

The Single-Minded Confessional Character of Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia

I will make some comments about the character of our Basis of Union, which is authoritative for the Uniting Church and to which the ACC has pledged loyalty, via a recent experience of real Methodism.

Late last year, Dr. Kenneth Collins, a visiting Professor from Asbury Theological Seminary in the USA, rose to the pulpit in ChungDong First Methodist Church in Seoul and began his sermon with these words:

Thank you Dr. Nelson for that kind and gracious introduction. I bring you greetings from the church that's in Wilmore, Kentucky. I'm grateful to be among you in Seoul, Korea. I know that I have many brothers and sisters here because we worship the same Lord. I testify to Jesus Christ that he is the Son of God. That he rose from the dead. That death could not hold him. That he was raised by the spirit of holiness. And if that spirit of holiness that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is in us, then we too shall rise.

It's vivid, concrete language, isn't it? Perhaps this kind of language these days in a Pentecostal Church but is it ever heard in a Uniting Church? Actually, Collins called his sermon, "Warning: Sin is Dangerous to Your Health". He went on to expound, along those great Methodist lines, that the Holy Spirit is God present in the world and given to the church, that God graciously justifies and regenerates all who trust in Jesus Christ, and that God calls all believers into entire sanctification in a moment of full surrender. And we sang some Methodist hymns according to John Wesley's instructions at the front of his *Selected Hymns of 1761*: "*Sing lustily and with good courage... Sing modestly... Sing in time... Above all sing spiritually...*"

After the sermon, Dr. Collins lectured for an hour or two. He took us through John Wesley's life; how Wesley's father – an Anglican ordained – and his mother – an early strong Christian influence, formed his youthful experience, how Wesley determined early on at Oxford University to seek the full Christian life, how he later sought to preach to natives in Savannah but failed, how he then met prayerful Moravian Anabaptists and got an inkling, 15 years after ordination, of something more in the whole sanctified life Christ calls us to and how the Holy Spirit empowers us to have it, and how through tireless efforts Wesley established "bands" of believers who became, later, the congregations of the Methodist church. Kenneth Collins has published many books on John Wesley, including *The Scripture Way of Salvation* which is an easy introduction, and the recent *Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*, which is a complete and solid read. "It", Collins remarked, "Contains everything I know about Wesley." Collins lives and preaches like his subject.

Afterwards, the introducer of Collins, Dr. Nelson, (a visiting lecturer at the Asian Center for Theological Studies, a small seminary of 700 students in YangPyeong where I live), remarked that he felt he'd just attended a complete course of lectures. Collins' was a welcoming message

of salvation for all – Asbury, after whom Collins’ theological seminary was named, was “Arminian” and a famous early Methodist preacher in the USA. Collins’ was refreshing for us something that we’d known before and have forgotten. Collins was giving explanation to some parts of Methodism that have lingered in the church but have been snuffed down by modernism. Instead of flirting with ideas that we can be what we want to be Collins called us back to a gospel of Christ who comes to each of us as He who changes us with forgiveness and sanctifies us. Christian theology only ever happens in church foyers. John Calvin said much the same in the 16th Century Europe, like St. Athanasius long before him in the 4th Century Africa: The sole purpose of theology is to help Christians better understand the Christian faith so that they might come to deeper faith. The rest is irrelevant nonsense.

Now, if we look at Basis of Union to find this kind of real Methodism, not very much of it is there.

Wesley is named in paragraph 12 of the Basis of Union. Wesley’s 44 sermons of 1793 are lumped together with key documents for Presbyterians and Congregationalists: the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and the Savoy Declaration (1658). All together, they are documents, “she (the church) will listen to”.

“Listen to” sounds vague and unhelpful to: 1. identify differences of emphasis and manner, and theological points between these documents, and the traditions they represent, and 2. then try to reconcile and preserve them in a functioning Uniting Church. Listening is a dangerous method if is the kind of listening that was practiced by the Doctrine Commission four years ago when it approached migrant congregations’ view on the ordination of homosexuals and then totally ignored what it heard. Methodism could easily get lost among the clamor of other views put stridently.

However, the Basis of Union puts a codicil on the “listening” as to what the reader (ministers and instructors in the Uniting Church) will be listening for, “... so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.” This is Calvin’s and Athanasius’ idea of theology – it is always useful to the life of believers to whom it is addressed. Wesley would agree.

Even so, this codicil doesn’t necessarily help preserve Methodism in the Uniting Church. It looks like the particular and great Methodist heritage that Collins’ preached and lectured can be quashed out of the Basis of Union, and any semblance of it out of the life of worshippers in the Uniting Church. We need to back to the origins of the Basis of Union to see if this was an intended outcome.

And to do that, we need to go back to the ecclesiastical mood of the mid twentieth century. It was the high tide of Ecumenism. Thomas Oden, a leader of the confessional movements, explained that ecumenism peaked at the 1956 Evanston General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. (According to Oden, ecumenism was all downhill away from Christ after that.) However, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, the General Conference of the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Executive Council of the Congregational Union of Australia and New Zealand to appoint all together 25 men, all ordained except three, to a Joint Commission on Church Union. They were charged with finding a basis of union for the three churches. The joint committee met three times for periods of at least three days. As a result, the Joint Commission published a report in 1959, titled, *The Faith of the Church*. All members of the Commission declared that their discussions should uncover a basis for unity in a commonly held Christian Faith, and a common understanding of what pertains to the true structure of the Church's life.¹

Dr. J. Davis McCaughey was convener of the Presbyterian delegation to the Joint Commission on Church Union. One of his first acts as the first President of the Uniting Church in 1978 was to republish the 1959 report. His purpose was that, "It might still recall members of the church to a serious attention to Scripture, creed and confession."² This theme Davis struck in 1978 is apparent in the Basis of Union of 1971, and more so in 1959 report of the Joint Commission. It goes to the reason for the Uniting. McCaughey explained that a lot of the 1959 report got compressed into the Basis of Union, and some extra points added.

There is quite a lot about Methodism in this 1959 report. The report is divided into two sections. The first section tries to establish where a common Christian faith can be found: in Scripture, the early creeds, and the Reformation confessions. (The commissioners had misgivings about ignorance of other Christian traditions not their own.) The second section sets out the essential faith all can hold to.

Methodism is first considered in the first section on Reformation confession. Methodism is acknowledged as part of the evangelical emphasis on the believer's immediate awareness of the Saviour. It is called, "...an intensely practical, spiritual and ethical movement seeking the conversion of men and their growth in holiness."³ It is historically right but in the report it considered as one way of several to confession.

¹ *The Faith of the Church. The First Report of the Joint Commission of Church Union of the Congregational Union of Australia and New Zealand, The Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia.* The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand 1978, p. 9

² *ibid*, p. 8

³ *Ibid* p. 23

The report argues that it was the establishment of Methodism in the United States that led to the abbreviation of Anglicanism's 39 Articles by removing those that have an English reference,⁴ and other articles that had an Augustinian influence. The report also argues that, "Once separation became inevitable (from the C. of E. after John Wesley's death), the movement became a Church requiring a basis and a structured life.... (so that after some time) ...in principle, the Methodist Church has become, in its own distinctive way, a Confessional Church."⁵ The report quotes the 1932 Methodist Deed of Union to show this.

And then there is this acknowledgement of Methodism that also contains a negative;

"The singling out of *Notes on the New Testament* and of *Sermons* as 'confessional' documents may have its limitations from the point of view of those who stand in the Reformed tradition. Yet these have fundamentally the character of confession."⁶

That sentence by itself suggests a Reformed arrogance that words to a common confession would not be found in Methodism. And this impression is again gotten a few sentences on in the next paragraph. Methodism is referred to disparagingly in parenthesis as, "'ecclesia Anglicana's wayward daughter' or the faithful daughter of a wayward mother!"⁷ By itself, this sentence looks like the writers of the report agreed that it was not the Methodists who were relinquishing a manner of worship in entering Uniting, but Reformed who were relinquishing a (superior) manner of thinking and confessing. Stop! Dr. Harold Wood, the Methodist delegation's convener, wasn't agreeing to this at all. He and the seven other Methodist delegates were agreeing to value the Reformed manner of confession in Christ in confessional statements and to equally value the Methodist manner of confession in Christ in worship. The different manners might be brought together in an enriched Uniting Church. The 1959 report is basically trying to find a confession and method to which Presbyterian and Congregational Reformed and Wesleyan Methodist might all give assent. The point of agreement on which Uniting might happen would be confession.

There are some theological-confessional points about the ecclesiology of the Uniting. When commissioners agreed that Wesley's *Notes* and *Sermons* have the character of confession, they quoted Karl Barth to support the view that words of confession make no sense at all unless they are also words of prayerful worship.

The confession of the Church explains Scripture, it expounds and applies it. It is, therefore, a commentary. It is not enough for it to repeat biblical texts. It can point to them in order to make clear in what connection it wishes to explain Scripture. But at

⁴ Thomas Oden in *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyian Tradition* argues that Wesley himself altered the 39 Articles for use by Methodist bands prior to further altering by American Methodists

⁵ Ibid p. 25

⁶ *The Faith of the Church*. p. 23

⁷ Ibid p.24

bottom it must speak in its own words, in the words and therefore in the speech of its age.⁸

Confessional words, no matter how grand, make no sense unless the heart lifts them to the Lord. In Barth, through confession, the commissioners found Methodism and Reformed reconciled.

The next reference is about how a church teaches its members the Church's long-held confessions. Perhaps these commissioners half a century ago were speaking paternal attitudes of another age when they suggested that:

“When the Church is confessing her faith, she will not only put words into the mouths of the preacher. She will also put words into the mouths of worshippers. In company with S. Bernard, Martin Luther and countless others, Methodism has reminded the whole Church that faith comes not only by hearing but by singing.”⁹

The first point is more Reformed. It's Calvin's way of thinking that the Church put words in the mouths of preachers and worshippers. The Church itself represents Christ on earth. Christ is confessed in the words of the Church. The report acknowledges this later, “Their assurance that there resides in the Church a power of teaching and setting forth the faith. Such power is held by the Church *in via*, which issues from the Word of God and will achieve its final confessing in glory”¹⁰

The second point Methodists readily acknowledge. Methodism practices confessional hymn singing. It is what John Wesley wrote in his 1761 instructions about singing every word unchanged and spiritually. “...so that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.”¹¹ If this kind of singing is confession, then confession takes place in the moment of worship in the believer's heart.

This point is also expressed neatly in the commissioners report.

When God deals with a man He acts in such a way as to demand from him the decisive response of faith. This is personal trust in His Son and not only assent to or acquiescence in propositional statements however venerable or orthodox. The proper use of Creeds and Confessions in the Church means that from generation to generation men of faith

⁸ Ibid p.23 quoted from, Barth, Karl *Church Dogmatics* 1.2. 618,621

⁹ Ibid p.23-24

¹⁰ Ibid p.38

¹¹ Quoted in preface of *United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville, Tennessee, 2006

speaking to each other. This underlies Wesley's own constant appeal to the primitive church.¹²

The Church's confession is unalterable, but the report acknowledges that those who have confessed have done so as God called them: as faith witness in their age. In humility, the commissioners acknowledged, "We none of us come into union expressing the Church's Faith in its fullness, but confessing to God and one another the partial character and vision, the confusion of our preaching, the poverty of our worship, the weakness of our fellowship."¹³ In saying this, the commissioners suggest that the differing denominations may see in each other Christ truly confessed. The commissioners were really saying the Methodists are really doing confession what we are really trying to say in confession!

The commissioner's report agreed that confession does not stop with confession, but draws believers to bear witness to their faith in the world.

The commissioner's report emphasizes that the faith we confess is given to the Church, it comes through Scripture and is made known to the believer's heart by the Holy Spirit. The Commissioners found six key points of confession that all agreed, each with supporting affirmations.

So that, for example, where a Methodist in worship might confess concretely with Kenneth Collins that, "*Jesus Christ that he is the Son of God. That he rose from the dead. That death could not hold him. That he was raised by the spirit of holiness. And if that spirit of holiness that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is in us, then we too shall rise.*" The commissioners expressed this eschatological truth in a less accessible, more conceptual religious language that almost takes the point out of the Collins' confession, but makes our confession less offensive to a disbelieving world: "We confess that, saved by the redemptive acts of God in history, and daily renewed by His ever-present power, we look forward in hope to the final consummation, when Jesus will come as judge, and the faithful will joyfully receive the promised eternal inheritance and God will be all in all."¹⁴

In short, Methodism is the Uniting Church's confession of the heart, and Reformed our mind's confession.

That confession is expression in many words in the 1959 report, and one paragraph, 3, in the Basis of Union. In his commentary on it, Davis McCaughey calls it, "...the most fundamental paragraph in the Basis of Union."¹⁵

¹² Ibid p. 24

¹³ Ibid p 31

¹⁴ Ibid p. 42

¹⁵ McCaughey, J. Davis, *A Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* Uniting Church Press, 1980. P. 19

Some really difficult matters of theological understanding that have kept Churches in separate fellowships are made secondary to confessing Christ.

For example, Calvin's distinction between the visible and invisible Church is put together with the idea of election and a possible Wesleyan salvation for all in the same sentences;

We would demonstrate our justification by faith through seeking further to demonstrate the Church's unity. It is questionable whether a divided Church can preach a doctrine of justification by faith. As long as a man may choose between one of the several churches, there is hidden from his the essential words, "you have not chosen me but I have chosen you."¹⁶

Here, the commissioners are taking a short-cut to Uniting by focusing on a common confession and leaving the hard work (and painful) of further reconciling differing ecclesiologies to a later generation. In other words, the writers of the Basis of Union laid a confessional foundation for the Uniting Church, but they did not lay a theological foundation of what would be the new church. The discussion of the theology of church centers on circumstantial observations about the place of the church in the world, and how a church united could better deal with it. The 1959 paper declares;

*The theology of the Church must once again be sharpened by its conversation with the World. Too much traditional theology has removed God's controversy with His people and has put in its place the controversy of the people amongst themselves.*¹⁷

And:

*The Church in Australia lies sorely divided, bearing witness to (albeit falteringly) to traditions formulated in other lands for other days. She hears (albeit imperfectly) the call to a great mission in a land of rapid development and growth, and to the surrounding nations in the Pacific and Asia...*¹⁸

It's a huge omission. The writers of the Basis of Union were reversing the reformed theology of church, and the Methodist theology church, which encouraged new visible churches to arise so as to more clearly confess the truth of the one invisible church of Christ. And the Basis does not provide a theological foundation for reversing the reformed ecclesiology. It would have been a new and worthwhile contribution to theology if the writers of the Basis had tackled ecclesiology.

As it is, while the writers of the 1959 paper had faith to seize the moment and join to Uniting, they seemed to have little confidence in themselves to write the theology necessary for it. So at one point there is the remark,

¹⁶ The Faith of the Church p.43

¹⁷ Ibid p. 29

¹⁸ Ibid p. 30

*That we do not know if we have anything to say which is fresh and different from what has been said. Our concern, however, is not lest we should disturb the unity of faith, but that we should demonstrate it.*¹⁹

Several times the writers suggest that, just like the witness of past churches, their own act in faith is less than complete. To go forth confidently but inadequately, I suppose, is meant to point more concertedly to Christ who saves us and whose church we are saved in. But, I can't imagine Luther in 1517 nailing his theses to the Wittenburg church door with the suggestion that maybe his opposition was expressed inadequately. Nor can I imagine St. Athanasius saying to his Arian enemies, "Maybe I'm not saying it exactly, perfectly."

At any rate, this self-effacing note is not present in the 1971 Basis of Union. Something else fills the vacuum of theological depth. There is instead a sharper 1960's shift to theological liberalism characterized by an openness to worldly ideas. The method is explained in paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union. Uniting scholars are meant to work in concert with scholars in other churches and then sieve worldly thoughts contained in the "literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterized recent centuries" and so "better understand her own nature and mission." What was "scripture and confession (and strengthen our lack of faith)" in 1959, became "scripture, confession and modern ideas (and we can be a strong church in Australia and in Asia and the Pacific)" in 1971. I suppose the writers of the Basis had in mind persons such as Paul Tillich, whose lectures on "*The Courage to Be*", had so enlivened some Christians to the power of new ideas linked to Christian confession. Same with Rudolf Bultmann; same result. Their fizz is long gone. The world has changed. God is out, altogether. So is confession.

In other words, the Basis of Union does not provide any hint of a suggestion of how theological confession deals with worldly ideas.

It wasn't like that in the former Methodist church whose ministers annually and openly pledged to preach Christ following Wesley's 44 sermons as a confessional document. And it wasn't like that in the Presbyterian church whose ministers, on appointment to new a congregation, openly confessed their faith and to preach it according to the Westminster Confession. Mind you, confessing Christ is such a nice thing to do, ministers would want to do it every week, one way or another, I would have thought.

The Uniting Church should be strong. But we aren't. We are weak. We have forgotten to confess. The rot started early. Even as Davis' commentary went to press, Warren Bartlett, and Davis' own Presbytery, Yarra Valley in Melbourne, were toying with ordaining a woman practicing homosexual acts – at a time when such behavior was still a criminal offense among men! You can see how confessing Christ is central to unity. Not confessing Christ splits the

¹⁹ Ibid p. 30

church: that is the unfortunate outcome of those in God's Church who practice homosexual acts.

These days matters are far worse. Confession is nowhere: not in the public announcements of Uniting Church leaders, found on youtube.com for instance, and not in the common ideas the Uniting Church uses about itself: *identity, who we are, moving out of ourselves* etc. The Uniting Church even entertains among its ordained ministers some who flagrantly deny Christ. The Uniting Church does not provide the words of confession to congregations. It does not discipline its ministers. Congregations are shrinking to non-viability. We are entering an age of the demise of the mainline church and a rise of independent churches that are bringing God's saving confession to people who need it. In an age of instant global internet communication, congregationalism is making a come back. Perhaps the Uniting Church can do the right thing and lease its un(der)used church properties at a peppercorn rent to new local independent churches who do confess Christ. In that way, the Uniting Church will be true to the confessional basis on which it is built. The locals built those churches anyway. Praise God. **CONFESSION IS UNITING**

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