

Idolatry and the Uniting Church

Peter Bentley

Have you ever been asked - Do you love the Uniting Church?
I hope you have been able to respond “That is the wrong question”.

I do not believe that the Uniting Church does not now, and has never required the type of ‘love’ that this question usually implies, love that demands unquestioning adherence, and cannot address what is wrong. The call for any Uniting Church member is to love God and our neighbour. I perceive when people ask this question they unwittingly begin to generate an image of the Uniting Church that is separate from the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. It could also arise from the seemingly increasingly arrogant view that is sometimes heard in the Uniting Church, that it is the best church ever and should be leading the rest of the backward churches into the Church of the Future.

The Basis of Union is sometimes used in contemporary debates about sexuality, mainly using the ‘pilgrim people’ reference, but rarely is it deeply considered. In many ways, the Basis actually provides an excellent foundation for any contemporary mission or vision statement of the church, as it is richly grounded in biblical understandings and references to Jesus Christ. *The Basis of Union* helps us look at the appropriate response to being a member of a denomination.

1. The foundation for the church is Jesus Christ and not the institution

Paragraph 3 of *The Basis of Union* acknowledges that the faith and unity of the one church is built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the foundation. Unfortunately, growing institutionalisation has meant that the foundation for many Christians has become the institution. The head of church the church becomes ‘head office’, even though all our councils are supposed to be inter-related.

Our church councils are important, but the framers of the Basis recognised that the faith of the church was more important than its ordering, and that is why discussions started with matters of faith and not matters related to a new institution.

The direction of many parts of the church today is toward a focus on self or individual concerns which can mean the church simply ends up as a self-help group. I have been amused to witness proponents of ‘liberal theology’ bashing Pentecostal theology for its perceived self-orientation and focus, when they themselves focus on personal experience and narrative theology, and unwittingly and unfortunately belittle the uniqueness of the biblical stories.

2. We should avoid ‘using’ Jesus as the basis for maintaining false unity

Like many others in the church I have long been frustrated by the use of Jesus Christ to prop up the idea that we should all remain one in the Uniting Church. “Our unity is in Jesus” is the catchcry. The implication behind using Jesus Christ as the basis of our unity is ‘please forget or dismiss our differences’, after all, who can argue against Jesus?

The difficulty of course with this approach is of course a failure to consider the need for at least some agreement about who this Jesus that is being promoted. How can a denomination promote unity in Jesus Christ when there are now such different and often completely divergent views (compared to the Basis of Union) about Jesus being promoted by some ministers? If Jesus is just an ignorant peasant who never rose from the dead why are we even bothered about the right liturgical order for worship?

While I have often mused about this point, rather than make more personal observations, I refer readers to a very helpful statement from the Confessing Movement, a reform movement within the United Methodist Church. While this denomination has had different union experiences, the issues are startlingly similar.

“Unity in Christ: That The World May Believe”. A statement from **The Confessing Movement Conference: Cincinnati, Ohio, Saturday, Sept 24, 2005**

An extract is below:

A number of options for unity are abroad in our church. Contrasted with understandings that focus on polity or apportionments, on pension plans or principles of inclusivism, we believe unity in the truth of Christ is critically dependent on unity in doctrine. Our official United Methodist teaching is more than adequately articulated in our Constitutional Standards. Proposals for unity that ignore, evade, or minimize our historic standards are inadequate.

Genuine unity in the church is not secured by religious sentiment, sincere piety, tight property clauses, or appeals to institutional authority and loyalty. Not all opinions are compatible with our Doctrinal Standards. False understandings of inclusivism demand acceptance apart from repentance and obedience to the good news of God’s grace for all sinners. This ideology has become a substitute gospel that confuses the church and fractures its unity.

Genuine unity, as a precious gift of the Holy Spirit, is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, witnessed to in the Holy Scripture, summarized in the ecumenical creeds, celebrated in worship and sacraments, demonstrated in common mission, articulated in our teaching, lived out in love, and contended for by the faithful.¹

3. Our denomination is a small part of the One Church

An important paper from the Working Group on Doctrine is found on their website (no date): [Living and Believing within the Unity and Faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church](#)" A commentary on section two of *The Basis of Union*.²

This paper explores *The Basis of Union* from a modern perspective, highlighting the perceived special role of the Uniting Church in the present time. While there is much to commend in this approach, I urge caution as some people may be led to focus on the denomination as the One Church. Any special basis or perceived uniqueness does not provide an opportunity for license. The critical factor for the development of the Basis was its ecumenical foundation and theological reference focussed on the ecumenical faith of the church. This clearly illustrated that the Uniting Church was never founded to be the church around which other churches united, but a movement of the people of God as part of the One Church.

4. Don't assume that being 'progressive' means you are a pilgrim.

From Paragraph 3 of *The Basis of Union*

The Church's call is to serve that end: 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, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. "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. ...

There is significant discussion today about the nature of the 'emerging church', or the future of the church. It has intrigued me to see some proponents of liberal theology portray their ideas, or even their congregation, as the foundation for the new or emerging church. Apart from the fact that there is no statistical basis to support 'liberal theological congregations' as having a major future, this unfounded hope is also at odds with the development of reform movements in history.

I have had curious discussions with UCA members over the last few years, often listening to them berate conservative churches and groups, implying they are sects, exclusive and not open to change. It is worth considering that left wing groups can be actually more intolerant and exclusive than the congregations or groups they actually stereotype. They can also unwittingly, or even deliberately, foster humanist philosophy and even pantheist based theology that bears little connection with *The Basis of Union*.

We should not be complacent and thus acquiescent about these changes, but nor should we be shocked. This is the context in which confessing movements arise. As Confessing Christians we will continue to pray 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 Paragraph 18 of *The Basis of Union*)

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¹. <http://www.confessingumc.org/Sept2005UnityStatement.htm>

². <http://nat.uca.org.au/TD/doctrine/pdf/unityandfaith.pdf>