

ACC NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2018
WESLEY MISSION, SYDNEY
SCHOOL OF FAITH KEYNOTE ADDRESS
TUESDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2018
“FACING THE CHALLENGES OF CONFESSING THE FAITH WITHIN THE
UNITY OF THE ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH”
JAMES HAIRE

If we are to face the issues of the challenges of confessing the faith within the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, we need to begin by going back to basics.

How are we to confess the faith? We are to do so in both word and action. In the words used to form the ecumenical movement, we are to do so both by faith and order and by life and work. To do that we need something even more fundamental. We are to hear the very voice of God, for us Christians revealed in Jesus Christ. In his address to the inter-faith session of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre in 2006, Rowan Williams insisted that, in theological terms, it was not precise to speak of Christianity as if it were some sort of ideology competing with other ideologies in the marketplace of ideas. Rather, Christians are the ones who bear the mark of Christ upon themselves, symbolically on their foreheads, as it were. In Williams' words, “[w]e carry the name of Christ. We are the people who are known for their loyalty to, their affiliation with, the historical person who was given the title of ‘anointed monarch’ by his followers – Jesus, the Jew of Nazareth”¹. How do we listen to the voice of God? It is not our task primarily to invoke God for our particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to listen as that divine voice comes to us.

Therefore, in looking at how we confess the faith in the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church in Australia today, let us take up this task theologically, as we must as Christians. Let us first go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church universal. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world.

¹ Rowan Williams, “Christian Identity and Religious Plurality”, *Current Dialogue* 47 (2006), 6-10.

Equally, God's inexplicable will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to the Triune God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through him come close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly body of his Son, who is its heavenly head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the unity, harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace and love of Jesus Christ, as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation and salvation of humanity, then its life of unity is that which it receives from him, who is its life. The church's very existence will be shaped by the manner in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

Thus we are called to express our theology in ways that are relevant to our society and to our common calling. That will not simply be done in terms of words or semantics (faith and order), but also in the ways in which we live our lives individually and in community (life and work). Moreover, this will refer to individual faith and spirituality, communal faith and spirituality, individual Christian obedience and communal Christian action in the world. It will also be at the heart of Christian mission, our being taken up into the mission of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit into the whole world.

So, again, how are Christians, and the Christian community, that is, the church universal, to listen to the voice of God?² It is not their task as Christians primarily to invoke God for their particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to listen as that divine voice comes to them. Therefore, they need to take up this task of listening theologically, while also being very conscious of the need to discriminate between the voice of God on the one hand and their cultural and psychological impulses on the other. Thus the church has stressed the varying roles of scripture, tradition, experience of the Holy Spirit, and deliberations and decisions of assemblies, synods, presbyteries and congregations as ways in which the voice of God can be heard and confirmed. This is to guard against the danger of individual or small group projection, believing that they alone are able to express the will of God. It is intended to protect the church from self-delusion, which is most likely to occur at a time of individual or communal anxiety. Since the earliest days of the church sanctified self-delusion, or the symbiosis of mutually-attracting and mutually-attractive neuroses, have always been the close, and dangerous, companions of the church. This is seen in the varied forms of Gnosticism. The problem with Gnosticism is not that it is far from Christianity, but that it is close, and at times appears to be Christianity's friend. There is also always a fine line between legitimate, and indeed necessary, contextual theology, on the one hand, and syncretism, on the other. For the church contextual theology is essential for evangelism and apologetics, but the danger of the church simply following the spirit of the age is always present.

In addition, one of the historical cultural traits of much of western cultures has been that of progress. Here the Christian theological distinction between the primary and the secondary is crucial. Here the scriptural witness comes to our aid. In general for Christianity the issues of the primary and the secondary are central to Christian self-understanding. The primary both in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament for Christians) and in the New Testament is the worship and service of God, known to us in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The secondary are all those arts and skills necessary for human life, both individual and communal, that is, the arts and skills of the doctor, the businessperson, the manager, the accountant, the engineer, the builder, the statesman, the artist, and so on. In and of themselves, these arts and skills are important, indeed essential, for human life, both individual and communal.

² Some of the material in the following paragraphs is taken from my Preface to John Michael Own, *Property and Progress for a Pilgrim People*. Reservoir, Victoria: Morning Star Publishing, 2017, 9-13, and used with permission.

However, these secondary abilities can never become primary in human life. Any attempt to make them so is idolatrous. This essential distinction underlies the Christian theological tradition, and needs to be constantly borne in mind. There may be frequent and sustained progress in the arts and skills of the doctor, the businessperson, the manager, the accountant, and so on. However, progress is an inappropriate category when dealing historically with the worship and service of God. For the ultimately inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world by itself.

While I was completing my PhD dissertation, I worked in the Selly Oak Colleges Library in England at the carrel next to that of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who at the time was writing his commentary on the Gospel according to John, *The Light Has Come*. Occasionally during breaks we would discuss our work. Bishop Newbigin had returned to the United Kingdom after many years overseas, particularly in India, and I was back in Britain on study leave from Indonesia. Newbigin was overwhelmed at the 'pagan Britain' to which he had returned, and at the need to begin a new evangelisation of the country. He went on to be very influential in this area of thought. We both felt that what made it so much easier to work as a missionary either in India or in Indonesia was that one could clearly see in both places where the lines of demarcation between the gospel and the varied cultures lay. Of course, it was not always easy. One also had the added challenge of trying to see where a legitimate contextualisation of the gospel could take place, on the one hand, and where an inappropriate syncretism had occurred, on the other. There would always be debate as to an appropriate contextualisation. However, for our experiences, both in India and in Indonesia, the issue between gospel and culture was relatively manageable. However, the issue in the United Kingdom, and in the western world in general, was so much more difficult. During our discussions, Newbigin's insights in this area profoundly impacted me. Christianity in the west had so absorbed western culture, including the western understandings of the spirit of the age, that it was very hard to see where the gospel actually was. Even the churches, with their long history in the British Isles, expressed a Christianity which at times seemed so dependent on the varied British cultural norms that it now seemed almost alien to the gospel. These insights were given sharper focus for us by the thinking of Asian and African contextual theologians, led by John Mbiti, who not only saw the need for contextual expressions of theology in their own societies, but who even more could see the blindness in western Christianity as it seemed to be incapable of wrestling with appropriate and inappropriate forms of contextualisation.

The issue then arises as to where the gospel begins and ends in relation to cultures, especially western cultures, although this issue is well-known and well-appreciated, for example, in the varied Pacific cultures. In these situations Christianity needs to engage in what recent Indonesian theologians have termed a 'double-wrestle' between gospel and culture, in order to define Christian existence in contemporary society.

In western Christianity, this is apparent especially when three factors occur. First, when executive bodies are created out of councils (and even more so out of existing executives of councils) and assume to themselves responsibilities of a permanent nature, then the conciliar nature of the responsibility of councils can be imperilled. Second, when councils (presbyteries and synods) are merged, it is almost impossible for the larger of the councils not simply in effect to take over the responsibilities of both. Third, when conciliar responsibilities are taken over by executive officers, however well-meaning, then again the conciliar responsibility of councils can be diminished. Moreover, the thrust towards centralisation is stimulated by western cultural anxiety that conciliar responsibility appears at times to be disorderly and uncontrollable.

Here is a real issue of theological existence today. Here recent decision-making in the Uniting Church in Australia in relation to same-gender relationships and marriage seems to me to raise a number of important questions.

First, it seems to me that the recent decisions made by the Assembly in regards to these matters present a confidence that certainly was not apparent in the traditions of Reformed Christianity, particularly in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. The decisions made appear to present a confidence that Reformed Christians would have found unusual. What do I mean by this? The 2018 Assembly appeared to operate in private for much of its discussion on same-gender relationships and marriage. Thus the Assembly appeared to rely heavily on the action of the Holy Spirit within its discussions, and on Christian fellowship. There appears to have been little interaction with the rest of the church catholic, for example in terms of guidance and opinions given by ecumenical guests, both national and international. This is an unusual way for a church to operate, especially for a church committed to ecumenical fellowship. Moreover, in the history of Reformed Christianity there has always been an inclination towards being tentative as to knowing the will of God in any particular matter. Clearly this inclination to being tentative was influenced by fear of apparent certainties from the medieval church.

The Reformed tradition always sought “light from any quarter” to test its assumptions. Thus, the certainty expressed in the resolutions on same-gender marriage at the 2018 Assembly seem strange.

Second, an underlying understanding of the Assembly decisions, as presented in the reports from the Assembly after it was held, appears to give the impression that the Assembly was attempting to satisfy the human understandings of marriage. It thus appears that an aim of the Assembly in this matter was to attempt to honour the varied human understandings of marriage perceived within the membership of the Uniting Church in Australia. That aim may be totally legitimate for a parliament in a liberal democracy, as, for example, for the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, to seek to do. However, such a methodology would seem to me to be questionable within the church. This is so for a number of reasons. The primary purpose of an Assembly, in whatever it discusses, is to seek to fulfil the will of God, as far as it is able to understand the will of God. For that it will always need to be very humble, as the possibility of a human institution misunderstanding the will of God can be very high. It will also need, for the same reason, to be very cautious. So it will need humility and caution. Moreover, it would seem to me that any church, particularly one formally committed to the ecumenical movement, would need constantly to check with other parts of the church catholic that it is going in the correct direction, as it may be mistaken, and the perception of other parts of the church catholic may be the clearest and most helpful way to check on the wisdom of any significant proposals.

Third, we need to look at the hermeneutics of the *Basis of Union*, that is, at how we are to use and interpret the *Basis*. On this the issue of the nature of the authority of scripture also depends. During the same-gender marriage discussions, the view has been presented that we are not able to look at what appears to be the plain meaning of the text of the *Basis of Union*. Now it is true that there has been an enormous discourse, with attendant literature, on hermeneutics in the last forty years since the Uniting Church came into being in 1977, and, before that, since the time when the final text of the *Basis of Union* prior to the votes was created. This discourse has included many perspectives, among them a plethora of post-modern approaches. A number of perspectives may even then have been in the minds of some who drafted the *Basis of Union*, and certainly may have been, or are, in the minds of those who have sought to understand the *Basis* since then. However, the question must arise as to whether those individuals or councils who voted for church union had anything but the relatively plain meaning of the text in their minds when they voted.

For example, when they read in Paragraph 5 that the church's 'faith and obedience' were to be 'regulated' by the books of the Old and New Testaments, did they assume, or did they not assume, that those words were to be understood by the lens of Paragraph 3? Was that clearly explained to every voting individual and every voting council in the three uniting churches? Or was that not the case? Thus, does the question need to be raised: is there only a small and elite group of people in the Uniting Church who are really able to understand and interpret the *Basis of Union*? And are the rest of us really dependent upon them and their insights? This is of great importance for this issue, as on it depends the matter of how we are to understand and use scripture, and therefore the matter on where authority lies for Christian faith and life. This also relates to the counter-cultural nature of much in the New Testament. In a significant part of the Greek world of the first century AD homosexuality, in outlook and in practice, was honoured and was at times seen as culturally superior. Nevertheless, from the beginning, Christianity, following Jewish traditions, stood out against such an outlook and such practice. Thus the resolution of the hermeneutical questions raised above is of considerable significance to the Uniting Church.

Fourth, the issue of our ecumenical relations is also of importance. The vast majority of world Christianity has not gone along with same-gender marriage within the Christian church. It is true that a number of Protestant (and Anglican) churches in Europe and North America have agreed to same-gender marriage. However, the only churches in our region which have gone along this way are the Methodist Church in New Zealand and the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia and New Zealand, in addition, I presume, to the Metropolitan Church in Australia and New Zealand. A charism to re-unite the churches, a central charism of the Uniting Church at its formation, of itself clearly means a degree of caution and of inbuilt conservatism (with a small "c"). This appears to have been demonstrated in the Uniting Church's ecumenical decision to drop the "*filioque*" from the Nicene Creed at the 1994 Assembly, to bring closer our relations with the Orthodox Churches. This caution and conservatism now seems less apparent.

Fifth, it is necessary to deal with the issue of what constitutes "matters of vital importance to the life of the Church" (*Basis of Union*, Paragraph 15 (c)) or "a matter vital to the life of the Church" (Constitution, Clause 39 (b) (i)). It may well be that the institution of Christian marriage was not formalised in the early church. It may well be that teachings on Christian marriage have evolved in historically relatively recent times. Nevertheless, Christian marriage is a very significant institution in contemporary Christianity worldwide.

In western societies it perhaps holds a less significant position in western cultures than it did, for example, thirty years ago. However, in worldwide Christianity Christian marriage is as influential as ever. As an institution, and particularly as a very public institution, in contemporary Christianity it is therefore significant. Behind it, and undergirding it, lie many central Christian theological beliefs, including, among others, the doctrine of revelation, including scripture, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, including human creation, and the doctrine of reconciliation. Whatever may be said, these central theological concerns lie behind the presenting issue of same-gender marriage. For that reason they need careful consideration by the whole church, in all its councils. A similar theological concern arose in Germany behind the need to produce the Barmen Declaration in 1934. Its presenting concern was primarily the matter of the relationship between church and state. This issue is not directly dealt with in either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 AD and 381 AD. However, the theological issues behind it were central to Christian existence, including again the doctrine of revelation, the doctrine of God and the doctrine of reconciliation. Indeed, after the Second World War, no-one internationally would have taken German Christianity, especially German Protestantism, seriously if it had not been for the Barmen Declaration and the German Confessing Church.

Against such a background as these points raise, it seems to me that the most appropriate action is to seek for the invocation of Clause 39 (b) (i) of the Uniting Church in Australia Constitution. Such an invocation should be seen as a sincere service to the Uniting Church in Australia, and not in any negative way. If as a church the Uniting Church is *reformata et semper reformanda* ("reformed and always in need of being reformed"), the whole Church should rejoice at this opportunity to reconsider what the Assembly has recently decided. The church's long, historically hard-fought, traditions call some members at times to be, not deserters, but dissenters. The Uniting Church Assembly should rejoice in this opportunity to think again.

Rev. Professor Emeritus James Haire AC is Professor Emeritus at Charles Sturt University, a past Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Culture and Christianity and was the Ninth President of the Uniting Church (2000-2003).