quotes which leave little room for doubt:

Dr Lisa Diamond. Lesbian Professor of Developmental Psychology, University of Utah :

*“The various sexual categories currently in use (LGBTIQ, etc.) are useful mental shortcuts, educated guesses or stereotypes, but though they have meaning in our culture, ... we have to be careful in presuming that they represent any kind of natural phenomena. It is tricky to use these categories for advocating rights based on the concept of immutability, now that we know it is not true. As a community, homosexuals have to stop saying: ‘Please help us, we were born this way and we can’t change’ as an argument for legal standing.”*

Lesbian Activist, Camille Pagalia, Professor at the University of the Arts in Pennsylvania:

*“Homosexuality is not normal. On the contrary, it is a challenge to the norm. Nature exists whether academics like it or not and in nature, procreation is the single relentless rule. That is the norm. Our sexual bodies were designed for reproduction. No one is born gay. The idea is ridiculous. Homosexuality is an adaptation, not an inborn trait.”*

At the time our 15th Assembly was re-defining marriage in the Uniting Church because of an erroneous view of sexuality and gender, there was a conference taking place in the United States. The annual *Revoice Conference* states its purpose as, *“Supporting, encouraging, and empowering gay, lesbian, same-sex-attracted, and other LGBT Christians so they can flourish while observing the historic, Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality.”* The keynote speaker at this year’s conference was Wesley Hill, associate professor of New Testament at the Trinity School for Ministry. In his speech to the conference Hill declared very strongly that Jesus did not support *“trimming God’s standard down to fit whatever chaos is true in our lives. Jesus was not out to undermine God’s holy will for our lives. If anything, Jesus ratcheted up the standard of sexual purity and sexual holiness.”* He was addressing a conference full of people who identified somewhere on the LGBTIQ spectrum and he flatly rejected the idea that Jesus wants the Church to accept same-sex marriage.

During his speech Hill focused on John 8:1-11, the story of where Jesus saved a woman from being stoned to death for adultery but then warned her to “go and sin no more.” Hill said, *“Jesus does not combat the shame of this woman by rewriting the rule book. He does not discard what Moses said about adultery, nor erase any of the commandments. He’s going to redeem her but not at the expense of His law, or changing the standard of morality to fit her life.”*

So when you study the biological, psychological, sociological and theological understanding of marriage and gender, you cannot arrive at a place of support for same-sex marriage – especially not within the Church, which is our primary area of concern here. In 1Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul reminds us that it’s not the job of Christians to judge the world, God will do that. However, we are to judge the Church and keep the Church true to the Word of God and the call of Christ. I know of many respected Christian leaders who have remained largely silent on the decision of our Government to change the Marriage Act and legalise same-sex marriage. They have an opinion on that decision as a citizen, but as a Church leader, they know their responsibility is to the Church and it’s within the bounds of the Church they need to speak up. I only wish more would.

We are warned so often in the Bible to not let the priorities and views of the world infiltrate and dictate what we believe and do in the Church of Jesus Christ. We are called by God to be salt and light in the midst of a broken and dysfunctional world - not to let that brokenness and dysfunction re-shape the Church's doctrine. When the government changed the law and redefined marriage across our great nation, the pressure on the Church to conform increased. There was an assumption by some that the decision of our Government to change the law would simply be acknowledged by the Church in changing their doctrine to suit. However, every example in the Bible where God's people took their cues from the world, ended very badly. The Church is called to show the way to the world – not the other way around. From God's perspective, the Church is not peripheral to the world - the world is peripheral to the Church!

I want to now address the toughest part of this whole issue and the place where so many of us stumble because it's just so hard. Many of us have family members, friends or colleagues who identify as homosexual. Some of them are keen to embrace this new day which has dawned and get married within the Church. When our love and support for them as people is confronted by our desire to be true to God's Word and God's plan for creation, it can result in a gut-wrenching struggle. The man who led me to Christ when I was 14 years old quickly became my role-model as a wonderful man of God, a Church leader, a husband and a father. He was MC at our wedding. A decade later he walked out on his wife and three children and moved in with a man and that's where he has been ever since. That whole scenario set me on a journey of learning how to love a person unconditionally and still remain true to my convictions and what I believe is God's best purpose for us all.

Since that day many years ago, God has led a number of men and women into my life who identify as homosexual and most of them have been actively involved in the Church. I have had many difficult, but loving and mutually respectful conversations over the years. This is not an easy space to be in, but the most important thing we all have to learn, regardless of where we sit with this whole issue, is this: Saying to someone, "I don't agree with you" does not equate with "I don't love you, respect you and accept you as a person." When we are confused about this, we see relationships destroyed or we see people silenced and prevented from speaking the truth in love, for fear they will offend or upset someone they love. When people don't understand that it's possible to disagree with someone and still love them as a person, the consequences can be devastating.

Sadly, this is where many in our Church find themselves at present and it's really hard for them to step back from their personal situation and look at the bigger picture of what is right for the whole Church. If ever there was a time when we needed the wisdom and love of God to grip our hearts, it's now. We need grace and truth to rise above our personal stories and pain. Grace without truth is not God's grace and it leads to apostasy. Truth without grace is not God's truth and it leads to hard-hearted legalism. We need the grace of God and the truth of God in equal measure and that can only be found in Jesus Christ, Who is the full embodiment of both.

Diversity is a word which has been used a lot during this debate. Without question, the Uniting Church would be the most diverse Christian denomination in Australia. Staunch conservatives and radical liberals sit side by side in some Congregations and seek to make decisions together in the Councils of our Church. This diversity allows me to write what I'm writing here, knowing there are others who are writing something very different. That's very messy and fraught with danger – but that's the diversity we have been given, thanks to the successive decisions of our Assemblies over decades which has widened our doctrinal position to the point where diametrically opposed views are held within the one body.

The Uniting Church is therefore a really tough place to be a Minister of the Word, if the Word is still important to you! However, diversity in and of itself is not a bad thing, provided that our diversity has some limits. For the last 41 years in the Uniting Church those guiding and confining parameters have been the Bible and *The Basis of Union*. In our foundational document we have committed to always be "regulated by the Scriptures" and "guided by *The Basis of Union*." The most recent decision of Assembly on same-sex marriage has, in the opinion of many Ministers and members in our Church, taken us beyond the Scriptures and made a mockery of *The Basis of Union*.

We have now entered very dangerous, uncharted territory and that's why tens of thousands of UCA members across our nation are now crying out, "*Enough is enough – we can't keep doing this and still call ourselves the Christian Church.*" Of course, this is not the first time the Christian Church has had to wrestle with doctrinal differences to determine if a certain teaching is true or false. In the early days of the Church there were many councils convened for that very purpose. From those councils came statements which made it clear what the whole Church believed and some creeds were written which are still in place today. Sadly, in 2018, that kind of council no longer exists. The Church has become so fragmented and divided that we have multiple councils across multiple denominations - all determining on their own what is true and what is false.

One of those councils is our National Assembly. In July 2018, this Council made a decision, without any consultation with any other leaders in the wider Church, to break ranks on the issue of marriage and change 2,000 years of established Christian doctrine. That has forced other denominations to publicly re-affirm their support for the orthodox, Biblical view of marriage and distance themselves from the Uniting Church. Having served God in four different denominations during my long ministry, I cannot describe the grief I now feel for the whole Church in this nation. This should never have been a decision made in isolation by one part of the Christian Church – it should have been a decision of the whole Church. We have not only ignored *The Basis of Union* and the Scriptures, we have now defined ourselves as being separate from the wider Church, making a mockery of the word 'Uniting' and the foundational commitment it once embodied.

My ordination vows and the Ministerial Code of Ethics to which I am bound, demand that my preaching, my teaching, my writing and my whole ministry within the Church are always guided by *The Basis of Union*, regulated by the Scriptures and empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit. I believe all three have brought me to the position I hold today on this difficult issue and I cannot shrink from that. Tragically, the Assembly decision has placed hundreds of Ministers of the Word in an untenable situation where our commitment to *The Basis of Union* and to the Scriptures has now brought us into direct conflict with the decisions of the Councils of the Church.

I affirm my respect for the 15th Assembly, of which I am a member, and I respect their right to govern in accordance with the regulations of the Uniting Church. However, that respect does not equate to agreement with every decision they have made. At the very heart of this whole debate lies the real issue which is absolutely vital to the life of the Church: can we accept the Assembly decision on marriage and still be guided by *The Basis of Union* and regulated by the Scriptures? Hundreds of our Ministers and thousands of our members are answering an unequivocal "No!" The most vital issues in the life of the Uniting Church in 2018 are (a) our poor handling of the Scriptures; (b) our refusal to engage with the wider body of Christ on theology and (c) our blatant disregard for *The Basis of Union* and its foundational guiding principles. Unless all three are addressed urgently, we will rapidly become an apostate, impotent, shrinking shadow of the miracle that once was the Uniting Church in Australia.

My commitment to the authority of Scripture and the foundational principles governing the Uniting Church has brought me to this point where I must declare firmly with the great reformer Martin Luther: "*Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.*" I am grateful to be part of a Church which (at this point in time at least) still allows me the freedom to hold this position and fulfil my calling to preach and teach what I discern to be the Truth and respectfully expose what I believe to be false teaching. My heart-felt prayer is that we would all allow the Holy Spirit to bind us together in the midst of our diversity and keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, the Lord of the Church and the full embodiment of grace and truth. *Come, Holy Spirit, come.*

**Rev. Robert Griffith**

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