



Doc. bytes 2019

Discussion starters prepared on behalf
of the Assembly Standing Committee
following the 15th Assembly



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Preface

After the 15th Assembly's Decision on Marriage many conversations were sparked about the underlying theology of that decision and its relationship to other theological commitments of the Uniting Church. The questions raised predominately fell into six broad categories. The six papers produced respond to these fundamental, underlying questions.

It was also noted, that outside of the particular context of the marriage decision, the constructive proposals contained in these papers can serve the church in discernment and discussion of an array of issues on both national and local levels.

The papers are designed for individuals and groups. Biblical prompts and discussion questions assist further discussion and consideration of one's personal and communal journey of faith.

The papers are provided to complement the serious duty of reading Scripture charged to all members of the Uniting Church, a reading done in openness to Christ's ongoing renewal of the church and a trust that the gift of the Spirit will keep us on the way.

Further Resources

Uniting Church Theology:

- **Assembly DocByte on Doctrine**
- **Assembly DocByte on Reading the Scriptures**
- Dutney, Andrew. *Where did the joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union*. Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001.
- **The Basis of Union**

Theology and the Christian Life:

- Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Quest for the Living God*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
- Kegler, Emmy. *One Coin Found: How God's Love Stretches to the Margins*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019.
- Walker, Christopher C. *Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith: An Introduction to Theology*. Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2017.
- Williams, Rowan. *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*. London: SPCK, 2016.
- Williams, Rowan. *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist and Prayer*. London: SPCK, 2014.

The Bible:

- Peter Enns Website: **My approach to interpreting the Bible in five words**
- Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible Again*. Nashville: Nelson, 2018.
- Laidlaw, Matt. *How We Read the Bible: 8 Ways to Engage the Bible with our Students*. Pasadena: Fuller Youth Institute, 2018.

The Unity and Diversity of the Church

- Sanneh, Lamin. *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
- World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper, No. 214. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013.



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1 What does it mean to be biblical?

Summary Sentence:

For a position to be 'biblical' it cannot be based solely on its mere existence in the Bible; it needs to be found by serious reading, attentive to Scripture's overarching story, and with openness to the Spirit.

Common to debates on theology, ethics, and polity is the appeal that one's position is 'biblical'. There is, however, much in the Bible that we would/do not use in developing our doctrine and ethics (e.g. the kidnapping of women to make wives, the prohibition of divorce).

Throughout the history of the church there have been times when opposing theological convictions have each claimed to be biblical. For instance, both slave-owners and slaves have turned to the Bible to justify their respective arguments for and against slavery.

However, to be 'biblical' involves doing more than citing individual passages as they lie on the page. Instead, 'biblical' should be taken to mean continuity with the Bible's overarching story. To arrive at a biblical position also implies that Scripture is read with openness to the ongoing presence of the Risen Christ in our midst.

One way of thinking about this is to learn from the way the New Testament writers used *their* Bible, i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures. The early church was driven by two surprising phenomena: the unexpected execution of their Messiah *and* his continued felt presence in their midst. On the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection they were bold enough to reinterpret and re-read their Scriptures with imagination and novelty. The embrace of the Gentiles (without requiring circumcision) emerged from faithful re-reading of Scripture (e.g. Paul's interpretation of the nature of Abraham's faith) and encounters with the Spirit of God (e.g. Peter's acceptance that Cornelius and his household had received the Spirit). The church received this as a 'biblical' decision because they trusted God was with them and leading them into a new understanding of their existing Scriptures.

As the Basis of Union states, the church hears the Word of God in the Bible's unique prophetic and apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ who faith affirms is the Word of God. In this way its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. This hearing "calls for a continuous wrestling, for imaginative, Spirit-filled, faith-full and rigorously critical reflection on the radically active presence and will of God in ever changing times and circumstances."¹ In undertaking this serious duty of reading Scripture we may well be led by the Spirit into new readings, yet still decidedly 'biblical' readings, for the flourishing of the church and its mission.

¹ Elna Mouton, *The Pathos of New Testament Studies: Of What Use Are We to the Church?* (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2005), 17.

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: Acts 15:1-21, Deuteronomy 23:1-8 and Isaiah 56:1-8

Comment: Notice how the exclusion of eunuchs and foreigners declared as absolute law in Deuteronomy 23 is reversed in the prophetic vision of Isaiah 56. This has parallels with how the early Christians came to a new decision about the place of Gentiles in the church.

Scripture is the environment for the church. Scripture is the space we inhabit, the sanctuary where we meet God in Jesus by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is not something 'over' us bearing down on us or ordering us around. It is the air we breathe, the water we Christian fish swim in.

Dale C. Martin, Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 94.

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?



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2 What is the substance of the faith?

Summary Sentence:

Across many differences of culture and doctrines, Christians can recognise each other as sharing together in core convictions about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To ask the question what is the substance of the Christian faith is a bit like asking, 'What is the core of the faith?' Or to put it more specifically: What is it without which Christianity would not exist and which allows Christians to recognise each other as Christians across their differences?

Nowhere in the resources of the Christian tradition are we given a clear and universally-agreed formal statement of the 'substance of the faith.' The statement that might come closest would be the one we share with the earliest Christians, 'Jesus is Lord.' The Nicene Creed would also be close, confessing as it does basic convictions about Jesus' relationship to God and God's works of creation and redemption.

In a denominationally-divided church, however, every particular church has its own way of discerning and submitting itself to what it believes is the substance of the faith of the whole church. In the case of the Uniting Church, to address that question, we are directed to the *Basis of Union*.

According to Paragraph 3, the faith which the church is called to confess is grounded in and generated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's work of reconciliation in him, Jesus' lordship over the whole creation, the coming reconciliation and renewal which will be the final consummation of God's work in Jesus Christ. Without these realities, Christianity would not exist.

We should also note the language of Paragraph 14. It is this paragraph that defines "adherence to the Basis of Union" as a "willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in the Basis of Union." The last few words are important: *as that way is described in the Basis of Union*. In other words, the *Basis* does not point to a pre-existing or external formula of the substance of the faith. The *Basis* itself offers its own confession of what this faith is. It is most explicit in doing so in Paragraph 3.

The Uniting Church is able to recognise those who share these convictions about Jesus' life, death and resurrection as fellow Christians even if we have different views on, for instance, the remarriage of divorced persons. Some churches disallow such marriages on the basis of the Gospels' record of Jesus' teaching (Mt 5:32; 19:9 c.f. Mk 10:10-11). The Uniting Church allows remarriage because it believes that this teaching is not of the substance of the faith.

Because we agree on more fundamental matters, our disagreements on remarriage do not prevent us from recognising each other as fellow Christians.

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: 1 John 1:1-4; Col 2:9-17

Comment: Notice how 1 John, a letter written in the midst of theological controversy, begins by indicating that the theological basis of fellowship amongst Christians is a set of convictions about the incarnation. The Colossians reading includes a declaration about how diverse and controversial beliefs and practices are 'shadows' of Christ who is the 'substance'.

The expressions 'the faith' and 'the Deposit,' which had been handed on to the church through the apostles and which the church is enjoined to guard intact and hand on again, refer not merely to a body of belief in Christ but to the living substance and foundation of faith in Christ and what he has done for us and our salvation. It is in this sense that we are surely to understand the expression 'the substance of the faith.'

T. F. Torrance, "The substance of the faith," in Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics and Traditions, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 176.

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?



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3 What is it to be part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church?

Summary Sentence:

The apostolic faith teaches that Christ, who is Holy and Universal, makes us and all disciples one church, despite our shortcomings.

This is the classic phrase drawn from the ancient Nicene (or the Nicene-Constantinopolitan) Creed of 381CE. This is the Creed shared across the historic divisions within the universal church. It describes the key 'marks' or attributes of God's church. The *Basis of Union* explicitly commits the Uniting Church to live and work within the faith and unity of the church described with these words – in paragraphs 2, 14 (d) and 15 (a). The repetition of the phrase and the capitalisation of these words in both the 1971 and 1992 editions shows the importance of the concept.

How the church is to live and work within these marks is addressed in paragraph 3, which opens with these words: '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 four 'marks' of the church are not given equal weighting in this rephrasing of the classic statement. Instead, the 'oneness' of the church reflects the One Lord. So, a church is

- **holy** – set apart by God and sanctified for a particular purpose,
- **catholic** – universal in scope,
- **apostolic** – in continuity with the teaching of the apostles,
- **one** – when, and only when, it is built upon the *one* Lord Jesus Christ.

The oneness or unity of the church does not consist in agreeing with other churches, even over important matters such as sacraments, church structure and authority or biblical interpretation. The unity is a gift of the One Lord and an eschatological trajectory or call for which Jesus prays (**John 17:21**). A church which is built on the one Lord Jesus Christ will 'preach Christ the risen crucified One and confess him as Lord to the glory of God the Father' (*Basis*, #3). In other words, our common allegiance to Christ is what makes the various expressions of church across the world One.

Various parts of the church over history have declared other parts not sufficiently holy, catholic or apostolic, which has led to the fracturing of visible communion. But through the Holy Spirit we recognise our role is not to stand in judgement over other churches, but to contribute to the whole church being a fellowship of reconciliation (*Basis*, #3).

So, what is it to be part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church? A privilege and a call.

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: Ephesians 4:1-13

Comment: Notice how in this passage, the theme of unity is not an abstract notion, but is defined by Christ and is made concrete by the community of the one church 'speaking the truth in love'.

We affirm that the apostolic faith of the Church is one, as the body of Christ is one. Yet there may legitimately be different formulations of the faith of the Church. The life of the Church as new life in Christ is one. Yet it is built up through different charismata and ministries. The hope of the Church is one. Yet it is expressed in different human expectations.

World Council of Churches, "Called to be One Church", #5 (2006)

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?



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4 What does it mean to be apostate?

Summary Sentence:

A significant change in the church's teaching does not immediately mean that it has abandoned the faith; it means, instead, that previous understandings of the scope of God's grace must be renewed in order to allow the gospel to be confessed and lived in all its fullness.

The term 'apostate' comes from the Latin *apostata* and Ancient Greek *apostasias*, and literally means 'one who withdraws or revolts.' In matters of religion it may be used to describe someone who has formally and voluntarily renounced their faith.

A charge of apostasy within the Church is, therefore, a very serious matter. Essentially, it is an accusation that a person or a group has abandoned Christ and forfeited their salvation. The power of God's salvific grace should never be seen as somehow subservient to notions of doctrinal purity.

Ironically, the first time we read *apostasias* in the New Testament, the person being charged with it is none other than the apostle, Paul. He was charged with rejecting the teachings of Moses for welcoming Gentiles into the fledgling Christian community (Acts 21:21). Over time, the church realised that it was Paul rather than his accusers who grasped the implications of the Gospel.

A significant change in the church's teaching does not immediately mean that it has abandoned the faith. It can mean, instead, that previous understandings of the scope of God's grace must be renewed in order to allow the gospel to be confessed and lived in ways that bring out the fullness of its forgiveness, welcome and hospitality.

During the twentieth century, protestant churches began ordaining women and explicitly accepting people of diverse sexualities as full members of the church. This has involved changes to previous teaching on such matters. But it has not involved changes in the churches' confession of the centrality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel.

The Uniting Church continues to make that confession. And in its many diverse congregations and other communities of faith, the Spirit of God continues to embolden us to faithful worship, witness and service under the Lordship of Christ, and to draw us in hope towards the coming reconciliation of all things which he will bring.

Our context is ever-changing and sometimes this may mean the teaching and practices of the church must be revisited, but the church is never apostate as long as it confesses Jesus Christ and remains faithful to his way of loving God with all of our being and our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22: 35-40; Mark 12: 28-34).

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: Acts 10:1-11:18

Comment: Note how in this passage the new teaching and practice to which the church is directed is warranted in part by the evidence of the same Spirit in groups previously separated on the basis of existing theological convictions.

So if we are searching for the truth of the gospel in God, then we really need to get back to the God of Jesus Christ. Jesus wasn't a dogma to be believed in. He was a life to be followed.

Teresa Okure, "What is truth?" Anglican Theological Review 93 (2011), 405-22 (421).

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?



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5 What is unity in diversity?

Summary Sentence:

Unity in diversity is a visible expression of our discipleship and our shared witness to the risen Christ, thus reflecting Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21) even and particularly when diverse differences arise that relate to doctrine, belief and practice.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the Christian community as the body of Christ. Using this metaphor, Paul demonstrates that unity is made up of many diverse parts, yet all these different parts form the one body of Christ. The Christian community is made up of diverse members from different cultures and walks of life. The challenge the church continues to face since its early beginnings is keeping the integrity of an authentic Christ-centered community in the face of diverse differences, especially when those differences lead to conflict.

Through Christ and the baptism by the one Spirit we become and are diverse members of the household of God (Ephesians 2:19). Through baptism we are adopted into a wider kinship in Christ, and held together by a common faith in the Triune God. "The Christian church is called to be a diverse community in difference where our differences are sustained but held in unity in the Spirit of Christ."¹ Our baptism calls us beyond the confines of our exclusive self-defining cultural labels, denominational traditions, or theological categories by which we are prone to define ourselves over and against other Christians.

Unity should not be conflated with uniformity or the flattening of differences. "The unity, which God offers the Church in Christ, is a unity that allows, endorses and enhances difference."² The gift does not imply uniformity, but realigns us to Jesus Christ and the core values of the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed.

"The Uniting Church receives its unity from God, as both gift and calling"³ and "confesses that Jesus is head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity" (Basis # 3). In order to serve that end "the church is called 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 to bear witness to himself" (Basis # 3).

The "call to union – then and now – is a call to surrender our self-limiting identities that so often claim primacy in our self-understanding and our relationship with others within the body of Christ."⁴ Unity in diversity is a visible expression of our discipleship and our shared witness to the risen Christ, thus reflecting Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21) even and particularly when diverse differences arise that relate to doctrine, belief and practice.

¹ *Assembly Working Groups on Doctrine and Worship, "Called to a Community of Difference: A Uniting Church Charter" in Building on the Basis: Papers from the Uniting Church in Australia, edited by Christopher C. Walker (Sydney: Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, Sydney, 2012), 150.*

² "Called to a Community of Difference," 149.

³ "Called to a Community of Difference," 149.

⁴ *Geoff Thompson, Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology provoked by the Basis of Union, (Northcote: UAP, Melbourne, 2016), 7.*

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26; Galatians 3:25-29

Comment: Notice that both Paul's image of the body and his insistence on baptismal identity cut right across prevailing social structures and social norms and entail a vision of mutual accountability.

The Christian church is called to be a diverse community in difference where our differences are sustained but held in unity in the Spirit of Christ.

"Called to a Community of Difference," in Building on the Basis: Papers from the Uniting Church in Australia, edited by Christopher C. Walker (Sydney: Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, Sydney, 2012), 150.

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?



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6 In what areas do we hold diversity of beliefs?

Summary Sentence:

From its beginning the Christian faith has generated paradoxes which at face value appear to contradict each other but which can legitimately co-exist within the deeper logic of the gospel.

What scope is there for unity-in-diversity of belief, over and above the unity-in-diversity of the church's membership? Apart from diversity of beliefs held by individual members, can the church formally hold doctrines which are in tension with each other? This is not a new question. From its beginning, the Christian faith has generated paradoxes which seem at face value to contradict each other.

The most startling example of such paradoxes are the simultaneous confessions that God is utterly distinct from creation and that God is utterly close to it. By the laws of logic and the usual meaning of words, these two affirmations are in tension. Similarly, the doctrine of the Trinity was developed over time to affirm beliefs which are paradoxical: God is three and God is one. Trinitarian doctrine does not resolve the paradox, it provides the framework by which both are held together.

A similar example would be the Uniting Church's position on baptism. The Uniting Church is called to "baptize both those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility" (*Basis #7*). Those two practices presuppose seemingly contradictory understandings of the respective roles of human belief, God's grace, and the Spirit's renewing work. The Uniting Church is able to practice both forms of baptism because of its conviction that both of them, without denying their distinct theologies, "initiate[s] people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit" (*Basis #7*). On this there is no diversity of belief.

This provides some parallel with the Assembly's decision on marriage. The acceptance of both same-gender-marriage and traditional marriage imply different understandings of the theological significance of gender and the body, and of the purposes of sex. What holds the two definitions of marriage together are the convictions that:

- marriage "is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family"
- it entails "a public covenant between the partners and with God";
- it is "intended for life"
- "those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage" are to be nurtured by the church
- all people are to "support, uphold and nurture those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage"

On these matters related to marriage there is no diversity in the Uniting Church's belief.

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: James 2:14 and Gal. 2:16

Comment: Notice how these two verses point to different, seemingly contradictory, understandings of the place of 'works' within Christian faith.

[G]iven the diversity of biblical witnesses to Jesus, orthodoxy actually demands that we speak about Jesus in more than one way. To privilege one part or another is to reckon with a diminished Jesus, a Jesus whose personal identity is less fully rounded than the complex Jesus offered us by the great cloud of witnesses in the Christian tradition.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, "Reflections on a pilgrimage," in Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 323-325 (324).

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?

Acknowledgement:

This document has been prepared on behalf of the Assembly Standing Committee.



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