

OPENING SERMON by ACC Chair Rev. Dr Hedley Fihaki
ACC National Conference MONDAY 7TH NOVEMBER 2016.
1: 30 P.M. POATINA, TASMANIA.

Theme: Standing firm together in Christ.

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love” (1 Cor. 16: 13, 14).

Paul, in this section of his letter to the church in Corinth, had been talking about Timothy and Apollos. He, pauses, however, from talking about them to interject with this short, sharp exhortation to the Corinthians.

The Corinthians had shown a distressing immaturity in some things, and the apostle in a series of compelling imperatives points them to a better way.¹

Firstly, he calls them to ‘be on your guard’.

That is, Paul is calling them to make a determined effort to be awake; be ‘alert’. “Wake up!”, as says Jesus in Revelations 3: 2.

Romans 13: 11 similarly says, “The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed”.

1 Peter 4: 7 “Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray”.

Secondly, Paul says, “stand firm in the faith”.

He says this because stability was distressingly absent from the Corinthians. So, Paul says, “stand firm, in the faith’, that is, in Christ.

Paul in 2 Timothy 4: 3 reminds us what *instability* looks. “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”

In this light, Paul asserts, ‘stand firm in the faith’, don’t be “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4: 14).

Stand firm in the faith.

¹ Morris, L. (1985). *1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 7, p. 232). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Thirdly, Pauls says “be courageous, be strong”.

Similar to Psalm 31: 24 which also says “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD”.

Paul faced ‘danger’ at every turn (2 Cor. 11:26), including in Ephesus, even as he wrote this letter (15:30–32; 16:9). But because Paul’s readers were forced to endure ‘the same sufferings’ (2 Cor. 1:6) as he did, he encourages them to be ‘courageous’ and ‘strong’.²

As Christians, our courage and our strength comes not from within us as such, but from God. It is God who strengthens us in Christ and by the Spirit.

Philippians 4: 13, “I can do all this through him who gives me strength”.

Finally, Pauls says, “Do everything in love”.

This final exhortation, that their ‘every deed’ be done ‘in love’, is quite pointed [and direct] in view of their lack of love [which is] evident at many points.

- The theologically strong did not show love to the ‘weak brother’ (8:1, 9–13).
- The rich failed to love ‘those who had nothing’ (11:20–22).
- The verbally gifted spoke for personal self-display rather than in love to ‘build up’ the assembled church (14:1, 12).
- Paul’s famous ‘hymn to love’ (1 Cor. 13:1–13) was written precisely for this church, to show its members how to love one another.

Here, then, is one more reminder for them to love.³

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love” (1 Cor. 16: 13, 14).

As we hear this command to ‘love’, it is vital to also particularly understand and to be very aware of the current powerful tactic or strategy that is being used to silence those to who disagree with the advocates of the so called same gender marriage.

The tactic is to label those who disagree as being ‘unloving’.

“Those who disagree with ‘same gender marriage’ “, as highlighted in our proposed ‘declaration of marriage’, are vilified as bigoted, hateful, unjust, weirdos, morons, vile, and even ‘nauseating... filth’ (p.13).

² Barnett, P. (2000). *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People* (p. 310). Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications.

³ Barnett, P. (2000). *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People* (p. 310). Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications.

To stand firm, then, in the faith is to also stand firm against such strategies that seek to silence us by labelling us as 'unloving'.

And, we need to particularly help our young people understand this important point, as they are being easily led astray by the shallow but powerful argument 'love is love'.

Prof. B. L. Mauser, Princeton Theological Seminary says this important point:

"It is said in the debate today that the New Testament insists on an ethic of love to which everything else is subordinate. Love embodying the Gospel, it is argued, breaks down legalistic barriers and reaches out particularly to the disadvantaged and the oppressed.

The validity of this insistence must be recognized without reservation. But it does not at all follow from it that Christian ethical thought, and ethical practice, must be restricted to the bare injunction to love without consideration of the concrete forms of exercising love which correspond to the Gospel.

Love is the fulfilment of the law, but this love is not without its embodiment in actual concrete areas of human life. "Love is the fulfilling of the law" ... but this love fans out into the concrete forms of commandments "you shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet" (Rom 13:9-10).

Neither Old nor New Testament assume that human common sense, or a natural goodness of moral sensibilities, lead everybody to a universal understanding of what it means to love. Rather, love must be thought through and practiced in accordance with the act and word of God in which love receives its distinctive form" (p. 4).⁴

In Matthew 4 regarding Jesus' temptations in the desert, it is important to take note of one of the particular methods that Satan uses against Jesus.

Satan says to Jesus in the second temptation, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, 'he will command his angels concerning you and that they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone'".

Here Satan comes across in the guise of a bible scholar, an expert in the law – 'it is written', that is, he knows the word.

And, the cunning thing that Satan does is that he pits the Word of God against the Son of God, who is, the living Word of God.

⁴ The Bible and Homosexuality by B. L. Mauser, Princeton Theological Seminary

Incredible attempt at deceiving Jesus the Christ.

But, Jesus sees through the deception, He sees through the misuse of scripture and says, *“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

Past president of the Uniting Church, the Rev. Dr. Dean Drayton, is quoted as saying,

“The Assembly has decided that we are a diverse church, we have great and genuinely held differences, but instead of allowing these differences to divide us, we will hold together in something greater—our love of God and our love of the Uniting Church itself.”⁵

Here, ‘love of God and our love for the Uniting Church’ is misused to justify sexual practices that are incompatible with the clear witness of Scripture.

Here love of God and love for the Uniting Church is used to justify making sexuality an issue that falls within the diversity of opinions or within the diversity of theologies acceptable within the UCA.

The past president is correct in saying that the ‘Assembly *has* decided’; the Assembly *has* made formal resolutions regarding this matter.

That is, ‘sin’ *has* been formally enshrined and instituted into the life of the church in the form of formal resolutions, i.e. resolution 84 and resolution 108 regarding sexuality and leadership.

The ACC came into existence in 2006, precisely because we believed that such a situation cannot exist within the Church.

It is why we declared our belief that the 10th and 11th Assemblies of the UCA had been apostate in their decisions in relation to Sexuality and Leadership in the UCA because:

- i. these decisions were a departure from the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,
- ii. and because the Assembly had failed to observe its own prescribed processes when departing from its received tradition on sexual relationships.

During our national conference, beginning today, we will seek to strengthen our confession and our resolve by declaring to the Uniting Church that marriage is a matter that enters into the ‘substance of the faith’.

Therefore, in the light of this truth, we must also reject (in love):

⁵ http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_uoz.htm

- (a) the idea that adherence to the Basis of Union allows for difference of opinion on the nature of marriage,
- (b) the assertion that having a 'space for grace' allows for such difference of opinion, and
- (c) the misuse of 'conscience' to justify beliefs and practices contrary to Scripture.

Some have said that they can see why confessing Christ as Lord is important in the Uniting Church, but they can't see what that has to do with the issue of marriage and why same-gender couples can't marry.

This way of thinking, I believe, highlights the heart of the problem in the church, namely, the separation of marriage from our confession of Christ as Lord. That is, Christ and marriage are separated, as if they have nothing to do with one another.

It is why we must make very clear through our declaration on marriage and family that:

"Marriage is a reflection of Christ's love for us. At its foundation, marriage is not just about the bride and groom. It is about Jesus Christ and his Father's divine action in our world through the Holy Spirit. Marriage belongs to the whole story of creation and redemption.

Scripture begins with the marriage of man and woman and ends with the marriage of Christ and his Bride, the Church, new Adam and new Eve" (p. 5).

"Marriage is the sign and seal of the union between a man a woman which simultaneously signifies the union between God and Israel and Christ and the Church in which humanity is sealed by grace and enabled to living hope" (p.6).

"The fact that wedding feasts, bridegrooms and brides figure prominently in Jesus' parables and in Revelation is a sign of the sacramental or covenantal nature of marriage and its eschatological meaning. (p.6).

To put the matter clearly, in terms of what is at stake for us within the Uniting Church, let me quote important words that Rev. Rod James wrote in 2014:

To move away from this basic understanding of marriage (i.e. between a man and a woman) is to move away from Christ.

If a Christian denomination were to separate itself from this understanding of marriage it would be separating itself from Christ. By abiding in Christ the church

bears much fruit, but if a denominational church does not abide in Christ it will be 'thrown away like a branch and will wither'.

If the Uniting Church were to depart from his definition it would separate itself from Christ and, sadly, consign itself to the dustbin of church history.⁶

This is what is at stake. It is why we are called during this conference to 'Stand firm together in Christ'.

Standing firm together in Christ will involve, as Rev. Dr. Max Champion puts it, "exposing false arguments that have now become widely accepted as truth by many in the church and in the community regarding so called 'marriage equality'".

Of course, we will continue to be labelled as being 'unloving'. However, we are fully aware that this is simply Satan's method of trying to silence us.

We will not be silent. We will continue to speak the truth in love.

The president of the UCA will be present tomorrow, as well as members from the Doctrine Working Group to 'hear our voice'. This despite, ironically, the 2015 National Assembly rejecting the participation of the ACC in the consultation process regarding marriage.

Despite also knowing the reality, based on our past experiences, that the voice of the ACC will simply be forced into the 'diversity' framework of the Uniting Church, we welcome their presence with us so that they may hear directly our confession that Christ alone is Lord of the Church and the world.

"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love" (1 Cor. 16: 13, 14).

Amen.

⁶ Rev Rod James (June 2014 edition of ACCatalyst) <http://www.unitingviews.com/issues/item/marriage/christ-marriage-uniting-church/>