**Principles**

**1. The Lord loves unity.**

Jesus prayed that “they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). On the eve of his crucifixion, he was talking with God the Father about his disciples, and not only about them, but “also for those who will believe in me through their message” (John 17:20). That’s us.

Our unity was very important to Jesus, and it should be important to us. The call for oneness echoes through the New Testament, with Paul, Peter, and James adding their voices. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,” Paul wrote (Ephesians 4:3). We will have our differences—and we see plenty of conflict in the pages of Scripture—but the Lord's desire remains: that we might “be one.”

**2. Discern what is essential, and not.**

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.”

This sentence, a favorite of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, has long been attributed to St. Augustine, but recent scholarship points to a German pastor, writing in 1627. That was the middle of the Thirty Years War, a colossal struggle between Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics that tore Europe apart. You can imagine why a local pastor would call for unity, liberty, and charity (which is an old-time word for love). And you can see why John Wesley would use this quote while facing opposition from the Anglican Church for reaching out to unchurched people,

This quote doesn't solve our problems, but it clarifies our response to the issues. Not only are we figuring out what’s right and wrong, but we also need to decide how essential our position is. Is there a core aspect of Christianity at stake here, or could we “agree to disagree”? Throughout history, churches and denominations have split over issues such as use of alcohol, policy on divorce, ordination of women, slavery, and justification by faith. Some of these seem essential, others not so much. Do we need to build a dividing wall here, on this issue, or not?

**3. It’s better to be loving than right.**

The New Testament refers frequently to the all-importance of love. What’s the greatest commandment? Love God and others (Matthew 22:37-39). It’s how we fulfill God's law Romans 13:10). It's greater than faith and hope (1 Corinthians 13:13). Even if you do amazing religious things, without love they're worthless (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Of course we shouldn't dilute God-given love into the stuff of pop songs and romantic comedies. Love doesn't mean avoiding all conflict or just doing whatever people want. But it is our ultimate calling to put others first, to live sacrificially in the way of Jesus.

We see a glimpse of this “It’s better to be loving than right” philosophy from the apostle Paul in his discussion of Christian disagreements in Romans 14-15. He was dealing with issues that separated people from Jewish and pagan backgrounds—what food to eat and what holy days to observe. He assumes a certain liberty in these matters, but challenges people to act in love. “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. . . .If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:13,15). In the following chapter, the apostle says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7).

**4. We pay attention to our culture, but we don’t follow it.**

We want to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, there are culture-following churches that simply go with the flow, blithely accepting the opinions of the prevailing culture on money, marriage, or even morality. Then there are culture-blind churches that pay no attention to the changing attitudes of their communities. Both types become irrelevant. The culture-blind church loses its ability to speak to people in the modern world, and the culture-following church has nothing to say.

At Hope, we want to pay attention to the culture around us, but we don't want to follow it. In fact, we want to lead it. We want to speak prophetically, applying God's truth in all its fullness to a broad range of cultural questions.

The New Testament often mentions "the world"—referring to the social forces that tend to spin in opposition to God. Leveraging basic attitudes of pride, greed, and lust, the surrounding culture insidiously affects our priorities. “Do not love the world or anything in the world,” writes John (1 John 2:15). But we also read that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). We share the Lord’s passion for this world, but we won’t let the culture decide our priorities.

The apostle Paul showed pragmatism in his ministry to people of different cultures. “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews,” he writes, adding that he had a similar approach to those who did not follow the Jewish law. “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:20-22). In Paul's address to the Philosophy Council in Athens, we see a great example of paying attention to the culture. Attempting to explain the significance of Christ, Paul referred to a local shrine—evidently intended for idol-worship—and quoted Greek poets (Acts 17:16-34).

We are now in a cultural moment when many of our dominant social forces—especially media, education, and government—are prizing and protecting homosexual rights. Thirty years ago, this was not the case. As cultures go, this has been a rather sudden shift, and many churches have been taken by surprise.

At Hope, we don't want to embrace the changes simply because the culture tells us to. But we do want to pay attention to this cultural moment. What is the most God-honoring stand we can take?

It’s fascinating to note that the push for gay rights has adopted love as its main team. Sad to say, some churches have responded with hate. That’s not an option for us. Our challenge is this: How can we speak prophetically to this current culture about God's love—not jumping on anyone else's bandwagon, but proclaiming a theme that has been central to our own tradition for 2000 years?

**5. Through the Bible, God still speaks to our world.**

Increasingly, Americans see the Bible as a relic of the ancient world. How could it possibly guide us today? Some even consider this book dangerous, a supporter of violence, slavery, and discrimination against various people groups.

We think otherwise. Of course, the Bible describes violence and oppression enacted by fallible humans, but it also provides a better way. We believe God speaks truth to the world today through these Scriptures. That’s why Bible study is such an important part of our life together at Hope. As we understand these ancient writings better, we get to know God more. We’ve seen this happen again and again.

So this current conversation is not in any way a referendum on whether we believe the Bible or not. We do believe it. We study it and follow it. But how shall we understand it? This takes study, wisdom, and spiritual discernment. Many teachings of the Bible reflect God’s eternal design, but others deal with temporary matters. So, what is God saying to us? And how does he want us to communicate his message to our current culture?