

The Uniting Church and the Reformed and Evangelical Tradition

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1. The Uniting Church in Australia has a particular approach to the Christian faith, namely it does so drawing on its Reformed and Evangelical heritage and has this in its living tradition. The *Basis of Union* speaks of continuing to learn from the witness of the Reformation fathers and John Wesley (BU par 10). While not confined to this tradition the Uniting Church is nourished by it as it moves forward and develops its tradition. The phrase 'Reformed and Evangelical' is frequently used so this paper will explain the meaning of this important expression for the Uniting Church focusing on the documents listed in the *Basis of Union*.

Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical

2. The expression 'Reformed and Evangelical' can rightly be expanded to say that the Uniting Church holds to a Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical tradition. The word 'catholic' here means the universal church going back to the beginning of the Christian church. The Uniting Church in its *Basis of Union* affirms that it "lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" (BU par 2).¹ Its catholicity is evident in saying that its membership is "open to all who are baptised into the Holy Catholic Church in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (BU par 12). The Uniting Church makes use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. It says, "The Uniting church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day" (BU par 9). A feature of the Uniting Church is its ecumenical commitment and involvements both within Australia and internationally. It is consciously part of the universal church stemming from Jesus Christ and the witness of the apostles² and seeks to continue to be an instrument through which Christ may work (BU par 3).

Evangelical and Reformed

3. The word 'Evangelical' derives from the Greek *euangelion* meaning gospel or good news. The term came into use at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century to identify Protestants, especially as they emphasized belief in justification by grace through faith and the supreme authority of scripture. They based their teaching pre-eminently on the gospel. In Germany and Switzerland the term 'Evangelical' was used to refer to the Lutheran churches as contrasted with the Reformed or Calvinist churches. The use of the word 'Evangelical' continues as an adjective in the names of some Protestant denominations. It can also be used in theology to identify Reformation doctrine as in Karl Barth's, *Evangelical Theology*.
4. The meaning of 'Evangelical' has subsequently come to refer to those who experienced and espoused justification and scriptural authority in an intensified way. Personal conversion leading to a changed life and concentrated attention on the Bible as a guide to conviction and behaviour are characteristic of evangelicals. An emphasis on evangelism goes with this. This applies to Anabaptism, Puritanism, Continental pietism, the Wesleyan or Methodist movement

and the American Great Awakenings. Evangelicals can be found in many types of churches - from Anglicans to Pentecostals. There is a range of theological perspectives from fundamentalists to newer evangelicals who recognise modern scholarship and are concerned about social issues as well as evangelism.

5. The word 'Reformed' relates to the 16th century Reformation during which various people and groups protested against the beliefs and practices of the medieval Catholic Church, characteristically with an appeal to scripture alone as authoritative. Martin Luther was the primary leader and others followed, such as Huldreich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger and John Calvin. The protestant movement in Switzerland came to be known as 'Reformed' in contrast to Lutheranism. Both forms spread beyond their original nations of Germany and Switzerland with Calvin's approach being taken up by John Knox in Scotland in particular having spent time with Calvin in Geneva. He drew up the Scottish Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church of Scotland which was adopted by the Scottish Parliament in 1560 and remained the confessional standard until it was superseded by the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1647.

6. John Wesley was the key figure in the Evangelical Revival of 18th century Britain forming 'the people called Methodists' from those who responded to his and other Methodist preachers' ministry. While there were other aspects to the revival as well, the main one was the Methodist movement and the most important figure was John Wesley as the leader and spokesperson. His brother Charles Wesley effectively put the Christian message with Methodist emphases into stirring hymns. John Wesley provided standard sermons and *Notes on the New Testament* as guides for Methodist people and these became foundational for the movement as it continued to develop after his death in 1791.

Reformation Witnesses

7. The Uniting Church in the *Basis of Union* says that it "continues to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith, and in the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, from the witness of the Reformers" (BU par 10). It then names the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and the Savoy Declaration (1658). In like manner it says it will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793).

8. In the ordination charge for Ministers of the Word and Deacons, they are addressed in the following way: "Learning from the Confessional Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, you will diligently teach Christ's people, reminding them of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the grace which justifies them through faith."

9. Michael Owen points out that "These Reformation confessions are thus seen as having a historically important place within the process of the interpretation of the Scriptures."³ One or other of the churches that came into union received guidance in the interpretation of the Scriptures from these documents, so now the Uniting Church will continue to learn from the witness of these confessions. The *Basis of Union* says, "It will commit its ministers and

instructors to study these statements, so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture" (BU par 10). Hence what is given in the ordination charge. The Uniting Church will continue to learn from its Reformed and Evangelical heritage and will carry this tradition forward in the obedience and freedom of faith with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

10. For the Uniting Church then these are the primary expressions of the Reformed and Evangelical tradition that it looks to for guidance and inspiration. These particular confessions and the standard sermons of John Wesley are what the *Basis of Union* directs the Uniting Church to appreciate. While not limited to these, they are the primary documents for they were important to the three churches that came to form the Uniting Church.

11. It is helpful to know the historical background and to consider these confessions further. When John Knox returned to Scotland in 1559, the Regent Mary used force to repress the reforming movement. Armed resistance resulted. Mary's trained French troops gave her the edge until in England Elizabeth I sent an English fleet and army which forced the French to leave Scotland for good. The Scottish Parliament was then petitioned to draw up a summary of the doctrine they desired should be maintained in Scotland. John Knox was the main theologian among six who were appointed to write the Scots Confession of Faith in 1560 which they did in four days. While it was written in some haste, "it is a living document with the thought flowing on from one chapter to the next" says Michael Owen.⁴ The overall structure of the Confession is best seen as like a creed with a sequence similar to Calvin's *Institutes*. It served until the Westminster Confession of Faith took its place as the prime confession of Presbyterianism.

12. The Heidelberg Catechism was drawn up for the territories of the Elector Friedrich III, Count of the Palatinate. The Reformation had been introduced there over the previous seventeen years but was still to be consolidated. In particular there were conflicts between strict Lutherans and Reformed churchmen. Friedrich found himself leaning towards the Reformed side. A new catechism was intended to give the region its own theological position largely transcending the internal Protestant disputes. So the Heidelberg Catechism written in 1563 was not controversial in tone. The main authors were the theologians Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus. The catechism was designed to instruct young people and adults in churches and schools and covers the traditional areas for the education of the church's members: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments.

13. The Westminster Confession of Faith came about as a result of the English Parliament asserting itself against the king. It wanted the English Church to follow the models it saw in the Church of Scotland and the Reformed Churches on the Continent. So an assembly of 121 divines was called, along with 10 members of the House of Lords and 20 members of the House of Commons. Later six commissioners from the Scottish Assembly attended. Most were Presbyterians but there were some Episcopalians and Independents. The Confession was approved by the House of Lords in 1647 but when the two houses conferred in 1648 the Commons informed the Lords that while they agreed with the doctrinal part they suggested changes be made in some particulars. Soon after that, the Parliament fell under the power of

the Army and was dissolved by Cromwell who tended in the Independent direction rather than the Presbyterian. When the Stuart kings returned all that Parliament had done was reversed. In Scotland, however, the Confession was approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1647 and by the Scottish Parliament in 1649. It became the chief doctrinal standard of English speaking Presbyterian Churches throughout the world, including the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

14. The Savoy Declaration is a revision of the Westminster Confession and is the classic doctrinal expression of Congregationalism. It came about as a result of a conference held in 1658 at the Savoy Palace in London at the initiative of a group of Congregational ministers. The original intention was to draft a new confession of faith but all but one of the committee appointed to prepare it had been at the Westminster Assembly. So they decided on just having a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

15. John Wesley because of the stir he created through his preaching, especially in the open air, was a controversial figure in 18th century Britain. He published his sermons so that people could see what the doctrines were that he embraced and taught as the essentials of true religion. The first volume was published in 1746 and further volumes followed in 1748, 1750 and 1760. In 1763 Wesley issued a *Model Deed* for preaching houses that made it a condition of the use of the premises that preachers should proclaim no other doctrine than is contained in Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the four volumes of sermons. The forty four sermons published up to that time thus became the standard. It is worth noting that the Church of England published two volumes of Homilies which are referred to in its Thirty Nine Articles of 1571. So Wesley had a precedent in making his sermons the standard for Methodist doctrine.

16. The *Basis of Union* does not mention Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* but then it does not make reference to Calvin's commentaries either. The *Basis of Union* focuses on doctrinal statements rather than Biblical commentaries. So the prime documents for the Reformed tradition of the Uniting Church include the Scots Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith (for Presbyterians) and the Savoy Declaration (for Congregationalists) and Wesley's forty four sermons for the Evangelical (Methodist) tradition of the Uniting Church.

Features of the Reformed and Evangelical Tradition⁵

17. Common to both the Reformed and Evangelical traditions and emphasised in the *Basis of Union* (BU par 10), and in the charge to those being ordained, is the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the grace which justifies through faith, and the need for a constant appeal to scripture. This is the classic Protestant focus on Christ, grace, faith and scripture (*sola Christo, sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*).

18. The Reformed tradition is to be distinguished from the Lutheran tradition. Reformed theology and Lutheran theology were the two main forms of the Protestant Reformation with the Anabaptist tradition forming a third stream. Reformed theology values the church but has

little regard for ecclesiastical tradition that is not traceable to the scriptures or the earliest church. Scripture is the fundamental authority. Protesting against the defective practice of the Roman Catholic Church, it spoke of *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* which means the Reformed Church is always to be reformed. This does not mean constant change according to human desires but turning again to the form of the church and belief originating from Jesus Christ, lived out by the first disciples and early church, and witnessed to in the Old and New Testaments.

19. The 'Word of God' was the ultimate source of appeal in matters of faith. All other sources of knowledge, including the church's tradition, had to defer to this central source. While John Calvin was the Reformed tradition's greatest theologian, its sources are wider than him and for the English speaking world the Westminster Confession of Faith is the primary statement. It and related documents named in the *Basis of Union* represent the Reformed tradition for the Uniting Church. The Anglican Church became substantially Reformed in its theology as evidenced in its Thirty Nine Articles. Congregationalism, which grew from the Puritan tradition, has a Reformed theology but with an emphasis on the primacy of the local congregation.

20. The Reformed tradition did not seek to express a new theology but to state clearly what the church believed based on the Word of God found in the Old and New Testaments. The Westminster Confession begins with statements about Holy Scripture. God's sovereignty was taken very seriously as was sin. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, God's witness to the world, the Mediator, who now rules from heaven. God elects those who will be his people. Saving faith is the work of the Spirit of Christ in people's hearts. The proper response to God is shown in devout thought, speech and action. Scholarship was appreciated and there was a concern for society and not just the individual. The ministry of the lay people was given prominence.

21. The Evangelical tradition as explained above in its broader expression simply means the Protestant tradition with its characteristic emphases on Jesus Christ, justification by grace through faith, and in having scripture as the fundamental authority. In its narrower expression the Evangelical tradition refers to those who emphasise personal experience of saving faith and scriptural authority with a desire to see others become converted to Christ.

22. John Wesley represents the Evangelical tradition in a fuller way than it often has been expressed by others since. As he is the one named as representing the Evangelical tradition in the *Basis of Union*, it is his theological emphases that are most helpful for the Uniting Church. He had a discriminating theological understanding in relation to evangelical doctrine.⁶ In an age of rationalism he reaffirmed justification by grace through faith. He desired that people experience saving faith. He also emphasised sanctification which included both personal and social holiness. Justification led to the new birth which was the beginning of growth in grace and he wanted people to aim for fullness of faith. Wesley encouraged people to do good works through faith that is enacted by love. Related to these was the assurance of faith and the assurance of forgiveness in particular. In all this scripture was his primary source as it was for the Reformers.

23. In reemphasising justification by grace through faith, Wesley went back to the Reformation emphasis but was critical of Luther for being strong on justification but weak on sanctification. He was closer to Calvin which is understandable given his being an Anglican. Faith was primarily trust and was enabled by prevenient grace. He took sin seriously and was similar to Calvin in speaking about total corruption. However he avoided the predestinarian position by affirming God's free grace is in all and for all. Everyone has a measure of prevenient grace which partially restores his or her reason and freedom. So people can respond to or resist God's saving grace.
24. People can not only be forgiven and accepted by God, they can go on to be restored to the image of God. They can go from the imputed righteousness of Christ to gaining imparted righteousness as they grow in grace and holiness. Wesley was concerned about scriptural holiness in its personal and social dimensions. He encouraged people to seek to become perfect in love though he was aware of the need to qualify what he meant by this. He was concerned about social issues such as poverty, prison reform and the abolition of slavery. He also held that people could be assured of their relationship with God. The inner witness of the Spirit, coupled with outward signs, provided confidence in being a loved child of God.
25. Like Calvin, Wesley gave prominence to prayer, searching the scriptures and the Lord's Supper. He also emphasised the value of Christian conversation and small groups. Music and singing were important to him and he made use of his brother Charles' many hymns and translated some German ones himself. Whereas the Reformed tradition has tended to be somewhat dour, Wesley emphasised a warm faith, simple lifestyle and group support. He made extensive use of lay preachers and lay leaders and desired that all people witness to and serve Christ.

Conclusion

26. The Reformed and Evangelical tradition is a living tradition that continues to place the person and work of Christ at the centre of theological thinking in the Uniting Church. The *Basis of Union* is Christocentric stating that "the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ" (BU par 3). In doing so it also affirms a Trinitarian understanding of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
27. Scripture is fundamental. The Uniting Church holds the Old and New Testaments "as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated" (BU par 5). The interpretation of scripture is an ongoing task and the Uniting Church values faithful and scholarly interpreters (BU par11)
28. The message of justification by grace through faith is always counter cultural for it points humans away from self-justification to God whose grace – prevenient, justifying, sanctifying and sacramental – is necessary for salvation. Even our trusting response is enabled by God's grace with Wesley a better guide than Calvin on this point. There is the need not only to hear the gospel but to encounter Christ and experience the transforming power of the Spirit.

29. Sanctification is important to the Reformed and Evangelical tradition. People are to live out their faith in thought, speech and action enabled by the Holy Spirit. They are called to grow in grace and become more loving, more Christlike. This involves both personal and social holiness: personal spirituality, concern for the well-being of others and God's creation, and seeking a more compassionate and just society.
30. The Reformed and Evangelical tradition gives prominence to the ministry of the whole people of God. The *Basis of Union* affirms that "every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant" (BU par 13). It says the Spirit has endowed people with a diversity of gifts and there is no gift without its corresponding service. All ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. All people can use their gifts and abilities in the service of Christ through the church and in the world. Belonging to a small group assists people to grow and sustain their discipleship.
31. The Christian faith is not something to be kept to oneself; it is to be shared with others. The Evangelical tradition in particular encourages the Church to proclaim the gospel widely and witness openly to its faith in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world and invite others to respond to his call.
32. The Reformed tradition knows that the Church is always in need of reform. The Uniting Church belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end and that necessarily means change and reform as it goes. It prays that through the Spirit God will constantly correct it and use its worship, witness and service for God's eternal glory (BU par18).

Notes

1. "Living and Believing within the Unity and Faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" in Christopher C. Walker (editor), *Building on the Basis* (Adelaide: MediaCom, 2012) pp. 203-213
2. "On Being an Apostolic Church" in Christopher C. Walker (editor), *Building on the Basis* (Adelaide: MediaCom, 2012) pp. 160-169
3. Michael Owen, *Back to Basics, Studies on the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1996) p.178
4. Michael Owen (editor), *Witness of Faith, Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1984) p.59
5. See also Andrew Dutney, *Introducing the Uniting Church* (Adelaide: Uniting Church Press, 2008) pp. 12-13
6. Albert C. Outler (editor), *John Wesley* (NY: Oxford, 1964) p.119

Glossary of Terms

Anabaptism: 16th century Protestant movement promoting adult baptism on profession of faith and separation of church and state.

Puritanism: 16th and 17th century England and 17th century American movement which held to strict religious discipline and a simplification of acts of worship.

Pietism: German Protestant movement in the 17th and 18th century that focused on personal piety rather than ritual and church government.

American Awakenings: 18th and 19th century revival movements.

Predestination: the doctrine that God has established in advance who will be saved and who will not.

Prevenient grace: grace that precedes or goes before people are aware of it.

Fundamentalism: movements based on literal interpretation and strict adherence to doctrine.