

**‘The Uniting Church commits its ministers to preach’ (BoU, Para 5):  
a review of the foundational and historical documents of the Uniting  
Church in Australia, identifying the place and importance of  
preaching in the life of that Church.**

Rev Graham Robert Vawser BA(Flind) BD(MCD) DipLS(MCD)

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## SUMMARY

In the documents of the Uniting Church in Australia and its former denominations (the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia) there is an implicit acceptance of preaching as a valid act of communication in the life of the Church.

This thesis examines *The Basis of Union (1971)* of the Uniting Church, along with its antecedent documents (*The Faith of the Church*, and *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, including *A Proposed Basis of Union*) and the historical documents mentioned in Paragraph 10 of *The Basis of Union (1971)* [*The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)*, *The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)*, *the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)* and *the Savoy Declaration (1658)*, along with John Wesley's *Forty-Four Sermons (1793)*] to show how these various documents establish preaching as an important part of the Uniting Church's life and work.

After an introductory chapter, the first section of the thesis examines the antecedent documents and the *Basis of Union (1971)*, with an excursus into the way in which Karl Barth's theology was a framework within which those who formed the documents were working.

The second section of the thesis concentrates on the documents named in Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union (1971)*. After an introductory chapter which briefly establishes the historical context of each of the documents, each of the

documents is reviewed, and implications for preaching are drawn. John Wesley's *Forty-Four Sermons*, being themselves the result of preaching, do not give many clues to Wesley's understanding of preaching, and so Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* are also examined for implications about preaching.

The final section, Chapter 12, draws together that implications for preaching in the Uniting Church which have been identified in each of the other sections.

For ease of expression in the thesis, the term "preaching" is used to cover the variety of forms of proclamation which are possible in this generation. It is outside the scope of this thesis to consider and describe these forms of proclamation, but it is assumed that "preaching" is not limited to traditional sermonic forms.

This study shows that some form of proclamation of the Word of God which is the message of salvation through Jesus Christ is an essential element of the life of the Uniting Church.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Graeme Harrison". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'G'.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## Chapter 1: General Introduction

The Uniting Church came into being on June 22nd, 1977. Gestation had lasted more than two decades. The Church's surrogate parents were the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia; but its real parents were the churches of the Reformation in England and Scotland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Evangelical Revival in England during the eighteenth century. Each of these expressions of faith was committed to the proclamation of the word of grace which came from God through Jesus Christ.

In the Constitution and Regulations of the Uniting Church, reference is made at a number of points to the work of preachers, lay and ordained.<sup>1</sup> The "Rules: Courses of Study for Ordained Ministry" of the Assembly Ministerial Education Commission speak broadly about 'General and Cultural studies which ... appreciate the world within which the Gospel is to be proclaimed',<sup>2</sup> and 'Foundational studies ... designed to reflect the primary focus of ... word and sacrament'.<sup>3</sup> This is generally interpreted by the theological colleges such that all candidates for ministry of the Word are required to complete, as requisite for their certificate of ordination, studies in homiletics; and many who candidate for ministry of Deacon choose to do so also.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Constitution refers especially to Lay Preachers in Para 19-20, and the duties and responsibilities of ministers of the Word begin with 'preaching of the Word' (Regulation 2.3.10 (a)).

<sup>2</sup> Rule 5.

<sup>3</sup> Rule 6(a).

This thesis is an attempt to put into context this assumption of the Uniting Church, that preaching is essential to its general life, ministry and mission. It must be noted that, in the context of this study, preaching is not limited particularly to what might be called “the traditional sermon”. Indeed it is useful here to remember C. H. Dodd’s identification that “preaching” ... signifies not the action of the preacher, but that which he [*sic*] preaches, his [*sic*] “message”.<sup>4</sup> In this study, reference to “preaching” will be open to various interpretations: sometimes it will refer to the action of the preacher; at other times it will refer to the message of the preacher, but without inferring that the message be delivered in any particular way. It must be understood, then, that the term “preaching” is a kind of shorthand which implies various ways of declaring the Word of God, of proclaiming the gospel, of inviting people to accept the salvation which is God’s gift and of encouraging people in their faith journeys. The term also allows for the fact that there are a number of ways of preaching sermons, and that there are ways of preaching which do not use sermons, but use other means of communication, verbal and non-verbal.

Any examination of historical and theological material relating to the development of the Uniting Church will show that there has been no study which identifies the way in which foundational documents guide the Church in its understanding of the place and purpose of preaching. A short list would include the following, which are the most extensive studies of the Uniting Church: Michael Owen has studied the processes by which the Joint Commission on Church Union produced its documents; Andrew Dutney has examined the development of the way ministry in general is to be understood; Val Webb has studied the documents of the Uniting Church looking particularly at the relationship between ministry and

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<sup>4</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, p3.

ordination. The symposium *Marking Twenty Years: The Uniting Church in Australia 1977-1997* addressed many issues under fifteen headings, including “Evangelism” and “Worship”, but did not address the question of the way in which the proclamation of the Word might be an essential part of the Church’s life and mission. In addition, various articles have been written in many journals<sup>5</sup> with topics relating to the Uniting Church’s understanding of authority, of ministry, of identity, of ordination. This study will look at the foundational and historical documents of the Uniting Church specifically seeking what they say and imply about the Church’s understanding of the task of preaching.

There are two sets of documents which are recognised as forming the framework of the Uniting Church. *The Basis of Union* is the document upon which the vote for union was taken. That document was the last of a series of documents prepared by a Joint Commission on Church Union, which began meeting in 1957 after each of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches had appointed seven representatives, whose responsibilities included ‘[t]he presentation, if possible, of a proposed Basis of Union to the Federal Committees on Christian Unity for submission to the next meeting of the three Federal Courts [of the churches].’<sup>6</sup> The Joint Commission on Church Union produced three documents: *The Faith of the Church* (1959), *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering* (1963), and *The Basis of Union*, which was published in two editions: 1970 and 1971. This set of documents can be identified as the “Foundational Documents”, with the term “antecedent documents” referring to the first two.

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<sup>5</sup> For example *Uniting Church Studies, Colloquium, St Mark’s Review, Trinity Occasional Papers, The Ecumenical Review, Scottish Journal of Theology*.

<sup>6</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p8.



The other documents which provide the framework within which the Uniting Church exists are the “Historical Documents” referred to in Paragraph 10 of *The Basis of Union*. The *Scots Confession of Faith* (1560), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) the *Westminster Confession* (1647), the *Savoy Declaration* (1658) and John Wesley’s *Forty Four Sermons* (1793) are given as the documents from which the Uniting Church will continue ‘to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith, and in the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit ... [and to which the Uniting Church] will listen’.<sup>7</sup>

In fulfilling the task of this thesis, it will be necessary to examine these documents, giving some background to each, describing the content of each, and drawing out from each the implications of their content for an understanding of preaching in the Uniting Church. It is noted here that this will of necessity mean a certain amount of repetition—the Foundational Documents, and the Historical Documents, each relied on and developed that which had been written before. In the first Section of this thesis, Chapter 2 will give a very brief general introduction to the Foundational Documents, and Chapters 3 to 6 will deal with each of the Foundational Documents. The second Section will contain chapters dealing with the Historical Documents, Chapter 7 being introductory, and Chapters 8 to 11 respectively looking at the various documents. Section 3 (Chapter 12) will draw together the implications for the Uniting Church’s understanding of preaching from the material found in the other sections.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Basis of Union*, para 10, p13.

## Chapter 2: Introduction to the Foundational Documents of the Uniting Church

In 1972 members of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia expressed by way of a ballot their opinion on whether or not they wanted to come into a union of the three churches.<sup>1</sup> The document upon which this vote was taken was the *Basis of Union*.

This section of the thesis (Chapters 2-6) will look at the development of the two antecedent documents—*The Faith of the Church* and *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*—and will examine *The Basis of Union*. In this, it will be important to address the question of the status of the *Basis of Union* in the Uniting Church, asking particularly how much the insights of the *Basis of Union* are prescriptive on the structure and life of the Church.

This section will provide an overview of each of the three documents, and throughout the overviews it will be possible to highlight matters which impinge on and develop the Uniting Church's understanding of preaching. It is appropriate that this discussion should be structured chronologically—that is, proceeding from the first of the documents to the last.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons relating to the constitution of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, the Presbyterian members were required to vote a second time, in 1973, before a decision could be made. See Scrimgeour, *Some Scots Were Here*, p223

It could, of course, be argued that as the *Basis of Union* was the document upon which the vote for union was taken, it should be the primary document examined, with the other two documents being referred to only as they relate to, address and inform this primary document. This suggestion is set aside because in all their work the members of the Joint Commission on Church Union were proceeding from one moment to the next and from one insight to the next, constantly aware that their work was to produce a final document which would lead their denominations into an effective union. There was a deliberate decision made by the Joint Commission on Church Union to consider questions relating to the faith of the church and the ways in which the church might be ordered and structured before coming to and presenting any proposal for union.<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging this, Davis McCaughey identified the developmental relationship between the documents, when he said in the preface to the 1978 edition of *The Faith of the Church*:

*The Basis of Union* has taken up much that is in this earlier report, albeit more briefly; but the earlier development of some of the central themes of the Basis may serve a useful purpose.<sup>3</sup>

The object of this examination of the foundational documents will be to discover how the people who were responsible for planning church union in Australia were (whether consciously or unconsciously) guiding the Church in its understanding of the preaching task. The function of the Joint Commission on Church Union obviously related to the whole life of the Church, and the documents which the Commission produced were intended to cover all aspects of faith and church order. There were very few occasions when the Church's preaching was the

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<sup>2</sup> See Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p9.

<sup>3</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p5.

major emphasis in what was written; indeed most of the comments about preaching are to be found in discussions of theological issues or issues relating to the structure of the Church's life and its ministry. In attempting to achieve the object of this part of the study, it will be necessary to give clearly the context in which comments about preaching were made. This means that at times the discussion will not relate specifically to preaching, but will provide the background information from which the understanding of the place of preaching grows.

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### Chapter 3: *The Faith Of The Church*

When *The Faith of the Church* was first published in 1959, it was anticipated that a second report on the structure of the church would follow, and that these two reports would constitute the basis upon which the participating churches would enter into union. The preface of *The Faith of the Church* suggests that ‘Part II of this Report ... may provide a part of a Basis of Union between our Churches’ (p9)<sup>1</sup>.

The Introduction to *The Faith of the Church* identified the questions with which the Commission had been ‘much preoccupied’ (p11), questions about the faith of the church and how the church’s grasp on the faith could be strengthened. The report was prepared in two parts: Part I set out to ‘demonstrate that we are able to speak together ... about the Church’s scriptural, catholic and reformed Faith’ (p11); Part II drew out implications for the church of the way in which the faith identified in Part I might become the common ground upon which could be built a union of the three Churches involved in the considerations. In both parts of the Report, though in different ways, there were references which were foundational to the Uniting Church’s understanding of preaching.

The Commission divided Part I of the report, titled “The Faith We Have Received”, into three sections. In Section A of Part I, “Concerning Statements of the Church’s Faith”, the Commission tried first ‘to give expression to an attitude towards

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, page numbers in brackets in the text refer to the Joint Commission on Church Union document, *The Faith of the Church*.

historic statements of the Church's Faith' (p13). It looked at the ways in which 'The Holy Scriptures', the 'Creed and Canon' of the Early Church, the 'Confessions at the Reformation', and the 'Forms of Confession in Evangelical Christianity of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries',<sup>2</sup> each in their own way had been used by the church for

the correction of its preaching, the guidance of its worshippers, the instruction of its members, the encouragement of reflection upon the implications of its gospel, and preservation of its message against distortion, and the maintenance of its unity in the faith. (p13)

So at the very outset of thought about church union, the place of preaching and the framework in which preachers would work were identified.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were shown to be a recital of the great saving acts whereby God first 'revealed His [*sic*] name and His [*sic*] Purpose to Israel' and then 'brought into being a new age, and a renewed people of Israel, the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (p13)<sup>3</sup> As the record of these great saving acts was passed on, it was formalised in such a way that those who heard in faith became aware that the words of the preaching (κήρυγμα) and the teaching (διδαχή) were perceived to be Word of God. The words and the Word, proclaimed and heard, led directly to a response by the believer, and this response also became formalised in time so that it 'had both a liturgical setting or a disciplinary function in the Church's life and a context of witness before the world.' (p14)

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<sup>2</sup> These are the four headings used by the Joint Commission in Part I A of the report, pp13-24.

<sup>3</sup> From here on in this thesis, exclusive language in quotations will be accepted without comment as a normal literary convention of the time in which the original was written.

Five factors were identified as having been important in the development of creed and canon in the Early Church and in later centuries:

i, Baptism and catechumenism; ii, Regular worship (liturgy and preaching); iii, Exorcism; iv, Persecution; v, Polemic against heretics. (p15)

The first two and the last of these factors were seen as particularly important, and the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Te Deum* and the *Nicene Creed* were given as examples of statements which grew, respectively, out of baptismal, liturgical and anti-heretical formulation. And even before the canon of Holy Scripture was in a fixed form, the church had accepted “‘a rule of faith’[,] ... what we should call today the apostolic kerugma’ (p15). This ‘apostolic kerugma’ was ‘the given message’ by which ‘[t]he Church of the early centuries was controlled’ (pp15f). A reference from Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* (see p16) appears to be the source of the idea that the Scriptures ‘controlled’ the Church, though in Barth’s understanding the church was controlled by God’s self-revelation in Christ. Only the witnesses to that revelation were the faithful bearers of the message which the church was to declare, and so the canon of Scripture recognised only their message. The Joint Commission was suggesting, then, that church in general, and the Uniting Church in particular, depended for its formation, direction and discipline on the content of the apostolic preaching and its revelation of God’s action in Christ. It follows from this that the Uniting Church’s preaching had to be an expression of that same revelation.

In time the canon of Holy Scripture itself became ‘*the rule of faith*’ (p16) by which the ongoing development of the church’s traditions could be examined and judged. And in the developing life of the church, as changing situations and times

brought a need for clearer expressions of the apostolic faith, new creeds were written, so that ‘the gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is witnessed to by Holy Scripture, comes to light anew amongst men’ (p17). The Joint Commission on Church Union implied that these new expressions of life and faith were also developments of the apostolic preaching, and as such had to be recognised in any development of the life of the uniting Churches. This meant, then, that preaching in the Uniting Church would need to take careful note of these developments in the apostolic preaching.

Despite the expectation that the canon and creeds should act as a control over the life and thought of the church, by the fifteenth century there was a perception among those who would eventually become the leaders of the Reformation that the church had, in fact if not in legality, begun to live and work outside the context of the gospel as it was found in the Scriptures. In an attempt to help people ‘once more to put their trust in the triune God ... the reformers used the ancient creeds in worship, in catechism, in doctrinal exposition; ... everywhere in their writings’ (p18). These writings—‘the Augsburg Confession, the Scots Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration of Faith, the Thirty-nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England’ (pp18f)—restated the truths of the ancient creeds, and at the same time also served ‘the particular needs of the Church of that day’ (p18). The Commission clearly asserted that although these documents each had limitations relating to the eras in which they were written, they ‘stand to bear witness to Jesus Christ, the divine Word definitively set forth in Scripture and to call the whole Church to obedience to that Word.’ (p19) This implied that the preaching of the Church, as every other part of the Church’s life, would need to take



particular note of the lessons of faith and understanding learned in earlier generations so as to allow all ‘who would in our day enter into the fulness of the Church’s Faith’ to enter ‘into a like engagement ... with the Universal Lord.’ (p19) Preaching in the Uniting Church would, therefore, constantly bring the light of the Word of God to focus on the issues of the world.

There were limitations in the particularity which was characteristic of all confessional statements. The first limitation which the Commission saw was that the statements were ‘derivative witness’ (p19) in that they told the truths of the faith, as found ‘definitively’ in the Scriptures, in the language of a new generation. In consequence of this, the writers of the confessional statements were ever ready to accept possible revision of their statements in the light of alternative proof from Holy Scriptures. The second limitation was that ‘Confessions of Faith made on earth are always subject to an eschatological correction.’ (p20) The writers of the Reformation documents understood that they were able to see only what God showed on earth, and that they and their documents were limited by the limits of human knowledge. There was always ‘the possibility that it [the church] may be better instructed by the Word of God’ (p20).<sup>4</sup>

Despite these limitations, God had used the Reformation confessions of faith to call the church again to obedience to the Word. And in all this, the reminder was given in the (Congregationalist) Savoy Declaration of Faith that the confessional statements should be received always with ‘forbearance and mutual indulgence ... [so as to] keep unto and hold fast the necessary foundations of faith and holiness’

(p21).<sup>5</sup> So the Commission recognised that the various statements, catechisms, liturgies and directories of worship of the Reformation were provided for and by the church to make possible an expression of faith which witnessed to the gospel without forcing people to accept it against their will. In the light of this comment, the Church's preaching and teaching should never be coercive or manipulative. All faithful preaching of the gospel must leave each person to make their own response.

The confessional statements of the Reformation were developed against the background of a dispute with the Roman Church which became a kind of (and sometimes actual) warfare. In that context, the Reformation Churches were aware that they lived in tension: in the time of 'the presence and power of [the] ascended Lord', but always awaiting 'the hour of final judgment and glory' (pp21f). As time passed, however, and the Reformed Churches became '[m]ore confident in [their] own status and statements', and 'showed less confidence in [the] Lord' (p22).

The rise of Methodism in the eighteenth century was one response to this lessening of awareness of Christ as personal Saviour; it was 'an intensely practical spiritual and ethical movement, seeking the conversion of men and their growth in holiness' (p22). Although Wesley himself never sought to break from the Church of England, and generally affirmed the Thirty-nine Articles as an expression of his faith, the separation, after Wesley's death, of the Methodist fellowship from the Church of England led to the setting down in 1806 of standard 'Articles of Faith'. 'Thus, in principle', the Commission declared, 'the Methodist Church [became], in its own

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<sup>4</sup> Quoting Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1. 2. p657.

distinctive way, a Confessional Church’ (p23), and that confession was expressed in the Hymn Book, Wesley’s *Notes on the New Testament*, and the first four volumes of Wesley’s *Sermons*—all of which found the basis of their thought in the Bible. *The Faith of the Church* suggested that an understanding of the Methodist Church as a Confessional Church ‘brings to light afresh three elements which belong to the Church in every age’ (p23): first, that ‘[t]he Church’s confession is the more effective the closer she keeps to commentary upon Scripture, and ... maintain[s] the purity of the Word’ (p23); second, that in confessing the faith, the church should allow not only for the preachers but also for the worshippers to express the truths of the faith, that ‘faith comes not only by hearing but by singing’ (pp23f); and third, that the ‘decisive response of faith’ (p24) which was demanded by God of all who hear would be tested, proved and encouraged by awareness of the faith of those who have gone before.

From the earliest discussions on church union, then, it was asserted that, like the rest of the Uniting Church’s life, preaching had to be based on the Scriptures, had to be part of the general confession of faith which all members of the Church would share in worship, and had to be set within the framework of the tradition of the Church. In other words, the preaching of the Uniting Church was to be a development in a new era of the faith which was the expression throughout the generations of the church of the revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The preaching was to be apostolic, scriptural, reformed and evangelical.<sup>6</sup> The preachers

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<sup>5</sup> Quoting “Preface to the Savoy Declaration of Faith (1658)”.

<sup>6</sup> See McCaughey, “If I had known then what I know now”, p8.

were to follow in the steps of the many through the centuries who had sought to find new ways of declaring the eternal truths, and of calling people to participation in the life of faith.

Section B of Part I of the report, was titled “A New Awareness of the Church”. In this section the Commission moved from a description of the place and function of the historic statements in the life of the church to a statement about the way in which those historic statements might provide direction for the church as it sought to be faithful in the twentieth century to the ‘great tradition in which they [the members of the Church] stand’ (p24). This section of the report, then, began with an acknowledgment that the churches which the members of the Commission represented were

debtors not only to the writers of Holy Scripture, but also to the Fathers of the Church who through creed, confession, commentary and hymn of praise have sought to keep men in a relation of faith and trust, of love and hope, in the worship of God as He has made Himself known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. (p24f)

In saying this, the Commission recognised that the development and maintenance of the life of faith among the people of God was a continuing process which involved the reiteration of the themes of Scripture in each generation. And in this context, the ‘confession’ and the ‘commentary’ lay as much in preaching as in any other form of expression.

At the same time there was the reminder that the Churches represented on the Commission were indeed narrowly representative of Western Protestant tradition, little influenced even by the Anglican or Lutheran traditions let alone the Roman

Catholic or any Eastern Orthodox heritage. There was an affirmation that ‘churches of varying traditions have already in this twentieth century found themselves drawn together in a new appreciation of their message and their calling.’ (p25) This led the Commission to assert that the faith professed by the Churches involved in these discussions could not be defined narrowly or limited to a particular heritage, and that the Churches could proceed to share in the ‘recovery of the Faith in its wholeness’ (pp25f) which was seen anew as God’s gift to the church.

For the Commission, this ‘twentieth-century recovery of Church-consciousness’ (p26) was the result of three related factors. First was the recovery of an awareness of the fullness of the biblical message and its place in the life of the church. In the preaching of the church, as in all other facets of its life, the two great themes of the Bible should be seen as complementary: ‘the Name and the Purpose of the One who calls, who redeems and in whose presence man reaches his lost home’ and ‘[t]he call, the redemption, and the destiny of the People [of God]’ (p26).

The second factor which the Commission related to the ‘recovery of Church-consciousness’ was the increasing awareness that if the church was to be effective in its response to a secularised Western World, it would no longer be able to live in isolated denominations. Reference to the Declaration of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church made at Barmen in 1934 identified that the church should ever affirm ‘[t]he centrality of the Jesus Christ as the Word of God’ (p27) and so should continue to discover ways in which the statements of faith about Jesus Christ could be made relevant to its present generation and situation. Although there

was debate among some people (particularly European) about the relevance of the Barmen Declaration to churches which were not in the situation of the German Church in the 1930's,<sup>7</sup> the Commission believed

that the Churches in Australia would do well to ask themselves some questions arising out of this instructive instance:

- (a) Is our message unequivocally conditioned by what God has said to man in Jesus Christ?
- (b) In listening to that Word have we sought the aid and guidance of our confessing forebears?
- (c) Are those of us who value the traditions of the past and cherish them, equally prepared to confess the Faith afresh in the present? Are we only confessionalists, or are we also confessing Christians?
- (d) Are we facing the world, or just facing each other? (p28)

From the Commission's point of view, these questions were, or should have been, leading the various sections of the church away from planning and executing their task in isolation from others, allowing for and assuming greater co-operation between the denominations. The answers to the questions related to every part of the church's life, including the task of preaching. The implication which the Report gave was that these questions would all be answered in the affirmative.

So, in the context of this study, both the content and the function of preaching would be established by God's Word which had been spoken in Jesus Christ, the preaching would be guided by those who had gone before and who were themselves witnesses to God's self-revelation, and the preachers, with all members of the Church would be eager to confess these received truths in new ways in each later generation and new cultural circumstance. Further, the church's preaching would have a double focus: it would be directed both to those already within the community

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<sup>7</sup> See McCaughey, "Church Union in Australia", p41.

of faith, nurturing and renewing their commitment, and to those outside the church, calling forth a response to faith in the saving power of God in Christ.

And the third factor which had led to the ‘recovery of Church-consciousness’ related to the broadening of the Australian church’s perspective on mission from being narrowly related to a Western European base to take account of world-neighbour needs and issues. This meant that it was important for the Uniting Church to share with and learn from the churches in its region (Asian churches, and the Church of South India in particular at this early stage in church union discussions), to enter conversation with the religions of the East and with Marxism ‘about the basic problems of men’s existence’ (p28), and to increase awareness of the church’s obligations to both urban and rural Australia, to Aboriginal Australia and the indigenous churches of the Pacific.

One implication of this, particularly for preaching, was that the church must always be ready to take note of, learn from and use appropriate insights which come from contemporary culture and media. So the church’s preaching should use all available resources and opportunities to proclaim the message entrusted to it, and the preachers themselves must continually update their skills and styles, to reach the people of each generation. In an age when a multiplicity of media are available to any who would deliver a message, the church and its preachers must be ready to use every appropriate method to announce the good news. No longer would the “traditional” sermon be the only means of preaching.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Detail of different types of preaching and the use of various media for presentation of the gospel is beyond the framework of this study, but see, for example, Christine M. Smith’s *Weaving the Sermon* (which suggests that

In this way the Commission set out what it believed to be the context in which the church in Australia in the twentieth century found itself. There was no denying the importance or the validity of the ‘great formulations of the Faith of other days’ (p29), but it had become obvious to the Commission that God was calling the church in Australia ‘to declare the ancient faith anew.’ (p29) In Section C of Part I of *The Faith of the Church* the Commission proceeded to give their understanding of the way of that call.

The Commission members were aware that what they were suggesting was ‘daring’ and would ‘disturb much and disturb many’ (p29). They therefore allowed the words of Karl Barth to be their guide; and from these words they justified their position.

There has to be an occasion important enough to justify as necessary the undertaking to speak differently from them (the fathers and brethren of the Confession-formulating period). What we have to say on this occasion has to be so fresh and different from what they said that it will be worth disturbing the unity of faith to speak differently from them. In some recognizable and compelling way—decisive by reason of the inner weight of what is stated, in virtue of its agreement with Scripture—it has to be the Church which undertakes to speak in another way. Before the work goes forward, in addition to Holy Scripture all the voices of the now effective confession have to be seriously heard, so that nothing is lost of what it has perhaps to say, in spite of and in our new situation and task. Our own undertaking has then to prove its sincerity by its courage in laying it before the rest of the Church as a decision which we

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principles of design in weaving—proportion, balance, emphasis, self-revelation, imagination and rhythm—are useful concepts for use in sermon construction), and Harold Freeman’s *Variety in Biblical Preaching* (which offers such styles as “Dramatic Monologue Message”, “Dialogical Message”, and “Narrative Message”, with a section on the use of video media). For discussion of the use of media in Christian proclamation, see Peter Horsfield’s article “The impact of electronic media on the culture we live in and some major implications for churches and Christian faith” at <http://vic.uca.org.au/ecrp/rolemedia.htm>. Horsfield suggests that ‘we need to recover preaching as a genuine oral communication event, which means reconceiving content in terms of oral communication rather than written communication, employing the full dimensions of rhetoric ... to speak not just to the mind but also to the eyes, ears, emotions’ ( in an email dated 30 June, 1999).



ourselves believe to be grounded in a divine decision, and therefore with the claim that a decision has to be made concerning it, and therefore without fear of a definite Yes or a definite No. And then a corresponding practical attitude has to accompany the altered confession from its inception as the indispensable means of its proclamation. (pp29f)<sup>9</sup>

It was Barth's clear perception, that the church should and must make courageous decisions in each new era, which motivated and encouraged the Commission to pursue the "new" ideas it was expressing. But it was clear that Barth demanded that both Scripture and the heritage of the church be listened to; and the Commission sought to follow that requirement.

The Commission perceived that the time was right for the Australian church to hear anew 'the call to a great mission in a land of rapid development and growth, and to the surrounding nations of the Pacific and Asia' (p30). With this call came the responsibility for the church to demonstrate the unity of faith which was based on Scripture and the voice of the church in history. The Churches represented on the Commission would need to be committed to 'the Catholic Faith in its fulness, the gospel of Jesus Christ, borne witness to in Scripture, made effective through the gospel sacraments, protected by the Church's creeds, brought to light anew at the Reformation and in the Evangelical Revival' (p30). The Commission was convinced that if the Churches accepted the truth of this call individually, then they should take the next step and answer God's call and make their confession of faith together.

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<sup>9</sup> Here the Commission quoted from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1. 2. p659. The parentheses are not in original.

The “Theology of the Word” which was an important influence on those who were preparing these documents, and the ‘call to a great mission’ echoing the Reformation and Evangelical Revival, was the background by which the Commission proceeded to set out its understanding of how, in a fourfold way, the church should confess this Faith. First was the acknowledgment that the faith of the church was a gift: ‘there is a given Word ... [which] points to Jesus Christ’ (p31). This meant that the church could never try to work out its faith for itself, but should always see that faith as a gift from God to be passed on to those who would hear and believe. As the “Excursus” below points out, Karl Barth’s theology (upon which the Commission drew significantly) developed this sense of the given-ness of the message and the responsibility to ‘Go and preach’. Second was an acknowledgment that the Churches represented on the Joint Commission had failed to bear witness to the fulness of the faith: ‘the partial character of our vision, the confusion of our preaching, the poverty of our worship, and the weakness of our fellowship’ (p31) were signs of weakness which was caused by division, and led to division which was caused by weakness (see p32). Third was the acknowledgment that by God’s Word the church continued to be blessed and preserved. As the individual was saved by grace through faith, so ‘[t]he Church’s witness and worship have been declared righteous by grace through Faith’ (p32) and God’s presence continued to be with the church. Finally was the undertaking ‘together, God helping us, to enter more fully into the Church’s Faith’ (p33). Looking to the past so that nothing was lost of the faith which was held necessary by those who went before, the church was called to look to the future, anticipating the promised fulfilment of all things. The church stood between the past and the future, and the anticipated union of the three Churches would allow the church to proclaim better its confession and its praise.

Thus the Commission determined that there were three things which the Churches would have to do if they were to enter into union. First would be an acknowledgment of the fulness of the Christian faith, and an unambiguous declaration of where that faith was to be found; second would be an acknowledgment of the status of each of the uniting Churches as being individually and together Churches where the Word of God had been proclaimed; and third would be a ‘determination to seek the fullest possible expression of and obedience to the Faith’ (p34).

It is evident that these three elements influenced the Uniting Church’s understanding of preaching. It was through preaching based both on Scripture and on the Reformation interpretation of Scripture that the Christian faith had been proclaimed in each of the former denominations, and preaching would be one of the essential means by which the Uniting Church, continuing in the heritage of the uniting Churches, would both declare the Christian faith and call people to commitment within that faith.

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Part I of the Report, then, outlined “The Faith We Have Received”. In Part II of the report the Commission set out “The Faith We Affirm In Common”, under three headings: first—‘Where the Church’s Faith is to be Found’ (pp35ff); second—‘Our Confession’ (pp39ff); third—‘Our Commitment’ (pp42ff).

The church's faith was to be found pre-eminently in Jesus Christ, the Word of God. It was in and through Jesus Christ that the church had life, and in the elements of its living—worship, preaching, credal statements, sacraments—'[Christ], the Word, may be said to be heard, seen and handled.' (p35) The Holy Scriptures, witnessing to the Word, 'contain at once divine instruction and human witness' (p36) and reveal the character of the triune God, God's acts of salvation, and the story of the people of God. Thus the church's message was controlled by the words of the Bible through which God spoke the Word that was heard and known through reading, preaching and sharing of the sacraments of the Gospel. The creeds of the ancient church, especially the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, the *Chalcedonian Decree*, and the *Te Deum*, provided 'an act of allegiance or affiance to a Person ... a framework for the instruction for the faithful ... protect[ion of] certain essential doctrines' (p37).

The confessions made in the time of the Reformation had Christ, the Word of God, as their central theme, and appealed to the Scriptures as the source of knowledge and faith (see p38). And then, in the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century, the same themes were echoed in the evangelical emphases of personal faith in Jesus Christ, assurance of salvation through the fruits of the Spirit's presence, and the certain awareness of the joy of eternal life shown to the world by word and deed (see p39).

So again the Commission set out in this first document an awareness of the foundation of all the proclamation of the church: Christ, the Word of God known

through Scripture and experienced as of earlier generations, whose obedience was the source of faith and life. This was to be the Uniting Church's preaching.

The Confession which the Commission offered the Churches as they prepared to consider union alternated between confession and acknowledgment. To the statements of "Confession" which took up the details of the faith identified in Part I and Section A of Part II of the Report—the triune God, acting by the Word, entering into covenant with all people, bringing salvation through Jesus Christ, and abiding in the church as the Holy Spirit—were added "Acknowledgments" of the ways in which the story of the God's activity in the lives of the ancient ones had become the stories of the people of the present generation. So not only is God 'Creator', but '*we* depend on God ... and ... recognize our own nature and need.' (p40, my emphasis) Not only do we 'confess one Lord Jesus Christ ... crucified, dead and buried ... [and] raised from the dead' but 'this same Lord Jesus is *our* Saviour.' (pp40f, my emphasis) By making its confession the Church entered into its inheritance as the people of God.

The "Commitment" set out in Section C of Part II of the Report was 'to grasp the Faith by which we are held' (p42), and the Commission suggested that the commitment was made in three related ways.

The commitment would be made in faith, which would be known to be the gift of God ensuring that 'God's justifying act in Jesus Christ' (p43) would be central to the Uniting Church's life. The faith would be shown to be effective by the

Church's message that all who were justified by faith (forgiven sinners) would be seen to belong to the one family of God. And the faith proclaimed by a unified Church would be offered to a world in desperate need of that gospel.

Second, the commitment would be made in love, such that the Uniting Church would be 'called to realize in her own life, and in her service of the world, the divine gift of love.' (p44) That gift of love would be the Church's message; it would be seen in the structures by which the Church functions and ministers; and it would be shown in the Church's mission with 'the strong helping the weak and the weak the strong, the rich helping the poor and the poor the rich, the wise helping the simple and the simple the wise.' (p45)

And the commitment would be made in hope—the hope that the day would come when a partial understanding of faith would be made whole. So the Uniting Church had to be aware that it was “on the way”, praying that those who come after would 'state the Faith more surely, ... worship God less unworthily, ... obey God more faithfully than those of us who have gone before' (p45) until the Lord comes. The message of this hope had to be taken by the Church into the world, for the world needed to hear the word of hope: that God gave gifts to humankind; that humankind, being in danger of misusing and abusing God's gifts, was able to be restored; that to those in despair and affliction, God came as one afflicted and broken,

that in the triumph of the cross and resurrection it has been shown that loneliness, desolation and death are not the last words, and that we look for the vindication of God's good purposes for His children when He will speak the final word of fellowship, restoration and life. (p46)

This 'word of fellowship, restoration and life' would be the basis of the Church's proclamation. The gifts of faith, love and hope which the church had received from God through Christ were to be declared through the Church's preaching as in all other areas of its mission.

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### Excursus: Karl Barth and the Theology of the Word

It is appropriate, and indeed necessary, here to identify that '[t]he theology of Karl Barth ... was an important influence on the Commission'<sup>1</sup>. The reference in *The Faith of the Church* to the Barmen Declaration and the major quotation from *Church Dogmatics*<sup>2</sup> show clearly how the thought of Barth influenced the Commission as it attempted to develop an understanding of the church which would suit the Australian context of its generation. It would be impossible within the parameters of this study to describe all of Barth's theology—it will be enough to mention that part of his life and thought which contributed directly to the work of the Joint Commission on Church Union and which impinges on this thesis.

It is to be noted that the first report of the Joint Commission on Church Union was intended to deal with *The Faith of the Church*, while the second report, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, was to deal with the structure and organization of the Church. Implications of Barth's theology would, therefore, be seen far more clearly in the first report than in the second, although the way in which the first report was used as a basis for the development of church structure in the second meant that the influence of Barth's thought remained. And the third document, which became the *Basis of Union* on which the vote for church union was eventually taken, also retained that same theological influence.

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<sup>1</sup> Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal*, p18.

<sup>2</sup> See Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, pp27 and 29f.



The theological environment in which Barth's training for ministry in the Swiss Reformed Church had taken place was the same as that in which the uniting Churches had lived in the later part of the nineteenth century, and which continued to influence parts of the life of the Churches in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. It is described as "neo-Protestantism", in which

the subject matter or centre of concern for Christian faith and thought was shifted from God himself to the impact of God upon man, and hence to Christian man's feeling (Schleiermacher), to Christian man's history (Ritschl), to Christian man's conscience (Herrmann), to the problem of Christian culture (Harnack), to the place of Christianity in the totality of human religious and cultural history (Troelsch).<sup>3</sup>

Barth himself referred to 'typically neo-Protestant preaching [that] does not claim to be more than as genuine and lively an expression as possible of the personal piety of the speaker'.<sup>4</sup>

When Barth took responsibility for his first congregation and 'wrestled with the problem of how he could genuinely preach the Word of God, ... how he could prevent his sermon from being merely his own word',<sup>5</sup> he came to the conclusion that his training had been unsatisfactory preparation for the task. And in the midst of Barth's struggle with this issue,<sup>6</sup> almost all of his theological teachers joined with other German intellectuals to support the war policy of Wilhelm II. About this event, Barth wrote:

In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realised that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of

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<sup>3</sup> Come, *Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics*, p26.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p66.

<sup>5</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p3.

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, in August 1914. See Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p14, and Moses, "Justifying War ...", p15.

history. For me at least, 19th-century theology no longer held any future.<sup>7</sup>

These two circumstances (taking his first congregation and his teachers' support of Wilhelm II) became the catalyst which launched Barth on a quest for a theology which would address the issues which the church faced in the twentieth century.

While his teachers had suggested that 'the task of theology [was] one with the tasks of science in general',<sup>8</sup> meaning that it was a quest for knowledge at one with all other such quests, Barth recognised that 'dogmatics is not a "free" science, but one bound to the sphere of the Church, where and where alone it is possible and sensible.'<sup>9</sup> Theology, then, as a product of the church, followed, guided and accompanied the language of the church.<sup>10</sup> In other words, theology was a study which could only be pursued within the parameters of God's revelation. So there was, for Barth, a direct link between the task of theology and the task of preaching: both involved 'taking up and passing on the word of Christ'.<sup>11</sup>

'The criterion of Christian language,' Barth said in the opening chapter of *Church Dogmatics*, '... is Jesus Christ, God in His gracious approach to man in revelation and reconciliation.'<sup>12</sup> So the one message which the church needed to proclaim was 'plainly and simply—Christ is risen!';<sup>13</sup> and this was echoed in a

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<sup>7</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p14. It should be noted here that in fact Barth respected the nineteenth century theologians for their contribution, which gave 'new emphasis to the essentially historical nature of the Christian faith which sets Christianity apart from other religions.' (*The Humanity of God*, p28)

<sup>8</sup> Adolf von Harnack, uncited quote in Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, p321.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p2.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*, p10ff, quoted in Macquarrie, John, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, p321.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p3.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p5.

number of places in Barth's writing. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Barth showed that Jesus of Nazareth, as the point of intersection of the known world of human life in need of redemption and the unknown world 'of the Father, of Primal Creation, and of the final Redemption',<sup>14</sup> was the one through whom 'God offers Himself to be known as God beyond our trespass, beyond time and things and men .... He guarantees our salvation by willing to be God and to be known as God—in Christ'.<sup>15</sup> In the Barmen Declaration, Barth highlighted the centrality of Jesus Christ who alone, as 'the one Word of God',<sup>16</sup> was to be trusted and obeyed. When, in his lectures on the Apostles' Creed, Barth came to the second article, he was adamant that 'our understanding of the second Article decides whether we rightly understand the first and the third',<sup>17</sup> and that 'the second article does not just follow from the first, nor does it just precede the third; but it is the fountain of light by which the other two are lit.'<sup>18</sup> This understanding of Christ was central to all of Barth's thinking.

Indelibly linked with this awareness of the centrality of Christ was Barth's commitment to an understanding of God's revelation which meant that it was always, only and ever God who revealed God. In *Church Dogmatics*, when talking about "The Word of God as Preached",<sup>19</sup> Barth used the image of four concentric circles, representing the relationship between, on the one hand, the Word of God which he identified as 'this actual event',<sup>20</sup> and the proclamation of that Word on the

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<sup>14</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p29.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p40f.

<sup>16</sup> "Barmen Declaration" in Manschreck, *A History of Christianity, Vol 2*, p531.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Credo*, p39.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p65.

<sup>19</sup> The heading of Chapter 1, §4, 1, in *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p98.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p99.

other hand. The outermost of these circles was ‘man’s language about God on the basis of an indication by God Himself fundamentally transcending all human causation, ... merely occurring as a fact and requiring to be acknowledged.’<sup>21</sup> The inner most of the circles, Barth’s fourth circle, was ‘man’s language about God, in which and through which God Himself speaks about Himself.’<sup>22</sup> The third circle was ‘man’s language about God which, ... is true language and therefore language to be listened to, language which rightly demands obedience’;<sup>23</sup> and the second circle was

man’s language about God on the basis of God’s self-objectification [*sic*] which is neither present nor predictable nor relatable to any design, but is real solely in the freedom of His grace, in virtue of which from time to time He wills to be the object of this language, and is so according to His own good pleasure.’<sup>24</sup>

The point was, for Barth, that it was only by God’s will that human beings could know God, and that it was God’s choice to be revealed and to be known. No kind of human endeavour could discover God’s Word, or know God’s way, except by the grace of God.

This led Barth to reflect on the Word of God as *written* in the Scriptures of the Christian church. And again, this written Word was God’s gift, to be understood and received only by God’s grace. Barth quoted Luther, who had said, ‘let none think that God’s Word cometh to earth of man’s device. If it is to be God’s Word, it must be sent. ... for God’s Word cometh alone because God sendeth it.’<sup>25</sup> The Holy

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<sup>21</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p101.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p106.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p104.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p102f.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p101.

Scripture was to be understood, then, as ‘the word, the witness, the proclamation and the preaching of Jesus Christ[,] ... the promise of God’s mercy ... which takes to itself us who, because of our enmity towards God, could literally never have helped ourselves.’<sup>26</sup> This inability to help ourselves was the reason why we could never discover the Word of salvation—it had to be God’s doing. So, ‘[t]he Bible is God’s Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it.’<sup>27</sup>

For Barth, the significance of the gospel message, whether spoken or written, lay in the fact that it could be known and accepted only as a gift from God. Grace was essential to the Christian understanding of redemption. This led Barth to the understanding of the commission given to all bearers of the Word of God. Barth recalled that ‘the Church has a commission to serve the Word of God’,<sup>28</sup> and that commission was to be understood as an extension of the task of hearing God speak. The word which the church heard from God could, in Barth’s mind, only be proclaimed when God gave permission for that proclamation; and the permission was given in the grace which made the proclamation possible.

This commission to serve the Word of God was given at the level of the corporate life of the church. ‘[T]he fulfilment of the service as ambassador’<sup>29</sup> is enjoined upon the Church as a whole, and the church

is *sent out*: ‘Go and preach the Gospel!’ It does not say, ‘Go and celebrate services!’ ‘Go and edify yourselves with the sermon!’ ‘Go and celebrate the Sacraments!’ ‘Go and present yourselves in a liturgy ...!’ ... Of course, there is nothing to

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<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p121.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p123.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p57.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p146.

forbid all this; ... but nothing, nothing at all for its own sake! In it all the one thing must prevail: 'Proclaim the Gospel to every creature!'<sup>30</sup>

This 'proclaim[ing] ... to every creature' could only happen, however, if there was proclamation to each creature. And this meant that at the personal level the proclamation of the Word of God 'demands in some sense a setting apart, a special imperative calling of the man who is to function here.'<sup>31</sup> Individual people were the agents by which the community of the church was able to fulfil its commission, and these individuals were themselves recipients of God's grace, with responsibility to share that grace and the Word which established it.

There were two other areas of the Joint Commission on Church Union's thought which had a relationship to Karl Barth's thought.

It is interesting to note that reference to and use of the Augsburg Confession in *The Faith of the Church*<sup>32</sup> was not followed through into the *Basis of Union*, and that while there was no reference to the Heidelberg Catechism in the antecedent documents, this catechism was one of the historical documents referred to in Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union*. It can be assumed that in the process of moving towards that focus of the Uniting Church's heritage which was finally recorded in Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* the Augsburg Confession was set aside because of its status as a document of the Lutheran Church, and the Thirty-nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer were set aside as being foundational to the Church of

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<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p147.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p64.

England. The Heidelberg Catechism, on the other hand, was ‘the confession of faith of the German Reformed Church’,<sup>33</sup> and Barth had a particular interest in it. He referred to the Catechism in *Church Dogmatics*, when referring to the relationship between the proclamation of the Word of God and the sacraments and preaching;<sup>34</sup> he used it to help in his commentary on Calvin’s catechism;<sup>35</sup> and he gave lectures in 1947 at the University of Bonn on the *Christian Doctrine According to the Heidelberg Catechism (Die christliche Lehre nach dem Heidelberger Katechismus)*.<sup>36</sup> Barth’s use of the Catechism fitted in with and confirmed the Joint Commission’s expression of its hope for the Uniting Church as a community within which the proclamation of Word of God in Jesus Christ would be central to the Church’s task.

The other significant expression which the Joint Commission took up, and which was to be found in Barth’s thought, concerned the status of the congregation. The congregation as ‘the embodiment in one place of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ’<sup>37</sup> was, of course, a tenant of Congregationalism; but it was one which Barth also encouraged. In *Dogmatics in Outline*, when speaking about the credal article on the church, Barth suggested that ‘the congregation to which I belong, in which I have been called to faith and am responsible for my faith, in which I have my

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<sup>32</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p18 and 19.

<sup>33</sup> Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol III, p247.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1. p62.

<sup>35</sup> See Barth, *The Faith of the Church*, p43, 55f.

<sup>36</sup> Published in English in 1964 as *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, see p11.

<sup>37</sup> *Basis of Union*, para 15(a).

service, is the one, holy, universal Church.<sup>38</sup> This also became confirmation for the Joint Commission that its vision for the Uniting Church was valid.

So at a number of points the theology of Karl Barth was an essential part of the framework in which the documents which led to the union of the three Churches were formulated

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<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p144.



## Chapter 4: *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering: Part 1*

The second report of the Joint Commission on Church Union was described as ‘the companion to “The Faith of the Church”’ (p8)<sup>1</sup>, and with the report came ‘a revised and completed proposal for a Basis of Union’ (p5). The Commission expected that reception of this report by the three represented Churches would see the completion of its work, declaring that the two reports were ‘the complete Report of the Commission and represent the fruit of [a] long process’ (p8).<sup>2</sup>

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With the first report concentrating on an understanding of the faith of the church, the second report was to concentrate of the structure of the church (see p8).

Understandably, the report was set out under three main headings, with the first describing the church, the second identifying the function of the church through its ministry of worship, witness and service, and the third offering an outline of the style of government which might be suitable to the church in its new form. A fourth section, ‘To the Glory of God’ (pp65f), concluded the report. Each of these sub-sections addressed matters concerning the preaching of the church, though the

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, page numbers in brackets in the text refer to the Joint Commission on Church Union document, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*.

<sup>2</sup> These Reports were in fact not the final step in the process of union of the three Churches. There were two large and related sections of new material—on ‘Episcopate’ both in and beyond the congregation (pp41ff), and the ‘Concordat with the Church of South India’ (pp52ff)—and these caused a division in the Commission, with a third of its members (some each of the Methodist and Presbyterian representatives) expressing their reservations in the Report (pp68f).

second section (concerning worship, witness and service) contained the clearest statements.

In the Introduction to the report, the churches which were represented on the Commission were reminded that the Commission's work was not to consider how the churches could come into union with the least amount of disruption to their life, but rather to address questions about God's will for their time and circumstances. The Commission was conscious of its responsibility to take seriously the heritage of faithful witness in which each of the churches had been nurtured. At the same time, the Commission was aware of, and declared again, the truth of the Reformation, 'that because the one head of the Church is Jesus Christ, she must constantly be ready to hear the living Word that He is speaking to the Church' (p8).

It was the Commission's hope that as the Churches approached the union which it believed to be God's call they would find it to be

the occasion by which God renews us all in His knowledge and love, and prepares us for a more effective fulfilment of our mission to the world. (p11)

The 'fulfilment of our mission' would, in the context of this study, include affirmation of the importance of preaching as a means of public declaration of the gospel.

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In Section A of Part I of the Report, the Commission referred back to its First Report and based its reflections on the church on

two essential elements in the nature of the Church:

- (a) her continuity with the history and life of Israel, but
- (b) the newness of her life through the transforming work of Christ. (p12)

The Commission identified that in whatever description might be given to the church these two elements were, and should continually be, held together.

In describing the church, the Commission looked first at the “Titles” of the church, and then at the “Duality” of the church. In each aspect of this description, it is possible to find references to and inferences for the preaching of the church.

The first title considered was “The Church of God”, a translation of the Greek ἐκκλησιᾶ, itself being a translation of the Hebrew *lhq*. This word had come in Scripture to mean the gathered assembly of the people of God, and the Christian community perceived itself as having become the people of God through the redemptive action of God in Christ Jesus. As such, and using the image which Paul used in Romans 11, the Christian community was seen as the tree which was the Israel of God with old branches, representing unbelieving Jews, removed, and with new branches, representing Gentile Christians, grafted in. And the image of the temple, likewise, reflected this awareness of the church in continuity with the life of Israel, but extended from that life to incorporate all whom God’s Word would reach. The old temple was ‘the place where God had chosen to dwell in the midst of His people’ (p13), but it ‘had failed to achieve the purpose for which it was built’ (p13). Jesus had asserted that ‘through resurrection His body would become the new temple—the place where God dwells with His people.’ (p14)

Preaching, like all other activity in the church, had to remain within the stream of revelation and redemption which was found in the history of God's dealing with both the old and the new Israel.

The second title which the Commission chose to highlight: "The Body of Christ"—with references to Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1, 4 and 5, and Colossians 1—was a development of the first title. The Commission affirmed that Christ, as the new temple of God, was the one in whom dwelt the glory of God; and through Christ's death and resurrection 'the limitations of the old covenant, with its cultic separation, legal fencing, and ethnic differentiation, were done away.' (p14) Noting that Paul stressed both the unity of the people of God in the Body of Christ and the Lordship of Christ as head of the Body, the Commission called the church again to its need to grow up into Christ, its Head.

Implied in this understanding of the church was the truth that Christ came to the people, and the people grew into Christ, 'in the word of witness ... in preaching and instruction, and in the word made visible in the Gospel sacraments' (p15).

Through participation in the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the people of God became one in "The Fellowship of the Spirit" (the third of the church's titles which the Commission identified). This fellowship involved the joy and responsibility of sharing in the gift which Christ had promised, both creating unity, which meant that 'the barriers of race, language, culture and class are done

away' (p15), and enabling the community to serve in mission, using the Spirit's gifts 'for the common good, and to enable mutual growth in love.' (p16)

As Peter's preaching at Pentecost resulted in increasing numbers of people being added to the fellowship, with expressions among the people of common interest and purpose, so the church's preaching of the redemptive action of God should be inspired by and seek to extend that same unity and mission which was the sign of God's continued activity.

The other motif which the Commission chose to use in describing the church was "Duality". By this motif the Commission emphasised that the church was always in a state of being and of becoming. Two aspects of this duality were identified.

First was the reality that the church lived in a dialectic of eternity and temporality. The church was called to live in the world of time and space, and it was created as the Body of Christ. This meant that the temporal church was always to rely on the eternal Christ as the source of its life, and that Christ would be the one who would provide for the church's needs through the gifts of Word and sacraments in which Christ was present. So the church, while living in the world, could not be of the world, because it always lived responding to God's call, being obedient to God's Word, and embodying God's action. At the same time, this embodiment of God's action must always be in the world, reaching out to people in their human physical need as well as their spiritual need. For this reason it was necessary for the

church to have the flexibility and freedom ‘to respond to Christ in the ever-new forms of obedience necessary to bring the Word of Christ to men.’ (p17)

In relation to this study, it is possible to conclude that the Church’s preaching must therefore be of such a nature as to allow people to hear the message. The Church and its practitioners of preaching together must allow for variety in presentation and develop models of proclamation which allow people to respond to the Word of grace; and this variety of presentation and these models of proclamation will reflect the discoveries about communication techniques which are made in the world. But at the same time, neither the message nor the method of its telling should be determined by the world’s agenda. God in Christ always remains the source of the message of salvation; and through the Spirit God provides the gifts in human life by which the message is announced.

The second aspect of the duality of the church related to the reality of sinfulness even among the people who were forgiven. The church was understood to be ‘at the same time justified and sinful’ (p18). Its sinfulness came from its humanness. The church was always in danger of turning away from God, of failing to be obedient to the Lord’s commands. But for all that, the church had received the gracious gift of Christ—the “imputation” of His righteousness’ (p17)—and was thus able to be called ‘holy’, though only by virtue of Christ’s offering of himself.

In this context, the church’s preaching must take account of the sinfulness and of the forgiven-ness, or potential for being forgiven, of the hearers. No

preaching which ignores the sinful state of the world and of the people will be valid as a statement of God's Word; nor will preaching which omits the declaration of new life which is bought through Christ's obedience on the Cross. The call to holiness through Christ must be clearly heard in the Church's preaching.

The Commission drew two implications from this awareness of the duality of the church. The first was that the church had always to remember that Christ's Lordship meant that it was he who would call the church to new life—'recalled from error and unfaithfulness' (p18) and redirected to new paths of service. And the second implication was that it was Christ alone who brought righteousness to the church. It was not the actions of the church, nor even right doctrine, but Christ's gift which enabled the church to be the way by which people could come to eternal life. It was through Christ's Word, sacraments, and ministry that the church was directed to be obedient 'to the changing forms of service in the world' (p19).

It follows from this that the preaching of the Church, being flexible and free, must respond appropriately to the needs of the temporal and sinful world in which it is called to mission.

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Section B, the major section of Part I of the Report, examined "The Function of the Church: Its Ministry of Worship, Witness and Service" under two headings: "The Ministry of the Whole Church" and "The Ministry in the Church".

The Commission began its discussion of “The Ministry of the Whole Church” by asserting that the church, in living out its mission, had to be guided ‘by Christ’s missionary example’ (p19). Christ, being the Servant Lord, called his people to follow him in the way of service, to be the ones who ‘Go ... and make disciples of all nations’.<sup>3</sup> This involved, though the Commission did not specifically refer to it, participation in the ministry of Christ which was ‘to preach good news to the poor ... proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord’.<sup>4</sup> So the church was to participate in Christ’s mission in the world, to participate in the prophetic and kingly aspects of Christ’s ministry.

At the same time, the Commission recognised that the church was called in its worship into the presence of God whose Word to the people was the word of forgiveness and cleansing and feeding. The gathering for worship, then, was the occasion when the people of God were drawn ‘into the drama of [God’s] saving acts’ (p19). And in worship the church was joined to Christ, and so was able to offer (as a sign of Christ’s priestly ministry) thanksgiving, confession, intercession on its own behalf and on behalf of the world.

In these two events—going out into the world and coming in to the presence of God—the church was the community which had been entrusted with the message of God’s redeeming activity in Christ. This message would be proclaimed in many

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:19 (RSV).

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:18f (RSV).



ways, by word and deed; and preaching was one of the methods of that proclamation. By implication, preaching would be one of the means by which the nature of Christ was made known in the world: as 'prophet' and the 'king' in the proclamation of good news, release and healing; as 'priest' in the call to and declaration of thanksgiving and forgiveness.

Essential to the 'explicit and implicit invitation to accept [Christ] as Lord of all life and of each individual life' (p20) which was declared in the sacraments, was the idea that every member of the church was called, according to the gifts each had received, to participate in Christ's ministry and to take responsibility for proclaiming the message of redemption. In saying this the Commission made a link between a person's acceptance of Christ and that person's participation in the ministry of Christ. So it was asserted that all the people of God were to be active in ministry, and that Baptism (and confirmation) and Holy Communion were the means by which this ministry of the whole people of God, was initiated, commissioned and sustained (see p20).

This meant that preaching was a function of the church in which all appropriately gifted people should participate, and preaching was an extension of the activity by which all the faithful shared their experience of God's power and love. The commission to the disciples in Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8 was seen to be a commission to all the baptised members of the church 'to witness and serve in the world' (p21). First obeyed on the day of Pentecost when Peter preached to those gathered in Jerusalem, Christ's commission continued to be the basis of the church's

responsibility to call people through preaching to discover God's power. Those who were baptised were under an obligation to continue within the fellowship of the universal church, declaring by their lives as by their words Christ's message of salvation, and the gift given in baptism was an anticipation of things to come. So all baptised people were under an obligation also to continue in that work of mission until the fulness of the inheritance is received.

This focus of the church's mission in the name of Christ—by all believers, for others—was highlighted further in an understanding of the Lord's Supper. While baptism was a sign given for any member only once, the Lord's Supper was the 'constantly repeated ... sign of Christ's continuing presence with His covenant-people.' (p24) It was to be seen as *thanksgiving*—for the redemption brought about by Christ's death and resurrection. In this, it echoed the thanksgiving of the Jewish meal which celebrated God's redemption of Israel at the time of the Exodus. And it was *commemoration*—the story of Christ's passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit was called to mind, and to the present, in the lives of the believers who shared in the sacramental meal. By sharing in the bread and the cup they participated anew in the life of Christ and were 'continuously provided with the grace to continue in the way marked out by their baptism.' (p24) The Lord's Supper was understood as a *communion*—both with Christ, who was host of the meal and head of the body, and with the members of Christ's body who, gathered together at Christ's invitation, were growing into unity as the various barriers to community were broken down. This led then to the Lord's Supper being seen as *anticipation* or *pledge* of the new life of the kingdom—'a sign of [Christ's] final

victory over sin and death' (p25). And so the Lord's Supper was known to be a *showing forth* of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, and in this the participants became identified with Christ, making their own 'spiritual' sacrifice in service of Christ in the world.

When all this was linked with the understanding of participation 'in the worshipping, witnessing and serving life of the Church' which had been mentioned earlier (p20), a link between preaching and the sacraments became clear. Like the sacraments, preaching was responsible to celebrate the redemption brought through Christ, to commemorate and call to the present, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the story of that redemption, to create communion between the Lord and among the Lord's people, and to declare the promises of life in the kingdom of God.

So the Commission expressed its understanding that the ministry of the church was as "The Servant People of the Servant Lord" (p19). In this understanding, there was no sense in which there were degrees of ministry which imposed greater status on one group or other. All members of the Body of Christ were called to their own ministry, and were to recognise the importance and validity of the ministries of other members.

By implication, preaching as a ministry was to be affirmed and encouraged, both by those whom God had gifted for the ministry and by those whose other ministries were dependent upon and supportive of the preaching task. Those gifted for preaching were responsible to use their gift in preaching; those with other gifts

were to encourage the preachers through their alert, prayerful and eager reception of the message proclaimed, as through the appropriate use of their own gifts in response to the gospel call. At the same time, the preaching ministry was responsible, among other things, to encourage all members in whatever was their ministry.

Having established its understanding of “The Ministry of the Whole Church”, the Commission entered upon its discussion of “The Ministry in the Church” (pp27ff) under six headings.

Under the first heading, “The Functions of the Ministry”, the Commission recalled that the biblical term for ‘minister’ was related to the concept of servanthood. Throughout the history of God’s covenant with the people of the Hebrew and of the Christian communities, the concept of servanthood assumed and implied both ‘belong[ing] to God and perform[ing] His the work’ (p27). All people who belonged to God, who entered into the body of Christ through baptism and so participated in Christ’s life, death and resurrection, were called, therefore, to do the work of God, according to the gifts which each has received.

This concept of ‘every member called to minister’ (p27) did not, however, deny the reality that the church had been provided with certain ones whose gifts and calling gave them particular responsibilities of oversight, guidance and nurture to enable the people of God to grow up into the fullness of the Kingdom. Nor was there in the New Testament ‘a static or uniform, ... fixed pattern of ministry’, (p28) although certain regular functions could be identified. The Commission identified as having ‘well-nigh universal acknowledgment’ (p28) three particular marks:

- (a) responsibility for preaching and teaching—‘the Word truly preached’;
- (b) responsibility for sacraments and liturgical life—‘the Sacraments duly administered’;
- (c) responsibility for pastoral care and order—‘Godly discipline’ (p28).

These three marks—corresponding to the prophetic, priestly and kingly functions of the Old Testament—were found in Christ’s ministry, and continued throughout the centuries in the ordered ministry of the church. This did not, however, deny the validity of the ministry of the people: on the one hand the ordered ministries were given to enable the whole body to grow;<sup>5</sup> on the other hand the ministries of all people (both ordained and lay) were affirmed and found their unity in having been given by the one Holy Spirit.

It is within the framework of this understanding of the function of ministry—that it is an essential element of the life of all who belong to God, that it is part of the whole ministry of the church, that it echoes and fulfills the ministry of Christ, and that it is empowered by the Holy Spirit—that preaching, as one of the acknowledged marks of ministry in the church, is to be understood. It will be recognised as essential; its performance will be necessary for the fulfilment of the church’s ministry; its practitioners will be aware of their indebtedness to the Holy Spirit.

The second section of “The Ministry in the Church” dealt with “The Foundations of the Ministry”. The first foundation was, of course, the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was ‘the sole head of the Church, and all ministry within the

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<sup>5</sup> The Report refers here (p28) to Ephesians 4.

Church and within the world, flows from His ministry.’ (p29) In the same way as all members of Christ’s body, through their baptism, were to look back to the events in history by which their redemption was won and to look forward to the final triumph which Christ will bring about, so the ministry of the church was to have a two-fold emphasis. In looking back, the ministry of the church would witness to the events of Christ’s life and enter into the established order of the traditions of the people God; in looking forward, the ministry of the church would announce that the rule of Christ was yet to be fulfilled, and in anticipation of that time to come the church would need to assess in each generation what was the appropriate word to be given in each new circumstance.

The other foundation of the ministry of the church was the ministry of the Apostles, who themselves established the same two-fold emphasis which Christ showed, and which the church would emulate. The Commission pointed out that the fact that the apostles numbered twelve both echoed back to the twelve tribes of Israel—the first structure of the people of God—and anticipated (in the image of the twelve foundations of the temple in John’s Apocalypse) the ‘dawn of the last hour with the breaking in of God’s kingdom’ (p30). The Twelve also were uniquely placed as the ones who had been companions of Jesus during his earthly ministry and who had received the commission in Acts 1:8 to ‘be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samara, and to the ends of the earth.’ And Paul, who was not one of the twelve, none the less reflected this same two-fold emphasis—he affirmed his association with the risen Lord Jesus and with those who had been with him, and at the same time he presented the gospel in new ways to new people.

For the Apostles, and Paul was included in this, there arose a tension which has been part of the church's life throughout its history. The church has always struggled to keep its understanding of the importance of the past (tradition) in balance with its call to pursue new ways of mission. The Commission reminded the church that this tension had on many occasions brought the church to breaking point, but

the picture of the apostolate here presented should drive us back towards that unity of life in which we are granted the fullness of continuity with the past, and are prepared for that true openness to the future which will enable us to be servants of Christ in His mission towards the ends of space and the end of time. (p31)

So three related points were emphasised as summary of the apostolic understanding of ministry. The first was that because of their unique relationship with Jesus, the place and function of the apostles in the church could never be repeated, though their witness, formalised in the "Apostles Creed", was normative for the church of every age. The second point was that the apostolic ministry remained definitive for all Christian ministry. References to ministry throughout the New Testament reiterated time and again that ministry should include the same witness and pastoral care which was committed in the first place to the apostles. And the third point was that the church was always 'called to be an apostolic body ... [and] to remain within the apostolic teaching and fellowship' (p32).

The implication here is that within this broad understanding of participation in the ministry of Christ and the ministry of the Apostles the ministry of preaching would have an important and essential place. Preaching, like all ministry in this

model, had to declare the importance of the heritage of faith and to announce the life of the Kingdom which was to come. Its practitioners had to be intimately associated with Christ, and to invite people to find themselves in a similar relationship. Along with all ministry, preaching would present anew for each generation the story of the salvation of all people which is represented in the stories of the Old and New Testaments, being guided by the stories which are the history of the church. And at the same time, the function of preaching was to call people to share in the mission of the church which would reach out to the ends of the earth and continue until Christ's kingdom had come.

Having discussed "The Foundations of the Ministry", the Commission set out briefly that "The Ordained Ministry" was the natural extension into the later life of the church of the apostolic ministry of the New Testament. The laying on of hands, which in the New Testament symbolised for the Christian community the provision by God of gifts for and of ministry, became the accepted means of ordination for those 'set apart to equip the saints for their work of ministry' (p32). And the Commission emphasised that this setting apart has been evident in every age of the church's life, a sign of God's continued blessing of the church, establishing a line of continuity between the apostolic church and the church in every century.

This continuity, however, was not to be equated with stereotype. The fourth heading of the discussion of "The Ministry in the Church" was "Varying Patterns of the Ministry in the History of the Church". Identifying 'New Testament', 'The Early



Church' and 'The Reformers' (pp33, 35, and 36 respectively) as three moments in the church's history, the Commission reminded the church of this variety.

First, there were different understandings of ministry associated with the New Testament terms *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος*. These terms were respectively associated with the Jerusalem Church (especially associated with Peter) as described in the early part of The Acts of the Apostles, and the Hellenistic Church, described in the letters of Paul, which structure included also the office of deacon (*διάκονος*). Other New Testament books, and here the Commission highlighted Matthew and the latter part of Acts, gave other structures for ministry and for the authority which some had in the life of the church. This variety of forms of ministry did not, however, mean that there was a variety of tasks. Indeed, there was only 'one task of making the message known and effective in the lives of men and of shepherding the flock.' (p34) So it was understood from the beginning of the church that ministry always involved in some way or other the proclamation of the gospel.

The second moment in church history, 'The Early Church', saw the gradual emergence of the bishop 'as the figure around whom the unity of the Church was to be maintained' (p35); and here began the theme which would fill a major part of this second report of the Joint Commission on Church Union. The Report identified that the bishop in the Early Church was 'the authoritative witness to the apostolic kerygma and the visible and articulate witness to the unity of the Church in time and space.' (p35) It was the bishop's role, then, to maintain in the church's preaching the clear declaration of salvation through Jesus Christ.

By the time of the Reformation, ministry had become a single order of ‘ministers of the Word and Sacraments.’ (p36) Both Luther and Calvin were quoted by the Commission as identifying bishops with pastors, but this identification did not imply that the Reformers wished to abolish the place of episcopal function in the life of the church. They ‘simply demanded that bishops be no longer primarily politicians and administrators, but pastors and teachers.’ (p37) In addition to Calvin, Knox in Scotland and Ussher and Baxter in England encouraged ‘the idea of a Bishop-in-Presbytery, or “reduced Episcopacy”’ (p39) where the bishop and the presbyter (clergy) were essentially the same office. Because the Word of God alone had first place in the life of the church, ordination, and the “Apostolic Succession” or “Succession from Christ” which was assumed by the act of ordination, had to do with ‘succession in apostolic faith and life’ (p40), with no validity being given to the ‘political or ceremonial succession’ (p39) by which Rome claimed to be the true Church. The true church was to be understood as that which came from the Word of God; its faith and its life, and so the recognition and acceptance of all ministries, was to be under the Word of God. By pointing here to the idea of “Bishop-in-Presbytery”, and by developing the concept later in the Report, the Commission clearly accepted the Early Church model of the bishop as the one with particular responsibility for maintaining the purity of and articulating (and so preaching) the Word of God.

After this analysis of the various patterns of ministry found in different stages of the history of the church, the Commission asserted “The God-Given Character of the Ministry”.<sup>6</sup> At this point, the report reaffirmed

that the whole Body of Christ participates in His threefold ministry as Prophet, Priest and King; and that the whole Body is apostolic in its faith, doctrine, order and mission ... [and] that within the Body it is God’s gift to His Church that some are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments and to Pastoral Care. (p40)

So, following on from what had been identified in the historical analysis of ministry, the ordained ministry was seen to have the responsibility of exercising oversight (episcopate) through ‘the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments and the pastoral care of the people’ (p40); and each ordained minister exercised this oversight personally, as the one performing the functions of ministry, and corporately, as the one who encouraged the exercise within the congregation of all the gifts of God’s grace. As was understood to be the case for the early bishops, and in direct line with the Reformation understanding of episcopate, the Commission declared that it was the responsibility of the ordained minister to uphold the Word of God and to make that Word known, to study the Scriptures and to preach.

The discussion of episcopate (oversight) as part of the God-given-ness of ministry led the Commission to its sixth heading under “The Ministry in the Church”—“Episcopate in the Congregation”. In this section, the Commission for the first time began to make specific suggestions about how the Uniting Church would be structured. There would be three levels at which oversight in the congregation

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<sup>6</sup> The fifth heading under “The Ministry in the Church” in Joint Commission On Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, p40.

was exercised: by the presbyters, the name given for ordained ministers as a way of clarifying that all people were involved in the ministry of the church, and that there were different offices within that one ministry of the church; by the congregation itself; and by deacons, who were 'members chosen to be associated with the presbyter in the care of the Church and to be leaders of the laity in their witness and service in the world' (p43).

The special tasks of the presbyter aligned with the tasks of the ordained clergy of the uniting Churches, namely:

- (1) Preaching the Word, and building up members in their most holy faith; striving to bring sinners to repentance both by public and private exercise of his ministry and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins; encouraging and giving full scope to the exercise by church members of their various ministries in the Church; and forwarding all efforts directed to the establishment of righteousness and the removal of wrong in the community.
  - (2) Teaching and baptizing; instructing the young and preparing candidates for Confirmation and for admission to communicant membership.
  - (3) Using every opportunity to preach the gospel to non-Christians and to bring men to the obedience of faith.
  - (4) Leading the worship, administering Holy Communion and conducting the other services of the Church; and acting as intercessor for the people committed to his care.
  - (5) Watching over the flock of Christ; visiting the people, especially the sick and the erring; with authority to teach, to warn, to rebuke and to encourage; and maintaining the doctrine and discipline of the Church with all fidelity.
  - (6) Taking his share in the government of the Church.
  - (7) To these ends, being diligent in private study and prayer.
- (pp41f)

This description of the tasks of ordained ministry again made it clear that preaching was recognised as an essential function of the ordained ministry, and held a significant place in the life of the church. It was clear that preaching had many

forms and purposes. Through its preaching the church would nurture the community of the faith, and both the faithful and those outside the church would be called to repentance. Through the church's preaching the faithful would be encouraged to use their gifts in the service of God and those outside the church would be offered the joy of entering into the family of God. Through preaching the church would become a sign of the Kingdom of God in the world.

Corporate oversight belonging to the congregation would be given to members of the congregation who, in association with the presbyter, would care for the church and be leaders of the people in their witness and service. These 'Deacons' would be ordained to

a limited but genuine participation in the one order of the ministry of the Word and Sacraments; and therefore in preaching and teaching, liturgical and sacramental life, pastoral care and discipline. (p44)

Once more, the Report had made special mention of the ministry of preaching as a special part of the life of the church, with the recognition that certain people (by assumption, gifted by God and recognised by the congregation) would continue to be set apart for that ministry.

Here, incidentally, for the first time in Uniting Church documents, was the basis of the difference between the preaching of the ordained ministers and that of lay preachers which would be developed further in the *Basis of Union (1970)* and (1971). Enough to say here<sup>7</sup> that the ordained ministers had a greater responsibility than the lay preachers to ensure that present day faith was nurtured within the context

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<sup>7</sup> This idea will be developed further in Chapter 6 below.

of the scriptural and historical heritage and the life of the whole Body of Christ. The lay preachers were to tell the story of faith from their experience of God's presence in their own journeys, using the Scriptures as source.

The seventh heading under "The Ministry in the Church"—"Episcopate Beyond the Congregation"—continued to develop the idea of oversight (episcopate). Having already dealt with the idea of episcopate within the congregation, the Commission here set out its understanding of oversight 'at the trans-congregational level' (p45). As oversight at congregational level had been both personal and corporate, so was episcopate beyond the congregation. Corporate episcopate rested with the presbytery, the synod and the assembly; personal episcopate was to rest with the order of ministry called bishop. Because biblically and historically the church had recognised that part of God's gift was the provision of people who exercised oversight of the Body in the name of Christ, the Commission suggested that the time was appropriate for the church to establish an episcopal office which would ensure oversight at all levels of the church's life, and 'meet the needs of the life of the Church beyond the local congregation' (p48).

The Commission was at pains to remind the uniting Churches that at four points this office of the church should be carefully structured. First, it should keep faith with the understanding of ministry which was prevalent in the former Churches. Second, it had always to be open to reform under the Word of God and subject to the decisions of the councils of the church. Third, it was to be arranged in such a way as to allow each bishop to fulfil a function 'representative of the mission of the church,

pastor to pastors and guardian of the preaching, sacramental and pastoral life of the churches committed to his care' (p48). And fourth, those appointed would remain "bishops-in-presbytery" so that their personal episcopate would be exercised within the corporate episcopate of the presbyters.

The third of these points illustrated again what had already been shown of the Commission's expectation and assumption, that preaching, along with the sacraments and pastoral care, was a significant and essential part of the church's life. The bishops would be 'in a genuinely personal way ... guardians of the preaching, sacramental and pastoral life of the Churches committed to their charge' (p47), always under the influence of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God and within the structure of the church. In doing this, the bishops would maintain 'the true expression of the Christian faith in preaching, teaching and evangelism.' (pp49f) But the comments about this function of personal episcopate left questions unanswered. The guardianship to be passed to the bishops had until now been held by the councils of the uniting Churches and by their clergy in a kind of corporate oversight. What checks would be put in place to ensure that the bishop, who would be 'free to fulfil in a personal way' his guardianship, would indeed maintain the Christian truth? And how would this guardianship of preaching affect the freedom of the presbyters to proclaim the Word which God spoke to and through them?

According to this part of the second Report the authority of oversight was to be found at all levels of the church in the continuing inter-relation between persons and groups, and all who were in ministry (which meant all with gifts for service—lay

people as well as bishops and presbyters) could exercise the freedom and initiative which would enable them to fulfil the tasks of their ministry as expression of their part in the ministry of Christ. Like the other ministries, the bishops would exercise their initiative in ‘the threefold office which all ministry must fulfil’. (p49) They would carry out their priestly office as they maintained and safeguarded the sacramental and liturgical life of the diocese, their kingly office as they cared for the shepherds, maintained unity among the people within the Church and exercised necessary discipline in the life of the Church, and their prophetic office in preaching, teaching and evangelism.<sup>8</sup>

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In Section C of the Report, the Commission turned its attention to “The Government of the Church” declaring:

All that we have said concerning the nature of the Church, the ministry of the whole body, and the provisions for personal and corporate episcopate at all levels of her life, carries with it clear implications for the government of the Church. The aims and manner of her government will be controlled by her understanding of her worship, mission and service. (p57)

Because this study seeks to identify the place of preaching in the Uniting Church, it does not need to discuss the structure of the Church’s government; but it is useful to highlight the comments which the Commission made as it came to its conclusions about government. As the above quotation indicated, the essential

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<sup>8</sup> In the end, the ministry of bishop did not proceed into the Uniting Church. As the dissenting minority of the Commission had said, the issue was ‘likely to cause such uncertainty and concern among the membership of our three Churches as will hinder their progress towards union.’ (p69)



elements on which the Commission developed its understanding of church government were the same as the convictions upon which all the other parts of the report were based.

The government of the Uniting Church, like every other part of the Church's life, had to remain constantly under the Word of God, and the Church's constant reformation as '*ecclesia semper reformanda*' would occur 'by hearing now what God the Lord would say.' (p58) The Christian community will grow, discerning the will of God, as it 'is guided by the Word of God through the Holy Spirit.' (p59)

In its renewed form of government the Uniting Church would take note also of its heritage, listening to the General Councils of the church (including the contemporary World Christian councils) when they were 'agreeable to the Word of God' (p59). At the same time the Uniting Church would develop its own councils ensuring that they remained flexible, that they continued to be determined by the mission of the Church at each level of its life, and that they had 'authority to carry on the work and mission of the Church at the level of Church life for which [the councils] are responsible.' (p60)

The Commission identified four Councils for the Uniting Church, of which the Congregation was understood to be 'in its own particular area the embodiment of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ' (p61). This meant that the Congregation was to be a gathering of people who built one another up in love, listened to the Word of

God and participated in the wider life of the church. It was implied that the Church's life would be found in local Congregations, and the other Councils of the Church had episcopal function with responsibility for functions which, for the better mission of the Church, were more appropriately performed at regional, state or national level.

In all this, the concept of the mission of the Church was foundational. It was the mission of the Church which determined the way in which any part of the Church would function, as it also determined the way in which the various parts of the Church—people and councils—related to each other. Ultimately, the Church's understanding of that mission would come from its reflection on and proclamation of the Word of God, and both the reflection and the proclamation would take place in the context of the world in which the Church was set.

In respect of preaching, this part of *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering* confirms what has already been identified. The life of the Uniting Church would be specifically determined by the Church's understanding of its mission as that mission was set out in the Holy Scriptures and tested in the heritage of the uniting Churches. This listening to the Word of God would take place in the local congregation (see p61), and preaching which was grounded in the Word of God, which took particular note of the heritage from which the Uniting Church had grown, and which sought to make links between that Word and heritage and the world setting in which the Church was placed would be one way in which the development of the Church's mission would take place. Because the mission of the Church was to

bring people into a relationship with God in Christ, preaching would have a significant place in the Church's life.<sup>9</sup>

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As a final comment to the Report, the Commission called upon the Church to watch and pray, and offered its work to the Church in the expectation that the unity it had worked for would soon be a reality.

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<sup>9</sup> See McCaughey, "Confession of Faith in Union Negotiations", p32: 'The Church does not exist to preserve a body of teaching, but to bring men into a new relationship of faith in God through Jesus Christ, and this comes through the preached message, the Word, Euaggelion, kerygma, logos, paraklesis'.

**Chapter 5: *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering—Part Two,*  
A Proposed Basis of Union  
for the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in  
Australia**

Part Two of the second report of the Joint Commission on Church Union (*The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*) was *A Proposed Basis of Union for the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia* (pp73ff)<sup>1</sup>. This *Proposed Basis of Union* consisted of a Preface and five sections. Section I set out the actual “Decision to Unite”; section II outlined the “Concordat with the Church of South India (C.S.I.)”; section III gave detail of the “General Articles” of the proposed Uniting Church’s faith and order; section IV highlighted the need for an “Interim Constitution” to be adopted for an initial period so that the Uniting Church could discover its mission and so develop its own “Constitution”; and section V, “A Confessing Act”, provided a confessional statement for use during the inaugural services of the Uniting Church.

The Preface identified four convictions which had brought the three Churches to the point of union. These were a summary of various points identified by the Joint Commission in its first and second reports:

- (i) [The Churches] have been led to acknowledge anew the given character of the Church’s Faith and Life ...
- (ii) They have been led to acknowledge their failure as churches to bear witness to this faith and fellowship in their fullness ...

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, page numbers in brackets in the text refer to the Joint Commission on Church Union document, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*.

- (iii) They have been led to acknowledge that in spite of our sin God has blessed and preserved His Church by His Word  
...
- (iv) They have been led to undertake together, God helping them, to enter more fully into the Church's faith, life and worship. (p75)

In this way the Joint Commission on Church Union affirmed that the uniting Churches came from and were built on a heritage of 'teaching, worship and ordered fellowship' (p75), which expressed 'a faith ..., a message and a fellowship ... of God's making and not of ours' (p75). But this given-ness of the church's life did not deny the reality of the faults and failures of the uniting Churches. Indeed, having been Churches whose vision was partial, whose worship was poverty stricken, whose fellowship was weak and fragmentary, and whose message had not been spoken clearly, it was necessary that the Churches confess their failure and fault so as to acknowledge the truth that God, through the Holy Spirit, had never-the-less blessed the life and witness of the Churches.

Aware of this, the Uniting Church would come into being committed to discovering, by the grace of God, new ways to fulfil its mission of calling each generation to the salvation which was God's promise and gift in Jesus Christ. In this way, the *Proposed Basis of Union* would be at the same time 'an instrument whereby three separated denominations may come together' and 'an occasion for all members to enter more fully into the inheritance which is, with all the saints, theirs in Christ Jesus' (p76). That inheritance included the strong heritage of preaching which belonged to each of the uniting Churches, and the implication was that the Uniting Church would undertake to develop its gifts (including preaching) so that the

message of the gospel could better be proclaimed to the new generations in which the Uniting Church would find itself.

The statement, “The Decision to Unite”, was a clear expression of the detail of the union which would take place. It included a declaration of fellowship with the whole church and an avowed intention to continue to seek ‘that unity which is both Christ’s gift and His will’ (p77). In its wording, “The Decision to Unite” first declared praise for God’s grace through the years of their various histories, second offered confession that the churches have not been fully obedient to God’s call, and then expressed a longing for the opportunity to share in worship, witness and service so that the word of salvation could be set forth for all people until ‘the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ ... will be manifest’ (p77).

Behind this third part of the statement was the understanding that the Word of God would be the source of the Uniting Church’s life, with the implication that the Word would be proclaimed through the Church’s preaching, and that the preaching would find its place in the worshipping life of the Church, and would call people to participate in witnessing to the gospel and serving in the name of Christ. Through the preaching, and by the response of the hearers, others outside the Church would hear and make their own response in faith.

The only comment<sup>2</sup> which needs to be made in this thesis about the “Concordat with the Church of South India (C.S.I.)” (p77) is that by it the Commission confirmed its belief in the Uniting Church’s acknowledgment of the importance of its heritage within Christian history. The Concordat would allow, in a way that other forms of making bishops would not (see pp51f), for an acceptance of ‘*our present ministries as they are*, affirming that God has owned and blessed them as true ministries of His Word and Sacraments’ (p52). This implied that the function of ordained ministry included the proclamation of the Word, and it also recognised that preaching was part of the continuity of the church’s heritage.

In the third section of the *Proposed Basis of Union*, seven “General Articles” relating to life in the Uniting Church were affirmed.

The first article related to doctrine. The faith of the Uniting Church would be that of the one holy catholic and apostolic church as given to the church in the scriptures of Old and New Testaments. The historic Creeds were to be foundational and honoured ‘as safeguards to the right understanding of [the faith]’ (p78), and the Reformation Confessions and Declarations, with ‘the later confessional statements of John Wesley in his forty-four sermons’ (p78), were ‘an essential contribution to the catholic formulation of the Faith’ (p78). All these encouraged a continual development of the understanding of ‘the centrality of the Person of Christ in the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation)’ (p78). So ‘instruction in the faith’, ‘constant appeal to Scripture’ and ‘exposition of Christian doctrine’ (p78) were seen to be as aspects

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<sup>2</sup> Because the “Concordat” and any discussion of bishops in the Uniting Church was removed from the next (and

of the preaching by which the Church would continue to ‘teach[...] and set[...] forth the Faith’ (p78)

In the second article, the two sacraments found in the Gospels were highlighted as being gifts of God in Christ for the church. Baptism was the act by which people were incorporated into the body of Christ, with the imagery of participation in Christ’s baptism, cross, burial and resurrection, and of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit being foremost, as signs of initiation. Though not specifically mentioned, the implication was that baptism was understood as a response of faith to the proclamation of the word of grace.

The Lord’s Supper, also called Holy Communion, was the constantly repeated act by which Christ’s presence among his people was celebrated. The bread and wine, as signs of Christ’s body and blood were to be seen as ‘travelling provisions on the way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom’ (p79). As in traditional reformed practice, the service of the Lord’s Supper was to include ‘the unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution, ... the breaking of the bread, the taking of the cup and participation in both kinds by presbyter and people’ (p79). A list of key elements for a normal communion service was given (including ‘The ministry of the Word’).<sup>3</sup> It was made quite clear that the responsibility for the celebration of Holy Communion rested with those alone who had been ordained to that task.

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final) document, *The Basis of Union (1970) and (1971)*, relating to the union of the Churches.  
<sup>3</sup> For the full list of these key elements, see Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, p79f.



It is interesting to note that the requirement that ‘The ministry of the Word’ be part of every service of Lord’s Supper was in fact followed by a qualification—‘at least a reading from a Gospel’ (p79). In Part 1 of the Second Report of the Joint Commission the comment about ordination which equated the authority to preach with the authority to preside at the Lord’s Supper (see pp40f) identified an undeniable conjunction, in those who were ordained, of the duties of preaching and administration of the Sacraments. The act of ordination carried with it the responsibility to proclaim clearly the message of salvation and the responsibility to preside at the Holy Communion. The qualification in this *Proposed Basis of Union* replaced the full responsibility to preach (to declare the meaning of the gospel to those sharing in Communion for their salvation) with the option of simply reading a portion of a Gospel (a reminder of the story of the Saviour without any call to respond to the message of God’s salvation). Even acknowledging this as a concession for a shorter form of Holy Communion which might be shared with people for reasons of infirmity or illness who could not attend the service within the gathered community, this removal of the need for proclamation in the sacrament is somewhat inconsistent with what had been suggested earlier. The logical extension of the understanding expressed in the discussion of “The Ministry in the Church” would be that there should always be some, however short, exposition of the Word in every service of the Lord’s Supper.

The third article of Uniting Church life related to membership of the church. In Baptism a person became a member of the Body of Christ. The Act of

Confirmation, gaining its significance from Baptism, was the means by which baptised members would, through prayer with the laying on of hands, be ‘sent out into the world to fulfil their ministry within the occupations of their daily life.’ (p80)

The implication of this understanding of baptism and confirmation, that every person who through baptism had responded to the message of salvation had a service or ministry to perform according to the gifts which God had imparted (see p20), was developed in the next article which was divided into 3 parts, all concerning ministry within the church. In the first part of this fourth article, the Uniting Church was to affirm that all members of the church have a ministry—a recognition and use of the gifts with which the Holy Spirit had endowed each member. All these ministries were to be an expression of ‘the ministry of Christ’s reconciling love reaching out across national, cultural and racial divisions.’ (p81)

The second part of this article took up the roles of those ordained to specific ministry. Theirs was to be the task of building up the members in their various ministries, and, taking up wording used earlier in the document (see p28), three characteristics of the ordained ministry were highlighted as being reflections of the three-fold ministry of Christ (Prophet, Priest and King):

- (i) Responsibility for preaching and teaching—‘The Word truly preached’.
- (ii) Responsibility for sacraments and liturgical life—‘The Sacraments duly administered’.
- (iii) Responsibility for pastoral care and order—‘Godly rule and discipline’. (p81)

Although there was to be only one order of ministry, the church would recognise different functions. The two functions of “presbyter” and “bishop” were to be assigned at the beginning, with the implication that other functions within the one order of ministry might in time be identified. The *Proposed Basis of Union* reiterated the seven basic duties of a presbyter which had been described in Part 1 of the Second Report (see pp41f). The preaching of the Word was to have an important place of the Uniting Church’s understanding of the role of presbyter and bishop. This preaching was for building up the members of the church in their faith, and included responsibility for calling people to repentance, encouraging the exercise of all the various ministries of the people of God, and establishing righteousness in the wider community. Preaching also included the task of proclaiming the gospel of God’s salvation to those outside the faith, and this in turn related to teaching and baptising, with responsibility for instruction of the young and preparation of candidates for confirmation. Other tasks of the presbyter included leadership of public worship and administration of Holy Communion, praying for the people under the presbyter’s care and doing such things as were necessary for the care of the ‘flock of Christ’ (p82), including watching over, visiting, warning, rebuking, encouraging, and maintaining doctrine and discipline, sharing in the government of the church, and being diligent in private study and prayer.

Ordinations of presbyters would involve:

- (a) A prayer that the one to be ordained may receive the gift of God’s Holy Spirit for the office and work of presbyter in His Church.
- (b) The laying on of hands by a bishop and at least three presbyters, with a declaration of the authority given by Christ to fulfil the office of the ministry of the Word, Sacraments and Pastoral Rule.

(c) The affirmation by the one to be ordained of his belief in the Gospel as witnessed to in the doctrinal standards of the Uniting Church. (pp82f)

This procedure for ordination was a clear expression of the continuing link between the church in the present generation and the heritage of former generations. These obligations of ordination (including those related to preaching the Word) were placed on the presbyter of this renewed church, as they had been placed on those with appropriate gifts throughout the history of the church. In the context of this study, it has already been pointed out that preaching has been one of the gifts which was continuously present throughout the history of the church

An overlap in responsibility between presbyters and bishops in the Uniting Church meant that a bishop would be responsible with the presbyters for:

- (a) the purity of the faith, the proclamation of the Word, the call and training of men for the ministry and their continued growth in the knowledge of the Word;
- (b) the proper sacramental and liturgical life of the churches committed to his care; the ordination of presbyters and deacons and the confirmation of the faithful;
- (c) the government and discipline of the diocese. (p83)

The bishop's role as '*pastor pastorum*' and 'a symbol of the unity of the people of his diocese with the whole people of God' (p83) were extensions of the church's understanding that the Word of God guided the life of the church. The bishop's responsibility was to ensure that the Word of God, studied and preached, was available to all people.

In a third group of people functioning in ordained ministry, representative men and women would be ordained to the office of deacon, which was to be 'a limited but genuine participation in the one ministry of the Word and Sacraments and

in the oversight of preaching and teaching, liturgical and sacramental life, and pastoral care and discipline' (p84). Deacons were to be elected by members of the council of the church over whose concerns the deacon would have oversight (usually, but not necessarily, the congregation), and the ordination of deacons would be by laying on of hands and prayer of a bishop or a presbyter. Deaconesses in each of the three Churches, Presbyterian elders, Congregational Deacons and Methodist Local Preachers would be recognised as deacons in the Uniting Church. The inclusion of Methodist Local Preachers at this level of ordained ministry illustrated the Commission's expectation that preaching would continue to be an aspect of the ministry of those who would offer themselves for diaconal service in the Uniting Church.

It is interesting to note that although there were ordained women in the Congregational Church, no reference had been made in either of the first two reports of the Joint Commission on Church Union until this point, and it was clearly suggested that this ministry in which both women and men could function was a lesser ministry, being 'limited' and with this ordination being by either a bishop or a presbyter, while the ordination of presbyters and the consecrations of bishops were to be by both bishops and presbyters. It is significant to note, however, that the clear association which this ministry had with the task of preaching implied that women could and should be active in proclaiming the Word of God.

A short comment included in the *Proposed Basis of Union* indicated that those being ordained to any of the three orders of ministry would need 'to affirm

their belief in the fundamental doctrines of the catholic faith ... and to accept the order of the Uniting Church as agreeable to Scripture' (p84). Freedom of opinion was allowed for those matters which did not enter into the substance of the Faith, and although there was no specific reference in the *Proposed Basis of Union* as to what constituted 'the substance of the Faith', the phrase, 'as agreeable to Scripture', was an important pointer to where the essential elements of the faith were to be found. The implication of this for the preachers of the Uniting Church was to place them under the obligation of always proclaiming the message of the gospel in a way that was consistent with the scriptural heritage.

The fifth article of the *Proposed Basis of Union* concerned the Councils of the church. The Joint Commission on Church Union reminded the church that its mission would be fulfilled only as the church recognised that mission in broader, more than merely local geographical, terms; the church's mission was to be developed in sociological and demographic ways also. After describing the wider Councils, the *Proposed Basis of Union* described the Congregation as being 'in its own particular area the embodiment of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the spirit [*sic*] in Christ' (p86, echoing p61). While the Parish Council and Meeting of the Congregation were envisaged to enable the Congregation to witness effectively as this fellowship of the Spirit, 'certain duties (the ordering of public worship, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments)' (p86) remained the direct responsibility of the presbyter. This again affirmed the special place which preaching was to have in the

Church's life. The Word was to be preached, as it were, independently of the decisions of the Councils of the Church.

It is appropriate here to point out the obvious fact that the preaching of the church was performed in the Congregation. No specific reference was made to preaching in the descriptions of the other councils of the church, other than general comments about responsibility for matters of worship and for training for ministry. It was assumed that all people involved in the wider councils of the church would be active members of congregations, where the Word of God would be regularly and faithfully preached. Being members of congregations thus under the Word, those in the other councils would continue under the Word in whatever other activity was theirs.

The comments which the Joint Commission had made earlier about the need for different forms of congregational life to meet the different circumstances in which the church and the people of faith found themselves (see p27) seem to have been somewhat overlooked at this point in the *Proposed Basis of Union*. It is, however, appropriate to point out that the possibility of alternative forms of congregational life might well effect the way in which the Church would perform its preaching task. For example, the assumption that the presbyter would work in conjunction with the Congregational Councils could need to be reviewed, and this might mean the preaching could be the responsibility of other members of the congregation.

The sixth article indicated that the General Assembly would have responsibility for the preparation and authorisation of the offices of the Church, the worship services and the hymn books. And the seventh article made allowance and provision for the Uniting Church to 'interpret the General Articles and to modify and add to them, but always in agreement with Holy Scripture, and consistently with the provisions of the first Article' (p87).

The fourth section of the *Proposed Basis of Union* established the procedure by which the Uniting Church would come into being with an Interim Constitution prepared by the federal bodies of the uniting Churches. This section also showed that the Uniting Church would in time prepare its own Constitution.

The fifth and final section of the *Proposed Basis of Union* provided the Uniting Church with a Confessing Act which reflected the ancient creeds and which could 'be used at all Services of Inauguration or Recognition' (p88). An understanding of the importance of the Word of God and of preaching could be implied in the trinitarian statement which began this confessional statement. Firstly, God was recognised as 'Sovereign Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things ... who by His Word through Prophet, Priest and King maintained a perpetual witness to His Holy covenant' (pp88f). Then it was acknowledged that Jesus Christ came as 'the promised Prophet ... the great High Priest ... [and] the King who came to reign over men [and who] entered into His glory by way of the Cross.' (p89) Third was the statement that the Holy Spirit was 'sent forth at Pentecost to abide in the Church,



there to make known the saving work of God.’ (p89) Preaching in the Church was to be a declaration of the Word and a witness to God’s actions; through preaching the Kingdom inaugurated through the glory of the Cross would be proclaimed; and it would be by the Spirit’s gifts that the preaching of the Church would have power.

The fourth part in this Confessing Act acknowledged fellowship with the one holy, catholic and apostolic church, existing ‘to worship and serve [God], and to fulfil in every generation the mission of preaching, teaching and baptizing all nations.’ (pp89f) It was in this ‘mission of preaching, teaching and baptizing’ that those who were saved and renewed by God’s act and power could look forward in hope to the consummation when through Christ’s judgment the faithful would receive the promised eternal inheritance. The Confessing Act and the *Proposed Basis of Union* concluded with a declaration of the expectation that the Uniting Church would ‘live to adore and serve one God—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, to whom be glory for ever.’ (p90)

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As would be expected, the *Proposed Basis of Union* drew together the details set out in the first part of the Report. And the comments and implications about preaching which were drawn from that Report are echoed here.

The heritage of preaching which was evident in the uniting Churches opened the Uniting Church to the development of those gifts which would allow for effective proclamation of the Word of God, within the community of faith and among those who had not yet responded to God’s love in Christ. Those gifted and trained for

ordained ministry in all its parts were responsible for the preaching of the Church, both as those who functioned as preachers and as those who guarded the Church's heritage and message. Preaching was an activity which occurred at congregational level, and it was assumed that members of all other councils of the Church would hear the Word proclaimed within the congregation. (This did not, of course, preclude preaching at other levels of Church life, nor did it hinder the Church from preaching in contexts outside the congregation. Indeed, the possibility of other that traditional congregational structures meant that preaching might well take new forms in different situations.) And preaching was a component part of both sacraments: preaching led people to respond to the gospel message and to offer themselves for Baptism (and confirmation); preaching was one aspect of the service of Holy Communion by which the faithful were strengthened for service in the church and the world. Preaching, as anticipated in the Uniting Church, was one of the means by which people would be '[s]aved by the redemptive acts of God, and daily renewed by His ever-present power' (p90).

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## Chapter 6: *The Basis of Union*

Before entering into discussion about the way the *Basis of Union* can address the Uniting Church's understanding of preaching, it is necessary to identify something of the status of the document.

As the other documents had attempted to do, the *Basis of Union* set out to establish a foundation upon which the faith, life, structure and form of the Uniting Church would be established. It was indeed on the basis of this document that the vote for church union was taken. It has, however, been shown, particularly in the discussion which included the Assembly document "The status, authority and role of THE BASIS OF UNION in the Uniting Church in Australia",<sup>1</sup> that the status of the document in the Uniting Church's life cannot be taken for granted.

Soon after the vote for union was taken, when the uniting Churches had established the joint commissions to prepare for the act of union, some of those on the Joint Constitution Commission expressed their understanding that

the *Basis of Union* was not, in fact, going to have any continuing constitutional significance in the Church after union! It would apply only for "the moment of union". Thereafter, the Church would operate on its constitution.<sup>2</sup>

Their understanding was that the interim Constitution, which would be ratified by the first Assembly, and successive amendments to that interim Constitution, would

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<sup>1</sup> Published by the Assembly Communications Unit in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p241f.

become the document(s) upon which the on-going life of the Uniting Church would be based.

On the other hand, suggestions have been made about the ways in which the *Basis of Union* remains the significant document upon which the life of the Uniting Church is based.

Stephen Reid<sup>3</sup> has argued that the *Basis of Union* ‘cannot be understood to have a theologically prescriptive authority’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after identifying that the document contains many different kinds of writing—‘historical reports; expressions of belief, desire and intention; verbal acts of commitment; performatory sentences (promises, oaths, declarations etc); theological affirmations; future-tense predictions; prayers and exhortations’<sup>5</sup>—he went on to suggest that ‘whatever authority the *Basis* possesses cannot be a simple, uniform kind of authority’.<sup>6</sup> He suggested that there was ‘sufficient ambivalence about some matters in the *Basis* to warrant the suspicion that the *Basis* is far from being a consistently perspicuous document in matters of faith and order.’<sup>7</sup>

Further, by suggesting that ‘[o]ur adherence is to the *Basis*, not to the Joint Commission’s understanding of the *Basis*, nor to that of any particular member of the Commission’,<sup>8</sup> Reid argued that the *Basis of Union* could not be ‘personif[ied]’,<sup>9</sup> nor

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<sup>3</sup> In “On the Theological Authority of The Basis of Union”, in *Uniting Church Studies* Vol. 1, No. 2, August 1995, pp. 47-62.

<sup>4</sup> “On the Theological Authority ...”, p47.

<sup>5</sup> “On the Theological Authority ...”, p48.

<sup>6</sup> “On the Theological Authority ...”, p48.

<sup>7</sup> “On the Theological Authority ...”, p49.

<sup>8</sup> “On the Theological Authority ...”, p52.

<sup>9</sup> “On the Theological Authority ...”, p52.

taken to be understood in any one particular way. '[T]o make the *Basis* into a form of authority which requires "this" approach, or "that" interpretation', Reid said, 'is to reify a worthwhile vision and make it an instrument of oppression.'<sup>10</sup> Rather, he saw the *Basis of Union* as a document which, though 'set within a theological framework which is mainly neo-orthodox',<sup>11</sup> allowed individuals (and the Church itself) the freedom to interpret 'important rules of doctrine'<sup>12</sup> in ways which would allow the Church 'to grow, develop and even to improve without the implication that, somehow, the *Basis* has become obsolete.'<sup>13</sup>

So at the conclusion of his article, Reid reminded the Church that

The *Basis of Union* is a literary text. ... It is not an abiding presence of truth in linguistic form. It is a vision by which the church can continue to be nourished and to which it can give adherence. The *Basis* does not bind the Uniting Church, but empowers it to go forward "in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church".<sup>14</sup>

Those who were involved in its preparation, understood that the *Basis of Union* was to be 'an instrument whereby [the uniting Churches] might call their members into a deeper commitment to the faith and worship of the Christian Church in its fullness.'<sup>15</sup> In this way, *The Basis of Union* was offered to the uniting Churches as the basis on which the vote by members for or against union would be made. And in the Preface to the 1970 version of the *Basis of Union* the Chairman of the Commission (W.F.Hambly) made it quite plain that the 'Basis brings together the

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<sup>10</sup> "On the Theological Authority ...", p53.

<sup>11</sup> "On the Theological Authority ...", p55.

<sup>12</sup> "On the Theological Authority ...", p59.

<sup>13</sup> "On the Theological Authority ...", p60.

<sup>14</sup> "On the Theological Authority ...", p62.

<sup>15</sup> McCaughey, "The Formation of the Basis of Union", p9.

doctrinal affirmations and principles of order and structure which will give shape to the Uniting Church.’<sup>16</sup>

It was the intention of those people who were involved in its preparation that the *Basis of Union* would remain a significant foundational document for as long as the Uniting Church would exist. Representatives of each of the uniting Churches have been quoted in the Assembly Report, “The status, authority and role of THE BASIS OF UNION within the Uniting Church in Australia”,<sup>17</sup> indicating that it was the common expectation that the *Basis of Union* ‘would be an undergirding authority, of a permanent character in the Uniting Church ... accepted [as] a document of continuing validity ... [and] the statement of Faith and Order which would guide the ongoing life of the Uniting Church.’<sup>18</sup>

Michael Owen<sup>19</sup> was adamant that the *Basis of Union* had to be understood in this way. He was convinced that the *Basis of Union*’s loss of status in the parliamentary bills which were required to inaugurate the Uniting Church<sup>20</sup> had nothing to do with any inherent invalidity of the *Basis of Union*. Rather, it was the work of a small group of people on the Joint Constitution Commission<sup>21</sup> who were allowed to go ahead because ‘no one wanted to have that issue [of the status of the

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<sup>16</sup> *Basis of Union* (1970), p5.

<sup>17</sup> Issued by the Assembly in October 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Davis McCaughey (Presbyterian), Henry Wells (Congregational) and Norman Young (Methodist), quoted in “Status, Authority and Role of the Basis of Union” pp4f.

<sup>19</sup> *Back to Basics*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1996, especially pp240-251.

<sup>20</sup> The Act of Parliament which established the Uniting Church recognised the *Basis of Union* as that upon which the union of Churches took place and gave power to the Assembly to amend the interim constitution in any way, but did not, in Owen’s words, ‘spell out a requirement for any amendments, alterations or replacement constitutions to be in accordance with the *Basis*.’ See Owen, *Back to Basics*, p245.

<sup>21</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p244f.

*Basis of Union*] argued out in court against continuing Presbyterian lawyers.’<sup>22</sup> And this was exacerbated, according to Owen, by ‘a degree of estrangement between some of the leaders of the respective joint commissions.’<sup>23</sup>

Owen offered the reminder that

if the *Basis* no longer possessed any authority ... [t]he Uniting Church would have no defined relation to the Holy Scriptures, to the ancient creeds, or to any other authoritative declarations of the faith[,] ... would lack any certain theological position ... [and] we should all begin to revert to whatever we had known before[,] ... free to seek to fill the vacuum by getting the Assembly to approve a new definition of what one needed to believe, or to have experienced, in order to be a minister, or even a member of the Church[.]<sup>24</sup>

And in addition to evidence from those who prepared the *Basis of Union*, he showed that at a number of points the wording of the *Basis of Union* assumed that the Uniting Church’s life would, and should, continue to be founded and developed on this very *Basis of Union*. He pointed to the fact that after the first paragraph the *Basis of Union* itself continually spoke about the way in which the Uniting Church would understand itself and its life,<sup>25</sup> and to the fact that the *Basis of Union* required the ministers and other office holders to ‘adhere to the *Basis of Union*.’<sup>26</sup>

Owen also called attention, as did the Assembly Discussion Paper, to the fact that Assembly decisions and Presidential Rulings were a sign that the Uniting Church was ‘seeking new orientation on the *Basis of Union*’,<sup>27</sup> and he affirmed that

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<sup>22</sup> See Owen, *Back to Basics*, p244.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p247.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p249.

<sup>25</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p243 and p250.

<sup>26</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p250.

<sup>27</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p250 and see Appendix to “Status, authority and role ...”, p19.

the *Basis of Union* ‘enjoys considerable regard ecumenically as a significant document of Christian unity and Church union.’<sup>28</sup>

For these reasons, then, that the *Basis of Union* can be understood as a foundational document of the Uniting Church, and that it continues to be one of the significant authorities to which the Church should turn when asking questions about its own life and mission. Because ‘[t]he Uniting Church in Australia lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church as that way is described in its Basis of Union’<sup>29</sup> the guidelines which the *Basis of Union* offered in respect of preaching can, and must, be taken seriously and developed for those engaged in ministry of the Word (both ordained and lay; both preachers and listeners).

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The *Basis of Union*, published first in 1970 and in an amended form in 1971, was the final document produced by the Joint Commission on Church Union. As has already been seen, the Second Report of the Commission included a *Proposed Basis of Union*. But the uniting Churches had rejected aspects of the Second Report and the *Proposed Basis of Union*, and had suggested a number of other amendments. The Joint Commission on Church Union examined in detail ‘all the comments and suggested amendments’<sup>30</sup> and produced a new document, *The Basis of Union (1970)*,

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<sup>28</sup> Owen, *Back to Basics*, p250.

<sup>29</sup> “Status, authority and role ...”, p17.

<sup>30</sup> Preface to *Basis of Union (1970)*, p4.



in which the Commission brought ‘a renewed emphasis on the themes of word and faith’.<sup>31</sup>

When the 1970 edition of the *Basis of Union* was published, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church sought clarification of a number of points; in all but one of these, ‘the Commission members felt that they were being asked to make clearer what was to them already clear.’<sup>32</sup> The Preface to the 1971 edition of the *Basis of Union* listed the revisions from the 1970 edition.

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The *Basis of Union (1971)* is a document of 18 paragraphs, with subject matter ranging from historical reports<sup>33</sup> to theological descriptions,<sup>34</sup> from prescriptions about the Church’s received authority<sup>35</sup> to descriptions of the various roles which people in the Church will perform,<sup>36</sup> from acknowledgment of the Uniting Church’s place in the church catholic<sup>37</sup> to identification of its structure.<sup>38</sup>

References to the Word of God and implications about the place of preaching in the life of the Uniting Church occur at a number of places in the document. In Paragraph 1, which was a statement of the heritage of those parts of the church which would become the Uniting Church, there were two references. The first recognised

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<sup>31</sup> Preface to *Basis of Union (1970)*, p5.

<sup>32</sup> Preface to *Basis of Union (1971)*, p6.

<sup>33</sup> Paragraphs 1, 9 and 10.

<sup>34</sup> Paragraphs 3 and 4.

<sup>35</sup> Paragraphs 5 to 8.

<sup>36</sup> Paragraph 14.

<sup>37</sup> Paragraph 2.

<sup>38</sup> Paragraph 15.

that in the three Churches entering into union there had been a strong perception of the importance of ‘their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation to all mankind’ (p9)<sup>39</sup>; and the second acknowledged that the three uniting Churches would ‘remain open to constant reform under [Christ’s] Word’ (p9).

In the context of this study, the first reference opens the way for an identification of implications for preaching in the historical documents (referred to in Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union*) of the three former denominations. This will be taken up in chapters 8-11 below. The second reference can be seen as a call for constant examination of the life of the Church, and this means taking up, among other things, the task of identifying the place of preaching in the Uniting Church, which will be the subject of chapter 12 below.

Paragraph 2 of the *Basis of Union* established the fact that the Uniting Church ‘lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.’ (p9) This Paragraph, therefore, placed the Uniting Church in the context of the historical and universal Christian church, and implied that as all parts of the Uniting Church’s life had to be faithful to the heritage of the church, so preaching had to be grounded in the kerygma of the early church<sup>40</sup> and in the developments of the church’s preaching through the centuries. The Uniting Church’s preaching also had to be a true reflection of the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world

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<sup>39</sup> In this chapter, page numbers in brackets in the text refer to the Joint Commission on Church Union document, *Basis of Union (1971)*.

<sup>40</sup> The term, kerygma, here is used as the technical term coined by C.H.Dodd in *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, p17f: ‘a proclamation of the facts of the death and resurrection of Christ in an eschatological setting which gives significance to the facts.’

and especially, considering Australia's geographical position, within the 'Churches in Asia and the Pacific.' (p10)

Paragraph 3 was a trinitarian statement centered on Jesus Christ. It acknowledged that the faith and unity of the Uniting Church were grounded in Jesus Christ: in Christ was found the saving love of God who 'was reconciling the world to himself' (p10); through his earthly ministry—his life, death and resurrection—Jesus showed forth that saving love and called people to respond in faith; in his gift of the Holy Spirit Christ brought people into a life of reconciliation. This would be the basis of the preaching of the Uniting Church—to announce the salvation which, being 'effected by the sovereign grace of God alone' (p10), would lead to this reconciliation. The *Basis of Union* at this point distinctly echoed the theology of its time, recognising that in the task of announcing this salvation the church was acting as the agent of God's Word. Indeed, it was Christ himself who 'feeds [the church] with Word and Sacraments' (p11).

In Paragraph 4, the *Basis of Union* developed further the concept that the church's preaching was in fact God's own work. It was an extension of an understanding that the church was 'able to live and endure through the changes of history only because her Lord comes, addresses and deals with men' (p11), to say that in preaching the church was making Christ present as the Word of God who 'acquits the guilty, ... gives life to the dead and ... brings into being what could otherwise not exist.' (p11) It was, therefore, the responsibility of every preacher to

ensure that the proclamation clearly announced and made real the saving act of God in Christ.

The foundation of the preaching of the Uniting Church was given in Paragraph 5 of the *Basis of Union*. The message in the preaching was quite simply ‘controlled by the Biblical witness’ (p11) found in the books of the Old and New Testaments. The idea that the preaching of the Church was ‘controlled’ by the Biblical witness, which had been developed in *The Faith of the Church*,<sup>41</sup> from Karl Barth’s understanding that the life of the church was ‘controlled’ by God’s self-revelation in Christ, implied that the Scriptures did not simply contain ‘random information on a number of subjects’ (p6)—in which case the Scriptures could be seen as being somehow a static or passive element in the Church’s life—but were in reality the means by which God made available knowledge about the salvation which was God’s will and gift.

The members of the Uniting Church were obliged to undertake ‘the serious duty of reading the Scriptures’ and the ministers of the Church were committed to ‘preach from these’ (p11). This obligation on the members itself has an effect on the Church’s understanding of preaching. Those charged with the responsibility of proclaiming the Word would do so in the context of a community which was already well aware of the power of that Word and which was expected to continue to reflect deeply on the implications of God’s Word in all its manifestations.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Pp15f.

<sup>42</sup> Paragraph 11 was an important extension of this idea of serious study of the Scriptures.

The status of the two sacraments was described in Paragraphs 6-8 of the *Basis of Union*. Proclamation of the Gospel was in two forms—the preaching which had been described in Paragraphs 4 and 5, and the visible acts of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, in which Christ was present as he was in the preaching of the church. It was Christ who ‘by the gift of the Spirit confers upon men the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise’ (p12). Again, the implication was clear that the proclamation of salvation, whether by spoken word or by sacramental act, was the work of God through the church.

Paragraph 9 of the *Basis of Union* declared that the Uniting Church’s framework of faith would be found in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds which were recognised as ‘authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day’ (p12). The ministers and instructors of the Church were committed to the study and interpretation of these Creeds, and the ministers and congregations were to use them for instruction in the faith and in worship.

When this was added as a supplement to the requirement that preaching be based on the Biblical witness, the Uniting Church was reminded that there had always been a need to interpret the announcement of God’s act of salvation in different ways in the various ages of history. Preaching in the twentieth century was to express an understanding of the faith which had been given in the Scriptures and which had passed through the crucible of the generations. The creeds, ‘declar[ing] and ... guard[ing] the right understanding of that faith’ (p12), established in all the

church the framework from within which the faith was to be announced. On the basis of this, it was an expectation of the *Basis of Union* that as the Uniting Church's preachers would be diligent in their study and interpretation of the creeds so they would be faithful in their proclamation of the faith found in those creeds.

Following on from this identification of the place of the Creeds in the life of the Uniting Church, Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* affirmed that the Uniting Church continued to find foundations for its faith and life in the various documents of the Reformation in England and Scotland and the English Evangelical Revival.<sup>43</sup> The wording of Paragraph 10 was important: the Church was to 'learn of the teaching' and 'listen to the preaching' (p13) of these documents. In other words, the documents were not to be seen as prescriptive of doctrine for the Uniting Church. Taking up the injunction to 'learn' and 'listen', these historical documents will be examined fully later in this thesis for their insights into preaching.

With the church in every generation, the Uniting Church was called, in Paragraph 11, to the task of continued study and reflection on the Holy Scriptures. In this, the Uniting Church 'enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, ... [and] thanks God for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr.' (p13) The heritage left by these and all faithful people was the foundation which would become the model for members of the Uniting Church of the way of faithful witness and service in the Church's new day. Implied in Paragraph 11 was

the understanding that all leaders in the Church (including in this context, the preachers) should be involved in active and critical study of the Scriptures and of other fields of knowledge, so as to ‘be ready when occasion demands to confess her Lord in fresh words and deeds.’ (p13)

It is important to recognise that there was no statement equivalent to this Paragraph in the antecedent documents. Its inclusion at this point in the *Basis of Union* was intended as a comment on the way in which Paragraph 10 and, by implication, the immediately preceding paragraphs were to be understood. By its inclusion, Paragraph 11 ruled out from Uniting Church doctrine any fundamentalist, literal or uncritical interpretations of Scripture. When the draft of the *Basis of Union* was being prepared, Maynard Davies (one of the members of the Joint Commission on Church Union) commented,

Clause 10 concludes with references to the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scriptures and the responsibility for exposition of the faith. The fancy and sub-Christian sects invariably appeal to the Bible for their justification. We shall have to define our attitude more clearly. ... We shall not misuse the Bible to write our own ticket to life here or hereafter. We shall be very wary of isolated proof-texts considered apart from the whole Gospel. ... Yet to read clause 10 as it stands the impression conveyed to our constituency is that the Uniting Church is unwilling to launch its ship into the deep waters on which modern man is currently battling for life.<sup>44</sup>

So the Church was to make use of the skills of contemporary scholarship and science and to be in ‘contact with contemporary thought’ (p13) when under the Word of God it continued to examine itself and its mission. ‘[F]resh words and deeds’

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<sup>43</sup> The documents listed in Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* (p13) are the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and the Savoy Declaration (1658), and John Wesley’s Forty-Four Sermons (1793).

would be required ‘when occasion demands’ (p13), and so the message of salvation could be made known to and accepted by new generations of people. In consequence of this, preaching in the Uniting Church was to be the result of conscientious study of the Scripture using careful exegesis and appropriate hermeneutical practice, and was not to be, for example, a mere listing of biblical quotes in support of standards of morality, or an exposition of some current social dogma backed up by spurious interpretations of Scriptural passages.

Paragraphs 12-14 developed the awareness of the continuity between members of the Church in the present day and the faithful men and women of former generations, and formalised the Uniting Church’s understanding of the status and role of the members of the Church.

Paragraph 12 affirmed the status of the members of the uniting Churches, and went on to declare that membership of the Uniting Church would be ‘open to all who are baptized into the Holy Catholic Church in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ (p13) And Paragraph 13 spelled out what the confirmation of God’s declared baptismal promises should mean. ‘[E]very member of the Church’, it said, ‘is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant.’ (p14) This declaration was expanded into the affirmation that all baptised people were endowed by the Spirit with gifts for service, and each was expected to perform the ministry to which he or she was called and for which she or he was gifted. In this paragraph, for the first time, the clear statement was made

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<sup>44</sup> “Comments on Revised Basis of Union”, Mitchell Library Manuscripts 2733, Add-On 1034, Box MLK 01081 File: (1967) 1968 B Indexed.



affirming the Uniting Church's belief that God had given gifts to both men and women, equally and for the various tasks in the Church's life and mission.<sup>45</sup> Also, in this paragraph the *Basis of Union* acknowledged Christ's bidding that all who would have status in the Kingdom of God would be recognised by their service to the community of faith and in the world,<sup>46</sup> and Paul's assertion in I Corinthians 12 that the varieties of gifts given all emanate from the 'one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.'<sup>47</sup>

So it was that in Paragraph 14 the *Basis of Union* specified various roles for those, both men and women, who were 'called by God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in the government and to serve those in need in the world.' (p14) Four designations of ministry were recognised—ministry of the Word, the ministry of eldership, diaconal ministry, and the ministry of lay preaching.

Ministers of the Word [Paragraph 14(a)] would perform their functions of preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments and exercising pastoral care with the stated aim of equipping 'all [God's people] ... for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church.' (pp14f) The link between the threefold expression of the function of the minister of the Word and the understanding of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King (as it had been set out in *The*

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<sup>45</sup> Although the Congregational Church in Australia had ordained women to the ministry and the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches had been discussing the question for some years (see "Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women ..." pp6-9), the antecedent documents had only briefly spoken of the role of women in the life of the church, and that role had been identified in *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering* as 'limited' (pp44 and 84). There was no inference of equal gifting and service until this Paragraph in the *Basis of Union*.

<sup>46</sup> See John 13:12ff, Mark 10:43f and parallels.

<sup>47</sup> I Corinthians 12:11 (RSV).

*Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*<sup>48</sup>) clearly affirmed the Church's awareness that its life and ministry (in all its parts) were dependent on Christ in such a way that the 'apostolic witness' was transmitted through the life and service of all the people, and not only through those of the community who were 'ordained'. In the context of this study, this meant that preaching (as also the other functions of ministry) must have, as a main focus, the task of enabling the members of the Church to learn and express their faith, to become themselves witnesses to God's saving grace.

Paragraph 14(b) affirmed the importance to the Church of those lay people who had been 'endowed by the Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight' (p15), and Paragraph 14(c) affirmed the ministry of 'deaconesses' as a means by which women were called to 'share ... in the varied services and witness of the Church' (p15). In a sub-paragraph of Paragraph 14(c), the writers of the *Basis of Union* recognised the move to a renewal of the diaconate, and clearly stated that the Uniting Church could expect 'men and women' (p16) to be called by God into the diaconal ministry.

The fourth of the areas of ministry envisioned in the *Basis of Union* [Paragraph 14(d)] recognised that each of the former denominations had affirmed the ministry of preaching as valid among the lay members of the Churches. Members of the former denominations, and those who after union would have confirmed to them the gifts for preaching, would be affirmed as lay preachers. It was recognised that training of such people was an important part of the Uniting Church's commitment

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<sup>48</sup> See pp28f.

to the preaching ministry; and the Church was called to be receptive to ‘that fuller understanding of the obedience of the Christian man which would follow from their ministry.’ (p16)

It is important to note that the *Basis of Union* made a distinction between the ordained and the lay preaching ministries. As was pointed out in the discussion of *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*,<sup>49</sup> the preaching of the minister of the Word established links between the scriptural and historical heritage of the church and the faith of the present generation. So it was the responsibility of the ordained person to identify and encourage the gifts which God had bestowed on the members of the Church so that the whole Body of Christ might be built up in love. On the other hand, the lay preacher was given the task of expounding the Word in a way as to encourage people in their obedience to that Word in daily life. It was expected that through the preaching of lay people the ‘fuller understanding’ (p16) of what that obedience to the Word might mean would be evident in the Christian community. Obviously there is a point at which these two emphases blend together—recognition of the gifts which God has given leads to obedience to God’s call, and obedience to God’s call is shown in the use of God’s gifts—but the two ministries were seen to be separate, and their responsibilities complementary

The final section of Paragraph 14 gave an explanation of the meaning of the phrase “adhere to the Basis of Union”, and noted that ‘adherence allows for

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<sup>49</sup> See above, Ch 4, pp59f.

difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.’ (p16) As in the “Proposed Basis of Union”,<sup>50</sup> the identification of those things which were of ‘the substance of the faith’ was not clarified. It was clear, however, that the Bible and the Creeds and Confessions of the church were the foundation upon which ministers in the Uniting Church were to base their life and work; and so those called to preach were required to proclaim the faith as it was expressed in those documents, and to live and to call others to live in obedience to that faith.

The final sub-paragraph of Paragraph 14 committed the Uniting Church to a reconsideration of traditional forms of ministry, and of renewed participation of all the people of God in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, the building up of the fellowship in mutual love, in commitment to Christ’s mission, and in service of the world for which he died. (p16)

This call to renewal of forms of ministry was set in the context of an understanding of church structure which had been developed through the history of the church, and particularly through the events of the Reformation and the English Revival. The *Basis of Union* acknowledged that new forms of ministry would be developed which, on the one hand, would build on the heritage of earlier centuries and, on the other, would allow the church to fulfil its mission in each new generation. In considering these new forms of ministry which would enable it to fulfil Christ’s mission and to serve the world, the Uniting Church was committed to exploring new forms of ‘preaching of the Word ...’. And, because what it meant for Christ’s mission to be fulfilled would need to be worked out differently in each place,<sup>51</sup> new forms of preaching would need to be found according to the missional needs of the Church in

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<sup>50</sup> See Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, p84.

<sup>51</sup> So, for example, no specific structure of congregational life is offered, but the comment, ‘The congregation will recognise the need for a diversity of agencies ...’ (p17).

each place. It is because of this that in this thesis no precise definition of preaching can be given.

Paragraph 15 of the *Basis of Union* set out an understanding of government within the Uniting Church in which both men and women who had the appropriate God-given gifts and graces would have responsibility for government. Government in the Church would be through ‘a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world.’ (p17) The Uniting Church was to expect and look for Christ to speak in and through these councils, and the councils would ‘wait upon God’s Word, and ... obey his will in the matters allocated to its oversight.’ (p17)

Five councils were identified in turn in Paragraph 15. The Congregation, being ‘the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’ (p17), was charged with, among other things, the responsibility and privilege of meeting regularly ‘to hear God’s Word’ (p17). Here was the foundation of all the life and work of the Church. All other councils of the Church, and committees and agencies of the councils, were made up of people who were members of congregations, who were charged with regularly hearing God’s Word. Those who were to speak that Word, then, had a specially significant responsibility, and not only to the people immediately listening to them. The proclamation of the Word in its various forms addressed the Church’s life, witness and service in all the world.

Key words in the description of the responsibilities of the Elders' Meeting, set out in Paragraph 15(b), were 'building up', 'sustaining' and 'leading' (p17). Recognising that these tasks were shared in a congregation by the minister of the Word and lay people with appropriate gifts, the relationship was again established between the work of the church and the Word which God had spoken in Christ. The task of preaching continued to relate to the whole life of the church.

Paragraph 15(c) declared that the Presbytery was 'to perform all acts of oversight necessary to the life and mission of the Church in the area for which it is responsible.' (p18f)<sup>52</sup> Behind this concept of 'oversight' was all that the antecedent documents had said about 'episcopate'.<sup>53</sup> And although the ministry of bishop had been set aside, the responsibility of guarding 'the preaching, sacramental and pastoral life of the Churches'<sup>54</sup> remained with the Presbytery. In Paragraph 15(d) and (e), the Synods over their respective areas, and the Assembly, at the national level, were charged with similar responsibilities of oversight.

In Paragraph 16 the Uniting Church was again reminded that within its councils it would be necessary for people to be able to serve in ways appropriate to their gifts. This was an expression of the pastoral care which was to be a hallmark of the Church's life, being an expression of God's care for all people. All members of all councils were to 'take upon themselves the form of a servant.' (p19)

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<sup>52</sup> 'except over those agencies which are directly responsible to the Synod or Assembly' (p18).

<sup>53</sup> See Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, pp41ff.

<sup>54</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, p47.

While acknowledging that laws would be necessary in the Uniting Church as in any other human institution, Paragraph 17 of the *Basis of Union* declared that the Uniting Church would always be careful to formulate its laws in ways which were consistent with the Gospel. Constant review of the laws would allow the Church to be increasingly 'directed to the service of God and man', such as to allow for 'free obedience of the children of God, and ... the final reconciliation of mankind under God's sovereign grace.' (p19)

The final paragraph of the *Basis of Union* contained the affirmation that the Uniting Church believed itself to be 'the people of God on the way to the promised end.' (p19) For this reason, Paragraph 18 consisted of the Church's prayer that under God's Spirit it would be constantly corrected when in error, it would be brought into unity with other churches, and its worship, witness and service would bring glory to God through Jesus Christ the Lord.

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It is obvious that the *Basis of Union* did not set out to make definitive statements about the way the Uniting Church would carry out its preaching ministry. Never-the-less, the document made significant comments from which an understanding of preaching can be gleaned. It cannot be denied that preaching was one of the elements of the church's life which the *Basis of Union* assumed would continue into the new Church.

The Uniting Church would continue to proclaim the Word of God so that the word of salvation could be made known to all people. Grounded on the kerygma of the early church, and taking note of developments in preaching throughout the history of the church (and particularly the Reformation and the Evangelical Revival), the Uniting Church would seek ways of proclaiming the gospel in its own time and geographical place.

As with every part of the Church's life, preaching would be controlled by the Biblical witness, and those charged with this ministry (both lay and ordained) were urged to serious study and careful exegesis, to clear proclamation of the Word of God in the milieu of twentieth century Australia.

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## Chapter 7: Introduction to the Historical Documents of the Uniting Church

Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* called the Uniting Church in Australia to remember its heritage. This section of the thesis (Chapters 7-11) will look for insights into preaching which might be found in those historical documents of the Uniting Church to which Paragraph 10 referred.

The Uniting Church did not develop from nothing, nor without reference to the historical development of the church catholic; and the former denominations each had a heritage in and from the development of the Reformation. The ‘witness of the reformation fathers’<sup>1</sup> was essential in the development of the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches in the sixteenth century, and the ‘preaching of John Wesley’<sup>2</sup> was basic to the development of the Methodist Church in the eighteenth century.

Thus the documents referred to in Paragraph 10 were recognised as being foundational documents for each denomination. The *Scots Confession of Faith* and the *Westminster Confession* were distinctly foundational for the Presbyterian Church, and the *Savoy Declaration* became ‘the classic doctrinal expression of Congregationalism, although it was never to achieve great constitutional significance.’<sup>3</sup> The *Heidelberg Catechism* was accepted as being ‘a basic document of the Reformed Churches ..., and has been deeply influential in the English-

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<sup>1</sup> *Basis of Union*, para 10, p13.

<sup>2</sup> *Basis of Union*, para 10, p13.

<sup>3</sup> Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p115.

speaking world’,<sup>4</sup> particularly since Karl Barth brought it to the awareness of Reformed theologians in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

No specific foundational document was given for the Methodist Church—none was written. But in addition to the injunction to ‘learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith’ from the four Reformation documents, the Uniting Church was to ‘listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793).’<sup>6</sup>

Because of similarities in the historical and theological circumstances in which these documents were developed, it is understandable that there should be some repetition of ideas. To identify all points of this repetition would be tedious, and so the repetition will be allowed without comment. The points at which ideas about and implications for preaching converge will be identified in Chapter 12.

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The Presbyterian Church developed as a clear alternative to the church in Scotland which, through the French connections of the ruling classes, was Roman and Papal in structure and authority. The *Scots Confession of Faith* was a statement of doctrine that showed the significant differences between the “new” (reformed) way and the “old” (Roman) way. The ‘impudent blasphemers’ and ‘sons of

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<sup>4</sup> McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, p54.

<sup>5</sup> See above, pp36f.

<sup>6</sup> *Basis of Union*, para 10, p13.

perdition' mentioned in the Preamble to the *Confession*<sup>7</sup> were those who declared anything against the reformed understanding of 'the purity of Christ's Gospel'.<sup>8</sup>

It was a significant factor in the history of Scotland, and particularly of the Reformation in Scotland, that from the fourteenth century education was actively encouraged among the people, especially of the middle class.<sup>9</sup> Trading contact between towns on the east coast of Scotland and northern Europe, and safe conducts for Scottish students into English universities, enabled the movement of humanist and Reformation principles into Scotland, and assured the reformers of a ready audience.

On the other hand, the English defeat of James IV at the Battle of Flodden in 1513 and Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1530 'had the effect of ... enhancing the Scots' alliance with Catholic France.'<sup>10</sup> When Mary became Queen of Scots at the age of six days (in 1542), English and French factions (respectively Reformation and Catholic in emphasis) vied for control of the throne. Ultimately the French party was successful, with a resultant revival of persecution of followers of the Reformation. Lutheran books and English Bibles, which had been available in the early years of the sixteenth century, were forbidden, and other expressions of Reformation faith were outlawed as heretical.

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<sup>7</sup> See Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p63.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p64.

<sup>9</sup> See Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol 2, p276ff.

<sup>10</sup> Ozment, *Age of Reform*, p422.

‘But if the Reformation movement was losing ground as a national policy, it was gaining strength as a spiritual quickening in the hearts of the people.’<sup>11</sup> Among those who were instrumental in this ‘spiritual quickening’ was George Wishart, who had fled from persecution in 1538 and returned in 1543. For about three years he preached in Montrose, Dundee, Ayrshire and the Lothians, bearing witness to the Reformation understanding of the Gospel. He was martyred in 1546. But one of the people who travelled with Wishart was John Knox, who acted as a bodyguard after the Romanist party had tried to assassinate Wishart.<sup>12</sup> This made Knox a marked man, and after Wishart was burned at the stake Knox ‘renounced his clerical vows and joined the band of Scottish Protestants who boldly called themselves the Lords of the Congregation’.<sup>13</sup> He entered the Castle of St Andrews where the Lords of the Congregation had taken refuge, and it was there that, almost against his will, he preached his first sermon. The power of his preaching ‘placed him at once in the foremost rank of Scottish Reformers’,<sup>14</sup> and caused people to predict that he would suffer the same fate as Wishart.<sup>15</sup>

When the French arrived at St Andrews, the people in the castle, including Knox, were transported to France and made galley-slaves. After his release from the galleys nineteen months later, Knox entered England and began preaching in earnest. In the time of danger which accompanied Mary Tudor’s accession to the throne,

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<sup>11</sup> Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol 2, p284.

<sup>12</sup> See Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol 2, p284.

<sup>13</sup> Jensen, *Reformation Europe*, p131.

<sup>14</sup> Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol 2, p285.

<sup>15</sup> See Knox, *History*, p75.

Knox travelled to Geneva. There he ministered to English religious exiles until 1559, when at the request of the Lords of the Congregation he returned to Scotland.<sup>16</sup>

His preaching, however, was only part of Knox's contribution to the life and witness of the church. While he was in Geneva, Knox developed his understanding of ways in which the reformation of the church could be established in Scotland. At the same time, the reformers in Scotland had 'chosen to boycott the parish churches and worship together in private homes',<sup>17</sup> and this opened the way for regularly constituted Reformed churches. Knox returned to a country struggling to find its religious way either as Roman Catholic or as Reformed. He continued to preach, and was active in establishing contact with reformers in England.

Early in 1560 'the Lords of the Congregation sought a statement regarding the reformation of religion in Scotland',<sup>18</sup> and Knox and five other reformers (John Winram, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, John Douglas and John Row) were commissioned to the task. Two documents were produced in 1560 – *The Book of Discipline* and the *Scots Confession of Faith*. The first of these contained 'our judgements touching the reformation of religion which heretofore in this realme (as in others) hath been utterly corrupted';<sup>19</sup> and the second was a 'brief and plain confession of such doctrine as is propounded unto us, and as we believe and profess'.<sup>20</sup> The *Confession of Faith* was ratified by the Estates (Parliament) and

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<sup>16</sup> See Reardon, *Religious Thought*, p289.

<sup>17</sup> Ozment, *Age of Reform*, p428.

<sup>18</sup> *Basic Documents on Presbyterian Polity*, p6.

<sup>19</sup> *Basic Documents on Presbyterian Polity*, p8.

<sup>20</sup> Preamble to *Scots Confession of Faith*, in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p63.

issued as the statement of the faith of the church; it became the standard by which decisions about doctrine and polity were judged.

Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* committed the Uniting Church to continued study of the *Confession of Faith*, with no mention of *The Book of Discipline*. While there was not in the *Scots Confession of Faith* any specific section on preaching, there were statements which became significant to an understanding of the way in which the Presbyterian Church understood preaching. These statements became foundational to the Uniting Church's understanding of the importance of preaching.

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The *Heidelberg Confession* was used as 'the manual and textbook of German, Dutch, Hungarian, and Swiss Reformed Christians.'<sup>21</sup> Its use in Holland, and the close ties between Scotland and the Low Countries, meant that the Confession soon found its way into Scotland and was taught in Scottish schools and churches.<sup>22</sup> It was through its use as a document of the Scottish reformation that the *Heidelberg Catechism* came to be one of the historical documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.

As the name suggests, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was a product of the northern European Reformation. There were a number of German Confessions written in the latter half of the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth centuries,

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<sup>21</sup> Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, p24.

<sup>22</sup> See Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol II, p4, note 1.

and the *Heidelberg Catechism* was '[b]y far the most celebrated, and the only one which maintains its place as a doctrinal symbol down to the present day'.<sup>23</sup>

As with all the German Reformation Confessions, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was an attempt to find common ground between the Lutheran and the Calvinist doctrinal positions. Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus prepared the *Catechism* at the request of the Elector Fredrich III of the Palatinate. Both Ursinus and Olevianus were theologians and preachers. Olevianus was professor of dogmatics at Heidelberg University until 1562 when he became minister of the Heiliggeist Church in Heidelberg; Ursinus, who had spent time in both Wittenberg where he was 'a disciple and friend of Melanchthon'<sup>24</sup> and in Switzerland where he was influenced by Calvinist thought, was appointed to the position of professor of dogmatics left vacant by Olevianus' move.

The inclusion of the *Heidelberg Catechism* as one of the historical documents which Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* called the Uniting Church to study has meant that the relationship between the *Catechism* and preaching must be considered. The structure of the *Catechism* allowed it to be 'read in the course of nine weeks'<sup>25</sup> with explanation 'briefly and simply in a sermon ..., the aim being to have preached through the whole *Catechism* at least once a year.'<sup>26</sup> This relationship between preaching and instruction in doctrinal matters is an important part of any understanding of the place of preaching in the Uniting Church.

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<sup>23</sup> Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol II, p4, note 1.

<sup>24</sup> Gonzalez, *History of Christian Thought*, Vol III, p247.

<sup>25</sup> Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p85.

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In the seventeenth century, the Presbyterian Church made its expression of faith anew, against the same difficulties which the Congregationalist (Independent) reformers faced. The Congregational (Independent) Church saw itself as an alternative to the established Church of England of its time. The *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* are respectively related documents of these two churches.

The political rift in the sixteenth century between Henry VIII and Pope Clement VII had opened the way for a reformation of religious practice in England, and during the reign of Edward VI, following Henry's death, the protestant cause was encouraged. But then, on the accession in 1553 of Mary, who was of Catholic extraction, relations with Rome were restored, with many on the protestant side being martyred. After Mary's death in 1558, Elizabeth I set about establishing 'a national church that could embrace as many of her subjects as possible'.<sup>27</sup> The Church of England was re-established as a protestant church, and the "Articles of Religion" were promulgated. One of the implications of this renewal of protestant principles was that Elizabeth could, and did, expect that all her subjects would come to a uniform understanding and expression of the faith. Article 34 declared that the 'national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority'.<sup>28</sup> This, however, did not sit well with all people, and the Puritan movement (seeking to follow only the ways of Scripture)

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<sup>26</sup> Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p86.

<sup>27</sup> Gonzalez, *History of Christian Thought, Vol III*, p167.



came into being. These became the antecedents of those who in the seventeenth century declared themselves independent of the Church of England, and while they espoused reformed understandings similar to the Church of England, they sought to express their faith outside of the constraints of that established and episcopal church.

The constitutional crisis which arose in the seventeenth century out of the intractable relationship between Charles I and the English Parliament led in time to the calling together at Westminster of 121 ministers of the church and 30 members of Parliament.

The function of the Westminster Assembly was perceived differently by different groups. On the one side, the House of Commons, in taking over the powers of the king, had taken over the government of the church. 'It appointed ministers to parishes; created committees to administer the confiscated revenues; controlled pew rents; declared that Scottish pastors might become English incumbents; appointed a committee to eject scandalous ministers and a committee to relieve plundered ministers.'<sup>29</sup> The House of Commons therefore believed that the Assembly was a body meant to advise it on these and other matters relating to the government of the church.

But Parliament, which 'ordered the establishment of presbyteries throughout the land, and the election of elders',<sup>30</sup> also sought to limit the power which the presbyteries and elders could exercise. This, on the other side, led the members of

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<sup>28</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, p381.

<sup>29</sup> Chadwick, *The Reformation*, p234.

the Assembly, the majority of whom were Presbyterians and Calvinists, and who believed that they were gathered as a national assembly of the church, to look for ways of persuading the Parliament to allow greater oversight of the church by the elders. In this, their overall aim was to cement the change in the Church of England from an episcopal style of government to a presbyterian style of government.

The original intention of the Westminster Assembly was to revise the ‘Thirty Nine Articles’. But the outcome was the new document, *The Westminster Confession*, which was ratified by Parliament in 1647 and ‘became the classic exposition of English and Scottish presbyterian doctrine’<sup>31</sup> and ‘one of the hallmarks of presbyterian Calvinism’.<sup>32</sup> The Assembly also produced two catechisms (a *Shorter* and a *Larger*), a *Directory for Worship* and a *Form of Church Government*.

The execution of Charles I brought an end to the Civil War, and brought Oliver Cromwell into power, so that for a time England was ruled by a person whose religious preference was with the (minority) Independents. Before his death Cromwell called a meeting of representatives of 120 Independent churches, which meeting took place in 1658 (after Cromwell’s death) in the Savoy Palace. It was charged with the task of drawing up a statement of common doctrine, and a revision of the *Westminster Confession* was made, under the title of *A Declaration of Faith*. In addition to the *Declaration* itself, the Savoy Conference prepared two other parts:

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<sup>30</sup> Chadwick, *The Reformation*, p235.

<sup>31</sup> Chadwick, *The Reformation*, p236.

<sup>32</sup> Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, p270.

a *Preface* and a statement of church order, *Of the Institution of Churches, and the Order appointed in them by Jesus Christ*.<sup>33</sup>

Paragraph 10 of the *Basis of Union* committed the Uniting Church to the study of only the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* with no reference to the other documents produced by the two assemblies, which documents were confirmation of the principles which were identified in the *Confession* and the *Declaration*. Clear statements in both the *Confession* and the *Declaration* will be seen to guide the Uniting Church's understanding of the place of preaching in its life.

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The Methodist Church was a development of church life from within the reformation tradition, in the form of the Church of England. It was Wesley's hope, even expectation, that the "new" development would in fact stay within the traditions of the Church of England: 'His avowed purpose from the beginning of this monumental work to its end was to reform the moribund Anglicanism of his day'.<sup>34</sup> The Act of Toleration of 1689 enabled people to worship in whatever way they preferred 'so long as their buildings were properly registered as Dissenting Chapels and the doctrine of the Trinity was properly maintained'.<sup>35</sup> For many years Wesley held that there was no need for the chapels and preachers of the Methodist societies to be licensed under the Act of Toleration; he considered the societies to be within

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<sup>33</sup> See Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol III*, pp708ff and p724.

<sup>34</sup> Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, p46.

<sup>35</sup> Davies, *Methodism*, p26.

the framework of the Church of England. Even in 1787, when Wesley allowed the licensing of chapels and preachers, he insisted it be ‘not as Dissenters, but simply “Preachers of the Gospel”’.<sup>36</sup> And at the Conference in 1788 when consideration was being given to leaving the Church of England, Wesley recorded his understanding that ‘in a course of fifty years, we had neither premeditatedly nor willingly varied from [the Church] in one article either of doctrine or discipline.’<sup>37</sup> For all this, the Methodist Church used John Wesley’s publications rather than the documents of the Church of England as the source of its understanding of the faith.

The *Basis of Union* called on the Uniting Church to ‘listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty Four Sermons (1793)’.<sup>38</sup> In the Cato Lecture of 1985, Geoffrey Wainwright, speaking of the Protestant Reformed sources used in the *Basis of Union*, observed ‘the oddity of dropping Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, where Wesley’s contact with the Scripture was at its most direct.’<sup>39</sup> Along with the *Forty Four Sermons*, the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* provides insights into Wesley’s understanding of the place of preaching in the life of the church.

The *Forty Four Sermons* give hints about Wesley’s understanding of preaching. An examination of the *Notes upon the New Testament* as well as the *Forty Four Sermons*, will allow a better understanding of the way preaching was

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<sup>36</sup> *John Wesley’s Journal*, p403.

<sup>37</sup> *John Wesley’s Journal*, p408.

<sup>38</sup> *Basis of Union*, para 10, p13.

<sup>39</sup> Wainwright, *On Wesley and Calvin*, p11.

understood by Wesley, and will enable clearer identification of the implications for preaching in the Uniting Church.

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It is to these historical documents, then, that we turn in our search for an understanding of the place and importance of preaching in the denominations which came together in the Uniting Church. This will provide basic information for an understanding of the importance of preaching in the Uniting Church.

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## Chapter 8: *The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)*

The reference to ‘God’s Word’ in the full title of the *Scots Confession of Faith* (“The Confession of Faith professed and believed by the protestants within the real of Scotland, published by them in Parliament, and by the Estates thereof ratified and approved, as wholesome and sound doctrine, grounded upon the infallible truth of God’s Word”<sup>1</sup>) hints at the significance of preaching in the Scottish Reformation, as in the Reformation in all countries. And the Scripture reference given at the head of the *Confession*—Matthew 24[:14]—affirms that preaching had a significant place in the process by which it was understood that the ‘glad tidings of the Kingdom’ would come as ‘a Witness unto all Nations’.<sup>2</sup>

The prayer at the conclusion of the *Scots Confession* called upon God to ‘[g]ive thy servants strength to speak thy Word with boldness’ (p77)<sup>3</sup>. The passage of Scripture from which this phrase was taken (Acts 4:23-31) recalled the second pentecostal experience<sup>4</sup> and evidence of God’s presence and power. After their release from arrest, imprisonment and trial before the authorities, Peter and John rejoined the believers, praised God for deliverance, and prayed for strength to proclaim the gospel. A certain similarity between the experience of the early apostles and the Scottish Reformers was obvious; and the words of the prayer in Acts

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the *Scots Confession of Faith* are taken from the text provided in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, pp63-77.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p63.

<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, page numbers in brackets in the text refer to Owen, *Witness of Faith*. Chapter numbers refer to the chapters in *The Scots Confession of Faith*.

<sup>4</sup> See Neil, *Acts*, p92.

4:29b were quoted as an expression of the desire of the new generation to continue the work of preaching to the nations. The words were repeated in Acts 4:31b ('they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness' [RSV]), indicating that the prayer of the apostles had been answered. The use of the same words in the *Scots Confession* was a certain indication that the writers of the *Confession* confidently expected that the same answer would be given, that God would use the preachers of their later generation in the same fruitful manner. Thus would 'all nations attain to the true knowledge of thee.' (p77)

Aware of these comments in the opening title and concluding prayer, it is not difficult to identify other references in the *Scots Confession of Faith* which established preaching as essential to the life of the (Presbyterian) Church.

In the Preamble, the writers of the *Scots Confession* clearly assumed that 'God's holy Word' (p64) was the one foundation of faith for the church, and the one source from which inferences could be made about the church's life. Echoing one of the comments in John Knox's first sermon,<sup>5</sup> they offered to prove or amend, according to Scripture, all statements made in the *Confession*, and in this way they showed their belief that the Scripture contained all information necessary for salvation and for the ordering of the life of the church. While preaching, as such, was not referred to in the Preamble, it follows from the reference to the text Matthew 24:14 (immediately before the Preamble) that the declaration of salvation contained in the Scriptures had to be made through preaching.

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<sup>5</sup> See Knox, *History*, p75.

In its structure the *Scots Confession of Faith* was divided into twenty five chapters, with a wider pattern showing the same four articles established in the creeds and found in Calvin's *Institutes*, namely: I—God, Creation, Sin; II—Christ's person and work; III—The Holy Spirit; IV—The Church's structure and ordering.<sup>6</sup> From the point of view of this thesis, some implications about the purpose of preaching will be found in the first three sections, mainly in that on the Holy Spirit, though the subject matter of these sections was clearly understood to be the subject matter of the preaching of the church. It will be in the fourth section, dealing as it does with the structure and ordering of the church, that most detail about preaching will be found. In Chapters 18 and 22 preaching will be identified as foundational to the life of the church, being the means by which the members of the church come to faith in Jesus Christ.

It is to be expected that there was little reference to the practice or place of preaching in the chapters which deal with the persons of the Trinity. Chapters 1-3 identified the nature of God as 'eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible' (ch1, p64), the nature of humankind as 'after [God's] own image and likeness ... [given] wisdom, lordship, righteousness, freewill and clear knowledge of [...]self' (ch2, p64), and the nature of sin as being fallen from the honour and perfection which was given, so that 'the image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his posterity of nature became enemies to God, slaves to

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<sup>6</sup> See Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p59.



Satan, and servants to sin' (ch3, p64f). And then toward the end of Chapter 3 was the recognition that

regeneration is wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost, working in the hearts of God's elect an assured faith in the promise of God revealed to us in his Word. (ch3, p65)

This was the beginning of an understanding of preaching as one of the means by which salvation was brought to the people of God. The *Scots Confession of Faith* would suggest in later chapters that election and assurance of faith were revealed through the preaching of the Word of God, which was one of the signs of the true church.

Chapter 4 ("Of the Revelation of the Promise") and Chapter 5 ("The Continuance, Increase, and Preservation of the Kirk") formed a bridge between these chapters dealing with Creation and Fall and the chapters which would set out the place of Christ in the order of things. Each chapter affirmed that God continued to relate to the creation, even after the fall, and maintained a relationship with the chosen people, promising and fulfilling the promise that the Messiah would, in due time, come and restore the creation by 'destroy[ing] the works of the devil' (ch4, p65).

Each of Chapters 6 -11 were given over to an aspect of Christ's life and work. Chapter 6 referred to the Incarnation by which Christ 'took the nature of manhood from the substance of a woman' (p66) and while remaining truly God became truly human, 'two perfect natures united and joined in one person.' (p66) Chapter 7

declared that Christ needed to be both fully divine and fully human in order to bring salvation. Indeed, salvation both sprang from and depended on this ‘wonderful conjunction’ (p66). And further, in Chapter 8, this salvation was expressed as an election by God in Christ who as the one ‘appointed ... to be our head, our brother, our pastor, and the great bishop of our souls ... bec[a]me the perfect Mediator between God and man’ (p66). The *Confession* affirmed, in describing Christ’s passion, death and burial (Chapter 9), that ‘there remains no other sacrifice for sin’ (p67), that Christ’s resurrection (Chapter 10) was ‘for our justification ... [and has] brought life again to us who were subject to death and its bondage’ (p67), and that Christ’s ascension (Chapter 11) was his ‘inaugurat[ion] into his kingdom’ (p67) by which he was established as ‘the Messiah promised, the only Head of his Kirk, our just Lawgiver, our only High Priest, Advocate and Mediator.’ (p68)

The *Confession* declared in Chapter 12 that the assurance of faith in salvation through Jesus Christ was ‘the inspiration of the Holy Ghost’ (p68). It was the Spirit who enlivened, enlightened and encouraged the people of God to obedience; and the sanctification and regeneration which the Spirit brought were entirely undeserved and unmerited gifts which continued within the people entirely by the Spirit’s action. Implicit in this was the understanding that preaching was one of the acts by which this free gift was impressed on the imminent faithful.

It followed, then, in Chapter 13, that good works were not the fruit of the human spirit, but were the product of ‘the Spirit of the Lord Jesus ... dwelling in our hearts by true faith’ (p68); and in the opposite, those who lived immoral and wicked lives had ‘neither true faith nor any portion of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus’ (p69).

Chapter 14 continued this discussion, declaring that good works both honoured God and brought benefit to one's neighbour. Among the works declared good were: 'to hear [God's] Word', and 'to save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed' (p69). Behind the hearing of God's Word was an assumption that that Word would be preached; behind the 'sav[ing]', 'repress[ing]' and 'defend[ing]' was the expectation that the preaching of God's Word would be effective for the kingdom of God. And as a converse to this, with an understanding of sin which included such negatives as not calling on God, not hearing God's Word with reverence, came the affirmation

that evil works are not only those expressly done against God's commandment, but those also that, in matters of religion and the worship of God, have no other warrant than the invention and opinion of man. (p70)

It follows from this that preaching which was not inspired by God, or which proceeded only from human ideas and purposes, was to be understood as false and, in terms of the *Scots Confession*, 'evil'.

The dichotomy between the perfect Law of God and the imperfection found in human nature was addressed in Chapter 15, which acknowledged that there was no way in which, in its imperfection, human nature could fulfill the expectations of God's Law, and no works which could be done to be obedient to what the Law required. On the other hand, Christ was recognised as working 'righteousness and satisfaction ... [as] the end and accomplishment of the Law.' (P70) It was therefore as being 'in the body of his Son Christ Jesus' (p70) that imperfect and stained people were accepted by God as perfect and righteous.

There are two implications for preaching in this. It meant, first, that the preacher had to be part of the body of Christ. No-one could preach the Word of God without the perfection and righteousness which were God's gift through Christ. Second, it meant that the task of preaching had to be undertaken always and only with the awareness that the imperfection and stain which was inherent in all human activity was transformed by God's grace alone. No human endeavour in either the preacher or the listener could make preaching effective for faith.

It followed, then, in Chapter 16, that the Kirk (church) should be identified as 'one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the Kirk' (p70). God's choice of these people, and their acceptance of faith in Christ, combined to allow them to be called 'the communion (not of profane persons) but of saints' (p71). So the Kirk was recognised as the only community within which was found life and salvation, and that salvation would be available only to those 'who in time come unto [Christ], avow his doctrine, and believe in him.' (P71) This coming to Christ, avowing doctrine and believing could be seen as the results of the preaching of the church.

The community of faith was extended, in Chapter 17, to include those of the faith who, having died, 'rest from their labours ... [and] are delivered from all fear, all torment, and all temptation' (p71). These were understood to be the church triumphant, while those who continued in life 'are called the Kirk militant.' (p71)

Attention was drawn in Chapter 18 to the ways in which the true church and the false could be identified. One set of standards—‘antiquity, title usurped, lineal descent, place appointed, ... multitude of men approving an error’ (p71)—was deemed to be inadequate. The signs of the true church were:

first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, which must be annexed to the Word and promises of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline rightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished. (p72)

These signs alone were the evidence of the true church in which Christ existed as he had promised (Matthew 18:20). The Chapter continued with a declaration that there were at that time in Scotland churches which satisfied these requirements, though the description related specifically to an understanding that the Word of God contained all that was necessary for salvation. This chapter made the significant link, then, between Word of God as source of salvation and preaching as means of disseminating the detail of salvation. All preaching, to be truly sign of the church, had to be based on, derived from and an extension of the Word of God. Any preaching which failed to be grounded in the Word of God, and which failed to tell of God’s saving acts, failed at the same time to be an expression of the true church. And the other detail relating to preaching which this chapter highlighted was the necessity for the preacher to be a truthful interpreter of Scripture. Without this also there would be no valid preaching.

In Chapter 19 the question of the authority of Scripture was addressed, highlighting the Reformation understanding that Scripture's authority came from its status as Word of God, and not from any relationship that might have been between Scripture and the church. The church, which 'always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor' (p73), remained for ever under the authority of the Word which was heard. Here was further recognition that the preaching of the church was to be understood as being founded on the Word of God. At this point, however, the inference was clear that the preaching of the church, like the church itself, was secondary to the Word of God. Any word other than God's Word which was proclaimed was without status or effect.

Chapter 20 drew attention to the difficulty created by and for the church when the Councils of the church<sup>7</sup> presumed 'to forge for us new articles of our faith, or to make ordinances contrary to the Word of God' (p73). Here again, the *Scots Confession of Faith* echoed the Reformed understanding, which declared that the church was always under the authority of the Word of God and had to allow itself to be examined and judged according to that Word. So the function of the Councils was and would be, under the authority of the Word, 'to refute heresies, and to give public confession of their faith to the generations following ... [and] for good polity and order to be constituted and observed in the Kirk' (p73). On this point, the Chapter declared that polity and order were 'temporal ... [and] may, and ought to be, changed' (p73) as ages, times and places changed; and in this way superstitious practices in respect of church ceremonies could be averted.

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<sup>7</sup> The Councils referred to in Chapter 20 are the 'General Councils', but it is obvious that the comments relate as specifically to lesser councils.

These comments, about the Councils remaining under the authority of the Word while addressing the issues of their respective ages, lead to similar comments about the preaching of the church, which must change with the changing generations and, as the Councils did, address the new needs of new eras and cultures. And preaching, like the Councils, must always retain its link with, dependence on and accountability to the Word of God. Though the style, expression and manner of preaching might change to suit new circumstances, the essential core of the gospel and purpose of preaching (to declare the Word of God and call people to faith) should never change.

Chapters 21 to 23 dealt with issues relating to the Sacraments of the church. Two sacraments only were allowed, relating to the two Old Testament “sacraments” of circumcision and passover. Baptism and holy communion were recognised, in Chapter 21, as the only sacraments instituted by Christ, and the purpose of these sacraments was ‘to make a visible distinction between [God’s] people and those that are outside the Covenant, ...[and] to exercise the faith of his children, and ... to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise’ (p74). Nor was either sacrament a mere sign; baptism *was* the act of incorporation into Christ, and holy communion *was* the act by which Christ was ‘so joined with us that he becomes the very nourishment and food of our souls.’ (p74)

Chapter 23 declared that the sacrament of baptism was open to all who were seen to belong to the community of faith: ‘to the infant children of believers as to

those that are of age and discretion' (p76). But the Lord's Supper was open 'only to those who, being of the household of faith, can try and examine themselves both in their faith and in their duty to their neighbours.' (p76) The open invitation to baptism was, therefore, an element of the preaching task of the minister, and the barring of the table, with its related 'public and individual examination of the knowledge and the manner of life of those who are to be admitted to the table of the Lord Jesus' (p76), was likewise a task of the minister and so related to the preaching role.

These last comments were the extension of the affirmation made in Chapter 22 about the relationship between preaching and the sacraments. That Chapter declared that the only people who had authority to administer the sacraments were those 'that are appointed to the preaching of the Word, or into whose mouths God has put some word of exhortation, and who are lawfully chosen for that by some kirk.' (p75) This was because a direct link between the sacrament of holy communion and preaching was recognised: "As often as ever ye shall eat of this bread and drink of this cup ye shall show forth" (that is, extol, preach, magnify and praise) "the Lord's death, till he come." (p75)

It is interesting to note here the implication that either all preachers were ordained or that lay preachers were authorised to preside at the sacraments, and it is important to note that in the context of this *Confession* women were excluded from the task of preaching and so from administration of sacraments. But it is necessary to draw the inference from these chapters and Chapter 18 that preaching was an



equal partner with the sacraments. There could be, in the understanding of the *Scots Confession*, no sacraments without preaching as a foundation. Indeed it is valid to go further and to suggest an understanding of preaching as “sacrament of the Word”, in the sense that preaching, like baptism and holy communion, makes a visible distinction between the faithful and those outside the church.

Chapter 24 set out an understanding of the place of civil authorities in the order of things—all civil authorities were given their place and purpose by God, and were accountable to God for their work. They were to be ‘loved, honoured, feared and held in highest esteem, because they are the lieutenants of God, ... [and] are not only appointed for civil government but also to maintain the true religion’ (p76). This chapter obliged all people to be obedient to the civil rulers, but with the special rider: ‘while they vigilantly labour in the execution of their office’ (p76). The obligation on the community to be obedient to those in office was dependent on those in office fulfilling their function responsibly. This being so for civil officials, it is logical to suggest that it applies equally to those who function within the church. Preachers also will be respected ‘while they vigilantly labour in the execution of their office’.

The closing chapter of the *Scots Confession of Faith* (Chapter 25) acknowledged again the ‘certain and infallible signs of the true Kirk’ (p77), but recognised that these signs did not allow for automatic inclusion in the company of the elect. People might well outwardly participate in the Sacraments, hear the Word of God preached, and live under the discipline of the church; but they would not

necessarily share in the fruits of faith. Only those who ‘unfeignedly believe with the heart and boldly confess with the mouth the Lord Jesus’ (p77) would certainly receive the gifts of the kingdom.

The ultimate conclusion of the *Scots Confession of Faith* was the prayer referred to above.<sup>8</sup> The expectation was that by God’s blessing, the Word of God would be boldly proclaimed until all the nations have true knowledge of God.

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The *Scots Confession of Faith*, then, declared that the church was constituted, in the first place, by ‘the true preaching of the Word of God’ (ch 18, p72). The purpose of this preaching, as of the other two signs of the church (right administration of the sacraments and of ecclesiastical discipline), was to bring the community to faith in Christ as Son of God, whose death and resurrection were the act by which all people were brought into God’s family as adopted children. It was only through the preaching of God’s Word that people were given the detail of Christ’s life and ministry, such that they would have faith in him, and receive salvation.

All the effects of preaching—sanctification, salvation and regeneration with enlivening, enlightenment and encouragement—were gifts of the Holy Spirit. Statements about the Holy Spirit in the *Scots Confession* led to an awareness that all

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<sup>8</sup> See p116f.

preaching, and all the results of preaching, were attributable to the action of the Holy Spirit. It was assumed that preachers would be inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that they would never enter into or continue in the work of preaching for any personal reasons or with any human agenda.

It was also clearly understood that the preachers were themselves members of the Body of Christ, aware of their own sinfulness, and equally (with their listeners) in need of forgiveness and under the grace of God. It was not, therefore, by their own words, but by the Word of God that they announced the good news.

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## Chapter 9: *The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)*

From its very beginning, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was grounded in the common life of the church. It consisted of 129 questions and was intended for use in four ways.

(1) It should be an instrument for teaching. (2) It should be a standard of doctrine for the teachers and preachers of the Palatinate. (3) It was divided into nine readings which were to be used in cycles in the liturgy of public worship every year. (4) It was further divided into fifty-two sections which were to be the respective themes for a sermon every Sunday afternoon of the year.<sup>1</sup>

So the *Catechism* was not essentially a document which was written as an academic exercise, nor an attempt to sway argument about doctrine in one direction or another, nor ‘a piece of abstract theology, abstract polemics, or church politics’.<sup>2</sup> It was meant to be used in the process of enabling the people of God to grow in faith. And it was structured in a way which allowed for its regular use within the life of the church, in the usual Sunday activity of the community of faith. That meant that there was expected to be a close relationship between the *Catechism* and the preaching life of the church. With fifty two Sundays identified, a year’s reflection was available to the preacher as to the catechuminate; sermons on each of the issues identified in the questions provided continuous opportunity to present the Christian message.

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, p121.

<sup>2</sup> Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, p22.

The nine lessons and fifty two Sunday sections were built into a tripartite framework. Questions 1 and 2 of the Catechism, listed for the First Sunday and part of the First Lesson, were introductory to the tripartite framework. After Question 1 had provided a general description of the ‘comfort’ which came with the knowledge that ‘I ... belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ’ (p87)<sup>3</sup>, Question 2 gave an explanation of this tripartite structure:

*Question 2* How many things do you need to know, in order to live and die in a state of blessedness with this comfort?  
*Answer* Three things: Firstly, how great my sin and misery are. Secondly, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Thirdly, how I am to be grateful to God for such redemption. (p87)

The First Part, “Of Man’s Misery”, was given in the First Lesson (the Second to Fourth Sundays); the Second Part, “Of Man’s Redemption”, was covered in the Second to Sixth Lessons (the Fifth to Thirty Second Sundays); and the Third Part, “Of Thankfulness”, extended from the Seventh to Ninth Lessons (Thirty Second to Fifty Second Sundays).

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The *Heidelberg Catechism* was to be used as a standard for teaching and preaching.<sup>4</sup> In consequence of this, many of the questions and answers did not provide information about the methods and practice of preaching, but they did provide the subject matter for that preaching. And so Questions 1 and 2 were clear statements of the overall task of preaching: the preacher’s call to the congregation was to belong to

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<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, question, answer and page numbers in brackets in the text refer to “The Heidelberg Confession” in Owen, *Witness of Faith*.

<sup>4</sup> See Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, p121.

the 'faithful Saviour Jesus Christ' (Answer 1, p87); and the preacher's three part declaration had always to be that salvation was available to all who acknowledged their 'sin and misery', that these were then 'redeemed from all [their] sins and misery', and that they were 'grateful to God for such redemption.' (Answer 2, p87)

It is significant to note that there were only 9 questions in the *Catechism* dealing with the "Misery", compared with 74 questions dealing with "Redemption" and 44 questions dealing with "Thankfulness". We may assume then, that preachers who followed the *Catechism* as a source for their subject matter would find a similar balance.

The First Part of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (questions 3-11) set out clearly the separation between God and the human world. Sin and misery were perceived by knowledge of the 'Law of God' (Answer 3, p87), which taught that 'You shall love God, your Lord, with your whole heart, with you whole soul, with you whole mind and all your powers ... [and] You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Answer 4, p87) The Law could not, however, be kept perfectly because each person was 'inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour' (Answer 5, p87), even though this was not the order of creation. Indeed, 'God created Man good and in accordance with His own image' (Answer 6, p88); but '[f]rom the fall and disobedience of our first parents' (Answer 7, p88) came the corruption of human nature into which all were born, and from which there was no escape 'unless we are born again by the Spirit of God.' (Answer 8, p88) This state of corruption was understood to be of human not divine making, and would be punished fully by God, who though merciful

was always righteous and required ‘that the sin that has been committed against God ... be punished with the extreme, i.e. with everlasting punishment’ (Answer 11, p88).

The Second Part of the *Catechism*, the most extensive part, began by establishing an understanding of the nature of Redemption. On the fifth Sunday the hint was given of the One who would stand in place of each person to pay the debt which was owed. It could not be any creature other than ‘a true and righteous man ... at the same time, true God’ (Answer 15, p89). And so the sixth Sunday established the understanding of Jesus Christ as the One who, being himself truly human and truly divine, could be ‘given us for complete redemption and righteousness’ (Answer 18, p89). Knowledge of this comes ‘[f]rom the Holy Gospel’ (Answer 19, p89) which was God’s self-revelation in the Old Testament and in the person of Christ.

The seventh Sunday contained the reminder that people would not automatically be provided with an opportunity to escape the punishment due, but only those ‘who by true faith are incorporated into Him and accept all His benefits’ (Answer 20, p89). This faith was the ‘certain knowledge’ and ‘heartfelt trust’ in the truth of all that was revealed by God ‘in His Word’ (Answer 21, p89). All this knowledge and trust was ‘promised us in the Gospel’ (Answer 22, p90), was necessary for faith, and was summarised in the Apostles’ Creed (given in full in the answer to Question 23).

It is important that preaching in the church take note of the implications behind this discussion in the *Heidelberg Catechism* of “Misery” and of “Redemption”. No preaching will be valid which denies the reality of the sinful state of the world. The fact is that people are separated from God, from each other, and from the fulfilment of their own being as God intended. In this way Creation and human life is debased. Preaching which fails to take note of this, which refuses to take seriously the situation in which this places the world, which refuses to name sin and to declare that the righteousness of God requires that sin must be punished, misrepresents a significant part of the Scriptural heritage and denies the truth of those who are thus isolated. In its preaching, as in every other part of its life, the church must have a realistic view of the situation in which people find themselves, and must never be afraid of denouncing those aspects of Creation which are ‘fallen’.

Equally, however, no preaching will be valid which stays always with the sinful state of the world. The Scriptural heritage moves from the fallen state of the world to declare God’s redemption. The punishment required by the righteousness of God has indeed been exacted; the ‘Mediator and Redeemer [whom] we ... seek’ (Question 15, p89) has been found; and ‘out of sheer grace’ (Answer 21, p89) God has forgiven sin. So the church must declare the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ to all who will listen. Preaching must perform both functions: acknowledging the sinfulness of the world and declaring the salvation which has come through Christ.



Questions 24 and 25 (the eighth Sunday) were introductory to the questions which dealt with the nature of God as described in the Apostles' Creed. Questions 26 to 28 provided an understanding of God the Father: first, that being Creator, God brought all things into being; and second, that God provided for all things so that nothing 'come[s] to us by chance, but by his fatherly hand.' (Answer 27, p90) This led to the awareness

[t]hat we should be in all adversity patient, in happiness grateful and regarding the future of good confidence towards our faithful God and Father, that no creature will separate us from his love, since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will they cannot even move or stir. (Answer 28, p91)

So, by implication, preaching must acknowledge and affirm that God's loving care is available to all who are ready to acknowledge God's parental interest and involvement with all people.

The Eleventh to the Nineteenth Sundays (Questions 29 to 52) developed thought about the place of Christ in God's plan (as hinted in Question 18). It was Jesus, the Saviour, whose sacrifice alone saved from sin.<sup>5</sup> His title, "Christ", declared that he had been 'ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit' (Answer 31, p91) to be Prophet, Teacher, High Priest and King, revealing, redeeming and ruling by Word and Spirit (see Answer 31, p91). And being a "Christian" meant by faith being 'a member of Christ' (Answer 32, p91) and so sharing in Christ's anointing and confessing Christ's name.

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<sup>5</sup> So Questions 29-30, see Owen, *Witness Of Faith*, P91.

It follows from this that preaching should be inspired and ordained by Word and Spirit, and that the preacher, as a 'member of Christ', has the threefold role, recalling Christ's threefold nature, of prophet, priest and king.

First, it must be acknowledged that the preacher, like every 'member of Christ', has personally to be enlightened by the revelation which Christ as Prophet has brought, to be within the redemption which Christ the High Priest has won, and to be under the rule of Word and Spirit which Christ the King has established.

At the same time and extending from this personal state, it is the preacher's task to take up the three functions of revealing, declaring and showing the redemption of Christ. The prophetic task of preaching presents God's Word to the people, declares God's action and love, and calls the people to repentance and new life. The priestly task is evident when the preacher, who shares the situation and circumstances of the people, offers up, as it were, the human lot for God's blessing. And in holding the kingly task the preacher declares God's rule and announces God's justice and truth in the social context.

Questions 33-52 related to the Christological section of the Creed, and Questions 53-64 to the clauses relating to the Holy Spirit, church, fellowship of saints, forgiveness of sins and resurrection to eternal life. Question 59, which began the Fifth Lesson, suggested that the knowledge which came through the credal statements was of benefit to the Christian who was thus able to know that 'in Christ I am righteous before God and an heir of eternal life.' (Answer 59, p95) This righteousness before God came

[o]nly by true faith in Jesus Christ, ... yet, without any merit of my part, out of pure grace, God bestows on me and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ ... if only I accept this benefit with a believing heart. (Answer 60, p95)

So here again was an expectation that the preaching would encourage people first to recognise God's undeserved gift and second to accept the gift offered.

Concerning the value of good works, the *Catechism* declared that these held no righteousness, because before God all things had to be perfect and 'even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled' (Answer 62, p96); that rewards for good works came not 'from merit, but from grace' (Answer 63, p96); and that good works as fruits of thankfulness would issue from 'those who have been ingrafted into Christ by true faith' (Answer 64, p96). On the basis of this, preaching would not call for any response of 'good works', but would call people to come in faith to Christ, from which new state would issue lives of fruitful service.

A discussion of the sacraments began with Question 65. Faith was worked by the Holy Spirit in our hearts through 'the preaching of the holy Gospel' and was 'confirm[ed] ... by the use of the holy sacraments.' (Answer 65, p96) This implied that preaching was seen to have a primary place in the order of means by which the church brings God's salvation into the world. It was through the preaching of the church that knowledge of God's action and the gift of faith came.

In terms similar to the other historical documents,<sup>6</sup> the sacraments were defined as ‘visible, holy signs and seals instituted by God in order that He may by the use of them better make us acquainted with and seal upon us the promise of the Gospel’ (Answer 66, p96); and ‘both the Word and the sacraments [are] intended to direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross as the sole ground of our salvation’ (Question 67, p96). ‘[H]oly Baptism and the holy Supper’ (Answer 68, p96) were the two sacraments instituted by Christ in the New Testament: in baptism the believer was ‘reminded and assured’ (Question 69, p97) of the promise of being washed by Christ’s blood of all sins even as water washed impurities from the body. This being washed meant having ‘forgiveness of sins from God out of grace’ and being ‘renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be a member of Christ’ (Answer 70, p97).

Question 74 gave validity to the baptism of young children who ‘belong just as much as the adults to the covenant of God and His community’ (Answer 74, p97). The promises of redemption and faith worked by the Holy Spirit applied to children as to adults, and through baptism children were incorporated into the Christian church in the same way as circumcision incorporated children into the Old Testament community. In recognising baptism as an action which was as valid for children as it was for adults, the *Heidelberg Catechism* stood against the Anabaptists, and drew on Scriptural sources to affirm the place of children in the community of faith.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See *Scots Confession*, Ch 21 and *Westminster Confession*, Ch 27.

<sup>7</sup> Reference was made to the covenant with Abram (Genesis 17:7), to Jesus’ references to children and the Kingdom (Matthew 19:14), to the promises and experiences of the work of the Holy Spirit with children (Luke 1:14f; Psalm 22:10, Acts 2:39).

This assertion, that children are validly part of the community of faith, provides an opportunity to stress that the church as a whole, and the preaching of the church in particular, has to take seriously its responsibility to present the faith to non-adults as well as to adults. There is no doubt that in its own generation the *Heidelberg Catechism* contained no suggestion that sermons should be addressed to children. It was the function of the parents to instruct the children in the faith. In our generation, however, with a different social structure including a broader understanding of the rights of children, the assertion that children form a valid part of the community of faith brings with it the clear responsibility to proclaim the message of salvation in such a way that they also will be able to respond in faith. Children have as much right to hear the message of salvation as do adults, and any preaching which constantly and persistently has no regard for the needs of the children can be deemed to have failed in its task.

Question 75, which began the Sixth lesson, asserted that the “Holy Supper of Jesus Christ” was first the reminder and assurance that the faithful participated in the unique sacrifice of Christ through the sharing in the bread and wine which represented respectively the offered and broken body and the shed blood of Christ; and was second the Supper by which Christ fed the faithful soul with the food and drink of eternal life, as surely as the human body was fed by bread and wine ‘from the minister’s hand’ (Answer 75, p98). Further, the answer to Question 76 declared that participation in the Holy Supper—which meant ‘to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink His shed blood’ (Answer 76, p98)—implied an acceptance of the whole suffering and death of Christ, which led to an obtaining of forgiveness of sin and eternal life as well as union with Christ and so a life ruled by the Spirit of Christ.

Questions 77, 78 and 79 gave the warrant for Holy Communion, denied the doctrine of transubstantiation, and declared that in the same way as ‘bread and wine sustain this temporal life’ (Answer 79, p98) so in the Holy Supper the bread was “body” and the cup was “blood” because the crucified body and shed blood were the true food and drink which sustained the soul for eternal life. Further, by receiving the bread and wine, we ‘partake of [Christ’s] true body and blood through the working of the Holy Spirit’ (Answer 79, p98). Question 80 identified that the difference between (Reformed) Supper of the Lord and (Popish) Mass rested in the belief that complete forgiveness of sins came not through Christ’s being ‘offered ... daily by the priests of the Mass’ (Answer 80, p99), but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ once accomplished on the Cross, and the incorporation into Christ which was worked by the Holy Spirit.

In all this, participation in holy communion was not open to any who wished to come. There was a barring of the table which was described as ‘the office of the keys’ (Answer 82, p100). Sinners who ‘trust that [their sins] are forgiven and their remaining weaknesses are covered by suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to amend their life’ (Answer 81, p99) shared at the table of the Lord, but those who ‘show themselves to be unbelieving and godless’ (Question 82, p99) were excluded by this office, ‘until they amend their lives.’ (Answer 82, p100)

This ‘office of the keys’ was declared to be the ‘preaching of the holy Gospel and the Christian discipline of repentance’ (Answer 83, p100), both of which opened the Kingdom to believers and closed it to unbelievers. By including preaching in the definition of the office of the keys the *Heidelberg Catechism* made clear the twofold task of preaching—declaration of the Good News and call to repentance. Question 84 dealt with the way in which preaching of the gospel was an element of the office of the keys. Preaching opened the Kingdom of Heaven to believers through the proclamation and public testimony that when they ‘accept the promise of the Gospel with true faith, all their sins are truly forgiven’ (Answer 84, p100); and preaching to unbelievers declared that they were ‘under the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, as long as they are not converted’ (Answer 84, p100). This preaching effectively shut the Kingdom of Heaven to those who would not repent. This inferred also high status and high responsibility to preaching in that ‘God wills to judge both groups’ (Answer 84, p100) on the basis of the witness to the gospel, and the witness to the gospel came through the preaching of the church.

Likewise, in answer to Question 85, it was stated that discipline was an element of the office of the keys such as to be the means by which those who ‘carry on unchristian teaching or an unchristian life’ (Answer 85, p100) without changing even after several admonishments were excluded from the Christian community by being forbidden sacraments, and those who amended their lives were accepted as members of Christ and the church.

The Third Part of the *Heidelberg Catechism* dealt with “thankfulness” (Questions 86 to 115) and “prayer” (Questions 116 to 129). These elements were essential as responses in the Christian life to the work of God in salvation.

Question 86 was a reminder that good works were a response to God’s act of redemption ‘out of grace and without any merit on our part’ (p100). Being renewed by the Spirit ‘in [Christ’s] own image’ (Answer 86, p101) meant that the Christian life was lived in thankfulness and praise to God for what God has done. Good works were a sign of faith shown by its fruits, and won others to Christ. In this, the life of the redeemed was a reflection of the life of Christ. And, conversely, in Question 87, there was no salvation for people who did not turn from their ‘ungrateful, impenitent way of life’ (p101).

True repentance was defined in Questions 88 to 90 as ‘[t]he dying away of the old man and the resurrection of the new’ (Answer 88, p101), which led to ‘desiring ... to live in all good works.’ (Answer 90, p101) These good works were those ‘done out of true faith in accordance with God’s Law’ (Answer 91, p101), which was set down, in Question 92, as the Ten Commandments. These commandments were discussed in Questions 93 to 113.<sup>8</sup>

Of particular interest to this thesis is the discussion of the second commandment in Questions 96 to 98. No depiction of God was valid, nor were images of any creatures allowed for the worship or service of God (see Answer 97,

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<sup>8</sup> See Owen, *Witness Of Faith*, P102-106.



p103). And this prohibition was extended in Question 98 to exclude any instruction of the people other than 'the living preaching of His Word' (Answer 98, p103). This comment clearly established the importance of preaching as the means by which instruction in the faith was brought to the people.

It is significant that the preaching was described as 'living'. Earlier in this chapter it was shown that the needs of the community, the power of God in the Holy Spirit and the new life which Christ had brought were all important issues in respect of the validity of the church's preaching.

Taking this up with the image of 'living' preaching, it is now possible to suggest that preaching will be effective at three points. First, living preaching will be alive to the needs of the people listening, so that they will feel that the situations of their lives are accepted as circumstances in which God seeks to be present. It means also that preachers themselves will be aware that they are part of the listening community, as in need of God's Word as are all others. Second, living preaching will be alive to the power of God in such a way that the preachers will be deeply aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their preparation and in their presentation of the Word. It means also that through the preaching God's power will be brought to bear on all broken-ness and dis-ease, bringing healing and peace. Third, living preaching will be alive with the resurrection life of Christ so that both those who preach and those who hear will be aware that the promises of salvation can be received by those who respond in faith. In the final analysis, both preacher and preaching has to be alive to the issues of the present generation and culture. Only

then will it truly and adequately call people to faith in the saving grace of God in Christ.

In respect of preaching as instruction, it is interesting to note the comment in the answer to Question 103 (relating to the fourth commandment) that the Sabbath was given so that ‘the office of preaching and schools be maintained’ (Answer 103, p104), so that the faithful might ‘learn the Word of God, ... avail [themselves] of the holy sacraments, ... call on the Lord publicly and ... give Christian alms.’ (Answer 103, p104) Further, it was expected that the faithful would come ‘regularly, and especially on the Sunday holiday’ (Answer 103, p104). This implied that the task of preaching, as of other religious acts, would be a Sunday activity, though ‘especially on a Sunday’ assumes that preaching would also be part of everyday life.

Question 115 gave two necessary reasons for the Ten Commandments to be preached: first, so that by recognizing ‘our sinful nature’ (Answer 115, p106) the faithful would seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ; and second, so that the faithful, by asking for the grace of Holy Spirit would ‘be conformed more and more to the image of God, until we reach the goal of perfection after this life’ (Answer 115, p106). These two reasons for preaching echo earlier comments and were definitive of the task of preaching always to bring new life to those who lived in sin. Preaching which only convicted of sin, and which left the listener in grief and guilt over their sinfulness was incomplete.

Prayer, said the answer of Question 116, was ‘the principal part of the thankfulness God requires’ (Answer 116, p106), and it was God’s will that grace and the Holy Spirit were given ‘only to those that without ceasing ask Him for them.’ (Answer 116, p106) It had to be a humble call from the heart to the one, true God, in the knowledge that it was not from the worthiness of the petitioner but ‘for the sake of the Lord Christ’ (Answer 117, p106) that God was willing to hear the prayers of the faithful. God commanded that prayer should be for ‘[a]ll spiritual and bodily needs’ (Answer 118, p106), and the Lord’s Prayer was given as the model for all prayer (see Answer 119, p107). Questions 120 to 129 gave explanation of all the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, including the suggestion that the second petition (“Your kingdom come”) meant that God would ‘so rule us by Your Word and Spirit that we may more and more submit ourselves to You’ (Answer 123, p107). This meant that only when both preachers and listeners were ruled by Word and Spirit would the preaching of the church be effective. In this way alone would the church be preserved and increased until the kingdom arrived. Likewise, Question 124 stated that the third petition (“Your will be done on earth as in Heaven”) was a reminder that ‘everyone may carry out his office and vocation as willingly and faithfully as the angels in Heaven.’ (Answer 124, p108) Again, preachers would need to be included in this requirement if preaching was to be effective. The fourth petition (“Give us today our daily bread”) expanded this further, declaring that ‘without [God’s] blessing, neither our care and work nor Your gifts prosper for us’ (Answer 125, p108). And so no preacher or preaching could expect to be fruitful without God’s blessing.

We have seen that by its very structure the *Heidelberg Catechism* was designed to be part of the weekly life of the church, and was a source of the church's preaching. While there was little specific detail about how preaching was to be practiced, the whole of the *Catechism* was a summary of the subject matter of the preaching. The promise of salvation, and thanksgiving for God's blessings, were the main themes for preaching. The misery of the human condition was only a small part of the whole; questions dealing with redemption and thanksgiving formed the greater part of the *Catechism*. The implication was that preaching would therefore also be more emphasizing of these things, calling the community to hope, not ignoring the difficulties of life but always leading people to new life in Christ.

Because the preacher was always part of the Christian community, and so a 'member of Christ' (Answer 32, p91), the task of preaching would include prophetic statement (God's Word), priestly act (sacrifice for God's blessing) and kingly declaration (God's justice and righteousness).

Without preaching the church could never call people to faith and knowledge of God, and the sacramental actions of Baptism and Holy Communion would lose their power to confirm people in the faith. At the same time, by the valid preaching of God's Word boundaries would be drawn which would exclude from the community of faith those who would not take seriously God's call to repentance and new life. And yet, for all this, the church's preaching never aimed to exclude, but always sought to bring people to the forgiveness and righteousness which were gifts

of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. This, of course, could only be possible when it was blessed by God. No human endeavour was fruitful without God's grace.

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**Chapter 10: *The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)*  
and *The Savoy Declaration (1658)***

The *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* were written in the form of a number of chapters (33 for the *Confession* and 32 for the *Declaration*), each chapter dealing with an aspect of the faith. The *Declaration* followed the *Confession* closely, but inserted its own Chapter 20 “Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof” and omitted Chapters 30 “Of Church Censures” and 31 “Of Synods and Councils” of the *Confession*.

The documents began (Chapter 1) with a definition “Of the Holy Scripture”, indicating that ‘[a]lthough the light of nature and the works of creation and providence ... manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God’ (1,i, p121)<sup>1</sup> salvation came only through knowledge of God’s revelation which was found written in ‘Holy Scripture ... now contained [in] all the books of the Old and New Testament’(1,ii, p121) with specific exclusion of the Apocrypha (1,iii, p122). The documents denied any authority for Scripture which came from ‘the testimony of any man, or Church’ (1,iv, p122), and affirmed that the authority of Scripture rested ‘wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof’ (1,iv, p122). While people were encouraged to reflect on various aspects of human perception of Holy

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, arabic and lowercase roman numerals followed by page numbers in brackets in the text refer to chapters and articles in “The Westminster Confession” and “The Savoy Declaration” in Owen, *Witness of Faith*.

Scripture,<sup>2</sup> it was only by ‘the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts’ (1,v, p122) that the discovery of salvation took place.

That reference to the place and work of the Holy Spirit in respect of Holy Scripture was echoed and affirmed also in the subsequent articles of Chapter 1. While all things necessary for salvation, faith and life were compassed in Holy Scripture, the ‘inward illumination of the Spirit of God [was] necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word’ (1,vi, p122*f*); and, implying and assuming the action of the Holy Spirit, ‘not only the learned, but the unlearned, ... may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.’ (1,vii, p123) In addition, translation of Holy Scripture ‘into the vulgar language of every nation’ (1,viii, p123), and ‘[t]he infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture [by] the Scripture itself’ (1,ix, p123), along with examination of ‘all controversies ..., all decrees ..., opinions ..., doctrines ..., and private spirits’ (1,x, p123) were carried out by a conjunction of Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture.<sup>3</sup> This understanding of the importance of Holy Scripture leads easily to the implication that preaching also must always take care to be under the direction of the Holy Spirit; it is not to be a human invention. And preaching must take care to be available to all people—not only to those who are educated, trained and qualified, but to the unlearned also. Preaching must present to all people an understanding of God’s grace in salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> Described in Chapter 1, article v (see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p122) in phrases such as ‘high and reverent esteem’, ‘heavenliness of the matter’, ‘efficacy of the doctrine’, ‘majesty of the style’, *et al.*

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession* has ‘the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture’; *Savoy Declaration* has ‘the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit’. See Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p123.

Chapter 2 of both the *Westminster Declaration* and the *Savoy Confession* described the nature of God and the Holy Trinity. The first article of this Chapter provided a list of terms, descriptive of God's being (2,i, p124); the second article offered a list of attributes of God which led to, and called out 'from angels and men, and every other creature', a response of 'worship, service, [and] obedience'(2,ii, p124); and the third article gave specific detail of the trinitarian union of the Godhead, being 'three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity' (2,iii, p124f). To describe the relationship of the three persons within the Godhead, this chapter used terms which echoed the version of the Nicene Creed known in the Western Church, with the Father 'of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding', the Son 'eternally begotten of the Father', and the Holy Spirit 'eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son' (2,iii, p125). The *Savoy Declaration* added that this understanding of the trinitarian relationship between and within the Godhead was 'the foundation of all our communication with God' (*Savoy* 2,iii, p125).

This chapter was the starting point for the discussion of the nature of God which developed in the two documents, Chapters 3 to 7 dealing with the first person of the Trinity, and Chapters 8 to 19 and *Savoy Declaration* 20 describing the functions of the second and third persons.

In assessing the importance of this for an understanding of preaching, it becomes a reminder that all preaching must take care to proclaim the actions of all three persons of the Trinity. Emphasis on or avoidance of any of the persons will be a distortion of the message of the gospel.



Chapter 3 of the documents expounded an understanding of “God’s Eternal Decree” concerning predestination and fore-ordination: that ‘some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and other [*sic*] fore-ordained to everlasting death.’ (3,iii, p125) The difficulty of this was recognised in the eighth article of the Chapter, which warned that this doctrine should ‘be handled with special prudence and care’ (3,viii, p126). The whole Chapter was careful to express the understanding that God was neither limited nor constrained (so 3,i and ii, p125),<sup>4</sup> and at the same time it was careful *not* to identify who were the ones predestined for life or fore-ordained for death.<sup>5</sup> While the Chapter suggested that there was nothing to be done for those whom God ‘pleaseth ... to pass by’ (3,vii, p126), it was clear that by attending and being obedient to the Word of God the elect would ‘from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election’ (3,viii, p126).

In the context of this study, this Chapter implies, on the one side, that preachers should be ready to proclaim the Word of God so that all might hear, so that the ‘elect’ will be encouraged, and, on another side, that the proclamation of the gospel will only be effective within the context of God’s plan. It is not the preacher’s task to decide who will and who will not hear, any more than it is the preacher’s task to decide who will and who will not respond.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 3,XXIII,2,5,10.

<sup>5</sup> In this, *Westminster Confession* and *Savoy Declaration* appear to follow the thought of Calvin, ‘that the judgements of God are incomprehensible and unfathomable to us, and that it is therefore impossible, in spite of all the “signs” that may be given, for us at this present time to distinguish the elect from the reprobate.’ (Wendel, *Calvin*, p284)

Chapter 4, “Of Creation”, declared that God created all things, including human beings who were ‘created ... with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; ... and yet under a possibility of transgressing’ (4,ii, p126). These human creatures remained in happy communion with God for all the time they were obedient to God’s command.

Chapter 5, “Of Providence”, offered an answer to the dilemma which existed in respect of the relationship between God who created all things and that which was created, in which sinfulness was so evident.

God ... doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, ... to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. (5,i, p127)

In this Chapter, the two documents declared that God, whose ‘almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness ... manifest themselves in His providence’ (5,iv, p127), was not ‘the author or approver of sin’ (5,iv, p128). Rather, God ‘doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations’ (5,v, p128) and ‘witholdeth His grace ... [and] withdraweth the gifts which they had’ (5,vi, p128) from the wicked and ungodly. So while the existence of sin was not God’s doing, God chose to allow the people to follow their own way. For the righteous this brought an opportunity to recognise their need for close and constant dependence upon God; for the ungodly the result was greater exposure to the power of Satan. And it was affirmed that God’s providence extended most especially to the church, ‘dispos[ing] all things to the good thereof.’ (5,vii, p128) The proclamation of God’s Word, then, required a clear announcement of both God’s

plan for creation (and human life within creation) and God's gracious freedom, with the anticipation of a response by which people will live obediently in God's way.

In Chapter 6, the two documents developed the ideas expressed in Chapter 5. The *Westminster Confession* was most adamant that while the sin of Adam and Eve could be imputed only to themselves, God allowed their sinning, 'having purposed to order it to His own glory' (*Westminster* 6,i, p128). On the other hand, the *Savoy Declaration* only allowed for the breaking of the covenant between these first parents and God (see *Savoy* 6,i, p128). The ensuing fall from 'original righteousness and communion with God' (6,ii, p129), which was declared to be death in sin, was conveyed to all their progeny so that all people were corrupted in the same way and were thereby 'utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil' (6,iv, p129). By this act, all people were caught up in sin, and as such were 'bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law' (6,vi, p129).

It was only through 'some voluntary condescension on God's part' (7,i, p130), therefore, that this situation could be redressed. The first covenant, 'a covenant of works' (7,ii, p130), proved to be inadequate; a second covenant, 'commonly called the covenant of grace' (7,iii, p130), brought the offer of life and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Both the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* declared that this new covenant was administered in different and various ways during different eras which were described as 'the time of the law, and ... the time of the gospel' (*Westminster* 7,v, p130)/'the time of the law, and since the coming of Christ in the flesh' (*Savoy* 7,v, p130). The *Westminster Confession*

asserted that the means by which this new covenant was made known was through ‘the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper’ (*Westminster 7,vi*, p131).

These four chapters together, then, provided one of the basic reasons for preaching having an important place in the church’s life. The original state of innocence had been lost, and God had provided first one then another means by which the lost might be restored. The old covenant, based on human endeavour, had failed to restore the relationship between God and humanity. It was the task of the church through its preaching to present to those lost in sin God’s free gift of salvation which had come through Christ. This preaching was to make known the way by which people could come again into the perfect relationship with God. Both the old and the new covenants (as found in the Old and New Testaments) were part of the declaration of the church, for ‘[t]here are not ... two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.’ (*Westminster 7,vi*, p131)

Chapter 8 of the documents set out an understanding of Christ as ‘the Mediator between God and man; the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of His Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world’ (8,i, p131), and identified that in Christ ‘two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person without conversion, composition, or confusion’ (8,ii, p132). This inseparable joining of the two natures meant that Christ ‘was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit, above measure’

(8,iii, p132) and ‘underwent the punishment due to us’ (*Savoy* 8,iv, p132). In this way, Christ ‘hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father, and purchases, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven’ (8,v, p133). This redemption was available not only to those of generations after Christ, but to ‘the elect in all ages’ (8,vi, p133), and was communicated through the Word, which with the Spirit persuaded and governed the hearts of all who were ‘most consonant to His wonderful and unsearchable dispensation.’ (8,viii, p133) Preachers, according to this insight, were clearly obliged to announce in their preaching that Christ was the only source of redemption.

But none of this, the documents said,<sup>6</sup> was forced on the will of humankind. Before the fall human beings lived in a ‘state of innocency, [and] had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good, and well pleasing to God’ (9,ii, p133). Along with the fall came a loss of ability to choose the good or to change the human state (see 9,iii, p133f); and, according to this order of things, with conversion came the opportunity for each person ‘freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good’ (9,iv, p134), even if imperfectly. But this was not human ability—it was God’s act and work alone which created this opportunity. From this it must be implied that the message of the church’s preaching should always be an expression of the act of God which leads to new life for the Christian. There can be no hint that human endeavour would achieve any conversion of the sinner.

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 9 “Of Free Will”, Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p133f.

God's Word and Spirit were the means by which all who were 'predestinated unto life' were called 'out of that state of sin and death ... to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ' (10,i, p134). The Holy Spirit quickened and renewed all who were called by God's grace, even '[e]lect infants, dying in infancy' (10,iii, p134). But those who were not among the elect could 'never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved' (*Westminster* 10, iv, p135), even though they 'be called by the ministry of the Word' (10,iv, p134); only by God's effectual calling could any come into life. So it was to be understood that preaching was under the same limitation. No preaching would automatically result in people coming to faith; not all who were called would respond. The effectiveness of preaching would always be according to the will of God.

The Eleventh Chapter of the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* stated that God's justification of those who were called to life was not through any action on their part, but 'by [God's] imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in His death for their whole and sole righteousness' (*Savoy* 11,i, p135)<sup>7</sup>. This righteousness of Christ was received by faith which was 'the alone instrument of justification' (11,ii, p135), and Christ's obedience and death were the full remission of sin and made 'proper, real, and full satisfaction to His Father's [*Savoy* has 'God's'] justice in their behalf' (11,iii, p136); but it was not until 'the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them' (11,iv, p136), that the full benefit of Christ's act was received. The last two articles of this chapter said that those who were justified were assured, after their

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<sup>7</sup> *Westminster* expressed this as: 'by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them', see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p135.

humble confession, of the forgiveness of their sins and that believers under the terms of the old covenant were equally justified with those under the new covenant. From the point of view of preaching, this chapter was another reminder that it was God's action, not the power of the preacher's rhetoric, which brought the pardon which led to justification. And the timing of anyone's acceptance of Christ was out of human hands, and was clearly left with the Holy Spirit.

The out-workings of justification were identified in the next two chapters—Chapter 12 “Of Adoption” and Chapter 13 “Of Sanctification”. In the first instance, those who were justified ‘are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God’ and were ‘never cast off’ (12,i, p137). In the second place, because the justified were given ‘a new heart and a new spirit’ (13,i, p137), they were sanctified and ‘the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed’ (13,i, p137). While sanctification remained ‘imperfect in this life’ (13,ii, p137), in the final analysis

through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate path doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (13,iii, p137)

It can be suggested that one of the means by which those who are called continue to find and experience the ‘strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ’ is through the preaching which declares God's free gift of salvation. The constant re-affirmation of the adoption and sanctification which follow the justification which comes by faith in Christ's sacrifice, along with clear expressions of awe and love for

the One who provides the gift, alerts the believer to the signs of that 'grace' and 'perfecting holiness' referred to.

Chapter 14 identified that '[t]he grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ' (14,i, p138), and that the usual means by which this grace was declared was through the 'ministry of the Word' (14,i p138), by which was implied the preaching of the church. And increase and strengthening of that grace of faith which was received through the preaching came through further preaching and the sacraments and prayer. For individuals, faith might vary in degree of weakness or strength, but Christ, being 'both the author and finisher of our faith' (14,iii, p138), was the one who brought the victory and full assurance.

It was an essential element of the understanding of preaching here that it always declare the saving action of God through Jesus Christ, and by this declaration call people to receive and be built up in that saving faith. Again, the preaching was not the source or foundation of the faith, but the work of the Spirit of Christ in the preaching was the sole means by which preaching was effective in bringing people to faith.

The Savoy Conference differed considerably in its wording of Chapter 15 from that of the *Westminster Confession*, though not so much in the meaning of the chapter. The first hint of this was in the change of the heading, "Of Repentance unto Life", by the addition of the words "and Salvation". The Westminster Divines had



begun the chapter with the declaration that ‘Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.’ (*Westminster* 15,i, p138f) In this comment the *Westminster Confession* made it quite clear that it was the task of all ordained people to engage in the activity of preaching, and implied that preaching was a necessary requirement for ordination. In addition to this general implication was the specific call to every minister to preach the evangelical doctrine of ‘[r]epentance unto life’.

This preaching of the doctrine of repentance unto life, said the *Westminster Confession*, caused sinners so to hate the nature of their lives that they ‘turn from [their sins] unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in the ways of His commandments.’ (*Westminster* 15,ii, p139) This repentance, called out by preaching, was ‘of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.’ (*Westminster* 15,iii, p139) The *Westminster Confession* went on to declare that no sin was so small as to be undeserving of damnation, nor was any sin so great as to bring damnation on those who truly repent (see *Westminster* 15,iv, p139). So all people ‘ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but ... endeavour to repent of [their] particular sins, particularly’ (*Westminster* 15,v, p140), and in making full confession (in private or in public) should ‘declare [their] repentance to those that are offended’ (*Westminster* 15,vi, p140). In this way they would know reconciliation and be received in love.

The Savoy Conference, on the other hand, chose to begin the chapter by declaring that repentance from sin was a gift of God available to all the elect (see

*Savoy* 15,i, p138f), and that believers who sinned and fell would, by God's merciful covenant of grace, 'be renewed through repentance unto salvation.' (*Savoy* 15,ii, p139) Repentance, for the Savoy Conference as for the Westminster Divines, was 'an evangelical grace' (*Savoy* 15,iii, p139), but the Savoy Conference declared that it was the work of the Holy Spirit which convicted a person of sin and enabled that person to pray for pardon and strength of grace, and that 'it is every man's duty to repent of his particular known sins particularly' (*Savoy* 15,iv, p139). This led the Savoy Conference to declare with the Westminster Divines that 'there is no sin so great, that it shall bring damnation on them who truly repent' (*Savoy* 15,v, p139) and to conclude that 'the constant preaching of repentance [was] necessary.' (*Savoy* 15,v, p139) So both documents, though coming as it were from different directions, declared clearly that the function of preaching was to call sinners to repentance.

The 16th chapter of the documents identified immediately that good works were only those done in response to the commands of God's holy Word, and as such were

the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the Gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God. (16,ii, p140)

It was understood that it was the Spirit of Christ which enabled believers to do these good works; but the doing of good works could never 'merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God' (16,v, p141). God accepted the good works which were sincerely done in the same way as God accepted the believer—through the merits of Christ the Son. And the documents were clear in their refusal to allow any good

works done by those who were unregenerate, ‘because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith’ (16,vii, p141).

The inference in this for preaching is that when preaching strengthens, edifies, and adorns the faithful, stops the mouths of opponents of the faith, and glorifies God, it comes into the category of ‘good work’. On the other hand, when preaching does not strengthen and edify the faithful, and allows for contention and exalts the preacher or the listener, then it can be criticised as ‘defiled, and mixed with ... weakness and imperfection’ (16,v, p141). It follows from this that the preacher has to be alert to and conscious of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, enabling the work of preaching to be effective.

Just as Chapter 10 had shown the call to salvation to be ‘God’s free and special grace alone’ (10,ii, p134), so Chapter 17 declared that the grace to ‘persevere ... to the end, and be eternally saved’ (17,i, p141) was God’s gift to the saints by virtue of ‘the immutability of the decree of election flowing<sup>8</sup> from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father ... [and the Son and the Spirit]; and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace’ (17,ii, p142). Both the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* acknowledged that the faithful could ‘fall into grievous sins ... and bring temporal judgments upon themselves’ (17,iii, p142), though the *Savoy Declaration* added the reminder that ‘they are and shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.’ (*Savoy* 17,iii, p142f) For this to be taken seriously, the content of preaching would not change a great deal

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<sup>8</sup> The word “flowing” is omitted in the *Savoy Declaration*.

between sermons addressed to “unbelievers” and those addressed to “the faithful”. All people (within and outside the church) were to be reminded of the reality and dangers of sin, and all were to be called to accept God’s gift of salvation.

Chapter 18 made it clear that one difference between ‘hypocrites and other unregenerate men’ and ‘such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus’ (18,i, p143) lay in “the Assurance of Grace and Salvation”, of which the latter could ‘be certainly assured’ (18,i, p143). The foundation of this assurance rested ‘upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation’ (*Westminster* 18,ii, p143) and ‘on the immediate witness of the Spirit, testifying our adoption’ (*Savoy* 18,ii, p143). The believer was reminded, in article iii, that this assurance was not an essential element of faith, and the believer might struggle to appreciate it. But because the Spirit enabled a believer to attain this assurance, every believer was urged ‘to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure’ (18,iii, p143). In this way the believer would experience ‘peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, ... love and thankfulness to God, ... strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, [which are] the proper fruits of this assurance’ (18,iii, p143). And article iv of the Chapter was a reminder that even when the assurance of salvation was shaken in a believer, for whatever reason, the believer would be ‘never utterly destitute of that seed of God ... out of which ... this assurance may ... be revived’ (18,iv, p144). In respect of the “Assurance of Grace and Salvation”, then, it was the task of the church’s preaching always to provide the encouragement necessary for people to grow in their awareness of that personal assurance of God’s gift of faith.

Chapter 19 identified the way in which the law of God was to be understood. In article i, the law given to Adam was described as ‘a covenant of works, by which [God] bound [Adam] and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience’ (19,i, p144). Life was promised if this law was kept; death was threatened if the law was disobeyed. God delivered this same law, ‘commonly called moral’ (19,iii, p145), to the people of Israel, in the form of the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. God further gave ‘ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances’ (19,iii, p145), which were abolished under the new covenant. And God also gave ‘sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people’ (19,iv, p145). The moral law, however, ‘doth for ever bind all’ (19,v, p145). The documents were at pains to assert that following the moral law was not evidence of any ‘covenant of works’ (19,vi, p145), nor was it ‘evidence of [the believer’s] being under the law[,] and not under grace’ (19,vi, p146). Rather the documents declared that for true believers it was ‘a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty’ and a means of ‘discovering ... the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives’ (19,vi, p145). From this we recognise that while preaching of the moral law would be important, it had always to be in the context of grace and salvation. Preaching of moral law without reference to the grace of God and salvation of Christ would lead to works righteousness, which was (of course) denied by all Reformation thought.

*The Savoy Declaration* inserted next its own Chapter 20—“Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof”. The Gospel was ‘the promise of Christ, ... the means of calling [the elect], and begetting in them faith and repentance’ (*Savoy*

20,i, p146), which promise was ‘revealed only in and by the Word of God’ (*Savoy* 20,ii, p146) and could not be known by any human thought or reasoning. It was ‘the sovereign will and good pleasure of God’ (*Savoy* 20,iii, p147) that the gospel was to be revealed in all ages, to people and nations, through preaching. And at the same time it was through the ‘irresistible work of the Holy Ghost upon the whole soul’ (*Savoy* 20,iv, p147) that people were converted from sinful life and brought to new spiritual life. In all ages then, preaching controlled and inspired by the Holy Spirit was to be the means by which the Gospel was revealed, and care was to be taken to ensure that the needs of each particular generation were met. So it can be inferred that preaching in this era must be careful about the ways in which current media and technologies are utilized for the proclamation and preaching of the Gospel.

Chapter 20 of the *Westminster Confession* and Chapter 21 of the *Savoy Declaration* spoke about the freedom which believers had

from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law ... the bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; ... as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind. (20/21,i, p147f)<sup>9</sup>

This liberty of the Christian extended to a liberty of conscience by which the believer was free to avoid ‘the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to [God’s] Word’ (20/21,ii, p148). The Westminster Divines included in this Chapter a fourth article (which the Savoy Conference chose to omit) asserting that ‘the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased’ (*Westminster* 20,iv, p149) were intended to be mutually affirming, and

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<sup>9</sup> From here, the first chapter number refers to *The Westminster Confession*, and the second to *The Savoy Declaration*.

any opposition to the lawful authorities, both civil and ecclesiastical, even in the name of Christian freedom, might ‘lawfully be called to account’ (*Westminster* 20,iv, p149), for it stood in the way of God’s will and purpose.

Chapter 21/22 told “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day”. Worship could only be practiced according to the way set down by God, and was not to include ‘the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.’ (21/22,i, p149f) It was to be offered only to the Triune God (see 21/22,ii, p150), and was ordinarily to involve ‘[t]he reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, singing of psalms, as also the administration of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper’ (*Savoy* 22,v, p150)<sup>10</sup>. Worship should include prayer which had to be ‘in the name of the Son, by the help of His Spirit ... and, if vocal, in a known tongue’ (21/22,iii, p150). This comment about prayer being ‘in a known tongue’ meant that prayer had to be spoken so that the people were able to understand, and by understanding participate in, the prayer and other action of the worship.

It is possible to extend the meaning of this instruction to the other elements of worship, and particularly to preaching, with the analogous results. Further, if ‘in a known tongue’ is taken to mean not simply that the words used are part of the common language, but that the concepts and expressions also belong to the common processes of communication, then preaching, like praying, will be an element of worship which involves both those who speak and those who listen.

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<sup>10</sup> See also *Westminster*, Chapter 21, article v (Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p150).

Occasional and seasonal elements such as ‘religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings’ (*Westminster* 21,v, p150)<sup>11</sup> were also encouraged as required, and without any restriction on place or form (see 21/22,vi, p151). Articles vii and viii of this Chapter affirmed the status of the one Sabbath day in the week

which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed to the first day of the week, ...the Lord’s Day. (21/22,vii, p151)

This day was for ‘the public and private exercises of [God’s] worship’ 21/22,viii, p151). It is significant that the Assembly Commission on Liturgy in its resource book, *Uniting in Worship*, appropriately described normal Sunday worship as “The Service of the Lord’s Day”.<sup>12</sup>

Chapter 22/23, which expounded “Of Lawful Oaths and Vows”, declared that the taking of lawful oaths was ‘a part of religious worship’ (22/23,i, p152), and that those taking oaths ‘ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act’ (22/23,iii, p152). Article iv, stressing that the oath ‘be taken in the plain and common sense of the words’ (22/23,iv, p153), echoed the comment made about prayers being in the vernacular.

The place, importance and function of the Civil Magistrate was dealt with in Chapter 23/24. Only at one point does this chapter have relevance to the topic of this thesis. Although it was responsibility of the magistrate to ensure ‘that unity and peace be preserved in the Church’ (*Westminster* 23,iii, p154), and ‘to encourage,

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<sup>11</sup> See also *Savoy*, Chapter 22, article v (Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p150).

<sup>12</sup> See *Uniting in Worship*, p75f.



promote, and protect the professors and profession of the gospel' (*Savoy* 24,iii, p154), it was not appropriate for the magistrate to 'assume ... the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven' (*Westminster* 23,iii, p154), nor to deprive of liberty any who had 'differences about the doctrines of the gospel, or ways of the worship of God ... [while] not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them' (*Savoy* 24,iii, p154f). On the understanding that the phrase, 'the office of the keys',<sup>13</sup> in *The Heidelberg Catechism* was defined as 'the preaching of the holy Gospel',<sup>14</sup> the barring of the magistrates from 'the power of the keys' was a barring from preaching. In other words, while it was the responsibility of the civil authorities to preserve a social environment in which the work of the church could proceed without threat, this chapter secured the preaching of the church from censure by civil authority. It affirmed that the church's preaching was to be controlled by no other authority than the Word of God, and opened the way for preaching which brought the Word of God to bear on the issues of society and politics.

Chapter 24/25 dealt with issues relating to marriage, and provides no information for this thesis.

Chapter 25/26 set out an understanding "Of the Church". While both documents described the Church as 'invisible, consist[ing] of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be' (25/26,i, p157), the *Westminster Confession* declared that the 'visible Church, ... consists of all those throughout the world that

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<sup>13</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Questions 82-84, see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p100.

<sup>14</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Answer 83, see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p100.

profess true religion; ... out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.’ (*Westminster* 25,ii, p157) Accordingly Christ had given this ‘catholic visible Church ... the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints’ (*Westminster* 25,iii, p157). The purity or otherwise of the visible church was determined by the way in which ‘the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed’ (*Westminster* 25,iv, p157).

It had already been identified in earlier chapters of the *Westminster Confession* that preaching was one of the means by which the gospel was taught and embraced, (see *Westminster* 15, p138f) that the ordinances referred to in Chapter 25, article iv, included preaching (see *Westminster* 7,vi, p131), and that public worship should always include the preaching of the Word of God (see *Westminster* 21,v, p150). It follows from the comment in Chapter 25 of the *Confession*, therefore, that the functions of preaching included the gathering and perfecting of the people of God and the maintenance of the purity of the church.

On the other hand, the *Savoy Declaration* suggested that the ‘visible catholic Church of Christ ... is not entrusted with the administration of any ordinances, or have any officers to rule or govern in, or over the whole body’ (*Savoy* 26,ii, p157). In this, it expressed the Independent/Congregationalist understanding of the autonomy of each community of faith within the whole body of the church catholic. While it accepted preaching as a necessity of the church’s life (see *Savoy* 25,v,

p139), it did not see preaching as a constitutive ordinance in the same way as the *Westminster Confession* did.

In Chapter 26/27, discussion was “Of the Communion of Saints” which was founded on the fellowship with Christ which each one had ‘by His Spirit’ (26/27,i, p159). Through the ‘graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory’ (26/27,i, p159) of Christ all were

united to one another in love, ... have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. (26/27,i, p159)

The saints were required to ‘maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God[,] and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification’ (26/27,ii, p159). This communion maintained the fellowship of the church, and was to be ‘extended unto those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.’ (26/27,ii, p160) The *Westminster Confession* added a warning that participation within the communion of saints did not allow anyone to consider themselves ‘partakers of the substance of [Christ’s] Godhead’ (*Westminster* 26,iii, p160). Neither could the saints imagine that their communion with each other allowed them to have rights to the property of others.

In discussion “Of the Sacraments” in Chapter 27/28, both documents declared the sacraments to be ‘holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits’ (27/28,i,

p160)<sup>15</sup>. The function of the sacraments was to confirm the interest in Christ which the faithful had. The *Westminster Confession* suggested that the sacraments also ‘put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world’ (*Westminster* 27,i, p160), and both the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* asserted that the sacraments ‘engage [the faithful] to the service of God in Christ’ (27/28,i, p160). While in the sacraments there was a relationship ‘between the sign and the thing signified’ (27/28,ii, p160), there was no power in the sacraments to confer grace. The effectiveness of each sacrament depended ‘upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains ... a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.’ (27/28,iii, p161) There were ‘only two sacraments ordained by Christ ... Baptism and the Supper of the Lord’ (27/28,iv, p161), and it was only the lawfully ordained minister of the Word who could administer these sacraments. This restriction of administration of sacraments to the ordained minister (preacher) clearly declared the powerful relationship between Word and sacraments which was seen in the *Scots Confession*<sup>16</sup> and the *Heidelberg Catechism*.<sup>17</sup>

Baptism (Chapter 28/29) was by ‘water ... in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, [and performed] by a minister of the Gospel’ (28/29,ii, p161), and was ‘but once to be administered to any person.’ (28/29,vii, p162) It might be by immersion, by pouring or by sprinkling (see 28/29,iii, p162), and was for ‘those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, [and] also the infants of one or both believing parents’ (28/29,iv, p162). It was ‘admission ... into the visible Church’ (*Westminster* 28,i, p161) and ‘a sign and seal of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Savoy* suggested that it was Christ who instituted the sacraments, see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p172, note 1, Chapter XXVII/XXVIII,i.

covenant of grace, [being] ingrafting into Christ, ... regeneration, ... remission of sins, ... to walk in newness of life.’ (28/29,i, p161) However, ‘grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto [baptism]’ (28/29,v, p162) that people might not be saved without baptism, nor that all baptised people were automatically saved. The grace promised in baptism was ‘offered, ... exhibited and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, ... according to the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time’ (28/29,vi, p162).

The Lord’s Supper (Chapter 29/30) was the means by which all the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice were made available to true believers for ‘their spiritual nourishment and growth in [Christ], their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him; and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other.’ (29/30,i, p163) The sacrament was not a real enactment of the sacrifice of Christ, but ‘a commemoration of that one offering up of Himself, by Himself, upon the cross, once for all’ (29/30,ii, p163). As with baptism, those with the responsibility of declaring the Word were to be the ministers of this sacrament.<sup>18</sup> Both elements were to be given to the communicants; denial of the cup to the people and various devotional acts relating to the elements of the Lord’s Supper were ‘contrary to the nature of this sacrament’ (29/30,iv, p164). There was an explicit ban on offering the elements to those ‘who are not then present in the congregation’ (29/30,iii, p163), as there was also a ban on ‘[p]rivate masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest or any other alone’ (29/30,iv, p163). Articles v

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 21, Owen, *Witness of Faith*, pp73f.

<sup>17</sup> See Questions 65ff, Owen, *Witness of Faith*, pp96ff.

and vi of Chapter 29/30 specifically denied the doctrine of the Roman Church ‘commonly called transubstantiation’ (29/30,vi, p164) which suggested that the elements of bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. ‘[I]nwardly by faith, ... but spiritually, [believers] receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death’ (29/30,vii, p164). Ignorant, wicked and ungodly people were unworthy to participate in the Lord’s Supper, and in eating and drinking judgment upon themselves sinned against Christ (see 29/30,viii, p164). The documents implied that preaching was important to the administration of the sacraments in that people were encouraged to amend their lives so as to be able to partake of the sacrament in an appropriate way only through the church’s preaching (see 15, p138f).

Chapters 30 and 31 of *Westminster Confession* “Of Church Censures” and “Of Synods and Councils” were omitted from *Savoy Declaration*. The Westminster Divines declared that ‘Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate’ (*Westminster* 30,i, p165) had been appointed by Christ with power ‘to retain, and remit sins; to shut [the] kingdom against the impenitent ...; and to open it unto penitent sinners’ (*Westminster* 30,ii, p165). The censures were necessary to ensure that the church should remain pure (see *Westminster* 30,iii, p165), and were exercised by admonition, suspension and excommunication according to individual circumstances (see *Westminster* 30,iv, p165). The Synods and Councils were the assemblies of the church which allowed the ministers ‘to determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience, to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of His Church’ (*Westminster* 31,iii,

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<sup>18</sup> Note particularly the wording of *Westminster*, Chapter 29, article ii: ‘to declare His word of institution to the

p166). These assemblies were ‘to handle, or conclude, nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth’ (*Westminster* 31,v, p166f).

Chapter 32/31 commented “Of the State of Men<sup>19</sup> after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead”. This chapter declared against the Roman doctrine of purgatory and expanded on the Biblical statements relating to the resurrection of the dead. Chapter 33/32 concluded the documents with statements “Of the Last Judgment”, which declared that it would be Christ who would sit in judgment on ‘all persons that have lived upon earth’ (33/32,i, p168). For the elect there will be salvation; for the reprobate damnation. But the day of judgment, so certainly known to be coming, was unknown as to its time. For this reason the documents called people to ‘be always watchful ... [and] ever prepared to say, Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen.’ (33/32,iii, p168)

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Echoing both the *Scots Confession* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* affirmed that preaching was a critical element in the church’s ability to declare the new covenant of God’s grace. Preaching, like Christ’s existence, had to draw together both the divine and the human. God’s Word was to be communicated through human vehicles to the human situation, so that God’s grace could be received. And because God had given to all

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people’— see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p163.  
<sup>19</sup> *Savoy* had “Man”

the elect<sup>20</sup> the freedom to choose the right and good, to accept or reject Christ, preaching was never to be manipulative.

These two documents were adamant that preaching was always a calling of sinners (those away from God) to repentance and entry into God's care. To ensure this, it was vital that preaching be controlled and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Whether preaching was performed within or outside the structure of the church, the aim had to be that of bringing sinners to faith and the faithful to greater knowledge of God's love; in this, different circumstances would call for different forms.

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<sup>20</sup> *Westminster/Savoy* Chapter 10, article iv, believed that those 'not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word' cannot come to Christ. See Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p134



## Chapter 11: John Wesley's *Forty Four Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*

In the Preface to the *Forty Four Sermons*, Wesley declared that the sermons ‘contain the substance of what [he had] been preaching’<sup>1</sup> since his conversion in 1738. From the following evidence, however, it can be assumed that, even if they were the ‘substance’ of his preaching, the *Forty Four Sermons* were not exactly as preached. Wesley gave the place and date of Sermon I as ‘St Mary’s Oxford, before the University, on June 18th, 1738’,<sup>2</sup> though his Journal records that ‘on Sunday 11, I went to Oxford’ and that on Thursday (June 15th) he ‘reached the Maese ... and in an hour and a half landed at Rotterdam.’<sup>3</sup> This, coupled with the fact that the first of the *Forty Four Sermons* were published in 1746, some years after at least some were preached, and the frequent use of phrases in New Testament Greek<sup>4</sup> and occasional Hebrew phrases,<sup>5</sup> suggests the probability that the sermons were not “as preached” but rather had been reworked into their written form. The *Sermons* none-the-less contained the material of Wesley’s sermons, and were written ‘as I generally speak, *ad populum*—to the bulk of mankind, to those who neither relish nor understand the art of speaking’.<sup>6</sup>

In Sermon I, “Salvation by Faith”, Wesley affirmed that the function of preaching was to bring repentance and belief,<sup>7</sup> and so “whosoever believeth on Him

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pv.

<sup>2</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p1.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, p55.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the greek phrases in Sermon XII (Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pp141-144).

<sup>5</sup> As, for example, in Sermon XXI (Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p277).

<sup>6</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pv.

<sup>7</sup> See Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p8.

shall be saved,” is, and must be, the foundation of all our preaching’.<sup>8</sup> Neither were there limits to the audience for preaching:

Whom shall we except? The Poor? Nay; ... The unlearned? No.  
... The young? By no means. ... The sinners? Least of all.<sup>9</sup>

People of every station in life should have the opportunity to hear the Word of salvation. And for Wesley, the size of the crowd seems also to have been irrelevant.

In his Journal entries for August 27 and 28, 1743, he wrote

*Saturday 27.* I reached Exeter in the afternoon; but as no one knew of my coming, I did not preach that night, only to one poor sinner at the inn; ...

*Sunday 28.* I preached at seven to a handful of people. ... From church I went to the castle; where were gathered together (as some imagined) half the grown persons in the city. ... So vast a congregation ... all silent and still, while I explained at large, and enforced, that glorious truth, ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.’<sup>10</sup>

Wesley was alert to the possibility of his own error, and, as earlier Reformers had done,<sup>11</sup> he invited others to ‘[p]oint ... out a better way than I have yet known. Show me it is so, by plain proof of Scripture.’<sup>12</sup> So Scripture was the measure by which all things, including the preaching of the church, were to be judged. In the Preface, Wesley offered by way of suggestion as to how someone might lead him from his error to new understanding, a model for the process by which people of the faith could lead those outside the faith gently into the path of life:

if I linger ... labour with me a little; take me by the hand, and lead me as I am able to bear. But be not displeased ...: I can go but feebly and slowly at best.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p9.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p9.

<sup>10</sup> Backhouse, *John Wesley's Journal*, pp101f.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the Preamble to *Scots Confession of Faith*, in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p64.

<sup>12</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pvii.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pvii.

Wesley suggested that this model would work for him in his journey from error to truth. It could be extended to work also for all—including preachers and pastors—who seek to lead others to the truth of the gospel.

Examining almost any page of Wesley's *Forty Four Sermons* shows clearly how much Wesley's preaching relied on a vast knowledge of the Scriptures. Most of the points he made in his sermons were confirmed and proved by quoting some verse or passage—though many of the references were not specifically given. Obviously, Wesley believed, and acted on the belief, that preaching was first and foremost the announcing of the Word of God. He lived, of course, in an era before modern Biblical criticism;<sup>14</sup> and, convinced that the Bible contained 'the fountain of heavenly wisdom',<sup>15</sup> he offered a literal interpretation, which he wrote 'chiefly for plain, unlettered men, who understand only their mother-tongue, and yet reverence and love the Word of God, and have a desire to save their souls.'<sup>16</sup> For this reason, it was not a random or careless gathering of "proof texts" which Wesley dropped into his sermons; rather each reference was a serious attempt to show the truth of his message so that the hearer could be certain of the validity of the salvation offered.

Wesley was convinced that the purpose of preaching was to bring people to faith. In "The Righteousness of Faith" (Sermon VI) Wesley provided an evangelistic sermon which called the hearers away from any suggestion of works righteousness to the simple acceptance of faith:

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<sup>14</sup> This is shown, for example, by his explanation of the relationship between the four Gospels, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p11.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament*, p9.

<sup>16</sup> Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament*, p6.

Wherefore, then, dost thou say, 'I must do this and this *first*, and then I shall believe'? Nay, but *first believe!* Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ .... Let this good foundation first be laid, and then thou shalt do all things well.<sup>17</sup>

In this Wesley echoed Reformation theology's *sola fides*: by faith alone was salvation gained. This was for Wesley the essential declaration of all preaching.

Wesley was certain that the importance of preaching rested in its ability to bring people into the community of faith. In his sermon "Of the Church",<sup>18</sup> he made it quite clear that his understanding was that the church was constituted first and foremost in its being a '*coetus credentium*, "a congregation of believers", ... men endowed with "living faith".<sup>19</sup> This was in contrast to the declarations of the various confessions of the Reformation that the first mark of the church was 'the true preaching of the Word of God ...'.<sup>20</sup> Preaching was then, for Wesley, a means to an end: it was the way in which men and women were brought into the community of people who lived by and shared that 'living faith'. He was even prepared to allow, contrary to the *Thirty Nine Articles* and the other Reformation documents, that the church could in fact exist even where 'wrong opinions ... and superstitious modes of worship',<sup>21</sup> might otherwise preclude people from membership of the true church. In justification of this stance, Wesley offered the alternative, but Scriptural, definition of the church which he found in the text of that sermon: being "one body", united by

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<sup>17</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p71.

<sup>18</sup> Sermon 74, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol 3, p45ff.

<sup>19</sup> Sermon 74, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol 3, p51.

<sup>20</sup> So *Scots Confession*, ChXVIII, see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p72. See also *Augsberg Confession*, Article 8, and *Thirty Nine Articles*, Article 19, in Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, Vol III, p11 and p499 respectively.

<sup>21</sup> Sermon 74, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol 3, p52.

“one spirit”; having “one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.”<sup>22</sup>

Because the *Forty Four Sermons* were in fact written sermons developed from preached sermons, it is not surprising that they contained only a limited amount of information about Wesley’s understanding of preaching.

Throughout the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, on the other hand, Wesley made general comments which expressed his understanding of preaching as it was practiced and understood in the New Testament, and in which he illustrated from New Testament examples of his understanding of the task of the preacher. Wesley’s *Notes* also included insights into his own predisposition to encourage preaching.

In his note on Matthew 4:17, Wesley referred to Jesus having ‘preached ... both to Jews and Samaritans (John iv. 41, 45),’<sup>23</sup> commenting that Jesus’ preaching began ‘in the same words with [*sic*] John the Baptist [*Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*].’<sup>24</sup> For Wesley, this verse was the beginning of Jesus’ ‘solemn, stated preaching.’<sup>25</sup> And his note on Luke’s comment, after Jesus had begun his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth (4:22), echoed this description:

*The gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth—A person of spiritual discernment may find in all the discourses of our Lord a peculiar sweetness, gravity, and becomingness, such as is not to be found in the same degree, not even in those of the apostles.*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Sermon 74, *The Works of John Wesley, Vol 3*, p50.

<sup>23</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p27.

<sup>24</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p27.

<sup>25</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p27.

<sup>26</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p216. It should be noted that Wesley’s practice was to print in italics all words quoted from the verse being noted, and following an em-dash to make his comments on the verse.

In the introduction to the Gospel of John, Wesley suggested that the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees in John 8:13-30 was in fact ‘Christ’s preaching and vindicating His doctrine’.<sup>27</sup> In his notes on that passage, however, there was no direct reference to preaching, but a reference to Jesus’ use of ‘the divine name, I AM (Exod. iii. 14).’<sup>28</sup> It was Wesley’s understanding that when Jesus was speaking of himself, and of his relationship with the Father, he was in fact calling to faith those who would hear and believe. For this reason, when commenting on verse 26 (‘I have many things to say and to judge of you: but he that sent me is true; and I speak to the world the things which I have heard from him’<sup>29</sup>), Wesley gave this interpolation of Jesus’ words:

I have much to say concerning your inexcusable unbelief ...  
Whether ye believe, or no ... I deliver truly what He hath given  
Me in charge.<sup>30</sup>

Here, then, was one of the essential elements of preaching for Wesley. Preaching was the process of calling others to faith through the proclamation of the words and experience which God had given.

Wesley also commented about the preaching of other New Testament figures, relating their preaching to that of Christ. Recording the words which Peter spoke after his experiences in Joppa and Caesarea (Acts 10:34ff), Wesley translated εὐαγγελιζόμενος (in verse 36) as ‘preaching the glad tidings’.<sup>31</sup> His comments on

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<sup>27</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p301.

<sup>28</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p338. And see also the notes on verses 27 and 28 (p339)

<sup>29</sup> Wesley’s own translation, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p339.

<sup>30</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p339.

<sup>31</sup> Wesley’s translation of Acts 10:36b, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p435.

this verse made a link between this preaching of good news and the ‘word’ which had been ‘sent to the children of God’.<sup>32</sup> Wesley saw a direct relationship between Christ, whom God had sent to proclaim ‘[p]eace—[b]etween God and man’,<sup>33</sup> and all preaching, which was proclamation of God’s act of salvation by Christ.<sup>34</sup>

This meant, of course, that there was a major difference between the message of God’s saving act which Jesus proclaimed and his call to faith, and the message and call proclaimed by those of later generations. It amounted to this: that Jesus not only proclaimed but also effected the saving act. In his journal reference for May 24th, 1738, Wesley clearly identified not only that Christ had opened the way for his experience of new life, but that Christ was the means of that opening:

an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me.<sup>35</sup>

It was Christ who took the sins away, and Christ who did the saving. And this was what was implied when Wesley said:

[t]he Son of God, who came from heaven, is here showing us the way to heaven; to the place which He hath prepared for us; the glory He had before the world began.<sup>36</sup>

And no preacher since Christ had been able to bring the salvation other than by announcing what Christ had done.

In his notes on I Corinthians 3:11, Wesley asserted that the foundation of all salvation was ‘[i]n the counsels of divine wisdom, in the promises and prophesies of

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<sup>32</sup> Wesley’s translation of Acts 10:36a, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p435.

<sup>33</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p435.

<sup>34</sup> See *Notes on the New Testament*, p435: ‘Preaching—Proclaiming by Him’.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, p50.

the Old Testament, in the preaching of the apostles, St. Paul in particular’,<sup>37</sup> and in his note on II Corinthians 2:15, Wesley identified ‘the preachers of the gospel’,<sup>38</sup> equating ‘we’ in verse 15 with all those, in verse 17, who ‘speak ... in Christ’<sup>39</sup>. In reference to III John 7 (‘*They went forth*’) Wesley added ‘To preach the gospel.’<sup>40</sup> In this way, he suggested an identification of all missionaries and emissaries<sup>41</sup> of Christ as preachers.

In his note on I Corinthians 1:17-23, Wesley suggested that Paul was giving his own understanding of what his preaching was about—his ‘general proposition’.<sup>42</sup> So in verse 23, he suggested that Paul was saying, ‘*We go on to preach, in a plain and historical, not rhetorical or philosophical, manner, Christ crucified*’.<sup>43</sup> Preaching was, then, not to be understood as a matter of artful tricks and skills, but a simple process of announcing the good news. In a similar vein, Wesley used the opportunity provided by the word ‘exhortation’ (παράκλησις) in I Thessalonians 2:3 to affirm that preaching was ‘not a lie, but the truth of God’,<sup>44</sup> that it was not done ‘[w]ith any unholy or selfish view’,<sup>45</sup> and that it was always delivered ‘with great plainness of speech’.<sup>46</sup> So Wesley believed that preaching was a task performed by trustworthy people acting in a plain, open and honest way.

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<sup>36</sup> Sermon XVI, in Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p186.

<sup>37</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p593.

<sup>38</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p649.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley’s translation of II Cor 2:17, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p649.

<sup>40</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p925.

<sup>41</sup> See Smith, *First, Second and Third John*, p152.

<sup>42</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p587.

<sup>43</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p588, Wesley’s italics.

<sup>44</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p755.

<sup>45</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p755.

<sup>46</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p755.



For Wesley, there was a juxtaposition of preaching and gospel. Preaching was the means by which the gospel of Jesus Christ was set forth. Where, in Philippians 4:15, Paul spoke about the time of ‘the beginning of the gospel’, Wesley noted this to be ‘When it [the gospel] was first preached at Philippi.’<sup>47</sup> And Wesley identified ‘the preaching’ (κήρυγμα) in II Timothy 4:17 as ‘The gospel which we preach.’<sup>48</sup> Likewise, when Colossians 1:5 referred to ‘the word of truth, of the gospel’ Wesley interpreted it as ‘The true gospel preached to you.’<sup>49</sup> Further, in the note on Colossians 1:6<sup>50</sup> Wesley implied that the gospel was only real and effective when it was preached. Preaching was for Wesley a specially important means by which the gospel was spread. And while such things as Christian lifestyle, acts of charity and even participation in sacramental fellowship might support and reinforce the real proclamation of the gospel, nothing could stand in for, or replace, preaching.

In a sense Wesley went even further, implying that in true preaching there was a kind of “real presence” of Christ. In the note on Galatians 3:1 Wesley interpolated Paul’s words, saying that ‘*before [the Galatians’] eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth*<sup>51</sup> by our preaching, as if He had been *crucified among you*.’<sup>52</sup> When Christ was proclaimed, Christ became present to the hearers, and the announcement of Christ’s salvation was the opportunity for Christ’s salvation to be appropriated.

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<sup>47</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p739.

<sup>48</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p796.

<sup>49</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p741.

<sup>50</sup> See *Notes on the New Testament*, p741.

<sup>51</sup> Wesley’s translation of Galatians 3:1, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p686.

<sup>52</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p686.

It was a logical extension to this that the notes Wesley gave in respect of II Corinthians identified that the content of the preaching should be ‘always concerning [Christ] ... not variable and inconsistent with itself ... [a]lways one and the same, centring in Him.’<sup>53</sup> Wesley assumed a direct association between a person’s preaching and the knowledge which the preacher had of Christ. In his note on 1 Corinthians 2:2, ‘*I determined not to know anything*’,<sup>54</sup> Wesley expanded Paul’s words, so that he (Wesley) had Paul saying he would ‘waive all my other knowledge, and not ... preach anything, *save Jesus Christ, and him crucified*.’<sup>55</sup> In other words, Wesley would have Paul, and by implication all preachers, say that all knowledge of other things was to be put aside, and nothing was to be preached except the one point declared in his sermon on “Salvation by Faith”<sup>56</sup>—the salvation which came through God’s act in Jesus Christ.

Further to this, preaching was never to be a display of detail and knowledge of facts, as in a lecture or oration; it was always to be focused on its purpose of bringing people to faith, and encouraging them in faith. Specifically, (in the note on Romans 12:7), Wesley identified the task of preaching (exhortation) as: ‘to urge Christians to duty, and to comfort them in trials.’<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Wesley emphasised that preachers should ‘transmit[...] [God’s] pure word, not [their] own. ... The tongue is ours, but the power is God’s’.<sup>58</sup> And in

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<sup>53</sup> Note on II Corinthians 1:19, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p646.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley’s translation, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p589.

<sup>55</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p589.

<sup>56</sup> See Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pp 1-11 and especially p9.

<sup>57</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p570.

<sup>58</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p649.

respect of the phrase ‘speak we in Christ’ (in II Corinthians 2:17<sup>59</sup>) Wesley affirmed that this speaking was always ‘[w]ords which He [Christ] gives, approves, and blesses.’<sup>60</sup> Then in notes on II Corinthians 4:5 (‘We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord’<sup>61</sup>) Wesley affirmed that it was not the preacher who was ‘able either to enlighten, or pardon, or sanctify you’,<sup>62</sup> but Christ who was ‘your only wisdom, righteousness, sanctification.’<sup>63</sup> So again, the central aspect of preaching was always Christ, and Christ’s power.

Wesley was prepared to read ‘preaching’ where the New Testament used alternative terms. In the note on I Thessalonians 2:3, he suggested that the word ‘exhortation’ meant ‘preaching’, though he acknowledged that when the term ‘exhortation’ was used, ‘[a] part is put for the whole.’<sup>64</sup> Likewise, in I Thessalonians 5:20 Paul identified ‘prophesyings’ as ‘preaching; for the apostle is not here speaking of extraordinary gifts’;<sup>65</sup> and again Wesley acknowledged that this term related only to one aspect of preaching: ‘It seems one means of grace is put for all.’<sup>66</sup>

Parenthetically, it must be acknowledged that Wesley was not consistent in this identification of preaching as an “ordinary” gift. In his note on Ephesians 4:11<sup>67</sup> Wesley suggested that ‘evangelists’, those who testified ‘of things past: and that chiefly by preaching the gospel’<sup>68</sup> were to be classified as ‘extraordinary’, while

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<sup>59</sup> Wesley’s translation, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p649.

<sup>60</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p649.

<sup>61</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p652.

<sup>62</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p652.

<sup>63</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p652.

<sup>64</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p755.

<sup>65</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p762.

<sup>66</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p762f.

<sup>67</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p713.

<sup>68</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p713.

pastors were ‘ordinary’; and this comparison was echoed in the note on Acts 20:20<sup>69</sup> where Wesley implied extraordinary status to apostles and described pastors as ‘ordinary’. Similarly, in reference to I Thessalonians 1:5, he declared that

signs, if not the miraculous gifts, always attend the preaching of the gospel ...: neither are the extraordinary operations of the Holy Ghost ever wholly withheld, where the gospel is preached with power<sup>70</sup>

The use of the term ‘means of grace’ in the note on I Thessalonians 5:20 is significant. Wesley had used this term, in his Sermon XII, when referring to ‘outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, and appointed to this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.’<sup>71</sup> In that sermon, the chief means of grace were identified as

‘prayer ...; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon); and receiving the Lord’s supper ...; and these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying His grace to the souls of men.’<sup>72</sup>

By describing ‘preaching’ as a ‘means of grace’ in his notes to I Thessalonians 5:20, Wesley put preaching with prayer and the Lord’s Supper as appropriate means by which salvation was made available to people.

Wesley’s note on Acts 19:9 showed further that the importance of preaching lay not only in its being the means by which the gospel was spread. Paul’s act of preaching the gospel ‘[i]n the school of one Tyrannus’<sup>73</sup> was, in Wesley’s eyes, enough to set that place apart, with the same status as the synagogue from which

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<sup>69</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p478.

<sup>70</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p754.

<sup>71</sup> *Forty Four Sermons*, p136.

<sup>72</sup> *Forty Four Sermons*, p136f.

<sup>73</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p472.

Paul had departed.<sup>74</sup> Preaching, in this case, had a kind of sacramental function. It was through the preaching of the Word that a secular building became a sacred place, a place where God's salvation was re-enacted.

Wesley's reformation bias was shown in his note on Galatians 2:2: '*The gospel which I preach among the Gentiles—Acts xv. 4, touching justification by faith alone*'.<sup>75</sup> Here he identified the classical reformation theme in preaching (justification by faith alone), even though the Acts 15:4 reference simply says 'And being come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church, and the apostles and elders; and they declared all things which God had done with them'.<sup>76</sup> There was no reference here to preaching, let alone the content of that preaching. But Wesley took the opportunity to reinforce to his readers what he understood to be the essential content of all preaching.

Wesley was ready to identify the act of preaching as '*discharg[ing] the office of an herald ... whose office it was to proclaim the conditions and to display the prizes*'.<sup>77</sup> But the relationship between faith and preaching was recognised in the note on II Corinthians 4:13-14 where Wesley indicated that

[w]e preach the gospel, even in the midst of affliction and death, because we believe that God will *raise us up* from the dead, and will *present us*, ministers, *with you*, all His members, 'faultless before His presence with exceeding joy'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See *Notes on the New Testament*, p471f.

<sup>75</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p682.

<sup>76</sup> Wesley's translation, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p452.

<sup>77</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p613.

<sup>78</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p654. This is continued in Wesley's note to II Corinthians 4:15, also on the same page.

In other words, both preachers and listeners were in line to receive the benefits of salvation when the gospel was proclaimed.

Wesley used I Thessalonians 5:21 to remind preachers of the necessity for their preaching to be always grounded in the Scriptures. This meant that in the practice of their faith, and as the proof of the truth of their propositions, (Wesley asserted that Paul spoke ‘of practice, not of doctrines’<sup>79</sup>) preachers should ‘[t]ry every advice by the touchstone of Scripture.’<sup>80</sup> In this he echoed his own invitation issued in the Preface to *Forty Four Sermons*.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, in his note on II Thessalonians 2:15, Wesley affirmed the necessity to ‘*Hold—Without adding to, or diminishing from, the traditions which you have been taught*’.<sup>82</sup> These traditions had been passed on both by Paul’s preaching and by his writing. And when in his note on I John 1:2, Wesley identified the relationship between preaching and writing:

We testify by declaring, by preaching, and writing (verses 3-4).  
Preaching lays the foundation (verses 5-10); writing builds  
thereon<sup>83</sup>,

it can be assumed that Wesley applied this same thought to himself, that he knew that the faith he proclaimed through preaching and through writing was the same as that which he had himself been taught.

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<sup>79</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p763.

<sup>80</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p763.

<sup>81</sup> See Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, pvii.

<sup>82</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p768.

<sup>83</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p903.

Wesley's notes on I Corinthians 1:6 showed further his understanding that the 'gospel', which term Wesley equated with 'preaching', was confirmed '[b]y these gifts attending it'.<sup>84</sup> Wesley identified that the work of the Holy Spirit was a necessary component in all effective preaching. It was the Holy Spirit 'which works on the conscience with the most convincing light, and the most persuasive evidence.'<sup>85</sup> And for Wesley, there was a relationship between preaching and miracles of the Holy Spirit. Where Paul reminded the Thessalonians that 'our gospel came not to you in word only, but also with power, and with the Holy Ghost, and with much assurance',<sup>86</sup> Wesley explained that with the Holy Spirit '[b]earing an outward testimony, by miracles, to the truth of what we preached, ... signs, if not the miraculous gifts, always attend'.<sup>87</sup>

Further, Wesley accepted that the Holy Spirit could, and on occasions did, allow for an extension and expansion of the rules and directions which even such an authority as Paul might have made. In I Corinthians 14:34, Paul ruled: '*Let your women be silent in the churches*'.<sup>88</sup> In a letter to Thomas Whitehead in 1745 Wesley had adamantly used this text and others to oppose the suggestion that women might have any part in the preaching ministry of the church.<sup>89</sup> Here (in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* in 1754) Wesley's note accepted the instruction but added the rider: 'Unless they are under an extraordinary impulse of the Spirit.'<sup>90</sup> This exception was despite Wesley's affirmation in his notes on I Corinthians 11:5-6, where he declared his approval of the 'badge of subjection',<sup>91</sup> in the form of veil and

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<sup>84</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p586.

<sup>85</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p590.

<sup>86</sup> I Thessalonians 1:5 (Wesley's translation), in *Notes on the New Testament*, p754.

<sup>87</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p754.

<sup>88</sup> Wesley's translation, see *Notes on the New Testament*, p632.

<sup>89</sup> See Telford, *Letters of John Wesley*, Vol 2, p119.

<sup>90</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p632.

<sup>91</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p618.

long hair, which women were to wear. Yet even here, Wesley declared his belief that ‘under an immediate impulse of the Spirit ... was a woman suffered *to speak in the church*’.<sup>92</sup> It is interesting to note that by the 1760’s he had accepted the place and work of women as valid, to the extent that he ‘conceived of lay preaching, male or female, as ... a gift of God ... to be exercised with a profound sense of responsibility.’<sup>93</sup>

This change in his tolerance of women as preachers can be put down to Wesley’s understanding of preaching as a means of drawing people into the community of living faith. Wesley saw the evidence of people coming into the community of living faith through the ministry of women as a sign of God’s “owning” of their preaching,<sup>94</sup> and that led him to accept that the task of preaching could not be only a male preserve.

In an attempt to understand the place of women in the order of the church, Wesley made contemporary assumptions about officers within the early church. He showed that the New Testament church was prepared to allow only for widows ‘[w]ho have no near relations to provide for them; and who are wholly devoted to God’<sup>95</sup> to take their place among ‘the number of deaconesses, who attended sick women or travelling preachers.’<sup>96</sup> In practical terms, however, Wesley ‘gave to women positions of genuine leadership, trust and responsibility ... [and] encouraged women to use the varied gifts they had been given—in teaching, preaching, nursing, organizing and pastoral oversight.’<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p618.

<sup>93</sup> Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, p118.

<sup>94</sup> See Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, p144.

<sup>95</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p780.

<sup>96</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p781.

<sup>97</sup> Newton, “Wesley and Women”, p134f.



Wesley was anxious to identify the difference between the two functions, that of apostle and that of prophet, although he was happy to allow both functions in the preacher. In his note on I Corinthians 12:28 he identified that apostles were those ‘[w]ho plant the gospel in the heathen nations’,<sup>98</sup> and in the note on I Corinthians 15:7 he said that the title “apostles” ‘seems to include the seventy; if not all those, likewise, whom God afterwards *sent* to plant the gospel in heathen nations.’<sup>99</sup> Prophets, on the other hand, were those ‘[w]ho either foretell things to come, or speak by extraordinary inspiration, for the edification of the church.’<sup>100</sup> We have already seen that Wesley identified the function of the apostle (planting of the gospel) with that of the preacher. Accepting that Wesley understood that the task of the prophet and that of the preacher were equivalent, we see here that the prophet’s task (edifying the church) was also one of the valid functions of preaching.

In respect of I Thessalonians 5:12, where reference was made to various tasks in the Christian community (“labouring among”, “being over”, and “admonishing” the people), Wesley was ready to identify that each of these tasks could belong to the one person or to a number of people:

Sometimes the same person may both *labour*, that is, preach; *be over*, or govern; and *admonish* the flock by particular application to each: sometimes two or more different persons, according as God variously dispenses His gifts.<sup>101</sup>

In this passage, we note that Wesley equated ‘labouring’ with ‘preaching’. Similarly, in the note on Colossians 4:11 ‘*fellow-workers*’ were identified as those ‘preaching

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<sup>98</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p625.

<sup>99</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p633.

<sup>100</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p625.

<sup>101</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p761.

the gospel.<sup>102</sup> Significantly, ‘fellow-workers’ was Wesley’s translation of the Greek word *συνεργῶν* which is also used in Philippians 4:3. In that case, however, while Wesley offered the same translation into English, he allowed a different interpretation. There he suggested that labouring for the gospel ‘doth not imply preaching, or anything of that kind; but danger and toil endured for the sake of the gospel’.<sup>103</sup> It is noted, however, that although Wesley here disallowed the idea of ‘fellow-labourers’ being ‘preachers’, yet he still allowed himself the preacher’s task of calling people to know their own status in faith: ‘Reader, is thy name there [in the book of life]?’<sup>104</sup>

Having recognised that preaching was labouring for the gospel, Wesley was keen to alert those involved in the task:

But oh, what a misery is it when a man undertakes this whole work without either gifts or graces for any part of it!<sup>105</sup>

The task of preaching was ‘a commission ... given after the Resurrection.’<sup>106</sup> This commission was that in which Jesus promised that the disciples would ‘be empowered to witness My gospel, both by your preaching and suffering.’<sup>107</sup> Wesley made it clear that any preaching which did not have this dominical commission, and consequently any faith which might proceed from such preaching, would be ‘*Vain—Without any real foundation*’.<sup>108</sup> Nor did Wesley see this commission in any way as a general call to any task. In his note on Acts 6:2 he said:

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<sup>102</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p751.

<sup>103</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p737.

<sup>104</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p737.

<sup>105</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p761.

<sup>106</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p634.

<sup>107</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p394.

<sup>108</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p634.

when some of [the deacons of both sexes<sup>109</sup>] afterwards preached the gospel, they did this, not by virtue of their deaconship, but of another commission, that of evangelists, which they probably received, not before, but after, they were appointed deacons.<sup>110</sup>

The call to diaconal service and the call to preaching were clearly different calls, even if issuing from the same divine source.

In line with Wesley's affirmation, in II Corinthians 4:5,<sup>111</sup> that Christ was the source of preaching, it was appropriate that in the notes on Titus 1:3 he suggested that Paul was declaring the authority by which he could preach. Only '*the commandment of God our Saviour*' was sufficient authority for any to 'dare[...] exercise this office'.<sup>112</sup> It followed then, that the purpose of preaching was never to satisfy the whims of people, but rather to be obedient to the will of God. Indeed Wesley said that all who hoped 'to keep in favour both with God and with the world'<sup>113</sup> would do so in vain.

Wesley believed that there were different moments in the process of telling the gospel story. In his note on Acts 16:13, he expanded Paul's comment, '*We spake*', with 'At first in a familiar manner', suggesting that 'Paul did not immediately begin to preach.'<sup>114</sup> So Wesley would have it necessary that preaching be one of a number of ways in which messengers of the gospel would fulfil their task. And in his comment on I Corinthians 2:4 ('*And my speech* in private, as well as *my public*

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<sup>109</sup> Wesley was prepared here to acknowledge that both sexes could receive a calling to preach.

<sup>110</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p414.

<sup>111</sup> See *Notes on the New Testament*, p652.

<sup>112</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p798.

<sup>113</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p680.

<sup>114</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p459.

*preaching*'<sup>115</sup>) Wesley recognised that there was a difference between the apostle's private and public speaking. The public speaking was preaching.

The idea of different ways and moments in the process of spreading the gospel was also seen in Wesley's conjunction of preaching and teaching. In Acts 20:20 Paul had reminded the Ephesian elders that he had preached to them and taught them 'publicly and from house to house'.<sup>116</sup> Again Wesley allowed the 'publicly' to relate to the preaching, and the 'house to house' to the teaching. And he added the comment that 'even an apostle could not discharge his duty by public preaching only. How much less can an ordinary pastor!'<sup>117</sup> Speaking familiarly, preaching, teaching—these were all means by which the gospel was proclaimed.

Incidentally, in the comment relating the duty of an apostle to the work of an ordinary pastor, Wesley expressed the understanding that preaching and pastoral work were dependent on each other. This dependence should not, however, be taken to imply that Wesley necessarily placed preachers and pastors in the same order of church functionaries. As we have already recognised, in his comment on Ephesians 4:11 Wesley called apostles, prophets and evangelists 'extraordinary officers', and he declared that the pastors and teachers were 'ordinary [officers] ... [w]hether of the same or a lower order, to assist them [the extraordinary officers], as occasion might require'.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p589.

<sup>116</sup> Wesley's translation, in *Notes on the New Testament*, p478.

<sup>117</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p478.

<sup>118</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p713.

Wesley was convinced that there was a kind of two-directional function for those with authority in the church. It was, for Wesley, ‘doubtless the proper business of a Christian bishop: to speak to God, in prayer; to men, in preaching His word, as ambassador for Christ’.<sup>119</sup> This contained a double implication for preaching. Those who spoke with God in prayer became by that very act the ambassadors whose responsibility it was to bring God’s Word to the people; and likewise those who were preachers had to be in such a relationship with God through prayer that they knew the Word which God wanted proclaimed.

Finally, Wesley was eager to show that there should be no ‘limitation or restriction [on the task of preaching]. If ... every creature in every age hath not heard it, either those who should have preached, or those who should have heard it, or both, made void the counsel of God’.<sup>120</sup> If, as Wesley believed, preaching was the means by which the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ was proclaimed, then there could, in Wesley’s mind, be no stopping the preaching until all the world had heard. It was a logical extension of this for Wesley to say that in Romans 10:14-15 ‘St. Paul infers that the apostles were sent by God to preach to the Gentiles also’,<sup>121</sup> and then to comment in his note on Romans 10:18 that ‘so many nations have already heard the preachers of the gospel, that [their numbering was] of the lights of heaven.’<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p415.

<sup>120</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p195.

<sup>121</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p563.

<sup>122</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p563.

The heritage of the Uniting Church includes John Wesley's insights.<sup>123</sup> *The Basis of Union* commits the Church to 'listen' to the sermons, and that very process of listening suggests that it is appropriate for any understanding of preaching in the Uniting Church to take these insights into account.

For Wesley, preaching was powerful: 'armed with threatenings, ... [a]ttended with the power of the living God, and conveying either life or death to the hearers.'<sup>124</sup> The task of preaching for Wesley was summed up in the note on I Corinthians 3:2:

*I fed you, as babes, with milk*—The first and plainest truths of the gospel. So should every preacher suit his doctrine to his hearers.<sup>125</sup>

Preaching was the process of calling people to faith, through the proclamation of what God had given. God's act in Jesus Christ, the salvation which had been won by Christ's death and resurrection, and which was known by grace through faith, was to be the theme of all preaching. Preaching was, in Wesley's mind, one of the significant ways in which the gospel of Jesus Christ was set forth and spread in the world. There was no place for preaching which was a mere display of knowledge of facts; preaching was always to focus on bringing people to faith, and encouraging them in faith.

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<sup>123</sup> *Basis of Union*, para 10, p13.

<sup>124</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p820.

<sup>125</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p592.

In line with this, Wesley held preaching to be of the same status with prayer and the Lord's Supper, as appropriate means by which salvation was made available to people. If the Lord's Supper was a 'Means of Grace',<sup>126</sup> then preaching also, as a means by which a person was convicted of sin and brought into the fellowship of the Kingdom, had a kind of sacramental function.

No-one should be outside the range of preaching. Wesley was certain that all nations should hear, and indeed had already heard, the gospel. For Wesley, the Word of God was a source of the grace of God, and repentance was a part of the process of hearing that Word. So the task of the preacher was to proclaim the Word in such a way that all hearers would come to the point of repentance. And it was an important point for Wesley, that, along with all the world, preachers (as well as their listeners) should understand themselves to be in line to receive the benefits of salvation when the gospel was proclaimed.

The preacher was recognised as a labourer for God and the authority to act as preacher came from God alone. It was God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, who gave the authority, the gift, the ability to preach. Preaching was never to satisfy the whims of people, but was always to be an act of obedience to the will of God. And without the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts which were the evidence of the Holy Spirit, it was impossible for the preacher to perform the task effectively. It was the power of the Holy Spirit which brought about the signs of faith as a result of preaching. The Holy Spirit also made possible the opportunity for all kinds of people

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<sup>126</sup> Sermon XII, in Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p134ff.

to be effective in the task of preaching. Though in many places Wesley held that women should take a secondary role, he discerned that by the Holy Spirit women also were empowered to proclaim the message of faith. But he was urgent in his caution that where the authority for preaching (of both men and women preachers) did not come from God, where the commission did not come from the risen Christ, then any faith which might proceed from such preaching would be groundless faith which had no true foundation in the gospel.

It was important for Wesley that preaching be in accordance with the traditions which had been passed down. If even Paul had allowed his preaching and writing to be guided by the traditions handed to him, then, Wesley thought, it was appropriate that the same should apply to all preachers. The traditions handed down included, of course, the Scriptures, and Wesley was adamant that preaching should be always grounded in the Scriptures. He used Hebrews 4:2 to affirm that it is ‘only when *it* [the Word] *is mixed with faith*, that it exerts saving power’; outside the context of faith the hearing of preaching ‘increased their damnation.’<sup>127</sup>

Wesley believed that preaching was a task to be performed by trustworthy people acting in a plain, open and honest way. He always demanded that preachers be constant and faithful in their office. When in the note to Galatians 2:18 he expressed his understanding that preaching was for the destruction of sinfulness, he drew the consequence that the preacher, like all who ‘profess the gospel’,<sup>128</sup> had to live that gospel in daily life.

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<sup>127</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p819.

<sup>128</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, p685.



This, then, is part of the foundation upon which the Uniting Church should build its understanding of preaching. Its preaching is to be a strong call to faith in God who has acted in history, opening the way for salvation by grace through faith. It is to be broadly based, so as to allow all people to hear and understand the message. The preachers are to recognise their authority as from the risen Christ; and the preaching is to be in accordance with the truth of God as received through the Scriptures and the traditions handed on by those in the faith who have gone before. The character of the preacher must reflect both the power and the humility of a disciple of Christ, and the life of the preacher must show forth the salvation of God.

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## Chapter 12: The Uniting Church's Preaching

This chapter brings together the many comments about preaching which have been identified in the overview of each of the foundational and historical documents of the Uniting Church. Each of the issues that have been identified in the earlier chapters of this thesis qualifies an important aspect of preaching in the Uniting Church.

The documents provide at different points and to differing degrees insights about the place and function of preaching and insights about the content of preaching, both of which are important in an understanding of the importance of preaching in the Uniting Church. We will look at the ideas about preaching these documents have given under a number of headings.

A number of comments suggest that preaching, by which term we mean the proclamation of the gospel, is an ESSENTIAL part of the life of the Church. From the historical documents we have noted that one of the signs which distinguishes the faithful church from the false church is 'the true preaching of the Word of God',<sup>1</sup> and we have recognised that 'sound preaching and unconscionable hearing of the Word of God'<sup>2</sup> is an essential element of the ordinary worship of the church. In line with this, Wesley was also clearly convinced that preaching was an essential part of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Scots Confession of Faith*, Chapter 18, see Owen, *Witness Of Faith*, p72.

<sup>2</sup> *Westminster Confession*, Chapter 21, article v, see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p150. This idea is echoed in *Savoy Declaration*, Chapter 22, article iii.

life and mission of the church.<sup>3</sup> This understanding, that preaching is one of the intrinsic aspects of the church's life, is an underlying implication in each of the antecedent documents and in the *Basis of Union* itself.<sup>4</sup> This awareness of preaching as an essential part of the church's life means that the church will truly perform its function of witnessing to and serving God in Christ only when its preaching is a faithful declaration of the gospel, and an uncompromising call to people to commit themselves to follow the way of Christ.

The documents make it quite evident that the Uniting Church, along with all churches in every age, has a basic dependence on the APOSTOLIC PREACHING. The *kerygma* of the early church is seen to be the foundation upon which the faith of the church rests. As a 'rule of faith',<sup>5</sup> the apostolic preaching provides a basic framework of detail about the issues of the faith. The essential elements of the apostolic preaching upon which the preaching of the Uniting Church depends are these: the centrality of Christ as the one through whom God has brought salvation; the relationship between Christ and the promises of God found in the Old Testament; and the call to repentance, and entry into fellowship with Christ through baptism.

These three foci begin to identify the CONTENT of the preaching of the Uniting Church. They are continually shown in the foundational documents to be vital elements of all preaching. Preaching must declare the centrality of Jesus Christ as the Word of God who announces, in the story of salvation, the new life which God

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<sup>3</sup> See above, throughout Chapter 11.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, pp13, 35; *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, pp28, 86; *The Basis of Union*, Paragraphs 4, 5, 14 and 15.

<sup>5</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p15.

offers to all who confess faith in Christ. As Christ's atoning sacrifice was central to the process by which salvation was made available to all, so the redemption brought by that atonement must be the fundamental element in the message which the church proclaims.

A necessary part of this message must be the relationship between the experience of the life, ministry and sacrifice of Christ which is recorded in the New Testament and the action and promises of God revealed in the Old Testament. (This leads to comments which will be made shortly, about how important for preaching is the study of Scripture, and by extension the study of the Creeds and Confessions.)

The third focus of preaching is an extension of these first two. At the same time as we see the central place which Christ holds in God's plan of salvation, and discover how Christ's life, ministry and sacrifice are experienced in themselves and as fulfilment of the promises of God, the church's preaching must logically lead to an invitation to all to enter into the life of the kingdom. This invitation begins with an open declaration of the separation between people and God, and includes a clear call to repentance. The invitation is an opportunity for people to accept the new life which is God's gift seen in the resurrection of Christ, and includes an acknowledgment of the signs of God's love active in the individual and in the community of faith.

Preaching, then, must always be a declaration of faith and a call to commitment. Both to those within the church and to those outside, preaching must declare the presence of Christ in such a way that it leads to a response in the hearers.

To those outside the faith, the preaching of the church makes clear the possibility of a right relationship with God through God's grace. The message in all preaching is that Christ's death, resurrection and ascension provides the sacrifice which leads to justification and the new life inaugurated in the Kingdom of God. Preaching must declare the gift of salvation to all, and provide the invitation to enter into the fellowship of the community of faith.

To those within the community of faith, preaching continues to be a reminder of sinfulness (separation from God), and of forgiven-ness. But preaching is also the means by which those within the community of faith are encouraged to recognise God's gifts within them, to accept those gifts and to allow them to be used in fruitful service. It is an assumption and an expectation in the various documents that all preachers themselves have an intimate relationship with Christ, and their preaching is to call others into a similar relationship. Preaching within the community of faith is a call to people to find and experience the signs of adoption and sanctification by which they are people of God, and contains encouragement by which the faithful are built up into their own ministry within the mission and service of the church.

In all this, special note must be made about the balance which must be kept in preaching. It is not enough for the church to preach about sinfulness. In the way it

was constructed, the *Heidelberg Catechism* showed the balance of sinfulness, redemption and thanksgiving. So the preaching of the Uniting Church must maintain a similar balance, which is not frightened to declare the sinfulness of the world and the church, but which is also eager to announce that Christ has brought salvation to all who will receive and celebrate it.

The Uniting Church's dependence on apostolic preaching leads to another set of comments: the HERITAGE of the Uniting Church has a strong emphasis on preaching.

For the Uniting Church, this strong heritage of preaching stretches through the centuries from the time of the apostles, and is seen especially in the Reformation and the Evangelical Revival of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Though it is not specifically mentioned in any of the documents, in each of former denominations of the Uniting Church there was also a clear continuity of preaching ministry from the Reformation and Evangelical Revival through the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

Preaching within this heritage was significantly based on Scripture, was seen to be part of the general confession of faith, and was set within a framework of the tradition of the church. So preaching provides a means by which the issues of faith can be related to everyday life, and through preaching, faith is developed in the lives of the people of the church. It is preaching which has '[kept] men in a relation of

faith and trust, of love and hope, in worship of God'.<sup>6</sup> It is through the preaching of the church<sup>7</sup> that the stories of the ancient faithful are told to people of later generations for their education, encouragement and growth in faith.

An extension of this is the preaching which tells the story of the faithful of more recent generations, identifying the ways in which the faith of the ancients continues to be proved. "A Calendar of Other Commemorations" in *Uniting in Worship*,<sup>8</sup> which echoes the "Sanctoral Cycle" and the "Calendar of Saints' Days" in other denominations, is 'a representative group of people from the communion of saints ... who have been servants of Christ in their day and generation.'<sup>9</sup> Its use provides a reminder of the ways in which the faith is lived out in daily life. And the use of "personal testimony" is a further way of recognising how the faith of those who went before continues to be effective in the present generation. The "Commemorations" and the "testimonies" are, in their own way, effective means of declaring the salvation which is God's gift, of acknowledging the reality of sin, and of inviting others to respond to the call to new life in Christ.

Heritage also played an important part in the Church's understanding of the means by which its preachers are set apart for their work. Ordination by the laying on of hands is the means of making a link between the person being ordained and the tradition within which the ministry exists. In a similar way, the commissioning of a Lay Preacher includes the act of laying on of hands and spoken recognition of the

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<sup>6</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p24.

<sup>7</sup> This without denying the importance of the teaching, small group, family and other nurture programmes of the church.

<sup>8</sup> *Uniting in Worship: Leader's Book*, pp347-351.

<sup>9</sup> *Uniting in Worship: Leader's Book*, p347.

tradition of preaching of the church. Both lay and ordained are reminded of the heritage within which the message of salvation is spoken and passed on, and both ordination and commissioning express a recognition of the Spirit's role in equipping, inspiring and guiding these ministries.

A further extension of this acknowledgment of the Spirit's power means that those ordained and commissioned are charged with the responsibility of equipping others for their own ministry. Preaching of the apostolic witness to Christ in each new generation makes Christ available as the source of strength and comfort, and the Spirit's power in preaching becomes the power for all Christian service.

At the time when the Joint Commission on Church Union was proposing that the office of bishop be part of the structure for the Uniting Church, it was recognised that the bishop was responsible for maintaining the link between the church's preaching and the heritage of past generations. The bishop was understood to be the 'guardian of the preaching, sacramental and pastoral life of the churches committed to his care'.<sup>10</sup> When the Joint Commission on Church Union removed the office of bishop from the structure of the Uniting Church it saw fit to maintain within the structure of the presbytery the function of episcopal oversight. While the responsibility for guardianship no longer rests with any person, it clearly rests with the council of the presbytery. It is one of the presbytery's tasks to ensure that the work of the preachers in the church links directly with the scriptural, credal and historical heritage of the Church.

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<sup>10</sup> Joint Commission On Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, p48.



But the heritage was not to be understood as looking only to the past. It was an essential element of the church's preaching that it declare the faith which had been received as part of the announcement of the life of the kingdom to come. The heritage of the Uniting Church in Australia at the time of union went back to European Christianity. But it has been necessary for the Church to relate the message which it received to a people who increasingly live in an Asian context. Indeed, as the Uniting Church has developed in the years since union, there have been significant contacts with Christianity which has developed in non-Western-European contexts.<sup>11</sup> The Church's preaching continues to be embedded in apostolic soil and in that of the Reformation and the Evangelical Revival; but the flower of the Uniting Church's preaching develops in a different atmosphere from that of those who went before. Even this, however, follows easily in the Church's heritage: the expansion of the mission of the church through the ages has always involved expressing the truths of the faith in ways which could be understood in new cultures.

One particular comment can be added here concerning the Uniting Church's responsibility to children and young people. In the historical documents are comments which required that the conduct of worship be in such language that all present would be able to hear and understand what was being said, prayed and preached. Each of the historical documents took particular care to include children in their comments about baptism, and particularly the *Heidelberg Catechism* acknowledged that '[children] belong just as much ... to the covenant of God and

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<sup>11</sup> This includes both Eastern Orthodox and Asian Christianity.

His community'<sup>12</sup> as do adults, and Wesley refused to exclude the young from hearing the gospel proclaimed.<sup>13</sup>

Taking up the injunction in Paragraph 11 of the *Basis of Union* 'to sharpen [the Church's] understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought'<sup>14</sup>, and using modern understandings of the status of children in society, means that the Church must be responsible to ensure that the invitation and the encouragement contained in its preaching is able to be received by those who have not attained adulthood. Children and young people, no less than adults, need to hear the message of God's gift in salvation, and need to be reminded of the gifts which God gives for work in the church and the world. Likewise, children and young people must be encouraged through the preaching of the church to use their gifts in the mission of Christ. This of course means that the Church must take care to ensure that its preaching is in a language and style which will be understood and appreciated by young people. The dilemma is that this must be done without at the same time excluding adults. Ultimately, all people must be able to hear the message of salvation, and so it will be that at different times, and to different groups of people, the preaching of the Church will take different forms.

In all this, the foundational and historical documents make it clear that the preaching of the Uniting Church has to be faithful to apostolic kerygma, take serious note of the historical developments by which the faith is understood in each new

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<sup>12</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Answer 74, see Owen, *Witness Of Faith*, P97.

<sup>13</sup> See Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p9.

<sup>14</sup> *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 11, p13.

generation, and be cognisant of the geographical and social situation in which the Uniting Church finds itself.

The SCRIPTURES are the source and the CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS are a framework within which the Uniting Church's understanding and announcement of faith is to be made. Preachers of each generation have been and are required in their sermons to be faithful to the understanding of God's action expressed in the Scriptures and in the Creeds and Confessions.

It is essential that every preacher declare the basic truths of the faith, as they are identified in the Scriptures and the Creeds and Confessions of the church. These truths lead to the declarations: that all forgiven sinners belong to the family of God; that the love of God is to be seen as a gift, and the gift is to be identified in all the structures of the church; and that the hope of faith is realised when the partial becomes whole, when the gifts of God are used in Christian service, and when God's good purpose is shown in the life of the world. The church's preaching acknowledges and affirms the Biblical revelation of God's loving care for all people, and indeed for the whole creation. It announces that God's love is available to all who are prepared to recognise God's involvement in their lives and in the life of the world.

The historical documents have made it quite clear that the foundation of preaching is always to be: "Whosoever believeth on this shall be saved".<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons*, p9.

documents of the Uniting Church expect and assume (even demand) that the Church's preaching will be "Biblical". The Word of God (lived in Christ and written in Scripture) is understood as the sole source of salvation, and the Church's preaching is the means by which the detail of that salvation is made known. Each of the historical documents was adamant that this preaching was a sign of the true church. And the Uniting Church in its *Basis of Union* unequivocally says that one of the essential activities of the congregation as 'the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic church worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ'<sup>16</sup> is the preaching of the Word of God.

To fulfil this responsibility, preaching must continually refer back to the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments ('not ... two covenants of grace, ... but one and the same, under two dispensations'<sup>17</sup>) and remain within the stream of revelation and redemption contained in them. Only by constant study of the Scriptures and careful process of announcing precisely what God has revealed will the preaching of the Church remain as a clear and decisive declaration which brings sinners to repentance, builds the people up in their faith, encourages the proper use of the gifts of God, removes wrong and establishes righteousness within the community. Without this constant study of the Scriptures and continual reference back to the traditions contained in the Creeds and Confessions, the preaching of the church becomes confused, and the whole witness of the church—its mission and its service—is weakened.

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<sup>16</sup> *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 15(a), p17.

<sup>17</sup> *Westminster*, Chapter 7, article vi, see Owen, *Witness of Faith*, p131.

So the preaching of the church, as the result of faithful study of the Word of God as it is found in Scripture and discerned in faithful living, is the guide point for the church's life, and has to be available to all people. When study of the Scriptures has been undertaken, the preaching of the Word of God has to be decisive and clear with 'a definite Yes or a definite No'.<sup>18</sup> The history of the Christian church would suggest that maintenance of the decisive and clear statement of the Word of God requires significant and singular effort. Often the 'definite Yes or definite No' has been the cause of spiritual, emotional and even physical violence. For all this, preaching must continue as a clear statement of God's Word for salvation and life, and preachers must maintain both their faithful study of the Scriptures and, in those instances where others disagree, the graciousness of Christ who enjoined love to those who persecute.<sup>19</sup>

The Creeds and Confessions contain the essentials of the faith into which the preachers themselves have grown, and the preachers are required to hold to and develop those same traditions. The *Heidelberg Catechism* in particular was clearly developed so that the church's preaching would be structured to cover throughout a year all the issues of faith, and the *Catechism* took its structure from that of the Creeds. It is understood that the theology found in the Creeds and Confessions mentioned in the *Basis of Union*<sup>20</sup> will be the theological basis for the church's preaching. This, of course, creates a difficulty which arises from apparent contradictions in the various documents, and from developments in the way the

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<sup>18</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church*, p24 (quoting Karl Barth).

<sup>19</sup> See Matthew 5:44.

<sup>20</sup> See *Basis of Union*, Paragraphs 9 and 10, pp12, 13.

church understands itself and its history. Paragraph 11 of the *Basis of Union* requires the Uniting Church to examine critically its own heritage as found in Paragraph 10.

The essential point in an understanding of the place of the Creeds and Confessions in the Uniting Church is that preaching will continue in its day both to express and explain the theology which grows out of Scripture. As in the Creeds and Confession, the theology of preaching will clearly be trinitarian so that the action of God in salvation will be Christological, and the empowerment of the Church for mission will depend on the action of the Holy Spirit. One of the basic tests for the validity of the Church's preaching is its consistency with the Scriptural heritage.

Preaching is seen to be part of the whole ministry of the church, and is necessary for the fulfilment of the church's MINISTRY AND MISSION. All ordained ministry practitioners—in the earlier documents these were presbyters, bishops and deacons; in later documents those identified are ministers of the Word and members of the Diaconate, and Lay Preachers are included as commissioned ministry—are to be preachers, proclaimers of the Word. And all preachers are, as indicated in their ordination or commissioning, indebted to the Holy Spirit for the ability to make the proclamation. At the same time, preaching remains 'the direct responsibility of the presbyter'.<sup>21</sup> In the foundational documents, the development of understanding of the church's life brought increasing awareness that preaching was basic to the mission and so the ministry of Uniting Church.<sup>22</sup> In the *Basis of Union*

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<sup>21</sup> Above, p76.

<sup>22</sup> See McCaughey, "Confession of Faith in Union Negotiations", p33: 'A recovery of the greatness of the Christian Faith will ... certainly include a recovery of it as preached message'.

(1970 and 1971), two of the four specified ministries (those of ministry of the Word and Lay Preaching) are preaching ministries.

It must be said here also that the practitioners of preaching are not limited to any particular group of people within the Church. Both lay and ordained, who have been gifted by the Spirit of Christ for proclaiming the Word, are to exercise their ministry in the corporate life of the Church. In this, it is quite clear that men *and* women are understood to be equal participants in the service of Christ and the Church.

The function of preaching is always to bring people into the community of faith. As the preaching of the early church had been the basis of the mission of the church and had been the means by which the unity of fellowship developed, so preaching is the impulse for and consequence of the Uniting Church's mission and unity.

The great commissions in Matthew and Acts, to 'go and make disciples of all nations'<sup>23</sup> and 'be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth',<sup>24</sup> echo through the foundational documents of the Uniting Church. One major impetus which drove the former denominations in their desire to come into union was the belief that these commissions could better be obeyed within a new church structure, particularly adapted to the culture and circumstances of the Australian scene. In this context also, the place of preaching is affirmed. Preaching is one part of God's sending out

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 28:19.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 1:8.

(*missio*) of the Church into the world. In the announcement of the salvation which God has brought through Jesus Christ, both within the gathered community and outside that community to those who have not responded to the promises of faith, the Church fulfils its mission task. Alongside of all the church's other tasks—worship and sacramental activity, service and social justice, teaching, pastoral care—preaching continues to be one of the ways of making known to the world the reality of God's presence and power.

It is recognised that the effect of preaching is the result not of the preacher's skills, but is the **OUTWORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**. It is 'the enabling power of the Holy Spirit'<sup>25</sup> (recognised in the ordination of a minister of the Word and in the commissioning of a Lay Preacher) which works through the preacher and in the listener to bring the grace of faith, an awareness of the salvation which God offers, and the evidence of signs and miracles which accompany effective preaching.

This leads to the understanding that all effective preaching is the **WORK OF GOD**. Preaching which truly declares Christ is, in fact, God's self-revelation. Throughout the history of the church it has been through the act of preaching that God has chosen to announce the saving action which centred on Christ. It is in the context of preaching that the announcement of the Word of grace brings a response in the hearer which leads to faith, and is the sign of the free gift of salvation.

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<sup>25</sup> *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 14(a), p15.



In the same context, the relationship between preaching and the sacraments is made clear. Both are forms of proclamation, and in both Christ is made present in the world. In line with this, the historical documents clearly say that the only people recognised as having authority to preside at the sacraments were those ‘that are appointed to the preaching of the Word’.<sup>26</sup> As this thought is followed, the Church must continue to think through the implications of its policies about lay presidency of the sacraments. Either Lay Preachers may be recognised as celebrants, or only ordained people may preach. Further, the historical documents suggest that preaching implies an invitation to baptism and is an essential part of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Through preaching and the sacraments the church proclaims God’s message, acknowledges and affirms God’s loving care, declares the gospel and issues the call to repentance. Preaching, then, is not to be classified as simply a human activity. Indeed, when preaching proceeds only from human ideas without being inspired by God, it is false; when it stands in place of what God has willed, it is in fact evil. In this context, it becomes an important part of the preacher’s skill and ability to discern which human thoughts are inspired by God and to be open to the prompting of the Spirit to transform human techniques into divine gifts.

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<sup>26</sup> *Scots Confession*, Chapter 22, see Owen, *Witness Of Faith*, p75.

The conclusion which this thesis comes to is twofold. First, the preaching of the Uniting Church must “live”. Reiterating what has been said above,<sup>27</sup> the preaching of the Church must be alive to the issues and circumstances which are faced by the people of the faith community and those outside. The Church’s preaching must always relate clearly to the needs of all people. Unless the Church’s preaching is relevant to its hearers, it might as well not be spoken. This means that preaching must take seriously the reality of sin and brokenness. In answer to this sin and brokenness, preaching must present the gospel of grace and new life in Christ as the means by which the separation from God that results from human sinfulness is removed. Preaching which does not address and give answers to the needs of people is wasted. When preaching is faithful to its reformed and evangelical heritage the announcement of the good news of salvation by grace through faith will bring new life to the world.

The preaching of the Church must be alive also to the power of God, both within the preacher (who must embody the faith which will speak to the faith of the listeners) and within the listeners (among whom the signs and miracles which will be seen). These signs and miracles are evidence of the resurrection life which is God’s gift through Christ. It is a promise, identified in the historical documents and implied in the foundational documents, that the Uniting Church will experience the signs and miracles, and show in the world the new life of Christ. Any failure to see the signs and miracles will be an indication of the failure of the Church’s preaching.

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<sup>27</sup> p143.

Preachers and hearers must, therefore, commit themselves to discerning the action of God in the community of faith, seeing there the real evidence of God's love and power.

The second comment to be made in conclusion is the reminder that the styles of preaching in the heritage of the Uniting Church have changed according to the circumstances in which the Word was announced. But the core message of the preaching of the church does not change. Whenever the Church declares its faith, whenever men and women proclaim the Word of God, it must be a contemporary expression of the announcement of God's purpose in bringing to all people the salvation delivered through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In whatever way the Church might express this message, the purpose is always to invite people to receive the gift of grace, and to encourage them to be open to God's will for their own and the world's life. This means that while the detail of the saving action of God is ever the same, and is contained in the Scriptures and explained in the Creeds and Confessions of the church, in each generation the Church has the freedom and flexibility necessary to tell the story of salvation in such a way that those who are listening will hear and in responding be received into the Kingdom of God.

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