

FIRE IN THE BELLY

the Holy Spirit in the Basis of Union

To undertake the task of giving an account of the Holy Spirit in the Basis of Union one has to choose between being exhaustively competent or being strategically helpful. For reasons related to the nature of my topic I have chosen to do the latter, i.e. to try to be strategically helpful. There are two reasons for this choice:

1. It is important to state that what we are doing in this seminar is not simply conducting a competent theological exercise. Rather, we are seeking to helpfully assist one another within the Uniting Church to fulfill our calling to participate in the world-wide mission of Christ. All Scripture, Creeds and Confessions have to be viewed in the context of what God is doing between Pentecost and the Second Coming of our Lord. The ethos here is not honing our expressions of truth to a state of theological perfection, but confessing Christ to the glory of God and for the salvation of the world.
2. The second reason for choosing strategic helpfulness over exhaustive competence is that the focus of our attention in this session is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has been poured out by God through our Lord Jesus Christ to clothe us with power from on high that we might be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. That is, to put fire in our belly! When we look at the references to the Holy Spirit in the Basis we find that their focus is largely this missional context.

Mentions of the Holy Spirit in the Basis of Union

It is reassuring, and indeed, exciting to report that the Basis is deeply Trinitarian and thoroughly Christocentric. It also has many pertinent acknowledgements of the gift, the power and the work of the Holy Spirit. To begin with we will just savor these:

Para 1

(The uniting churches) pray that this act (of union) may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and **the Holy Spirit**...(and) 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**.

Para 3

To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth **the Spirit** that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone.

...The Church as **the fellowship of the Holy Spirit** confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of

a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church **the Holy Spirit** as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation...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.

Para 4

...Through human witness in word and action, and in **the power of the Holy Spirit**, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith;

Para 6

...it is Christ who by **the gift of the Spirit** confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.

Para 7

...The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way Christ enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out **the Holy Spirit** at Pentecost. Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in **the power of the one Spirit**.

Para 8

...In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptized people on their way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom. Thus the people of God, through faith and **the gift and power of the Holy Spirit**, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.

Para 10

...The Uniting Church continues to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith, and in **the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit**, from the witness of the Reformers as expressed in various ways...so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.

Para 12

...membership is open to all who are baptized into the Holy Catholic Church in the name of the Father and of the Son and of **the Holy Spirit**.

Para 13

...The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that **the one Spirit** has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.

Para 14

...Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that word, will, through Christ and in **the power of the Holy Spirit**, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word.

...The Presbytery will ordain by prayer and the laying on of hands in the presence of a worshipping congregation. In this act of ordination the Church praises the ascended Christ for conferring gifts upon men and women. It recognises Christ's call of the individual to be his minister; it prays for **the enabling power of the Holy Spirit** to equip the minister for that service.

'It will seek to recognise those endowed with **the gift of the Spirit** for (the) task' of lay preaching, and it will seek to recognise in the congregation those endowed by **the Spirit** with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight. Such members will be called Elders or Leaders.

Para 18

...The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through **the gift of the Spirit**, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

From the above we see that, if the Basis is its basis, the Uniting Church believes emphatically in the Holy Spirit and depends continually upon the Spirit for its faith, its life and its mission.

A closer look at what the Basis of Union says about the Holy Spirit.

The basis tends, not so much to define what we believe, as to describe what God has done, is doing and will do. Listen for this descriptive style as we look at what the Basis says about the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and the Triune God

The Basis is emphatically Trinitarian and Christocentric. The formation of the Uniting Church is 'to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. Baptism is 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. It is 'God in Christ who has given the Holy Spirit...', and Christ who 'poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost'. It is through the Holy Spirit that the Church 'confesses Jesus as Lord...'

Far from the gift of the Holy Spirit being a second, subsequent or separate blessing, 'the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit' is given 'so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded...of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier' and may 'have communion with their Saviour'.

Dr J. Davis McCaughey, in his commentary on the Basis, says of the Trinitarian formula in paragraph one:

There will be a number of references to the Trinity in the Basis. They should not be regarded as merely conventional. It is because God is three in one that we can pray to him: He enables us by his Spirit to respond to that Son in whom he has revealed himself and acted graciously towards us. (*Commentary on the Basis of Union*, J.Davis McCaughey, p. 9)

The Holy Spirit and salvation

Faith is a work of God, who 'has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone' and 'it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.'

This is surely a beautiful expression of the will, the ways, the work and the wonder of God. Dr McCaughey saw this beauty and grace and commented on this section of the Basis thus:

Note again the subject of these phrases: the initiating and supporting power is that of Christ—he himself acts, he by the gifts of the Spirit confers, he awakens, purifies and advances in men the faith and hope. Forgiveness and the rest are not ultimately a matter of human technique, of social setting or psychological conditioning; they depend upon Christ's action, in the name of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Once more we find that the Basis is implicitly Trinitarian and adheres to the principle that 'the whole work of man's salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone'. (McCaughey, p. 34)

This paragraph of the Basis, together with Dr McCaughey's comments upon it, is very relevant to the Uniting Church's current fascination with 'leadership' and all its attendant methodological theories. As far as the Basis is concerned, the growth and life dynamic of the church of God is the proclamation of the Word of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit

The Church is 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' precisely because 'God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the

whole creation.’ It is this ‘promised gift of the Holy Spirit’ which provides the believers with a ‘pledge and foretaste’, i.e. an inward witness enabling them to ‘confess Jesus as Lord’ and ‘Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. It is through this gift of the Spirit that Christ awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone (the benefits of salvation) can be accepted.’ Again ‘the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit’ enables God’s people to continue ‘to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith’...’so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.’

This ‘one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and...there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.’

It is this ‘gift of the Spirit’ which keeps the Church on track so that it does not ‘lose the way’, and ‘the Uniting Church prays (and therefore we are instructed to pray) that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly’ correct error, bring, deeper unity, and use the Church’s worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.

The power of the Holy Spirit

No less than seven times (!) the Basis refers to ‘the power of the Holy Spirit’ indicating that the founders of the Uniting Church did not simply hold to a Trinitarian orthodoxy in a formal sense, but were conscious of the essential, enabling power of God’s Holy Spirit, and they desired the Church to know of this power and to depend upon it.

The uniting churches sought ‘a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit’. The Basis acknowledges that ‘through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith’.

By baptism people are ‘united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit.’

In the Holy Communion ‘the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit,

have communion with their Saviour,

make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,

proclaim the Lord's death,

grow together into Christ,

are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world,

and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.'

All these are done 'through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit'.

It is 'in the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit' that 'the Uniting Church continues to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith, and from the witness of the Reformers and the preaching of John Wesley...'

The Uniting Church 'is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to (his) word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word.' In the ordination of its ministers the Uniting Church, with the laying on of hands, 'prays for the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to equip the minister for that service.

Clearly if the Basis is its basis, the Uniting Church is to do nothing apart from 'the power of the Holy Spirit'. In my days as a theological student I was described by someone as 'an incurable supernaturalist'. We can see, from our present study that, in this respect, I was merely adhering to the Basis of Union.

The Holy Spirit and the Church

It is as 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (a lovely term) that the Church is able to confess 'Jesus as Lord over its own life' and also to confess 'that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.'

Likewise as 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' the Uniting Church is called

'to be a fellowship of reconciliation,'

'a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole,'

and 'an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.'

'God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.' 'The Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal... and 'on the way it...has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.'

The Uniting Church 'acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.' The Church is assured 'that God...will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word.'

‘The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.’

It is important to note that the writers of the Basis and the founders of the Uniting Church did not envisage the construction of yet another Christian denomination. Rather their vision was of a ‘fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ that was part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, and which, ‘through the gift of the Holy Spirit’ sought a ‘deeper unity with other Churches’. I can remember Rev Maurice Wilmshurst explaining that the vision was not of a denomination, but of an ecumenical movement under the banner of ‘Uniting’.

The Holy Spirit and the mission of God

‘Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith’. ‘Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit.’

Thus ‘the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit...are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation’.

Commenting on paragraph 3 of the Basis, Dr Andrew Dutney observes:

It is entirely characteristic of the Basis that, not satisfied with a simple ‘I believe in the Church’, nor with an amplification of this article in traditionally philosophical terms, it called the church to an awareness of itself in relation to the message of Christ. The Basis did not seek to define what the church *is*, but to describe the church in terms of what it *does* in response to the message of Christ. The church works for reconciliation and, pooling the gifts of its members, it can continue its missionary pilgrimage from the event which it proclaims to the fulfilment of that event's promise: the ‘reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation’. And this missionary journey is itself a work of God's grace: the church grows neither faint nor lost, being fed by Christ and led by the Spirit. (Manifesto for Renewal, p101)

The Basis and its roots

Like all living things, the Basis of Union has roots from which it sources its words, its vision and its life. These are ‘the Holy Scriptures’, ‘the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed’, and ‘the witness of the Reformers’ in the founding statements of the three uniting churches. No living thing can be cut off from its roots, and so the Basis constrains the Church to

‘learn’, ‘listen to’ and ‘study’ these root-sources with a ‘need for a constant appeal to Scripture’. It is to do this (you guessed it) ‘in the power of the promised Holy Spirit’.

In recent days the Uniting Church has taken to celebrating diversity in a way that accommodates a plethora of theologies, some of which stray far outside the Basis and its roots—surely a step too far. At the present time the Assembly, as the council entrusted with ‘matters of doctrine’, has been unable or unwilling to define its faith in any meaningful way that would constrain or limit this elastic diversity.

With promise, however, the Basis reassures us that God ‘has never failed to provide witness’ to his word, and that the Uniting Church ‘has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way’. It encourages us, therefore, to pray ‘that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life’. Surely a good prayer for today.

In summary

The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia does not speak of establishing an institution made up of stolid structures, rigid regulations, bastions of bricks and fountain of finance. Nor does it speak of a denominational church that exists in dogmatic distinction to other denominational churches. Rather, it commits us to live and work within ‘the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’, and declares for us our ‘readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church’.

The Basis envisages a ‘fellowship of the Holy Spirit’, a fellowship which ‘affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end’. Together with all God’s people it participates ‘in the mission of Christ in the world’, and has ‘the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation’. By the continual grace of God ‘it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way’.

Thanks be to God!

Where is the Holy Spirit in the Uniting Church today?

Our final reflection should be:

- Where is the Holy Spirit in the message and life of today’s Uniting Church?
- Is the obvious dependency on the gift, power and work of the Spirit, which is conveyed in the Basis, reflected in the life of UC congregations today?
- Have we that same ‘fire in the belly’ that the Basis of Union clearly has, and which it aspires for every congregation to have?

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