

# The ACC's

## theological declaration and commentary/study guide

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The ACC's theological declaration (2008) and its commentary (2009) were prompted by what we see as a profound crisis of culture. Within this culture secularism seeks to explain human life with little or no reference to the creator and relativism holds that life is neutral and no guiding truth is needed. Much of the western protestant church has also adopted this culture where impartiality and inclusivity assume priority over truth and there is a deep cynicism of exclusive claims such as 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. The folly of secularism and relativism is their failure to see that in denouncing what they describe as imposing worldviews their own claims are an imposition, a worldview. The folly lies in the failure to believe that freedom may not be separated from truth. 'The truth shall make you free'. The truth is *we have a story*, or rather *we live in a story*. We live in God's narrative: the compelling and liberating story of the Trinitarian God who invites us into personal relationship, with God and with each other. This story of which we are a part is a story of hope; not wishful thinking or cheerful optimism, but a hope on which our lives depend. Centred on Jesus Christ, drawn to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives become more fully human. This is no narrow fundamentalism or privatised spirituality for 'those who go in for that sort of thing'; it is indeed the world's hope. 'For our sake and for our salvation he came down from heaven.'

The theological declaration and commentary emphasise therefore that Christian truth claims are unequivocally connected to public life. When society is shaped in a godless image greed and exploitation result and human persons suffer. When the only 'rights' are those of the autonomous individual, the whole community suffers. As one example, we now have in Victoria, the most liberal abortion laws in the country and laws prohibiting euthanasia are constantly under threat. These matters are not the preserve of individuals and their rights; when any human life at any stage is violated we all suffer. The ACC's social responsibility commission has produced an excellent paper on abortion, stating unequivocally that our origin and our destiny are in God, and that respect for all human persons applies from the moment of conception. These issues are more fully discussed in Sections 1 and 5 of the commentary.

The theological declaration poses the challenge: is the UCA living by the exclusive claims of the gospel or is the church capitulating to the culture? Jenson puts it this way. 'It is yet another truth that the contemporary Western church is too subservient to culture to speak in public'. Another writer describes this watering down of Christianity as 'Christianity Lite' (Eberstadt, 2010). This 'lite' Christianity lives by the belief that in relaxing standards of sexual morality, by refusing to make any truth claim which might cause offence, that more people will be drawn to the church. This is, in fact, a failed experiment for it is a hope misdirected. 'Christianity Lite' does not provide the nourishment we need for our bodily lives to flourish and therefore leaves us without hope.

On the question of relativism, where your truth is as good as mine and I must on no account be seen to proclaim one exclusive truth, Jenson has another word about what he sees in much of the church's worship. 'When the church invokes the Lord, and then for good measure invokes, say, a Hawaiian water god. . . it does not truly invoke the Lord at all and indeed is perhaps no longer the church (Jenson, 2005, p.61). You will find many references to worship throughout these documents for as one commentator says, 'Sit in the pews of any church on any Sunday and you will quickly see which god is being worshipped.'

Having established, together with other confessing movements around the world, that the church is in a crisis of faith, the declaration takes the opportunity to 'recall the goodness and strength of the gospel' and to recover the joy and freedom of that gospel, which is the world's hope.

### **Purpose and context**

The declaration is not to be seen as the ACC's reformulation of doctrine; neither is it intended to stand alone; nor is it a new confession per se. It is written in the context of the world wide confessing movement in responding to what it sees as a church increasingly lacking in confessional discipline and a world which cannot hope to answer that confusion. The declaration is written in faithful adherence to the Basis of Union, and is intended not to replace but to complement the other foundational documents of the ACC.

Our intention is that these documents should act as a springboard for further discussion aimed at assisting ACC members and the wider church to articulate the faith of the church proclaimed in Scripture and testified in the church's tradition through the ages. We therefore hope that the theological declaration will provide a basis for preaching and teaching; refuting some of the contemporary 'doctrines' arising within the culture of the day which lead to the worship of alien gods. This so-called 'new gospel' suggests that the historic creeds of the church are no longer relevant; we no longer need the faith of the church because we can have faith in ourselves. We want this declaration to be seen as a declaration of hope-not in humanity itself-but in Jesus Christ, the one who alone is our hope in life and in death.

We believe that in making a declaration we also make decisions: to say 'yes' to one statement involves saying 'no' to another. That is, in saying 'yes' to the apostolic witness we say 'no' to any other prevailing ideology. As Scott Stephens recently put it in paraphrasing Karl Barth: This is to 'declare the unqualified "Yes!" of God's reconciliation in Christ to all people, and God's unrelenting "No!" to every idolatrous political, cultural and religious fad' (Stephens, 2010a). In another article Stephens says that the UCA in failing to uphold the Basis of Union, and like so much liberal Protestantism throughout the world, has 'gone whoring after the strange gods of impotent theology, liturgical gimmickry, inert bureaucracy and social respectability. . . In short it has become the lowest possible denomination' ('The lowest common denomination: a lament' (Stephens, 2010b).

Let us now turn to the commentary on the declaration in more detail.

## For whom is it written?

The declaration is written for the members of the ACC and the wider UCA membership. It is also written for those in the wider community who wish to explore the contrast between the prevailing ideologies of our culture and the biblical and apostolic tradition. However, as emphasised, it is not intended to stand alone, nor to be read alone; it lends itself better to group discussion. It supports the literature of other confessing movements around the world, and is also intended for our ecumenical partners. This latter point is especially important. In contradiction to statements by UCA leaders that our ecumenical partnerships are not in jeopardy, some of you may already be aware that the Lutheran Church has now placed constraints on joint ministry arrangements; namely, that a minister in a same-gender relationship will not be acceptable in any joint UCA/Lutheran ministry. It is this issue which has also halted the UCA's dialogue with the Orthodox. We hope the declaration will assist in identifying and combating any teaching which threaten the church's unity.

## Theological language

Here we emphasise that theological language is nothing more or less than talk about God-who God is and what God has done for us. In our daily lives we attempt to show how we are reconciled to Christ through the renewal of our minds. *'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus'* (Phil 2:5). The emphasis here is to see theological language as giving expression to our life in Christ which involves our intellect; theological language is expressed daily through reconciled lives in body, mind, spirit.

Theological language is not some lofty specialist language reserved for academics; it is communicated through the thoughts and words and deeds of faithful Christians living in obedience to the one who reconciles our language by reconciling our whole lives. In other words, we are dependent on God who transcends our thoughts and words to reveal his Word to us in Jesus Christ. As Walter Abetz says in a recent article 'Unless Christians acknowledge God as transcendent and personal, their religious language will ever only be words pointing to words, instead of to the living God' (Abetz, 2010, p.26).

We are grateful to Warren Clarnette for taking his red editorial pen to both documents, to ensure the language is as plain as possible. Where the language requires further elucidation we encourage a communal approach which draws on various individuals' wisdom and understanding and interpretation for the benefit of the whole. That is why we recommend the declaration and commentary for discussion in small groups.

## Preamble

Reiterating the preamble to the declaration, the study guide reminds us that our constant desire is for the reform, renewal and reconciliation of the whole church under the Word of God. We acknowledge that each of us also stands constantly in need of renewal and reconciliation.

*The questions for discussion* (which appear at the end of each section) ask people in the study group to identify where a crisis of faith is evident, providing some examples for discussion. We also ask you to consider whether the statements and the commentary will in fact assist the church towards 'a vital recovery of orthodox ecumenical teaching'. If it fails to do this you should let us know.

*The suggestions for further reading* are by no means exhaustive, but are offered as a guide to study.

## **Section 1. The Gospel as public truth.**

Its priority placement as No 1 emphasises the fact that **J** as a sign of hope for all humanity. As Gregory of Nazianzus stated 'what Christ has not assumed he has not redeemed'. This section is also given priority to remind us that, contrary to a seductive, privatised spirituality increasingly embraced in western culture, we are called to affirm as **public truth** God's presence in the world. This is to counter the threatening ideology that separates religion from public life and which calls into question, for example, the place of religious symbols in the church's hospitals and education institutions. It is also to counter the view, 'The gospel is for my own personal salvation; it is about my individual life with my God and is therefore nobody else's business.' We have tried to spell this out further in a number of 'therefore we reject' statements, particularly in the second last dot point about our creation as man and woman in the image of God and the witness to human sexuality in the sacredness of marriage. Again, this is to emphasise that Christianity is no private religion disengaged from the world; what we say about Christian marriage is that it is good for the whole of society. What we say about other deeply divisive social issues is central to obedient discipleship. The Cross of Christ is not on the periphery of personal existence; it stands at the centre of the world's political, public life. The emphasis here is on our involvement in social issues of the day. This is where Christians are called to stand: in the midst of public discussion about war and peace, the plight of refugees, euthanasia, abortion, global warming, and other significant issues.

*The questions for discussion* at the end of this section invite people to study each statement in turn to sharpen those things we affirm and correlatively those things we must reject. We invite discussion on additional points which might have been included.

*The further reading* includes Newbigin and Bonhoeffer, but as stated in the structure of the commentary, these are only suggested readings. Rather than recommending whole books, in most instances we've suggested selected passages for easier access for group discussion, and included some relevant websites.

## **Section 2. 'The One whom we confess'.**

This section sets the context and the ordering for the remaining sections. It is Christ alone who is our justification; it is in Christ alone that history is transformed. How do we bear witness or confess to this truth? In quoting para 3 from the Basis of Union we here emphasise the need for liturgical renewal in our churches, particularly where the characteristic authoritative elements in Christian worship are replaced by so-called 'alternative worship' or as one commentator puts it 'rubric gives way to Rafferty's rules'. We see evidence of this where baptism is literally watered down; where it is no longer the mark of entry into the body of Christ. We see it where the Lord's Supper or Eucharist is regarded as an 'optional extra' or a mere sharing of a meal; where the historic creeds are replaced by 'creeds for our day'; where prayer is not patterned on the Lord's prayer, becoming rather an outpouring of subjective emotions. We see 'other gods' being worshipped, particularly where it is forbidden to use the text 'No one comes to the Father but by me' for its exclusivity; thus resorting to the god of relativism described earlier.

We can learn much about the centrality of worship from our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters who insist on the Latin *axiom lex orandi, lex credendi* or 'as we worship, so shall we believe'. In the Basis of Union we see the prominence of language of prayer and praise as well as confession. *The Basis of Union* is a 'liturgical document, shaped by the logic of Christian worship ("the rhythm of the gospel," as McCaughey called it in his Commentary).

The final sentence 'therefore we reject' is a direct response to movements which subordinate Christ to one sage among others in human history rather than declaring he is the one and only saviour of the world.

*The questions for discussion* invite people to consider whether our patterns of worship reflect the historic faith of the church, and to discuss how we confess anew the centrality of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In the UCA's call to embrace 'diversity' above all else how can the uniqueness of the confession 'Jesus Christ is Lord' be upheld?

*For further reading* includes, among others, reference to four specific pages of Davis McCaughey's *Commentary on the Basis of Union*.

### **Section 3. The confession of the church: the Trinitarian faith.**

This is the central and hence largest section of the declaration and explores the way confession of Trinitarian faith cannot be divorced from confession of sin. Here we invite discussion on a common theme in many of our churches that sin is too negative a notion and therefore out of place in our world which is becoming progressively good. Rather than succumbing to this temptation to bypass sin and speak only of positive themes, we encourage Christians to renewed hope, not in ourselves or in human progress, but in the joyful freedom of the 'Trinitarian conversation'. So we emphasise the basis of the church's unity and the mission of the Trinity within which salvation of persons takes its place. It is in the confession of the Trinitarian faith and in the context of the whole historic church that we know what sin is and can therefore acknowledge our need to confess. Our hope and confidence, however, is not in our confession but in Christ the Lord who confesses our sins on our behalf and bears our guilt on the cross. It is the faith of Christ by which our faith is justified.

The worldwide confessing movements embrace three interrelated ways of living out the truth in speech and action: confession of sin, confession of grace, and confession of the church's historic faith. In saying yes to these truths, we therefore must reject statements such as the following: 'I can be just as good a Christian on my own, I don't need to go to church' or 'We've moved beyond sin; the main thing is to do good to others'.

*The questions for discussion* encourage a focus on Doug Miller's slim volume *The Trinity and our humanity*, and other readings on the nature of doctrine. For those who would reject faith in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as irrelevant dogma, we quote Newbigin: 'The statement that all dogma must be questioned is itself a dogma which must be questioned.'

On the question of human sexuality and confessional discipline we have not attempted to restate what is already available in the ACC's excellent Statement on Sexuality. We have, however, in the section *For further reading* made some recommendations, particularly in relation to our creation as male and female in the image of God.

We draw attention to one book recommended in its entirety, that is the remarkable book by Pope John Paul II on the theology of the body in which he analyses Genesis 1 and 2 'not simply in itself as an account of the beginning, but as a component of Christ's teaching about the beginning (p.115)'. His exegesis on 'man and woman he created them' achieves a masterful consistency as he traces the mystery of love extending from the Trinity, through Yahweh's relationship with Israel, Christ's spousal relation with the Church, to the concrete bodies of men and women, emphasising the complementarity of male and female expressed uniquely in marriage. As a commission this is where we see our current emphasis, to explore more fully the joyful exclusivity of marriage which gives expression to God's creative purpose for humankind. We are taking up this emphasis also because the UCA Assembly, has by its recent pronouncements, ensured the question of sexuality and leadership is now off the agenda.

#### **Section 4. The witness of scripture**

In this section we restate the authority of the Holy Scriptures through whose 'spectacles' (as Calvin puts it) we recognise God's self-revelation in the world around us. With the Basis of Union we acknowledge that when the Church preaches Christ crucified and raised, she gives witness to the authority of Scripture. We also emphasise that the Bible is a community book addressed mainly to communities; therefore we encourage a communal context for reading scripture within the body of Christ where we also acknowledge our need for constant reform. Karl Barth ('The Witnesses' in *Evangelical Theology*, p.35) addresses the question of how Scripture is to be read and understood. He speaks of the 'deep simplicity' of Scripture. This, however, does not mean that the great affirmations of the Bible are self-evident: readily understood by any person in the street. The Word of God must be *sought* using every possible means of critical/textual analysis at our disposal. In seeking the truth of Scripture we hold together the living Word of God made known only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this section the intention is to explore in what ways other 'authorities' are replacing the authority of Holy Scripture, particularly those which defy John 14: 6 (quoted earlier) or the supersessionist views that regard the OT as inferior to the 'more enlightened' NT. Finally, in this section, the declaration clearly states the Scriptures are 'unique testimony' by which the church's faith and obedience are nourished; and hence the source of our hope (Basis of Union, para 5).

There are several *questions for discussion*, particularly the one which emphasises the B of U injunction for the church's 'serious' duty' of reading the scriptures and committing its ministers to preach from them.

*For further reading*, we can do no better than to recommend NT Wright's text on the authority of Scripture; acknowledging of course there are many others. You will note that the declaration itself does not include Scripture references. It is in the commentary where we try to relate all the statements to Scripture, and encourage further study of the commentary in the context of Bible Study groups.

## Section 5. Faith and ethics.

The unity of faith and ethics challenges the view that ethics has nothing to do with faith or that ethics is only concerned with an individual's rights. Christian ethics is grounded in the person and being of God who through his son has declared his purpose for the whole of human life. Our intention here is to make a strong statement that what we proclaim in doctrine is not divorced from what we do in our life in the world; and this is not a burden but the response of living joyfully in freedom. We are (to use one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith) freely bound. In this freedom lies our hope for ethical daily living.

This section also takes us back to the beginning: the gospel as public truth and the reminder that the church's worship is the springboard for our daily lives. Ethics and daily living are supremely grounded in regular faithful worship. In our homes and marriages; in our places of work, study and recreation; in public engagement; in times of joy and sadness; we glorify God. In participating in political life, in the way we vote, in the attention we give to social issues, we glorify God and witness to the world. Worship and ethics cannot be separated. Scott Stephens in the same article quoted earlier says: 'It is hard not to come to the conclusion that the Uniting Church is more symptomatic of Australia's deep cultural divisions and ethical dysfunctionality than it is truly prophetic.'

An understanding of Christian ethics allows us to state with confidence what we reject; namely, that autonomous individual rights should be given supremacy over shared life in community. 'It's my body, my life and my choice' is the current mantra. Christians hold to a different truth. We are who we are in our total humanity only because Jesus Christ in his humanity has already spoken for us. 'Our decisions are therefore free only insofar as we make them in joyful obedience to Christ.' To quote Jenson again, there is in the church a resurgence of the ancient heresy of antinomianism, which sees no purpose in preaching the law. We would rather say:

*I do not necessarily delight in your 'lifestyle,' but since it is yours, love requires that I leave you to it. I do not necessarily delight in my own lifestyle either, but that's the way I was made and I need to love myself too-and we will be saved by grace in any case. So runs the theology of much of the late-modern church. Despite its appearance it is a dark theology indeed. (On Thinking the Human, p.66).*

The theme running through the commentary is that while we say 'Yes!' to faithful ethical living we must say 'No!' to other gods.

*The pivotal question for discussion* is 'Who is Jesus Christ for us' in relation to daily, practical, ethical living. That question cannot be separated from who we are as obedient disciples, renewed by baptism and fed by the bread and wine of the Eucharist, nourished by faithful preaching, and supported through our communal life. It is then, by grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives are turned outwards, toward our neighbour. Discussion is centred on what other 'authorities' challenge faithful Christian ethical living.

*For further reading*, we have included some recommended texts on Christian bioethics.

## Conclusion

Returning to our starting point, we quote the B of U again, summarising what are the pivotal elements of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith and asking 'by whose authority do we live'. Throughout the document we have tried to make it clear that our confidence, our hope, and not least this theological declaration, is made possible only by the one who has acted for us and will bring all things to fulfilment. The commentary ends with a quote from Oden that God has not abandoned his church and a reminder of our calling to be faithful witnesses (Oden, 2006, pp.55-6).

The declaration ends with a quote from the Basis (chap 4):

*'Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.'*

In his lament for the Uniting Church's failure to uphold the Basis of Union, Scott Stephens nevertheless remains hopeful. He says:

*... the Basis of Union has already placed the church under the judgement of the Word of God with joyful repentance. For is this not the hope that the prophets extended to those 'pilgrim people' in exile: repent and return, for who knows what God may yet do? (Stephens, 2010b)*

To live in hope is to know that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ holds us in his hands: our past, our present and our future. Our task is to bear witness in private and public life to the perfect unity of the church promised in the fulfilment of time. In full dependence on the Holy Spirit we pray that this unity will be more fully realised in the present. And so the declaration concludes with confidence: Even so, **'Come Lord Jesus'** (Rev 22:20).

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