

Commentary: Joined in Christ, even when we disagree

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For the past year and a half, as a part of my service on the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Governing Board, I have worked on what we called the [Illumination Project](#). We were constituted to address CBF's hiring policy, which was adopted in 2001 and included an absolute prohibition on hiring any LGBT person for any role in CBF life.

Among our discoveries is that *none* of our peer organizations (the BGCT, NAMB, World Vision, *Christianity Today*, et cetera) included a word about sexuality in their hiring policies. That is not to say these ministries do not have convictions about sexuality; it is just that hiring policies are not the place to address those convictions. So we wrote a new Christ-centered hiring [policy](#) to replace our old policy.

We also, separately, wrote an implementation plan that restricts the hiring of missionaries, their supervisors and those in ministry leadership roles to persons who "practice a traditional Christian sexual ethic of celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage between a woman and a man."

Why did we land where we did?

Agree to disagree

First, let me say I believe what the Bible says and what the church has taught for two millennia about sex: We are all created in God's image, being male or female is part of God's good gift to us and marriage is a lifetime commitment between one man and one woman.

While I think there are a number of biblical arguments for that position, for me the strongest is in the parallel Gospel texts of Mark 10 and Matthew 19, in which Jesus, responding to the Pharisees about divorce, defines marriage in light of Genesis 1 and 2. If Jesus says it, it is good enough for me.

That said, and sometimes to my chagrin, I continue to see the unmistakable regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in people who disagree with me. Which causes me to ask: Must I be joined to those to whom God is joined? For me the answer is “yes.”

I disagree with some of my brothers and sisters in Christ—and they are brothers and sisters in Christ. I don’t know how this is all going to work out, so I am exercising a holy patience and trusting that God knows more and better than I how to work his plan to redeem the world.

CBF and the local church

Second, those of us who served on the Illumination Project have been clear from the beginning that as Baptists, we neither write policy nor prescribe theology for local churches. Baptist churches are autonomous and are accountable to God, not to CBF.

Because we do not exercise control over churches, it is important for us to be both clear and honest about who we are and what we believe so that we can invite others to join us in the work of sending missionaries and advocating for God’s justice. We choose to welcome all who want to be part of our work, even when we do not agree about important matters.

The Illumination Project revealed that less than 15 percent of CBF churches are welcoming and affirming. So, we wrote a policy that commits us to hire only people who profess Jesus Christ as Lord, who are committed to our missions mandate and who exhibit the highest levels of professionalism.

Again, that policy only affects the 52 employees in our Decatur, Ga., office and the 78 missionaries sharing the gospel in 30 countries around the world. The CBF hiring policy has no binding effect on anyone else and does not require any church to change its policies or by-laws.

Welcoming all

Third, I believe our hiring policy both reflects and respects the actual practices of most Baptist churches. Every Baptist church I know wants to welcome anyone to come, join and be part of the fellowship. And for almost every Baptist church I know, that welcome means LGBT Christians can do many but not all things in the life of the church.

CBF has said the same thing: We want to hire the best people for each job; we have no agenda beside being maximally effective for the kingdom of God. And there are roles in our ministry for which we discriminate on the basis of sexual activity—and that discrimination applies equally to heterosexual and LGBT Christians.

‘A unity broader than uniformity’

At the end of the day, these are schismatic times. We are quick to paint those who do not think as we think as unbelievers. We are quick to break fellowship. Everyone on my Facebook wall seems to agree that I am right, so I must be right. Right?

Maybe not.

Maybe this is a moment to breathe, listen and try to model for the world a unity in Christ that is broader than uniformity and which calls us to reach out to each other.

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on the Illumination Project.