

## **Queries in the UCA**

### **Look out for the slippery slides in UCA language!**

I like being part of the monthly Monday night chats. Chatting makes me feel at home, among patient friends, though I'm far away.

During the last chat, in July, the question of hard-to-pin-down theological errors in the UCA came up again. It was Dennis who raised it. The errors are not easy to see, Peter suggested, because it is so 'slippery' to buttonhole people or statements due to vagueness.

Rob Brennan, in his Catalyst article about how the “UCA listens but still doesn't hear” had some ideas that bear upon the slipperiness. Rob showed that quite different ways of thinking with different moral outcomes – Rob clarified opponents as ‘confessional faith’ and ‘morally revisionist liberalism’ – can both claim to “believe the Bible” and be “operating out of the reformed tradition”. He then proceeded to show how today's moral revisionist liberal thinking might have arisen from chapter 3 of Calvin's Institutes – that the knowledge of God has been implanted naturally in men's minds, and chapter 5, the knowledge of God shines forth in the fashioning of the universe, and keeping in mind chapter 6, “Scripture is needed as a guide and teacher for anyone who would attain to the God the Creator.” So, the reformed tradition has had within different streams. I suggest that the liberal one is approaching its natural conclusion – death – and that the confessional one is alive and well and is also specified in the Basis of Union as the stream to which the UCA belongs

I think the ‘moral revisionist liberals’ have gone through several phases in their rejecting attitude to the Basis of Union. The first was to claim that the Basis of Union was a historical document that had no continuing relevance to the life of the UCA after it served its initial purpose of being the agreement on which the three former denominations came together in June 1977. Max Champion discusses this in his Forum Booklet no. 6 of 1994, “Forward Together: on What Basis?” This stage went so far as Dr. Darcy Wood, acting in his capacity to write a Presidential Ruling, insisted that the Basis has no authority in regard to the Constitution of the church, but only in a “more general sense”. And then proceeded to spray doubt about the Basis throughout the UCA with his remark that, “there needs to be more debate on the authority of the Basis of Union, and this should take place in various councils of the Church...”

The next stage of dealing with the Basis of Union was to officially change it. The UCA Assembly does not explain how it could change a document which it previously decided was primarily to serve as the coming together of a three churches at point in time. The new 1992 version is still available on the official UCA website.

I want to suggest that there is now a new phase in the Uniting Church's denigrating the Basis of Union. That is, acknowledging it as having “general authority” and frequently referring to it – so it looks like fidelity to the Basis – but doing certain things to it: selecting the parts that give church councils authority, offering some recognition in doctrinal discussion of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds in paragraph 9 but **not** working that into the mission and worship of the church, and then totally ignoring the references to the “reformation fathers” of paragraph 10.

Also almost totally ignored is paragraph 3. That is a modern statement of classical orthodox faith – it is the one Davis McCaughey observed in his 1982 Commentary on the Basis of Union as the “the most fundamental Paragraph in the whole Basis.” This is one that reads:

*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 controlling words here are: built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ, confesses, glory of God the Father, reconciling the world to himself, love for the world. Those are the same words that Athanasius used in his great summing up of the theology of the Nicene Creed in his booklet (still marvellously readable today) “The Incarnation of the Word.” The same fundamental basis of the Christian faith is what drove the Reformers. This is why the Basis of Union several times commits the UCA to stating this “again and again”.

What the Uniting Church does in its official documents is barely mention the wonderful unchanging ground of our Christian faith. When UCA documents do mention Jesus Christ it is in short hand way – I suppose the short hand is meant to suggest to confessing Christians the faith expressed in paragraph 3 which is held dear, but such short hand also allows moral revisionist liberals to reach different conclusions. In any case, they soon reach different conclusions themselves because there is a slide in language, a change in terms that sound similar but are in fact quite different in meaning.

I want to give you an example of how this works. I refer to the downloadable “Docbytes – Doctrine” leaflet meant for congregational discussion.

Most of it is beyond criticism.

The definition is given, “*Doctrine is the way the church corporately listens carefully to the past and grapples with faithful thinking and living now.*” That sounds okay and consistent with the Basis of Union. “Listen” is a Basis of Union word. And the reader can at least think of the ancient creeds and the reformers statements, even if they aren’t mentioned.

There is this explanation;

*Doctrine is never an abstract or theoretical matter. It is closely related to the life of the church, and gives guidance to it. Doctrine is the thinking, deciding and teaching required to assist the Uniting Church in Australia to live faithfully today as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The Basis of Union guides us in this process.*

And then there are some notes about how the very first church, described in the book of Acts, had to deal with questions that arose such as the appointing of deacons and response to Jewish believers in Christ. That is quite Biblically focussed.

Then there is a large quotation from Jürgen Moltmann, “*Theology is the business of all God’s people. It is not just the affair of the theological faculties, and not just the concern of the church’s colleges and seminaries.*”

Again, this is sounds consistent with the Basis of Union.

And then in large type is the reminder, “*The Assembly ... has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine .... It makes the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils.*” This authority is not reconciled with Moltmann’s claim above, and it might be a reminder of the Assembly’s failure to assume its responsibilities in regard to the motion 84 and 108, but anyway, it is a direct quote from the Basis of Union.

Then, right at the bottom in small type, under the question, Why does this matter? is this: *The Uniting Church accepts that we receive authoritative guidance from the early church councils concerning Jesus Christ and God as Trinity (expressed in creeds of the early church), while also being committed to a process of constant reformation in the life of the church (finding new forms of church life and interpretation for today). See the Basis of Union, para. 9.*

There are big problems here. The first is that this is doctrine itself and, unlike the rest of the “Docbyte”, is not up for discussion. The second problem is the language slide in the second brackets. The reform of the church is not mentioned in paragraph 9, as it seems to be suggested here (paragraph 9 is about the early church councils) but is mentioned only once in the Basis of Union in paragraph 1, and it is a sub-clause:

*To this end they declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church; they remain open to constant reform under his Word; and they seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Why interpret “constant reform under his word”, to mean “finding new forms of church life and interpretation for today” instead of using the words of Basis of Union, “confessing her Lord in fresh words and deeds?” By changing the words to church life and interpretation, the focus shifts away from Christ (and omits entirely the guidance that might be offered by the reformation fathers) to something that people in the church might come up with.

So, this “Docbyte” seems to be faithful to the Basis of Union, but has become something else.

Let me suggest some of these substitutes in tabular form:

1. Instead of “confessing her lord in fresh words and deeds” the UCA tries “finding new forms of church life and interpretation for today.”
2. Instead of “unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated” (para. 5) the UCA proclaims, “The Bible is an extraordinary library of very diverse texts and sub-texts. It does offer gospel and commandment.

But it also offers *Boy's Own* adventures in military and sexual violence, tales of touching tenderness and terrible passion, erotic love poetry and misogynistic, apoplectic pornography” (**Speaking to My Paper: The MEANING of DOCTRINE in the LIFE of the UCA** Margaret Tyrer, February 2006 - the official Doctrine Working Group website)

Does your heart bleed with sadness that holy scripture is treated disdainfully?

3. Instead of, “The Word of God on whom man’s salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.” (para. 5 Basis) we get, “It offers a God so vivid and vocal in some places, and so apparently passive and silent in others, so shockingly various, that some wonder whether God has something approaching a multiple personality disorder.” (**Speaking to My Paper: The MEANING of DOCTRINE in the LIFE of the UCA** Margaret Tyrer, February 2006 - the official Doctrine Working Group website)
4. Instead of, “The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” (para. 6 Basis of Union) we get, “We will also see Christians who find in Buddhism or Islam or Indigenous Aboriginal spirituality a way of life that attracts them.” (LIVING WITH THE NEIGHBOUR WHO IS DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN VOCATION IN MULTI-FAITH AUSTRALIA - the official Doctrine Working Group website)
5. Instead of, “He himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is he who by the gift of the Spirit confers upon men the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is he who awakens, purifies and advances in men the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.” (para. 6 Basis of Union) we get, “The Spirit is present in all of life. No part of life, no person is without the influence of the Holy Spirit.” (LIVING WITH THE NEIGHBOUR WHO IS DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN VOCATION IN MULTI-FAITH AUSTRALIA - the official Doctrine Working Group website)
6. Instead of, “The Uniting Church will seek ways in which the baptized may have confirmed to them the promises of God, and be led to deeper commitment to the faith and service into which they have been baptized.”(para. 12) We get, “God delights in diversity and seeks unity” (LIVING WITH THE NEIGHBOUR WHO IS DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN VOCATION IN MULTI-FAITH AUSTRALIA - the official Doctrine Working Group website)
7. Instead of, “She prays that she may be ready when occasion demands to confess her Lord in fresh words and deeds.” (para. 11) we get, “we can afford to "agree to disagree"” (**Speaking to My Paper: The MEANING of DOCTRINE in the LIFE of the UCA** Margaret Tyrer, February 2006 - the official Doctrine Working Group website)
8. Instead of, “The Uniting Church will seek ways in which the baptized may have confirmed to them the promises of God, and be led to deeper commitment to the faith and service into which they have been baptized.” (para. 12), we get, “The unity, which God offers the Church in Christ, is a unity that allows, endorses and enhances difference.” (NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CALLED TO COMMUNITY OF DIFFERENCE: A UNITING CHURCH CHARTER 9th Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia)

I'm sure it is easy to spot examples where the Uniting Church uses some small pieces of the holy language of the church but omits the central Christian gospel of paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union that in Christ our sins are forgiven and we are saved and instead uses language about individuals finding their "spirituality" and everyone living happily in community of "strenuous tolerance" which includes adherents of all religions. And we all know that instead of encouragement of each other in the joy of faith in Christ, there is looming authority to force acceptance.

One thing we can do, perhaps the best thing we can do, is what the Basis lays on us to do "again and again" and that is proclaim the saving work of Christ for each sinner. Look out for some stupid little modern ideas about unity and strenuous tolerance that have no place in a Christian church and never have had a place in the Christian church. They will be seen for what they are, and fall by the wayside. Perhaps we should be ready to take our place in this church and confess with the blind man in John chapter 9, "One thing I know. I was blind and now I see!... I have told you already and you did not listen."

And we can sing together with gusto Charles Wesley's wonderful hymn of 1844, *Ye Servants of God*.

*Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,  
And publish abroad his wonderful name,  
The name all victorious of Jesus extol,  
His kingdom is glorious and rules over all.*

*God ruleth on high, almighty to save,  
And still he is nigh, his presence we have,  
The great congregation his triumph shall sing,  
Ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.*

Paul Langkamp