

Unity in a Changing World

A Statement from the North Boulevard Elders and Preachers
February 1, 2009

In the last recorded prayer Jesus offered before His crucifixion, He spoke these words: *“I pray also for those who will believe in me ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”* (John 17:20, 23).¹

Ever since our beginning in 1947, the North Boulevard Church of Christ has sought to live up to Jesus’ prayer for unity among our members. We seek to *“make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:3). We want to obey the biblical exhortation *“that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought”* (1 Cor. 1:10).

God has largely granted North Boulevard a spirit of unity and peace throughout the past six decades. As the congregation grows larger, however, and as more people come to us from diverse backgrounds, we must work harder to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Today more than ever we find among our members different expectations, maturity levels, styles, customs, needs, and ideas about how to do the work of the church. The call to connect the message of Christ to so many different people challenges us every day at North Boulevard.

The Scriptures provide certain non-negotiable guidelines for how to live out the message of Christ, including how to do ministry, how to witness to the culture around us, how to live holy lives, and how to conduct our assemblies. Beyond these non-negotiable instructions, however, the Scriptures permit Christians and churches to exercise considerable freedom and to apply God’s Word in merciful ways. *“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”* (James 2:12-13).

How do we exercise the freedom Christ has given us in such a way that reaches the most people with the Good News while at the same time maintaining the unity of the body? Most churches wrestle with this tension. So do we at North Boulevard.

This document and the accompanying spoken lessons delivered at North Boulevard on February 15 and 22, 2009, represent the general position of the North Boulevard elders and preaching ministers regarding how to maintain the unity of the body while at the same time exercising the freedom Christ has given us in order to communicate the message of Christ to a changing world around us.

This document is not a creedal statement, nor is it intended to summarize every core belief at North Boulevard. There are many important matters of faith not treated in this document. Rather, this document is intended to explain to the congregation the spiritual criteria the leadership at North Boulevard uses to make decisions about how to do ministry, how to communicate the Good News, how to conduct our assemblies, and the like. Furthermore, this document is not a planning document intended to prepare the

¹All Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

church for any particular changes we might make as a church. Rather, the document is intended to describe our general approach to the work of the church—an approach that we hope honors God both by engaging our heritage and by speaking intelligibly in a changing world.

The document is also intended to encourage you, the members of North Boulevard, to join the leadership as we seek a balance between this continuity with the past and a sincere effort to communicate the Good News in the language of the present. We know that such an effort may pose a constant challenge, but with God’s help and with patience and forbearance on the part of the church, we believe taking the challenge head on will be well worth the effort in reaching the lost and helping the saved to mature.

The North Boulevard Elders, John Risse, and David Young

STATEMENT FROM THE NORTH BOULEVARD LEADERSHIP

1. We intend to be obedient to the Scriptures.

We Believe

All of North Boulevard's leaders want North Boulevard to be a church that obeys the clear teachings of the Bible and that seeks the same experience of Christ that the New Testament church sought. We believe what the Psalms declare:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11)

Our desire to be a biblical church is so strong that none of us, including any elder or preacher, would want to remain in the North Boulevard congregation if the North Boulevard church were knowingly and deliberately to abandon its biblical foundations. We believe that “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

When we approach the message of the Bible, we want to accept it “*not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe*” (1 Thess. 2:13).

We Acknowledge

We acknowledge that because of our sinfulness and imperfect human judgment, there are areas where we have not fully obeyed Scriptures or have not fully understood their implications. This will always be the case since we remain weak and our world constantly changes. As James reminds us, “*We all stumble in many ways*” (James 3:2). To say that we are a New Testament or Bible based church is not to claim perfection. It is to describe our commitment to take the Scriptures seriously and to submit to them as the Word of God as fully as we know how.

We Commit

As leaders at North Boulevard, we commit to the ongoing process of studying the Scriptures, seeking to submit to them, and measuring what we do as a congregation by the teachings of the Bible. We want to be like the people of the ancient city of Berea, who possessed noble character because “*they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day*” (Acts 17:11). The New Testament teaches us to test ourselves: “*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*” (2 Cor. 13:5). We pledge to the church that we will continually test ourselves using the truth of

Scripture. We also pledge that we will not deliberately lead the church away from the Word of God.

We Ask

We ask the congregation to make this same commitment to follow the Scriptures in life and in doctrine. We ask the congregation to study the Word of God, to integrate it into your hearts and minds, and to walk daily by its precepts. *“Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart”* (Psalm 119:2). We also ask the congregation to work lovingly and gently with the leadership as together we continue to seek to become everything the Scriptures teach us to be. We want the entire congregation to practice Paul’s admonition: *“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers”* (1 Timothy 4:16).

2. We want to extend freedom in matters of opinion.

We Believe

North Boulevard has a heritage of granting freedom in matters of opinions, styles, and methods. We believe that North Boulevard should continue to practice the freedom of Christ where no clear teaching of the New Testament is involved, so long as that freedom is guided by appropriate principles of love for others, godly wisdom, justice, and mercy. Freedom is a central theme in the New Covenant of Christ: *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”* (2 Cor. 3:17). *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”* (Gal. 5:1). *“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love”* (Gal. 5:13).

For this reason we believe that God wants us to extend freedom in areas of opinion and that God is dishonored when we create a legalistic or judgmental environment or an environment dominated by human traditions or frequent controversy. *“The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other”* (Gal. 5:14-15). *“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ”* (Col. 2:8). *“But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him”* (Titus 3:8-10).

We believe in practicing liberty in matters of opinion, and we seek to speak where the Bible speaks and remain silent where it is silent. We will try to honor the ancient maxim: *“In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all matters, love.”*

We Acknowledge

We acknowledge that this is not an easy commitment to keep. As humans, each of us has strong feelings for particular styles and traditions that we, for various reasons, don’t want to give up. As humans, we acknowledge that some of us simply do not like change but instead value stability. And as humans we confess our tendency to want to

have things our own way, even in church. Just as the early church faced tensions over various cultural and traditional issues, we know that we will face the same. We also acknowledge that it is not always easy to determine whether a particular issue is a clear biblical teaching or a mere private interpretation or stylistic preference. Knowing what is a matter of faith and what is a matter of opinion is difficult in some cases and may often require long periods of prayer, study, and conversation, but the result is worth the effort.

We also acknowledge that, though many things may be permissible, not all things are helpful (1 Cor. 6:12). There are things that the Scriptures allow Christians to do in theory that may be harmful or even wrong in our particular context.² For this reason, we acknowledge the need to balance Christian freedom with Christian responsibility, exercising our freedom in love (1 Cor. 16:14), for edifying others (1 Cor. 14:26), and for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). In matters of opinion or judgment, we acknowledge the need to ask the question, “Will this help us to do what God wants done?” We do not wish to create an environment where freedom is exercised without concern for how such freedom will impact others.

We Commit

As leaders at North Boulevard, we commit to the instructions of Ephesians 4:2: “*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*” We pledge to extend freedom in matters of opinion and to encourage people to flourish within the freedom that Christ offers, so long as this freedom is used responsibly and in loving ways that edify others and glorify God.

We Ask

We ask the congregation to be discerning between matters of faith and matters of opinion. We ask the congregation to be willing to accept that some of the things we have done in the past at North Boulevard are only traditions and that these traditions may not be necessary for following Jesus. Indeed, we ask the congregation to join us in recognizing that, from time to time, our traditions may eclipse the Word of God or even hinder God’s work. Jesus found the traditions of the Pharisees to do just that: “*Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition*” (Matt. 15:6). We do not want to be like the Pharisees. We ask the members of the body to appreciate that we have many different opinions and traditions and that we ought not to give our traditions the same weight as we do the Word of God. We ask every member to be open to consider when a tradition no longer serves its original purpose or when it is preferable to alter a tradition or adopt a new custom or method.

We further ask that every member exercise care not to judge other members merely on the basis of cultural, traditional, or stylistic norms. As Paul concludes “*So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment*

² Paul’s discourse on eating meats that had first been sacrificed in the name of idols demonstrates this truth. Paul admits that there is nothing wrong with such meat and that Christians may eat it with clear consciences. At the same time, however, Paul warns his Corinthian readers that they might inadvertently lead a former idolater back into paganism by exercising this freedom. He even expresses concern that one might end up mixing the table of Christ with the table of demons by eating such meat. Paul shows a careful balance between freedom in Christ and Christian responsibility—a balance we must practice today as well. See 1 Corinthians 8-10.

on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way” (Rom. 14:12-13). We remind ourselves that we will be judged with the same strictness we apply to others. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matt. 7:1-2). “Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11-12). And we remember that God takes our complaints about one another very seriously. “Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” (James 5:9).

We ask every member to practice the fruit of the Spirit in our dealings with one another. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23).*

3. We want to stand firm on the unchanging Gospel while constantly seeking culturally sensitive ways to communicate the Gospel to an ever-changing world.

We Believe

We the leaders of North Boulevard are committed to the timeless Gospel as revealed in the Scriptures. We believe that the Scriptures cannot be changed and that the Gospel must not be compromised. At the same time, we acknowledge that the way we communicate the Gospel, including the language we use, the styles and methods of communication, even the moods, methods, and technologies of our assemblies, must constantly be adapted to our ever-changing culture if we are to communicate the Gospel in a way to win people to Christ and help the saved continue to mature.³ We believe that speaking the Gospel in fresh, contemporary ways can help others, even our own members, appreciate its profound beauty and truth and respond in life-changing faith. We stand on Paul's ministry philosophy:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free

³We acknowledge that a primary purpose of our Sunday assemblies is to encourage and inspire those who are already Christians (this is implied in such texts as 1 Corinthians 14 and Hebrews 10:24-25). Nevertheless, even those who are already Christians need the message of Christ communicated to them in understandable, relevant, challenging, as well as appropriate ways. As Paul says regarding the Corinthian assemblies: “Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (1 Cor. 14:8-12). For this reason, we should continually test our assemblies to assure that they are speaking Christ's message in styles, methods, and languages that twenty-first century people, including Christians, can understand and appreciate.

from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

Just as Paul was willing to change his method in order to connect with his audience,⁴ in the same way we are willing to explore and try new traditions, new styles, and new methods of communicating the Gospel to an ever-changing culture around us if it helps bring people to Christ and mature them as disciples and so long as such changes do not dishonor God or prove to be ineffective in accomplishing His will.

This applies to our ministries, our leadership styles, our preaching and teaching styles, our singing, and the general feel of North Boulevard. We want to be like the men of Issachar, who “*understood the times and knew what Israel should do*” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Not a single leader at North Boulevard is willing to see the congregation or the Lord’s church at large suffer under ever-increasingly archaic, obscure, or irrelevant styles, methods, or traditions just because our fathers practiced those same styles, methods, or traditions.

We Acknowledge

We acknowledge that change is painful. We acknowledge that many of us wish we did not have to make any changes to communicate to people, even though we are committed to making the effort. We also acknowledge that we leaders often don’t know the best way to communicate the Gospel in an age that is becoming more vulgar and more hostile to Christ. Sometimes in the short run, it would be easier just to stay the same, even though it might slowly deplete our spiritual fervor. We also acknowledge that sometimes we have difficulty agreeing even with one another on what changes are worthwhile and how best to implement them. We acknowledge our need for grace and understanding from the body at North Boulevard as we try to live by Paul’s premise to “become all things to all men” in a church that has so many different tastes, traditions, and strongly held feelings about how the work and worship of the church ought to be conducted.

Indeed, a church family as diverse as North Boulevard—in education, economics, ethnicity, generations and backgrounds—is a seedbed for potential disagreement. But our diversity also provides us with a great opportunity to demonstrate the unity of Christ by forbearing with one another and by learning to love one another in spite of our differences. Our diversity actually enhances our ability to demonstrate the beauty of the body of Christ:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober

⁴For an example of how Paul actually practiced this philosophy, compare his sermon in Acts 14 with that of Acts 17. In Acts 14 he preaches to Jews in a synagogue in the city of Antioch of Pisidia. His lesson is derived from the Old Testament, he quotes many Scriptures, and he shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture. In Acts 17 Paul preaches on Mars Hill to pagan philosophers in a strikingly different style. Here, he quotes no Scripture, but instead quotes two pagan philosophers, whose quotations actually referenced the pagan god Zeus! He begins his message not with a reference to the Old Testament, but with a reference to a pagan shrine. And he says little about Jesus, but rather speaks of the universal God in a language these philosophers could appreciate. Paul’s skillful adaptation of his message to the people around him helps account for Paul’s wild successes as one of the first Christian missionaries.

judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Live in harmony with one another. (Rom. 12:3-5, 10, 16)

We Commit

As leaders of North Boulevard, we commit to exercising wisdom as we strike a constructive balance between maintaining our continuity with the past while at the same time trying to speak a language that communicates to a diverse world in the present. We remember the counsel of Solomon: “*By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established*” (Prov. 24:3). Styles, traditions, and methods will change with or without us. We commit to making changes wisely, carefully, and with the consensus of the leadership team. We commit to seeking to give the church adequate explanation for changes we make and to giving the church fair time to process the changes. We commit to listening to the church as it seeks to understand what the leadership at North Boulevard is doing. We will try to work slowly and wisely so as to avoid disorder, disunity, and needless confusion as we try to speak the Gospel in a world with multiple opinions and tastes.

We want our roles as leaders to reflect God’s purpose for leadership as described by Paul:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph. 4:11-16)

We Ask

We ask the congregation to join us in thinking as missionaries think—that is, trying to speak the Gospel in a language and a style that reaches as many as possible in our increasingly diverse community as well as in our world. We ask the church to be patient and grace-filled as we continue the ongoing work of seeking to communicate the Good News in styles, languages, and traditions that include as many people as possible. We ask the church to join us in seeking to enjoy here on earth the great diversity of people who will worship God in heaven in the hereafter. “*And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’*” (Rev. 5:9-10).