

## The Author Responds

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I found the responses to be interesting, helpful and constructive. I am glad for the opportunity to learn from brothers and sisters in ministry and to clarify some of my positions. And, I believe it's safe to say that we all affirm the saving work of Christ, not just as words to repeat but as the basis of our life together.

I will begin by quoting Amy's important reminder that "it matters if you have cared for those brought into relationship with you." Her response serves as a reminder that *how* we decide these questions cannot be separated from what we decide (and, thus, the subtitle of the essay). Our fellowship is not something we have chosen for ourselves, but something into which we have been called by Christ (and is, therefore, not to be treated unadvisedly or lightly).

Worth, Hartmut, and David helpfully point out some of the tensions inherent in our current debates—upholding the saving work of Christ while not usurping God's more omniscient capacity for making final judgments; discerning when scripture offers a final word and when the Spirit at work behind scripture offers new understanding in our own time; embodying both a confident profession of faith and a humble willingness to learn new things from God, and so on. The responses demonstrate that these tensions are not problems to be solved but are inescapable and potentially constructive tensions in the life of faith, both for individuals and for communities.

I share David's wariness with regard to

moving too quickly or easily toward change, and I agree that it's not the case that everything is up for grabs all the time. At the same time, the Church has always had to live through the conflicts created while discerning what to hold onto and what to let go under the guidance of the Spirit. Adding to the complexity of the situation is the widely varying perception of what "rapid change" means in a congregational or denominational setting. When it came to "setting aside" admonitions of scripture—dietary laws, circumcision, the day on which we observe Sabbath, and so on—the early churches moved with great care. Even the huge shifts required for full inclusion of Gentiles—well, was that decades-long discernment process fast or slow? One's answer at the time of that conflict would probably depend on one's initial view of how good or bad it was to be "Gentile." I think of the admonition in the epistle of James, "let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:4). We need more than a little endurance for the days ahead.

Let me express appreciation for Wally's kind personal words, noting that he omitted mention of the depth of ministry received from him and from Linda. I regret that my focus on the role of fear and suspicion in these conflicts might lead one to believe that I see those as the only motives at work. People on all sides act from a genuine desire to see the ways of God emerge. When working through issues this hotly contested, however, it can be difficult to maintain enough

self-awareness and humility to remember that the intensity of one's beliefs says nothing about one's conformity to the ways of God.

As for a change from discussing whether Jesus is the only way, to discussing whether Christianity is the only way, that shift constitutes one of the essay's main points. Wally questions whether it is possible "to remove Christ from Christianity and have anything meaningful left." I agree. Our relationship with the risen Christ, in my view, constitutes the core of our life and faith. My brother's next question, however, touches a different concern, "Can one follow Jesus and not be Christian?"—well, maybe. I say that based on certain passages of scripture (discussed in the essay and listed in footnote 5), not based on what has been said by "bishops in other denominations and their disciples in the Moravian Church." One purpose of my essay was to offer a third possibility that makes the following point, crudely stated: there are other choices besides "Bishop Spong" or "traditional beliefs." As Wally, Worth, and David all note, issues have become personalized and politicized, so that certain people's names have become entangled with other issues, animosities, and allegiances. It seems to me that all the respondents share a desire for the Church to move beyond the coalitional stumbling blocks that stand in the way of truth and reconciliation ("I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.'" (I Cor 1:12))

Our differences over the interpretation of John 9 and Acts 4 would take too much space to explore in detail. I agree with Wally's point that Jesus' followers did not question his Sabbath healings. My point had a different emphasis. The people's reaction in John 9 ("He can't be from

God because he broke the Sabbath," versus "No one could do this unless he came from God") seems to me to say that our preconceptions of how God acts can blind us to the actual actions of God. I'm most interested in what enabled people to recognize that he came from God.

Both Wally's and Hartmut's discussions of Acts 4 are better than mine in upholding the union of the spiritual and the physical, an understanding of human life that I agree with. Their discussions point more effectively to the larger significance of the healing and the story's emphasis on Christ and salvation. At the same time, I would still argue that the union of "healing" and "saving" and the context of healing that surrounds the statement under question ("there is no other name ...") calls for a deeper exploration of what "salvation" means. I agree that my discussion does not begin to explore the ecclesiological concerns that might be raised. Briefly, though, I suspect that we would have vast areas of agreement on what the church should do in carrying out its mission. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life—not the Church—and it is by Christ's name that we are saved—not the name of the Church. Sometimes our battles make it look as if we think that God belongs to us rather than that we belong to God.

I agree with Wally's assessment of the scriptural grounding for the ordination of women. My point was not to deny "the relevance of Scripture" but to note that when people make scriptural texts compete for authority, the Church has always searched for combinations of texts that connect with the purposes of God. I fundamentally agree with *the Ground of the Unity* on this point. And, I believe that my brother

would agree that there is more than one way to understand the authority of Scripture while still being faithful to its testimony.

David makes a significant point about provincial synods “defer[ring] to Unity Synod to decide controversial questions before plunging ahead on their own.” This is worthy of sustained consideration, which can’t be undertaken in this setting. How the Church might decide in advance what qualifies as controversial enough, well, that’s not easy to do. And, we haven’t been able to discern the best process for legislating an issue as controversial as homosexuality. It was apparent to me at the Northern Province Synod that a “Robert’s Rules of Order/simple majority vote” approach constitutes exactly the wrong way to discern the ways of God on this matter. But, that’s another

discussion. Unity Synod has given (mandated) breathing room on legislating this question. The larger Church still has the obligation before God and each other to work through this as a Unity.

Wally concludes his comments saying, “It appears my brother and I cannot even agree on what divides us, let alone on how to understand the relevant texts.” I have no doubt that if we keep engaging one another with respect and love and focusing on the Church’s mission to a world in travail, we will see where we differ and understand what matters to us most and why. I’m not yet sure if we agree on what divides us, but reading Wally’s final paragraph and reading each of the responses assures me that we agree on what unites us—the saving love of Christ who calls us to life together in service to others.

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## Letters

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*Many thanks to all who wrote this autumn!*

*Please send letters by email to: [zinzenhof2002@yahoo.com](mailto:zinzenhof2002@yahoo.com).*

Today we did receive *The Hinge* Summer 2003 mailed from Bethlehem September 17th and arrived here 22nd. Thank you for all arrangements. After taking it out of the envelop I read as first matter of major interest (!) the whole text of your grand review on John Granger’s book on Harry Potter. My wife Erika was as I was myself enthusiastic about this reviewed book and your review. Thank you. We will communicate this text to our four children for them and for our twelve grandchildren many of whom do read Harry Potter as my wife does in order to communicate with them. She also finds Harry Potter quite interesting. I have not spent so much time on these books. But if we have room to spare I consider to take a German translation of your text as appended matter into our Continental *TMDK* November issue. I think all this is quite intriguing and in Christmas time many of these books will again be a present if youngsters can bridle their impatience and will not have already read everything of it beforehand. It was refreshing to read this whilst at present there are still so many difficult theological issues in the air.

— Hartmut Beck, Karlsruhe, Germany

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Reading through the pages of this Summer 2003 issue I was pleased to note so many names of people I know; Morgan, Sommers, Volpe, Castello, Wilde, Couch, Graf, and Weinlick. Why do I know so many? I’ve had the privilege of meeting them at Synods or working with them in various programs of the Church. “Working