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CROSS Purposes

a forum for theological dialogue

Contents

CROSS Purposes

Cross Purposes 19 features our usual assortment of articles and reflections, while also launching something new.

This issue's ministry reflection is from James Godfrey. James encourages us to enter imaginatively into the experience of a mentally ill person, an outreach worker and a carer, arguing that a christologically founded mental health ministry is a foretaste of future ministries outside the walls of church, and ought to be a priority.

Chris Duxbury's sermon on Psalm 25 invites us to "throw ourselves on the kindness of God", trusting him even when we cannot trust elsewhere. This faith is the grounds for the confident hope of Advent.

Ian Breward reviews the process followed in the proposed changes to the constitutional preamble of the UCA, and argues in favour of more extensive consultation, especially with congregations.

In this issue, we begin a new series of main articles, titled *Credo*, reflecting on different articles of the creed, and on what it means to be a credal church in the modern age. In (approximately) seasonal spirit, we begin with two articles about the virgin birth. Ross Carter seeks to elucidate the functions that this clause of the creed served when it was written, arguing that understood in this way, it still serves to express the Christian faith.

Walter Abetz takes a different tack, responding to Bruce Barber's piece in *CP* 18, which is a sort of "launching pad" for the *Credo* series. Walter offers an alternative diagnosis of the malaise in the Western Protestant churches, emphasizing need for revealed Reality to critique the autonomy of the postmodern subject.

Finally, Kylie Crabbe reviews Sara Miles' book *Take This Bread*, which recounts the author's conversion to Christianity through participation in the eucharist, and her radical ideas about the unity of liturgy and mission.

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in service

James Godfrey

Mental Health Ministry

in the chaplaincy partnership between the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra and Eastern Access Community Health[1]

Part I

Late last year, the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra resolved to establish the Mental Health Ministries as *priority ministries* in the mission of the Presbytery. Why?

This paper will attempt to explore the broader christological and ecclesiological implications of this decision and argue that the *Mental Health Ministry witnesses to the identity and future character of ministry in our church*. It will identify the distinctly Christian character of *ministry*, and argue that it will be precisely through claiming this Christ-centred identity that the ministries of the church become most relevant in a secular society.

As we claim in the *Basis of Union*, "in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews [us] as his Church" (§4). Thus the ministry of the church must express something of the ministry of Jesus, for it is in grounding our ministries in the ministry of Jesus that we find our identity, our nourishment, our hope and our future. So what do the person and ministry of Jesus look like?

The gospels establish our hope in a person who is born into a homeless holy family; whose thirst is quenched by a Samaritan woman at a well; who recognizes the mark of faith in the woman suffering haemorrhages—in the ones regarded as unclean.

The ministry of the church is grounded in a person who leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one; who engages with the demoniac; who eats with sinners and tax collectors; who cares for prostitutes and criminals;

[1] Eastern Access Community Health (hereafter EACH) is a multidisciplinary service providing a range of primary health, disability and psychosocial support services within the eastern region of Melbourne.

EACH's service philosophy is based on a social model of health, recognizing that social and environmental factors such as education, housing, employment, relationships and community inclusion are the primary determinants of health status for individuals and whole communities. Services provided by EACH reflect a balanced focus between direct care and treatment services, health promotion, community development, and social advocacy. The social justice and human rights principles of access and equity strongly underpin the values and actions of the organization. For further information see www.each.com.au.

who ministers to the sick, imprisoned, hungry, naked; who is crucified on the outskirts of the city; and who is so like us in appearance as to be mistaken by Mary as the gardener.

Our hope and our identity and our call is given by the one who greets us in our humanity, on our roads to Emmaus, without solutions and remedies, but with a greeting of peace so sincere our "hearts burn within us".

Our image of Jesus becomes incarnate in the ministry of the church.

So how does the chaplaincy partnership between the church and a secular community health organization, such as EACH, strive to bear the marks of the ministry of Jesus?

In general terms the Mental Health Ministry happens outside the gates of the city, beyond the walls of the church, among the depressed, the disaffected, the disconnected, the dislocated.

Part II

It is reported that one in five persons in Australia are affected by mental illness. This indicates that most if not all of us have encountered, in ourselves or in those we love, something of the debilitating effects of mental illness. But it is through this kind of experience that we realize that mental illness is not something abstract; it is not a problem seeking a solution; it is, first and foremost, a person who is hurting: to truly "understand" mental illness is to be in relationship with the one who is suffering. Similarly, to understand the ministry we may best begin by imaginatively inhabiting the concrete stories, feelings, and places of the people to whom the mental health ministry seeks to respond.

Imagine yourself as a person affected by mental illness. From a place of social standing and respectability you begin to slide into a black hole in which you experience profound isolation. You lose your job, your behaviour becomes strange, you become unaware of your appearance, friends step back unsure of how to respond to you. In your black hole you hear voices of loathing and hatred. You come to believe that you personally and exclusively caused the September 11 terrorist attacks. Your feelings of guilt and shame overwhelm you and you attempt to take your own life.

You arrive at the locked High Dependency Unit of a psychiatric hospital. Here you are tried on different medication, you receive electro-convulsive therapy, and you dribble and shuffle and sleep, fifteen hours a day.

You attend the Spiritual Reflection Group that is facilitated by the mental health chaplain every Tuesday morning. This is a space in which patients can be reminded that they are people, that they are sacred. You recognize that you are more than your illness, that God loves you as you are; that you have a rich inner life that no illness, no delusion, no amount of medication, despair or disappointment can erase.

You are diagnosed with schizophrenia. Unable to live independently, heavily medicated, with needs greater than your family can manage, you are discharged from the hospital into an SRS,

a Supported Residential Service. 85% of your pension goes on room and board. You have $30 per week spending money. You sit in a room where everyone is talking, but only to themselves.

You are assigned a caseworker to support you in your recovery. But it seems so far away. And in this place you wonder where is your hope, your dignity, and your freedom. You hunger for real community, for places of hope, but you fear seeking this from a church, you just can't face the possibility of another rejection.

Where is God in the boarding house? Where is God in your life? You hesitate to talk about these aspects of your life lest they be construed as symptoms of your illness. You confide in your caseworker.

Your caseworker contacts the mental health chaplain who visits you. Together we share our experiences of faith, of the struggles and joys of belonging to a church, of the challenge to recognize the presence of God in our dark places. We talk about the possibility of joining a faith community, one day, when the time is right. I offer to introduce you to some of the pastors in the area when you feel ready.

There is relief that these feelings are real, that there is hope, that you are not alone.

Through the support of your case worker you start attending a Day Programme; a day *community* where you meet others who can relate to your story. You join in the outings, the art activity, and the music group.

Again, there is the chaplain; a familiar face, someone who met you when you were in hospital, in the SRS when you felt outside the reach of hope, and now again here, in this place, a little further down the long road of recovery.

Because you are *known*, there is nothing to hide. There is no shame in illness, no risk of being "found out", and you are reminded just by the presence of a chaplain that your spiritual life, your relationship with God, is legitimate and real and constant and over and above, within and beyond your illness.

You attend the meditation group that the mental health chaplain runs every week: Day Programmes in Ferntree Gully and in Healesville. You discover, by surprise, that your social and spiritual needs are beginning to be met. For now, this is church.

You cannot be reduced to a patient of a hospital, a client or consumer of a system, service or program. You are a citizen of a sacred kingdom.

Now imagine yourself as a Mental Health Outreach Worker. You spend almost your entire working week with those for whom the fullness of life has seemed to evaporate. You try to console yourself with ideas of subjective recovery, client-focused support and individual recovery plans.

But your clients confront you with questions of self-identity, of freedom, of meaning and purpose, which no "recovery plan" seems to be able to contain.

And you cannot but ask of yourself these questions. What is your role in this person's life? What difference do

you make? Where are your sources of nourishment? Where are the marks of the sacred, profound, holy in your life and work?

You contact the chaplain and meet at a café. Through a series of conversations you realize that these questions are part of the richness of your job; that the spiritual discomfort you are experiencing may be a call to enter more deeply into your inner life.

You begin to see the challenges of being with marginalized people as a call to grow in your humanity, to explore your belief system, to test and challenge and discover. You begin to experience *yourself* as supported by those you support. The separation between the helper and the helped seems to dissolve.

The ministry to the staff of EACH and the clients of EACH is thus one ministry.

So now imagine yourself as a carer: as the mother of a son with a severe psychiatric disability. Your own friendships have taken a back seat for so long that you wonder if you still have any friends at all. You live with the fears and hopes and dreams of your son, so absolutely that sometimes you don't know who you are anymore. You have offered everything you have to offer, and nothing has changed. Various medications have had limited success, and despite your efforts your son emotionally and physically abuses you. You know it's not really him, it's the illness, but you don't know how long you can go on with this. You are exhausted. You church wants to help, but is not sure how. They don't seem to know what you are going through.

You attend a meeting at the Mental Illness Fellowship, one of the carer's networks in the area. The Mental Health Chaplain is there. You feel understood, you feel that you are from the same "congregation"—the congregation that forms around the marginalized, that knows the burdens of loving someone with a mental illness, loving until it hurts, and then beyond. You arrange to meet with the chaplain.

In the conversation you feel heard, that there is understanding, but without trying to fix the problem, there is solace without solution and your son becomes again an expression for your love and not only the form of your deepest fears.

We talk about Mary the mother of Jesus, a mother who loses her son, a mother who mourns and grieves for her lost son, but in this framework you recognize that a mother's despair is not the final word, that tears, though they are many, will be wiped away. Without denying the place of hopelessness you are in, you discover hope.

Part III

This is but a small slice of what happens in ministry located at the fringes of church culture and yet claiming an identity that is given and is accountable to the kingdom vision of the church.

As a ministry situated within a secular health organization, it strives to challenge the organization to formulate

policies and practices that reflect the dignity of the human person.

It is a ministry that seeks to be relevant to consumerism and the various prosperity doctrines that fill the spaces left in the postmodern landscape, whilst at the same time challenging the forces of individualism.

It is a ministry that engages with the ecumenical, multifaith, post-Christendom, secularized, consumerist character of our community, and is always looking for the language that speaks to the spiritual yearnings of this broader community.

It is a ministry that seeks to express the ecumenical identity of the Uniting Church through building relationships of trust and respect with other faith communities in the outer eastern region.

And while it is, from a Christian perspective, a ministry located within a foreign culture, it is always a ministry fundamentally Christian, always a ministry of the church for it seeks to bear the marks of the ministry of Jesus. It seeks to be, as claimed in the *Basis of Union*, one of the "ministries [that] have a part in the ministry of Christ" (§13).

This is not a ministry that seeks solutions to social problems, that is driven by through-put and the expectations of funding bodies to show results. It is a Christian ministry that, as Henri Nouwen describes in *The Wounded Healer*, will show at least these three qualities:

- a personal concern for the one who is hurting;
- a courageous witness to the sacredness of what is; and
- a hope in a future beyond the present.[2]

In a culture where a person's spiritual identity is too often subjected to the reductionism of social, historical, psychological or emotional "science", the mental health ministry strives to recognize the presence of Christ, as Teresa of Calcutta puts it, in *distressing disguise*.

And in this lies the gift *to* the church by the ones we minister to. In their poverty, hardship, pain and confusion, we as a church are called to encounter Christ outside the city gates, among sinners and tax collectors, touching and being touched by the ones considered unclean.

And as this ministry seeks to make incarnate the ministry of Jesus, we may recognize the marks of the future of our church:

- a church that is interested in the life of the marketplace;
- a church that does not fear those who are strange or bizarre, who behave without regard for social norms; and
- a church that has eyes to see and ears to hear the presence of Christ in *distressing disguise*.

As a ministry that happens among the forgotten I implore you to remember this ministry, to maintain your interest in the lives of those too often forgotten about, to continue your financial support, and to watch this ministry

[2] Henri J. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (NY: Doubleday), 71.

carefully as a pilot ministry, so to speak, for future ministries beyond the walls of our church.

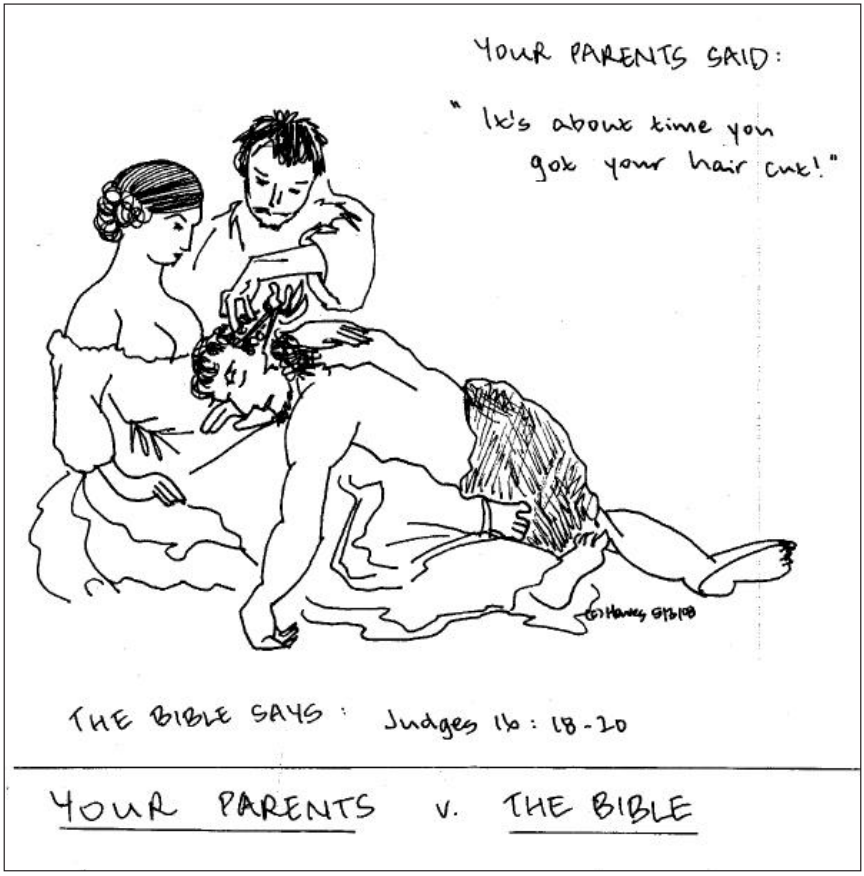
The mental health chaplaincy partnership with EACH offers a testing-ground for our church to reveal its relevance beyond its own city gates:

- to offer the freedom and peace of the gospels to those hurt and damaged by their experience of church;
- to become more and more a church that cares enough and dares enough to leave the ninety-nine and go in search of the one; and, perhaps most importantly,
- to become a church that can listen and speak authentically to a culture disconnected with church and yet thirsting for the peace that Christ brings.

James Godfrey is Mental Health Chaplain to Eastern Access Community Health within Yarra Yarra Presbytery.

double take

Hilary Howes



through a glass darkly

Chris Duxbury

Advent: A Season of Hope

a sermon on Psalm 25

Jobs aren't secure these days. The time when people worked for a company and knew they would always have a job with that same company are over. Gone are the days when an employee's loyalty was rewarded with an answering loyalty from his or her employer. Politicians break promises. People can let us down. As we grow older our health can let us down, and so can our memory. Things we once could trust in seem to be less trustworthy now. Yet, in the midst of all this uncertainty, the psalmist reminds us that we can have trust in God.

Today's psalm—Psalm 25—is a psalm of lament. The words of this psalm, coming so soon after psalms of trust (Ps. 23) and liturgies of entrance to the Lord's house (Ps. 24), show that those kinds of prayer are not enough, in the short term, to dispel times of danger and possible shame on their own. Times of waiting for the Lord also call forth the prayer of lament, a profound expression of that deep-down sense that things are not as they should be.

It is an important reminder for us that lament and hope are not enemies. Indeed, it is hope and trust that often give rise to lament, for they provide that sense of "what may be" by which we are empowered to know that, by contrast, we are in a bad place. The psalmist is going through a hard time, certainly. But that pain is not endured in isolation from God, for the psalmist ultimately hopes in God, believing that God is trustworthy and will bring to fruition his promised peace. So the psalmist brings his or her pain before God in the belief that God cares, and that God will heal the gaping wound that is the subject of the lament. To be real with God, then, to trust God with how we feel and how we are coping with life, is both the beginning of lament, and ultimately its healing and resolution.

Sometimes it is through our darkest days that we can feel closest to God. Could it be that it is in these most uncertain times we are being reminded how much we actually rely on God? When life is going smoothly, by contrast, we can often fall into a false sense of security, forgetting our dependence on God's love and grace, and imagining that we have achieved it all ourselves.

The psalmist lifts up his soul to the Lord. His trust in God allows him to be vulnerable with God. This is a very personal act. The soul, for the Hebrew

through a glass darkly

mind, represented the whole self. To lift up one's soul to God meant, therefore, that you were able to trust God with your deepest and most vulnerable self—past, present, and future. By contrast, I'm sure we have all had that experience of trusting someone at a deep level—with our innermost selves, as it were—only to discover that our trust has been abused and broken. It can hurt deeply. So deeply that we think twice—more than twice—about whether we will ever trust someone again. The abuse of trust can even disable our capacity to trust anyone at all, ever again.

The good news of the gospel is that we can share in the confidence of the psalmist and lift up our souls to God. We can share with God what's on our heart—things that we may not ever feel safe enough to share with others—and God will honour our trust. The good news is that we can be totally open and trusting with God, for God is faithful even where we are unfaithful. This is the gift, the truth of divine grace, that was made known to us in Jesus Christ.

God wants us to be honest with him. Of course, that means that we also have to be honest with ourselves. The psalmist is honest enough to confess his fear of being shamed by his enemies. He worries that, by this, they will triumph over him. Let me therefore ask the question of you, gathered here today: What is on *your* heart, right now? What is troubling *you*? What is causing *you* to fear? These contents of the soul are not unknown to God. God knows them already. But we shall not be able to receive from God the promised gifts of peace now, and hope for the future, unless we are first prepared to trust God with the full *reality* of what scares us. Only by this intimate mode of confession and trust will the healing come. Only by throwing ourselves, vulnerably and with abandon, upon the *kindness* of God will the specific burden that is unique to us ever be lifted.

This is the hope of the gospel that we celebrate today, on this first Sunday of Advent. For this first Advent candle is about hope. In the reading from Jeremiah we find the theme of the psalm repeated: in the midst of national peril, fear and uncertainly, God plants seeds of hope. In the memory of Israel and Judah, their early king David had set the standard for every later king. The people thought their national fortunes rose and fell with the virtue of their kings. In a time of national peril, Jeremiah predicts what a new, good king, descended from David, will do for the nation. Christians believe that the "good king" is none other than Christ, for whom we look with eager anticipation during this Advent season.

Seeds of hope were planted within this promise. Hope that would give strength and courage to the people in the midst of their very tough times. Hope that would shape their living now and help them to endure and not despair. Hope that would also challenge them to do justice and love mercy, even as the world around them turned to chaos and barbarity. For the promise delivered through Jeremiah was that a new branch from David's

line would sprout from the ruins of his reign, a branch that would grow to full maturity and shelter the people beneath the bows of God's peace.

God calls us to be part of his promise of justice and righteousness right now. He does not want our waiting to be entirely passive. Let us continue to live just and right lives, even if many others do not. Have you ever shared something you have with someone who is in crisis? Have you ever stood up for someone that others were brutalizing? Have you ever offered your help to people who are not being treated fairly? I am sure you have. And you should continue to do so because of your hope in God.

Our faith communities are called to be places of justice and righteousness, harbours of refuge and safety from the ravages of an increasingly brutal world. When we live like this we do more than simply wait, passively, for things to get better. We also "plant seeds of justice and righteousness" in places where these things are lacking. We also become, ourselves, a present manifestation of that coming shelter and peace that God has promised for everyone. But first we must trust. First we must believe. Only then will our communities and their way of life gain flesh enough to nurture a similar faith and hope in others.

What hopes do we have for this congregation? What are we doing to fulfill these hopes? How is our hope becoming active, taking on flesh? Hope is like the prayers that we pray. When we pray for world peace we also discover the call of God to become *makers* of peace in our homes, workplaces and communities. Likewise, hope is not really hope unless it is able to seed itself in the realities of our lives: in the way we live, the way we relate to one another, the way we handle conflict, the way we behave, the choices we make. These are the fertile ground for hope that God would plant in our hearts, if only we would "lift up our souls, our lives, to the Lord".

Following the words of trust and praise in the previous psalms, the themes of waiting, and seeking forgiveness in Psalm 25 stress that coming near to the Lord is not easily undertaken. Nor is taking "the way of the righteous" as set out in Psalm 1. We are aware, as in earlier laments, of struggles along the way, both external in terms of enemies, and internal "troubles of the heart". Deliverance from the things that would oppress the one who fears the Lord, or from even choosing "the way of the wicked", requires discipline and instruction. In Advent we talk a lot about us waiting on God. Have you ever thought that God is waiting on us? To draw nearer to him?

God is indeed waiting to see how fair-dinkum we are about following God's ways. God is waiting to see how fair-dinkum we are about deepening our trust in him. God is waiting to see what we are willing to put to death in our lives—what fears, anxieties and griefs—in order to give ourselves wholly into his healing embrace. God is waiting to see how vulnerable, how truthful, we are prepared to be about ourselves and our world. God longs, you see, for such openness to his Spirit that we are

prepared to be carried wherever that wind may take us.

We are in the midst of a season of chaotic busyness that gets us running ragged. It can be a real discipline to slow down and to consider our relationship with God, to consider what sustains us and what does not, to contemplate that which leads to life and that which does not. To listen to what God's Spirit is calling us to, in faith and hope and love.

The psalmist needs to be taught by the Lord. He is called to learn the ways of the Lord which themselves reflect goodness, uprightness, integrity, mercy, and "love". But these are all the qualities of the Lord. They are not only set out before the psalmist to choose, but they also sustain him/her. Through them he/she is brought into the covenant community of God. This is what we do as we wait in Advent.

We see in today's readings that waiting is not just about waiting for God to act. God actively waits for us. To see how we respond to God's love in our lives and in the life of his church. Let us all live in hope that shapes our lives and calls us into action now—living as God intended us to live and, in doing so, revealing the presence of God that lives amongst us.

Chris Duxbury is a Deacon serving in the Canterbury Road UC Congregations.

With thanks to Howard Wallace, whose commentary on Psalm 25 may be found at hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au. I have also drawn on the *Seasons of the Spirit* resource (Mediacom) for Advent 1 in Year C.

on Areopagus Hill

Ian Breward

Changing the Preamble

At the 2009 meeting of the Uniting Church's national Assembly, approval was given to replace the original preamble to the Constitution with one which relates and interprets the common history of the Aboriginal peoples and the immigrants who have settled in Australia since the First Fleet. Interested readers will find the text of the new preamble, with some arguments supporting the changes, in an Assembly document, Frequently Asked Questions*, available at nat.uca.org.au/images/stories/resources/0909preambleqafinal.pdf. Ian Breward comments on the process towards this Assembly decision, and offers a critique of aspects of the* Frequently Asked Questions *document.*

The process for changing the preamble has been very unsatisfactory, even though a small group concerned with the renewal of the Covenant has been involved since 2003. This group has been widened by the Assembly Standing Committee, since the 2006 Assembly, also to deal with related constitutional changes. Inadequacies of consultation with the wider church should lead the Assembly to reconsider how to secure a more adequate consultation process.

The use of clause 39 has been equally inadequate, with no sign of memory about the way such procedures were used by Congregationalists and Presbyterians to ensure adequate consultation on important matters.[1] In those cases, proposals were brought to the Assembly by the relevant committee, carefully discussed and amended by the Assembly, then sent down to presbyteries and sessions, which in turn could amend and comment on the matter before sending it back to Assembly for approval.

Especially important matters were dealt with under the Presbyterian Barrier Act. After appropriate consultation, they then had to be approved by a majority of state assemblies, presbyteries and sessions. This was an important educational process, giving councils of the church a sense of ownership of the decisions taken by the General Assembly of Australia.

[1] Clause 39 of the Constitution states: "On matters which, by a two thirds majority vote, the Assembly deems to be vital to the life of the Church, the Assembly shall seek the concurrence of Synods and/or Presbyteries and/or Congregations as the Assembly may determine". A variation of this clause, recently approved by Assembly Standing Committee, is currently being considered by Synods and Presbyteries. —*Ed.*

Though the process was time-consuming, it was genuinely consultative. Clause 39 does not set out such clear procedures, for even many Presbyterians hoped for a more flexible procedure in dealing with important matters in the Uniting Church. Yet the expectation was that matters would regularly be referred by the Assembly to other councils. This has not happened. The resulting process relating to the preamble has revealed serious defects in procedure.

The production of the new preamble quite rightly involved a good deal of conversation with the Congress. Synods and presbyteries did not have the same time to give the revised proposals adequate consideration before they were submitted to the National Assembly. Indeed, the final version of the preamble took form in Perth in July, just one week before it was submitted to the Assembly. The final version was different from the draft given to synods and presbyteries earlier in 2009.

Even more unfortunate was the inability of members of the Assembly to suggest any amendments, due to the walkout of Congress members who claimed, under a new procedure, that they felt unsafe when questions were raised about the wording. This was a very difficult cluster of issues. Then the Assembly's Business Committee recommended that there be no further debate. Given that there were important Congress sensitivities to be taken into account because of procedural changes, which, in effect, gave them a veto, many in the Assembly felt it was important to pass the proposed preamble without any further debate. It could not be called a consensus decision.

Indeed, while the proposal has been sent down to the wider church under clause 39, it appears that synods and presbyteries can only approve or disapprove. This may well defeat the hope of Congress and Assembly officials that the preamble will create a new climate for relations between Congress and the wider church.

Even more unfortunately, congregations have not been included in the process despite the *Basis of Union*, in paragraph 15(a), making it very clear that they are one of the councils of the church. This is an extraordinary exclusion which completely disregards the Congregational heritage of the Uniting Church and significantly ignores vital parts of the Presbyterian pattern of consultation. In the absence of any reason being given to the Assembly and the wider church for this flawed process, one could be forgiven for concluding that it was another sign of the steadily developing managerial exclusion of the wider church by the Assembly and synod bodies from the making of significant decisions.

It is worth asking why no decision of the Assembly has hitherto been sent down under clause 39 until this decision at the last Assembly. A cynical explanation of this might be that such a pattern developed because the Assembly has decided nothing that is vital to the life of the church, so that nothing needed to be sent down under clause 39. I suspect, however,

it has more to do with the convictions that changes need to be made as speedily as possible. Consultation with other councils was not thought to be necessary. The result has been that such decisions have not been widely owned. It is far from clear what "concurrence" might mean in this historic use of clause 39.

Given that the new preamble has not been subjected to careful biblical and theological analysis, the process can only be said to have trivialized what a preamble stands for. I cannot imagine that the preamble to the Australian Constitution could be amended in such a unilateral manner, with no reference to voters.

The new preamble makes some astonishing statements which should have not been accepted without careful scrutiny. It potentially makes the multicultural nature of the Uniting Church weaker, for some ethnic networks are much larger than the Congress and have equally ancient cultures. It privileges the views of some Assembly and Congress leaders, suggesting they are unwilling to defend their views biblically and theologically, thereby weakening the possibility of consensus. The preamble, therefore, is unlikely to ensure the hoped-for outcomes set out in *Frequently Asked Questions*, a document prepared by the Assembly in August 2009 to explain the rationale of the new preamble.

A preamble's significance is usefully sketched in the section 55 of the Assembly agenda. While a preamble is not legally binding, it nevertheless can be an essential resource for reading the context of the Constitution and shaping its intended meanings. So we have to ask whether the reasons given for a new preamble in *Frequently Asked Questions* really stand scrutiny. Does the proposed preamble really tell us what it means to be this Uniting Church?

Frequency Asked Questions includes a faith statement which demands very careful discussion. "The most significant mark of what it means to be an Australian is that we live on land that was, and is, Aboriginal land", (note there is no mention of Islanders), "and that a critical relationship in this land is the relationship between First and Second Peoples" (p. 4). That may be true. We need to ask, nevertheless, Is this a characteristic which immediately strikes a visitor to Australia, or to the Uniting Church as being self-evidently true? This claim demands careful analysis. Do our British and European heritage of law and politics, our Federal Constitution, our ethos, which have developed over more than 200 years of settlement, count for nothing by comparison?

> "This process may well defeat the hope of Congress and Assembly officials that the preamble will create a new climate for relations."

Even if Uniting Church members agreed with this claim, will the new preamble stay before the mind of the Church in a continuous way, and in such

a manner that Congress no longer needs to keep educating the leadership of the Uniting Church about the nature of relationships with Aborigines and Islanders? Surely this change requires an initiatory process and will not be achieved alone by a new preamble?

Then there is the claim that the preamble would better express the significance of "law" in the life of the indigenous community since time immemorial (p. 5). To have such truth telling within the framework of the law of the church is seen to be extraordinarily important. This is an important acknowledgement of immense respect for both the people and the relationship. Such claims appear to assume that the Congress can speak for all Aboriginal and Islander communities about the nature of "law". This is a doubtful claim. No adequate attention appears to have been given to the variety of meanings attached to" law" among Aborigines and Islanders and changes which may have taken place since encounter with the Second Peoples of Australia. Nor is there any examination of the place of law in different parts of the Scriptures, let alone its role in the Uniting Church. It is very misleading to conflate their meanings as the new preamble does.

Granted that God is always calling us to new obedience as Christians, there are many historical examples of disobedience to what has been revealed in the Scriptures and reaffirmed in the creeds and confessions. Unless this is taken into account, can we be perhaps more in accord with contemporary Australian culture than in accord with our confessional and biblical heritage?

The commentary of *Frequently Asked Questions* on paragraphs 1 to 3 of the preamble make the bold claim that what Aborigines and Islanders knew before their meeting with colonial Christianity, with its many defects, was in accord with the love and grace fully and finally revealed in Jesus Christ (p. 6). In fact, it must be said that the stories of the Dreaming are very different from the Christian Scriptures in their account of divine beings. There is little sign of biblical teaching here on the transcendence of God. Claims are also made about the work of the Spirit (or should it be the Holy Spirit?) creating witnesses beyond the church, which are not resolved by a selective reference to Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Page 6 of *Frequently Asked Questions* needs a much more nuanced account of what it means to speak of a creator God.

The *Frequently Asked Questions* section on paragraphs 2 and 3 of the preamble then goes on to insist this is not to claim that indigenous peoples knew Jesus Christ's significance fully. This disclaimer needs careful reworking to be consistent. It is undoubted that there was great vitality and religious depth in Aboriginal and Islander cultures, which was not recognized by colonial Christians, or indeed by many Christians throughout the 20th century. The recently republished essays by W. H. Stanner make that ignorance, at every level of Australian society, very plain.

Paragraph 5 of the new preamble

surely needs to be much stronger. Sorrowfully taking note of some 20,000 Aboriginal deaths, in what can only be described as brutal and illegal murders by settlers and police, is essential, if due recognition is to be given to the pain which modern Aboriginal communities feel about their past. These murders were accepted without comment or complaint by many Christians in the wider community and in colonial governments, without the slightest hint of remorse, or any attempt to bring the murderers to justice. *The Monthly's* November 2009 issue has an illuminating article which makes clear just how pervasive these attitudes were among our forebears. They also effectively denied Aborigines and Islanders any legal rights. The preamble must be improved in this respect.

The final section of *Frequently Asked Questions* (p. 7), on what the changes in the preamble mean for the whole church, also underlines the need for redrafting. The claim that the preamble will be of critical importance in how we understand ourselves in the Uniting Church may be true. The preamble, however, needs to have some significantly different wording if the hope of the drafters is to be realized.

It is too much to claim that for the first time our covenantal relationship is founded on truth and not the lingering denial of our historical past. Nor is it enough to claim that the way the Congress has experienced our relationship is now enshrined in the introduction to the law of the church, of which we all are a part. We read:

> When we live in a relationship founded on truth, we have the potential for a new relationship. This truth will not only help set the First Peoples free, it will also offer to liberate the whole church from its bondage to the past, to claim its future as a reconciled community in Christ Jesus, a sign of hope to the rest of the world.

One can say Amen to that, but have adequate foundations been provided for such a noble hope?

As well as examining the increase in the powers of Congress and the Standing Committee set out in division 4 of the Constitution, synods and presbyteries should reject the preamble. They should ask that an amended version be brought to the next Assembly, after genuine prior consultation with synods, presbyteries and congregations as the *Basis of Union* 15(e) requires:

> It is obligatory for [the Assembly] to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasions of the Congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.

If the preamble is as vital as *Frequently Asked Questions* claims, no consultation without the concurrence of congregations will do.

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Cross Purposes *will shortly publish a collection of essays both for and against the proposed new preamble, as an aid for synods and presbyteries in considering it. This will be mailed to synods and presbyteries, and will be available online at cp.unitingchurch.org.au.*

credo

Ross Carter

Conceived by the Holy Spirit Born of the Virgin Mary

Human beings are those creatures who speak to one another about the reality that encounters them. A creed, therefore, is an attempt to give expression to the reality that has encountered a particular community. I have been asked to reflect on the article of the Apostles' Creed that confesses Jesus to be "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary". What I hope to do, therefore, is set out something of what the church was trying to confess in this article.

By way of introduction to these comments it is important to know that "conceived by the Holy Spirit" and "born of the Virgin Mary" were originally formulated to express the church's belief that Jesus Christ was truly human. It was seen as important to insist on his humanity because in the early church no one doubted that Jesus Christ was God, but there were those who did seriously doubt that God had bound himself to humanity in the humanness of Christ. The phrase "born of the Virgin Mary" was meant to emphasize the humanity of Christ Jesus. It is one of the ironies of history, I suppose, that many today in the church hear this confession as an expression of the non-humanity of Jesus.

As a consequence of this reversal the statement we have before us today is one of the most difficult for modern people to understand. It has been fiercely attacked by some people for being hopelessly irrelevant to modern people and, in the case of Bishop Spong, for being responsible for the oppression and demeaning of women. However this may be, we should assume, I think, that our fathers and mothers in the faith had a fair idea of what they were trying to say when the articles of the creed were developing. So let us see if we can think ourselves into the reality they were trying to express before we throw this article out of the creed.

Conceived (Born) by the Holy Spirit

In order to get at the content of this confession, we can remind ourselves that the early Christian communities which confessed the articles of the creed were familiar with the language of being "born" of the Holy Spirit. In the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John, we read that to all who received God's Word, "who believed in his name, he gave power to become

children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Reflecting the faith of the New Testament, the author of the Gospel declares that those united in Christ are a new humanity, a new community that has come into being through the initiative of God by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The confession that God creates a new humanity in Christ is rehearsed at every baptism where the baptized are said to die to the old self in Christ, and are raised to the new in him. As St. Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

Now of course St. John or St. Paul did not think that this meant that our physical bodies had now become "spiritual" bodies, whatever that could mean. Nor were they speaking of some kind of sexual event: St. John ridicules Nicodemus who thinks Jesus is talking about re-entering the birth canal when he says that everyone must be born anew. What the Christian community is doing in this language is speaking of what they believe to be the power of God who has, out of the blue so to speak, constituted them as a community of Christ Jesus whom they worship as belonging so integrally to the reality of God that he is called "Son of God". In trying to describe what has happened to them they think of themselves as somehow being a "new" humanity.

In view of the above we can venture the view that when the creed confesses that Jesus Christ is "conceived by the Holy Spirit", it means to stress that the God who can constitute people as a new humanity can bond with humanity in a particular person without ceasing to be God. The confession "conceived by the Holy Spirit" also witnesses to the church's belief that the presence of Jesus who is known as a man, and who is also worshipped as I indicated, is not a historical accident, but rather is the deliberate act of God in fulfilling his purpose for human beings. In short, what this language attempts to give expression to is the belief of the Christian community that the reality of God has bound itself to the reality of the human in the person Jesus known as the Messiah.

If this is how we should understand the confession "conceived by the Holy Spirit", then clearly it is not to be thought of as giving us factual information about the birth of Jesus. On the merely factual side we can hardly say more than that Jesus must have been born somewhere in Palestine around the end of the reign of Herod the Great, and that his birth, at the time at which it occurred, was an utterly obscure event. Rather, the credal article has to be understood as giving us theological information about the event that has encountered the church.

Born of the Virgin Mary

As I mentioned above, the confession about Jesus being born of the Virgin Mary was originally meant to stress that Jesus Christ is truly human. This confession was a polemic against Gnostics who said that God, whom they defined as

unchanging and not able to suffer, could not bind himself to a changeable, suffering and dying embodied person who is born in time. The point of confessing that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary was to declare that human flesh can receive the life of God. "Born of the Virgin Mary" is, therefore, the confession by the church that Jesus is a man, born of a woman, in solidarity with all humanity. It means that the body that is embraced by God is the truly human body, the body of humanity that is so often broken and suffering. It means that God experiences all that people experience precisely as a bodied person, as we are.

One of the problems that people have with this credal confession is with the word "virgin", because it suggests something that is gynaecologically impossible. But Mary and a virginal conception are put together to assert the full humanity of Christ. The creed, in confessing that God bonds to humanity in Jesus Christ, wanted to avoid any possibility of this being understood to mean that God was the sexual partner of Mary. In pagan religions gods were believed to take human women as sexual partners. What often resulted of these unions were the birth of creatures that were half-god and half-human. The assertion about Mary's virginity is a rejection of such notions. The article is setting forth again the conviction that Christ is fully and robustly human.

Conclusion

Now there is no doubt that "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" is a language that sounds strange to us. But can it still bear service in the task of giving expression to Christian belief? I think it can if we understand that in the credal article words have been stretched, and that things that do not usually go together have been put together, because a community has been encountered by the unprecedented reality of the purpose of God for humanity, taking form in the person Jesus. I think it can still bear service if understood somewhat in the way I have outlined.

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Walter Abetz

Why One May No Longer Speak of the Virgin Birth in the Mainline Churches

This article is not only about the virgin birth, but is also a response to Bruce Barber's assessment of church and culture in the West. I offer an alternative assessment of the cancer in the mainline church, and a prolonged and painful potential cure.

Bruce Barber's assertion that there is increasing hostility to Christian faith outside *and* inside the church should be as surprising as an assertion that within the Australian Rugby Union *and* the Australian Football League there is an increasing hostility to Australian Rules Football. Hostility within the church against the Christian faith is largely a Western protestant mainline church phenomenon. The leadership of Western mainline churches have, by and large, become captivated, willingly seduced, by our contemporary culture.[1] How to assert orthodoxy in a church run by an apostate[2] leadership is indeed a vexed question for those who seek to remain orthodox.

[1] Perhaps that is a defining feature of a "mainline" church—it seeks to remain culturally acceptable, even though significant social shifts away from Christianity have occurred, e.g., the German Lutherans in Hitler's Germany, or the Episcopalian Church in the USA in our era.

[2] A strong word, but is opposition to the Christian faith from within not a falling away: apostasy?

Some Symptoms

I am a member of (and lately minister in) the Uniting Church in Australia, a mainline (?!) church. Over the last thirty years I witnessed the leadership of the Uniting Church deliberately steer away from the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ alone and move towards bringing in the Kingdom of Human Rights in the here and now, where Jesus' exclusive claims are frowned upon, if not rejected out of hand. I do not make this claim lightly.

I attended a Presbytery retreat for ministers, convened to reaffirm ordination vows. At the critical moment it was decided by the leader, a former Victorian Moderator—out of "pastoral concern" for those unable to speak their ordination vows with a clear conscience—that ministers renew their vows in silence. In silence each person self-affirmed the self-authenticating autonomous subject of postmodernity, instead of voicing our communal commitment to the triune God.

Such a pastoral stance, which refuses to exercise church discipline, lacks Judaeo-Christian love.[3] This lack of love

[3] Lev. 19:17-19 requires brotherly rebuke as part of what it means to love one's neighbour. Such an act of rebuke flies in the

has indeed become a "restrictive cultural legacy" for the mainline churches. Bruce acknowledges in his concluding sentence that some ministers hold to the creeds "with a bad conscience", if they hold to them in anything more than a Pickwickian sense. This phenomenon is not a *novum* in the history of God's people:

> "But my people have changed their glory
> for something that does not profit.
> Be appalled O heavens, be shocked, be
> utterly desolate," says the Lord.
> "My people have committed two evils:
> they have forsaken me, the fountain of
> living water,
> and dug out cisterns for themselves,
> cracked cisterns that can hold no water."
> (Jeremiah 2:11-13)

In such circumstances, there is still a sense of hope amongst God's people, that faith will not disappear. Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others did not resign their membership in the Hebrew nation. God addresses his people from beyond the predominant culture:

> "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel,
> all the knees that have not bowed to Baal
> and every mouth that has not kissed him."
> (1 Kings 19:18)

I recognize that it is potentially anachronistic to draw parallels between Elijah's, Isaiah's and Jeremiah's times and our time. Nevertheless, it should be of interest that neither Elijah, Isaiah, nor Jeremiah stated that "much of the antagonism might be considered to be misplaced, or at the very least, as demonstrating a failure to recognize the concealed presuppositions from which the protagonists on both (all?) sides are operating". Of course, to launch a conversation between hostile partners on an equivocating basis is much more eirenic than on the confrontational basis of "Thus saith the Lord", as represented by Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Bruce's eirenic spirit must be acknowledged here.

I understand Bruce to make a distinction between what the Western Protestant mainline churches now believe, and what the Christian faith demands us to believe. If there is no such distinction, then there is no ground for hostility. I am not sure whether Bruce perceives there to be hostility between Western culture and Western mainline Protestant (=apostate?) churches, since both are seen as increasingly hostile to the historic Christian faith.

The Diagnosis: A Hostility Implacable

The hostility between the Western protestant mainline church and Christian faith operates at two levels, not just one. Bruce eirenicly diagnoses "concealed presuppositions". While I concur, concealed presuppositions, in my opinion, would not in themselves prevent a resolution, if that were the only reason for the hostility. Revealing these presuppositions, and discussing them rationally and prayerfully, would have the potential to resolve the conflicts

face of Enlightenment (and postmodernity's) self-authentication and autonomy. "Who are you to tell me …", is the cultural response to rebuke. There is indeed hostility to the practice of Christian faith within the mainline church.

within the church, and at least generate mutual respect outside the church. No renewal of language would be required for this.

Christian faith meets with a more difficult and a more deeply entrenched hostility in the mainline church. The hostility comes from the self-authenticating autonomous human subject, who, in order to remain so, must oppose each and every truth-claim that calls into question such self-authentication and autonomy. In order to maintain the illusion of self-authentication and autonomy, our culture has developed a new trump card, "tolerance", which is a wolf disguised in sheep's clothing. It is this new tolerance (with its concomitant "diversity") which is inimical to the Christian faith. The Western human rights agenda is predicated on a one-sided tolerance. The unforgivable sin is no longer the maligning of the Spirit of God. Now the unforgivable sin within the Western protestant mainline church is this: to be found to be intolerant of self-authentication and autonomy within the church, even though self-authentication and autonomy are diametrically opposed to Christian orthodoxy.[4]

Whenever orthodoxy is merely tolerated, it will finally be proscribed. Western protestant mainline theology claims to tolerate orthodoxy. The orthodox may be allowed, for a season, to believe this or that; they may indulge their inclinations and personal tastes for a while. After all we are self-authenticating autonomous subjects. But as soon as orthodoxy insists that there is a right or wrong belief or action, such a claim is seen as an "intolerable violation of the etiquette by which one is tolerated".[5] Orthodoxy denies self-authentication and autonomy to the individual. So one must not be orthodox; one must not have "the effrontery to propose that this or that is normative".[6] Being marked guilty of this intolerable violation of the etiquette has consequences. Such a violation is not an offence against one of the "superficialities of a decadent culture", but a transgression against the very core of our postmodern culture. Such transgression can lead to ruthless exclusion from ministry while being "a minister

[4] The self-authenticating autonomous subject has developed in opposition to the Christian faith. Philosophy was allowed to trump scripture. A theology anchored in Platonism, or Aristotelianism, or in acceptance of the historical-critical method and findings of the Tübingen School and their successors, or in existentialism, poststructuralism, etc., is deficient, if any one of these philosophical positions is allowed to trump scripture. Such theologies will no longer be Christian. At least in the UCA we should be aware of this. What we say about Jesus Christ is to be controlled by scripture (paragraph 5 of the *Basis of Union*), not philosophy.

[5] "Neuhaus' Law of 'Optional Orthodoxy': A Lesson for the Churches", *ACCatalyst* 3 (June 2006): 9. This is a reprint from *First Things* (1997) (no further details given). Barber is very eirenic in the opening paragraph of his paper, but I wonder if trying to make peace in a situation where Neuhaus' Law already operates leads to a progressively compromised orthodoxy.

[6] Ibid.

in good standing".[7] Bruce is right, there is a "restrictive cultural legacy" at work. Western Protestant mainline leadership generally denies the normative nature of religious texts, both as meaningful text and as communal norm. If one insists on

> "Now the unforgiveable sin is to be found intolerant of self-authentication and autonomy within the church."

meaningful text and communal norms, one is identified as "obsessed", "having personal provisos", as "fundamentalist" and "literalist".[8] To speak of the doctrine of the virgin birth as a requirement of the Christian faith risks such treatment.

The Offence of the Virgin Birth

To speak of the virgin birth in such a context is more dangerous than a mere "casting pearls before swine". The declaration of the birth narratives fundamentally attacks the self-authentication and autonomy of the human individual. Self-authenticating autonomous human beings do not need a human-divine Saviour to free them from their sin, nor do they want to be in the household of the Father: under the jurisdiction of Another. Therefore such narratives cannot be tolerated as meaningful—instead they will be relegated to fairytale status, or censored—by the people outside *and* inside the church. To treat the birth narratives otherwise would be to blaspheme against those who worship themselves as self-authenticating autonomous beings. To those who remain orthodox, the virgin birth is not merely a theological concept, but a theological concept that arises out of the way in which the use of words is interlocked with life, life that is authenticated and personalized by the trinitarian God.[9]

Most Western philosophies and much of Western theology has broken the covenant between word and living, according to Steiner and Wittgenstein, amongst others. To speak words that only refer to other words is indeed futile, but this circular reference is a consequence of our claim to self-authentication and

[7] I have documentary evidence for this.

[8] Bruce indicates that our culture regards only the literal as mandatory. It seems that it works in the opposite direction in religion. What is mandatory, must be rejected. Therefore anyone claiming a text to be mandatory must be summarily dismissed as a "literalist", because religious texts opposing self-authentication and autonomy cannot be allowed to be mandatory! By diagnosing this problem as "loss of metaphor", Bruce seems to avoid the confronting issue, namely, that Christian orthodoxy comes with mandatory beliefs.

[9] The Word did not remain language but became flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. Through his human-divine life, his human-divine speech-acts, death and resurrection he brought life to humans. It is not language as language that brings reconciliation and life, but the creative word-act of the Father does. The Word was made flesh to exist as empirical fact. That is one of the basic tenets of the Christian faith.

autonomy. Wittgenstein's question will continue to haunt the Western mainline churches in their sickness unto death, "Is the meaning only in the use of words? Is [the meaning] not the way this use interlocks with life?"[10] Western culture has broken the links.

A Remedy?

One of the ways to address the Western mainline churches and Western culture is through community that demonstrates the normative nature of a religious text. Re-establishing the covenant between language and life seems to be one of the attractions of Islam for some disillusioned Westerners. George Lindbeck made the case in the 1980s for a Christian community that sets clear boundaries in daily life through engagement with the scriptures. The Moravians led by Count Zinzendorf come to mind as a historical example. Fusion's festivals at market square events (agricultural shows and international sporting events) are a present-day short-term demonstration of a welcoming community with clear boundaries. This demonstration of community has the potential to draw people into the kingdom of God: the experience of joyful, mutually supportive inter-generational community through physical play allows people to relinquish their desperate grasp on self-authentication and autonomy, and so frees them to be open to hear the call of God. Experience of such community coupled with its normative language can open the eyes of people's hearts.[11]

Premature talk of the virgin birth cannot cure the problem of our culture. While orthodoxy remains merely *one of many* options within the church, the covenant between language and life remains broken. Words will only point to other words, instead of to God, to God-authenticated Reality[12] and to our creatureliness—all matters addressed in the doctrine of the virgin birth.

An Issue of Language?

Bruce's eirenic attempt to diagnose the malaise as a loss of metaphor could be read as if God was not transcendent,[13] but immanent in language.[14] By identifying language as the problem Bruce does not give enough space to the transcendent and personal nature of the trinitarian God, nor to personal responsibility to shape one's culture, i.e., to be salt and light. Our culture, I am sure, has not lost the use of metaphor. We simply refuse to use this feature of language in religious discourse, because our culture has a

[10] I am perhaps misunderstanding Bruce—but it seems to me that his fear of literalism prevents religious texts "interlocking with life". NB, Wittgenstein did not understand this interlocking in a static way, but in a very dynamic way. He recognized the many-layered functions of language, in particular the functions of "measuring standard" as well as of "a thing to be measured", as constricting at times and opening up at others, depending on the context.

[11] Ephesians 1:15-23.

[12] See the Appendix for an explanation of "Reality".

[13] See the Appendix for the meaning of "transcendent".

[14] I want to assure the reader that I do not believe that Bruce holds to such a view.

need to refute, or at least silence any references to, God's transcendence. God's transcendence makes us dependent: neither autonomous nor self-authenticating. God's personhood authenticates our personhood; we are persons in a derivative sense. The religious metaphor works from God to us. To use metaphor in the direction from God to human—"Thus saith the Lord"—is to give the declaration power as a prophetic word. Prophecy has implied mandatory force, and therefore it is an offence against the etiquette by which orthodoxy is tolerated. But unless Christians acknowledge God as transcendent and personal, their religious language will ever only be words pointing to words, instead of to the living God.

The covenant between language and life needs to be restored first, before we can speak intelligibly of the virgin birth. Such restoration will necessarily involve language as communication. It will make religious language more "literal" and "mandatory" (whether fact or metaphor), in the sense that language will point to something or Someone[15] beyond itself, in the form of an external truth-claim. The same words, the same grammar, the same figures of speech currently in use will suffice, but they will occur in a context where the use of words and the way we live are meaningfully intertwined. The required restoration is a matter of permitting language to do more than to simply refer to other words. Words from the outside will have to be allowed to refer to us—the transcendent God's word to us—revelation. Giving ourselves permission to listen to revelation is a matter of the will: conversion, a return to the fountain of living water. This restoration is only possible through a renewal of the heart and mind. The current features of English are entirely adequate for religious discourse.

Furthermore, the reintroduction of metaphor into discussion of religion does not guarantee anything. Metaphor can be deceitful. We need bring ourselves to acknowledge the meaningfulness of our religious texts and their mandatory nature, as our *Basis of Union* does so beautifully:

> The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony [note the singular], in which it hears the Word of God [Jesus Christ], and by which [not whom!, the "which" refers to the testimony] its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated [meaningful and mandatory (therefore in some sense literal !?)]. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the biblical witnesses [acknowledgement of a plurality of witnesses with a common testimony that restricts what we may say]. (§5)

[15] In John 14:6 Jesus is reported to claim that he *is truth*. In John 18:37 Jesus is reported to say that those who *belong to the truth* hear his voice—a peculiar turn of phrase in our ears. We often speak as if we owned the truth, but Jesus' point is that the truth owns us! In John 3:21 Jesus is reported to say that those who *do truth* come to the light. This seems to indicate that truth has an extra-lingual component.

Who Can Act?

The call to transformation will be sounded by those who have no hostility to the Christian faith—the seven thousand who have not bowed to Baal nor kissed him. One wonders whether Isaiah's lament about unclean lips relates to the worship of Baal infiltrating in to Judah from Israel over a couple of centuries:

> "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips
> and I live among a people of unclean lips;
> yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

This passage refers to the misuse of language in deceitful ways.[16] As members of such a community we often unwittingly become partners in such deceit. We need to establish communities where we exercise the provocative mutual love described in Leviticus 19:17-19 and in Hebrews 10:24. The call to transformation will be a call to give up our broken cisterns: our delusions of self-authentication and autonomy.[17] Even so, it is God who wills and works this transformation in us, not we ourselves as autonomous beings. May we accept the invitation (better, command!) to return to the trinitarian God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who authenticate our existence and call us into joyful obedient fellowship with them.

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[16] Isaiah 5:20-24.

[17] Matthew 20:1-16 is a parable that refutes human self-authentication and autonomy, in the light of God's grace.

Appendix

Here are some sketches of what lies behind my diagnosis.

On Reality

To speak of two realities that need to be bridged by metaphor is not helpful. For Christians to speak thus gives credence to an intolerable bifurcation. It perpetuates the concept of the human being as a self-authenticating autonomous subject—which scripture opposes. Nor is panentheism the answer: it makes God the author of evil. Nor is God a Platonist or a Marcionite god who cannot "lower" himself to create things physical. God speaks, and matter comes into being, and God calls the completed creation very good. God's speech generally is speech-act, rather than words only, or ideas only.

Terminology is a minefield. Terms have historical baggage. Nevertheless, it may help to distinguish between reality and worldview. Worldview is the model or emotive/cognitive structure I build to make sense of my experience (which includes reports of other people's experience!). The trinitarian God and his creation constitute Reality—with a capital R to distinguish it from the virtual "reality" of the self-authenticating autonomous subject of postmodernity, who elevates "my worldview" to "my reality". God's worldview (the trinitarian God is reported to have knowledge and emotions!) is isomorphic with this Reality. As Creator and Author he is truly "I am who I am; I will be who I will be".

My worldview may be diametrically opposed to this Reality, or it may be in

accordance with parts of God's worldview, but only as in a glass darkly. Jesus' comment about "belonging to the truth" (John 18:37), belonging to this Reality, refutes any and all attempts by Christians to legitimize self-authentication and autonomy.

On Metaphor

Metaphor does not bridge two Realities, because there is only one Reality. Metaphor bridges two worldviews, that of the teacher and that of the learner. A metaphor has a teaching function: extending knowledge. In the process of bridging, a metaphor may even overturn the worldview on the learning side of the bridge. Educating a child uses this kind of process, building a worldview, sometimes tearing down, more often building up. Jesus declared, "Unless you become like little children, you will in no way enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 18:3). There has to be the possibility of conversion, of correcting worldviews (Rom. 12:1-2).

On Transcendence

God is a risk-taker. Humans are commanded to be stewards of God's creation. We are commanded to obey God, commanded to respond consciously and conscientiously to his love. That carries with it the possibility of disobedience. That is the mystery of the love of the trinitarian creator, who creates and welcomes the other. True love allows the possibility of evil, without being the originator of it. True love is willing to bear the consequences of that risky love—as exemplified in the willing suffering of Christ as the Son of God, for our sake; he is God the Father's acknowledgement that true love continues to make room for the other at great cost. Christ also embodies humanity's abject apology to God for human disobedience.

Within this picture of Reality, transcendence does not carry with it the sense of a god who has absconded, as in Renaissance Deism, for example. Transcendence carries the idea that Reality is bigger than our experience, that God exists separate from and independent of his creation, that our worldview is always smaller than God's worldview, that our ways are not God's ways, and that his thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

On Speech

Bultmann's dictum about "Christ rising into the kerygma" domesticates the Word into words. The Christian faith attests to the promise of Christ's return, and the establishment of a new heaven and earth. "Christ rising into the kerygma" does not carry this larger possibility. Speaking only of metaphor, without introducing the notion that a metaphor may come from beyond us in the first instance (as divine revelation), has the potential to collapse scripture into merely human speech. Speech of merely human origin cannot sustain claims of divine inspiration. This has consequences for hermeneutics, as demonstrated by the Tübingen School of the nineteenth century, for example.

The problem of our age is not language itself, but the deceptive use

of language. Mainline leaders dress up their unbelief (their fundamental rebellion against God as Creator, Author and Lawgiver), in language that sounds orthodox, while they are actively promoting schism, if not apostasy. And may I hasten to add that I am a man of unclean lips, dwelling amongst a people of unclean lips, in search, within the Uniting Church, of a community that will live by mutual provocative love to develop cleaner lips, and that will treat the trump card of a false tolerance as an abomination.

what are you reading?

Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion
by Sara Miles
New York: Ballantine, 2008
Reviewed by Kylie Crabbe

> It took actually eating a piece of bread …It turned out that the prerequisite for conversion wasn't knowing how to behave in a church, or having a religious vocabulary or an a priori "belief" in an abstract set of propositions: It was hunger, the same hunger I'd always carried. (xiv)

So Sara Miles describes her conversion to Christianity. From *Sunday Times*-reading, atheist intellectual parents, who she only later realized were reacting against her radical Christian activist grandparents, Miles had roamed the conflicts of Central America, been a journalist, cook and nursed friends dying of AIDS. But in this autobiographical account she describes her experience of eucharist as bringing the layers of her life together.

And the story which follows is compelling. Miles has an engaging grasp on liturgical theology, and is clear about what this all means for the church's life and mission. She has the uncomfortable zeal of a convert, which might easily leave others of us wondering how we can ever have slid into lukewarm enthusiasm for an inherited faith so radical. She'll also, no doubt, get up your nose. She can be somewhat cynical and persuasive at once:

> The entire contradictory package of Christianity was present in the Eucharist. A sign of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, it was doled out and rationed to insiders; a sign of unity, it divided people; a sign of the most common and ordinary human reality, it was rarefied and theorized nearly to death. And yet that meal remained, through all the centuries, more powerful than any attempts to manage it…At that Table, sharing food, we were brought into the ongoing work of making creation whole. (76-77)

Miles wandered into worship at St. Gregory's in San Francisco, a church known for its welcome in particular to gay and lesbian people. It was there that she was surprised by the turmoil which receiving eucharist unleashed for her ("an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion" (xii)). It was also there that she went on to be baptized (and she comments on the unconventional ordering of these sacraments frequently), where she became a server, and where she, ultimately, began a food bank. Each of these stages prompts new revelations for her. When she becomes a server, she comes upon "the truly disturbing, dreadful realization about Christianity: You can't be a Christian by yourself" (96). And when she starts the food bank, she tries to bring together the high church liturgy she has found so moving and her desire to respond to the call "Feed my sheep".

The area surrounding St. Gregory's, Miles observes, covered both extremes. It was a decadent "foodie heaven" area, for instance boasting shops which exclusively sold different varieties of olive oil. At the same time there were hundreds of children who ate free lunches through school programmes, but had nothing to eat at home. And so Miles suggested not only a food bank, but a food bank which would distribute food from the same altar around which the community gathered for holy communion. And with the same kind of indiscriminate invitation. She was determined that this be its central symbol—"the literal bread of life served from the same table as the bread of heaven" (104).

Just below the surface of her account, readers will see the emerging conflict in Miles' congregation. And they will also see that she has very little patience with such conflict. Sometimes she comes across as a little self-righteous, and I've no doubt she would be a difficult person to have in your congregation! But she would also be a very rigorous conversation partner. Sometimes the church politics she describes provide a nice vignette which could fuel cynicism about church, such as in the very matter of distributing food from the altar.

It seems that just before Miles began at St. Gregory's, the congregation had spent about six thousand dollars on the new altar, with two sayings carved into it. Firstly, the Greek text from Luke which Miles loosely translates "This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them". And on the other side, from Isaac of Nineveh (a seventh-century mystic) "Did not our Lord share his table with tax collectors and harlots? So do not distinguish between worthy and unworthy. All must be equal for you to love and serve." (95) The priest, Donald, told Miles later that when he heard about her proposal for a food bank he sighed and thought, "Wow, this will be interesting. We just spent all this money on an altar, and now we're gonna bring in people who will scuff it?" (111-112)

The book itself is easy to read, if at times a little too detailed. And it raises good questions. It will have you contemplating the significance of eucharist

as evangelical moment. Perhaps prompt you to reevaluate how sacramental faith might change the world. And get you wondering about the relationship between liturgy and mission—because Miles describes unashamedly high liturgy which nonetheless engages a diverse array of people. And, if you're thinking of a group with which you'd like to read it, then you'll be pleased to know it even comes with a short study guide in the back! (And is being purchased as a set through the Otira bookclub.)

I found the basics of the story very moving: a woman who describes her hunger being sated unexpectedly in eucharist, who then goes on in spiritual formation for herself and to feed others both in spirit and in very literal, physical ways. And she does write well—there are some passages which just seem to get to the heart of things:

> [Christianity] proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same. It doesn't promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God's. (xv-xvi)

Miles covers a lot of territory in this book. She writes about baptism, eucharist, prayer, mission, healing and wholeness. Much of it is inspiring, some frustrating, and I've no doubt some you'll disagree with—but I also have no doubt it will start a good conversation. I heartily recommend giving it a go.

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