CROSS Purposes

in service

op. cit.

Areopagus Hill

Issue 16

February 2009

Andrew Collis

John Hudson

Paul Tonson

Sandy Yule

on interfaith relations

CROSS Purposes

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A forum for theological dialogue

THIS YEAR'S FINAL *Cross Purposes* revisits some of the subjects that have stimulated debate in recent issues.

CP 12 (March) featured Ken Dempsey's reconsideration of the "Essendon Incident" and the accompanying controversy about "flags and funerals" in the Uniting Church; a response from Ross Carter followed in May. In this issue we print a sermon from Wes Campbell, who was at the heart of the original controversy, preached after Anzac Day this year. Taking his cue from Paul at the Areopagus, Wes interprets our rituals and symbols of war and sacrifice as a "sustaining myth"—he argues that if Paul were preaching in our day, he would acknowledge the sincere searching that these practises represent, but would also challenge them with the alternative, hopeful sustaining myth of the Christian gospel.

In this Issue

Cross Purposes is published by the Hawthorn Parish of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Contributors from the Progressive Christian Network were represented in *CP* 13 (May), and in response to their critique of "traditional" Christian thought, *Cross Purposes* took up the question "What is the church to preach?" Craig Thompson responded to David Merritt on the theme of sin and salvation, and Peter Blackwood articulated his view of the language and content of the gospel message. These themes are further discussed in the current issue.

Alan Smart, a member of the Joint Commission on Church Union, responds to Peter on the subject of the *Basis of Union's* ongoing authority within the Uniting Church. It was always the intention of the framers, he argues, that this document should have a permanent governing role in the church's life. The *Basis* should control the Assembly, not vice versa.

In this issue's main article, Peter Whitaker gives an alternative account of the church's primary evangelical task, both its "What" and its "How". Peter pleads for the church to "clear the decks for action", to sweep away the many distracting and misleading questions that preoccupy our thinking, and to focus clearly on a mission in which word and deed are united. If we can live up to the words quoted by Tertullian, "See how they love one another", offering truly distinctive Christian fellowship (not just a cuppa after church), the world around will be more likely to sit up and listen.

Our latest ministry reflection is not part of this "retrospective" focus. Christina Rowntree works at

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basis in faith, the standing ground, for the Uniting Church. We certainly never intended that it should only be of significance at the time of union. There was no intention that the Assembly of the Church would be in control of the *Basis*, but rather that the commitment explicitly made by the Uniting Church in the *Basis* should control the life of the Assembly, as of every other part of the Church's life. To hold office within this Church it was necessary for ministers and others to "adhere to the *Basis of Union*"; and the *Basis* describes its understanding of that phrase as "willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this *Basis*".

Further documentary evidence to this effect can be found in Michael Owen, *Witness of Faith* and Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal*. It is in the light of this understanding of the overarching function of the *Basis of Union* that the then surviving members of the Joint Commission, led by the late Dr. Ian Gillman, protested against certain proposals put forward by the Assembly Standing Committee on the grounds that they were incompatible with the *Basis of Union* which must at all times reign supreme in the Church's thought and action.

The *Basis of Union* differs markedly from confessional documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 in that it does not consist of a series of propositions to which ministers and office bearers are required to subscribe. Rather, it reflects the Joint Commission's determination not to encourage the Uniting Church "to develop a terminology which suggests distinctive doctrines. We have no identity to separate us from the Church of God." Indeed, the emphasis of the *Basis* is on the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that faith is witnessed to in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the great credal statements of the Universal Church. Among its ongoing functions in the life and witness of the Uniting Church is its consistent call to ministers and instructors to study the Scriptures in an informed and scholarly way and to continue to be taught by the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions and the preaching of John Wesley. The aim of this stated call is that "the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture".

Since the *Basis of Union* commits the Uniting Church to this kind of life, worship, witness and service, its supreme, continuing function in the Church is abundantly clear.

ALAN SMART, a Presbyterian Member of the Joint Commission on Church Union, 1967-1977, is now living in active retirement from ministry in Castle Hill, NSW.

Not Baseless

Alan Smart

PETER BLACKWOOD has contributed a timely article in the September 2008 issue of *Cross Purposes*. He has provided a much needed stimulus for rigorous thinking about how we should be seeking to proclaim "the word of salvation for all people".

To state the obvious, different audiences require different languages to hear and appropriate the same word of salvation. Dr. Blackwood's emphasis on our need to come to terms with the poetic language and imagery of the ancient biblical texts has been an illuminating reminder for me. It is a valuable adjunct to the philosophical category of analogical discourse, particularly in regard to the issues of scriptural inspiration and authority as they are raised by the *Basis of Union*. These issues are the subject of my own current theological studies.

I would, however, enter one important caveat concerning the second sentence of the introductory paragraph of Dr. Blackwood's article. There he states that the *Basis of Union* certainly reads like a memorandum of understanding to accomplish one purpose at a particular time, but over 30 years later the *Basis* still holds a significant place in the life of our church for many of us.

He prefaces this sentence with the admission that he has not asked any of those who collaborated in writing the *Basis of Union* "if they meant the document to guide the church beyond the task of bringing the three churches into union in 1977". Admittedly it is not easy to put that question to the members of then Joint Commission on Church Union, as most have since died. The few surviving members are located in different parts of Australia. Although we are all retired, we are still mentally and theologically active!

Apart from personal enquiries, there is available documentary evidence which clearly points to a significant, lasting role for the *Basis of Union* in the ongoing life of the Uniting Church. The Convener of the Joint Commission, the late Dr. Davis McCaughey, delivered a lecture entitled "The Formation of the *Basis of Union*" before the Synod of Victoria in October 1994. It was first published in the *Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society, Synod of Victoria*. It was reproduced in *Fresh Words and Deeds: The McCaughey Papers*. In the latter publication the ongoing function of the *Basis of Union* is clearly stated on page 18. According to Dr. McCaughey, a critical decision of the Joint Commission was to offer this *Basis of Union* as the

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the Centre for Theology and Ministry in a project called "Artfull Faith". In this role she has had opportunity to witness how art can be an active vehicle for people's faith. On the grounds that art can open up sorts of knowledge that are not accessible through other theological methods, she argues that artistic reflection on faith should be at the centre of Christian practice.

Cross Purposes will be back in February 2009, with a few changes. One new idea we are considering is a column for reviews of recent books that deal with subjects discussed in these pages. If you would like to suggest a book for consideration, or to contribute in any way, please contact the editors at the address opposite and we'd be happy to talk to you.

Meanwhile, enjoy the last *Cross Purposes* for 2008, and have a very merry Christmas!

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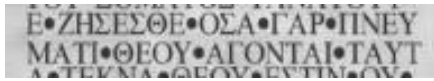


Letters

An Elephant in the Room

My chief impression from articles in CP 14 *is the high profile of "spin" in theology. "Spin" is different from theological emphasis. "Spin" appears to take on a life of its own, as if the reality, to which "spin" purports to refer, doesn't really matter. This was summed up for me in particular by Peter Blackwood's remark that he had not checked with the authors of the* Basis of Union *as to the part the* Basis *was intended to play in the life of the Uniting Church.*

Apparently Revd. Blackwood is not aware of "The Status, Authority and Role of the Basis of Union *within the Uniting Church in Australia", a discussion paper put out by the Assembly in 1995 with a section entitled "What was the intention of those people who framed the* Basis of Union*?". In this document the framers all affirm the continuing authority of the* Basis*. But "spin" does not acknowledge this reality. Without continuing authority in the life of the church, the* Basis *is open to any construction members choose to put on it, contradictory or otherwise.*

"Spin" reminds me of a story about a man who went to the doctor because he thought he was dead. The doctor sent him off to do some research on the characteristics of dead people. The man returned and related his findings to his doctor. The doctor stabbed him in the leg with a letter-opener. Bright red blood spurted out. "Look", said the doctor, "your own research tells you dead people don't bleed. So what do you conclude from that?" "Dead people do bleed", replied the man.

The continuing authority of the Basis of Union *is the elephant in the living room that few people in the Uniting Church seem to want to talk about.*

Katherine Abetz

Sin, Salvation & Time

Craig Thompson's article "Particular Sin—Particular Saviour" (CP 14) *is a stimulating critique of David Merritt's reflections on a "progressive" Christian movement. However, as we see it, Thompson's response does not adequately emphasize the particular and unique place of Christ's cross and resurrection in not only inaugurating, but continuing to embody the specific realities of sin and salvation. This problem of emphasis derives from an apologetic framework which means that Thompson partially submits to Merritt's logic of historical distance. For example, Thompson writes that the "suggestion that I am guilty of the crucifixion is an odd one. … Believing … in the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus today has something to do with the blood we have on our hands."*

The suggestion is only odd when one thinks that the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection "happened" a long long time ago. Late in the article, however, Thompson moves towards a more subtle position concerning the re-embodiment and re-presenting of the crucifixion and resurrection in the liturgy of the church. We are constituted in every act of worship as the Israel who crucified Christ and for whom he came when, by receiving Christ's word of forgiveness from the Cross (especially in the sermon), we repent (focused in confession) and are drawn into the life of the resurrection (embodied in the Eucharist). Living out of that particular "story" and those "images" (to use Merritt's language) becomes the way that the resurrection, sin and salvation can be said to "become realities for us". The crucifixion and the resurrection actually happen now.

The problem with starting from another point—starting with humans instead of God and the liturgy—is evident in Thompson's argument that sin and salvation must have to do with our contemporary conflicts with other

gathers primarily to discuss and where prayer is more an opening devotion than prayerful opening of oneself with others.

When our non-Christian friends and associates see genuine fellowship they will be more likely to come and listen. It will be practical Christianity lived out in the being of people, rather than our rationalizing of the faith, or pseudo-deconstruction of the faith, which is often an accommodation of the faith to the world's values. It will be the fellowship of authentic community that will speak more relevantly to the world than our rationalization and reductionism.

PETER WHITAKER is minister of Burwood Uniting Church.

Notes

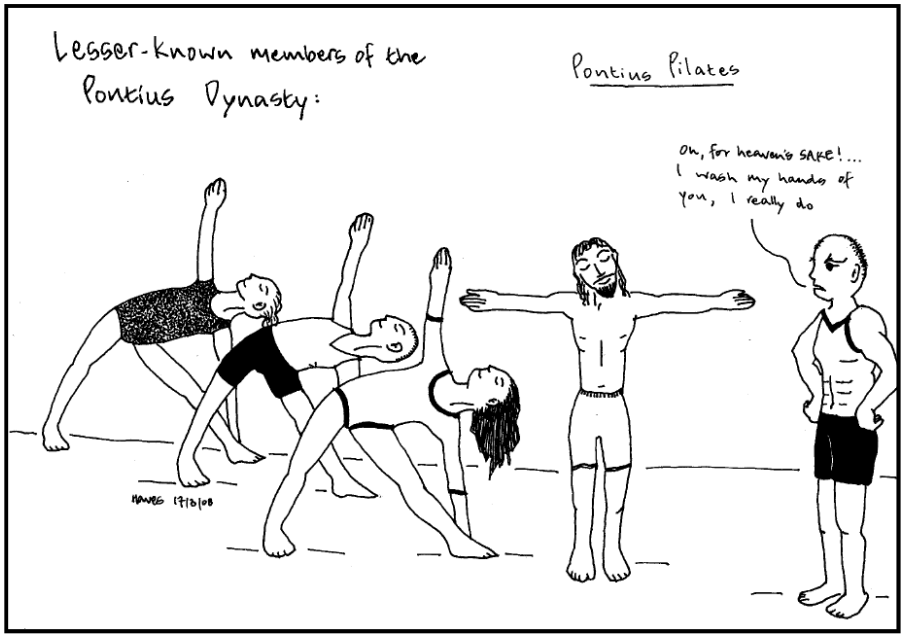
[1]I am distinguishing between proclamation and preaching as I use the former to depict a wider expression of the faith inclusive of word and deed, and preaching to be a more specific and non-educational in its intention.

[2]Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (1958) argues as a scientist that scientific knowing includes personal knowing—intuition and faith.

[3]W. H. Willimon; *Who Will be Saved?* (Abingdon, 2008), 15.

[4]Athenagoras, "A Plea Regarding Christians to the Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius" (177 AD), in C. C. Richardson (ed.), *Early Christian Fathers* (Macmillan, 1970), 303.

[5]Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Penguin, 1967), 56.



The Christendom period failed us by letting us get away with an evangelistic method that allowed a separation of word and deed. During this period, when society as a whole shared the Christian worldview, the church could gather people under its roof and call them to decide for Christ. Deeds became largely moral practice and works of charity. The life of the Christian community was led and served by the clergy. Fellowship was reduced to socializing and, at best, study groups—a feeding of the intellect. Much of the life of the church was about the institution and its fabric, not about believers committed to each other. Thank God that today this method is largely ineffective because of our pluralistic and secular society, because it robbed the church of being the church.

Looking at the experience of the church in the first few centuries we glean a better pattern for evangelism. It was not a method or a programme but a way of being—the natural way of being for the church—that contributed largely to the growth of the church in the first few Christian centuries. The first Christians and early church existed in a pluralistic society; they were a small marginal group, and were sometimes persecuted. Accused of atheism, cannibalism and love orgies,[4] they not only survived but also grew significantly to the point where they became the dominant religion. What was it? Tertullian gives us a clue when he quotes the pagans saying about Christians, "See how these Christians love one another".[5] The quality of their fellowship proclaimed their faith in Christ.

From a human perspective, I see the revival of deep fellowship being the key for the church's survival. By fellowship I do not mean the friendship groups that emerge in the local church. Fellowship is not friendship or vice versa. Friendship may be a by-product of fellowship but it is not the same. Fellowship is about wrestling with God together, struggling to be faithful in life and mission, and growing in our relationship with God and each other. Fellowship transcends friendships and invites and includes those who want to walk down the same road of faith in Christ and share the mission given to the church.

The principal vehicle for developing our fellowship is not the Sunday service and the cuppa after worship. If that is meant to be fellowship it is only stage one. Indeed if the fellowship is judged by the after-worship-conversation then the church's fellowship is much less than one might get elsewhere. The principal vehicle is the small group meeting where people gather to pray, listen to the word, struggle to understand the voice of God for them, and commit to participate in the mission of word and deed. I am not speaking here of the study group. We need to recognize the limitation of the study group that

humans, and with "forgiveness given or withheld, for the spilling of … blood by the one whose blood it was. … There is no forgiveness, and no reconciliation with God, and so no resurrection, if there is no coming together of people who are at enmity with each other." This way of forming the argument means that modern social reconciliations can seem to become a hurdle requirement or pre-requisite for reconciliation with God rather than an outpouring of the fruits of this reconciliation, already present in the resurrection. It is true that these modern re-embodiments of Christ's cross are real emblems of crucifixion and resurrection. But they are only such when God graciously makes them so in relation to the resurrection of one Jew, Jesus Christ, who is not important or shocking simply as the historical correlative of any persecuted person today, but as the only Son of the Father, whose death and resurrection show us our sin and our salvation, and enable the world to live in a new resurrection life. This is the kind of particularity in which worshipping Christians participate.

So, the problem seems to be at heart one of time. Do we think of time as an inexorable forward roll, making 2000 years ago increasingly more distant, content to make Peter's sermon something said to a group of Jews who actually had crucified Jesus? Or can we, within a logic of liturgical time, be reformed into the icons of the living Word made flesh? Can we talk about that more radical fullness of time, if worship is a conclusion rather than the first confession?

Matthew Champion
& Miranda Stanyon

Craig responds…

I thank Matthew Champion and Miranda Stanyon for their thoughtful response. I find myself in agreement with much of what they write and perhaps would differ "only" in emphasis. Given, however, the rhetorical and polemical nature of preaching (a sermon being the original form of my article), the emphasis really matters. I will limit my comments to just one problem they identify in my argument —that my focus on the inter-personal, human dimension of forgiveness seems to make reconciliation with God dependent upon such historical reconciliations taking place.

I agree that such historical reconciliations are only "emblems" of Christ's history when graciously made so by God, and not by any other inherent quality or characteristic which might be thought either to facilitate or to force God's hand.

Yet, this much being granted, the problem remains that we are sorely tempted to identify this or that reconciliation as such an emblem, and yield

to the temptation. This is my main concern in the article. Matthew and Miranda do not suggest that such identifications are necessary but they are very often made, and made both by those who reject and by those who continue to embrace the "idea" of sin. It is such presumption in making judgments of history—that God has or has not been active here—which leads to the theological dissolution of our understanding of sin and, correspondingly, of salvation.

The intention of my article was to make an offering towards rehabilitating a theological understanding of sin, as distinct from the largely moralistic understanding which prevails in the church, whether this latter understanding is rejected by "progressives" or embraced by "conservatives".

Progressive theology can reject sin as an ineluctable marker of human existence when it presumes by moral judgment to be able to name true goodness in the world.

At the same time, conservative theology similarly blurs the matter in its apparently more traditional treatment of sin. While Matthew and Miranda affirm the process towards and from confession (preaching, leading to confession, leading to eucharistic embodiment), it is noteworthy that, in the vast majority of congregations where there remains a formal confession and declaration of forgiveness, these take place before the preaching, typically at the very beginning of the service. While this appears to elevate the importance of sin by prioritizing its confession, in fact such a liturgical order tempts me to abstract from real, concrete revelation and treatment of my sin. This liturgical order tempts me to identify sins of which I "know" I am guilty, perhaps replaying in my mind the moral failures of the preceding week.

It is, however, the sin of which I am ignorant which is theologically the most interesting—surely the point of the fact that "the house of Israel" (to recall Peter's Acts sermon) imagines itself to be crucifying Christ on God's behalf.

The problem here is that if my sin is abstracted to what I can believe it to be rather than what God reveals it to be in the light of the gracious return of the one against whom I've sinned, then my presumed saviour is similarly abstracted. The abstraction of sin arises from being encouraged to analyze myself before I have met my "accuser", who is always a real historical person. Conveniently, this also frees me to be forgiven before this meeting, turning my saviour into no-one in particular. I may, then, imagine myself to be absolved of my sin without having really met its effects, or having them set aside by those affected by it. Hence the title of the article "Particular Sin—Particular Saviour"; unless a "real" face is put to my sin, the sin remains

our various situations and cultures. It seems that the three classical Atonement theories of Sacrifice, Christus Victor and Revelation remain three facets of the diamond of Jesus Christ. To focus on only one facet is to lose sight of the beauty of the diamond, which is the object of our appreciation, and to subtract one or more facets is to destroy the gemstone. I would contend that for Jesus sacrifice, victory over the powers and revelation of the love of God were present in every moment of his ministry as he journeyed to Jerusalem. Let us be wary of our Western culture's notion of God as one who creates us but never acts for us. Let us be wary of reducing God to a "god" who loves us because we only need affirmation, a "god" who does not stand in our place for we are OK, or who has victory over the powers because we believe there aren't any as we are in control.

I have briefly listed some of the issues on the deck. How will we come to discern truth and interpret this One, whom the church has named the Christ? The church has traditionally proclaimed the faith of the apostles, but today our Western culture's secularism and rationalism expects us to re-interrupt the apostolic faith. Rather is it that we think they expect this? This usually means adapting the faith to our individualistic, secular and pluralistic way of thinking. Our society is indoctrinated with the view that to doubt is to be, whereas the mothers and fathers of the faith understood that to trust is to be. The challenge for the church is to demonstrate that trust, commitment and personal knowing is a valid pathway to truth.[2] This I assert can be best demonstrated in our life together.

I believe these issues are part of the mess on the decks that need tidying up before we go to sea. Any nautical action requires a tidy ship. That is to say, the mess will not disappear, but should be set aside so we can sail on. I would contend that both the liberal-progressive and the orthodox-conservative theologians have a Christ to proclaim. Let's do it. Let us be clear about what we perceive to be the content of faith, and how we will speak of this Jesus. Will we reduce him to an abstract idea, or the concept of love, or the personal being our fathers and mothers of the faith have passed on to us?[3]

THE HOW OF PROCLAMATION is always a matter of word and deed. A good biblical picture is Peter and John's encounter with the lame man where word and deed come together in transformation (Acts 3:1-13). This story brings home the point that without the word spoken the deed could be misunderstood. It is equally true that a word alone may remain a hollow sound. The integration of word and deed, and faith and works, rooted in the ethic of love, has always been the foundation of evangelism.

read books that emphasize one side of the debate without realizing it. This ignorance of the debate leads us into simplistic conclusions with the material we are using. Further to the point, I would suggest that the epistles provide a far better picture of the first Christians' understanding of Jesus than the gospels. In these writings we find an understanding of Jesus within the first decade that forms the foundation of the later creeds of the church. These epistles do not solely reflect the understanding of the authors, for the authors include the earliest formulations of the faith by the community in their writing (e.g. Rom. 1:3f; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20).

A third mess on the deck is the absolute claims of the faith, which cause an embarrassment in the light of our culture's commitment to pluralism and tolerance. This results in a common rejection that Jesus claimed to be the only way, truth and life, preferring to attribute such claims to the early church. Some are incredulous that this absolute claim could be attributed to Jesus in the light of a loving God. I remain equally incredulous that Jesus would understand himself as only one of the ways to God!

Akin to this mess on the deck, which we need to tidy up, is the thought that God is a loving God, who could never "sacrifice his son"; or require "redemption". Now this mess is a large mess. Part of the problem is how both protagonists and antagonists to the notion that Jesus' death was a sacrifice simplistically apply the logic of economy. Such logic belies the universal truth that "cost and sacrifice" lies at the heart of life—not literally but metaphorically. Let me offer an example. In Christian literature and conversation one will come across the notion that Jesus being a sacrifice is alien to God and is the result of the primitive mind, and consequently is an offence to our sense of love. The story of the Prodigal Son's father is offered as a paradigm for God's gracious gift of love and acceptance. So the dominant theme of a loving God reduces the prodigal's father as a metaphor of the loving God, without addressing the cost and sacrifice of the prodigal son's father. This silly sentimental old fool of a father, who runs to meet his prodigal son, has earned the chagrin of his peers and the effrontery of his older son, who stands outside and effectively demands his father comes to him, which the father does. Such is the cost and the sacrifice of the father of this parable. This is not some economic cost paid to some mysterious figure; it is the deep cost and sacrifice that belongs to the warp and woof of life. The prodigal son's father paid a *price* for his outrageous acts of unconditional love.

This takes us to the atonement theories. I would suggest that they remain as profound metaphors that allude to deep truths that address us in

an idea, and so too does the salvation I claim. Yet the gospel does not deal with "ideas" of humankind or God but historically located, effected and affecting identities.

My remark that "there is no forgiveness, and so no reconciliation with God, and so no resurrection, if there is no coming together of people who are at enmity with each other" was not intended to suggest that it is in fact possible for us to achieve such human forgiveness and reconciliation, leading then to God's forgiveness. This would be to re-moralize the whole dynamic.

In fact, quite the opposite: our lives remain characterized by psalmist's "How long, Lord?" precisely because this historical reconciliation is not our experience in anything but a fleeting iconic, emblematic or sacramental way. But this is so because our hearing of the gospel—or our experience of genuinely liberating news—is also only a fleeting thing, if it occurs at all. By the grace of God we might catch a glimpse of where our true selves would lie and, so, of where we have gone astray and, so, of what salvation would really mean.

What salvation would really mean is taking seriously the complexly intertwined and fractured nature of our mutually affected identities before each other and God, and looking toward the kind of justice and righteousness which moves past moralistic assessments of our relationships to the grace which is forgiveness. Jesus saves as the inauguration of such reconciliation, the true human slain by the false one, the true God slain for a false one, and yet in his gracious return the possibility of renewal of the broken human being and the death of the false god. It being inaugurated in Jesus, we await the completion for the whole of the "Body of Christ" of what was begun in him, that we might finally speak of a true reconciliation, forgiveness and resurrection for all.

Craig Thompson

The Theological Imagination

Practising an "Artfull" Faith

Christina Rowntree

WHAT IS ART and what has the church to do with art? In earlier times this question would have been meaningless. That art is seen as somehow separate from the rest of life, as a "special" category demanding a different kind of attention, is a relatively modern idea.[1] My recent experience in the church, as in the wider community, is that art is regaining an integral place. Individuals, congregations, presbyteries and the Synod are making space for the arts, allowing the arts to challenge, lament, uplift, and inspire.

The "Artfull Faith Project" grew out of a ferment of artistic endeavour in the church which is reclaiming and proclaiming the arts in all their diversity. A review conducted by Alexandra Sangster commissioned by the Commission for Mission presented several recommendations for the church to engage the arts in its life worship and mission.[2] Four years into the project I am glad of the opportunity to reflect on the nexus of art, theology and the role of the imagination and consider the role the arts plays in practical terms in the life of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania.

"Imagination may be the primary locus of God's redemptive activity in the world" says Trevor Hart, Director of the Institute of Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews.[3] He notes the "explosion of interest", the rediscovery of the contribution the arts are making in the church worldwide. This inclusion of imagination in thinking about theology and art is helpful. For Christianity is a work of imagination, a re-visioning of the world. As followers of Christ, as pilgrim people we actively imagine and co-create the world. In contrast to popular ideas of art as self-expression, Christian art is a participation in the Spirit's creative power, and artists become partners and co-labourers with God toward the completion of God's artistry. By removing the focus on self -expression we free our artistry in service of God.[4]

"Art challenges the finality of appearance here and now", states Archbishop Rowan Williams, "the

The What and How of Proclamation

Peter Whitaker

THE PROCLAMATION of the Gospel seems to be clouded over with many extraneous things that divert attention and impede the journey. Indeed this is not new and appears to be more acute in our denomination in today's society. To use a naval principle from Nelson's navy, we need to clear the decks for action. There is a lot of stuff on the decks, untidy stuff and unnecessary stuff. And we spend too much of our time tripping over the stuff and thus inhibiting our action. In addition the task is not a new programme or an anxious activity; it is the task of *being* God's ship at sea. There is nothing new, just the task of proclaiming Jesus Christ in word and deed.

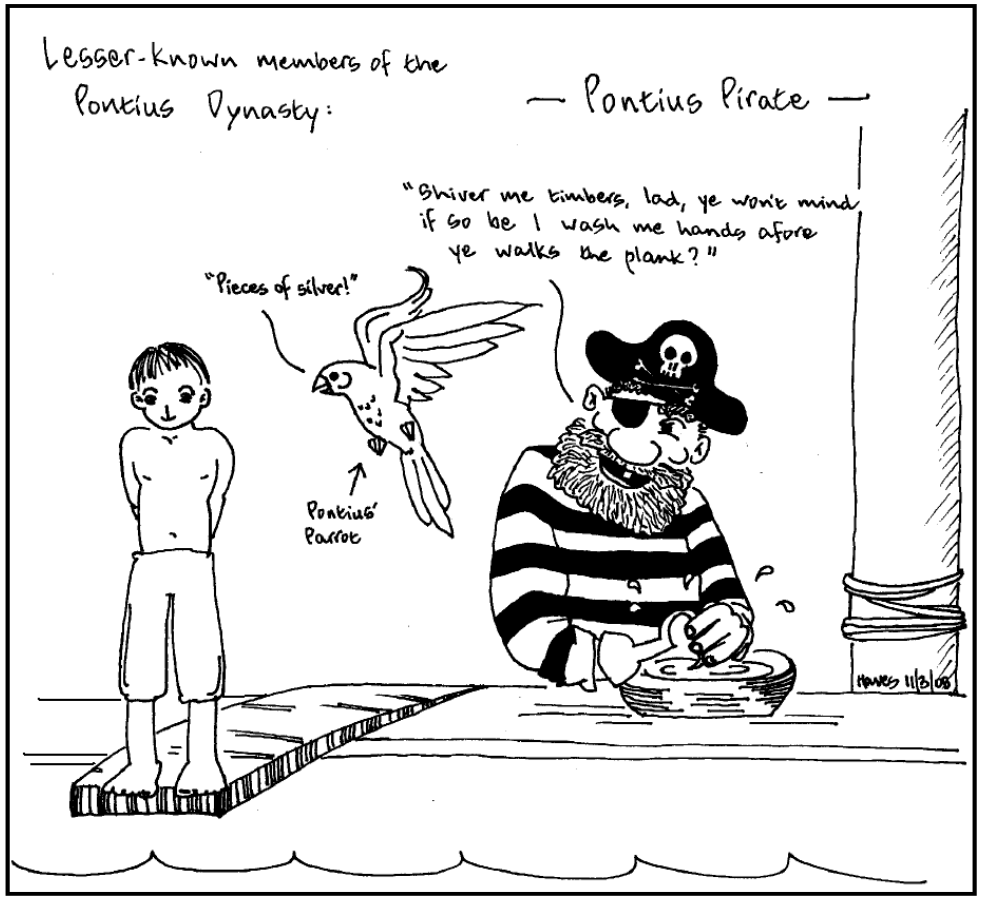
We cannot overlook the singular significance of the person of Jesus to the proclamation. It has been said that the first Christians missed the point, because Jesus came and proclaimed the Kingdom, and they proclaimed Jesus. But they did not miss the point. They got it in one. The Kingdom of God was breaking in, and it was clear to them that Jesus of Nazareth had made the difference that was so significant that they could only point to him and name him Lord and Saviour.

The next mess on the decks is the debate about the historical Jesus, which has gone on since Reimarus' Fragments emerged (1774-78). There are two principal things to note about this debate. Firstly, we believe that if we can get to the historical person, understand his thinking and motivation, drill down to his teaching we will be better equipped to proclaim the Gospel.[1] Indeed we presume that we would know more than the first Christians did. The problem is that the debate has gone on for more than 150 years, and has been largely unsuccessful in its findings. The problem lies essentially with the New Testament writers who understood that there was one thing to know about Jesus, and that was that he was the Saviour. To know this and enter into God's Salvation in Christ was all that was necessary. If the first problem for the historical debate is the paucity of biographical and historical data, the second is that today clergy and laity

On Areopagus Hill

Double Take

by Hilary Howes



artistic task is to open up knowledge otherwise unavailable".[5] Art and theology are closely aligned because both provoke our imagination to see the mystery beyond the finality of experiential reality and they both give expression and form to theological knowledge unavailable to the ordinary mind. Form is important. The mystery of God must become flesh and find an anchoring point in the human experience. We see the Incarnation as a model of that truth. Likewise, if ideas, concepts, images remain unfleshed or unformed, and somewhat locked in the imagination, then new life has not yet been formed.

We assert the Word of God becomes incarnate, in the person of Jesus, and the Word of God is given form in the scriptures. These poetic, historic, epistolary and apocalyptic texts are manifestations of the mystery of God given concrete form. Art-theology allows knowledge otherwise unavailable to the traditional cognitive, rational and conceptual forms of theology by giving equal value to the imaginative, the empirical and relational. I find support for this approach in the *Basis of Union* which encourages the church to be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds. These fresh words and deeds may take the form of works of art. A painting, a poem, a performance can give expression to the mystery of God, challenging the finality of appearance here and now.

In conversation with Ministers of the Word in our Synod I hear many reflections that support these ideas. Ji Zhang asserts art is a way of doing theology, not a mere reflection of a theological reality. Ian Ferguson speaks of practising the art of ministry, integrating theological reflection, pastoral care, proclamation of the Word in a multi-modal art form of performed existence offered to God and the church. Many ministers engage the arts of poetry, painting and photography, for example, both as art form and exegetical or theological reflection.

Congregations are seeking ways to express their faith through art in worship, congregational life and their local community. A recent example is the Peace Wall created at Warrandyte Uniting Church where a number of professional local artists designed and constructed a magnificent mosaic on the outside wall of the church with and for the whole community. Over a two year period the church and artists worked together in the whole community running workshops for everyone from kindergarten children to senior citizens making and painting the individual ceramic elements that were finally brought together to complete the overall design. The design shows the Spirit of Peace descending and infusing the whole creation.

Other congregations are responding to the challenge to offer hospitable places for the arts to thrive. They encourage artists to contribute their work

in the service of God, not only in and for the congregation but acting as a catalyst between church and community. There are significant examples in our Synod of how that can be done, through artist–in-residence programs, developing relationships with artists, commissioning works, providing low cost studio and exhibition space.

It is encouraging to observe a growing perception that artistic expression is available to all people. I delight to encourage people to engage with various art forms, suspend judgment for a time, allow a new experience of submission to the materials at hand, or give imagination free rein.

My work presents many opportunities to lead groups of people to participate in art. I have been invited to lead Presbytery gatherings where the arts are central to the program. At a Barwon Presbytery Youth Camp young people engaged in the theme *Love and Fear,* through writing, graffiti, installation art, choral movement, music and multi-media - which was brought together in a service of worship. At the Gippsland Presbytery Gathering this year, time was spent engaging in photography, telling memories and forming an art installation, sculpting and writing in response to medieval imagery and texts. The expectation that everyone participates was modeled in the Saturday night ceilidh where everyone contributed a joke, spoke a poem, joined in the dance or played music for the delight of all. I worked alongside local artists at each of these gatherings increasing the range of art forms offered.

My experience leading people in a workshop demonstrates some of the caution which people approach art making. As I welcome people to the workshop, and explain the process, someone in the group invariably claims "I'm not creative". An old fear of judgment has raised its ugly head. So many people have a memory of a stern teacher whose frosty criticism or harsh judgment burnt whatever tendril of expression was burgeoning. My task at that point is to acknowledge the fear and create an environment for playful exploration. Others in the group get down to work. Some lose interest, or express frustration. The materials are too difficult to manipulate. The words won't come to mind. Encouragement is needed and support with technique will help. Certainly people have a preference for certain art forms and so it is always good to offer options and a range of materials. Finally, I observe the group becoming immersed with the materials and into the task. Imagination engages. Silence deepens, time stretches.

By the time we finish some people are surprised to find their creation satisfies the work of imagination. Others will review their perceived failure and laugh, deciding the outcome is not so important. Many will claim that irrespective of their judgment about the quality of the art work they have

violence will end. And the Spirit of life that has raised him from the dead is the power of this world's future.

It would take another sermon for us to explore how Paul's message to people of the first century drew them into a new style of community; those who had been utterly divided from each other were gathered by the story which gave them new hope. And, again, there is no time to unfold how radical these communities were, as they engaged in an experiment. It certainly didn't come naturally: they needed constant encouragement and reminding of their new life; as we hear in other verses from the letter we read:

> Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but on the contrary, repay with a blessing … Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil, and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. (1 Peter 2: 8-11)

That instruction to "pursue peace" is allied with the instruction to "love your neighbour". And even beyond that, to "love your enemy". That is where Paul's preaching leads.

Will we give Paul a second hearing? Perhaps in our world threatened by "terror", this Christian talk sounds a bit *namby pamby.* Far from it. When Luke told the story of Paul in Athens, he had already been executed by the Roman Empire. He was a martyr, along with a number of Jesus' first disciples.

Those deaths of the earliest generation of Christians led a North African bishop, Tertullian (AD 160-225), to declare that the *blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*. These were willing to die for Jesus but were not willing to take life in his name, and they remind us that for the first 300 years of the church Christians did not join the army. This early missionary martyr Paul models for us a way of engaging our own culture and its sustaining myth.

His approach in Athens lets us look carefully at those things which promise to make our life secure and acts of human charity and courage that are celebrated. Paul allows us to look honestly and openly at the destruction of war, its legacy of pain and suffering, its vicious cycle of revenge and payback, the trauma of guilt. And then he holds out to us something that is more than "myth": a truthful story of the One who saves this threatened world by going into its depths, and by a *self-sacrifice* of love promises us forgiveness, a new beginning, and a new way of living.

That is the story worth telling: a story worth dying for; but never killing for!

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These are educated people. Their culture has taught them science and given them an appreciation of the fine arts. They know how the world works. And now Paul courts controversy by speaking of a man who has been raised from the dead. He has been in prison for it. He will finally be executed for it. In saying it he offends the rational scientist.

As we know from Paul's letters, his offence is not simply that he speaks of a dead man rising; he speaks of a *crucified Jew as risen from the dead!* So he offends the devout believer. Paul's message offends all his listeners, because he is not talking about a heroic death. His message concerns someone who has experienced a godless death, and the unseen God has become an ally of that executed man on the cross.

Paul speaks to Greeks. A few years ago, an English theologian, Lesslie Newbigin, suggested that we modern western people are Greeks. Our mindset and our way of seeing the world is very "Greek". So, Paul speaks to both the Greeks in first century Athens and to us when he quotes a poet to speak of that God who made all things, in whom we live and move and have our being, who is a power for justice, now and in the future, who raises the dead!

Paul speaks to us as Greeks: if you doubt to our "greekness" , go to the Shrines of Remembrance and read the words and see the images of "heroes", of noble deeds, of those remembered for their courage and virtue. Listen to the way it is said we will "remember them". All this is very "Greek".

So how does Paul speak to us and our sustaining Anzac myth? That is a challenging question, especially as some will say that what Christians have to say is all Greek to them!

Paul would speak respectfully of Anzac acts of courage and self-denial, extraordinary feats which led to caring for others and defence of the weak; then he would want to speak of that which we Australians hardly know, whether in the church or in the wider community. He would, I am sure, point to all our symbols of war and sacrifice and heroes. Then, he would say that these are part of our search for something we hardly know; we are groping for a pattern which makes sense of the human struggle; we are stumbling around in the dark to make sense of the slaughter, the fear and guilt in human experience.

Then he would tell of an unseen power of love that has brought the universe into being, and who has given secure life to us. And most remarkably, he would point to the figure of Jesus, both crucified and risen, as confirmation of that. And then, using even the language of warfare, he could speak of Jesus who is our defender, who by his self-sacrifice has brought us to the God of peace. And most remarkably, has set in train a process that will finally liberate the world from guilt, fear and hatred. He is God's promise that finally all destruction and

made, new discoveries have been made. They have groped toward expression in a different form from their everyday experience.

We are rediscovering that the arts lead people into the mystery of faith, through participating in art making or as viewers or audiences. The arts may challenge, shock, inspire and move us to action. Robyn Archer, a former director of the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts, describes the power of art thus: "We can encounter a work of art which blinds us with colour or sound and sends us reeling into the outside air knowing we have to act—tell someone we love them, visit an ageing relative, change the way we work, do something about an injustice. The inchoate response to pure beauty or the shock of the new can illicit very strong and transforming experiences."[6]

There are demonstrable benefits of engaging in the arts. I have observed how people enjoy participating in a common task to create a work of art together. The church is drawn to collaborative art forms such as banner making, mosaic, and choir. These forms express unity in diversity and support fellowship in the process. Engaging in art can also support pastoral conversations. As a chaplain at NCYC 07 in Perth I spent time in the art studio provided during Nitelife. With heads down and hands engaged in making, conversations flowed and deepened naturally in a way I rarely experienced in other pastoral situations. The therapeutic role of art is appreciable, as congregations and agencies engage artists and art therapists to offer programs based in the arts.

Following the launch of the Centre for Theology and Ministry, June 2007 where the arts played an integral part of the program of Wisdom's Feast, plans are well in hand for Wisdom's Feast 2009. The conference will begin with participants attending a theatre production, *Prophet and Loss*, attending to contemporary stories of workplace grief and listening for solace and comfort through the ancient voice of the prophet Isaiah. A visual art exhibition will explore notions of holiness expressed in the book of Isaiah. I look forward to realizing these projects.

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Notes

[1]James Perkinson, "Beauty Born of Pain: Why Are We Afraid of Art", *Spirit of Fire, Faith, Art and Action* (Sojourners, 2003).
[2]Alexandra Sangster, *The Arts in the Body of Christ* (Commission for Mission, 2004).
[3]*The Spirit of Things* (Radio National, 14 September, 2008).
[4]These ideas developed in conversation with Garry Deverell, June 2007.
[5]Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (Continuum, 2005).
[6]Robyn Archer, "Imagination and the Audience: Commissioning for Creativity", Alfred Deakin Innovation Lecture (Melbourne Town Hall, 2005).

A Sustaining Myth

Wes Campbell

Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-17

A WOMAN wore her hair tightly coiffed. One day her head was itchy, she scratched and discovered a nest of cockroaches. But it's an urban myth. It's not true. That is what a myth is to many people. Something that is not true.

There is another way of speaking of myth. A myth is a story that gives meaning, purpose and direction to life. That is called a "sustaining myth".

On this Anzac weekend we have been taken to Australia's sustaining myth with the word *Gallipoli*. Words such as *digger* and *sacrifice* tell the story. Such myths also expand. The Anzac myth now includes every Australian soldier, from 1914 on, represented by the digger's slouch hat and the Australian flag. Gallipoli has become a "sacred site", where pilgrimage is made, especially on 25 April. As the myth is retold it connects with what people experience now: it now includes the so-called "war on terror", with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. In brief, as magazine covers tell us, Anzac defines the Australian identity.

through a glass darkly

Anzac challenges a Christian preacher. This is a myth which sustains many: families whose members have fought in battle and bear wounds, physical or psychological. It is a challenge because the church also tells a sustaining myth, of *sacrifice, wounds* and *suffering*. A preacher could go down the path of treating the Anzac myth and the Christian myth as the same. So we would simply retell the Anzac story here, highlighting the virtues of heroism, courage and self-sacrifice.

But we cannot simply match these two. We are much more like Paul as he enters the world of Greek culture, in a city whose sculptures and altars tell their sustaining story.

Paul is there as a Christian missionary. But he doesn't take the path many missionaries have: telling his hearers that all they believe is rubbish, telling them to "put on the clothes" of the missionary. We know that did happen in many mission fields, including among Australian Aboriginal communities.

In tonight's reading Luke is telling us Paul's story. Paul, the preacher who is on a mission from God. He works with a team including Silas and Timothy. Arriving in Athens he goes first, as usual, to the local church, the synagogue, to argue his case. And as usual, he creates interest, even a ruckus and controversy. Then he gets a chance to

speak in the main street: this would be something like a Christian preacher standing in the Shrine of Remembrance and speaking to the early morning Anzac crowd gathered there.

He is, as you know, a Roman citizen, and he has been educated in both the Jewish faith and Greek culture. An educated man, Paul knows the rules of debate. Every good debater seeks to establish rapport with the listeners. Now, as preacher, Paul seeks to build a bridge between his Greek listeners and his message. And, in effect, he begins a dialogue with Greek culture that later theologians continued as they sought to engage the intellectual world of the Greeks by their faith.

Paul engages in the marketplace of ideas. In a city whose streets are lined with the gods of Greece, he begins to speak. There is an aside, a sort of footnote, put into this text: "Now the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new". I think we are being told that the Athenians are only interested in something that will divert them, something new to pass the time. They are going to get more than they bargained for.

Paul begins to speak with respect for what the people believe. Although he is distressed by their many idols, he speaks positively of their devotion. He affirms them. But he then directs them to their own streets and tells them that, as he went through the city, he saw an altar *to an unknown god*.

Paul is in the New York of the empire; the intellectual heart of the Roman empire. As a Jew he knows how Jews and Greeks offended each other with their beliefs and practices. Now he stands at the heart of Greek culture and speaks to his Greek audience of what *they do not know*; at best, he speaks of *an intuition—but one that has no real content.* Or, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's formulation—here they are dealing with a *known unknown*.

(It would be instructive for us to explore some current approaches to "spirituality" which emphasize intuition without exploring the truth content.)

Paul takes his chance. Sounding like a philosopher, he tells the story of the universe; how the unseen God set things in motion, and then set things in place that would allow humans to search for God. The human search is like a search in the dark. Paul says that humans would "grope" for God, and then would have success in finding.

Such knowledge is possible because there is Someone real, actively seeking to be known. The narrator expects that we will know he is speaking of the Creator whom Jews trust, and know as Judge. And then, stretching all credibility, Paul goes on to speak of a man who has been raised from the dead. Not surprisingly, some thought he talked nonsense; yet others were open to "hearing more".