

COURAGE AND CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST

Jesus and the Gospel
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Prayer: Risen Lord Jesus, as those who believe that the church of the Living God is 'the pillar and bulwark of truth' (1Tim. 3:15), give us good courage us to 'press on' (Phil. 3:14) into Christ's future, and not to lose heart (Deut. 20:3; 2Cor. 4:1). May we be renewed in proclamation confidence as we turn our eyes upon Jesus!

A Golden Age

As we re-examine the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* it is helpful to keep in mind, these words of Andrew Dutney in his book, *Manifesto for Renewal*:

'We don't revisit the Basis of Union looking for a "golden age" of faith and insight. There was no "golden age". That generation was as flawed as any.'¹

Concerning the Joint Commission who helped formulate the Basis of Union, Dutney notes that 'they did not try to bind us to themselves and their day, but to guide us to Christ and the promised day. In so far as there is a "golden age" it doesn't lie behind us. It lies ahead, promised in Christ as the end in view for the whole creation'. Dutney continues: 'We revisit the Basis of Union just so as to be pointed ahead again to that promised end'.

The future belongs to the Lord Jesus. We belong to him. My task is to focus our attention upon **Jesus** and his Gospel, and to help us see how Basis of Union does this too.

1. THE NEWS OF HIS COMPLETED WORK (Paragraph 4)

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus said: "**In the world you face tribulation. But take courage (be of good cheer); I have conquered the world!**" (John 16:33b).

This is one of the many staggering claims that Jesus made. Even prior to his crucifixion, prior to his resurrection he says with courage and confidence: 'I have conquered the world'. He clearly believed his capacity was there—together in communion with the Father, and in the Spirit's power—to *accomplish* the work he had been given to do. Luke 12:50, indicates that although Jesus work in the cross involves *great stress* he intends to accomplish it.

With that in mind let us consider one of the finest, most agreeable sentences in the Basis of Union, from Paragraph 4, '**CHRIST RULES AND RENEWS THE CHURCH**'

*The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work.*²

Jesus was preaching *the news of his completed work*, even before he had completed it.

¹ Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal*, (Media Com Education, 2002), 11

² The 1971 text of the Basis of Union spoke throughout, of the church as 'she', in relationship to 'He'
² The 1971 text of the Basis of Union spoke throughout, of the church as 'she', in relationship to 'He' who is her Lord, namely Jesus Christ. In rightly wanting to update the language in 1992, so as to not only 'command men's attention and awaken their faith' (Para 4), but that of women and children too, the revised Basis of Union hastily, (IMHO), discarded a valuable, relational element of biblical typology, namely that of Christ as Bridegroom and the church as Bride (Eph. 5:32; Rev. 21:2-17; Song of Songs 2:16, Hosea 1-3). The gospel proclaims Christ's intimate love for his Bride, the church. And remember, the BofU points us ahead to that promised *telos*, which is the great Marriage of Christ and his Bride. Once again, our generation is 'as flawed as any'. We are not bound to new blind spots.

To preach this news as our basic topic will affect for good our disposition, our witness. Much of public debate and church conversation centres upon *what might happen*. Imagine if it centred first and foremost upon *what has happened*: the news of Christ's completed work?

The frenzied demand for immediate change 'now' that meets us daily often has more to do with Karl Marx's program than that of Jesus. Reconciliation as a done deal in Christ has a strangeness to it. As Scottish theologian James Denney (1856-1917) wrote long ago:

Reconciliation is not something which is doing; it is something which is done. No doubt there is a work of Christ which is in process, but it has as its basis a finished work of Christ; it is in virtue of something already consummated on His cross that Christ is able to make the appeal to us which He does, and to win the response in which we *receive* the reconciliation.³

Denney said that *unless we can preach a finished work of Christ in relation to sin, a reconciliation or peace which has been achieved independently of us, at an infinite cost, and to which we are called in a word or ministry of reconciliation, we have no real gospel for sinful people at all.*⁴ In many fine words, Barth hammers home the same point:

With his sacrifice He [Jesus] has left the sphere of all that is improper and provisional and done that which is proper and definitive.... what took place was not something provisional, but that which suffices to fulfil the divine will, that which is entire and perfect, that which cannot and need not be continued or repeated or added to or superseded, the new thing which was the end of the old but which will itself never become old, which can only be there and continue and shine out and have force and power as that which is new and eternal.'⁵

Through faith in Christ, as Romans 5:11 has it, 'we have now received reconciliation'.

STORY: In the Rio Olympics, two Australian sisters, Cate and Bronte Campbell were favourites for the 100m freestyle; One of them quoted another gold medallist who told her: "If you are not a valuable person before you win a gold medal, you will be not be one afterwards, either." Strangely these two sisters were leading the swim, but both failed to get even a bronze medal. One said: 'That belief that I hold, is being severely tested right now'. So is ours. So we acknowledge it yet again, Jesus has conquered the world (John 16:33b). The news of his completed work precedes any success or failure that we might experience.

2. THE LIVING LORD (Paragraph 4)

The Living Jesus is the Christ who "comes, addresses, and deals with" his people. Having embedded the matter of Christ's completed work into the BofU, it goes on to say that:

'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'. (Paragraph 4)

Jesus Christ acquits us—the guilty. Jesus gives life to the dead, both personally and to the church community.⁶ Jesus brings into being what otherwise could not exist: the creation, the

³ James Denny, *The Death of Christ*, (Keats Publishing, 1981), 146

⁴ Denny, 146-7

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, §59.2, 281

⁶ The Word gave new life to Lazarus who was dead (John 11). Jesus commanded the church in Sardis who had 'a name of being alive' but were dead, to 'Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death' (Rev. 3:2). We too, must continually respond to Jesus, the Living Word.

church, a revived humanity, a future for human community, the reconciliation of all things, and a renewed creation (John 1:1-3; Eph. 1:22; Rev. 21:1). Interestingly, the BofU begins with ‘the Word of reconciliation’ not the Written Word, or the pre-existent Logos.⁷

Amidst personal criticism, or attack, human beings, churches, communities and nations, can sometimes—but not always—weaken. Dissenters can be silenced. More often however, *Christians* weaken from losing good, habitual contact with the Living Christ. It may be that we have been resisting the Lord’s coming to us, quenching his Spirit and ceasing to respond to his addressing, and *dealing* with us. This is important. Jesus said, “Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.” (Luke 8:18)

In listening to the BofU acknowledge Jesus current activity, namely that he Christ comes to us, addresses us, and deals with us, I was reminded of a potent passage by P.T. Forsyth, directing us to respond to the living Jesus. It is in the footnote below.⁸ Jesus Christ is living. The BofU directs us to ‘the authentic voice’ of The Living Lord, the Jesus of the Bible.⁹

3. THE CHURCH IS BUILT UPON ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST (Paragraph 3)

Jesus, or Christ, or the Lord, or the Son, is mentioned over 60 times in the BofU. But in Paragraph 3 Jesus is set forth as our one foundation. It is the same Jesus that walked in Capernaum, and that we meet in Scripture, that is commended to us by the BofU.

Romans 10:9 says: ‘if you confess with your lips that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’

Jesus is Lord. It is this crucified, risen, saving **Lord** who is built upon in the BofU:

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.

God the Father

Importantly, our confession of Christ as Lord is to ‘the glory of God the Father’. Any reluctance to exalt, sing of, proclaim, or even mention ‘God the Father’ in Uniting Church

⁷ J. Michael Owen, ‘The Word and the Words: How Barthian is the *Basis of Union*?’ in W. & K. Abetz (Ed.), *Swimming Between the Flags*, (Middle Earth Press, 2002), 23.

Owen has pointed out that when the BofU speaks of ‘the Word’ it begins with ‘the word of reconciliation’ (2 Cor. 5:19), and ‘the word of the Cross’ (1 Cor. 1:18), and not with either ‘the written Word’ or ‘the pre-existent Logos’. This origins of this approach was probably derived from Karl Barth’s discussion of the Church’s ‘living Lord’ (CD I, 1 2nd. ET, 88-99)

⁸ P. T. Forsyth, *The Living Christ*, in ‘God the Holy Father, (NCPI, 1897, 1987), 88

Living faith is faith in a living Christ. It is only a living Christ that calls out a living faith. Do not fret yourself examining your faith, trying its limbs, feeling its pulse, watching its colour, measuring its work. See rather that it is set on a living Christ. **Care for that Christ, and He will care for your faith.** Realise a living Christ, and He will produce in you a living faith, He acts in many ways. He acts by His historic character, and He acts by His historic Church. But still more He acts by His Eternal Person and Holy Ghost. This living Lord is invisible, invincible, and immortal; and at the last irresistible; He acts not only on the large course of human events, but directly on living souls and wills, whether humble or refractory; and He rejoices alike in the love of His Father and the love of His redeemed, and in the communion of both. To realise this is more than faith in a historic Christ. Because living faith is faith in a living Christ. If He is not living, faith must dwindle and die. Do you think you can feed living faith on a dead Christ?

⁹ J. Davis McCaughey, in *The Basis of Union: A Commentary*, (MediaCom, 2016), Edited and Revised by Andrew Dutney, 21-22

worship services, in public prayer, theology and theological colleges is entirely out of step with the Uniting Church BofU, and of course the biblical witness. Paragraph 3 goes on to point us to the completed work not only of Jesus the Son, but the completed work of God the Father. Chapter and verse is even cited in the 1992 version. It says:

In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV).

This reconciliation of the world is through the Son, Jesus, and is the work of God the Father. This is crucial for 'the news' we are given to tell. Para 3 of the BofU continues.

In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin.

I recall a Uniting Church Easter article quoting Steve Chalke's claim that to preach Jesus' death as 'penal substitution' was 'tantamount to cosmic child abuse' by God the Father. This kind of thinking rapidly found a welcome among secular critics of Christian theology, and a home among so-called *progressives* too. Articles of this type often set the evangelical alarm bells a-ringing. It need not do so. Even if Chalke's point is half-baked. Uniting Church members belong to a church who's BofU ties God's love to a substitutionary atonement.¹⁰

The BofU proclaims the Father's gift of the Son as being 'in love for the world', and the purpose of Jesus' work is '*to take away the world's sin*'. The BofU sets forth what John the Baptist said as he pointed to Jesus: 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). It affirms what Scripture teaches, that the revelation of God's love is seen in the Son's being *given* as a propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole *world* (1John 2:2 and 1John 4:10). UCA Christians need not ask, "God is Love, why atone?" The BofU gladly throws its lot in with the witness of Scripture, which surely announces: 'God has atoned. Behold what love!'

The Ministry of Jesus is encapsulated in more pithy statements in Paragraph 3.

- *Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love.*
- *Jesus himself in his life and death, made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God had long sought in vain.*
- *In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love.*
- *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.*

When the Elders are called to help lead all members 'into a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world' (Paragraph 15b), it is this ministry of Jesus that is in mind.

The Confessing Response of the Church

Paragraph 3 of the BofU has many more good things to say about Jesus and the gospel. Some of these things are in the context of describing the Church's response to Jesus, as a *fellowship of the Holy Spirit*.

¹⁰ See the essay by Walter and Katherine Abetz, 'Substitutionary Atonement', in Walter & Katherine Abetz (Ed.), *Swimming Between the Flags*, (Middle Earth Press, 2002), 47

- *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.*
- *The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which **Christ** will bring;*
- *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.*

4. PATTERN FOR PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST'S PRESENT WORK AS REIGNING LORD

In the UCA there will always be another ethical issue that we need to consider in the light of what we know of Jesus and the gospel. In this age, this activity will always be incomplete. However, our primary task as Christian people is to continually be renewed and formed, and directed and guided through the news of God's Completed Work in Jesus Christ. Is this a factor regularly acknowledged when gathering as a congregation, Synod or Presbytery?

The former Uniting Church President, James Haire was most helpful at meetings on difficult matters. He would often preface his remarks by saying something like this:

'Jesus Christ was born among us as one of us. He came from the Father, with good news of salvation, calling us to repentance and faith. He has gathered up a sinful humanity into himself, and taken us into his death on a cross, and has borne our judgment, and dealt with our evil, once and for all. He has poured out his Spirit to impart the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. His Word is one of grace, peace and comfort. He is one with us in our struggles. On that basis, it is my view that we should bring this good news to bear in this difficult situation by.... [We can fill in the blank].

The UCA President located the matters of human life within the context of the freshly proclaimed gospel. He did not merely assume the gospel would be the basis of community thinking within the church. He has given us a valuable, even crucial template to emulate.

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; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; **in his own strange way Christ** constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church." (Para 4)

Finally, in the Spirit's power, the UCA needs to be 'guided' by what the Basis of Union says.

The Uniting Church may not profess its faith, nor act, in any way which is overtly opposed to the contents of its *Basis of Union*. In that sense the Uniting Church in Australia is truly a confessional church.¹¹

In the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, as disciples of a crucified Lord, may we pray with confidence, and proclaim with courage, looking to *this* Jesus and his gospel, to see what he yet does, *in his own strange way* as he comes to his people, loves, rules and renews his Bride, the Church in her life and mission to the world.

¹¹ James Haire, 'Forward' in Walter & Katherine Abetz (Ed.), *Swimming Between the Flags*, (Middle Earth Press, 2002), vii