

CROSS

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a forum for theological dialogue

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CROSS Purposes

The final *Cross Purposes* for 2010 addresses some familiar questions, hopefully shedding some new light in the process!

Hedley Fihaki responds to William Loader's piece on sexuality (*CP* 21) by taking issue with Loader's hermeneutical framework, which he argues takes insufficient account of scripture as inspired and authoritative, and cedes too much ground to "the world" and "the self". William Loader offers a brief reply.

A contrasting view is given in Brendan Byrne's sermon on the difference between "Christian" and merely "biblical" approaches to theological controversies, both in Paul's time and our own. Byrne argues that it is seriously inadequate to insist on "obedience" to scriptural "rules".

Returning to the subject of the proposed Preamble, John Michael Owen adds his voice to the case for the negative. Asking the question whether we really believe what we say in the *Basis of Union*, he finds a number of points in which the proposed text departs from the trajectory of salvation history which is set forth in the *Basis*.

Finally, our *credo* series on central affirmations of the Christian faith continues, this time examining the perennially contentious opening statement, "I believe in God the Father". Craig Thompson suggests that "Father" is a *name* rather than simply an image for God; the scandal we feel in identifying "God" with "Father" is analogous to the scandal the synagogue had identifying "Jesus" with "Christ".

Sharon Hollis' contribution on this question has been delayed until the next issue because of the limitations of space.

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Letters

Vital Visiting

Thank you for the recent publication. Particularly relevant was the article by A. F. Reid on the theology of pastoral visitation, and the vital role of the Minister of the Word in this regard. This is a matter dear to my

heart. This ministry can never be left to a committee, a timetable, a phone call, an appointment schedule. Some of us have delegated this to others; we are never too busy for this special ministry. It is vital to our call!

Bill Pugh

op. cit.

Hedley Fihaki

The Church's Faith and Message is Controlled by the Biblical Witness

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.

(2 Tim. 3:16-17, GNB)

This paper is a brief response to Prof. William Loader's lecture on "Sexuality in the World of Jesus and the Future" (CP 21). Basically, it seeks to highlight the major problem

or flaw in his methodology, in that he does not declare his particular understanding regarding the "nature" and "authority" of scripture as well as his hermeneutic for interpreting scripture: this is vital for understanding sexuality from a Christian perspective.

His failure to declare his position, gives the false impression that we all begin with the same starting point (presupposition), or that we all come from the same tradition or community of faith regarding our

understanding of scripture. However, as I will try and show, Loader is working from outside the reformed and evangelical tradition regarding scripture as God-breathed or inspired revelation. Loader may argue that he does view scripture as being “inspired”, but he certainly would not use the term in any authoritative way to suggest that scripture is an authority in itself outside of the individual’s own capacity to reason. And, certainly not to be used in any way to suggest that God may actually condemn some sexual practices as sin.

The great difference in our understanding of the nature of scripture highlights a vital matter within the UCA, as Peter Bentley puts it: “How can we satisfy two very different groups, with theological understandings which are in reality *mutually exclusive*?” That is, “the Uniting Church needs to address how it can continue to allow two fundamentally different ecclesiologies to develop”.¹

The Question of “Method”

Prof. Brian Hill points out that we all come to the text with our own presuppositions. To claim to be objectively neutral is deceptive, as “recent philosophical and postmodern critiques have exposed as illusory the myth of scholarly neutrality”. That is, “minds closed to miracles will never see God”.² What is important as an expectation of scholarly research today,

¹ Peter Bentley, *Liberalism, Sexuality and the Future of the UCA* (2010) (www.unitingviews.com); emphasis added.

² Brian Hill, *Approaches to Scripture—Where to Start* (2004) 7.

says Hill, is that the researcher will spell out clearly “what relevant beliefs about reality they are taking as given”, as well as explaining “why they focused on that particular problem, and why they think the methods they chose to use in investigating it are appropriate. This [then] puts other scholars in the position of being able to factor these elements into their evaluation of the purported findings of the enquiry”.³

In other words, “How we approach scripture depends greatly on what kind of a record we believe it to be”. That is, if we begin with “the assumption that the bible contains (inspiring) speculations it is likely to lead us in a very different direction from that which assumes that in a meaningful sense it is to be wrestled with as (inspired) revelation”.⁴

Though Prof. Loader does not declare his position on scripture, his method does reveal his presuppositions regarding the nature of the bible and the subsequent way he uses the bible to support his claims regarding sexuality for the present and future.

The focus of Prof. Loader’s lecture, as the title highlights, is “Sexuality *in the World of Jesus and the Future*”.⁵ He further expands exactly what he will be speaking on and what he will not be speaking on by saying: “It seemed fitting to speak of the ‘World of Jesus’ *rather than* the bible or Jesus or the biblical tradition” (12).⁶ The reason he gives is

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ Emphasis added.

⁶ Emphasis added.

“because then as now, and doubtless in the future, much of what is believed about sexuality and sexual behaviour was deeply engrained in the way society at large saw such issues, often without a lot of reflection” (12). That is, Loader begins with the premise that our understanding regarding sexuality (and by implication anything else) is shaped and determined by culture (by “the way society at large saw such issues”). In other words, for Loader, it is the “world” (culture), rather than the bible or Jesus or the biblical tradition, that shapes and determines our understanding of sexuality, particularly the rightness or wrongness of a particular sexual behaviour or practice.

*Scripture Viewed Solely as a Product
of Culture Naturally Leads
to Culturally Bound Conclusions*

Loader’s basic argument, using the world as his starting and end point (cross-cultural analysis) is that the world we now live is “so” different from the world of Jesus, that it is a gross injustice to hail as “so wrong” today something that belongs to an era and a culture so far removed from our own. This is confirmed by the language and examples that Loader uses at the start of the lecture, such as the world being flat and one’s belief back then that this reality was “so right”, yet has been proven over time to be “so wrong”, serve to paint a picture that there is this great unbridgeable divide between then and now, the past and the present. This so called great distance or chasm between the past and the present Prof. Loader uses as the basis for justifying

why the clear testimony of scripture can be put to the side.

It is why Loader uses the language of “beyond right and wrong” in his paper on “Approaches to Scripture”.⁷ Loader does say that “the scriptures form the authoritative context for our reflection”. However, as Hill points out:

What is consistently unclear, because unstated, is how authoritative in our reflection he will allow the scriptures to be... In short, we are at liberty to set aside the clear testimony of scripture whenever our reflection, or the findings of theologians, or current attitudes in the wider community, seem to be at odds with that testimony.⁸

Loader’s method fails to allow for the possibility that scripture or even God himself (speaking to us through scripture) is an external authority outside of the thinking subject and the world. That is, the thinking subject (reason) or the community of faith to which one belongs become the ultimate authority in terms of determining those aspects of its tradition and practice that are right or wrong. The traditional understanding that scripture interprets scripture or that we need to “[constantly] appeal to Holy Scripture”⁹ gives way to the authority of the “self” and the “world”.

To place authority on individual (reason) and the community of faith is to undermine the *Basis of Union’s*

⁷ William Loader, “Approaches to Scripture—Considering the Options” (www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/scripture.htm).

⁸ Hill, 1.

⁹ *Basis of Union* §10.

understanding of the authority of scripture as being a “unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God, and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and *regulated*”. The church’s faith and message, as importantly pointed out in the *Basis of Union*, “is *controlled* by the biblical witness”.¹⁰ It is not culture that controls the biblical witness.

Loader would probably point to §11 of the *Basis of Union* regarding the important role that scholarly interpreters bring to the life of the church. “In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterized recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God’s ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith”.¹¹

This is true, however, we must equally note, that the scholarly interpreters and people to whom the *Basis of Union* is referring are those who have “acted trustingly in obedience to *God’s living Word*”.¹² That is, it is our understanding of scripture as God’s living Word in Christ Jesus that is to be our starting point in any scientific enquiry. To begin from another starting point is fine. However, the scholar (if a UCA member) must acknowledge, not hide, that he or she is working outside the boundaries or the framework of the *Basis of Union’s* understanding of the biblical witness.

Homosexuality, Slavery and Women in the Bible

Prof. Ulrich Mauser points out that “there is virtual agreement among all who participate today in the homosexuality debate that Old and New Testament contain some unequivocal condemnations of homosexual practice”.¹³ Loader himself acknowledges this fact.

However, his strong support for the claim that it is a “gross injustice” that some would judge these condemnations to be an “infallible divine decree”, and his subsequent argument that to impose “on those *ancient* authors inappropriate authority which on other issues we are happy not to cede to them” (24),¹⁴ again highlight that, for Loader, scripture is only a product of culture. Change of culture, therefore, justifies change of scripture.

Regarding slavery and the status of women, Hill importantly points out that Loader’s comparison of homosexuality to these issues “glosses over the fact... that scripture clearly contains the seeds of reform in respect” to slavery and women. However, it “at no point implies any shift in its condemnation of homosexual practice. This argument by analogy does not wash”.¹⁵

Mauser also makes this strong point:

Against this claim it must be kept in mind that, first, nowhere in Old or New Testament is it indicated that being a member

¹⁰ Ibid., §5, emphasis added.

¹¹ Ibid., §11.

¹² Ibid., §11, emphasis added.

¹³ Ulrich Mauser, *The Bible and Homosexuality* (Princeton, 1994) 1.

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Hill, 12.

of a given race, or being a woman, is in conflict with being a part of God's good creation, but homosexuality is said to be in that conflict. And, second, while both slavery and a patriarchal society are presuppositions in much biblical literature, they are counterbalanced by other aspects of biblical teaching which have been used successfully by advocates of the abolition of slavery and of women's rights; but no such counterbalance exists in the bible concerning homosexuality. In regard to homosexual activity there is no biblical evidence which might soften the unambiguous stand adopted in the bible.¹⁶

To begin with the presupposition that our understanding of right and wrong is limited to the natural order of things in the world (scripture being understood as part of this order) means that we fall into the danger, that Hill points out, of regarding the world as "a closed system of cause and effect. God, if he exists, is not to be thought of as active or communicative in the world, except in a mystical or metaphorical sense."¹⁷

Love as a Key Hermeneutical Principle Must Be Understood in Concrete Forms, in the Light of God's Love in Christ Jesus

Loader does rightly point to "love" as the overarching hermeneutical principle by which all scripture should be understood:

Love, indeed, and its foundation, being loved, produces an attitude of love, which in turn produces behaviour which gives expression to love, even far beyond what the biblical injunctions prescribe and

enjoin. Such brilliant light breaks through the clouds of conflict, and shows itself to be among humanity's best insights, attested, as we now recognize, in many of the world's religions and in the best wisdom of secular society, then and now. (19)

However, because Loader views scripture as simply being culturally bound, he fails to give love its full biblical and theological meaning, in the light of God's creation of the creature in his image as male and female, and in the light of the significance of law and commandment, as faithful concrete responses of "obedience" to God's calling to "follow him" as his disciples in Jesus Christ.

That is, we cannot understand love, as Mauser rightly argues:

Without consideration of the concrete forms of exercising love which correspond to the Gospel. Love is the fulfilment of the law, but this love is not without its embodiment in actual concrete areas of human life. "Love is the fulfilling of the law" ... but this love fans out into the concrete forms of commandments "you shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet (Rom. 13:9-10)."¹⁸

Mauser importantly points out:

Neither Old nor New Testament assume that human common sense, or a natural goodness of moral sensibilities, lead everybody to a universal understanding of what it means to love. Rather, love must be thought through and practiced in accordance with the act and word of God in which love receives its distinctive form.

¹⁶ Mauser, 4.

¹⁷ Hill, 3.

¹⁸ Mauser, 4.

And in this context – it must be stated with unambiguous harshness – sexual relations between male and female are not comparable in kind or in value to relations between same-sex partners. Heterosexual unions are an emanation of God’s creation: homosexual unions practice the denial of it.¹⁹

It is also worth noting this statement from Mauser in full:

It is a fundamental mistake, in my view, to discuss biblical statements on homosexuality in isolation from the positive ethos of human sexuality in scripture. As bits and pieces of Old Testament legislation, and of Jewish heritage in the New Testament, the sparse references to homosexuality could well be attributed to the social conditions of a distant past. But seen against the foil of the extremely high valuation given to the counterpoint of maleness and femaleness in God’s creation in the bible, *the sole attribution to time-bound modes of social norms cannot be maintained.* On the background of the *positive ethos* of human sexuality in Old and New Testament, homosexuality becomes inescapably a denial of the goodness of God’s creation.²⁰

Rev. Doug Jones reminds us that:

The world does not absorb the Word but the Word absorbs the world. The gospel critiques both the dominant contemporary culture and also, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, leads the church to a full expression of the freedom that the truth in Jesus Christ gives. In that process, the church discerns those aspects of its tradition and practice that are culture bound.²¹

The key question is indeed, as Jones points us, “whether the dominant culture is shaping the church culture or whether the gospel is creating its own culture”.²² That is, is the church controlled by the biblical witness or by the world.

I believe that Prof. Loader’s lecture highlights the fact that he is working from within the cultural values of our postmodern society. It is a reflection of the UCA and how it has “surrendered to our culture’s values and the lure of alien gospels”.²³ I therefore pray “that the UCA will resist captivity to cultural forces by upholding the apostolic faith defined in its own *Basis of Union*”.²⁴

HEDLEY FIIHAKI is a UC minister in Cairns, Deputy Chairman of the ACC and President of the Pacific Communities Council FNQ.

William Loader Replies...

I thank Hedley Fihaki for reading my lecture. His objections relate not to its substance but to my approach to scripture. I have always been clear about my approach both in website articles and in many publications. I see the New Testament as a collection of witnesses to the faith experience which inspires them. To me that means they bring their faith to

and Human Sexuality. Some Reflection on the Way” (a paper used as the basis of a conversation with ministers of the Downs Presbytery on 27 August 2003) 8.

²²Ibid.

²³Preamble to “Theological Declaration” of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia (2008) 1.

²⁴Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 3, emphasis added.

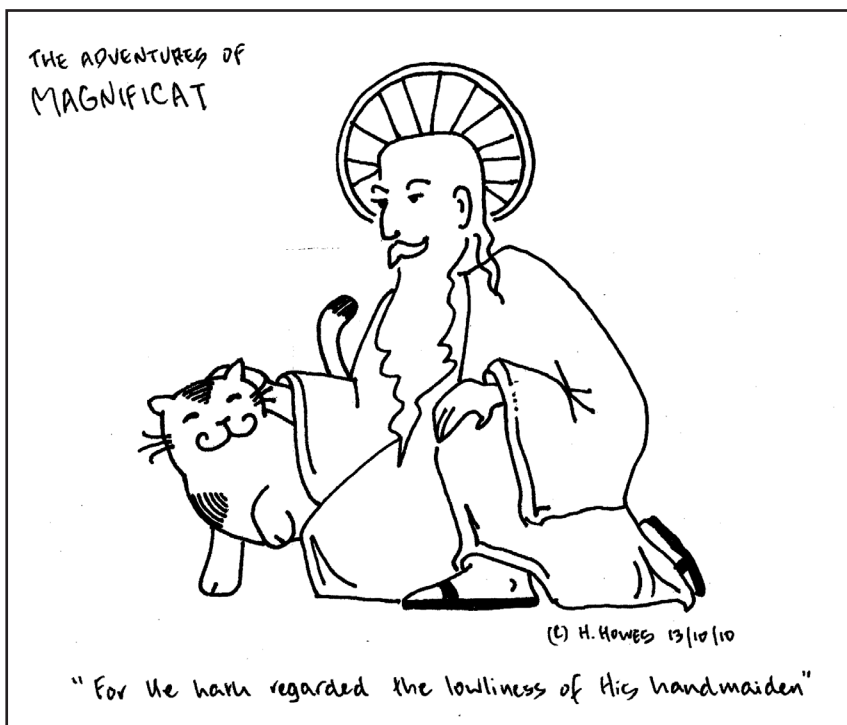
²¹Doug Jones, “The Gospel, the Church

expression in ways that reflect the culture of the times, but I would never assent to the view that they are just reflections of culture as he suggests. He acknowledges the same, when he cites the instance of statements about women and slavery and is comfortable to have them overridden by other trends within scripture. I would include some things in other trends which he would not, especially in relation to same-sex relations. I find it an artificial distinction to say that only those parts can be set aside where there is a specific counter indicator. My research persuades me to believe that Paul, like other Jews writing in his time, viewed all

people as created heterosexual, so that action which reflected otherwise was sin. I think Paul is right where people deliberately subvert their heterosexuality, but, differently from Paul, I also think that some people are not heterosexually oriented and stand by my view that a biblically informed approach would see imposing Paul's restraints on them as inappropriate. Engaging the witness of scripture entails critical discernment. To see things differently from Paul in relation to women, slaves, same-sex behaviour, and much else (such as cosmology, cosmogony) does not rob his witness of its life, including the life it gives to me.

double take

Hilary Howes



through a glass darkly

Brendan Byrne

Biblical—Or Christian?

a sermon on Galatians 2:15-21 and Luke 7:36-8:3

I don't know if you saw it or not, but earlier this week there appeared an article in *The Age* newspaper, which suggested that in many mainline churches, moves are afoot to restrict, or even reverse, the ordination of women to the clergy. Those behind this move insist that they are acting "biblically", and cite texts such as Paul's First Letter to Timothy to justify their position. Those who oppose this apparently growing movement insist with equal vigour that it is their position which is "biblical", and refer to texts including Paul's Letter to Galatians to justify their claims.

It's an interesting thing that both sides in this debate appeal to Paul to justify their claims. Of course, I'm aware that other passages from the bible, including certain contentious texts from the Old Testament, are also frequently cited in debates of this sort. But what struck me about the *Age* article was the fact that it was Paul who was the basis of each side's justification, the basis of each side's claim that their position was "biblical"—and, by implication, that the other side wasn't.

I say it was an interesting thing that both sides of this debate appealed to Paul as their authority, because Paul himself was often confronted with

the issue of whom he could appeal to as his authority. As the Acts of the Apostles makes clear, Paul was often in conflict with the disciple group based in Jerusalem, headed by Cephas—that is, Peter—and James. They often charged that Paul had no right to preach, let alone found churches, because he was not a member of the disciple group ordained by Jesus. He wasn't one of them, one of the chosen. Paul, on the other hand, argued that his commission had come directly from Christ, in and through the event of his conversion. For Paul, the commission to ministry wasn't a matter of membership, of being part of some anointed, unchanging elect.

But if there was one group in particular with whom Paul was often in conflict, it was that faction within the Jerusalem group who insisted that Gentile Christians, in order to be accepted into the early church, had to comply with the requirements of the Mosaic law. Paul strongly resisted this claim, arguing instead that membership of the church was not a matter of regulation, but of faith. It was faith in God through Christ that made one a member of the faith community, not whether or not one complied with the dictates of scripture.

In essence, the question being debated was this: what was the ground and centre of Christian faith—obedience to scripture or discipleship to Christ?

And this is a debate in which Paul engages in today's reading from his letter to the Galatians, because a debate very much like the debate over women's ordination was happening within the Galatian community—a debate about who was in and who was out, who could be included, and who had to be excluded. The Galatian church, founded by Paul, made no requirement on Gentile converts that they adhere to the Mosaic law: indeed, Jewish and Gentile Christians shared meals together, an arrangement which apparently even Peter found acceptable.

But then other missionaries, claiming to have been sent from Jerusalem by James, arrive; and they start telling the Galatian Christians that what they are doing is all wrong. According to them, the Jewish and Gentile Christians must effectively live apart until and unless the Gentile Christians submit to the requirements of the Mosaic law. And unless that submission occurs, the Gentiles who accept Christ as the Messiah aren't "really" Christians; at most, they're fringe dwellers, stuck in the remote outer suburbs of righteousness.

Now, these days, we tend to get all self-righteous and say things like "How awful! Such shocking discrimination!". But we must remember that, for those who were perusing this argument, discrimination—at least, in the modern sense of the word—simply didn't enter into it.

Rather, what they were saying was that in order to live faithfully, to live in right relationship with God, one had to be obedient to scripture. After all, they said, Christ himself had proclaimed that he

“Scripture does not exist for its own sake, or for the sake of any human agenda.”

had come, not to overthrow the law, but to fulfil it. So if Christ had come to fulfil the law, then Christians, in order to live in proper discipleship to Christ, needed to meet all the requirements of scripture, within which the law was contained.

But Paul rejects this position. Not, I hasten to add, because he rejects the law. On the contrary, Paul himself declares that he is a Jew, raised in and obedient to the law; indeed, a careful reading of Paul shows that, in many of his letters, he references scripture in order to reinforce the points he makes to the different Christian communities to whom he writes. And no doubt, Paul could have utilized all sorts of scriptural references in order to rebut the arguments made by the followers of James. But Paul doesn't engage in a tit-for-tat argument with duelling scriptural quotes at twenty paces—because, for Paul, the centre of Christian faith resides, not in the law, but in Christ.

Indeed, it is the very fact that Christ came to fulfil the law that, for Paul, makes Christ the ground on which Christian faith stands or falls. Because

it is Christ who achieves the very thing which the law was given to humanity to do, but which could not be done because of human brokenness. Which is not to say that the law is inferior or outdated; rather, that Christ embodies the intention of the law, and makes that intention a reality. God, in and through Christ, takes the initiative in order to achieve what humans are incapable of doing: God, in and through Christ, fulfils the purpose for which the law was gifted to humankind.

And, for Paul, what that means is that faithful living, life lived in relationship with God, is achieved through faith in Christ—because Christ is what the law sets out to achieve. Thus, to be a Christian, to be a member of the faith community, what is required is not a life lived by dotting the i's and crossing the t's of scripture; what is required is a life which is, in Thomas a Kempis' famous phrase, the "imitation of Christ".

In other words, and to translate this into modern terms, what Paul is saying is that what is required is not a life which is demonstrably "biblical", but a life that is demonstrably Christian. Not because a Christian life is divorced from what is contained in scripture. But because the Christian life is one that approaches and understands the bible, not as a set of rules and regulations that must be slavishly adhered to, but as that which constantly points beyond itself, to the One in whom it finds fulfilment. Scripture does not exist for its own sake, or for the sake of any human agenda; and any attempt to reduce scripture to the words

on the page, and to make faith nothing more than mere obedience to those words, leads us away from Christ, and from an authentically Christian life.

And we get an image of what an authentically Christian life looks like in today's reading from Luke's Gospel. All the gospels have a version of today's reading, in which a woman anoints Jesus: in some accounts, she anoints his head with oil or perfume; in others she washes his feet with tears and wipes them with her hair. In Luke's version, she washes his feet with tears, wipes them with her hair, and then anoints those same feet with ointment, even going so far as to kiss them afterwards.

But what makes this episode so compelling is that it takes place in the house of a Pharisee. The Pharisees are often depicted as fundamentalists of a sort, but in truth they were a kind of reform movement. They wanted to rid the Judaism of their time of the influence of Greek philosophy, and they insisted that this could only be done by faithful obedience to the law of Moses. So anyone who didn't follow the dietary laws, who didn't observe the rituals of purification, who didn't keep to the society of other law-abiding Jews, was a "sinner", impure, an outcast from the community of faith. So for a woman who was a "sinner" to enter the house of a Pharisee and come into intimate physical contact with a person thought of as a rabbi, a Teacher—this was a matter of considerable scandal. It amounted to one who was excluded from the community of faith infecting that community with their presence.

But that is not Jesus' attitude. Because Jesus didn't see faith as a matter of obedience, but of relationship. And relationship is a matter of friendship, of intimacy, of communion. And in coming to Jesus, to weep and anoint and wash his feet, this woman is expressing her desire for relationship with God through repentance. Because repentance is not mere regret for wrongdoing; it is the desire to turn back to God, to rediscover the hope that comes through relationship with God. And Jesus recognizes this; and this is why he tells her her sins are forgiven. Because Jesus recognizes that what the woman desires is not membership of an elite, self-enclosed group; what she wants is participation in a community of faith, a community of those who live in relationship with God, and whose lives reflect that relationship.

And that is why Jesus rebukes the Pharisee, both through the parable of the two men forgiven their debts, and by pointing out his lack of hospitality. Because Jesus' point isn't that the Pharisee isn't a righteous person; or, indeed, that the woman isn't a sinner. Jesus' point is that the Pharisee's idea of righteousness is inadequate, because he fails to see that the law doesn't exist in order to be obeyed like some legal code; it exists in order to help people come into relationship with God. But the Pharisee's approach to the law robs it of that

purpose, reduces it to a kind of statute book, a means for controlling people, for suppressing those who don't conform to our prejudices. The Pharisee's approach to righteousness is a matter of power, not relationship; a matter of control, not freedom.

And this is the portrait of Christian life which today's gospel passage illustrates. Because to live a Christian life is to live a life that is based on Jesus' own life of inclusion, of welcome, of friendship. A life that is governed, not by rules of conduct or measures of righteousness, but by the recognition that the God of our faith is a God who desires us and seeks us out, who extends to us the grace of hospitality, without condition or exception. It is a life which extends that abundance and hospitality to others.

An abundance that is sadly lacking in the debate about the ordination of women. Because arguments about whose position is more or less "biblical" fail to see that being "biblical" is, perhaps, the least relevant of all the measures that need to be considered. Instead, what needs to be answered is the question of whether or not, in this debate, we are making Christ the centre and ground of our faith—or merely using scripture as an excuse to run our own agendas.

BRENDAN BYRNE is an exit candidate for Ministry of the Word currently awaiting placement.

on Areopagus Hill

John Michael Owen

Believing in Reconciliation

Johannes Hamel, a university chaplain in communist East Germany, anxiously anticipated arrest by political police, but was quite at peace, once it happened. Under interrogation, he answered truthfully. An officer paused and asked, “Wait a minute, do you mean you actually believe what you’re saying?”. Hamel answered, “Yes”. “But that makes you quite different from other people.” Hamel again answered, “Yes”. And then the room fell silent, as it sank in.

According to Marxist theory, history was moving towards a classless society; those who profited from inequities were resisting the trend; and churches supported them by teaching that God sanctioned the status quo. Hamel helped a few communist officials to see that was not necessarily so. Christian faith and hope in God, and love for human beings, matched Marxist faith, hope and altruism. The gospel was not a fraudulent way of supporting political reaction, but a genuine alternative view. Marxists could still question it, but it also raised questions about Marxism. Dialogue was necessary and possible.

Jesus does say,

When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.¹

We may still worry, when we have to speak, even on occasions well short of arrest and interrogation. Jesus tells us not to speak out of our worries, but in relaxed confidence in his promise of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not feed us special messages to deliver, but witnesses to Jesus Christ and enables us to witness to him, too. That is Christians’ central role among the nations of the world.²

For the gospel expresses the fundamental truths about humans and their world.

In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. In love for the world, God gave his Son to take away the world’s sin. ... In raising [Jesus] to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness... Jesus bore to him on earth, he reasserted his

¹ Mark 13:11 // Matthew 10:19-20 // Luke 21:14-15.

² Mark 13:9-10 // Matthew 10:17-18; 24:14 // Luke 21:12-13.

claim over the whole of his creation, he pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love.³

These quotations from the *Basis of Union* speak of God's dealing with the world in Jesus Christ to determine its past, present and future.

The *Basis of Union*⁴ sees unity given by the grace that accepts us all equally in Jesus Christ without any merit on our part, justifying the ungodly through faith.

The one, universal church is grounded in Jesus Christ, and therefore centred on proclamation of his gospel and scripture's unique witness to him. Church order and orders of ministry in the *Basis* follow Reformed models in seeking only to serve Jesus Christ as God's living Word and the church's Lord, as he constitutes, rules and renews his church and draws it into his mission in the world. Unity in faith, life and mission are given by God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The *Basis* invited the three churches to unite by taking quite seriously what they centrally believed. That means that, when we appeal to the *Basis* and quote from it, we may fairly be challenged, as Johannes Hamel was, "Wait a minute, do you actually believe what you're saying?"

In answer, we should not too hastily say, "Yes", for appearances tell against us. Our constitution and regulations ignore the *Basis's* view of church government as

³ *Basis of Union* §3.

⁴ Note the most important recent study by Geoffrey Thompson, "Does the Uniting Church Have a Theological Future?", *Uniting Church Studies* 15.2 (December 2009): 25-41.

service of the church's living Lord. Our sermons and reports too frequently skip over God's action and promise in Jesus Christ and exhort us to do things that God primarily does for us. Too often, we behave as communists have always suspected, putting a personal, social or political agenda first, and then embellishing it with faith statements. How much do we really believe of what we pay lip-service to with the *Basis of Union*?

This is a question for the whole Uniting Church. The proposed Preamble finds support, because it seems like other things we do. But it still provokes the question, "Do we actually believe what the *Basis* acknowledges in our name?"

God reconciled the world with himself in Jesus Christ. The world and people in it always had a relation to God, who called them into existence out of nothing. But the human race then lapsed into deep estrangement from God, with serious consequences for them and their world: the meaning of creaturely life was lost or perverted. Yet God has reconciled the world with himself again.

It began with the election and call of Abraham and God's promises and covenant for him and his descendants. Amidst the surrounding cultures and religions, God worked with that chosen people, making his word, law and wisdom known to it, revealing himself as the one and only God, maker of heaven and earth, true Lord of all nations. Nonetheless, God's people did not uphold its side of the covenant and repeatedly acted out the deep estrangement from God common to all humans.

That story came to its final escalation and crisis, when, “In love for the world, God gave his Son to take away the world’s sin.” Humans, even those blessed with a covenant relation and history with God, had proved themselves prepared to resist God—to the death. But God determined that the outcome for human

“How much do we really believe of what we pay lip-service to with the *Basis of Union*?”

beings should not be death, but life; and therefore God accepted death for himself. In sending his Son as a human being, God opened himself to all the world’s rejection and hostility, without retaliating and so perpetuating the rift. By meeting hatred with love, God disarmed human beings’ resistance to himself and took away the world’s sin.

The *Basis of Union* acknowledges that God has raised Jesus to live and reign: Jesus Christ, risen and ascended, is now the living embodiment of God’s life and sovereignty. He is the church’s Lord and head over all things for the church.

God’s action in raising Jesus from the dead, against the specific background of Jesus’ life and ministry, in the wider context of the Hebrew scriptures and in interaction with Jewish interpretations of them, did other things, too. By that action:

- God “confirmed and completed the witness that Jesus bore to him on earth”—Through Jesus’ story, God reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- God “reasserted his claim over the whole of his creation”—Reconciliation restored the world’s relation to God. Our relation to the created world, too, is mediated through Jesus Christ;
- God “pardoned sinners”—Every human creature’s relation to God is restored, virtually or already actually in faith, through Jesus Christ;
- God “made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love”—Jesus lived, died and was raised as representative of all people and the whole old creation. He will bring their final reconciliation and renewal, and his church serves him by already beginning to live in the strength of that.⁵

If we thus believe with the *Basis of Union* that “the whole work of [human beings’] salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone”,⁶ we cannot approve a new preamble for the church’s constitution that seeks to:

1. Ground this church, not solely in Jesus Christ, but also in a prior history of indigenous peoples with God apart from him;⁷
2. Establish a special sort of unity for a separate Australian church apart from the unity of the one, universal church;
3. Match God’s once and for all act of reconciliation, in recognition of which

⁵ *Basis of Union* §3, cf. §§1, 8, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §3.

⁷ Assembly Minute 09.08.03.3.

the Uniting Church was formed, with a human agenda of securing for one group a special status over against others in the church;⁸

4. Counter God's once and for all act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ by the constitutional consolidation of one group's inevitably partisan position against other groups in the church;⁹

5. Read fragments of trinitarian doctrine into indigenous traditions, distorting both traditions and doctrine;¹⁰

⁸ Assembly Minute 09.08.03: "As the Church believes God guided it into union so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands." The comparison must have seemed possible because the original "Preamble to Interim Constitution" ignores the interpretation of the act of uniting provided in the *Basis of Union* and attributes that step to a belief that God was calling the churches into a corporate union. Both the present Preamble and the proposed one misrepresent the basis of the original union. But the proposed Preamble seeks to make the Constitution into a defining document (09.0902 a], b] and the stem of 09.08.03), which it had not been up to now.

⁹ Assembly Minute 09.08.03,¹⁰—Some of the ways in which Australia's history is recited there seem tendentious and have already proved hurtful to some.

¹⁰ The kind of syncretism attempted in the proposed preamble is similar to the colonial policy of the Roman Empire, by which gods of local peoples would be identified with comparable Roman deities, probably giving the local deities a different character, but furthering the coherence of the colony (see Charles Thomas, *Celtic Britain* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986) 26-28). It also

6. Give indigenous peoples things to boast of,¹¹ as if they did not need God's sheer grace as all other people do;

7. Describe an unbroken relation of indigenous peoples to God from time immemorial in ways implying, and only supportable by, notions of natural theology and justification by works.¹² The natural theology of German missionaries, teaching each nation's direct relation to God the creator apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, fed into the development of apartheid in South Africa and of antisemitism and notions of racial superiority and national destiny in Germany.

If we just believe what we say in our *Basis of Union* and pray for grace to let ourselves be reconciled with one another, as we already have been reconciled with God in Jesus Christ, we may trust that we shall be led together in new insight and understanding.

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resembles the way in which some in Israel began to identify Yahweh with the Baal worshipped by Canaan's earlier inhabitants. But that went against God's first commandment!

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:29-31; Romans 3:27f; 4:2; Luke 18:9-14.

¹² Revd. Alistair Macrae, President of the UCA Assembly, "Some Biblical and Theological Comments about Paragraph 3 of the Proposed Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia" (December 2009) 1-2, 5. I consider that this paper misrepresents the positions of biblical writers and Karl Barth.

credo

Craig Thompson

What's in a Name?

What's in a name? that which we call
a rose
By any other name would smell as
sweet. (*Romeo & Juliet* II.ii.43-4)

So muses the lovestruck Juliet at the thought of the sweet-smelling Romeo, when she discovers that he has a rather problematic surname. Why not simply discard the concern with names, and simply enjoy the Romeo? So it may well be for roses, and perhaps even for Romeos. It is an important question for the church in this day and age, however, whether the same conclusion applies also to gods. Is a god by any name just as sweet, or just as odorous, as the case may be? The name of God is rather a controversial thing in parts of the church these days. For some, gods are like roses, and for others, quite the opposite.

In unpacking what is going on in the naming of God the first thing we need to note here is that God's name is *not* "God". A god is a kind of a thing, in the same way that a tree is a kind of a thing. If you're the sort of person who likes to talk to trees, then you'll most likely address *any* tree as "tree", be it a gum tree, a lemon tree or a pine tree. "Tree" could not really be the *name* of a tree, unless it happened

to be the *only* tree which existed. Then, the *type* of thing it was would become its *name* because there'd be no mistaking *which* tree or thing you were talking about. In fact, strictly speaking, it would cease to be "a" tree at all. So also with gods. "God" can only be God's *name* if there is only *one* God, for then the ambiguity about *which* god we are referring to drops away. Again, strictly speaking, God would cease to be a god.

So the first thing we have to establish if we are going to talk about naming God is whether there is only one god, or many. Christians have generally held there is only one God. As a result, we have tended to treat the word "God" as a name, even though it is not *necessarily* that. The testimony of scripture, however, is not quite that there is only one God. Paul, for example, declares "there are many gods and many lords..." (1 Cor. 8:5). For him, as for the rest of scripture, the real question is not whether there is a god or how many there are, but rather whether the thing which is serving as a god in your life, is in fact ultimately doing you (and everyone else) any good. The bible is not so much interested in the idea of the *oneness* of God as it is

with the sovereignty, the lordship, of the *particular* God of Israel—the god above all gods.

It is when our task becomes a matter of distinguishing between particular individuals of the same type that names become important. A name enables us to distinguish between two people: Jane is not Angela, although they are both women. But a name by itself is not always enough, and so sometimes there enters another problem. There is a strange phenomenon I've observed in ministry, in that it seems that within a Uniting Church parish there is usually one name which occurs rather more frequently than most other names. In my last parish, there were at least five Davids. When I began in my current placement the combined membership roles listed eight Margarets! In such a case, we begin to distinguish between our Margarets according to historical features which mark them off as different to one another. It might be whether or not a Margaret is married, or what her racial background is, or how old she is, or who her parents are, or whatever. As we run through those historical markers we end up identifying which Margaret it is we are talking about, because not all Margarets have all things in common.

Now, as it is with Margarets, so also it is with *gods*. In the bible, two names are given to God which stand out among all the others. The first is the answer to Moses' question to the burning bush—"Who shall I say sent me?" The answer God gave there is the word we sometimes know as "Jehovah", or more often

these days as "Yahweh". The god in the burning bush says to Moses, "tell them that Yahweh sent you". And so the name "Yahweh" comes to be the way in which the people of Israel address their God. More than this, the bearer of this name is linked to particular acts—in particular, the liberation of Israel from Egypt. The first of the ten commandments begins: I am Yahweh your God, who brought you up out of slavery in Egypt. Which God does Israel worship? The God Yahweh, who brought liberation to the captive people Israel.

The second outstanding name the bible gives for the God of Israel features mainly in the New Testament, where there are two things to note. The first is that God is now marked not only by the Exodus but also by the resurrection of Jesus. Who is the God of the church (and of Israel)? The one who raised Jesus from the dead! The second thing to note is that the name "Father" displaces the name "Yahweh" to identify the same God.

Some help on the significance of the name Father can be found in Jesus' great prayer for his disciples (John 17). Here Jesus speaks to the Father about having "made your name known". Now we need to note here that Jesus is *not* quite saying, "I have made *you* known". This is where *our* focus usually is, for our questions are usually along the lines of, how can we know there is a God? Or, how can we know what God is like? And our answer (if we are Christians) is usually "Jesus shows us...". But three times in this chapter Jesus refers specifically to importance of the "name" of the one he is addressing

as God, with this name clearly being “Father”: John 17.6—“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world”; John 17.11—“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one”; John 17. 26—“I have made known to them your name, and I will make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them”.

Now, the controversy we often have around the word “Father” arises from the fact that there are human beings in each of our lives to whom we refer as “father”. The word “father” here functions for most of us in two ways: it is both the *name* of a person—the way we can address someone—and it describes a type of relation. Ordinary names sometimes do the same thing.

Some of you will have seen a movie about twenty years or so ago, called “Dances-With-Wolves”. “Dances-With-Wolves” was the name of a man, given to him by a tribe of Indians who watched him do just that—playing with wild wolves on the prairie. When they used that name for him, they knew why and what it meant. In the New Testament the disciple Simon has his name changed by Jesus to “Peter”, because “Peter” means “rock” in Greek, and Peter’s future was to be the foundation upon which Christ would build his church. When the disciples used that name for Simon, they also knew why and what it meant. But those meanings usually become lost. We forget what “Peter” means—the Peters in our lives are “just” Peters, and we still

know who we are talking about! So also we (and Israel) have long since forgotten

“If ‘Father’ is a name, to change it to ‘Mother’ or something else in a prayer would be as unhelpful as calling Jesus ‘Eric.’”

what “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” meant, but we still use the name to identify the God who freed the Israelite slaves. *But*, we have a problem with the word Father, because it remains for us both a name and a word with a meaning we still know. This means that when the word “Father” is used in Christian talk, it will set off for some of us a whole series of thoughts and experiences which will distract us from God and even become a barrier between us and God. This is because some fathers have been extraordinarily destructive influences in their children’s lives. Consequently it would seem to do such children no good to require them to think about God in terms of what seems to be the “image” of a father. And so, for what seem to be all the *right* reasons, we are then tempted or encouraged to avoid the “F” word in church and replace it with something which has nothing to do with gender at all. Or, alternatively, we are encouraged to slip into a “balanced” mode of language, interchanging feminine images for God with male ones or neutered ones, in an attempt to ensure

that God is identified neither as male nor female.

And this brings us now back to the question of names, roses and gods. Is the Father, “by any another name”, still the one who raised Jesus from the dead? That is, is the word “Father” replaceable by something else in the life of the church? It depends on whether the word “Father” in the New Testament is properly a *name*, or merely an image or metaphor laid upon a thing. If “Father” in the New Testament *is* properly a *name*, despite the fact that we also use the word in other ways, then it *cannot* be changed. If it *were* a name and yet *could* be changed, then we could also conceivably change other names. And so, for example, we could pray our prayers in the name of “Eric, our Lord and Saviour”. We would actually *mean* the one the New Testament identifies as having been called Jesus, but we might have had some reason to be offended by the name Jesus and so change it to Eric because that name bothers us less, unless, of course, we’ve had a terrible experience with an Eric, in which case we might go with Barry or Roger. *If* “Father” *is* a name, to change it to “Mother” or something else in a prayer would be as unhelpful as calling Jesus “Eric”.

If the word “Father” is *not* a name but an *image* or *metaphor*, so that the New Testament is saying that the one who sent Jesus is *like* a father, then of course we *can* change it, because by any other “name” or image the Sending-One is still the same thing, and indeed we *must* change the image when it comes

between us and the divine thing we desire.

So, is “Father” a name, or an image or metaphor? Deciding this is *not* simply a matter of personal preference. And so what we think are important pastoral concerns can’t straightaway decide the matter, either. If indeed there *are* many lords and many gods—many powers active in our lives—we need to be able to distinguish the one(s) which ultimately matter from those which do not. If we are to distinguish in this way, then we have to tell a story which identifies the various gods by their history and their effects. If we have to do *that*, then the church (at least) will never be able to avoid using the word “Father”, simply because Jesus is at the centre of our identification of God, and he just happened to use the word “Father” to refer to the one who sent him. We could call God whatever we liked, but sooner or later all those names will come back to the ones which are used in scripture, because that is the only place we have to go for an authoritative account of the story of this particular god.

There is no denying that the word “Father” is a problematic one for the church, whether we believe it to be a name or not. But we should also recognize that the problem the word causes us is *exactly* the same as the problem the synagogues once had with the idea that Jesus was the Christ. How can the *name* and *history* of the man called Jesus possibly be joined to the *idea* of “Christ”? We are so familiar with the expression “Jesus Christ” that we treat it as a first name and a

second name. In fact it is not a name but a sentence—a theological statement, and so also a political statement—“*Jesus is the Christ*”. “Jesus” and “Christ” are realities which existed independently until the church forced them together into an unnatural relationship under the impact of Jesus on its understanding of God. To say that Jesus is the Christ actually makes no religious sense. It is the joining of “Jesus” to “Christ” which both scandalized many of the Jews—the point of crucifying Jesus—and gave the church its message of hope.

It is the same with the seemingly problematic use of the word “Father” in relation to “God”. Both these thoughts exist independently in our minds, and are not naturally or necessarily linked for us. We have excellent reasons for requiring that the word “Father” be put aside. The use of the word “Father” and the corresponding New Testament word “Son” obviously draws on the relationship between a human father and son—and all that boys’ club stuff threatens to spill over into dangerous patriarchal nonsense which can deny the freedoms and responsibilities of women. Because of our political sensitivities, the name “Father” gets in the way, and contradicts our general *idea* of God, and so we do our very best to help God out by avoiding its use.

Unfortunately this sounds very much like the kind of logic which led to the conclusion that Jesus must be crucified, and we should back up a bit a reconsider if that is where we are going to end up! Jesus-the-man redefined Christ-the-idea

by filling it with the content of God’s Suffering Servant, among other things. At the same time, Christ-the-idea located Jesus-the-man as the one who had been waited for, as the one who would bring God’s kingdom. It had to flow both ways.

In the same way, the word “Father” redefines God by giving it a particular history—the history in which Jesus refers to the one who sent him by that name, and so links all that he does and experiences with the Father. At the same time, the word “God” locates the Father for us as the one who not only directed the Jesus-show but is indeed the one God who alone is to be loved, or feared.

This redefinition is important. By “pastorally” avoiding the use of “Father”, we also shield ourselves and others from the fact that God is not only a comfort to us but also an assault, or an offence, or a redefinition. The offensiveness of the word “Father” is part of the offensiveness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus offends because it is claimed that the God of all the world is located and defined in the events of his ministry and crucifixion. But this identification of God is not just an offensive idea. It is also what gives the gospel its power to change the world. If, by raising him from the dead, God identifies with the desolate and abandoned Jesus on the cross, then God speaks a word of judgement on *all* powers which would conspire to dismiss the seemingly weak and powerless—including the powers of patriarchy. Gods usually simply reinforce the religion or culture in which they are worshipped. Despite the church’s efforts

to make its God do just that, the God of Israel, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, does exactly the opposite, attacking structures which limit the freedoms and responsibilities of both God and God's creatures. "The Father"—the one who sent Jesus—is not a reinforcement of patriarchy or any other quasi-religious structure but an attack on it. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is not able to change for us the meaning and application of our language for God and for the world, then it is a poor thing indeed.

So, what's in a name? Whatever the case for roses and for Romeos, for gods it is everything. Names not only distinguish between our gods, but associate them with particular histories. Most gods have histories which begin with their culture and die with their culture. The God of Israel preceded the people Israel, and so was able to remain free of the culture and religion of that people in order to shape and change it. As such, the God of Israel is not really a god at all, because he is so different from all the other gods. The God of Israel redefines what the word "god" can mean. And so also, for God to be Father is for God to be unlike any human father we might otherwise know. The God and Father we know in Jesus Christ redefines what "father" can mean for us.

There is an ironic conclusion which drops out from all this. If we truly *understand and believe* that all our words about God are controlled by the history

of Jesus, including how he referred to God, then it *would* indeed be possible to substitute other names for God, because we would expect God to redefine for us the words we use for those names. Thus, if we were to call God "Mother", the thoughts about God we would have would actually be a long way from the ones we rightly have on Mother's Day, for example.

But the irony is that if we understand that a redefinition of our words must always take place for the words we use to refer to God, then in fact we would not *need* to change them, because the name "Father" would no longer actually be a distraction for us, for its meaning would also be controlled by its use by Jesus, and not our own social use.

The "F" word must remain privileged in our references to God, not because it is traditional, or because a male preacher says that it must (and you'd expect that from such a one!). It must remain privileged because to abandon it is to abandon the possibility and *so the reality* that this God can change our culture and politics by changing the meaning of our words.

We've abandoned many good things for apparently good causes in the last little while.

Too abandon this would be too much...

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credo — the descent into hell

Garry Deverell

through a glass darkly

Clive Ayre

responds to Michael Champion

an interview with

Marilynne Robinson