Does the Uniting Church have a theological future?

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It is probably a rather strained analogy, but discussions about of the future of the church have certain psychological and cultural parallels with sex. Like sex, the future of the church can become obsessive: few meetings of the various councils of the church don’t end up, at some stage, talking about the future of the church. Like sex, the future of the church sells: drop the ‘future of the church’ into the title of a book and a market is guaranteed. There is one point, however, where the analogy breaks down. In the controversies of recent decades the church has at least—and at last—began to think about sex theologically. I am not so sure that the same can be said of discussions about the future of the church: such discussions tend to sit rather lightly to theology.

At the risk of that comment being dismissed as a heavy-handed appeal for the theological high-ground, let me say that to the extent that it constitutes accurate and fair commentary, the situation is not the result of any particular institutional or personnel failures peculiar to the Uniting Church. Rather, that this is the case is the result of long-standing and powerful cultural forces equally at work in the various mainstream Christian traditions.

In what follows, through reference to those forces, I want to make a case for re-framing the discussion about the future of the church. In asking the admittedly idiosyncratic question about whether the UCA has a ‘theological future’, I am actually asking two distinct questions. Firstly I am asking about the kind of theology that emerges from the UCA’s own roots. Second, I am asking whether the church is able to understand itself theologically as it faces the future. Ultimately, the second question is the far more important one. But much spade work has to be done in addressing the first in order even to begin answering the second. So, the first two sections of the paper will be devoted to making an argument that the marginal role of theology in discussions about the future of the church is itself a by-product of—and inseparable from—the marginalisation of Christianity in western cultures in recent centuries. Then, drawing on the confessional approach of the Joint Commission on Church Union (JCCU), I will offer an alternative account of theology and its role in the church. With that foundation laid, I will (more briefly) make a proposal for how the church can face the future theologically.

Framing the church’s cultural location

That our discussions about the future of the church sit lightly to theology is a phenomenon widespread in the western churches and is, in fact, an inevitable side-effect of the marginalisation of Christianity to the edges of western culture. If for present purposes we understand ‘theology’ in a very general and loose sense as the discourse by which Christianity engages its foundational texts, articulates its truth claims and organises its beliefs, then the church’s theological work was itself a central target in the modern
West's rejection of Christianity.

Yet the details of the narrative of Christianity's tumultuous 300-year long interface with modern western culture seldom inform or shape discussions within the church about our cultural marginalisation. Instead, our minority position is explained by a quite different, far more condensed, and much less probing narrative which begins only in the recent past and, perhaps for that very reason, has successfully established itself as a frequently invoked framework for discussions about the church's immediate future.

Psychologically this narrative is immensely powerful. Historically and sociologically (at least within its own timeframe), it is indisputable. Theologically, however, it is completely misleading. It goes like this...

Since the middle of the twentieth century the mainstream western church has experienced drastic and seemingly irreversible numerical decline. The decline continues because the church has failed to keep up with a range of social changes. So, caught in a self-inflicted time warp, the church makes itself inaccessible to the contemporary world. Where contemporary culture is adept at forming communities through open-ended networks, the church—it is said—is tied to institutionalism; where baby-boomers confidently challenge and reject received authorities, the church—it is said—remains authoritarian; where postmoderns crave experience over knowledge, the church—it is said—remains doctrinaire; where Gen Xs and Gen Ys are flexible and able easily to absorb change, the church—it is said—is stuck with a suffocating rigidity.

There is a mindset in the church which deals with this gulf by saying, in effect, 'If we can only catch up with these cultural trends, we will be able to turn the ship around'.1 (Ironically, this mindset knows no theological boundaries. It easily crosses from radicals to conservatives; it just picks up different and often competing cultural trends as it does so.)

The problem with this mindset is twofold. First, it uncritically assumes that the numerical and institutional decline of Christianity in the western middle-classes during the latter-half of the twentieth century is the presenting problem facing the contemporary church. It is my contention that fully to understand the situation of the contemporary church requires us to see that this is not at all the presenting problem. The persistent assumption that it is, reflects a failure to grasp the extent of what has happened in western culture during the last 300 years. The story of denominational decline and the strategies for

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1 The rhetoric and ethos of this whole approach is startlingly captured in the title of the recent book by Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, i.e. Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2007). Similar approaches can be found in works of Tom Bandy and Leonard Sweet, both of whom are widely read within the Uniting Church. See, for example, Thomas G. Bandy, Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches, upgrade edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) and Leonard Sweet, Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). I do not deny that there are useful lessons to be learnt from these latter two authors. Nor am I suggesting that their proposals can be completely reduced to what I’ve described as the 'turn-the-ship-around' mindset. I am, however, drawing attention to what I think is their appeal to the relatively narrow historical perspective which distorts their cultural analysis, and their over-dependence on the psychology of change as the resource for motivating the church.
its reversal may well generate much energy, interest and agitation inside the church. In reality, however, it is a very small story. The really big story is that western cultures have broken free of Christianity and cultivated forms of life that have no need of God, let alone the church.\(^2\) They have done so confidently, happily\(^3\) and to all intents and purposes permanently.\(^4\) As a result the churches have been stripped of the supports provided by Christendom for over a millennium, and now stand culturally, institutionally and intellectually naked. The turn-the-ship-around mindset believes it can cover this nakedness, but the new clothes are often embarrassingly transparent.\(^5\)

Secondly, notwithstanding the urgent rhetoric in which this mindset often expresses itself and the keen sense of cultural engagement which it appears to suggest, it is actually built upon a quite striking cultural passivity (or, at best, cultural reactivity). Although glossed and packaged with the language of making the church 'relevant', it makes quite problematic assumptions about the theological significance of 'culture'. It assumes that that dynamic matrix of ideas, beliefs, practices, attitudes, institutions and customs which we call culture is something which the church watches as an outside observer and to which it must defer and/or from which it must take its bearings. As such, it denies to the gospel its own capacity to be 'culturally generative'.\(^6\) It forgets that the Christian gospel itself is a source of original ideas, beliefs, practices, attitudes, institutions and customs. Ironically, the church's minority position—now unfettered by the various cultural adornments of Christendom and its offer of power, influence and prestige—is perhaps the best position from which it can take its bearings from the gospel itself and thereby be culturally generative. This is the opportunity not taken by the turn-the-ship-around mindset.

The turn-the-ship-around mindset fails on these two counts because it lacks the kind of theological engagement which is required in order both to read contemporary western culture and to understand the church and its mission.

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\(^2\) That is not to say there is not some persistent quest for, or residual sense of, the 'transcendent' in post-Christian western cultures. As such, as Charles Taylor has shown in his *A Secular Age* (Belknap: Harvard, 2007), the standard secularisation thesis fails. Nevertheless, I would argue that whatever sense of the 'transcendent' (however variously that may be defined) does persist in Western cultures, it has no necessary relationship to the beliefs, practices and institutions of Christianity. In fact, it may well be a substitute or replacement for Christianity rather than a friendly remnant of it.

\(^3\) Or, at least, *more or less* happily. If the happiness of the separation is qualified, it is on the basis of the widespread recognition that modern culture thus produced has some increasingly apparent dark sides, notably the loss of community, a certain 'disenchantment' with the purely secular, and various forms of personal and communal alienation. It remains the case, however, that those seeking to repair these effects of modernity generally do not want to reverse the disentangling of western culture from Christianity.

\(^4\) Although the marginal status of the church is more or less widely recognised, I remain struck by the prevalence through the different domains of the LCA of the view that this marginality is some kind of temporary aberration which will quickly pass if only we work hard enough, pray with sufficient fervour or implement the right strategic plan.

\(^5\) For example, the mega-church phenomenon by virtue of its capacity to produce the group momentum, institutional stability and strong resource base that come with large and efficiently managed institutions appears to some of its champions to have overcome that post-Christendom nakedness. I would argue, however, that neither the existence of particular mega-churches nor their occasional patronage by national politicians can ultimately obscure the fact that mainstream Australian society has broken free of Christianity, and proceeds on its own way without any serious or culturally formative reference to the pockets of Christianity which might be found in these mega-churches.

In the next two sections of the paper I will propose an account of how the church's encounter with modernity not only pushed Christianity to the edges of western culture, but simultaneously undermined the church's confidence in theology thereby pushing theology to the margins of the church.

**Modernity and the fate of theology**

Not since the early church's encounters with its Jewish, Roman and Greek opponents has Christianity been so confronted by a culture with which it is in such fundamental tension as it is in its encounter with modernity. But the exact nature of modernity's challenge is as often misunderstood as its scale is underestimated. The challenge of modernity to Christian faith is not just the challenge of 'advances' in our knowledge of the universe or of 'progress' in our understanding of life's origins or of 'enlightened' accounts of the ancient world. These challenges are real, but they barely begin to tell the full story of modernity's challenge to Christianity. In fact, modernity—at least in its post-Enlightenment forms—is an en culturated form of resistance to Christianity. A complete and nuanced exposition of this claim lies well beyond the scope of this paper. For now, however, I make the point that modernity is not just some other culture which Christianity happens to have bumped into in the course of history. Instead, the culture of modernity arises from the explicit and intentional disentangling of Western European culture and its outposts (such as Australia) from the world views, literature, practices and institutions

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7 Manifestly the argument of this section is presented in broad-brush strokes. Although I believe that they are defensible as broad-brush strokes, I acknowledge that they warrant more nuance than is possible here.

8 As Michael Allen Gillespie observes in his *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008, p. 19: 'Modernity did not spring forth full-grown from the head of Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, or Hobbes but arose over a long period of time and as a result of the efforts of many different people in a variety of contexts.'

9 The notion of modernity as a 'culture' is often obscured in talk of the 'modern worldview'. To make a point stressed by theologians of the postbiblical and radical orthodox schools, modernity in its various expressions (no less than Christianity, Islam or Marxism in their various expressions) is a social project and only as such does it contain a worldview.

10 Such an exposition would, of course, have to begin with the widely-attested fact that modernity has its origins within Christianity and the fact that different strands of modernity offer different levels of resistance to Christianity. The latter observation means, in turn, that there are different possibilities of co-existence (albeit tension-filled co-existence) between modernity and Christianity. Nevertheless, the form of modernity most significant for Australia is undoubtedly that produced by the European Enlightenment, shaped as it was by its various critiques of religion. Whatever the relationship between earlier forms of modernity and Christianity, the Enlightenment provided the political will and sheer cultural force to break from Christianity. So, notwithstanding these various qualifications, I believe my basic point remains: modernity emerges as from a critical posture towards Christianity and a desire to develop forms of western culture variously independent of it. The discussions of the origins of modernity are, of course, vast. On the significance of post-Thomist nominalism and/or voluntarism see, for example, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 12–17, Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, pp. 19–43, Friederick Depoorte, *The Death of God: An Investigation into the History of the Western Concept of God* (London: T&F Clark, 2007), pp. 67–122, and Louis Dupre, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* (Notre Dame, UNOP, 2008). The idea that modern secularism has its roots as a reform movement within Christianity has been developed at length by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 264–267. On the historical and intellectual links between protestant Christianity and modern atheism see Alister E. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider, 2005), pp. 198–218. For a discussion of the seminal influence of the European Enlightenment on the formation of Australian culture see, John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002). For what is presently an hospitable account of the relationship between Christianity and modernity see Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child Reconstructed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) by the Australian Catholic theologian, John Thornhill. Note, moreover, how the very title of this book beautifully highlights both the roots of modernity within Christianity and the tension between them: modernity is Christianity's estranged child.
of Christianity. This antithetical posture of modernity towards Christianity is caught very well in the following words of Martin Heidegger:

What is new about the modern period as opposed to the Christian medieval age consists in the fact that man (sic) independently and by his own effort, contrives to become certain and sure of his human being in the midst of beings as a whole... The essential Christian thought of the certitude of salvation is adopted but such 'salvation' is not eternal, other-worldly bliss, and the way to it is not selflessness. The hale and wholesome are sought exclusively in the free self-development of all the creative powers of man... In the context of man's liberation from the bonds of revelation and church doctrine, the question of first philosophy is 'in what way does man, on his own terms and for himself, first arrive at a primary, unshakeable truth, and what is that primary truth?'

Note the opposition which is set up between basic Christian convictions and modern thought: the Christian call to selflessness is replaced by human independence; the revelation of God is replaced by humanity's autonomous quest for truth; creative powers are transferred from the Creator to the creature; hope is replaced by self-development.

Heidegger's remarks also point to the fact that like so many great cultural shifts which emerge as reactions against a hitherto dominant culture, the new culture inevitably defines itself in terms of what it rejects. This is why the discourses of modernity can provide seemingly benign and even hospitable echoes of Christianity whilst actually containing deep within their conceptual and ideological structure strong anti-Christian sentiments. It must, of course, be readily acknowledged that Christianity was justly chastened by many of the elements of modernity, and that in some respects Christianity itself has been positively transformed by some aspects of its encounter with modernity. That, however, is a by-product of modernity—clearly, of no small internal significance for Christianity. It cannot, however, finally obscure the intent of modernity to break free from and to resist Christianity.

Modernity set out to displace the Christian story with its own, and inevitably the foundations and content of the Christian story came under attack. As increasingly recognised in studies of this development, many of the church's theologians responded to this with a terribly misconceived strategy. They believed that they could defend Christian truth claims by trying to argue for them from some supposed neutral ground which it putatively shared with its modern critics. This attempt to hold the church's theological convictions in suspension and to render them dependent on some other intellectual discourse inevitably undermined the intellectual force—both within and beyond the church—of Christian theology itself. The point is this: if Christians were not prepared to argue from Christian theology, then why should

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12 On this remnant, as it were, of Christianity within modernity see Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, especially his discussion on the 'concealed theology of late modernity' (pp. 278–287).
anyone else take Christian theology seriously? Perhaps no one has made the case for this account of the deflation of Christian theology more penetratingly than Michael Buckley when he writes: 'To bracket the specifically religious in order to defend the God of religion was to assert implicitly the cognitive emptiness of the very reality one was attempting to support.' This strategy was not without its elements of either tragedy or comedy, as captured so sharply by the Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist John Updike, in his novel *Roger's Version*.

In the sixteenth century astronomy, in the seventeenth microbiology, in the eighteenth geology and palaeontology, in the nineteenth Darwin's biology all grotesquely extended the world-frame and sent theologians scurrying for cover in ever smaller shadowy nooks, little gloomy ambiguous caves in the psyche where even now neurology is cruelly harrying them, gouging them out of the multi-folded brain like wood lice from under the lumber pile.

This nullification of theology as an intellectually potent discourse was a spectacular intellectual own-goal, the ramifications of which continue to shape the western church and its relationship to its theological tradition. More specifically, as widely documented, it was this particular quest for non-theological foundations which established the major theological fault line in modern Protestantism.

On the one hand, liberal Protestantism sought a foundation in some pre-cognitive/pre-linguistic 'experience' which it (mistakenly) believed could escape being explained away by the emerging natural sciences and/or philosophy. On the other hand, evangelicalism laid a foundation in scripture and certain doctrines of its status. This was not, however, a case of evangelicalism bravely defending a pre-existing doctrine of scripture's primacy. Rather it was a new understanding of scripture buttressed by a certain rationalism and objectivism which was itself, at least in part, a product of modern thought. No less, then, than liberal Protestantism, much modern evangelicalism rested on non-theological foundations. But the foundations were different and a fault line was established. It may well have frequently branched and subdivided many times over the decades, but fundamentally it remains seminal for the contemporary form of Protestantism and the place of theological discourse within it.

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16 Arguably the classic account of theology’s quest for non-theological foundations is found in Barth’s chapters on the eighteenth century in his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, new edn., (London: SCM, 2001), pp. 86–159. The particular manifestation of the foundationalist fault line in American Christianity has been set out by Nancy Murphy in her *Beyond Literalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg: TP), 1996, pp. 11–61.
This fault line divided Protestantism not just on particular doctrines but according to different assessments of the cognitive content of theological discourse. For modern evangelicalism—shaped by the rationalism it had imbibed—theological statements actually describe objective states of affairs. For liberal Protestantism, however, by founding Christian theology in some pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic realm of human experience—a realm increasingly designated, isolated, contained and ideologically constructed as 'religious'—theology itself came to be little more than an intellectual ornament to the more primary and allegedly self-evident core experience. There is perhaps no more classic statement of this than the following taken from William James' classic work, Varieties of Religious Experience. Although not the words of a card-carrying liberal protestant theologian, James exactly describes the structure of the liberal protestant view of the relationship between so-called 'religious experience' and thought.

The truth is that in the...religious sphere particular reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together, and great world-ruling systems, like that...of the Catholic philosophy, may grow up. Our impulsive belief is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but its showy translation into formulas.20

Note the designation of a specifically religious 'sphere'. Observe the foundational role of 'inarticulate feelings' and intuition. Language and communally-held beliefs are designated as ultimately superficial. The pejorative rhetoric directed against 'verbalised philosophy' and 'formulas' of belief cannot be missed. To invest in this intellectual structure, which by definition regards the cognitive dimension of faith as a 'showy translation', inevitably renders the theological enterprise a most tenuous, potentially self-defeating exercise. This, I suggest, is exactly what liberal Protestantism did. Indeed, it continues to do so in its most recent manifestation, i.e., self-styled 'Progressive Christianity'. Its champion and de facto spokesperson, John Shelby Spong, articulates just such a view of language. He invokes it for that most basic task of the Christian church: the reading of the gospels. Spong makes a particular claim about the intent and nature of the gospels: 'In these Gospel stories the Jesus experience would be explained, interpreted and rationalized in terms of a first-century Jewish world view.' But, he continues: 'Inevitably this means that the Jesus experience would be distorted'. So, Spong trades off a 'literal truth' about Jesus against the 'experience of Jesus': the gulf between them is nothing less than the distorting power of words: 'That experience always lies behind the distortions, which are inevitable since words are limited.'21 Quite apart from the highly dubious appeal to the 'experience of Jesus' as the gospels referent, this 'words-distort-experience' hermeneutic in many ways is the ultimate outworking of the liberal protestant approach. To criticise it is neither to posit a naïve correspondence theory of language nor to deny the necessity of interpretation. After all, from the patristic era on, Christian scholars have recognised the need for interpretation. The


development of the medieval *quaedriga* is alone ample testimony to the rejection of literalism which was characteristic of Christian hermeneutics until the rise of certain forms of protestant Biblicism (and, in fact, highlights the theological aberration which modern literalism is). Instead, the issue is that the assumption that words *distort* experience and that they do so *inevitably* has two fatal flaws. Firstly, it ignores the fact that words relate to experience in manifold ways: they illumine, symbolise and even generate and expand experience. Secondly, to take the claim to its logical extension, it undermines the very words which are making that claim.

On a broader scale, I would argue that this self-defeating view of the relationship between language and experience which is enshrined in liberal Protestantism (and is often still confidently presented as the way to defend 'religion' to 'modern' people) is one of the reasons that liberal protestant theology has ceased to be anything like the kind of intellectual force in contemporary western societies which it once imagined itself to be. Moreover, to the extent that this approach has been dominant in protestant churches it is a major contributing factor in the loss of confidence in theological discourse and why theology has become marginal to the actual life of the church.

Even as, however, the liberal protestant project conspicuously failed to meet its own stated aim of commending the Christian faith to the modern world, its intellectual apparatus and conceptual structure shifted to serve an increasingly urgent internal, domestic function, i.e., the explanation and management of the theological diversity which increasingly came to characterise the denominations of mainstream Protestantism. To an ecclesial culture increasingly shaped by the maxim 'doctrine divides, experience unites', here was an account of the relationship between doctrine and experience which explained *why* doctrine could be regarded as secondary and why it did not need to divide.

The logic of this position is quite simple: if doctrines are fundamentally fallible accounts of a more basic common experience then divergence between these doctrines and beliefs can be explained as the inevitable consequence of cultural, personal and contextual prejudices and/or limitations impacting on the process of bringing that experience to linguistic and cognitive expression. To an ecclesial world threatened by or wearied from doctrinal division (as Protestantism almost perennially is), such an account of diversity solves many problems. In fact, such a view of the relationship between doctrine and experience is so well-established, so much a part of the discourse of the contemporary church, so central to the culture of mainstream Protestantism, that to challenge it is inevitably to challenge one of the pillars of that culture. Yet, whatever its ecclesiastical utility, it cannot evade scrutiny. It is fraught with quite serious conceptual problems and if the account I have given of its origin and development in this paper is sustained, it has embedded within it a history of a quite monumental intellectual and cultural miscalculation.

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22 Chief among these, I would suggest, are: its inability to identify a genuinely common 'experience'; its marginalisation of linguistically-encoded practices in the generation of experience; its problematic resistance to the irreducibly cognitive dimension of Christian proclamation; and its implicit appeal to an anthroplogy which so easily demarcates between cognition and experience. In terms of explicit theological problems, its general adherence to an idealist epistemology sits in significant tension with the broadly realist sensibilities built into mainstream Christian claims about revelation.
Be that as it may, the point at issue in this present paper is that for all the attractiveness of such a view of the relationship between doctrine and experience to the task of uniting three churches, it was not employed by the Joint Commission on Church Union. Indeed, the confessional approach taken by the Commission has far more confidence in the church's capacity actually to state the faith per se. So, to the Commission's statement of the faith and the theological assumptions built into it I now turn.

The UCA's theological origins: 'disturbing much and disturbing many'

Writing in its first report, the Commission noted: 'If we go forward into a union on the basis of a fresh confession of the Faith of the Church, we shall disturb much and disturb many. We must be convinced that that disturbance is justified.' The almost foreboding tone of these comments is a reminder that the theological work that produced the *Basis of Union* was not the intelligentsia's imprimatur on a popular movement that would have developed anyway. Whilst ultimately the levels of support within each of the churches' respective votes on union were quite high, this was the result of much debate, education and argument. (Notwithstanding these votes, it is easily forgotten—and perhaps it is little known to the contemporary UCA membership—that union still so very nearly didn't happen. The final vote of the Presbyterian Church passed the required two-thirds majority by only seven votes.23)

In other words, Union was not driven by a spontaneous groundswell of enthusiasm to be an 'Australian church'; nor was it driven by an irresistible quest to escape denominationalism; it did not emerge from a broad-based impulse to be 'inclusive'; it did not arise from a universally-held desire to orient the church's life to mission. Instead, this particular union of churches—and all those features of it that we have come to take for granted—had to be argued for, and had to be argued for *theologically*. That is not to say that the Joint Commission was not engaged with or responsive to the church's reactions to its work: the final *Basis* is what it is because of those responses. Nevertheless, in an important sense, the theological work of the Joint Commission was itself the driving force—but it was also (as the Commission rightly anticipated) the object of resistance (and not only prior to union).

Three significant questions converge around the Commission's prediction that its work would disturb. First, what kind of theology is entailed in offering a fresh confession of the 'faith of the church'? Secondly, what exactly is the faith which was confessed? Thirdly, why on earth should it be so disturbing?

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23 Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church* in Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (eds), *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008, p. 40. Hereafter, references to this document will be to *TFC*.

24 The vote was 230 to 133. See John Harrison's account of the ferment within the Presbyterian Church before and after this vote in his *Baptism of Fire: The First Ten Years of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986), pp. 20–24.
What kind of theology? ‘Rediscovering the church’s language’

“What is the church’s faith? Where is it to be found?” With these two interdependent questions the Commission begins its first report. It records that its deliberations were ‘much preoccupied by them’ and then continues:

We have come to see afresh that the Church’s faith is richer than our own partial understanding of it. We have come to regard with a new reverence the ways in which God has preserved his Church—by means of scripture, Creed, liturgy, confession and hymn of praise—faith in his Holy Name.27

In other words, in order to confess the church’s faith, attention must focus on the declarations of faith in scripture, creed, liturgy, confession and hymn. As such the Commission determined ‘to give expression to an attitude towards historic statements of the Church’s faith’.28 Its concern focused on the ‘forms of words which the Church has used’ in preaching, instruction and encouragement. Although its articulation of this concern was in strikingly jarring gender-exclusive language, the emphasis on, as it were, both the given-ness and giftedness of the properly and necessarily linguistic mediation of the faith is striking.

With regard to Scripture, the Commission draws attention to the recital of God’s saving acts, whereby the ‘Word was presented in words’ and the human response was made ‘in articulate and sometimes stereotyped phrases’.29 With regard to Creeds, ‘they give men [sic] a language with which to speak of the saving acts of God’.30 With regard to the Reformed and Evangelical confessions and the hymns of Methodism, the Commission judged that ‘[w]hen the church is confessing her faith, she will not only put words into the mouth of the preacher. She will also put words into the mouths of the worshippers’.31 Similarly: ‘the Church has protected the faith of the worshipper by giving him words in which he may truly declare his faith’.32 Underlying these comments is a conviction that Christian faith is given in and is accessible through words. As such, ‘the faith which the Church holds is not something which it works out for itself. It has been delivered to the saints’.33 Indeed, whilst conspicuously conscious of the Australian context of its work, the Commission issued this warning: ‘We in our day neglect at our peril

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25 “Rediscovering the church’s language” is the title of Davis McCaughey’s preface to the post-union re-publication of The Faith of the Church in 1978 (and which up until 1984 was reprinted 5 times). It functions as a summary of at least McCaughey’s understanding of the theological approach taken in The Faith of the Church. See J. D. McCaughey, ‘Rediscovering the Church’s Language: Preface to the new edition’ in The Faith of the Church (Melbourne: JBCE, 1978), p. 5.
28 TFC, p. 15.
29 TFC, p. 15.
30 TFC, p. 16.
31 TFC, p. 21.
32 TFC, p. 31.
33 TFC, p. 42.
34 TFC, p. 45.
these 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.35

With this dependence on the ‘great words of other ages’, what did it mean for the Commission to offer a fresh confession of the faith? To answer this and to enter into the mindset of the Commission, much light is shed in a section from the report on the nature of the Reformation confessions. It is worth quoting at length.

Indeed only that which has a particular context can have universal authority. It is of the nature of Christian confession, not that it should consist of general truths or statements, but that it should be wrung from living men (sic) who find themselves confronted by Pontius Pilate. Such a confession is the Church’s re-enactment or reflection of the witness borne by prophet and apostle in Holy Scripture. Against some particular attempt to get her to call someone else Lord, here is the Church’s Iesous Kyrios, Jesus is Lord. So a limitation of this sort attaching to particular Confessions does not invalidate them. It rather makes us hear them with special attention; and so far as any confession is such a reflection, we seek to make it our own. We claim that whatever their differences in points of detail, the Augsburg Confession, the Scots Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration of Faith, the Thirty-nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, all stand to bear witness to Jesus Christ, the divine Word definitively set forth in Scripture, and to call the whole Church to obedience to that Word. Those who would in our day enter into the fullness of the Church’s faith neglect such voices at their peril;….36

The whole section of the Report from which this passage is drawn merits close attention for the subtlety of the theological assumptions which are built into it. Be that as it may, however, the point of relevance to the present discussion is the dynamic understanding of Christian confession: it does not consist of ‘general truths or statements’ but is ‘wrung from living men and women as they confront Pontius Pilate’. Two key words helpfully condense this approach: ‘re-enactment’ and ‘definitive’. To confess the faith afresh is a re-enactment of the faith definitively set forth in scripture. The framers’ understanding of confessional theology can thereby be brought into contact with the remarkably fruitful recent discussion around the idea of both hermeneutics and ecclesiology as ‘performance’.37 Such discussions have highlighted that re-enactment is not mere repetition: it involves appropriation, creativity, adaptation and contextualisation. Yet re-enactment also involves a restraint: it is a re-enactment of something already given. As such,

35 TFC, p. 33.
36 TFC, p. 31.
re-enactment involves both creativity and fidelity. As Nicholas Lash observes in his seminal essay on this theme: "There is a creativity in interpretation which, far from being arbitrary (the players cannot do whatever they like with the score [or script]), is connected in some way with the fidelity, the 'truthfulness' of their performance."

Against this background, it is possible to read the Basis, and especially the core paragraphs 3 and 4, as a script for the re-enactment of the faith of the church. This brings us to the second of the issues raised by the Commission's prediction of disturbance.

What is the faith thus freshly confessed?

It was the singularly most important achievement of the JCCU that in seeking to ground the church in a fresh confession of the faith, it identified Jesus Christ as the sole foundation of the church. Yet, this is not to be understood as merely the minimalist claim that Jesus Christ is central to Christianity. Instead, to confess Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church is to confess certain things about Jesus Christ without which there would be little reason to have faith in him, no reason for Christianity to have emerged as a consequence of his ministry, and no reason for the contemporary church to engage in mission in his name. Paragraph 3 of the Basis is such a confession.

In turning to Paragraph 3, our attention is focused on what the various commentators agree is the very heart of the Basis. According to Davis McCaughhey it 'is the most fundamental Paragraph in the whole Basis'. D'Arcy Wood describes it as 'the basis of the Basis'. Michael Owen relates how this paragraph emerged from what was the most important single decision in the work of the [Joint] Commission, namely the decision to include a separate paragraph on the one Lord Jesus Christ [which would] have a controlling position and function in the whole. In effect, this paragraph is the Commission's distilled answer to the question it had set itself, 'What is the faith of the church?' Yet it is neither an explicitly creedal nor narrowly doctrinal statement of that faith. As Andrew Dutney notes, 'Instead of offering a doctrinal definition, the Christological affirmation took the form of a retelling of the message of Christ's life, death and resurrection'.

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38 If this paper is focused on the objectivity of the 'faith given', it does not intend to deny that the faith must be subjectively appropriated. Indeed, within the terminology of this paper, performance understood as appropriation, creativity and fidelity, points exactly to the need to hold together these two dimensions of faith which, of course, properly belong together.
40 Whilst I would argue that the theological approach of the JCCU is manifestly confessional, the Basis serves several other functions as well. As James Haire has pointed out in his 'Confessional Theological Struggles in the Uniting Church, 1997–2003', *Uniting Church Studies* 15, no.1 (2009), p. 5: "There are clear confessional statements within the Basis. However, there are also other genres, including transitional issues of church organisation." Paragraph 3 is clearly a confessional statement as such.
As such, the UCA’s central confession of Jesus Christ keeps as close as it is perhaps possible to keep in such a summary document to both the broad content and genre of the gospels’ testimony to Jesus. As with the gospels, Paragraph 3 confesses that Jesus’ identity and significance is given in the narrative sequence of his life, death and resurrection. Whilst it is completely correct to claim, as Stephen Reid has in his analysis of the Basis, that ‘Christ alone is our foundation, not human language about him’, this should not obscure the fact there is nevertheless a particular narrative which is to be told about him and about God’s action in him. In this particular history, so Paragraph 3 confesses, Jesus announced the sovereign grace of God and uniquely responded to God with humility, obedience and trust. Through him, God reclaimed the whole creation, pardoned sinners and began a new order of righteousness and love. Paragraph 3 therefore reminds us that it is only as such that Jesus is the foundation of the church. Yet, this confession also reminds us that the church exists not merely through its own recollection of this history: it is the Spirit who calls it into being in order both to proclaim Jesus’ death and resurrection and to be a fellowship of reconciliation which bears witness to Jesus and his lordship. Moreover, Paragraph 3 is faithful to the broader witness of the New Testament by also highlighting Jesus’ cosmological significance. He is confessed as not only the lord of the church: ‘he is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.’ In short: in this particular set of events, centred on this particular person, God was reconciling the world to himself.

What is fresh about this confession? I would suggest that what is so strikingly fresh about this confession is precisely its antiquity. The framers did not seek to confess Jesus Christ by repeating the ecumenical formulas of Christendom nor by taking sides in Reformation or post-Reformation Christological disputes. (And even less did they do so by appealing to any modern, revisionist account of Jesus.) By going back behind those to the broad themes and structure of the New Testament witness, I would suggest that the framers carried through (at least indirectly) on a particular aspect of the confessional mode of theology to which they were committed from the outset. In the discussion of the then growing significance of non-western churches, the JCCU noted that such churches were ‘engaged in conversation...about the basic problems of [human] existence’, a conversation which was demanded by the encounter with both secular and religious alternatives to Christianity. This was immediately followed by a claim about the kind of theology appropriate to this situation:

The theology of the Church must once more be sharpened by its conversation with the world. Too much traditional theology has removed God’s controversy with his people and put in its place the controversy of the people amongst themselves.

If the church is indeed to ‘sharpen its conversation with the world’, if it has anything distinctive to

45 Stephen Reid, ‘On The Theological Authority of the Basis of Union’, Uniting Church Studies Vol. 1 No. 2, August 1995), p. 62. My own approach overlaps with Reid’s own use of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic paradigm as a tool for interpreting the Basis and for assessing its status. I, however, would want to make stronger claims for the Basis confessing particular, normative and definitive statements about Jesus.

46 TFC, p. 38.

47 TFC, p. 39.
bring to that conversation it will not be what it has been saying to itself in doctrinal disagreement and theological controversy. It must be in what is distinctive about Jesus Christ. Herein, I suggest, lies the freshness of the confession of Jesus Christ in Paragraph 3. By returning to the narrative structure and broad themes of the biblical witness, by returning to the centrality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the events by which God reconciles the world to himself, the framers have taken the Church back to that which is both historically and theologically constitutive of Christianity. It was the apostolic proclamation of the crucified and risen Jesus' messianic identity that distinguished nascent Christianity from other forms of Judaism and it was the proclamation of this same crucified and risen Jesus as Lord which set Christianity apart from the prevailing religious and philosophical sentiments of the ancient world. In other words, it was the proclamation—foolish and scandalous—of Jesus crucified and risen which distinguished and identified the church at its origins. Indeed, it has nowhere else to find its identity and distinctiveness at any time. It is the proclamation of Jesus crucified and risen, not in the first instance disputed doctrines of, for instance, justification or sanctification, orders of ministry or sacraments, which identifies the church and which will sharpen the church's conversation with the world of different, overlapping and sometimes overtly hostile alternative beliefs.

But, why, it must now be asked did the framers believe that this eminently biblical approach would disturb much and many?

Christ the disturbance

The confession of Jesus as Lord of the church and Lord of creation is inevitably a polemical confession. It is a major theme of the The Faith of the Church that Jesus' lordship was not only not duly acknowledged, but that the churches had too easily acknowledged other lords. The Commission was not shy to speak bluntly of the churches' 'failure', 'confusion', 'weakness' and 'defection' or of the 'ravages of sin [which] have gone so deep that we frequently do not recognise that we are sinning'. In pointing to the grace which alone can forgive, renew and reconcile the churches, the Commission exhorted any new church to guard against allowing that which is necessary but secondary to play a dominant part in her life. No system of Church government, no rules or precedent, no system of doctrine or ethics, no technique of evangelising, no tradition of men [sic] regarding the ordering of worship, is sufficiently free from error to be permitted to hold anything but a subordinated position in the Christian church.

As such, the Commission has not merely located the disturbing or polemical nature of Jesus' lordship in the church's encounter with rival truth claims but in the internal life of the church. Jesus' lordship cuts across and announces judgement over what the church itself can hold most dearly—not least the very

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[48] Of course, this task will generate its own controversies in the church, but they would arguably be more constructive controversies oriented towards the church's missionary task.
[49] TFC, p. 43.
identity of the denominations seeking union. Nowhere is this seen so clearly as it is in the Commission’s consideration of Christianity’s encounter with the then advancing secularism of the Western world:

In this holocaust of traditional securities, customary alignments no longer stand. Men (sic) with the mark of the cross on their foreheads have no longer been allowed to look at the world as Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Independent or Methodist.\(^{53}\)

Once again, the Commission deftly linked the question of the church’s fundamental identity to the question of its orientation to the world. Just as the cross is decisive for the identity of Jesus Christ, so it is decisive for the identity of Christians in the world. Yet, the striking and provocative logic of this statement is also directed at the church’s internal structure. As the decisive symbol of Jesus’ lordship, the cross does not smoothly harmonise pre-existing internal Christian distinctions. Rather, it cuts across them, judges them and fundamentally destabilises them.

I do not believe that we can fail to extend this same logic to the post-union church. What if the traditional denominations are replaced with contemporary theological groupings and ecclesiastical parties?

In this holocaust of traditional securities, customary alignments no longer stand. Men and women with the mark of the cross on their foreheads are no longer allowed to look at the world as Evangelical, Liberal, Charismatic, Emergent, Post-liberal, Barthian, Feminist, Liberationist, Poststructuralist…

If Jesus Christ is the one who he is confessed to be in Paragraph 3 of the Basis—the one who announces God’s sovereign grace, the one in whom God pardoned sinners, the one in whom God began a new order of righteousness and love, the one who is Lord of the church and of creation, then our ‘unity in Christ’ is not merely the continued co-existence of various and competing theological camps with their assorted sub-cultural identities. Instead, it is a summons to treat those camps and identities with a finely-tuned suspicion. So to confess Jesus Christ is to be alert to their potential for idolatry. Jesus’ lordship destabilises all their claims to totality and judges their propensity to divide and separate.

Summary

In this third section of the paper, I have attempted to draw on certain aspects of the work of the JCCU. I believe that it can be argued that it sowed the seeds of a certain way of doing theology. It is a way of doing theology which begins not with a generic affirmation of Christ’s centrality, but with the revelation of his identity in the narrative sequence of his life, death and resurrection as witnessed to in Scripture. It is a theology whose various exegetical, doctrinal and historical tasks would finally be justified by their capacity faithfully to re-enact that original and definitive witness. Such a theology, following the JCCU, would proceed believing that such constant engagement with the basic claims of the faith is the best foundation for sharpening the church’s conversation with the world. Yet that conversation

\(^{53}\) IFC, p. 35.
will possibly be even more complex than that driven by the foundationalist apologetics of the modern era: it will be more like a series of ad hoc encounters on multiple intellectual and cultural fronts. In its continuing encounter with the culture of modernity and its ideologies of domination, Christian theology will be called upon to articulate afresh the Christian vision of human dignity and freedom. In its encounter with the cultures attracted to the relativism of postmodernism, Christian theology will speak of the real possibility of receiving, finding and living the truth. In its encounter with other religious traditions Christian theology will assist the church to state afresh what Christianity specifically means by ‘God’, ‘creation’, ‘salvation’, ‘good’, ‘evil’, ‘hope’ etc. And, in the church that often appears to be collectively shell-shocked by its own marginality, theology can offer generous and non-triumphant accounts of the church as the community of witness and servanthood.

Of course, at its best Christian theology is itself fully embedded in the church’s practices. It is not an add-on, but a strand that runs through all that the church does, animating and guiding the church’s worship, witness and service. When thus fully integrated into the church’s imagination, such theology has a role to play, as the JCCU’s own work did, in challenging and where necessary changing ecclesial self-understanding. Beyond—and often in conflict with—received notions of the church being justified by its social utility, its political influence or its role in meaning-making, the church could self-consciously become, in the words of Jürgen Moltmann, ‘the fellowship which narrates the story of Christ’. The church, says Moltmann, is a ‘story-telling fellowship which continually wins its own freedom from the stories and myths of the society in which it lives’.52 Above all, theology which would challenge and change ecclesial self-understanding in this direction must constantly allow itself to be disturbed by Jesus Christ and the disturbing nature of his lordship. Such a theology, would, I believe allow the church to face the future theologically.

Facing the future theologically

Here I suggest only a glimpse of what the church that faces the future with such a theology might look like. It would be a church untroubled and undefined by its culturally marginal status. It would resist the ‘turn-the-ship-around’ mindset regardless of the theological culture in which that mindset is embedded. The glimpse I offer is taken from the description of the confessing church offered by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. They posit this view of the confessing church as an alternative to the conversionist and activist options so characteristic of protestantism’s polarised reaction to modernity.

The confessing church, like the conversionist church, also calls people to conversion, but it depicts that conversion as a long process of being baptismally engrafted into a new people, an alternative polis, a countercultural social structure called church. It seeks to influence the world by being the church, that is by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift of faith and vision, which is ours in Christ. The confessing church seeks the visible church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their

promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God. The confessing church has no interest in withdrawing from the world, but it is not surprised when its witness evokes hostility from the world.... The confessing church can participate in secular movements against war, against hunger, and against other forms of inhumanity, but it sees this as part of its necessary proclamatory action. This church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most effective thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.53

Such a church could only exist if it has the narrative of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as its basic script and which knows that Jesus Christ himself is its foundation. It would be a church which was self-conscious and intentional about re-enacting that script. It would be a community in which members learnt together to be faithful to their promises, exhorted each other to love their enemies, provoked one another to tell the truth in the face of falsehoods, who together honoured the poor and suffered for righteousness. Absent such intentional re-enactment it is difficult to see what justification any church could give for its existence. On the other hand, such a church just might be the most 'culturally generative' way for the Uniting Church to engage the world from the margins where we now find ourselves.

53 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong, Nashville: Abingdon, 1989, pp. 46–47. To draw on Hauerwas and Willimon inevitably invites the various criticisms of the church-as-polis ecclesiology with which Hauerwas in particular is associated. One such recent, probing criticism which argues that such an approach leads to the ecclesial domestication of the Spirit has been put forward by Nathan Kerr, Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission (Oregon: Cascade, 2009), especially pp. 93–126 and his counter-proposal pp. 169–175. To draw on the church-as-polis rhetoric here is not to suggest that the Uniting Church should be understood only through this filter. Nevertheless, aspects of this approach are, I believe, fully consistent with the theological commitments bequeathed by the JCCU.