



Assembly of
Confessing Congregations
within the Uniting Church in Australia

**Theological Declaration:
Commentary and Study Guide
July 2009**

PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC), at its annual general meeting in 2008, received a document (the Theological Declaration) for distribution and study. An appropriate commentary was to be prepared.

The Theological Declaration stated that Christians must 'uphold the historic and apostolic faith committed to the church', because the church is seduced by a self-styled 'new gospel for our times'. Variations of the 'new gospel' movement suggest that the creeds and doctrines of Christianity are no longer relevant, and that much of the Bible is superseded by a more 'enlightened' view of humanity. We no longer need the faith of the church because we can have faith in ourselves. The following comments compare and contrast some of these 'progressive' views with the historic (yet contemporary) faith of the church.

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The declaration belongs to the emerging world-wide confessing movement. This movement has arisen wherever the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (revealed in Scripture and asserted in the classic Christian tradition and ecumenical creeds) has been abandoned. The declaration aims to reaffirm the Christian faith amid the confusion and uncertainty of a church lacking in confessional discipline and a world for which the church seems to offer little help in answering that confusion.

We have no intention of formulating new doctrine. We aim to restate the apostolic faith in ways that speak to church and society today. We hold to the orthodox testimony of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church which has been blessed by God for two thousand years.

The declaration is not a formal 'confession'. It is grounded in the strong affirmations of the *Basis of Union*, which as Davis McCaughey declared (in his *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 1982), is expressed 'most fundamentally' in paragraph Three.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. In love for the world, God gave his Son to take away the world's sin.

The declaration therefore reinforces the Basis of Union and calls the church to renewed study of this living, historical statement of faith.

The declaration complements other foundational documents of the ACC, including:

1. The Charter for the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia (October 2005).
2. Statement on Sexuality (October 2006).
3. Confessing Statement from the Executives of the Reforming Alliance and Evangelical members within the Uniting Church (EMU) (October, 2006).

FOR WHOM IS IT WRITTEN?

The declaration is written for members of the ACC, the wider membership of the UCA, other confessing movements around the world, and our ecumenical partners. It is designed to be read at all levels of church life; in meetings of synods, presbyteries, assemblies and congregations. We offer it to the public domain, where sometimes Christianity is held in contempt as a result of actions and policies of our own and other churches. It aims to be a working, practical document, readily available to members of the church. 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. It is written also to combat instances of apostate teaching which threaten the church's unity.

The declaration is intended for individuals and groups and for use in preaching, teaching, study and discussion.

THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

The declaration uses language that attempts to conform to Scripture and tradition. Where it seems unclear, we believe teaching, discussion, prayer and study are needed. Thinking about the Christian faith requires us to acknowledge our dependence on ‘the mercies of God’ who transforms our reason and renews our minds (Romans 12: 1-2). We pray, therefore, that our understanding will be conformed to the mind of Christ. ‘Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2: 5).

Theology helps us to understand that we know God only as we are reconciled to him in Jesus Christ. Theological language is therefore talk about God and about who God is and what God has done for us. Understood in this way, it is not remote from everyday life; rather, it reflects our lived relationship with Jesus Christ. We communicate God’s reconciling love in our daily lives through theological language. The love of God becomes real for us when we live by faith and in dependence on the Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES

Direct scriptural quotations are not used in the declaration. They appear throughout the commentary in various places where direct quotes can reinforce the statements. The expanded notes on each section include scriptural quotations to encourage further study.

STRUCTURE

Section 1: ‘The gospel as public truth’ emphasises that the vocation of Christians is to remind the whole world ‘that it is called to glorify God and embody God’s purpose for humankind’.

Section 2: ‘The One whom we confess’ describes in more detail how God is made known in Jesus Christ, who alone is ‘the answer to human despair and futility’.

Section 3: ‘The confession of the church: the trinitarian faith’ recalls us to confession, to the acknowledgement of our sin and to rejoice in the freedom to ‘turn anew to our neighbour’. This section lends itself to an expanded commentary as it explores in more detail the church’s confession of the Trinitarian faith.

Section 4: ‘The witness of Holy Scripture’ is a call to recover, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the scholarly interpretation of scripture at a time when ‘other authorities’ are staking their claim.

Section 5: ‘Faith and ethics’ is a natural outcome to the preceding sections. It calls us to faithful discipleship in every aspect of life. The declaration concludes with a call to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ ‘who brings into being what otherwise could not exist’.

The main text in the five sections states what we believe. Each section ends with the phrase 'We therefore reject ...' Each declaration presupposes a decision. To say 'yes' to one statement involves saying 'no' to another. In saying 'yes' to the apostolic witness we say 'no' to other ideologies. Each 'we therefore reject ...' is a summary of the breaches of apostolic faith that the declaration addresses.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Each section includes questions for discussion, only as a guide. Other questions will arise naturally. We hope group discussion will allow each participant to bring his or her wisdom, understanding and interpretation to benefit the whole group. Group discussion depends on each member's willingness to submit, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to the thinking of the group. The questions may also assist those who wish to use the declaration for preaching and teaching. Thoughtful preparation for discussion is essential, as is ready access to the other documents referred to above, including the Basis of Union and other suggested readings at the end of each section.

FOR FURTHER READING

Following the questions for discussion at the end of each section several references and websites are included as a guide to further reading. In most cases specific chapters/sections rather than whole books have been identified to make the reading material more accessible for group discussion.

Commentary/study guide for the Theological Declaration

Preamble

This theological declaration arises from the present controversy about the faith of the church triggered by the UCA's action in recent Assemblies. For example, deciding that homosexual practice is an acceptable Christian option, that ordination of persons engaged in such practice is valid, and that the church's understanding of marriage can be changed to include partnerships other than the lifelong commitment of one man and one woman. These examples illustrate what is meant in the preamble by surrender to 'our culture's values and the lure of alien gospels'.

The critical debate over who we are as male and female made in the image of God (Genesis 1: 27) goes to the heart of who Jesus Christ is and who we are as human beings. Contemporary culture's influence, reinforced by some Christians, would have us believe that who we are and how we express our sexuality is a matter of individual choice. In contrast to this seductive view, we believe that our freedom to choose is made possible by God's choice of us in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2: 9-10). Our decisions are therefore free only insofar as we make them in joyful obedience to Christ.

Why is a theological declaration necessary?
Because the church faces a crisis brought about by our failure to hold the faith of

the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

The crisis is more profound than the issue of sexual morality; it is a crisis of biblical authority and theological integrity. For example, some people within the church suggest that beliefs are always only temporary; open to change according to subjective experience and particular circumstances. In contrast, confessing movements exist to reclaim the historic faith of the apostolic tradition and to recover the vitality of evangelical, orthodox ecumenical teaching.

We are called to renewal through a searching rediscovery of classic Christian teaching; in defiance of seductive alien gospels.

The preamble concludes by calling for the 'reform, renewal and reconciliation of the whole church under the Word of God'. We acknowledge that we are a part of the whole church and each one of us stands constantly in need of renewal and reconciliation.

Questions for discussion

1. What are some 'circumstances of our time' which represent a crisis of faith?
2. How may this declaration assist the church towards a 'vital recovery of orthodox ecumenical teaching'?
3. If you have access to the internet, check the following site for 'The Center for Progressive Christianity' and carefully read the half page 'About Us'. How do these claims differ from the preamble to this theological declaration? <http://www.tcpc.org/about/index.cfm>.

For further reading

Oden, T. (2006). *Turning around the mainline: how renewal movements are changing the church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, especially pp.21-24 on 'the crisis of theological integrity.

Barnett, P. 'A deluded hope: re-writing the Gospels to find a Jesus who suits us'. In *ACCatalyst*, Vol 2 March 2009, pp.23-25.

Websites

Progressive Christian Network Victoria at <http://www.pcnvictoria.org.au/>.

Centre for Progressive Christianity at <http://www.tcpc.org/template/index.cfm>.

Section 1: The gospel as public truth

The declaration begins by locating the gospel within the world in which God is gathering all nations to himself. Christians are charged to remind the world of its calling to glorify God and embody God's purpose for humankind. Christians are to declare God's all-embracing promise of a new world (Revelation 21: 1, 2). The emphasis is on 'renewal of communal life' which embraces families, local communities, wider society and the whole world. By referring to the public truth of the gospel we establish a stark contrast to the commonly expressed opinion, 'The gospel is primarily

for my own personal salvation; it is about my individual life with my God’.

In the second part of this section we recall what is being declared in the first paragraph, then state some implications of that. Having clearly stated that since the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the world now belongs to a new order, the church asks itself what it means to live in this reality. That is, in accepting that we now ‘participate in this newness of life while awaiting its full consummation’ certain notions must be rejected. In sections 2, 3, 4 and 5 the ‘Therefore we reject ...’ statements consist of one line only, at the end of each section. Section 1, however, is intended to remind us of the far reaching implications of understanding the gospel as ‘public truth’. The notions to be rejected, therefore, include, but are not confined to, the following:

- (We reject the notion) ‘that Christianity is merely a system of private values’. This comes to expression in one commonly heard statement, ‘My relationship to God is no-one else’s business.’ Any interpretation of Christianity as a ‘system of private values’ is at complete odds with ‘the gospel as public truth’, and the ethical demands of discipleship (James 2: 14-26).
- (We reject the notion) ‘that Christianity is merely one among many forms of spirituality’. This statement contrasts a generalized spirituality with the particularity of Christianity’s call to be ‘in Christ’ who is the only way to the Father (John 14: 5-7). The word ‘spirituality’ often suggests an ‘other-worldly’ life that disregards our bodily reality. This section of the declaration emphasises that to live in the ‘spirit’ of Jesus Christ means

to be fully engaged—in body, mind and spirit—with the real world in which we live.

- (We reject the notion) ‘that Christians and Christian communities have the right to determine the nature of truth apart from their relationship to God in Christ’. A commonly heard claim is ‘I only know what’s true for me; no one else can challenge that’. While much contemporary culture would entice us to believe that truth is relative and that ‘my truth is as good as yours’, for Christians, Jesus Christ remains the only source of truth and, therefore, of freedom. ‘You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free’ (John 8: 32). We only know the truth because God has freely chosen, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, to tell us who God is and to draw us into relationship with himself. We cannot establish the truth of our lives by looking elsewhere; for example to the latest opinion polls, or to popular views such as ‘I don’t know what’s true or untrue so all I need are the right values’ Christian truth is not determined by any community or individual, however well meaning; the truth of our lives cannot be known apart from our relationship with the One who is the Author of all life (John 1:4).
- (We reject the notion) that human sexuality can be determined by individuals in contradiction to the biblical image of humankind’s creation as male and female. Any other sexual relationship is the attempted union of two people who do not belong together (Genesis 2: 24) and is a tragic caricature of marriage. In the face of contrary views in our culture we declare that marriage of

a man and a woman 'is appointed by God and is a gift of God in his creation' (Uniting in Worship: The Marriage Service). Refer ACC's statement on sexuality for further elaboration.

- (We reject the notion) that Christians should desist from public discussion about war and peace, the plight of refugees, euthanasia, abortion, global warming, and other significant issues. This point is related to the first; that Christianity is not a private religion but is directly engaged with all matters affecting the way we live—in family life, communal life, and political life; together with our national and international relationships. To live responsibly as Christians is thoughtfully and prayerfully to engage with the issues of our time. Why? Because the Cross of Christ is not on the periphery of personal existence; rather, the Cross stands at the centre of the world's political, public life.

Questions for discussion

1. This section seeks to locate personal salvation within the 'broader picture' of God's saving action for the whole world. Taking the 'bullet points' one by one, discuss whether these constitute appropriate Christian responses.
2. Are there other statements/issues/responses you would add to this list?

For further reading

Newbigin, L. (1991). *Truth to tell: the gospel as public truth*. Michigan: William B Eerdmans, especially the Introduction, pp.1-13.

Bonhoeffer, D. (1954). *Life together*. London: SCM Press, especially Chapter 1 'Community' (pp.8-26).

Section 2: The one whom we confess

God has brought to birth a new world. 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev 21: 5). Everything promised in the law and prophets has taken place in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord (Ephesians 1:10, 1: 22). The world is transformed in him (Colossians 1: 15-20). This simple statement hides a complex fact about the Christian faith; namely, that it is eschatological in character, which means that Christianity understands the purpose, or end, for which we and the whole of creation are brought into being. For Christians the word 'eschatology' refers to the Christian belief that history is bound up in Christ and is being transformed in fulfillment of God's purpose. When Christians speak of Christ as Lord, they understand that their life and thought are governed, paradoxically, by the 'two histories' defined by chronological time, on one hand, and eschatological time on the other. While we await Jesus' promised return, we live in a sinful world; yet we are already a new creation in which sin and death have been overcome. The Basis of Union makes this clear.

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing

city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way' (Basis of Union, para 3).

This emphasis on worship and the sacraments, repeated in Section 3 (below), is a reminder that the ordering of the church's life bears witness to our calling. Liturgical renewal is therefore urgently needed, particularly where the characteristic elements of Christian worship are being replaced by so-called 'alternative worship'. This is seen, for example, where Baptism loses its emphasis as the mark of our entry into the body of Christ, and where the Lord's Supper is regarded as an 'optional extra' rather than absolutely central to our life of discipleship. It is seen when the historic creeds of the church are replaced with creeds 'for our day' which undermine the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. It is also seen where prayer becomes an outpouring of subjective emotions rather than a fusion of the church's prayer with the prayer of the Son to the Father. Prayer loses its Trinitarian focus unless it is addressed to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord's Prayer is to be our pattern (Matthew 6:9 and Luke 11:2).

In the face of other 'gods' who claim that the answer to human despair and futility lies in scientific progress, or deeper self-analysis, or self-reliance, we confess 'that God's coming in Jesus Christ alone is the answer'. The only Christ we know is the Christ in whom God and humanity are bound together in the world. Life in Christ liberates us from reliance on scientific progress alone, and from human reason alone. Recall Peter's question to his Lord, 'To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life' (John 6: 68). This section is a call to renewed hope for the church:

not hope in ourselves or our capabilities or strivings, but a lively hope borne of freedom in Christ. We are free because we have already been judged and delivered from rebellion and alienation against God's grace (referred to in Section 3 as sin). We live freely, in joyful obedience, believing that in Jesus Christ, the One whom we confess; our lives are transformed. This is not, however, a call to complacency or to 'sit back and do nothing'; the transformation of our lives is continually being appropriated under God's grace. As the following sections show, we are therefore to live in obedience to this calling.

The final sentence in this section is intended to provide a summary of what is to be rejected if the preceding paragraphs are regarded as a faithful account of 'the One whom we confess'. In today's pluralistic world we are lured into thinking that, in order to acknowledge other faiths and religions we must state that Jesus Christ is merely 'one sage among others in human history'. For example, in some of our UCA congregations it is forbidden to claim that Jesus Christ is 'the way, and the truth and the life' (John 14: 6). The inference is that for some people this claim is too exclusive and subject to misinterpretation; it should therefore be omitted from scripture readings.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you think it is important to have some kind of formal liturgical structure in regular services of worship? Do the triangular symbols in *Uniting in Worship* indicating 'essential' components of worship provide a helpful guide?
2. Discuss the notion of individual sin and communal confession described in this section.
3. In the light of claims by other religions, and some within the UCA, can we still proclaim with St John, 'No one comes to the Father but by me'?
4. In the UCA's call to embrace 'diversity' how can the uniqueness of the confession 'Jesus Christ is Lord' be upheld?

For further reading

McCaughey, J. D. (1980). *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*. Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, commentary on Paragraph One 'Where we were, where we are, and where we are going', pp.7-11.

Oden, T. (2006). *Turning around the mainline: how renewal movements are changing the church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, especially Chapter 14 'The biblical teaching of confession', pp.179-196.

Assembly Commission on Liturgy. (1988). *Uniting in Worship*. Melbourne: Uniting Church Press and *Uniting in Worship 2* (2005).

Section 3: The confession of the church: the Trinitarian faith

This section calls the Assembly and related councils of the UCA to ensure the structure and obedience of the church conform to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. For example, we see the Assembly of the UCA exacerbating current divisions within the church by condoning the ordination of persons in homosexual relationships. While the issue of sexuality and leadership is by no means the only example of a church failing to live by the truth of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith, it is this issue which has necessitated a renewed confession of the church's Trinitarian faith. It is also a reminder to refer to the ACC's founding statements on this issue.

We acknowledge that a complete confession of the faith is not possible. However, this declaration aims to recall the church to the foundations of its doctrine, particularly where there is disagreement. We acknowledge that our acts of confession do not stand alone; they are part of a larger story. The story we are invited to share is that God is alive in us through the atoning death of the incarnate, risen Lord and our lives are hid in him by faith (Colossians 3:3-4). Nevertheless we are given visible signs of God's presence with us, in Baptism and Holy Communion, which nourish and sustain us on our way (*Basis of Union*). Faithful worship is always in relation to Christ's worship of the Father, in which we are called to share in Trinitarian life. Herein lies our call to mission. As one writer expresses it 'we are invited into the conversation of the Triune God'. This understanding of our lives as a

'conversation' includes our relationship with our neighbour. In this way theological language and the dogma of the Trinity are expressed through the way we live in obedience to the reconciling love of Jesus Christ.

This section of the declaration carefully locates personal salvation 'within the scope of God's plan for the world'. To speak of salvation is to speak of God's purpose for individuals and for the cosmos. This word, from the Greek 'kosmos', means 'world'. As we see in Romans 8:18ff, God's salvation is for the whole creation. Individuals belong within this 'bigger picture' (as we have seen in **section 2**). Another biblical description of salvation is 'oikonomia' translated as 'economy', suggesting that in God's household the way of life is already prepared for us (Ephesians 1:10). As members of the household of faith we belong in community, we are called into being by the one who embraces all. None is excluded.

We may not separate the joyful confession of Christ as Lord from the confession of our sins. Because of who Christ is, and who we are, the former confession entails the latter (as in the confession of Simon Peter, Luke 5:8). We confess and remember who we are as sinners only through the gift of God's unspeakable grace ('Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me ...'). Standing in God's awesome presence we say with the prodigal, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and against you' (Luke 15:18). In contrast to this emphasis is the misplaced notion that sin is now an outmoded view which should be replaced with a more positive emphasis on our progressive goodness.

This section on the confession of the Trinitarian faith of the church refers to the double confession – of our sin and of the apostolic faith. It is a

call to Christians to experience the joyful freedom of confessing the faith within the whole church in every time and place. The Latin root of confession (*con + fiteri*) means to speak *with*, not to speak alone. Confession has its rightful place in the community of faith, particularly when believers come to worship. Confession among the community of saints, supremely in the sacrament of Baptism (recalling 1 Timothy 3: 16) and of Holy Communion, is a foretaste of confession in the fullness of time when the whole body of Christ of all places and times finally confesses Jesus Christ as Lord (Philippians. 2: 9-11). In the creeds and in the *Basis of Union* we 'confess', 'acknowledge', 'witness to' what God in Christ has accomplished for our sakes and for our salvation.

Confession is fundamentally confession of Christ: acknowledging what God through Christ has done for us all. Confession is not primarily a preoccupation with what we, as individuals, have done or have not done. Confession therefore is the acknowledgement that our salvation is grounded in Christ alone who forgives our sin and makes us righteous children of the Father.

Sin is sometimes regarded as a sign of human inadequacy or immaturity; or a 'primitive notion unworthy of an enlightened humanity'. In this respect some within the church see little or no need for confession; such a notion is regarded as too 'negative'. To speak of sin, we are told, means failure to recognise our progress; rather, we can take pride in the fact that we are getting better and better all the time. In this theological declaration, however, sin is regarded as nothing less than 'rebellion against God and rejection

of divine grace'. Therefore, we are constantly called to confession; not with despair but in the freedom and hope of the One who hears and bears our confession.

In his priestly work (Hebrews 3:1) Christ as our intercessor takes all our confession, presenting us to the Father (Hebrews 4:14 ff.). Jesus promised that whoever confesses him before others, Christ will also 'confess before my Father' (Matthew 10:32 NKJV). Through his identification with sinful humankind, in undergoing John's baptism of repentance, he stands in our place. Jesus Christ, the one whom the Father raised and thus justified is the one who was obedient for our sakes. If Jesus Christ had suffered for his own sin we would not have been forgiven. He rejected this temptation in the wilderness; thus he became an obedient Son (Hebrews 5:8). In contrast to the declaration's emphasis, some within the church, in their rejection of sin, also reject the notion of a saviour. The question is asked, how can such belief be called 'Christian'?

Because of Christ's work we are able to confess our sins and be forgiven (1 John 1: 6-9). It is the faith of Christ which justifies our faith (Gal 2:16; 2:20; 3:22; Eph 3:11-12; Phil. 3:9; Rev 14:12). Christ's continuing intercession is on the basis of his once for all completed act of atonement and reconciliation. This does not mean the church repeats Christ's sacrifice through a continuing repetition of his cross; it means that Christ continues to address each generation with the news of his completed work. The use of the present tense to describe past actions is not uncommon in Scripture (e.g. Mark's Gospel and the prophets) and has long been a practice of hymn writers (e.g. *When I survey the wondrous cross*) as they bring past events and their consequences into

the present for the hearers. Paul proclaims it is Christ, the risen crucified one, 'who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us' (Rom 8: 34) and the writer of Hebrews says: 'We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne ...'(Heb 8:1). The church is therefore being called to renewal, to be a living witness through continuous transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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. Thus, the final sentence in this section deals with what we must reject if we believe the foregoing. Statements such as the following cannot be reconciled with the church's confession: 'I can be just as good a Christian on my own, I don't need to go to church' or 'We've moved beyond this notion of sin, we're far more sophisticated now, so I'd rather concentrate on the positive notion of doing good to others'. To restate in positive form the final sentence in this section: life in Christ necessitates participation in his body, the church, which also involves repentance of sin.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways does our participation in the church's sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper convey God's presence to us?
2. Using the passages from Hebrews as a guide, discuss Christ's priestly work referred to in the commentary, above.

3. In the face of beliefs which seek to downplay (or abolish) any notion of sin, how may the church be recalled to the three emphases referred to in the final paragraph of the commentary on this section?

4. Regarding the 'dogma of the Trinity' (refer end of second paragraph in this section (above), discuss Newbigin's statement: 'The statement that all dogma must be questioned is itself a dogma which must be questioned'.

For further reading

Miller, D. (1992). *The Trinity and our humanity: a study book on issues of faith in the three persons of the Trinity, as expressed in the Nicene Creed*. Melbourne: JBCE Specialty Books, especially Study 1, 'The Communion of Love', pp.11-16)

Newbigin, L (1991). *Truth to tell: the gospel as public truth*. Michigan: William B Eerdmans, especially chapter 1 'Believing and knowing the truth', pp 15-39).

Lindbeck, G. A. (1984). *The nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, particularly the final chapter.

For wider/extensive reading on the issue of our creation as male and female in the image of God refer, for example:

Gagnon, R. A. (2001). *The Bible and homosexual practice: texts and hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Gagnon, R (2009) '*What the evidence really says about scripture and homosexual practice: five issues*' Available at <http://www.robgagnon.net/ArticlesOnline.htm>

John Paul, II. (2006). *Man and Woman He Created Them: a Theology of the Body* (M. Waldstein, Trans.). Boston: Pauline Books & Media.

Websites:

<http://www.robgagnon.net/ArticlesOnline.htm>.

Section 4: The witness of Scripture

Scripture tells us who God is in Jesus Christ and what God has revealed about himself in nature, history and humanity. It is by the 'spectacles' of Scripture (Calvin Inst. Bk.vi.i) that we are enabled to recognize God's self-revelation in the world around us. With the Basis of Union (para 5) we acknowledge that when the Church preaches Jesus Christ her message is controlled by the biblical witness. The Church is not free to read into Scripture, or graft on to it, ideas and principles that cannot be read out of it. Individual Christians or councils never have the right to back their own opinion against the Scriptures.

The Holy Scriptures, in both the Old and New Testaments, are the unique witness of the apostles and the prophets to Jesus Christ who is the Word of God. A reader of Holy Scripture, whose

understanding is illumined by the Holy Spirit, hears the witness of the apostles and prophets to Jesus Christ.

The Holy Scriptures are authoritative. The deliberations of church councils must agree with the Scriptures, otherwise a council's deliberation cannot be a confession of the church nor can that council seek obedience from church members. We believe that Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God, and is attested in Holy Scripture, does reform the church, by correcting its error, after the testimony of Scripture is heard and believed.

The Bible is a community book addressed mainly to communities. The faith it proclaims involves communities relating to one another as the Body of Christ in relational terms (reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness, long-suffering, etc). To help us understand the Bible we continue to rely on faithful interpreters. In our reading of the Scriptures the church depends on the Holy Spirit (John 14: 25, 26). The truth to which the Scriptures point is the person of Jesus Christ who said 'I am the Truth ...' (John 14:6). Our purpose in studying the Scriptures is that the Christ of Scripture may be formed in us (Gal 4:19; Col 1:27).

We reject any argument that the Scriptures are open to personal interpretation, as if the Scriptures are a resource from which one can freely pick and choose according to one's tastes. No, the Scriptures are without parallel: they are God's Word spoken to his church where they are faithfully preached. As the Barmen declaration (1934) states: 'Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.'

The central issue is the authority of scripture. The Old and New Testaments are 'unique testimony' to God's redeeming grace in Christ which 'nourishes and regulates the Church's faith and obedience' (*Basis of Union*, para 5). People do interpret the Bible differently. But not all interpreters start from the clear understanding that Scripture stands over all cultural attitudes. Contrary to many contemporary 'enlightened' views, the Scriptures do not depend on particular cultures. The essence of this section is to state clearly that the Scriptures can be trusted. As Breck, an Orthodox theologian, states:

Only the Holy Scriptures are "canonical", admitting of no error in essential doctrinal and moral teachings. This is not to say they are "verbally inerrant," only that they preserve the fullness of revealed Truth and convey that Truth when they are accurately interpreted (Breck, 1998, p.60).

Wesley interpreted scripture by suggesting, 'The obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly' and the more difficult passages understood in terms of the 'whole scope and tenor of Scripture,' (Oden, *Turning around the Mainline*, p.130).

This section of the declaration, as with the others, concludes with a statement 'Therefore we reject ...' Having claimed that the unity of the Scriptures in both Old and New Testaments lies in the narrative of God's redeeming purpose for all mankind, we reject any interpretation that gives supremacy to the New Testament while describing the Old Testament as a primitive view superseded by enlightened

knowledge and experience. This is one example of laying claim to 'other authorities'. Some biblical interpreters also claim a 'new authority' based on a 'more informed' view of human nature, which suggests the biblical witness now needs to be interpreted in the light of these cultural claims. The declaration clearly states that the Scriptures are 'unique testimony' to God's redeeming grace in Christ which 'nourishes and regulates the church's faith and obedience' (*Basis of Union*, para 5). Finally, this section emphasises that faithful biblical interpretation is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways do you see the authority of Scripture being challenged by 'other authorities'?
2. How can the study of Scripture be revived in a 'community of love' as stated in this section?
3. The Basis of Union (para 5) calls the church to the 'serious duty' of reading the scriptures and 'commits its ministers to preach from these'. How can this commitment be maintained in the life of the church?
4. Since it is through the Scriptures Christ controls all that is done in worship, should more attention be given to appropriate training in public reading of the Scriptures?

For further reading

McCaughey, J. D. (1980). *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*. Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, especially commentary on Paragraph Five, 'Scripture', pp.29-31.

Wright, NT (2005). *The last word: beyond the Bible wars to a new understanding of the authority of Scripture*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Section 5: Faith and ethics

By placing this section at the end of the declaration we do not imply that ethics is of lesser importance. Personal ethics and responsible discipleship cannot be separated from who God is in relation to the world. Our intention is to describe the essential unity between our daily life as individuals and God's purpose revealed in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The covenant fulfilled in Christ is both the basis of the creation of the world and the centre of every Christian's life in the church. The ethical directions of Scripture are a call to live out this freedom, given once and for all in Christ who commands us to reflect the love with which he loves every person.

Christian ethics differ from other ethical systems in its grounding in Jesus Christ. Christian ethics spring from God's action in the world through creation and redemption, in the person of Jesus Christ (John 14: 10, 15-16). It is often argued that this kind of statement is too 'theological' or 'too dogmatic' and therefore divorced

from practical daily life. Others argue, 'I don't need God in order to live an ethical life'. For Christians, doctrine and ethics cannot be separated. In the incarnation of the Son of God our humanity is joined to his. As Christ does not live in some realm 'beyond' this world, we are called to responsible, ethical living in this world.

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. Worship and ethics cannot be separated.

The final 'Therefore we reject ...' statement attempts to refute the claim that Christians should give priority to individualistic autonomous rights, and/or that consideration should always be given to people's preferences. In deciding how we should live, the prior question for Christians is always 'who is Jesus Christ for us'? In joining our will to his we proclaim the gospel in human action.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways does Christian ethics compare with the 'authority' of individual rights?
2. How is the question 'Who is Jesus Christ for us?' related to practical, daily living?
3. What are some of the ethical implications for being 'a new creation'?

For further reading

Breck, J. (1998). *The sacred gift of life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Meilaender, G. (2005). *Bioethics: a primer for Christians* (2nd ed.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Conclusion

The theological declaration ends by posing the question 'by whose authority do we live?' In the midst of many persuasive and seductive 'alien gospels', Christians are challenged to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ, 'attested in Holy Scripture and acknowledged by the church in the ecumenical creeds and the historic documents named in the *Basis of Union*' (para 10).

In this declaration we join others around the world who see this call as urgent, as Oden reminds us:

God alone renews and continues to bless his people. God has not abandoned his church, and calls us to keep faith with him and those dear to him. We are called to be obedient to the faith once for all delivered to the saints... We believe God's call to be faithful witnesses within the church requires not only truthful confession, but also a long-term effort to reform our institutions... The work and witness of faithful confessors helps to reclaim and redirect these institutions toward their proper ends (Thomas Oden, *Turning Around the Mainline*, pp55-56).

The declaration concludes with a passage from the *Basis of Union* and a reminder that our hope lies in the one who alone is the truth; the one who holds our past, present and future within his saving purpose for the whole of humankind.

Questions for discussion

1. 'The church is called to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ.' How can the councils of the church be reminded of this authority?
2. What kind of encouragement can be gained from the extract from *Turning around the mainline* (above)?
3. What other 'conclusions' can be drawn from this final section of the declaration?