Christology in the Uniting Church in Australia

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Inasmuch as the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) ‘lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’, one might expect that its christology, particularly as expressed in its foundational documents and in subsequent doctrinal decisions of the national Assembly, would not signify any departure from the orthodox christology of the one Christian church. This is the christology primarily of the three formative ecumenical council of the fourth and fifth centuries: Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451). Essentially, in this christology Jesus Christ is acknowledged to be truly divine and truly human, of one being (ousia) with God (the Father) and of one being with humankind, usually expressed in summary form as belief in the ‘two natures’ of Jesus Christ. Certainly, the Basis of Union declares that the UCA regards the ancient creeds of the church, including the Nicene Creed, as ‘authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith.’ (§9) This formulation of the status of the creeds does not specify within what limits, if any, Christians of another day may use different language to declare their faith. There would clearly have to be some degree of continuity between what was then declared and what might now be said.

For a complex set of reasons, it is now much more difficult for a church like the UCA to declare what it believes about any doctrinal matter, including its christological beliefs. Notwithstanding the authority of the national Assembly to determine matters of doctrine (cf. §15e), the right of individual congregations and members of the UCA to claim that the Assembly does not speak for them is not infrequently invoked. Unlike most churches that describe themselves as ‘confessional’ or have a strong teaching office, the UCA is theologically (and liturgically) heterogeneous. Whether this is to be celebrated or lamented is, for the moment, not the issue. What is believed, proclaimed and taught about Jesus Christ covers a very broad theological spectrum. Some of it, one cannot help noticing from the church press and from sermons heard and read, is simply superficial. Where it could claim to be theologically more serious, the commitment to being contextual and contemporary—in itself entirely proper—far outweighs a clear commitment to continuity with the classic christological and trinitarian faith of the church catholic and reformed.

It is pertinent from time to time to ask where the UCA is going, theologically speaking, not only as expressed in decisions of church councils but inasmuch as a sensus fidelium can be discerned. One issue that has preoccupied this church for most of its 30-year history is the status and function of the Basis of Union, in particular whether it was merely a document for the establishment of the Uniting church or

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1 Uniting Church in Australia, The Basis of Union, 1992 Edition, 52. (Hereafter, references to the Basis of Union will be given in the main text of the essay, in brackets after the words quoted or the matter referred to.)
whether it has an ongoing authority. Initially, ministers, elders and some others had to ‘adhere’ to the Basis, understood as ‘willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis.’ (§14, passim) In a later revision of the service of ordination the relevant vow required only that ministers and others in particular positions of responsibility would, in their life and work within the Uniting Church, be ‘guided’ by the Basis, which can only be interpreted as a significant move in the direction of vagueness. One wonders whether the theology of the Basis, not least its christology, is permitted to cut any ice in the faith and work of the UCA. It is difficult to be confident that it is. In a recent article Geoff Thompson, writing about our culture as a whole, speaks of the ‘nullification of theology as an intellectually potent discourse’. One fears that this applies also to the culture of the Uniting Church.

The formulation of church doctrine is a very human work, always fraught, always provisional. There is no single way to ‘do’ doctrine. No-one, not even a doctrinal archaeologist, imagines that doctrine comes to us pure, dropping into our laps from the sky. It is also an ecclesial enterprise. Anthony Thiselton rightly says that doctrine is ‘not simply a matter of individual belief but also of communal understanding, transmitted traditions, wisdom, commitment, and action.’ In the UCA it is especially the transmitted traditions and the wisdom of what we have received that is at risk. This is not to diminish the importance of an exploratory theology that wrestles with new theological and moral challenges. New challenges call for fresh thinking. It is never adequate to respond to theological questions simply by invoking some patristic opinion, conciliar definition or confessional article. But no church lives in isolation. As an expression of the communion of saints, every church owes itself and other churches the gift of serious consultation, synchronically and diachronically, with theological voices from other places and other times.

In the church’s belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God, Saviour and Lord, the pluriform writings of the New Testament are, of course, foundational and irreplaceable. But they must be permitted to exercise their foundational function through the full breadth and depth of their christological affirmations, whether early or late, high or low, descriptive or doxological, and whether in narrative or epistolary form. If the ‘modern’ temptation to privilege Jesus the proclaimer at the cost of Jesus the one proclaimed proves irresistible to twenty-first century Christians, we will end up with one-sided and superficial accounts of him. Equally, if we do not allow our reading of the New Testament to come through the prism of the formative doctrinal tradition of the early Christian centuries, we are likely to find ourselves in the same doctrinal cul-de-sacs as those who read the New Testament too narrowly in the past. Pannenberg writes, ‘The neglect of the Christological tradition generally has as a consequence that one thinks he finds the present significance of Jesus in generalisations of certain aspects of his appearance that are

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astonishingly superficial and hasty.⁵ There is no way forward that avoids digging deep into the transmitted traditions that have their roots in the faith of the first Christians and in the conciliar formulations of their descendents. In particular, this means continual engagement with three central christological questions: who is Jesus Christ in relation to God? Who is Jesus Christ in relation to humankind? Who is Jesus Christ in God’s salvific, reconciling action in the world.⁶

The christology of the *Basis of Union*

The *Basis of Union* is not a confession of faith in the style of the classic Protestant confessional documents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, notably the Scots Confession, the Helvetic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Confession, to name only a few. It does not define the faith of the Uniting Church in the same detail as the earlier ones. Nor does it have the strong polemical style of the latter; it does not define the faith of the UCA in opposition to the faith of other churches. On the contrary, it declares that the UCA will live and work within the faith of the one Christian church. (§2) However, the *Basis of Union* is the closest thing we have to a confession of faith, and it does set out a particular understanding of the Christian faith. It certainly has a strong christology; Jesus Christ has a central place in it, and the church’s belief about Christ is set out explicitly in some detail. Perhaps, if the *Basis*—or some new theological ‘basis’ for a further union with another church—were to be written at the present time, it might be expressed in more explicitly trinitarian language. This remark should not be over-stated; the second sentence of §1 is explicitly and strongly trinitarian.⁷ In both historical and theological terms, there is a strong connection between christological and trinitarian statements; they are intrinsically related.

An essay on christology in the Uniting Church should not ignore the christology of the *Basis of Union*. There are references to Jesus Christ in 11 of the 18 paragraphs of the *Basis*, very solidly so in the first, third and fourth paragraphs. Our particular concern is with §3 of the *Basis of Union*, which has been described as ‘the most fundamental Paragraph in the whole Basis’.⁸

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’ (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world’s sin.

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⁶ Thompson, ‘A theological future?’, 34–35, recalls a warning given by the Joint Commission on Church Union in its report, *The Faith of the Church* (1959): ‘We in our day neglect at our peril [the] great words of believing men of other ages. If we in Australia are to avoid an idiosyncratic faith, we must give careful attention to the faith of the Church of the ages.’
⁷ ‘They [the three churches entering into union] pray that this act may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’ See also the last lie of §9 (on the creeds).
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.

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'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 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.

This paragraph is starkly different from its counterpart in the Westminster Confession of 1647, with which ministers of the Uniting Church who were formerly Presbyterian ministers will have been familiar. Chapter 8 of this Confession, entitled 'Of Christ the Mediator', consists of eight concise paragraphs in classic Reformed style. Whether one finds its theological formulation palatable or not, it can only be described as doctrinally 'thick'. By contrast, paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union carries its theology very lightly. Many things declared in the former are not mentioned in the latter. The main reason for this is that the Basis was never intended to be a comprehensive declaration of Christian belief and should not be expected to look and sound like one. Another reason is that by the middle of the twentieth century some significant changes in both content and form would have been regarded as essential.

The Basis commits the Uniting Church to continue to be open to 'the witness of the Reformers as expressed in various ways in the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and the Savoy Declaration (1658).’ (§10) (It also makes reference to the Sermons of John Wesley.) In this connection it emphasises 'the centrality of the person and work of Christ the Justifier'. As §3 declares, the faith and unity of the church—the whole church and thus also the Uniting Church—are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ.'

Paragraph 3 of the Basis makes a number of affirmations about the church's faith in Jesus Christ, which can most succinctly be set out in the following points:
• we preach Christ, the crucified risen one; and confess him as Lord;
• in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself; he takes away the world’s sin;
• in his life and death Christ made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God sought from humankind;
• God raised Jesus to live and reign, and thus completed his witness to God on earth;
• in him God began a new order of righteousness and love;
• Christ is head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, a new humanity;
• Christ will bring the final consummation of all things;
• Christ feeds the church, on the way to the city to come, with word and sacraments.

The Basis does not mention—let alone stipulate—any one interpretation of these beliefs. For example, there is an unambiguous reference to the doctrine of reconciliation, but no particular understanding of the atonement is set forth. This was not felt by those who drafted the text of the Basis to be necessary; their view was that, having set out the general shape and content of the faith on which the three churches would unite, they would thereafter together seek to express the fulness of the faith.\(^9\)

However, lest it be thought that nothing more is said about the ‘one Lord Jesus Christ’ in the Basis, some additional credenda need to be mentioned. In §1 Jesus Christ is declared to be the living head of the Church and to have died for the world. It is also said that we await with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, when he will reign for ever (§1). In §4 a further six affirmations about Jesus Christ are set out:

• he comes, addresses and deals with people through the news of his completed work;
• he is present among his people when he is preached; he is the Word of God; he acquits the guilty, gives life to the dead, and brings into being what could not exist;
• he reaches out to command attention and awaken faith;
• he calls people into discipleship;
• he constitutes, rules and renews his church.

For the sake of giving as full an account of these christological affirmations as possible, a further list of four from different paragraphs should be given:

• Christ himself acts in and through everything that the church does in obedience to his commandment to proclaim the gospel in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; he confers the promised forgiveness, fellowship, new life and new freedom (§6);
• in baptism Christ incorporates people into his body and enables them to participate in his own baptism, i.e. in his death and resurrection and in the pouring out of the Spirit (§7);
• Christ signifies and seals his continuing presence with his people in Holy Communion, feeding his baptised people on the way to the final inheritance of the kingdom of God (§8);

\(^9\) As a theological student in the mid-1960s, I clearly remember how strongly this point was made by Professor George Yule, an indefatigable advocate for this view.
• in order that the apostolic witness to Christ is maintained in the church, Christ confers gifts on people and calls people to be his ministers. (§14a)

These three lists of christological affirmation from the Basis of Union amount to a set of very substantial statements about the UCA's belief in (and about) Jesus Christ. A strong christology can be built on these affirmations, addressing the central questions about the identity of Jesus Christ. This is reinforced by the requirement that ministers maintain 'the apostolic witness to Christ' in the church. (§10a) If, as Karl Barth argued, a major task of theology is to enable the church to test the fidelity of its preaching and teaching to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, these statements from the Basis would constitute a very good test of what is proclaimed, in preaching and in teaching, as well as informally, in the Uniting Church.  

Modern approaches to the Identity of Jesus Christ

What is at issue is the identity of Jesus Christ: how he can most adequately be worshipped, preached, discussed and understood as the basis for our life together as a church and our work in the world. The question of his identity and how to name it is not the same for us as it was 250 years ago when the Gospels were first approached with a hermeneutic of suspicion and then rejected almost totally as reliable witness of what Jesus had been like, had said and done. From then on historical study and the theological convictions of the New Testament writers stood as polar opposites. In the eighteenth century Reimarus contrasted the ideas of Jesus, whom he regarded as an apocalyptic visionary, with the fraudulent teachings of the disciples, who invented the story of the resurrection and stole the body of Jesus as so-called 'proof'. More memorably, half a century later, David Strauss first made the now-familiar distinction between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith', the relation between whom he saw in terms of sharp discontinuity. From then on it was war between the putative certainties of history and the felt tyranny of dogma.

The historians, as became obvious in the course of the nineteenth century, could never agree on the identity of the historical Jesus. Hundreds of 'Lives' of Jesus were written, each claiming to have captured Jesus' real identity. It continues in our own time, with no greater consensus than before. In 1985 Robert Funk brought together a group of scholars under the name of the Jesus Seminar, whose aim was to ascertain 'the real facts about the person to whom various Christian gospels refer.' The group sees Jesus not as an eschatological prophet, along the lines of John the Baptist, but as a wisdom teacher. In Funk's words, Jesus was a teller of 'parables and aphorisms'. Reminiscent of Reimarus, he writes, 'after Jesus died, his disciples, who had not understood his sophisticated notion of time, reverted to what they had learned from John [the Baptist] and assigned that same point of view to Jesus. This appears to be the

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12 Robert W. Funk, Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium, Australian and New Zealand ed., Sydney, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, p. 145. He adds that Jesus 'may well have been a wisdom teacher—a sage.' (70).
best explanation for the contradictory evidence provided by the gospels.\textsuperscript{13}

Other scholars, e.g. E. P. Sanders, think Jesus undoubtedly shared the eschatological (i.e. apocalyptic) world-view of his time.\textsuperscript{14} Tom Wright writes of Jesus living in a climate of ‘intense eschatological expectation’.\textsuperscript{15} Dale Allison sees Jesus as a millenarian prophet, who took up ideas that were part of his heritage: the final judgment, the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of Israel.\textsuperscript{16} I think they are much closer to the truth about Jesus; but that is not the main point. What is striking is the close resemblance of the ideas of the Jesus Seminar to the nineteenth century scholars who thought that the most reliable way of finding the real identity of Jesus was through a historical study uncontaminated by later theological views about Jesus as a person and a salvific figure. The Christ of Christian faith was not believed to contribute anything plausible to the understanding of the historical Jesus. Francis Watson notes that ‘for many scholars, there must be a sharp dividing line between the real, authentic, historical Jesus and the later spurious Christ images that shaped the course of Christian dogmatic development.’\textsuperscript{17}

A climate change of major proportions has come upon us in the last two centuries, in which a hermeneutic of suspicion has largely displaced a hermeneutic of reception. Grand, encompassing narratives are no longer permitted; \textit{differance}, the continual displacement of meaning, is privileged.\textsuperscript{18} Nothing is stable, least of all the central convictions of Christian faith. The ‘metaphysical prejudice’ of materialism\textsuperscript{19} has an equally prejudicial counterpart in historical relativism, in which contingent historical events cannot be the bearers of absolute truth.\textsuperscript{20} This predisposes us to be suspicious of claims like the central claim of the Gospel of John that ‘the Word became flesh; he made his home among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.’ (1:14, REB) What I am critical of is not the rigorous questioning of biblical and theological traditions—after all, we cannot have the benefit of a historical grounding of our faith without the risk that it may also unsettle this faith—but the predisposition to distrust those traditions simply because they speak of God or of a Christ who is confessed as \textit{vere Deus, vere homo}, truly God, truly human.

\textit{The Basis of Union} declares faith in Jesus Christ, the crucified risen one, the Saviour, the Lord, the head

\textsuperscript{13} Funk, \textit{Honest to Jesus}, 146.
\textsuperscript{14} E. P. Sanders, \textit{Jesus and Judaism}, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985, pp. 124 and 375, n. 3.
\textsuperscript{15} N. T. Wright, \textit{Jesus and the Victory of God}, London, SPCK, 1996, p. 96. See also Marcus J. Borg \& N. T. Wright, \textit{The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions}, London, SPCK, 1999, ch. 3 in which Wright sees Jesus as a prophet, announcing the kingdom of God and believing that ‘the kingdom was breaking into Israel’s history in and through his own presence and work’. (37)
\textsuperscript{17} Francis Watson, \textit{‘Veritas Christi: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One’s Way’}, \textit{Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage}, ed. Beverley Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008, p. 102. He adds that this ‘stems not from considerations of historical plausibility but from a projection of contemporary concerns back into the first century.’
\textsuperscript{19} The phrase is from David Bentley Hart, \textit{Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies}, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 103.
of the church and all things, the inaugurator of a new humanity, who will bring the final consummation of all things. This has been the faith of the church from the earliest years of post-resurrection faith. Guiding metaphors and explanatory theories are secondary; we can agree or disagree about those. But the central credenda belong to the core of Christianity as a faith. Larry Hurtado proposes that we consider not only christology, the beliefs that took shape after Jesus’ death and resurrection, but what he calls Christ-devotion, since this includes a wider range of ways in which Jesus figures in early Christian communities, especially in worship. It includes how Jesus is addressed and how devotional practices take shape. Underlying his study is the conviction that very early in the church’s existence ‘Christians referred and related to Jesus [in ways] that seem to constitute treating him as a “divine” figure, or at least a figure of unique significance in God’s plan.’

Gradualist or evolutionary accounts of this phenomenon are quite inadequate for the evidence.

Receiving Christ clothed with his gospel

At issue in the quest for the true knowledge of Jesus Christ is whether the church’s theological tradition, as distinct from modern historical scholarship, is a justifiable, permissible source. Can the modern rejection of Christian confessional writing in the New Testament be regarded as determinative? Must we teach one way in the University and another way in the church and its theological colleges? Are the only options the secular historical approach, once presumed to be objective, and the removal of faith-claims from any historical grounding at all, as Bultmann proposed? This would be fatal for the gospel; Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued persuasively that ‘history is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology.’ Tom Wright confidently asserts that ‘authentic Christianity … has nothing to fear from history.’ One might want to distinguish the risk that the rug will be completely pulled away from under faith, which is most unlikely, from the risk that some of our claims about Jesus may need to be revised, which is always a possibility. In the face of this latter risk we must be engaged in (or promote and fund) the best scholarship possible.

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21 Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003, pp. 3–4 and throughout. Obviously, this has implications not only for christology but also for the development of a trinitarian understanding of God.

22 Larry W. Hurtado, How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005, pp. 27–28, lists six specific devotional practices that signal Jesus’ divine status: hymns about Jesus as part of Christian worship; prayer to God ‘through’ Jesus and ‘in Jesus’ name; ‘calling upon the name of Jesus’, especially in baptism, healing and exorcism; the common meal where Jesus presides as ‘Lord’ of the gathered community; ritual ‘confession’ of Jesus in worship; and Christian prophecy understood as oracles of the risen Christ.

23 Bultmann, Jesus belongs to Judaism; ‘Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian kerygma; i.e., a kerygma proclaiming Jesus Christ … to be God’s eschatological act of salvation.’ Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, trans. Kendrick Grobel, Vol. 1, London, SCM Press, 1965, p. 3. Apart from the fact that he existed, the details of Jesus’ life are of no real interest to Christianity. More specifically, Bultmann asserts that ‘what God has done in Jesus Christ is not an historical fact which is capable of historical proof. The objectifying historian as such cannot see that an historical person (Jesus of Nazareth) is the eternal Logos, the Word.’ Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology, London, SCM Press, 1960, p. 80.

24 Pannenberg, Basic Questions in Theology, p. 15.

25 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 123. ‘We cannot retreat into a private world of “faith” which history cannot touch (what sort of a god would we be “believing” in if we did?).’ (122)
Katherine Sonderegger argues that Christian worship and theology give us knowledge of Jesus Christ. She quotes with approval a sentence from John Calvin: ‘this, then, is the true knowledge of Christ, if we receive him as he is offered by the Father: namely, clothed with his gospel.’ In other words, we do not have him neutrally, as is the case with any figure from the past. We can set out a lot of facts that describe Jesus, facts any secular historian could discover. This is a ‘knowledge by description’, and Jesus would be the one who fits such descriptions. But this is not yet to ‘know’ Jesus. To know him properly is to know him as who and what he is for us, which is to say as Saviour and Lord. As Sonderegger says, ‘Jesus is more deeply known in his image as Redeemer, and … “Redeemer” is essential to the incarnate Word, revealed in Scripture.’ Melanchthon gave this point classic expression in the sixteenth century: ‘To know Christ is to know his benefits.’ This is certainly more than what can be asked of the historian working simply by the rules of his/her historical craft, who can only report that certain things, most extraordinary things, were said about Jesus, and even that worship and prayer were addressed to him. But it leaves out what Christian faith takes to be central about the identity of Jesus: that he was (and is) the Redeemer, the crucified risen one, the Lord of his community, the one who has come and will come, who still reaches out to humankind to command attention and awaken faith. Faith ‘knows’ this through the community of faith, from its earliest beginnings till now. This is what the church is charged with declaring to the world ‘in season or out of season’ (2 Tim 4:2, REB).

More explicitly, Francis Watson writes, ‘For Christians, Jesus’ true identity is established above all by the four-fold canonical Gospel. It is within this sacred textual space that we discover who Jesus is and who we are in relation to him.’ His argument is that critical scholarly work on the so-called ‘historical Jesus’ can be integrated into the canonical image of the biblical Christ. The question is whether the converse also holds: whether the ‘historical Jesus’ project can make room for what Christian faith holds as central: that Jesus is ‘the embodiment of divine saving action addressed to the whole of humankind, and not just one historical figure among many.’ Without such a relation to God he is either of no theological significance at all or a significance so attenuated as to take the heart out of a biblical and credal Christianity. The New Testament’s identification of the relation between Jesus and the God he called ‘Father’ is not marginal for Christian faith. To rule it out of an account of Jesus’ identity a priori is not only to get Jesus wrong but also to change the identity of God. Jesus ‘cannot be detached from his own reception by his first followers in the decades following his death.’

Historical scholarship alone will not settle the question whether Jesus was ‘sent from God’, whether

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he is the incarnate Logos, or whether he embodies in a definitive way the divine economy of salvation.\textsuperscript{34} It is inconceivable that the church should regard such claims as negotiable. For the church to deny what has been at the core of its belief about Jesus from the beginning would be to take the sword to its own heart. Moreover, the story of Jesus is not only a story about Jesus and his response to his contemporaries and his circumstances, but also the story of a self-identifying salvific act of God. To deny this and to abandon the church’s christological tradition would be to lay the axe to the root of the gospel; there would be nothing left worthy of being called ‘Good News’. The church would no longer be the \textit{ekklesia tou Theou}; at most it would be a sect within Judaism, distinguished by its interest in a Jewish prophet executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, Roman Procurator of Judaea in the reign of Tiberias.

A way forward

In 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave some lectures on christology which have since been widely read and admired.\textsuperscript{35} Procedurally, he makes the present Christ—who Christ is for us now—the central concern of christology. Only in a second step does he consider how Jesus was understood in the history of christological reflection. The question for Bonhoeffer was how to conceive of the presence of Jesus Christ as a person, as distinct from a spiritual influence across the centuries. His answer was that Christ is present as the God-man. ‘The contemporaneity and presence of Jesus Christ in the church are predicated of the one whole person, of the God-man’.\textsuperscript{36} For Bonhoeffer, this one ‘God-man’ is the starting point of christology. ‘I do not know who this man Jesus Christ is unless I say at the same time “Jesus Christ is God”, and I do not know who the God Jesus Christ is unless I say at the same time “Jesus Christ is man”.’\textsuperscript{37} From this profoundly orthodox centre, Bonhoeffer goes on to push out the boundaries of christological thought, more so in later writing than in these lectures. But he does not take leave of these fundamental convictions.\textsuperscript{38} He has no desire to get bogged down in speculative discussion of the ‘two natures’ of Christ; it is not about what Bonhoeffer called ‘the alchemy of the incarnation’; that is unfathomable.\textsuperscript{39} But if we take our stand on the of the convictions of the New Testament writers, sharpened and defined through patristic discussion and conciliar statement, we will do as Bonhoeffer did and undertake the task of trying to understand the identity of Jesus Christ as \textit{vere Deus, vere homo}, truly God and truly human, even though the ‘alchemy’ of the conjunction will remain insoluble.

A few years ago Christoph Schwöbel wrote an essay in which he argued that ‘modern christology is in a state of crisis.’\textsuperscript{40} The symptoms of this, he proposed, were a series of antinomies into which christological

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\textsuperscript{35} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Christ The Center}.

\textsuperscript{36} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Christ The Center}, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{37} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Christ The Center}, p. 46.


\textsuperscript{40} Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Christology and Trinitarian Thought’, \textit{Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act}, ed. Christoph Schwöbel, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1995, p. 113.
discussion had fallen. He did not suggest that this crisis could be solved by a theological traditionalism, simply turning the theological clock back, or by a theological modernism, simply discarding the classical christological paradigms. The first antimony is the radical separation of historical thinking about Jesus of Nazareth and thinking about him in ultimate or eternal terms, in short, in relation to God. It is a way of thinking in which the contingent and the metaphysical are kept apart and the focus is on the one, to the exclusion of the other. A second antimony polarises what Bonhoeffer distinguished but did not separate, *viz.* present experience and historical study. Schwöbel detects not only scepticism about the possibility that events in the past can determine the meaning of life in the present, but also a strong sense of an unbridgeable gulf between the language, the knowledge and even the reality of Christianity’s foundational documents, the conciliar decisions of the first five centuries and our present attitudes and beliefs. A third antimony breaks the conjunction of being and meanings; in christological terms, the ontological claim of Jesus’ divine and human identity, on the one hand, and the ways in which Jesus Christ may be found to be a significant influence on (or have a salvific importance for) people’s lives today, on the other. Schwöbel suggests that this antimony, one of the crisis-symptoms of modern christology, confronts us with the choice between a non-soteriological ontology (being without meaning) and a non-ontological soteriology (meaning without being).

Like most churches in the Western world, the Uniting Church in Australia is theologically heterogeneous. To borrow a term from another tradition, the UCA appears to like being regarded as a ‘broad church’, having room for a wide range of theological opinion. As far as the theology of the person and work of Jesus Christ is concerned, there is a wide spectrum of belief. In the theological colleges of the UCA the weight of theological opinion in this foundational area of doctrine appears to be in the middle range, neither as ‘liberal’ nor as ‘conservative’ as different parts of the church would like. The UCA is perceived, on the whole, to be theologically and morally on the ‘liberal’ side, but every generalisation about this would need to be qualified. In a survey a few years ago more members of the UCA expressed uncertainty about the deity of Jesus (47%) than those who said they believed in it (36%). (Of those who attended at least monthly 72% expressed belief and 24% were unsure.) Relatively few said they did not believe. It would be equally difficult to generalise about the christology of the sermons preached throughout the length and breadth of the UCA. Probably, the full range of theological opinion would be evident, but there would be regional differences. Insofar as the ‘progressive’ and the orthodox voice is organised, there is vigorous expression of the theological persuasions and convictions of both sides. Controversial theological thinkers like John Selby Spong, Robert Funk, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and Francis MacNab, all of whom have expressed their christological ideas, have a strong following in some

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41 Schwöbel, ‘Christology and Trinitarian Thought’, pp. 115–119.
42 Schwöbel, ‘Christology and Trinitarian Thought’, p. 117.
43 Schwöbel, ‘Christology and Trinitarian Thought’, p. 119.
44 These labels, though frequently used, are very seldom well defined and are relatively indeterminate in content. In the case of my own Theological College we would be more likely to have been criticised in the past as too ‘liberal’; these days it is probably more likely that we would be criticised for being too ‘conservative’.
45 See the *Wellbeing and Security Survey* by Edith Cowan University, Deakin University, Anglicare (Sydney) and CCLS Research, 2002. I owe this reference to Philip Hughes, Christian Research Association.
parts of the UCA. Again, it is unclear what can be concluded from such an observation.

It has been suggested in this essay that the *Basis of Union* describes the person and work of Jesus Christ in terms that are orthodox, though largely not in technical language, but also of a kind that funds a contemporary discipleship and missiology. The language is that of the mid-twentieth century but the theology is consistent with the apostolic witness. It seeks to be informed by the theology of Reformation confessional documents and the writings of John Wesley, and through them to be directed again and again to the Scriptures and the centrality of Jesus Christ in them. Guided by the *Basis*, members and ministers of the Uniting Church could not fall into the polarised thinking described by Schwöbel in his antinomies. The *Basis* speaks not only of Jesus as a figure of the past but also of the risen Christ who lives and reigns now. This risen Christ is head over all things, the beginning of a new humanity; he is the living head of the church, present among his people, acquitting the guilty, conferring forgiveness and awakening faith. This Jesus Christ will also bring the final consummation of all things. Clearly, this is no timid, truncated christology, but one that is rich and robust. Its language is restrained but its affirmations are ‘high’. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and the church confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. Moreover, the *Basis* encourages scholarship, not only to interpret the Scriptures faithfully but also to enable the church to ‘confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds’. (§11)

The *Basis of Union* describes and encourages a christology that is biblical and balanced, faithful to the ecumenical traditions of the church, and open to the distinctive heritage of the churches which came together to form the Uniting Church. Guided by the *Basis*, the theological leaders and teachers of the UCA will not easily fall victim to the binary thinking that makes historical and theological approaches to the identity of Jesus alternative rather than complementary. Much has been gained from employing a hermeneutic of suspicion in theology generally: neglected truths, silenced voices and the awareness that truth often went hand in hand with power. But the christology of the church, in the hands of scholarly believers, has not been discredited in the way often claimed by ‘liberal’ theologians. A hermeneutic of reception does not have to be comprehensively displaced by a hermeneutic of suspicion; each can be allowed to be a challenge to the other. If affirmations about Jesus Christ as the embodiment of a salvific action of God in and for the world should not be made with an unquestioning assertiveness, neither do they need to be made minimally and apologetically, as if there could be no grounds for such belief. The way forward is not to replace a theologically ‘thick’ account of the identity of Jesus Christ with one that is theologically ‘thin’. As Bonhoeffer saw with great clarity, the *vere homo* cannot be detached from the *vere Deus* without the loss of the gospel. Every statement seeking to unpack this claim about Jesus may leave us with questions or fail to convince us, but the claim itself cannot be circumvented. This classic affirmation of the true deity and the true humanity of Jesus is not the end of the quest to know who he is; it is the heuristic principle with which to approach the task of understanding him. It is not the full content of our answer; it frames the question with which we continually set out.
South Wales and two with history as a social and cultural force in Australia.

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