



San Francisco
Theological Seminary

In Christ. A New Creation.

Remarks at the SFTS Luncheon

Rev. James L. McDonald, PhD
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life
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In early May, the Faculty of a sister seminary sent out a statement about witnessing to Christian love in a time of schism. They ended with an appeal to “their sister seminaries to give witness to their own convictions.”

A week later, there was a second statement from an additional Seminary, this one urging everyone to practice *mutual forbearance*.

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I have grown tired of such statements. I found these cloying, unhelpful, and self-serving. Neither statement actually named the issue that they were addressing. One needed to read between the lines to sniff out the issue. “Purity” and “inclusivity” were *their own code words* for the issue that they dared not name. They quoted scripture, but I found no theology. The only thing missing from these statements was an appeal to the Gospel According to Rodney King, “Can’t we all just get along?”

When one seminary asks another “sister seminary” through a press release to do something, it cannot be taken seriously. Who exactly *was* the intended audience? Not their “sister seminaries,” that’s for sure. Communicating via communiqué is not the way to build up the church.

So, there will be no official press release from SFTS in response to these statements. Three years ago, the SFTS Faculty and students each passed unanimously a wonderful document that is now included in the SFTS Student Handbook. I was asked about this statement during the presidential search process in the spring of 2011, and I made it clear at the time that I personally endorse this statement, and in my presidency since then I have sought to uphold and advance it.

So, let me speak personally and unequivocally about the unnamed issue. The issue is the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in the life of the church. I don’t know how anyone could read the Gospels and come to any other conclusion about inclusion. And there is no more clear and simple statement of the gospel than Paul’s in II Corinthians: “Anyone in Christ is a New Creation.” There are no qualifiers. There are no exceptions. Anyone.

And here is what is so perplexing. Anyone who has been on a seminary campus—whether Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Church of God in Christ, Nazarene, Lutheran, or

you name it—anytime anywhere knows that seminaries have been educating LGBTQ persons, and the church has been ordaining LGBTQ persons to ministry for a very long time. This is a classic example of what we call an “open secret.” Let’s be honest with one another about the reality of the world we live in and the church we serve. This is who we are. This is God’s creation—wonderfully and richly diverse. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

I confess that in years past, SFTS has not been as open and forthcoming as we should have been. We have been part of the problem. Forty years ago, the SFTS Trustees asked Janey Spahr to resign from the board when she came out. We should not have done that. (We should ask Janey’s forgiveness for that.) Lord, have mercy.

Institutionally we have repented of that sin and that dishonor to Janey and ourselves. Those days are long gone, never to return. Thank God.

And now, here in Detroit, we have before the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a set of proposals regarding same-sex marriage. We will decide whether we want to provide an authoritative interpretation, which can provide guidance to pastors and sessions, especially in states that have made provision for marrying same-gender couples. Or whether we want to amend the Book of Order. Those proposals, as they are refined and brought to the floor, will be debated by the General Assembly.

But here’s my point. Let’s not be afraid of how some of our brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will react to the decisions we make here. We don’t need to wait until the last person in the pew comes to the realization that marriage equality is God’s will for God’s creation. Let’s pay attention to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit and let’s do what we can now to open the doors of our church as wide as possible.

And let’s stop communicating by communiqué.

Now let me talk for the next few minutes about San Francisco Theological Seminary and the exciting things that have been happening there.