Touchstone

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DOCTRINE MATTERS

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DOCTRINE MATTERS

This autumn, United Church presbyteries and congregations will be receiving a series of remits related to the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union. A remit—the putting of a question to a "lower court" of the Church—is required whenever an amendment to the Basis is proposed by the General Council. In this case, the remits on doctrine are being sent not only to presbyteries but also to congregational courts, sessions or their equivalents. This means that an affirmative majority of both presbyteries and sessions voting is required to amend the Basis of Union.

Three questions about doctrine are being put, each one asking whether a particular statement authorized by a past general council should be included in the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union. These previously authorized statements are: "Statement of Faith" (1940), "A New Creed" and "A Song of Faith." Currently the Doctrine Section is comprised of the original twenty articles providing the theological basis for church union in 1925. Each of these has been found worthy of widespread use in the Church; the question before presbyteries and sessions is whether any or all of them should now be included in the Basis of Union. While the Basis is an historical document, it is far from a mere artifact. *It is the constitution of our church, containing the doctrine and polity intended to govern its corporate life.* Therefore decisions about what should be in the Basis and what it should say are serious ones.

Our hope in devoting this number of *Touchstone* to doctrinal matters is that it will prove useful to members of presbyteries and sessions as they prepare to vote on the remits. More significantly, the theme title makes the assertion that *doctrine matters.* It is not unheard of today to hear the question, posed explicitly or implicitly, "How little do I have to believe to be a Christian and a member of the United Church?" Some even would dismiss the need to have any specified convictions or agreed creedal statements. In contrast to such theological minimalism (or carelessness), *Touchstone* contends that the dynamic of faith includes having convictions about God's being and work, and that such convictions derive not so much from individual preference as from the witness of the church as a whole. Belief (the conviction component of faith) is not a matter of haggling over the minimum deposit required; it is an aspect of

commitment to the costliness of faith. Belief is not hustling in and out of a fast food shop, but sitting down to a banquet of rich fare.

Belief, of course, is not the first or main thing in the Christian life. Lived faith is fundamental, the response of heart and soul and mind and strength to the invitation of a sovereign and saving Love. This response includes trust (resting on God's promises and care), and also obedience (following on the path of discipleship). It is out of such lived experience and action that reflection on the meaning of faith arises. This reflection is the work of theology and it results, in ecclesial settings, in the agreed and authorized statements that we call doctrine.

Yet this reflection is not something apart from the life of faith—unless, of course, it is carried out by an atheist holding an academic appointment in theology! Theology and its further task of expressing church doctrine belong to the journey of faith. Anselm of Canterbury called the venture "faith seeking understanding." And once provisional clarity and corporate agreement have been achieved in this process, the church has a body of convictions to teach, so that an understanding of the faith, not "blind faith," may be encouraged in its members and also communicated in its witness to others. "Be prepared to give an account of the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Belief implies cognitive content. One has trust in God and serves in obedience because one has come to know the divine character as worthy of trust and obedience. All can know the existence and power of a transcendent deity, according to Paul in Romans 1. Even the unbelieving eye can discern in the magnificence of the universe the handiwork of a Creator. But Christian belief carries us a good deal further than unshaped theism: in Scripture's record of the nearer revelation to Israel and in Jesus Christ, the veil of the unutterable mystery of God drops, revealing the divine character and purpose that gave birth to life and light. We worship God not only because we can scarcely deny our dependence on divine power and purpose, but also because this power and purpose became known in the lure of Love divine. In short, we worship the Creator because we come to believe that the nature of the "God of power and might" is love. We dare to believe even that God's anger and wrath are tokens of "a lover's quarrel with the world."

It is interesting that criticism of engagement with, and adherence to, official church teaching usually links "doctrine" with the spectre of "dogma." Dogma, of course, is a dreadful thing because it is understood to entail the imposition of alien edicts upon individual freedom. Even doctrine can be set up as such a straw man, to be easily knocked down. Our word "doctrine," of course, simply means "teaching." Contrast, then, the predictable suspicion toward doctrine prevailing in some Christian quarters with the appreciation of traditional spiritual teaching in Aboriginal communities. There, the elders and the passing on of traditional teaching are met with respect.

Do we have teaching that is worthy of being passed on to succeeding generations? Many Christians come to faith because the tradition *is* being passed on. They may encounter it and the One whom it attests in the context of worship and also through formal instruction. There is an interpretive circle in which Christian experience and teaching influence each other. Socialization in the church—e.g., exposure to the Bible though Sunday School, hymn-singing, learning to pray, enjoying the company of others—is the instrument through which God's Spirit generates the belief, trust and obedience that constitute Christian faith. In turn, one's lived experience of faith, thus founded on the corporate witness of the church, comes to shape our understanding and grasp of this witness. Theology and the articulation of doctrine arise from reflection on the primary data of faith, i.e., unfolding communion with the Divine. They also have shaping influence on how we experience and understand such communion.

Harry Robinson, an Anglican minister and an exemplar of "generous orthodoxy," recently died. I recall hearing him some years ago at a preaching mission at St. Peter's Church in Cobourg, Ontario. One of the illustrations he used seems to me arrestingly helpful. Some churches, he said, regard membership and belief as like a corral: the true believers are inside and the unbelievers are outside, and it is abundantly clear exactly who is who. He went on to say that in the Anglican Church there is no corral but rather a meadow; in the middle of the meadow is a post with the 39 Articles attached. The summons of the Church to its members and friends is, "Get as close to this as you can." We do need identifiable standards of belief in the church, whether or not

we regard deflection from them as "heretical." Moreover, we must be prepared to say that some theological or a-theological positions function to undermine the authorized teaching of the church and to subvert unity in the body. Such teaching can scarcely be in "essential agreement" with United Church doctrine.

In this number of *Touchstone*, readers will hear from Bruce Gregersen, chief program staff member at the General Council Office (GCO), who shares his conviction that the inclusive approach to doctrine implied in the remits signals a day of greater theological cohesiveness in the United Church. John Young, a commissioner at General Council 40, suggests apt criteria for determining what statements should be included in our constitution and offers historical perspective on the role of doctrine as understood by successive general councils.

Focusing on only one of the three statements, William Haughton tells the intriguing story of how the former Committee on Christian Faith brought "A New Creed" into being. Responding to the question of why historic creeds matter, John McTavish finds in Karl Barth a compelling guide. In "Awash with Theology," a sermon originally preached in 2007, Michael Bourgeois counters the cynical claim of some observers that the United Church really has no theology and is only a trendy religious club.
This number also contains Paul Jenkins' laudatory review article of Diarmaid McCulloch's prize-winning book on the three-thousand-year history of Christianity. Dorothee Sölle, who courageously resisted the use of religion to mask and suppress the voice of suffering, is the subject of the profile by Janet Gear. Marion Best, a long-time friend of *Touchstone*, looks back at shaping moments in her spiritual journey, thus speaking "From the Heart about the Heart of the Matter."

Please remember that we are interested in hearing from our readers and in publishing your comments on the inside pages of the subscription insert.

Peter Wyatt

REFLECTIONS ON THE REMIT
by Bruce Gregersen

As the General Council's lead staff member for theology, I've followed the process of the remit on doctrine from the beginning. The 40th General Council approved the proposal overwhelmingly, with some of us, observing from the floor, thinking the vote was unanimous. That in itself is remarkable, given the frequent disagreements in the church over the meaning and place of doctrine. One wonders, in fact, if it signals a renewed or revitalized consensus in the church on the importance of what we believe.

One obvious reason the proposal was so strongly received, I believe, was its emphasis on the primacy of Scripture. The proposal, in its basic intention, didn't need to do so. It was a response to a controversial Saskatchewan proposal that would have removed the Twenty Articles from the Basis of Union and instead created a collection of expressions of faith. The alternative simply to add the proposed statements to the Doctrine Section could have been accomplished without any reference to Scripture or "subordinate standards." However, conversations had preceded the General Council meeting, proposing that the term "subordinate standards" be used and explained, for it is found in the Basis of Union, although largely unknown and unused.

The United Church could hardly be accused of being unfaithful to its Reformed heritage of "once reformed, always reforming." Like most Reformed churches, the United Church has renewed its expressions of faith, making them appropriate to the present age. But unlike most Reformed churches, it has not added these statements to its formal doctrine, its "subordinate standards." What this has meant is that the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union has been relegated, in the minds of many, to the status of an historic statement with little relevance to the present faith life of the Church.

A truly Reformed understanding would see the doctrine of the church as a living resource, continually evolving to reflect the church's changing engagement with its time. But such doctrine always keeps its place, always subordinate to Scripture.

What the proposal, and now the remit, attempt to do, therefore, is to recover this overlooked aspect of the history of the Church and to make the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union a living document.

There are really only two requirements that connect the Doctrine Section to the rest of the Manual of the United Church. The first relates to the requirement of Candidates for Ministry to be "in essential agreement" with the doctrine of the church, and the second, in the Trust of Model Deed, is the requirement that the use of church property be consistent with the doctrine of the Church.

The latter requirement, which exists in other denominations with similar polities around property, has frequently been the key test for congregations who seek to withdraw with their properties from their denominations over theological issues.

The "essential agreement" rubric is a distinctive characteristic of the United Church and comes to us from our Congregational roots. It separates us from many other Reformed churches that require subscription to creeds or confessions.

My belief is that additional statements to our Doctrine Section will not change this basic distinction of our Church. However, for many candidates for ministry who have had great difficulty in expressing their essential agreement with the Twenty Articles, it will allow for much greater integrity in responding honestly. What it can do, I believe, is set forth the formal doctrine of the church as a spectrum of expressions, in dialogue with one another. Candidates who are asked to declare their essential agreement with the doctrine of the Church would not be expected to be in essential agreement with each part of it, but rather with the whole, and to indicate that they are able to locate their faith within it.

What of the statements that are adopted? The 1940 "Statement of Faith" and "A Song of Faith" (2006) could be incorporated into the Doctrine Section without any expectations that they would need to be revised at some time in the future. It is in fact one of the ways that subordinate standards work in most Reformed churches. Additional standards are added only after they have proved their worth through time. This is the meaning of the title of the study resource, "Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured and Loved."

But one of the proposed statements, "A New Creed," has been twice revised and is under discussion for further revision. If it is recognized as a subordinate standard, would this mean that any further revisions will require a category three remit, similar to the present process?

A final answer to this would likely be found only in a ruling by the General Secretary (and possibly an appeal to the Judicial Committee) in response to a revision formally adopted by a General Council. However, it would be consistent with an understanding of a subordinate standard that an addition to the Creed would need to be approved for general use in the Church. Only after a period of time, when the revised Creed had been tested and widely accepted would it be adopted into the formal text in the Doctrine Section.

I believe that the remit on doctrine is potentially the most significant change to the Basis of Union in our history. That it begins with an affirmation of the primacy of Scripture and was adopted overwhelmingly by a General Council perhaps signals an end to the divisions that have plagued us for too many years. It also may point to a renewal of the importance of what we believe as a denomination. The 2012 General Council will focus significantly on the identity of the Church. The approval of any of the three statements for addition into the formal doctrine of the church would be a fitting beginning to this journey.

WHAT WE SAY WE BELIEVE MAKES A DIFFERENCE: THE REMITS ON DOCTRINE IN THE UNITED CHURCH

By John H. Young

Introduction

The 40th General Council of the United Church, meeting in Kelowna in 2009, adopted an historic motion in the area of doctrine.[1] This General Council determined that each of three "faith statements"—the 1940 "Statement of Faith," the United Church Creed (as it is known in ecumenical circles or "A New Creed," as it has been more popularly known within the denomination), and "A Song of Faith"—would be the subject of a remit to determine whether to add each of these to the current Doctrine Section in the Basis of Union. Any of the statements receiving the support of an absolute majority both of presbyteries and of sessions [2] would be added to the Doctrine Section and understood as part of the "official" body of United Church doctrine.[3]

While giving these documents such a status will happen only if the remits are approved by a majority of presbyteries and sessions, the authorization of these remits was significant in and of itself. Never before had a General Council agreed to authorize a remit to add additional faith statements to the Doctrine Section. In only a few instances have changes even to a particular article in the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union been tested via remit. Only two such changes, both to Article 17, secured the necessary support to be adopted.[4] In this article, I want to provide

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[1] In the interests of transparency, I need to acknowledge that I was the mover of this motion concerning doctrine.

[2] Hereafter, when the term "Session" is used, it is understood also to refer to equivalent bodies as well.

[3] While the United Church has made many theological statements in the reports of particular committees and task forces, and, while General Councils adopted each of the three "statements" that will now be tested by remit, I use the term "official" here because the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union alone has that formal status. At present, for example, it is the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, and only that expression of United Church theology, with which ministry personnel in the United Church, as a condition of being given that office, must declare themselves to be "in essential agreement." [See "The Basis of Union, §11.2," *The Manual*, 35th rev. ed., (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 2010).] When the United Church has engaged in formal union talks with other denominations, the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union has been identified as the United Church's official doctrinal statement. See, for example, the Anglican-United Church study guide, *Growth in Understanding* (The Anglican Church of Canada and The United Church of Canada, 1959), 59.

[4] The words "and women" were added after the ordination of women had been authorized via

some background on these remits, reflect briefly on the concept of "subordinate standards," offer a brief historical commentary on the four major faith statements of the United Church, and indicate some important matters at stake in these remits.

The Action of the 40th General Council, Kelowna, 2009

The 40th General Council had before it a Proposal[5] from Wascana Presbytery (transmitted with concurrence by Saskatchewan Conference) to remove the Doctrine Section from the Basis of Union and to declare it, along with the 1940 "Statement of Faith," "A New Creed," and "A Song of Faith" to be "historic documents." What the proposal sought to do was neither technically possible nor, in my view, wise. To have adopted this proposal would have meant that the United Church, technically speaking, would have ceased to have a formal statement of doctrine. Such a decision would have been impossible for two reasons: (a) nothing in the proposal would have removed the existing requirement that candidates for ordination, commissioning, or admission be "in essential agreement" with "the Statement of Doctrine of the United Church"[6] and (b) the denomination holds its property on the basis of its adherence to its Statement of Doctrine.[7] Even if possible, such a move would have been unwise; it would have confirmed the erroneous view held in some quarters that the United Church is really a social club with no theology.

As commissioners from Saskatchewan spoke in the debate concerning their Conference's proposal, it became clear that the motivation was not that the United Church cease to have a formal statement of doctrine. Rather the desire was to recognize both that the Doctrine Section had been written in a particular time and context, and that three subsequent General Councils had adopted other faith statements—statements reflecting the time and context in which they were written. In other words, what lay behind the proposal was the

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remit in the 1930s. This same article was also changed, via remit, in the 1980s to include diaconal ministry.

[5] "Proposal" is a technical term in United Church polity. It refers to "a formal request for specific action within the jurisdiction of the Court [of the United Church] to which it is directed" (United Church of Canada, *The Manual*, 35th rev. ed., §001).

[6] § 11.2, The Basis of Union, *The Manual*, 35th rev. ed.

[7] Appendix II, Schedule B, §1, ibid.

conviction that doctrine in the United Church was larger than just the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union and that the three subsequent "faith statements" adopted by General Councils since 1925 should be given similar status. As a result of the debate, the General Council adopted an alternative to the proposal from Wascana Presbytery. That alternative motion recognized four existing realities in the area of United Church doctrine: (a) Scripture has primacy; (b) any doctrinal statement the Church makes is a "subordinate standard"; (c) the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union is such a "subordinate standard"; and (d) the Church, via its own processes as laid out in The United Church of Canada Act, can adopt such subordinate standards as it might, from time to time, wish to do. Given those named realities, the motion then proposed testing the will of the United Church, via remit, regarding the recognition of the 1940 "Statement of Faith," "A New Creed," and "A Song of Faith" as subordinate standards.[8]

The Concept of Subordinate Standards

One significant result of this motion has been a recovery for many within the United Church of the concept of "subordinate standards," one with deep roots in the Reformed tradition and one familiar to the drafters of the Basis of Union. The Reformed tradition has always understood Scripture to be the primary or ultimate standard for faith and life. But from its beginnings in the 16th century, this tradition, in which both our Congregational and Presbyterian forebears stood and with which early twentieth century Methodists were familiar, was strongly confessional. Denominations within the Reformed tradition adopted confessions or statements of faith, but they recognized such statements as efforts to articulate the historic faith of the Church in the context of a particular time and place. Such confessions or statements, however important in the life of a tradition, were always judged to be a partial and never a complete expression of the tradition. Their authority in the tradition was always seen as "subordinate" to Scripture (hence the term "subordinate standard"). With a very few exceptions, denominations in the Reformed tradition have also understood their confessions or statements of faith to

[8] *Record of Proceedings, Fortieth General Council of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2010), 165-166.

be subject to renewal and reworking from time to time to take account of the changing context. The Reformed tradition's concept of the church—*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (the church reformed and always to be reformed)—reflects this understanding.

Two sources confirm that the members of the Doctrine Sub-Committee, the body that drafted the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, shared this view of subordinate standards. First, these theological forbears had sufficient expectation that the United Church would want to add to or amend its doctrine, including the adoption of additional subordinate standards, that they included a specific provision for that possibility in The United Church of Canada Act.[9] Second, the published reflections of Thomas Kilpatrick, a member of the Doctrine Sub-Committee, provide insight about their thinking. Commenting upon the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, Kilpatrick wrote:

> Let it be further noted that this doctrinal statement makes no claim to infallibility or finality. The substance or essence of the Christian faith is here, communicated . . . by the Word and Spirit of God, and received by them [believers] in loyalty and humility. But the form of human speech in which they convey their message to the church and the world has the imperfection, which must belong to all efforts to express in forms of human thought, and language, meanings that are eternal, and divine. Creed revision is the inherent right, and the continual duty, of a living Church. This is our "Confession of Faith." We are conscious of limitations and inadequacies in the intellectual form of our statement. It will be the duty of those who come after us to find a more fitting intellectual expression for the unchanging and inexhaustible truth of the Gospel. We have sought, humbly and earnestly, to serve our own generation; and now we hand on the result of our toil, with prayer and hope, to the generation following.[10]

[9] *The United Church of Canada Act, Statutes of Canada*, George V, 14-15 (1924), c. 100, s. 28(b).
[10] Thomas B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1928), 63-64.

The question then arises: what criteria should be used in determining whether a denominational confessional or doctrinal statement should be accorded the status of "subordinate standard"? Two, of equal importance, stand out. First, the statement should have a history of proven use and value to the constituency as an expression of its faith. For that reason, it would be inappropriate for a General Council to adopt a new "Statement of Faith" and simultaneously to suggest it become a "subordinate standard." There is a test of time and discernment involved. Second, a "subordinate standard" should reflect continuity with the denomination's past faith confessions and with the Christian tradition more generally, even as it re-states that faith in the context of the particular time and circumstances in which it is written.[11]

A Brief Historical Reflection on the United Church's Key Faith Statements

Each of the four major faith statements of the United Church was written for a particular purpose. It also must be noted that the United Church has produced other significant theological statements both through the ongoing work of its standing committees and through task forces appointed to address particular questions. However, the focus of this article is on the four major faith statements.

Even during the years leading up to church union, the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union (essentially completed in 1908) was not well received in some quarters, including among some partisans of church union. The main criticism was that the document was not sufficiently contextual, for it did not take into consideration the social fervour of the age nor did it show evidence of reflection upon specific problems early twentieth century Canadian society faced.[12] The primary purpose of the Doctrine Section was to provide a theological basis upon which the three denominations could unite and to ensure that no major theological questions divided them from one another.[13] For that reason, among others (e.g., the motivations for church union were primarily practical, not

[11] For a more extensive reflection on such criteria, see *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, and Living* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2010), 5-8.
[12] John Webster Grant, "Blending Traditions: The United Church of Canada," *Canadian Journal of Theology* Vol. 9, No. 1 (1963), 54.
[13] Kilpatrick, 60-61.

theological; the era was one in which a stress on doctrinal particularities was somewhat suspect), the Doctrine Section was relatively general in its language and approach.

While some Presbyterians chose not to enter the United Church because they considered the Westminster Confession theologically superior to the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, other Presbyterians chose not to enter the United Church because they judged the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union failed to meet the "need for an updated theology which would take into account recent biblical research and a scientifically oriented modern age."[14] These Presbyterians feared that the failure of the Doctrine Section to engage theologically the issues of the day signalled that the resulting denomination would lack commitment to vigorous theological thinking.

Some unionist Presbyterians, along with a number of Methodists and Congregationalists, also had concerns about the adequacy of the Doctrine Section. However, they were prepared to overlook that aspect for what they saw as a greater good.

Such lingering sentiments about the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, plus the events of the years between the completion of the draft of the Basis of Union in 1908[15] and the mid-1930s, led the 7th General Council (1936) to initiate the process that led to the adoption by the 9th General Council (1940) of the 1940 *"Statement of Faith."*[16] The 1940 Statement reflected current concerns and theological trajectories in a way that the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union had not.

The members of the commission that produced the 1940 *"Statement of Faith"* clearly saw their task as being in the spirit Kilpatrick had described. The Preamble captures their understanding:

> The Church's faith is the unchanging Gospel of God's holy, redeeming love revealed in Jesus Christ . . . But Christians of

[14] Allan L. Faris, "The Fathers of 1925," in *The Tide of Time: Historical Essays of the late Allan L. Faris*, ed. John S. Moir (Toronto: Knox College, 1978), 119.

[15] There were very few changes to the Doctrine Section after 1908.

[16] For much of my sense of the reasons behind the development of the 1940 *"Statement of Faith",* I am indebted to Michael Bourgeois. He shared with me his chapter on United Church Theology, "Awash in Theology: Issues in Theology in The United Church of Canada," from the forthcoming *The United Church of Canada: A History*, to be published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

> each new generation are called to state it afresh in terms of the thought of their own age and with the emphasis their age needs. This we have attempted to do for the people of The United Church of Canada—seeking always to be faithful to Scripture and to the testimony of the Universal Church, and always aware that no statement of ours can express the whole truth of God.[17]

The 1940 *"Statement of Faith"* occupied a significant place in the United Church from the 1940s through the 1960s. During these decades, Church officials viewed it as a key resource in educating members about the faith tradition. *Highways of the Heart*, a book of meditations on the 1940 "Statement of Faith," had sold almost thirty thousand copies by 1952. By that same year, *This is Our Faith*, John Dow's theological exposition on the 1940 *"Statement of Faith,"* was in its eighth printing. [18]

Work on the United Church Creed (properly "A New Creed") began almost exactly thirty years after the 7th General Council authorized the development of the 1940 "Statement of Faith." In 1965, discussion of a new order for the Sacrament of Baptism raised the question of whether "there was need in the Church for a modern "Statement of Faith" which might be used as an alternative to the Apostles' Creed."[19] As a result, the Sub-Executive of the General Council asked the Committee on Christian Faith "to attempt to draft a brief profession of faith suitable for liturgical use."[20] Before the committee could turn to that task, the Sub-Executive received a request from Guelph Presbytery asking it "to refer to the Committee the task of producing a modern creed in modern language."[21] The committee reported to the Twenty-Third General Council (1968) where its version of a "modern" creed ran into significant opposition. The proposed creed was referred back to the committee "with the request that it be re-drafted in a manner that will give more adequate expression of the

[17] [1940] *"Statement of Faith"*, Preamble.
[18] *Record of Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1952), 340.
[19] *Record of Proceedings of the Twenty-Third General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1968), 311.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

Christian Gospel for our time."[22] The Executive of the General Council, having been given the power to do so, subsequently approved the revised version. That version has been amended on two occasions since—in 1980 to make the language of the creed inclusive and, at the direction of the 35th General Council (1994), to add the words "to live with respect in creation."

In the mid-to-late 1980s, there were once again calls for the United Church to adopt a new "Statement of Faith." In 2000, the 37th General Council asked the Committee on Theology and Faith to "produce a timely and contextual "Statement of Faith."[23] The committee consulted extensively with the constituency and held a symposium on the draft statement in the fall of 2005. Unlike both the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union and the 1940 "Statement of Faith," the committee used a poetic, rather than a propositional, format for this "Statement of Faith". "A Song of Faith" was adopted unanimously by the 39th General Council. It has been used, as the committee had hoped, both as an educational and liturgical resource.

When one looks over the history of the development of these statements, three things stand out. First, in common with many denominations in the Reformed tradition, the United Church has felt the need to re-state its faith from time to time to take account of the particular context in which its members think about, and live out, the Christian faith. Indeed, it has done so approximately every thirty years. Second, the United Church has never clarified the relationship between the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union and any of the three statements adopted subsequently or the relationship among those latter three statements themselves.[24] Third, each of the statements developed since 1925 has had,

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[22] Ibid., 56.

[23] *Record of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2006), 419.

[24] See Ibid., 425, 437-438. Michael Bourgeois, in his forthcoming chapter "Awash in Theology: Issues in Theology in The United Church of Canada," gives an account of the Church's efforts in the late 1950s approach to address concerns about the different understandings of revelation found in the Doctrine Section of the[24] [1940] *"Statement of Faith"*, Preamble.

[24] *Record of Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1952), 340.

[24] *Record of Proceedings of the Twenty-Third General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1968), 311.

[24] Ibid.

at least for a period of time after its adoption, a valued and a lively place in the life of the Church.

The Significance of These Remits on Doctrine

Three factors about these remits strike me as being particularly important. First, the remits offer the prospect of establishing a clear and formal relationship among our various faith statements. For that reason alone I strongly hope that at least one of the three remits will achieve sufficient support to be adopted as a "subordinate standard." While a good case can be made for each of the three, the United Church Creed ("A New Creed") would definitely seem to meet the criteria of being a valued and living United Church expression of the Christian faith that stands in continuity with both the Christian tradition and our own denomination's particular understanding of it. The 1940 *"*Statement of Faith*"* definitely had a very influential role in United Church life for the first twenty to thirty years after its adoption. However, the very specific attention to the context and the theological thinking prevalent at the time of its creation that made it so popular may work against this Statement being seen as a "lively expression" of our faith in our current context. For many United Church members, it has been lost in the mists of time. "A Song of Faith" is being used and valued by the constituency, and many in the United Church have expressed much appreciation for it. On those grounds, it too would be a good candidate for adoption as a subordinate standard. While I do not concur personally with the view that "A Song of Faith" has not been with us long enough to pass "the test of time" for recognition as a subordinate standard, I recognize that others may hold that view.

Second, should we adopt at least one of these documents as a subordinate standard, it would allow for a dialogue[25] between such statement(s) and the United Church's existing subordinate standard,

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[24] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 56.

e Basis of Union and the 1940 *"Statement of Faith"*.

[25] "Dialogue" among the statements is a concept I have drawn from the study document, *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, Living*, p. 6. I find it a helpful way to think about how various statements of faith, developed for particular purposes in particular contexts, interact together. Denominational faith statements often have at least slight internal contradictions; certainly different emphases and forms of expression mark denominational faith statements drawn from different time periods.

namely, the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union. While our faith statements represent a valuable resource for thinking through our faith, we use them in a formal way in the examination of persons who wish to serve the United Church as ministry personnel. Since a primary responsibility of ministry personnel in the United Church (regardless of the "ministerial category") is "to teach and preach the faith" (or, in other words, to engage in the education and the nurture of the Church's members that they may exercise more fully their ministry in the world), an examination that involved a dialogue between or among various faith statements would enable a fuller sense of whether such candidates can fulfill this calling. Such a "dialogue" would also be enriching for all church members. We would see where similarities and differences lie and be informed by them in our own thinking about the faith.

Third, adopting one or more of these statements as a subordinate standard would signal our congruence with the Reformed understanding that statements or confessions of faith, while critically important and necessary in a denomination's life, never capture fully the "essential truths" of the faith tradition. It would put us in the company of other (indeed, most) denominations in the Reformed tradition in adding, over time, subordinate standards. It would aid us in our appropriate valuing of the Doctrine Section, and any other statements we may subsequently adopt, not to make of any of them "the final word" their authors never intended. Adopting one or more of these statements as a subordinate standard would recognize that doctrine "develops," not in a progressive fashion that judges a current statement better than an older one that should then be left behind, but in the sense that the way we express the faith is always time-conditioned. While a good contemporary statement frames the faith tradition in the context of an era's challenges, it is in the conversation among contemporary statements and those of the historical tradition that both individual and denominational understandings are most enriched.

"A NEW CREED": ITS ORIGINS AND SIGNIFICANCE
by William Haughton

The 1960s[1] were years of social upheaval in Canada, as elsewhere, in which rapid and discomfiting cultural changes were keenly felt by the nation's churches.[2] Within the United Church, the production of "A New Creed" stands out as an important and enduring legacy of that era. Rather than fading out of memory, in fact, "A New Creed" has become arguably the most distinctive feature of the Church's life. The more recent "A Song of Faith," in fact, tiptoed gingerly around "the beloved New Creed."[3] One of its authors said that many were met in the drafting process who "thought that "A New Creed" so perfectly summarized the faith of the church that nothing else was necessary."[4] The pages that follow will offer a summary of the little-known story of "A New Creed" and some reflection on its significance for the United Church.

Writing and Authorization

Early in 1965, the General Council's (GC) Committee on Christian Faith became interested in writing a new "Statement of Faith."[5] Though its initial appetite for a joint-venture with the Presbyterian Church went unsatisfied, a much better opportunity soon arrived. In May, the committee was examining a baptismal liturgy projected for the forthcoming *Service Book* and was unhappy with the rubric, "The Apostles' Creed shall be said by all."[6] Subsequently, it received permission from the GC Sub-executive to draft a new confession that could be used in place of the Apostles' Creed. Too busy with other

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[1] Better the "long sixties" of Arthur Marwick in *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, C. 1958-C. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2] For John Webster Grant the 1960s were "A Decade of Ferment," *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd Edition (Burlington, ON: Welch, 1988), 184-206.

[3] *"A Song of Faith"*, 17.

[4] Michael Bourgeois, "Awash in Theology," a lecture at West Hill United Church, Toronto, 25 February 2007. http://www.vicu.utoronto.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=720 (accessed 17 December 2009).

[5] United Church of Canada Archives, Standing Committee on the Christian Faith fonds, 82.204c-2, Meeting Minutes, 11 January 1965.

[6] An *Observer* editorial offered a similar perspective: "Don't Make Us Recite the Apostles' Creed," 1 February 1965, 10.

responsibilities actually to do so before the 22nd GC, 1966, the committee then sought and achieved a broader mandate from the Sub-executive:

1. To examine the status and authority of the classical creeds in The United Church of Canada today.
2. To collect and examine representative modern statements of faith.
3. To attempt to formulate a modern credal statement suitable for use in the liturgy, with special reference to the new order for the administration of the sacrament of baptism.[7]

Beginning in October 1966, the Committee on Christian Faith met monthly at 85 St. Clair Avenue East, Toronto, for this purpose. In spite of much effort and discussion, no progress was made for several months as successive meetings revealed significant and unwavering disagreement among committee members on two key questions: what to do with the Apostles' Creed and how to go about producing a suitable alternative? Surviving members recall the intensity of their disagreements and that, almost a year later, "things seemed hopeless."[8]

However, the Committee turned a corner in October 1967 when Mac Freeman, of Victoria College, wrote and submitted a text that became the prototype for "A New Creed":

> I believe that
> Man is not alone.
>
> -God has created and is creating us.
> -God has worked in history and is working to liberate us for true humanity in community.
> -God has come among us in the true man Jesus and comes among us today in the Spirit of our risen Lord to deliver us from alienation from God, our fellows and ourselves.
> -God has called and is calling us into the company of Jesus with whom we are chosen to be servants, by whom others are also set free.

[7]*Creeds: A Report of the Committee on Christian Faith* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1969), 5.
[8]Personal telephone conversation with Mac Freeman, 7 December 2009.

> Man is not alone.
> -In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are in the presence of God.
>
> Believing that we are offered life and liberation from beyond our human resources, I trust God and commit my existence to his purpose.[9]

Generally pleased with Freeman's submission, the Committee then commissioned Richard Delorme, a minister in Valleyfield, Quebec, to revise this text in light of group discussion and, in November, he submitted an influential second draft:

> We believe that:
> Man is not alone; he lives in God's world.
> We believe in the God of this world and other worlds.
> -In God Who has created and is creating us.
> -In God Who has come among us in the True Man, Jesus.
> -In God Who, in Jesus, reconciles us to himself and others.
> -In God Who, by His Spirit, liberates us to serve.
> We believe in this God.
> Therefore:
> Man is not alone; he lives in God's world.
> -In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are in his presence.
> We believe in the God of this world and other worlds.
> We commit our existence to Him.[10]

This version introduced the now trademark opening phrase and also the committee's move toward a more poetic confession.

From that point, the committee worked primarily on this "Freeman-Delorme Creed." In February 1968, a team of Gordon

[9] Committee on Christian Faith, Meeting Minutes, 16 October 1967. Freeman remembers getting "Man is not alone" from a magazine article by John C. Bennett, of Union Theological Seminary. Conversation with Mac Freeman, 7 December 2009.

[10] United Church of Canada Archives, Standing Committee on the Christian Faith fonds, 82.204c, 3-41, "A Revised Creed by R. DeLorme based on the original by M. Freeman, November, 1967." Underlining original.

Nodwell, Dorothy Wyman and Alex Farquhar submitted a text which dropped the "We believe . . . " opening:

> Man is not alone; he lives in God's world.
>
> We believe in God:
> Who has created and is creating,
> Who has come in the True Man, Jesus,
> Who works within us and among us by his Spirit.
>
> We believe in Him.
>
> He calls us into his Church, to love and serve our fellow men, and to share in his kingdom.
> In life, in death, in life beyond death, he is with us.
>
> We are not alone; we believe in God.

In spite of such progress, however, disagreement and dispute among committee members persisted. Farquhar, for example, also submitted a dissenting text, arguing that the phrase, "In life, in death, in life beyond death . . ." was "redundant."[11]

Ultimately, reference to the work of Christ was expanded and the text was completed for presentation to the 23rd GC:

> Man is not alone; he lives in God's world.
>
> We believe in God:
> who has created and is creating,
> who has come in the true Man, Jesus, to reconcile and renew,
> who works within us and among us by his Spirit.
>
> We trust him.
>
> He calls us to be his Church:
> to celebrate his presence,
> to love and serve others,

[11]Committee on Christian Faith, Meeting Minutes, 12 February 1968.

to seek justice and resist evil.

We proclaim his kingdom.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, He is with us.
We are not alone; we believe in God.[12]

On Thursday morning 29 August, Donald Mathers presented the committee's report to the 23rd GC—meeting at Sydenham Street United Church in Kingston, Ontario—and Hugh Rose spoke to the report.[13] Writes the latter,

> I remember being suitably intimidated standing before Council and even more so when Ernie Howse, former moderator and minister of Bloor Street, and George Johnston, prof of New Testament at Emmanuel, neither of whom had the reputation of being conservatives, poured scorn on a creed that didn't begin with 'I believe' and then went on to dare to pretend to keep company with the "Historic Statements of the Church Catholic."[14]

The draft creed was discussed on the floor and possible revisions were discussed. Ultimately, it was moved and carried "that the new Creed be referred back to the Committee . . . with the request that it be re-drafted . . . and that the Committee report to the [GC] Executive which shall have power to issue."[15]

In late September, the committee re-convened and made the creed an "immediate priority." For it to appear in the *Service Book*, changes would have to be made quickly. Hugh Rose described his experience in Kingston thus: "There appeared to be no opposition to the effort to write creeds, but considerable concern as to the form and content of the Creed." Correspondence was read highlighting the view that the creed featured an

[12] Committee on Christian Faith, Meeting Minutes, 8 April 1968.
[13] *Record of Proceedings*, 23rd GC (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1968), 56.
[14] Personal correspondence from Hugh A.A. Rose, 12 December 2009.
[15] *Record of Proceedings*, 56.

"inadequate Christology" and that it "lacked depth." Ralph Chalmers, in particular, sent a list of ten detailed criticisms, including the following:

> The New Creed is very weak in Christology. Jesus is only "true Man". . . Since Christology is the very heart of any Christian Creed it would seem that we require at least a second line in it to sum up Christ's Incarnation, His ministry and teachings, death and resurrection, ascension and parousia.[16]

After discussion, the "lack of any reference to historic events of crucifixion and resurrection was recognized."[17]

Meeting next on 21 October 1968, Committee members were told that the Creed would have to be finished that day to be approved by the GC Executive for inclusion in the *Service Book*. The University of Toronto's Donald Evans had prepared a thorough commentary on the Creed, based on the September discussion as well as feedback from prominent Canadian Catholic theologian Gregory Baum.[18] The opening line should remain unchanged, Evans wrote, for "there was again general agreement within the committee that the creed should start with man; the agreement was supported by Gregory Baum's article." One change Evans suggested was to acknowledge God's presence outside the church—"who works within men and among men by his Spirit." Another was to expand "We proclaim his kingdom" to read "to proclaim the risen Jesus, our judge and our hope." Reference to "the risen Jesus," he argued, "is more explicit in expressing the conviction that Jesus is alive." "Our judge and our hope," finally, introduced the elements of divine judgment and of eschatological hope." Evans also noted that "my proposal leaves open the

[16] United Church of Canada Archives, Standing Committee on the Christian Faith fonds, 82.204c, 3-41, "The New Creed" (submitted by R.C. Chalmers).

[17] Committee on Christian Faith, Meeting Minutes, 23 September 1968.

[18] United Church of Canada Archives, Standing Committee on the Christian Faith fonds, 82.204c, 3-41, "'A Possible Revision of the Creed' by Donald Evans." Months before, Evans showed an early draft to Baum who then reviewed it in *The Ecumenist* (July-August 1968). Though complimentary, Baum thought the lack of reference to divine judgment would allow Canadian Christians go on living "a comfortable life, possibly in a nice suburb." Since the September meeting, interestingly, Rose had written Baum to ask "if he would care to make specific suggestions regarding revision in the proposed creed." Baum replied, however, that he could not, "as he felt it would be inappropriate in his position." Committee on Christian Faith, Meeting Minutes, 21 October 1968.

possibility of various interpretations of the resurrection" and "is open to various interpretations as to the way in which the risen Jesus is our hope." Adding finally a reference to Jesus' crucifixion and a closing "Thanks be to God," "A New Creed" was sent to the GC Executive, which, on 5 November 1968, approved it for publication in the *Service Book*:

> Man is not alone, he lives in God's world.
>
> We believe in God:
> who has created and is creating,
> who has come in the true man, Jesus,
> to reconcile and make new,
> who works in us and others by his Spirit.
> We trust him.
>
> He calls us to be his church:
> to celebrate his presence,
> to love and serve others,
> to seek justice and resist evil,
> to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
> our judge and our hope.
>
> In life, in death, in life beyond death,
> God is with us.
> We are not alone.
>
> Thanks be to God.[19]

Later Revisions

Years later, the language of "A New Creed" was revised to be more inclusive. In March 1977, the Committee on Christian Faith told the GC Executive that it had become too large and was paralyzed by theological diversity. It was then disbanded and replaced by a new Committee on

[19] United Church of Canada Archives, United Church of Canada GC Office fonds: correspondence of the Executive and Sub-Executive, 82.001c, 3, GC Executive Meeting Minutes, 5 November 1968. See also, *Service Book for the use of the people*, 310.

Theology and Faith.[20] In late 1979, an early act of this committee was to suggest to the GC Executive that the first line of "A New Creed" be changed to read, "We are not alone, we live in God's world." In response, the Executive then asked "That the [whole] Creed be revised to make it inclusive in its language."[21] A year later, a new version was presented and approved:

> We are not alone, we live in God's world.
>
> We believe in God:
> who has created and is creating,
> who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
> to reconcile and make new,
> who works in us and others
> by the Spirit.
> We trust in God.
>
> We are called to be the church:
> to celebrate God's presence,
> to love and serve others,
> to seek justice and resist evil,
> to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
> our judge and our hope.
>
> In life, in death, in life beyond death,
> God is with us.
>
> We are not alone.
>
> Thanks be to God.[22]

One further change to the text has since been made. In 1994, Toronto Conference petitioned the 35th GC to revise "A New Creed" in light of

[20] *Record of Proceedings*, 27th GC (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1977), 187-189.
[21] United Church of Canada Archives, United Church of Canada GC Office fonds: correspondence of the Executive and Sub-Executive, 82.001.c, 34, GC Executive, Meeting Minutes, 21 November 1979.
[22] GC Executive, Meeting Minutes, 19 November 1980.

growing environmental concerns, citing "a need for our confessional language to reflect this awareness."[23] In 1995, the Theology and Faith Committee proposed the phrase "to live with respect in creation" and the GC Executive approved its insertion immediately following "We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence . . ."[24]

Significance

In his best-selling book *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam noted that though bowling remains a popular individual pastime, fewer and fewer people are bowling in leagues.[25] This pithy observation illustrates what Canadians, and many others, began to sense in the 1960s: their society was rapidly losing consensus and cohesion. It was to preserve, I argue, a broadly effective ministry in the midst of such a challenging social context that the GC commissioned and authorized "A New Creed." While the breakdown of community in both church and society was leading to widespread feelings of isolation, this text reminded readers that they were "not alone." As a result, "A New Creed" has been and remains tremendously meaningful for many in the United Church. Current Moderator Mardi Tindal once said, for example, "It's the one thing I've made sure my children know. We say it as a grace at meals because I really want them to know it."[26]

As a response to the particular needs of a unique time and place, however, "A New Creed" also presents ongoing challenges. Said Phyllis Airhart tellingly, "the creed sounds sort of '60ish to me."[27] Acknowledging the difficulty of its task, the Committee on Christian Faith conceded in its final report, that "the impulse that has driven us to discuss new creeds is not so much a sense that we have a new consensus as to express a dissatisfaction with the consensus we have inherited." In the absence of consensus, they crafted a text which was intentionally

[23] *Record of Proceedings*, 35th GC (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1994), 526-527.
[24] Several translations, including the French *Confession de foi de l'Église Unie du Canada*, then appeared in *Voices United* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1996), 919ff.
[25] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
[26] Marion Best, *Will Our Church Disappear? Strategies for the Renewal of The United Church of Canada* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1994), 54.
[27] Best, *Will Our Church Disappear?* 54.

"suggestive rather than definitive . . . to be filled with personal content by those who say the creed."[28] Described much more recently by "A Song of Faith" as "concise and usefully open-ended,"[29] has "A New Creed" discouraged corporate confession of faith in the United Church and, in a sense, actually preserved the widespread sense of individual isolation which occasioned its writing?

More troublesome is the way "A New Creed" is being used, by all accounts, within the United Church, as a fully adequate replacement for the Apostles' Creed. As Paul Scott Wilson has warned, a wilful rejection of the latter means, "we would cease to be ecumenical."[30] Publication in *The United Methodist Hymnal* [31] and occasional use by congregations outside Canada notwithstanding, "A New Creed" is not a catholic statement. Its pervasive use by our denomination may signal, ironically, that within the wider church, we *are* alone. The future legacy of "A New Creed," and its impact on the United Church, will be determined in large part by our ability to confess and to celebrate both our distinctiveness and our catholicity.

[28] *Creeds*, 10.
[29] *"A Song of Faith,"* 11.
[30] Paul Scott Wilson, "Let Go and Let God," a sermon preached at Eglinton-St. George's United Church, Toronto, 22 November 2009.
[31] *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2002), 883.

KARL BARTH AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CREEDS
by John McTavish

C.S. Lewis once took issue with a friend whose understanding of the history of religion suggested that Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and others elaborated an original simplicity. No, said Lewis, Buddhism is a simplification of Hinduism, Islam is a simplification of Christianity, and the choice really boils down to either Hinduism or Christianity.

Karl Barth would seem to be saying something similar when he contrasts religion (read Hinduism) with revelation (read Christianity) in the chapter of his *Church Dogmatics* titled "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion":

> The revelation of God in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the judging but also reconciling presence of God in the world of human religion, that is, in the realm of man's attempts to justify and sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God. The church is the locus of true religion, so far as through grace it lives by grace.[1]

Whatever one makes of such discussions, the point is that if Christianity is indeed a religion based on revelation, then creeds are necessary. For creeds answer, or at least summarize the answers, to such essential question as: How did this revelation take place? When did it take place? Where did it take place? Why did it take place?

Whether creeds are long or short, contemporary or traditional in wording, formally recited or internally assumed—all of this is a matter of personal taste and style. Perhaps a blend of the classical and contemporary is best, given the saying in which the master of the household is praised for bringing out of his treasure "what is new and what is old."[2] But the important thing is that creeds are needed if our

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1 *Church Dogmatics* (, Edinburgh; T.&T. Clark. 1956), 1, 2, 280. We might note that while Barth insists upon a radical distinction between human religion and divine revelation, he recognizes that in practice Christians are forever muddying the waters by treating God's revelation as a higher religion (of sorts) among religions. Rightly understood, the distinction here does not lead to religious boasting.

2 Matthew 13:52.

religion is based on a historical revelation and is not simply another revelation of the human phenomenon of religion.

The church has recognised this from the start and consequently never been without creeds. Fortunately these creeds have been good on the whole, as indeed the scriptures themselves in their primal testimony to revelation have been good. Imagine if it had been otherwise. If, let's say, the Gospel of Thomas and other Gnostic writings had won out over the writings of Paul and the gospel writers in the shaping of the canon. Or if the theological struggles over the early formative creeds had been decided by the Gnostics and Docetics and Anti-trinitarians. We surely would have had a very different presentation and understanding of the Christian faith.

Historians like Edward Gibbon have long ridiculed the church for fighting so wildly over whether Christ was "of the same substance of God" or merely "of like substance." But for those who take the Christian faith seriously it really does matter whether Christ is really divine or "simply like the divine." Once again, the difference here is the difference between understanding Christianity as a religion based on an historical revelation and understanding it as a revelation of religion.

None of this, however, means that creeds are infallible any more than that the Bible itself is infallible. We are not Roman Catholics when it comes to creeds any more than we are fundamentalists when it comes to Scripture. Nothing is infallible in the church. And so whatever questions we might have about the creeds can be put without hesitation.

Many United Church people today are questioning the inclusion in the classical creeds of the article concerning the virgin birth. They point out that Mary's virginity is not found in the earliest gospel testimonies, that is, in Paul or Mark, but only in Matthew and Luke, who were writing considerably later, and whose nativity stories give off more than a whiff of the fabulous. Also, the miracle of the virgin birth simply doesn't illumine the mystery of the Incarnation for many people today. In these post-Freudian days one may even wonder why the ovum wasn't set aside as well as the sperm if such things had to be done to ensure the divine initiative.

United Church people often have trouble as well with the pre-scientific thought forms that clothe so many of the articles in the Apostles' Creed. The word pictures, for example, of Jesus *coming down*

from heaven and *descending* into hell, *ascending* into heaven and *sitting* at the right hand of the Father, and *coming again* to judge the living and the dead. Even when it is pointed out that this is the same kind of metaphorical language that people use today on a daily basis when speaking about the sun rising or setting, the grumblers still grumble over the outdated cosmology.

Yet after all the reservations have been registered, the Apostles' Creed is still a great creed. And how wonderful it is to be able to share this magnificent confession of faith with Christians across denominational lines and over the centuries! How wonderful, too, to have something so ancient and venerable for use in worship. People who can't stand the old and always want the new remind me of the man who thought he could see better and let more light in if only the authorities would let him smash the windows of Chartres Cathedral. "Don't let him" is my advice. The old creeds can still speak to us if only we will give them a chance.

One of the best ways of renewing one's appreciation of the Apostles' Creed is to study Karl Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline* which is based on lectures that the great theologian once delivered to German university students of various disciplines in the summer of 1946. Incidentally, the post-war conditions that Barth encountered that summer in Bonn were so "primitive" that for the first time in his life the theologian lectured without a manuscript. *Dogmatics in Outline* was then put together, Barth tells us, from a slightly polished and improved shorthand transcript.

Barth's exposition of the Creed admittedly starts slowly as he takes some time discussing what it means to say "I believe." Yet even here there is a fascinating moment that should hold special interest for United Church readers. Barth states:

> I believe in, *credo in*, means that I am not alone. In our glory and in our misery we men are not alone. God comes to meet us and as our Lord and Master He comes to our aid. We live and act and suffer, in good and in bad days, in our perversity and in our rightness, in this confrontation with God. I am not alone, but God meets me; one way or another, I am in all circumstances in company with Him.[3]

3 *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 16.

Clean up the sexist language (and this might have been the fault of the interpreter, as *Mensch* in German is apparently an inclusive term in a way that "man" has never been in English) and there is a promising suggestion here for "A New Creed." Whether or not the framers of our New Creed were aware of this Barth text, the compelling congruence means that they certainly might have been. *We are not alone; we live in God's world.*

If *Dogmatics in Outline* starts slowly, it quickly gains momentum when the various articles of the Creed are discussed. And when Barth comes to the core confession—*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*—his passion for the gospel fairly leaps off the page:

> At this point everything becomes clear or unclear, bright or dark. For here we are standing at the centre. And however high and mysterious and difficult everything we want to know might seem to us, yet we may also say that this is just where everything becomes quite simple, quite straightforward, quite childlike. Right here in this centre, in which as a Professor of Systematic Theology I must call to you, "Look! This is the point now! Either knowledge, or the greatest folly! — here I am in front of you, like a teacher in Sunday school facing his kiddies, who has something to say which a mere four-year old can really understand. 'The world was lost, but Christ was born, rejoice, O Christendom!'"[4]

Barth also provides a necessary corrective note, especially needed in conservative theological circles, in his discussion of the Creed's witness to the future or so-called Second Coming of Christ*:*

> . . . *To judge the quick and the dead*. If we wish to understand aright here, we must from the start repress certain pictures of the world-judgment, as far as we can, and make an effort not to think of what they are describing. All those visions, as the great painters represent them, about the judging of the world (Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel), Christ advancing with

4 *Ibid.,* 66, 67.

> clenched fist and dividing those on the right from those on the left, while one's glance remained fixed on those on the left! The painters have imagined to some extent with delight how these damned folk sink in the pool of hell. But that is certainly not the point . . . Jesus Christ's return to judge the quick and the dead is tidings of joy . . . For he that comes is the same who previously offered himself to the judgment of God. It is His return we are looking for. Would it had been vouchsafed to Michelangelo and the other artists to hear and see this! [5]

Finally, we have Barth's interpretation of the miracle that assures us of God's ultimate victory over human sin and death. There is an almost prescient reference here to today's climate change horrors. This is not to suggest that Barth is suggesting complacency in the face of these horrors any more than he counselled complacency in the face of the crazed supporters of Hitler in the days of the Third Reich. On the contrary, Barth would surely be screaming blue murder about the climate policies of the right and the inactions of the left were he with us today in the flesh. But the point is, even given the ecological worst that can happen—and indeed is already happening!—the cited passage of hope is phrased in a remarkably pertinent way.

> In the resurrection of Jesus Christ the claim is made, according to the New Testament, that God's victory in man's favour in the person of His Son has already been won. Easter is indeed the great pledge of our hope, but simultaneously the future is already present in the Easter message. It is the proclamation of a victory already won. The war is at an end—even though here and there troops are still shooting, because they have not heard anything yet about the capitulation . . . The Easter message tells us that our enemies, sin, the curse and death, are beaten. Ultimately they can no longer start mischief. They still behave as though the game were not decided, the battle not fought; we must still reckon with them, but fundamentally we must cease to fear them any more. If you have heard the Easter message, you can no longer run

5 *Ibid.,* 134.

> around with a tragic face and lead the humourless existence of a man who has no hope. One thing still holds, and only this one thing is really serious, that Jesus Christ is the Victor. A seriousness that would look back past this, like Lot's wife, is not *Christian* seriousness. It may be burning behind—and truly it is burning—but we have to look, not at it, but at the other fact, that we are invited and summoned to take seriously the victory of God's glory in this man Jesus and to be joyful in Him. Then we may live in thankfulness and not in fear. [6]

So much for the Apostles' Creed. There have been other great creeds as well as confessions over the centuries. One thinks especially of the magnificent opening question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism forged at the time of the Reformation:

> Q. 1: What is your only comfort, in life and in death?
>
> A. 1: That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Then there is the courageous Barmen Declaration that the Confessing church hammered out in reaction to Hitler's seduction of Germany's state church: "Jesus Christ, as witnessed by the Scripture, is the one Word of God which we hear and obey and in which we trust in life and in death. We confess the false doctrine that the church should recognize as God's revelation, beside this one word, as source of its message, yet other facts or powers, forms or truth."

Not least there's the United Church's New Creed which attempts to

6 *Ibid.,* 122, 123.

update our confession according to the spirit of the times, dropping unwanted and unnecessary baggage without compromising on the essentials. This is truly a magnificent "Statement of Faith". Highlights include the way it draws out the practical and ethical consequences of faith for our personal and political lives, and includes specific mention of the afore-mentioned ecological challenge of our day: "to live with respect in creation."

Patricia Wells has given us a beautiful and penetrating interpretation of this creed in a booklet titled, *Welcome to The United Church of Canada: A Newcomer's Introduction to "A New Creed."* Commenting on the New Creed's confession of the first article of faith—*We believe in God: who has created and is creating* —she writes:

> Watch the sun on a crystal of snow, the glitter of stars in a night sky. Look at the tiny fingernails of a new baby. You might say that God wrote a magnificent poem and called it 'creation.' With all our doubts and uncertainties we nevertheless step out over the bounds of modern scepticism to declare that this universe is not accidental. It is the careful work of a good and loving God. Not an impersonal first Cause. Not the product of a master clockmaker who, having wound up his masterpiece, leaves it to tick along on its own. Rather, the God who has created all things is the same God we have met in Jesus. It is this God who, by the processes of birth, growth, healing, by the life-giving energy which flows in all things, continues to sustain the universe through every moment of its existence. It is that God who by the designs of evolution, the events of history, the promptings of each individual soul *continues* to mould, shape, and form this creation.[7]

Earlier this year, *The National Post* asked the current Moderator of the United Church to indicate the minimum that a member of her denomination should believe before joining the church. Mardi Tindal offered a good confession of faith in response to what clearly was a baited

7 *Welcome to the United Church of Canada: A Newcomer's Introduction to "A New Creed"* (The Division of Mission in Canada, 1986), 3.

question. Among other things, she expressed her personal belief in "the Trinity, the Bible and the living, resurrected Jesus."

The Moderator, however, also implied that there would be no witch hunts or heresy trials for the post-theists or anybody else who might in truth have forsaken the truth of the gospel as the United Church understands it. This was probably wise given that heresy trials today would be self-defeating and end up doing more harm than good. Even so, wouldn't it have been better if the Moderator had simply shared "A New Creed" with the *National Post,* and let it go at that?

> *We believe in God who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh . . . We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation . . . to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.*

Let the Creed do the talking. It not only speaks of the gospel with great eloquence and depth but has the backing of the whole church. This is why in fact creeds matter so much. It's not just *me* saying these things, or a minister, a moderator, or a member of the congregation. No, it's the whole church rising up and confessing its faith in (to use the words of The Nicene Creed this time) "God the Father Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord . . . and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life."

Wouldn't it be refreshing if, for once, a reporter from some right-wing rag, or any kind of rag, came round for a juicy quote, an exposé of sorts, and had to report that the United Church of Canada is saying nothing but what the Creed has been saying all along in a remarkably pertinent and consoling way:

> *In life, in death, in life beyond death,*
> *God is with us.*
> *We are not alone.*
>
> *Thanks be to God!*

Sermon

AWASH IN THEOLOGY

by Michael Bourgeois

A little over seven years ago, when the United Church's General Council decided that it was time for a new "Statement of Faith", many people—both inside and outside the United Church—were surprised. Inside the United Church, some people thought that the Doctrine Section of the Church's Basis of Union was the only faith statement the church needed, while others thought that "A New Creed" so perfectly summarized the faith of the church that nothing else was necessary. Outside the United Church, many people thought that the word "new" just doesn't belong with creeds and statements of faith at all. Wasn't the faith of Christian churches, they might ask, fully and sufficiently expressed in the Nicene Creed in the 4th century? Or perhaps, as many Protestants would suggest, in the Westminster Confession of the 17th century? Others outside the United Church were surprised that it wanted a "Statement of Faith" at all, because they've tended to think that the United Church subscribes to *no* creed or "Statement of Faith".

My colleague Alan Davies, a retired United Church minister and professor of religious studies at the University of Toronto, had a conversation with someone who held this very view. Over lunch at the university one day, Alan's colleague claimed that the United Church has no theology because it does not require assent to any of Christianity's creeds or confessions of faith. "On the contrary," Alan replied, "it is precisely *because* the United Church is bound by no one creed or confession that theology is abundant in the church. The United Church is, in fact, 'awash in theology.'"

Alan's view may be uncommon, but I think he's right. For one thing, theology has regularly been part of the church's work—sometimes *explicitly* in official reports on questions like the authority and interpretation of the Bible, or the relation of Christianity to other faiths, sometimes *implicitly* in documents dealing with the church's role in social, economic, or scientific issues. Theology is also practised in study groups in congregations like Bloor Street; at lay training centres and theological schools; and in popular and scholarly articles and books

written by United Church members, ministers, and professors. The United Church is truly "awash in theology."

But if you've had even a little experience in any type of boat, you know that being "awash" is not a good thing. And if you've had even a little experience of the United Church, you know that its members don't all believe the same things. Is a church "awash in theology" as bad as a boat awash in water? To answer that question, there are two important things to say right away.

The first important thing to say is this: one of the founding assumptions of The United Church of Canada was that there would be diversity of belief and practice within the church. Even though the Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians involved in the church union movement a hundred years ago shared many beliefs, they didn't agree on everything. And, more importantly, they thought that they didn't *have to* agree on everything. They sought consensus about *what* they thought was theologically essential, and about *how to express* what is essential, but they also welcomed diversity on other matters.

The second important thing to say is this: as the formation of the United Church itself shows, actually *achieving* consensus isn't easy, and isn't always completely successful. By the time that the United Church was formed in 1925, about one-third of Canadian Presbyterians had decided *not* to join it. One of the reasons they didn't join was a theological disagreement, a failure of theological consensus: they objected that the proposed Basis of Union did not *explicitly affirm* that God not only predestines the elect to salvation but also predestines the rest to damnation. This idea is known as "double predestination," and they thought it was essential to the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. Because most Canadian Presbyterians in 1925 *did* in fact join the United Church, they likely did *not* think that "double predestination" was an *essential* article of faith; nevertheless, many Canadian Presbyterians did think it was essential, so they did not join. Achieving consensus on what is essential isn't easy, and it isn't always completely successful.

This example about double predestination suggests two other important things to say about being "awash in theology." First, while the United Church's Basis of Union does not *affirm* double predestination, it doesn't *deny* it, either. What this meant in 1925 was that a member of the

United Church *could* believe in double predestination, but another member might not. The Basis of Union's silence on this point meant that belief in double predestination was neither required nor forbidden; the church had room for both views.

The second important thing that this example suggests is this: our consensus about what beliefs are and are not essential *changes*. Double predestination was very important for generations of Reformed Protestants; but by the early 20th century most of them thought that it was no longer essential, or that it could be set it aside altogether. The content of our consensus changes.

Let me give another example of changing consensus: the Basis of Union affirms that Jesus Christ was "born of the Virgin Mary," but the United Church's 1940 "Statement of Faith" says simply that Jesus Christ "became man and dwelt among us." So, while the consensus on *essentials* of faith in 1925 included the virgin birth, in 1940 it did not. As in the case of the Basis of Union's silence on double predestination, the silence of the 1940 "Statement of Faith" on the virgin birth also meant that the United Church permitted diverse beliefs on this point. In the same way, while *"*A Song of Faith*"* mentions that Jesus Christ was "a Jew, born to a woman in poverty in a time of social upheaval and political oppression," it, too, neither affirms nor denies the virgin birth.

Of all the theological beliefs in which the United Church is awash, the virgin birth is a good example for two reasons. The first reason is that, although at no point in the six year consultation process that led to "A Song of Faith" did anyone say that the virgin birth was an essential element of faith, a few people at the last General Council *did* ask why "A Song of Faith" does not affirm the virgin birth. Although many United Church members do not believe in the virgin birth, some do. The virgin birth is not a *hypothetical* example of current theological diversity or disagreement in the United Church—it is a very *real* example.

The second reason that it is a good example is that it is, I suspect, one of the beliefs held by some church members that seems most *unbelievable* to others. It's not the *only* belief like this. Another example is the doctrine of the Trinity. On the one hand, some United Church folk seem to think that it is a relic of an earlier age that has long outlived its usefulness for meaningful faith in the world today; on the other hand,

early in the process of developing the new "Statement of Faith," many United Church people said that the Trinity is essential for them and they hoped that the new faith statement would help them articulate its importance more clearly.

The virgin birth and the Trinity are good examples of the *range* of diversity of belief—and not just within global Christianity as a whole, but within the United Church itself—the range of diversity of belief that makes it hard to see how people who believe *so differently* can see themselves as members of the same faith tradition. Can we be awash in theology without being completely swamped?

Of course, as you probably know, *some* people—some of whom think of themselves as conservative, *and* some of whom think of themselves as liberal—some people say that with such diversity of belief we actually *can't* all be in the same church. Simply as a matter of fact, there is some truth to this point of view. For some of us, faith traditions change too quickly; for others, they change too slowly—and for both, there sometimes comes a point when we must make the difficult choice to seek other companions for our spiritual journey. I've done it myself; in my home congregation nearby and at Emmanuel College where I work, I've met many other people who have done it; and I imagine that at least a few of you here today have done it, too. Simply as a matter of fact, it happens. But beyond that, I also think that it is good that it *can* happen. Faith compelled or coerced is no faith at all.

But there's also something to be said for making the journey with companions with whom we do not agree on everything; something to be said for not taking *any* particular expression of faith—including our own personal faith—as complete, perfect, or final; something to be said for holding each other accountable for the diverse ways we express our faith . . . while at the same time trying to understand what's at stake for each other *in that very diversity*, however bewildering it might be.

T. B. Kilpatrick, a Presbyterian who did join the United Church and helped write the Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union, put it this way: "[T]his doctrinal statement makes no claim to infallibility or finality . . . Creed revision is the inherent right, and the continual duty, of a living Church."[64] The preamble to the 1940 "Statement of Faith" put it this way:

[64] T. B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1928), p. 63.

"No statement of ours can express the whole truth of God." And "A Song of Faith" puts it like this: "God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description." The same humility with which we *as a church* view the ways we express our collective faith is the same humility with which *each of us* should regard our own more personal expressions of faith. None of us knows all the answers, or even all of the questions. The *inevitable incompleteness* of all of our expressions of faith is what animates the *ongoing task* of revising them. And the ongoing task of revising our expressions of faith not only includes incorporating new insights and experiences, but also includes paying attention to what we may have forgotten or neglected.

Although it may seem strange or even offensive to many of us today, I think there was something of enduring value at stake in "double predestination." It was the conviction that salvation is not something we earn or achieve, but is rather God's gift to us, no matter how horrible we are; and because salvation depends not on our own efforts but only on God, our salvation is assured. Unfortunately, acrimonious theological arguments in the 16th and 17th centuries led to the development of a doctrine that turned the fundamental meaning of salvation as God's free gift upside down. Fortunately, because Protestant Christians kept critically thinking about their different ways of affirming salvation as God's free gift, double predestination no longer plays the central role in Reformed Protestantism that it once did. Similarly, while the doctrine of the Trinity has been wrapped up in obscure philosophical and theological terminology, I think that it does express a profound insight about God—namely, rather than being an afterthought, God's desire for relationship is primary, central, essential to God's own being. Traditional language that says that the "Son" is "eternally begotten of the Father" certainly has its problems—but it also importantly says that the very Godness of God always has and always will entail being in relationship with others. In short, God is wholly love.

On the other hand, it's not at all clear to me, what of enduring value might be at stake in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. For one thing, it seems to contradict the basic goodness of creation and everything in it that's a part of the Bible and the Christian theological tradition. For another thing, it also seems to contradict the idea—an idea that I think *is*

essential—that Jesus Christ was a real, living, breathing, eating, and bleeding human person. *But*—and it's an important "but"—I might be missing something. And that's why it's important that I stay in conversation with people who believe differently, and who are similarly willing to be in conversation with me.

Being "awash in theology" can be confusing, distressing, and downright maddening. But it is nevertheless the spring from which the resources flow for a humble, living faith that sees religious truth as inclusive. It is the spring from which the resources flow for a humble, living faith that sees the task of expressing our faith as an ongoing one.

The challenge and value of being "awash in theology," the enduring task of building an inclusive faith is, I think, especially well expressed by Robert Frost in his poem "The Armful," even though theology may have been the furthest thing from Frost's mind when he wrote it:

> For every parcel I stoop down to seize
> I lose some other off my arms and knees,
> And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns—
> Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
> Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
> With all I have to hold with— hand and mind
> And heart, if need be, I will do my best
> To keep their building balanced at my breast.
> I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;
> Then sit down in the middle of them all.
> I had to drop the armful in the road
> And try to stack them in a better load.

Sermon delivered at St. John's United Church, Alliston, 28 October 2007.

Review Article

Field Code Changed

CHRISTIANITY: THE FIRST THREE THOUSAND YEARS.
Diarmaid MacCulloch[1] (New York: Viking) Pp. 1184. $52.00.

In the 19th century, Christianity began to spread across West Africa less as the result of formal missionary endeavors directed from Europe than because of the enthusiasm of ordinary indigenous believers fascinated by the new religion. As Diarmaid MacCulloch notes, "In Sierra Leone, many Krio women highly gifted in commerce were seized by enthusiasm for the Christian faith. On their far travels out of the colony, they marketed Christianity as successfully as all their other wares, like the Syrian merchants of Central Asia long before them." In itself, this story of the determined Krio women is of no unique significance, but with its glancing analogy to events far away, the passage gives an excellent idea of the virtues and quirks of MacCulloch's awe-inspiring history of Christianity.

For one thing, this passage—and countless others throughout the weighty, almost 1200-page volume—focuses on the activities not of churches, but ordinary believers who practise and preach the faith in ways that they understand, but that might not correspond to the sense of any formal institutional body. I enjoyed the remark of the frustrated 20th century Mexican priest who told his bishop that all his parishioners did indeed practise Catholicism, but "in a manner of their own." This is emphatically a history of Christianity, and of Christians, rather than of the church.

The book's historical vision also commands respect. How many other historians would let their minds wander so freely between West Africa in 1850 and the Silk Road a thousand years earlier? When approaching large subjects, historians tend to focus on periods and themes that appeal especially to them and skate briefly over eras they find less interesting. MacCulloch does not succumb to the temptation to focus on modern debates at the expense of earlier times; nor does he pass over the Middle Ages as a homogenous lump. He discusses all ages with equal

[1] For this book Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at St. Cross College, Oxford, won the highly prestigious Cundhill Prize in History for 2010, offered through McGill University.

erudition and enthusiasm. My unscientific attempt to locate the midpoint of the book landed me at the subheading "Tatars, Lithuania and Muscovy (1240-1448)" in a section dealing chiefly with the Orthodox churches.

This example, like that of the Krio women, suggests the book's startling chronological range, and I could easily cite many other illuminating parallels that MacCulloch draws. Describing the extremist Catholic Cristero movement in 1920s Mexico, for instance, he compares the phenomenon to lay Korean Catholicism a century earlier, then suggests that the Cristeros set a precedent for the realignment of lay and clerical roles during Vatican II in the 1960s.

MacCulloch's history is worldwide in scope at every stage. In earlier eras, telling the Christian story meant beginning in Palestine and very soon turning to Europe; thereafter much of the action would be a European affair. Other regions of the world mainly appeared as they were viewed from that central core: the Crusades, the legend of Prester John and eventually the missionary movement, through which Europeans took their faith to the darker corners of the globe. That spatial vision has denominational implications, as any reader would deduce that authentic Christianity must be synonymous with the Catholic and Protestant churches, while every other grouping plays a walk-on role. Peripheral regions spawned peripheral faiths.

Far from concentrating wholly on Europe, MacCulloch knows that early Christian expansion was in some ways far more successful in Asia, and he suggests that as late as the eighth century the obvious world capital for the faith would have been Baghdad rather than Rome or even Constantinople. At times, certainly, the strength of Christianity outside Europe has been severely weakened, even threatened with extinction, but the modern experience of globalization is anything but new. Christianity is a religion born and nurtured in Asia and Africa, and arguable in our day, it is going home.

The author's breadth of vision has enormous implications for how we understand the nature of Christian truth and the relationship between indispensable core doctrines and later theological interpretations. Not only were Asian and African churches non-European, but they paid little regard to the cultural and theological norms that emerged in Europe. For these largely forgotten believers, the Miaphysite/Monophysite positions

were as legitimate expressions of Christian truth as was the orthodoxy of the West. So was Nestorianism: the Christianity that Syrian merchants were carrying across Asia was almost certainly Nestorian rather than Chalcedonian. MacCulloch writes lyrically of the great Syriac churches of the East and duly mourns their later catastrophes in a lengthy and poignant section titled "Vanishing Futures."

The last book I can recall with anything like such geographical breadth was MacCulloch's earlier study, *The Reformation*—another instance in which his shifting of the geographical focus of the narrative profoundly reshaped our stereotyped vision of the theological debates and their outcome.

To be clear, this book is in no sense an anthology of historical quirks and byways, a collection of believe-it-or-nots concerning obscure heresies that flourished in out-of-the-way corners of the planet. MacCulloch provides superb coverage of European affairs and amply describes the mainstream churches, Catholic and Protestant. You would have to look far to find a better account of the controversies and divisions of the Reformation. But MacCulloch always places these familiar stories in the world-wide context and situates them in the long span of historical development.

I do not seek to lessen MacCulloch's achievement by suggestion that the extraordinary scope of the book, its free ranging through time and space, reflects his personal agendas. He makes no apology for declaring his book "emphatically a person view of the sweep of Christian history," and he freely cites his own upbringing to justify a book that "pontificates" (his word) on that story. His background in the Church of England gave him a lifelong fascination with the faith, but the relationship was never without its ambiguities. In the 1980s he was set for ordination in that church but abandoned that path because of scruples about the Anglican position on homosexuality. In some alternate universe, Diarmaid MacCulloch would be an esteemed bishop of the Church of England, a worthy intellectual companion to Rowan Williams and N.T. Wright and a persistent bane to British governments.

As a faithful gay Christian, MacCulloch has an understandable interest in probing the nature and emergence of orthodoxy, in comprehending the relationship between the substance and the accidents

of faith. How do we distinguish between the eternal truth of Christ and the culturally shaped forms of Christianity? Do churches really speak with single unequivocal voices through the ages?

Such questions underlie MacCulloch's emphasis on the countless manifestations of Christian spirituality over the centuries, the many and various ways God appears to have spoken (and still speaks) to his followers. So often what in one age seems bizarre—the property of a derided or persecuted sect—becomes the respected norm or variant in other, later circumstances—the abolition of slavery, the ordination of women, the avoidance of meat-eating or tobacco." The accidents change and pass; the One remains. But how to find that One? His section on the early centuries of the new religion is titled "One Church, One Faith, One Lord?"—and we note the query.

MacCulloch returns often to the dualities within the faith, particularly the struggle between its Greek and Jewish origins with what he calls their "two irreconcilable visions of God." This theme of contradiction explains the substantial attention that he pays to the cultural and spiritual predecessors of Christianity—attention that might otherwise look excessive. In this history of Christianity Jesus is not even born until page 77. Without a thorough grounding in Greek and Hebrew traditions, MacCulloch believes, we can make no sense of Christian doctrine; his "Three Thousand Years" subtitle is meant to be neither perverse nor paradoxical.

For MacCulloch, much of the church's subsequent story has to be understood as a fundamental attempt to make those two visions into a coherent whole, and, as he says, "the results have never been and never can be a stable answer to an unending question." That conflict long predated all the subsequent struggles that shaped orthodoxy, as a belief rooted in the Mediterranean and Near East began its gradual migration to all parts of the globe. Although MacCulloch titles his final chapter "Culture Wars," we suspect that he would have liked to apply this term to the whole story of Christianity.

MacCulloch's *Christianity* is the work of a brilliant scholar seeking not so much to find meaning in this vast story as to sort out and evaluate the many different meanings that naturally emerge. It is a book of questions and alternatives rather than absolutes and certainties. Not

surprisingly, many of his most provocative insights are framed as questions to which perhaps he has only begun to think through the answers. Of course, he knows the story of the institutional churches and respects their debates and their quest for absolute truth, but he can never forget the alternatives that have presented themselves.

For all the agonies and disasters MacCulloch describes—all those vanishing futures and forsaken visions—he ends on a note of optimism. In the final pages he writes, "This history can draw attention to what has gone before: an extraordinary diversity called Christianity." And he does not believe that the earlier seeking has exhausted the treasury of faith: "It would be very surprising if this religion, so youthful, yet so varied in its historical experience, has now revealed all its secrets."

Philip Jenkins

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FROM THE HEART—ABOUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER
by Marion Best

The Jesus of my early childhood was not connected to church. On my bedroom wall there were two pictures of Jesus: one of Jesus kneeling, while looking up, and the other of Jesus with a group of children. These were birth gifts from my maternal Grandmother, a dedicated Pentecostal, who lived at some distance and whom I met for the first time when in my teens. My parents had no church affiliation (both said they had had enough church growing up) but my younger brother and I were sent to the local Gospel Mission Sunday School. The people there were kind, warm-hearted and the music was lively. The weekly lesson leaflets had beautiful coloured pictures of the Bible stories that were printed inside. I collected them faithfully and treasured them. By around the age of twelve I was questioning some of those stories that I was expected to accept literally. When I was told people of faith didn't question but simply accepted and believed, I informed my parents that I too had had enough church and didn't want to go back.

Almost ten years later when I was a student nurse holding a dying three month old baby, I knew there was a hole in my life. What comfort could I offer to the parents; what sense could I make of this infant's death and how would I continue to face these life and death issues without a faith? I think that was the point when I yearned for the living Christ: not the Jesus of the childhood pictures or the Sunday School stories, but for a presence that would guide and support me.

The birth of our first child was a mystical experience: as she was born, the words that went through my mind were, "I have touched the hem of His garment." Those words doubtless came from one of those Bible story leaflets of my childhood but it led me to a deep conviction that this was a child of God and I wanted her to be baptized into a community of believers and truly to have a church home. The minister in the United Church where we were married graciously agreed to baptize her even though neither Jack nor I were members. I knew the commitment I was making at her baptism and could say the words with integrity but felt I needed to know more about the church and the Christian faith before committing myself to membership. Within the year I began membership classes and joined the United Church congregation

nearest our home. Those 20 years were rich with quality Christian education for all ages, leadership development for laity, social justice and prayer groups. Because I taught in the Sunday School for 15 of those years I was seldom able to attend congregational worship.

The New Curriculum of the mid-1960's opened up a world of biblical understanding and ways of integrating worship with the content and learning centre activities we shared with the children. Worship was an integral part of all we did together. Our teaching team of eight would meet for several hours to struggle with the biblical material first and to pray together for inspiration and encouragement for where we would go with the material as we prepared for the sessions. I learned the value of reading and discussing scripture in a group. The danger of too much alone time with scripture is that I am more likely to have it say what I most want to hear. During this period the Naramata Centre became a place of spiritual growth and learning for Jack and me and for our four children.

In her mid-twenties our eldest daughter (whose birth led me to the church) said she was going to seriously explore Reform Judaism and after a year she was baptized into the Jewish faith. She subsequently married a member of the Conservative Jewish Community and we now are grandparents of two grandchildren who have celebrated their Bat and Bar Mitzvahs. As a result of Cathie's conversion we made a commitment to deepen our understanding of Judaism and the whole family has gained an appreciation for its richness and for our own Judaeo-Christian roots. But there have also been painful times such as when their synagogue and cemetery were defaced. It hurt when a Christian acquaintance offered sympathy saying how difficult it must be for us now that our daughter was somehow incomplete because of her chosen faith. Cathie's mother-in-law carried the tattooed numbers and the emotional scars from her years in a death camp and the tears come quickly when I hear stories of the Holocaust and imagine our grandchildren in those horrific scenes. As I listen to some New Testament passages through the ears of our daughter, they do sound anti-Semitic. While we all desire a just and peaceful settlement of the Israel/Palestinian situation, how and on what terms that will be achieved is difficult to imagine.

My first visit to Africa in 1985 forced me to face the effects of colonialism. In Tanzania a painting of a white Jesus hung over the

communion table, choirs robed in North American style choir gowns sang Wesley hymns and there was no sign of African culture anywhere in the church. It was in that setting that I had the realization of how colonization and the church had brought many of the same results to our Aboriginal communities in Canada. The 1986 Apology states much of what troubled me: "*We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you who you were."* Thankfully, most churches in Africa are now African in nature and Native spirituality is flourishing in many Aboriginal communities.

My faith and my love for this church were tested during the General Council of 1988. After reading all 1837 petitions that came before our sessional committee regarding Sexual Orientation, Lifestyles and Ministry (SOLM), I was at a loss to know how the General Council could deal with the matter. Our twenty-four members listened deeply to one another as to where we stood on the matter and what led each of us to be in a particular place. We analyzed the petitions, worshipped and prayed together and agreed we would try to work toward a consensus statement for the Council to consider in place of the SOLM document that was before it. The times in the committee felt Christ-centred: our time together was respectful, focused on the task, and guided by prayer.

How different was the deliberation on the floor of the General Council!—clogged with procedural debates, speakers threatening to leave the church, and disrespectful statements coming from all sides. How I wished the Council could have had the same opportunity we had to listen to one another in love and respect. I could not see how we would ever come to a resolution and feared the results would divide not only the Council but also the Church. The responsibility I felt as Chair of that sessional committee was overwhelming. I remember, hours before the vote was to be taken, sitting alone in a little anteroom reading Psalm 131: *"I do not occupy myself with things too great and marvellous for me, but I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother."* It was as if a weight had been lifted and I truly knew it was in God's hands, not mine and no matter what the outcome, we were not alone.

My term as Moderator from 1994-97 was dominated by the Indian Residential Schools litigation. In December 1994 charges of sexual abuse in the Port Alberni Residential School arose and I still have feelings of

sadness and frustration about our Church's response to the situation. It was feared that, if the church accepted responsibility and negotiated compensation with survivors, the Federal Government would be relieved of all liability, and thus there was a prolonged court case. All of this weighed more heavily on my heart than any other matter. In the past few years it has been my privilege to attend the settlement hearings where survivors tell their stories before an adjudicator. The stories are painful to hear and at the close of the session I offered an apology on behalf of the United Church for whatever harms they suffered. Most survivors either reached out to take my hand or asked for a hug afterwards and these are truly grace-filled moments for which I thank God.

Serving for fifteen years on the governing bodies of the World Council of Churches enabled me to worship and work with Christians of many denominations and countries. The sound of 5000 people from 126 countries saying the Lord's Prayer together is a Babel that begins and ends within a rhythm and an intention that touches the heart. It is challenging and stretching to be part of a body that represents Christians from every part of the world.

Ecumenism runs deep for me and for the past 34 years we have worshipped in a shared Anglican/United ministry in Naramata where we live out ecumenism. It is the only church in the community and we take seriously the call to be the church as stated in "A New Creed":

> *to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.*"

PROFILE

DOROTHEE SÖLLE (1929-2003)

By Janet Gear

Introduction

With the exception of those in our church who had the privilege of a close friendship or collegial relationship with Dorothee Sölle, this Christian theologian from Germany and former Henry Emerson Fosdick Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, may be less known for her place among us in the United Church than many others profiled in this column. However, just as our individual and collective life of faith in the United Church has been shaped directly or indirectly by the work of theologians and their devotees from the first century forward, we have undoubtedly felt in the United Church the impact of Dorothee Sölle's significant contribution to western theology in our time. There are certainly those in the church who know of her work—who have read her work, heard her speak, taught or been taught her theology. There are countless others who, with or without knowledge of her name, at some time heard her prayers or recited her poetry at vigils and gatherings for disarmament or social justice. Through the decade of the 1980s, Dorothee Sölle was "one of us" in international ecumenical movements for justice and peace; we encountered her writing in Project Ploughshares, human rights and solidarity groups, and the growing ecological movement. She wrote for and from that work and her voice was as inspirational as it was informative and, like the gospel itself, was never without uncompromising challenge and concrete hope.

No less significant was her influence, among other "radical" theologians, on how we learned to be with one another as people of faith in the church—the intentionality with which we listened to and told

stories of our own hope and despair in all that we experienced and witnessed of the struggle for life. This "theology from below"—a longing for God that begins with questions arising from suffering and ends in poetry, song and acts of compassion—reflects not only Dorothee Sölle's theological method but her life of faith.

It may be, however, that the greatest depth of her insight we have yet to appreciate. Situated as we are, a church with a self-understanding of commitment to an *outward* work that nonetheless finds itself in a period of renaissance for the *inward* journey, we are struggling to articulate our deep purpose across what many experience as opposing or at best alternative thrusts of the Christian life—to reach out and to awaken within. At this juncture there may be no theology more directly helpful to our situation than Sölle's *prophetic mysticism*. Dorothee Sölle writes from the crux of the longing our church embodies at the beginning of the twenty-first century—a century in which religion must view the immanent and transcendent as one, must have a "mystical" materialism if it is to survive. It is not accurate to say that Sölle simply found a way to address both politics and prayer. Nor is it correct to assume that she integrated, or worse "balanced," the two distinct impulses of the Christian life—engagement in the world and contemplation. Certainly it is utterly false to claim she understood "spiritual" life as *fuel* for the "active" life. Rather it is true that in her radically incarnate theology of immanent transcendence (a this-worldly belonging with all in God), Dorothee Sölle understood the inner and the outer path as *one***.**

Biography

> Jesus of Nazareth tried to do with his life something that I want to do too . . . He teaches me an infinite, revolutionary "yes" which doesn't leave out anything or anybody at all.[1]

Dorothee Sölle's biography can be read in every piece of her work. Out of her experience as a German in WWII and the questions posed by both the suffering and apathy she observed, Sölle pursued a radically life-affirming theology. Throughout her life and work she followed these questions, formulating a theology more reflective of God's presence than omnipotence, and advocating a concrete love of God that sides with life

[1] Dorothee Sölle, *Choosing Life,* transl. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1981), 77-78.

by resisting contemporary forms of death through violence and isolation. All the while, Sölle strove for language that articulated a hunger for God at the heart of human life and maintained the "democratic" nature of God's desire to "be born in us."

Sölle was born on September 30, 1929 in Cologne, Germany, the fourth of five children of Hildegard and Hans Carl Nipperdey. She described her upbringing as more intellectual than religious. Her father was a law professor and later President of the Federal Labour Court and her mother was a homemaker whom Sölle described as liberal minded and spiritually conscious. Her parents and elder brother were politically opposed to the rise of fascism in Germany and the Nazi dictatorship, though not publically so. A typical youth, Dorothee developed her own views distinct from the adults in her home and found herself drawn into a fascination with a romantic, apolitical vision of Germany untainted and revered in music and poetry. She loved classical writing—Goethe, Rilke, and Hölderlin—and the music of Bach and Beethoven, sources of a more beautiful, positive German intellectual and cultural identity than the nationalism of the time.

Reflecting critically on her youth, she wondered: "To what extent did that romanticism insulate me and create a safe place for me to grow up? To what degree did it seduce me into holding on to and refining, in a sophisticated fashion, the lies that were handed to me?"[2] Such was the critical personal and social self-awareness at the heart of Dorothee Sölle's life of discipleship and her contribution to late 20th century Western theology. She was a theologian profoundly shaped by her experience of being German after the Holocaust.

After completing primary and secondary education in Cologne, in 1949 Sölle pursued her early passions by taking up studies in philosophy and ancient languages at the Universities of Cologne and Freiburg. In 1951, steeped in the popular intellectual culture of existential nihilism—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus—in which she, along with her immediate post-war generation had become immersed, Dorothee was "seduced into religion" through encountering the "father" of these thinkers, Søren Kierkegaard. Though she would say it was because of

[2] Dorothee Sölle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 6.

Jesus of Nazareth that she became a Christian, Sölle admits that it was because of Kierkegaard that she understood the longing for God at the heart of the religious life, or more accurately at the heart of becoming human. Sölle promptly pursued this passion for theology, "the language of hunger for God,"[3] as she would later come to describe this discipline, at Göttingen University where she completed a doctoral dissertation in literary criticism in 1954 ("Studies in the Structures of Bonaventura's Vigils").

In the same year, Dorothee married Dietrich Sölle, a union which lasted ten years. In the decade 1954-64, Dorothee became the mother of her first three children: Martin (born 1956), Michaela (born 1957), and Caroline (born 1960) while also teaching and working as a freelance writer. Sölle taught Religion and German at the Gymnasium (High School) for Girls at Cologne-Mulheim until 1960. From 1962-64 she was Assistant at the Philosophical Institute of the Technical University of Aachen and from 1964-67 became Director of Studies at the Institute of German Studies of the University of Cologne. Sölle's professional career suffered the consequences of her critique of post-war German politics and ideology, the constraints of hierarchical and patriarchal academic institutions, and the "delays" inherent in a mother's career, particularly in the years following her divorce. However, the most significant obstacle to her securing a professorship in Germany, which she at no time held, came later when, in 1971, she became the first doctoral student at the University of Cologne in nearly thirty years not to pass her defence, a move clearly reflective of a prejudice against an interpretation of the gospel that included an active, uncompromising commitment to social justice. Her allegiance to the "church within socialism" as opposed to the "church within capitalism," to which the ecclesial and academic institutions belonged, was costly.[4]

Through Sölle's first book in 1965, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the "Death of God,"* in which she wrestled with theodicy by focussing on the powerlessness of Jesus, she found herself in the company of other post-Holocaust or "death of God" theologians who

[3] Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990).
[4] *Against the Wind*, 35.

rejected traditional theism (Moltmann, Metz). Struggling to come to terms with the wartime atrocities of Hitler's Germany formed the foundational question for Sölle's early theological inquiry, "How could this happen?" – a question that led to a study of supernatural theism (do we believe in an interventionist 'god'?), apathy (what makes us numb to the impulse of compassion?), sin (I am responsible for the house I live in, though I did not build it) and suffering (how can suffering make us more capable of love, more human?).[5] In both her political and theological commitment to side with life in struggles against violence, materialism, greed and all manner of dehumanization, Sölle found Marxist analysis a critical tool for understanding the plight of "underclasses" of the world, while she found Christianity a call "to work and to love" for the sake of "the least of these." Though ultimately he did not support the direction her theology carried her (into political action), it was Sölle's study of and friendship with Rudolf Bultmann that secured her identity as a Christian theologian whose commitment to a de-mythologized biblical hermeneutic undergirded her theological method.

In the decade following, Sölle became involved in a community and activity that significantly shaped her theology and her life, the movement known as "Politische Nachtgebet" (Political Evensong). This weekly ecumenical gathering for worship and theological reflection on current issues of local and global concern ("staying with the context until it cries out for theology") grew in numbers and intensity from the late 1960s through the 1980s as the movement spread to other countries in Western Europe. With the backdrop of the Vietnam War and its resisters in the USA, the liberation struggles in Chile and the emerging arms race in Europe, Sölle credited the discipline of prayer, meditation and action practiced with the Political Evensong for shaping her as a radical democratic socialist and turning her theological commitment toward liberation. This experience informed what would become a signature of Sölle's work—the indistinguishable line between inner and outer life, between a life of prayer and of action.

With others in the Political Evensong, Sölle suffered personally and professionally the "cross-fire"[6] directed at the religious and lay leaders of

[5] Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).
[6] *Against the Wind*, 39-41.

what was perceived by many to be both politically and religiously threatening activity. It was in the Political Evensong community in Cologne that Dorothee met Fulbert Steffensky, a former Benedictine priest whom she married in 1969. The partnership brought Sölle much joy, including the birth of her fourth child, Mirjam (born 1970).

Though her work was not recognized in academic circles, by the mid-1970s Dorothee Sölle was known in Germany as a Christian activist and popular theologian. Her writing style broke intentionally from the scientific academic genre and she insisted instead that her publications reflect the social and political commitments of the work itself, work which gave expression to the struggle for life in all its particularity, urgency and beauty. Her trademark in these years was as much the style as the content—unafraid of confrontation or argument, energetic and fearless beyond her stature. She said of herself, "I am not exactly known for my gentleness!"[7]

It was an invitation to join the faculty of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1975 that offered Sölle the platform for her work that German universities did not provide. She taught at Union until 1987. Over these years, Sölle's writing, activism and voice as a public theologian within and beyond the church in North America grew significantly. Though her work demonstrated her "hidden" feminist commitments prior to coming to the United States, at Union Sölle added her theological and political weight to the concerns expressed in the growing canon of feminist theologies, all the while remaining critical of "separatist" feminist positions against men, marriage and motherhood.[8] Moreover, she became a credible interpreter of Third World theologies of liberation in the North American context, focussed as her theology is in asking two questions: "Who is hurting?" and "Who benefits?" For Sölle, theology is never innocent or neutral; it seeks rather to become involved in the love of God for life. "Truth," she maintained, "is something I do with my life." Protestant and Christian by choice, she studied Scripture and life as an "unremitting inquiry of God:"

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[7] Johanna Jäger-Sommer, "Zwischen Allen Stühlen" in *Publik-Forum Extra: Dorothee Sölle – Eine feurige Wolke in der Nacht* 2727 (1/2004), 27.(Translated from German by the author).

[8] Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

> "I have come that they will have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Christ came into the world in order that all people "might have life and have it to the full." What is "life to the full"? Where does it happen? Who lives it? I see two ways in which it is destroyed in our world: poverty without and emptiness within.[9]

Her work continually kept hold of the thread of the mystical tradition, and to the writing of Meister Eckhart in particular, thereby grounding her theology in the practices of self-emptying as much as of solidarity in a radical affirmation of "the totality of reality" in which we meet and participate in God's love for the world.[10]

Sölle continued during her years at Union to write prolifically poetry, essays and narrative, reflecting theologically from the locus of suffering—the victims of apartheid, imperialism, militarism, consumerism, ecological disaster—and to place herself in the struggle for justice and peace alongside lay and religious activists and communities of resistance from Central America to South Africa. In 1987 she returned home to Hamburg and continued this work with the Evangelische Kirchentag, a movement similar to the former "10 Days for World Development." While her theology always drew on the mystical tradition, her *magnum opus, The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (1997) is a masterful testimony to Sölle's understanding of life in God in which prayer and action stem not from two distinct commitments but one single wide-open embrace of the whole of things that both sides with life and brings one to life in the same moment. Dorothee Sölle died in the night of April 17, 2003 in Bad Boll, Southern Germany where she and Fulbert had earlier that day been leading a church retreat entitled "God and Gladness" (*Gott und das Glück*). She left an unfinished manuscript on the subject of "Mysticism and Death." The sermon at her memorial thanked God for

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[9] Dorothee Solle, "Life to the Full: Speech to the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in Vancouver, Canada, 1983," in *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality,* trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 12.

[10] Dorothee Solle, *Death by Bread Alone*, trans. David L. Scheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

"the wonderful, rich, difficult, conflict-filled and beautiful life of Dorothee Sölle, a true prophet in our time."[11]

A "theology from below" such as Sölle's must take into account the day-to-day of one's life, the ordinariness that in its own way captures, carries or animates fullness of life. For Sölle, as for many, these included friendship, singing, hiking, the beauty of nature, and her relationship with her children, grandchildren and life partner. Her son learning to read, the startling colour of a blossom, the chorus of a hymn, the companionship of colleagues—these too, along with the tireless denunciation of injustice, sustained and inspired her life in God. Attention to suffering and to beauty, practising wonder and compassion, these—in essence, love—built and shaped the life of this extraordinary and inspiring Christian theologian who remains "a cloud of fire to accompany all those who like her do not leave the world as it is."[12]

Signature Contributions

Sölle's work is neither universal nor timeless. It is written for Protestant churches in the liberal democracies of the West in the early twenty-first century. As such, it takes seriously the political and spiritual crises of our day and the particular way these "cry out for theology" and "make us hungry for the reign of God." She offers us a theology with a language for God that refers not to God's attributes but to God's relationships and proximity—biblical language that asks how God-is-with-us, personally and politically (by which she means in terms of where and how life is flourishing) and mystical language that frees us of false names for God and lends us an eye for God in all things.

At the heart of Sölle's work of prophetic mysticism is her application of early 20th century religious philosopher, Simone Weil's concept of "attention." This is the act of losing oneself in something outside oneself, of "becoming absorbed" in something and freed from self-interest, freed to belong to the activity of God for the flourishing of life. To practise "attention" as a form of imitation of the kenotic self-

[11] Bärbel von Wartenberg-Potter, "Funeral Sermon," in *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2003), xi.

[12] Britta Baas and Johanna Jäger-Sommer,"Liebe Leserin, Lieber Leser!" and back cover in *Publik-Forum Extra: Dorothee Sölle – Eine feurige Wolke in der Nacht,* 2727 (1/2004). (author's translation)

emptying of Christ enables us to experience a profound sense of union or belonging that is both spiritual and ethical. We see how being "lost in/absorbed/at-one-with" the beauty of a treed avenue in full blossom in some way momentarily displaces the self-interested or self-conscious self and creates an experience of shared life with the beauty of the trees. Likewise, she argues, that same attention to the melting icecaps or the grief of our widowed neighbour can absorb us equally; can aid us in experiencing our profound belonging to one another in God. Our ability not to avert our eyes even from the suffering of others is a measure of our capacity to displace our self-interest in the mystical union with Christ who is at-one with all in God. "The name of this intense, pure, disinterested gratuitous, generous attention is love," wrote Weil. In the practice of attention, we open ourselves to an indiscriminate acknowledgement of the totality of reality: we are able to give our attention to suffering that is ontological (grief) or historically imposed (damaged northern habitats) in ways that free us from self-concern and make us at-one with the heart of God in acts of compassion and resistance where "life is destroyed." Love does not distinguish the blossoms from the widow. In this sense, through attention or love, there is no distinction between the human's capacity for praise in the face of beauty and compassion in the face of suffering; the wide-open heart shares the heart of God. "God," she argued, "is our unending capacity to love."

Christians within and beyond The United Church of Canada whose faith has been buoyed, informed, challenged and affirmed by Dorothee Sölle's theology and her life of faith mourned her death in 2003 and continue to read her work. Her legacy of courage, honesty, strength, vulnerability and love are signatures of her life across her work and in this way she remains with us—a teacher and a disciple, a prophet and a mystic, a friend of God in the struggle and praise for life.

BOOK REVIEWS

Marpeck: A Life of Dissent and Conformity

Walter Klassen and William Klassen (Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History No. 44. Herald Press, 2008) Pp. 423.

In the same week that I finished reading this book, I wrote several letters in response to an urgent action request from Amnesty International. They were addressed to several officials in an Asian country where a Christian woman had been sentenced to death for blasphemy. Pilgram Marpeck lived in a somewhat comparable culture where, as an Anabaptist, he was regarded as a heretic by both Protestant and Catholic. One imperial order declared that "all Anabaptists are to be punished with death. Whoever recants will be beheaded. Who does not recant will be burned" (117).

Walter Klassen (College of Emmanuel and St. Chad, Saskatoon), and William Klassen (Principal Emeritus, St. Paul's College, Waterloo), follow Marpeck's life chronologically from his birth in the Austrian Tirol in 1495 until his death in 1556. We observe Marpeck in the four main communities in which he lived—Rattenberg, Strasbourg, Appenzell, and Augsburg—and on his travels as he sought safety in an unsafe environment.

The authors have provided a broad social, religious and political context for Marpeck's life and also an extensive examination and analysis of his writings. There are lovely miniatures of various individuals with whom Marpeck had contact. We are given details of the mining of silver and copper, the gathering of a city's wood supply, the hemp and linen industries, urban water works, and herbal recipes. A major engineering disaster for which Marpeck was responsible seems not to have affected his standing in Augsburg. Although some might question their use in academic work, I found speculative questions about his thoughts or feelings helpful.

For a United Church reader, the book raises at least three particular issues that seem pertinent to our life in the present. The authors have stretched their canvas between the opposite poles of conformity and dissent. Pilgram Marpeck received his religious faith, as did many of us, within the family into which he was born and in the culture in which he lived. However, circumstances drew him out of that received tradition

into a much more insecure environment. While Marpeck was mayor of Rattenberg, in the Austrian Tirol, Archduke Ferdinand ordered the house arrest of a local priest, Stefan Castenbaur, placing Mayor Marpeck and city officials in a precarious position. The priest was eventually executed, an event that had a deep impact on Marpeck. Although our situation in Canada is very different, the received faith of our mothers and fathers and our Canadian identity are being reshaped by a multitude of forces. To what aspects of the received faith and of the consumer society in which we are all immersed shall we conform and from what aspects dissent? Marpeck's conformity and dissent were tested as he danced between being a loyal public servant and engineer, and, at the same time, an Anabaptist leader.

Marpeck "called on his followers to identify courageously with their Lord in his humble renunciation of every use of power to dominate and control" (326). For him, the Kingdom of God was non-violent and non-coercive. When Marpeck was ordered as mining superintendent by Ferdinand to report any Anabaptists, he quietly left his employment, home, family, and possessions. Both Protestants and Catholics believed that coercion in the cause of truth was right and proper. Marpeck disagreed and was willing to pay a high price for the sake of his conscience. He believed that because the church has its source in Christ it could never condone the use of the sword for either coercing faith or protecting property. Marpeck's witness might call us to rethink the use of force, even to rethink the viability of the just war defence.

Marpeck's vision for the church was of a loving, responsible and disciplined community rooted in a Christ of deep humanity and humility. His faith was more experiential and relational than creedal. Certainly we all crave a church that is loving and responsible but how to be disciplined? There is a dilemma!

Klassen and Klassen have given us biography at its best, a readable and helpful account of one of the early leaders of the Anabaptist movement. Photographs, excellent maps and footnotes all contribute to making this a wonderful read.

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Calvin

Bruce Gordon (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009) Pp. 398.

Bruce Gordon has written the definitive biography of one of the most important figures in Western intellectual history. This is the best single volume work on the Reformer yet. I would without hesitation recommend it to those seeking an introduction to Calvin's life and thought. Don't be deterred by its length. Gordon's accessible and clear prose draws the reader in and holds our interest from beginning to end.

The author, a native of Canada and Professor of Reformation History at Yale, has written extensively about early sixteenth century developments, but this is his first extended foray into Calvin studies. The result is a fresh and more objective approach. He avoids technical jargon, assuming no prior knowledge of the subject. And he steers clear of the excessive praise and blame that have so often clouded our approach to Calvin in his own historical setting. Gordon offers a balanced appreciation, demonstrating the French Reformer's genius, incredible productivity, and widespread European influence, while also documenting his volatile and often cruel temper as bitter polemicist and demanding friend.

With great historical skill, Gordon navigates through all the difficult issues in Calvin studies. For example, he avoids speculation about Calvin's early studies at the College de Montaigu in Paris or his later legal studies at Orleans and Bourges. He simply reports what is known about the general quality of instruction at these institutions and suggests certain possibilities regarding the scholarly tools acquired for Calvin's subsequent reforming career.

Gordon offers helpful new perspectives on the religious conversion of Calvin. He convincingly argues that a person with such literary ability crafted powerful narratives that drew on existing models for stories of transformation. He writes that "Calvin's brilliance lay in his ability to infuse old traditions with new life" (34). When reading a rhetorician, what matters is the *effect* of the tale told. In this case, Calvin praises God's power to change individuals and establishes his own authority as one

called by God. Gordon helpfully underscores the Reformer's sense of common identity with the Hebrew prophets.

How does Gordon handle the thorny subject of predestination? He reminds us that thorough biblical interpretation is at the heart of Calvin's work. The Reformer refused to slide over passages such as Romans 9. This book also shows how many critiques Calvin received on this score from vital allies such as Heinrich Bullinger. Calvin clearly believed wholeheartedly in this doctrine. Other writers, notably Heiko Oberman, have shown the importance of understanding the context. Calvin wished to reassure persecuted French Protestants who worried they would lose salvation if they renounced their faith under torture. Gordon adds that Calvin fiercely defended himself against critics like Sebastian Castellio because he was so eager to maintain the influence of Geneva and the "united support of Protestant churches" in his campaign to aid his French sisters and brothers (208). In the end readers may still not agree with Calvin's view, but Gordon does help us to understand why they were so central to the Reformer's thought.

We also receive a compelling version of the burning of Michael Servetus at Geneva in 1553. Gordon reminds us that in the sixteenth century, long before our notion of religious toleration became prevalent, heretics were seen as a grave threat to the wellbeing of society. In a notable display of his even-handedness, Gordon underscores Calvin's lethal hatred for Servetus and his desire to rout him in debate. Yet he reminds us that "Calvin could not have Servetus executed." Only the Genevan civil government had that right, and they were then dominated by persons "not well disposed towards the Frenchman" (224). Gordon offers a particular contribution by detailing the ways in which Servetus' death was immediately turned into a theological war by those already incensed by Calvin's determined defence of predestination.

Gordon accomplished the almost impossible task of covering all dimensions of Calvin in a single tome. He addresses the Reformer's voluminous writing, his teaching and preaching, his attempts to maintain a united front with Lutherans, his sustained struggles for church discipline in Geneva, his European-wide lobbying on behalf of Protestantism, his special care for the emerging Reformed churches in France, and many letters of pastoral counsel offered to every spectrum of social hierarchy,

from new converts to monarchs. One cannot fail to gain increased appreciation for Calvin's tireless efforts to practise historically engaged theology. This book will help contemporaries become much more familiar with one of the giants of Western thought.

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Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity.
Laurel C. Schneider (New York: Routledge, 2008) Pp. 248.

Laurel C. Schneider is Professor of Theology, Ethics and Culture at Chicago Theological Seminary. She has written various articles and books that focus on the contemporary idea of God in light of modern theology, science, cultural theory, and post-modern philosophy. This insightful work argues that the Christian faith in God should unwaveringly welcome diversity and difference, instead of hiding behind the pursuit of unity and sameness.

Schneider suggests that the Christian gospel can develop its concern for multiplicity by recovering the theology of incarnation from its distorted history. This distorted history has resulted in the co-optation of the gospel by monotheistic ideologies in support of the all-unifying project of empire. Schneider problematizes monotheistic ideologies coupled with "the logic of the One" of imperial rule, and counters with "the logic of multiplicity" implied in the theology of incarnation. In order to present Schneider's thesis in a more nuanced way, I will focus on four major points of her argument.

First, Schneider notes that the logic of oneness inherent in empires is to be critically engaged. As Schneider says, "this book is not about God or gods" (5), but about "the logic of the One" prevailing in imperial rule, with the "principles of progress and the abstraction of bodies divided into useful social categories (like legions, classes, races and nations)" (5). This logic cannot but be coupled with exclusionary ideas of supremacy: "The logic of the One is powerful and it is not extricable from monarchical and supremacist entailments" (26).

Second, Schneider claims that the logic of oneness implied in

various forms of traditional monotheism must be critically reassessed in order for Christians to resist the logic of oneness imposed by imperial structures. Schneider challenges the traditional theistic understanding of God, with its emphasis on the unchangeable One in eternal stasis. She pithily summarizes her main thesis: "The deceptively simple claim of this book is that divinity beyond the logic of the One, beyond monotheism, occurs. The idea of occurring divinity—divine multiplicity—sins against the ideologies of eternity and stasis required of oneness and so recognizes leaks in the Christian empire's God Who is and ever shall be" (1).

Third, Schneider argues instead that the logic of multiplicity, suggested in the theology of incarnation, is to be affirmed. According to Schneider, the theology of incarnation emphasizes the irreducible concreteness of body which resists any subsummation into the logic of oneness. "Incarnation is, after all, about bodies. And bodies, in their own uncompromising thereness, queerness, and susceptibility to revolt, are always a problem for abstract theologies, which function foundationally on principles that tend toward stasis" (5). On the one hand, the logic of multiplicity resists any attempt to subsume various beings into a unitary concept that stabilizes and freezes creative and fluid becoming-events of body. "Multiplicity, as the simultaneity and presence of unique becomings and passings away, becomes thereby an intriguing lure for the philosopher willing to let go of the comfort of ideal resolutions" (151). "It is a hybrid of bodies in motion of localities shifting" (153). On the other hand, the logic of multiplicity still welcomes "a centered interrelatedness," while affirming the irreducible singularity of each body (195). Each bodily being is related to others in its creative process of becoming, without being reduced to a replaceable part of a unifying centre.

Fourth, Schneider encourages us to reconfigure our image of God from the One-in-Eternal-Stasis into an image of God as the multiplicity of creative events emerging in the hybrid and fluid process of becoming. The divine should be conceptualized as the multiplicity of fluid and fluent creativities emerging in infinitely diverse bodies, thus as "the tehom," "the natal Open" and "the porous Deep:" "The natal open is also the porous Deep. I want to suggest . . . the porousness of the divine is, in the dialect of multiplicity, a kind of open implication, an unfolding, complicating, interconnection that confounds the One-Many

divide"(161). "The divine multiplicity complicates every relation with an I am with you and unfolds or explicates every relation with some new things" (163).

Schneider's proposal for the theology of becoming and multiplicity seems to be grounded on her own caricature of traditional theism, if the term "theism" implies the analogical (similar but non-identical) relation between the eternal God and the temporal world. Schneider seems to associate the theological logic of the One with the logic of imperial domination too rashly. However, the logic of the eternal One can also relativize the triumphant self-idolatry of any temporal empire and thus challenge its all-unifying project, as we can see from the case of the resistance of the German church against the totalitarian Third Reich on the basis of her confession of the sovereignty of God. Moreover, Schneider does not seem to take into consideration that the idea of multiplicity and becoming may be incompatible with the ideal of eternity, given that traditional theism has admitted that any particular being in time derives its being from the eternity of God. In spite of these questionable points, her concern for understanding multiplicity in terms of God's creativity would encourage many Christians to reflect in a theological way on the issues of difference and diversity, no matter whether they agree or disagree with Schneider's position.

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***Contemporary Christologies: A Fortress Introduction*.**
Don Schweitzer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) Pp. 200.

Jesus' question to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29) continually recurs to those who believe in him as the Christ. Each generation answers it in a variety of ways. This is born out in the Christologies studied in this book. Each reflects something of the context it comes from and how its author experienced this. Yet each also reflects something of Jesus, who first asked this question. These diverse Christologies add new voices to the conversation about Jesus, his saving

significance, and the meaning of life that has been ongoing since his ministry began. Each of these new voices is worth listening to. (Preface)

The field of Christology these days is in a constant state of creative chaos. In post-Christendom contexts, and in myriad cultural configurations, Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" continues to be answered in a brilliant, yet sometimes disconcerting, variety of ways. Specialists pursue the question through vastly diverse frameworks and methodologies, reflecting a wide array of commitments and academic concerns. Meanwhile, pop culture, through films, books, and other media, does its own end-run on the enigmatic figure of Jesus, who still exercises a powerful hold on the imagination of people everywhere. For the "average Christian in the pew" (if there is such a thing), new forms of Christology are seen as (variously and simultaneously) confusing, consoling, disturbing, exciting, and challenging. In short: what an amazing mess!

For people wondering where to start in sorting through some of the key questions and figures of these new developments, Don Schweitzer's *Contemporary Christologies* comes as a refreshing and helpful field guide for the changing terrain. To help the reader get a sense of the subject, Schweitzer provides concise sketches of fifteen contemporary theologians working on Christology. He gives a short biography of each to set them in their social and historical context, and then summarizes and evaluates key aspects of their approach to Jesus the Christ. These sketches are framed by an insightful introduction which queries the "state of the question" and provides a good historical overview of the post-WWII context, and a conclusion which explores both the continuing relevance of the tradition and the emergent challenges which stimulate current Christological projects. There is also a helpful glossary of terms, ample bibliography, and study questions which increase the book's "user-friendliness."

To my mind, one of the most engaging aspects of *Contemporary Christologies* is the manner in which Schweitzer groups the theologians . Rather than categorizing them in terms of the "type" of theology they represent (e.g. feminist, liberationist, process, queer, post-colonialist, etc.), Schweitzer divides his sources according to five soteriological paradigms. Along with Aulen's classical model of Christus Victor, Anselmic, and Abelardian types, Schweitzer adds two more: "Jesus as

Revealer," and "Jesus as Source of 'Bounded Openness'." By grouping the Christologies according to their various theories of atonement, Schweitzer is able effectively to demonstrate one of his key convictions: that the person, work and relationships of Jesus must be held together and understood within the matrix of the specific forms of sin and evil which he must overcome to fully be the Christ.

As with any work in the field, there are "missing pieces" in Schweitzer's text. In elucidating the various contemporary Christologies, the author sometimes assumes on the part of the reader more detailed knowledge of the historical Christological tradition, specifically in its Nicean and Chalcedonian configurations, than may be warranted. For a reader who is not cognizant of these traditional trajectories, it may feel at times like entering a conversation which has been going on for 2000 years, with all the complexities that entails. Another potential weakness of the text (which Schweitzer clearly admits in his introduction) is that it does not give enough space to the explosion of global and inter-cultural voices wrestling with Christological issues. There are also "burning questions," such as the relation of Christ to ecological, post-colonial, and queer forms of discourse and praxis, which perhaps do not get as much attention as one would like to see. That said, this book is in the author's own words "an introduction. It makes no claims to be comprehensive." In short, it is a beginning of the conversation, not an end!

For ministers, for theological students, and for laypeople hungry for understanding, *Contemporary Christologies* is a great place to start. Christological discourse all too often gets dismissed as irrelevant or deliberately obscure; this is a great shame, as it is at the core of the Christian faith. We ignore Christological questions to our own peril. Schweitzer does the contemporary church a great service by (re)introducing us to some of the best questions, and the brightest thinkers, in the tradition today.

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***99 Ways to Raise Spiritually Healthy Children*.**

Kathleen Long Bostrom (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) Pp. 204.

Kathleen Long Bostrom enjoys writing books with lists! This is her third such book; the "bite-size" format of ninety-nine suggestions fits easily into the schedule of a busy family. However it is a hybrid, a cross between Barbara Colorossa's *Kids Are Worth It,* and *The Golden Book of Manners*. So if you don't own a copy of either of those classics, this book is a useful resource.

I appreciated several aspects of the book in particular. It is biblically based—in a way that is supportive and encouraging rather than labour-intensive. Each entry has a related biblical reading encouraging integrated thought. The quotes are not obscure and cement the quality of parenting and relationship that Bostrom is describing. I found that the question at the end of each entry is often the most profound and helpful piece in reflecting on raising a family in these times. They frequently serve to take one back to one's family of origin. The questions are not easy, at times nostalgic, and occasionally painful, but raise excellent issues and insight into what is at the heart of one's parenting aspirations.

I valued her approach to family life that was never gender specific; any parent would be comfortable reading these suggestions and ideas and not feel left out. Nor does she write exclusively for a traditional family. Bostrom continually affirms the joys and rewards of parenting, noting its responsibilities and privileges, and alerting the reader to how fleeting our time is with our young children. The "spiritual health" promoted in this list of ninety-nine focuses on real-life connection with God in the midst of everyday family life. Thankfully, permission is granted at the very beginning that one does not have to be successful in carrying out all the suggestions to have spiritually healthy offspring!

For me, the entries that spoke of self care, simplicity, listening and learning, taking time to be still and her notion of calendaring "Space to Breathe" (S2B!) alerted me to opportunities that my own family may be overlooking. Bostrom repeatedly states that a healthy spiritual life for the parent will have a trickle-down effect on the child. As a woman in ministry and a fulltime parent, these practices are essential for good

health: body, mind and spirit, for every member of the family.

There are entries about stewardship, tithing and giving of ourselves in faith to others. I believe that it is never too early to teach these basic Christian beliefs to our children, and dedicate ourselves to practising them ourselves too. Some interesting and new initiatives that caught my imagination were the family activities that involved writing a family creed, or creating a family crest, or a family affirmation of faith. I found myself eager to map out my own family tree of faith, and explore with my children the ancestors and pioneers of the faith within our own family. These projects could be revisited every few years, or when the family experiences a birth or marriage or some other significant change.

There are a few entries that seem to me too pedantic to be helpful or fun, but that's part of good parenting too—the discipline, the consistency and the appropriate boundaries. As I read this book I wondered, "To whom would I recommend this book?" I would give this book to young families—perhaps families who have little or no history with the church community. This would be an excellent entry point for those learning parenting techniques and also for parents beginning a faith journey and wanting to include their family on the path. There is substantial content related to faith development, finding a worship community that is right for one's family's needs, understanding the sacraments and being open to the mystery of God. The approach is basic, but never pretends to be anything else. It is a place to start. Regardless of the age of our children, or how many children one has parented, a teachable spirit is a gracious thing.This book reminds me that there is always room for improvement in all of my relationships, and that God has never expected me—or my children—to be perfect.

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