

# Changing the Preamble?

Strange though it may sound, the process leading to the proposed new preamble has not been controversial enough. Certainly, significant protests about the process itself have been raised (see for example Ian Breward’s criticism in *Cross Purposes* 19). But given the scope of the preamble itself—including its recasting of the context of the Uniting Church’s formation, and the more specifically theological affirmations it makes—we might have expected more “noise” before its acceptance by the 2009 Assembly.

The proposed preamble speaks in the voice of the whole Uniting Church community, an implicit “we”. But the engagement of the wider church in preparing the draft seems to have been too limited for this voice to be truly representative. That is not a criticism of the preamble itself, but simply an observation that the inter-conciliar nature of our church (including congregations) doesn’t seem to have registered well here. That the preamble has now been sent down to synods and presbyteries does not ameliorate the situation, since these councils will not be resourced for the debates—“pro” or “con”—in any way like the Assembly was.

Goodwill—the desire to set historical mistakes right—characteristically overrides clear thinking in situations like this, especially when the only clear alternatives are accepting the preamble wholesale, or rejecting it altogether and stalling the process further. It will be difficult to avoid the sense that saying “no” to this draft

would be saying “no” to our strong desire to do or say *something*. This may lead to a premature acceptance of the preamble as it stands, for the wrong reasons, and so commit us to historical or theological accounts which are less than they could have been.

The purpose of this collection of papers is to contribute a little to the “noise” level of the preamble discussion by presenting some arguments for and against the draft as it stands. The papers by Chris Budden and Tim Matton-Johnson present something of the case “for” the need for the preamble and the way it stands at the moment; those of Jonathan Button and Craig Thompson raise questions about the preamble, and its theological content in particular. In addition to these, there is at the end of the collection a series of internet links to other documents relating to the preamble, should you wish to read further. The proposed text as approved by the Assembly is reproduced on page 2.

We hope that this collection of material will help the Uniting Church as its synods and presbyteries deliberate on the question of the new preamble in the next few months.  
 —Editors

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**Cross Purposes is a quarterly journal, published within the UCA, for discussing some of the questions facing the contemporary church. It aims to be a “forum for theological dialogue”, a space for thinking seriously about the life and work of the church, where differing views can interact critically and constructively.**

**This collection of “focus papers” is offered to the church by the Cross Purposes team as an aid to synods and presbyteries in their deliberations. It may be freely reproduced and distributed.**

# The Proposed Text

The Uniting Church in Australia (the Church) was formed on 22 June, 1977 by the union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia after the approval of “The Basis of Union” by the councils and courts of those three churches, guided by the belief that they had been called by God into this union.

The Church in accordance with the Basis of Union accepts that the responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them and so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally, government is entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing gifts and graces, with which God has endowed them for the building up of God’s Church and that therefore the Church shall be governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation to the Church and the world.

The Church in accordance with the Basis of Union acknowledges that the demand of the Gospel, the response of the Church to the Gospel and the discipline which it requires are partly expressed in the formulation by the Church of its law, the aim of which is to confess God’s will for the life of Christ’s Church.

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, and as part of that to:

## RECOGNISE THAT

1. When the churches that formed the Church arrived in Australia as part of the process of colonisation they entered a land that had been created and sustained by the Triune God they knew in Jesus Christ.

2. Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.

3. The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.

4. Some members of the uniting churches approached the First Peoples with good intentions, standing with them in the name of justice; considering their well being, culture and language as the churches proclaimed the reconciling purpose of the Triune God found in the good news about Jesus Christ.

5. Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.

6. The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

7. From the beginning of colonisation the First Peoples challenged their dispossession and the denial of their proper place in this land. In time this was taken up in the community, in the courts, in the parliaments, in the way history was recorded and told, and in the Church.

8. In 1985 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Church formed the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

9. In 1988 the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress invited the other members of the Church to join in a solemn act of covenanting before God.

10. After much struggle and debate, in 1994 the Assembly discovered God’s call, accepted this invitation and entered into an ever deepening covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. This was so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

AND THUS the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

Text approved by 2009 Assembly. Source: <http://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/resources/0909preambleqafinal.pdf>

Chris Budden

# Theological Issues in the New Preamble

## Introduction

Constitutions have to do with identity, with who we believe ourselves to be, because they speak about the way we relate to each other and to God. Preambles, while not legally binding in terms of the interpretation of a constitution, speak of what led to the constitution, and of core values. The constitution of the Uniting Church has the dual task of giving expression in legal form to who believe ourselves to be theologically as church, and how we interface with the world as an institution and legal entity.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson suggests that “Christian identity” refers to three concerns:

- (1) what holds a community together internally, (2) how it is distinctive from an ‘outside,’ and (3) what about it is in continuity with the Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Usually the church in the reformed and evangelical tradition claims that its identity in all three senses is determined by commonly held beliefs. There is a great deal of emphasis given to shared ways of understanding faith, to a particular way of reading and understanding the core parts of the Christian story. When the Assembly decides to adopt a new preamble there is, quite rightly, a significant concern about the theological “rightness” of the statement.

Fulkerson, on the other hand, suggests that identity is more shaped by habitual, learned patterns of association and bodily practices that people feel their way into over time. One learns to be church, and to shape a particular identity much like a piano player learns to play—by practicing over time in ways that develop a certain “habitus”. As Dykstra and Bass make clear, practices

<sup>1</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “We Don’t See Color Here”: A Case Study in Ecclesial=Cultural Invention”, in Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Turner (ed.), *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: OUP, 2001) 141.

are not simply what people do after they sort out their beliefs. Practices are what people do to address fundamental human needs:

Normatively and theologically understood, therefore, Christian practices are the human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another.<sup>2</sup>

As people participate in the practices of the Christian community they come to know God and the world, and form their identity as a community. Important to identity are certain critical events which challenge and reshape patterns of association and practice, and the way in which the church locates itself socially and theologically in relation to those events.

This doesn’t make belief and tradition less important. It does suggest, however, that the engagement between theology and the practices of the church is not simply a one-way activity, with practices always being subjected to the judgment of theology. Both words and actions seek to express the same issues and struggles, and both need to listen to the other.

Both the new preamble and the debates which surround it are one of those critical events which challenge our identity. The preamble challenges the usual relationships between Indigenous peoples and other people within the UCA. It challenges the church’s social and theological location (i.e., who it sits with and whose interests it protects), and questions its “habitus” around relationships, the telling of history, whose telling of God is heard in the church, and what covenant means in reality. The new preamble affirms a new way of understanding our identity, and at the same time encourages practices and ways of associating which

<sup>2</sup> Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices”, in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (ed.), *Practicing Theology. Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 22.

will form us into the sort of community we believe the church is called to be.

The new preamble is important not simply as a theological statement. The process of debating and accepting the preamble is itself important in shaping our identity as church. Who we engage with, whose voice we allow into the conversation, whose agendas and interests we defend, and the way we engage in a conversation between our “habitus” and theological words are crucial to the way we see church.

## The Preamble

The opening clauses of the new preamble cover some of the same things as the present preamble: recognition that the three churches came into union in response to a call from God, affirmation that government is entrusted to representative men and women within a series of interrelated councils which have tasks and responsibilities in relation to the church and the world, and the affirmation that the law of the church is a way in which the church confesses God’s will for its life. The fourth of the opening clauses of the new preamble expresses the belief that, just as God guided the churches into union, now God is continually calling the church to seek a renewal of its life as a community of First and Second Peoples.<sup>3</sup>

As part of that searching for renewal there are then ten clauses which begin with “recognise that”. The first three speak about God’s presence and activity in this land prior to the arrival of Europeans: the land has been created and sustained by the triune God, through this land God has sustained the First Peoples who still understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians, the people had already encountered the Creator God, and the Spirit was already in the land revealing

<sup>3</sup> There has been an increasing tendency in Uniting Church conversations to speak of Indigenous peoples as “First Peoples”. In part this is because both “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are not always helpful words. This means that all those who are not First Peoples are “Second Peoples”. Whatever our diversity, and whatever the issues about power within this Second Peoples community, our common identity is that we live on Indigenous land as Second Peoples.

God through law, custom and ceremony. Clauses four to six speak of the ambiguous history that has existed in this country between First Peoples and the church. Clause seven is a reminder that First Peoples have always struggled against their dispossession, and clause eight notes the formation of the UAICC. Clauses nine and ten deal with covenant.

The issue of call, and the claims about the providence of God that are implied within the language of call, are central to the preamble. Within the original preamble that concern for providence and call was limited to the way the churches came into union. The concern was for the way God was involved in the formation of the Uniting Church. The new preamble affirms that sense of providence but then moves on to say something about what it means to be the Uniting Church in Australia. That is, what difference does it make that this church is located in this country and shares the history of the last couple of hundred years of European occupation of this land? Where is God in that story? What did God have to do with the First Peoples of this land?

### Theological Issues

The preamble raises a number of central issues of theology and practice: where does the church locate itself in this country and how does this reflect its understanding of God, how do we speak of the providence of God in relation to both First Peoples and the church in this country, is there place for revelation beyond Jesus Christ and the church, does the preamble pose difficult issues about law and grace, and how does the church speak truthfully about its history and relationships?

#### *Where is the Church Located in Australia?*

Who we are is tied to where we are in the world, socially and theologically. That is, who we are has to do with who we sit with, who we naturally relate to, whose interests we protect, and whose story we hear. Who God is for us is also tied to where we believe God is, and whose side God takes. Who and where God is for us reflects our sense

of among which people we encounter Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46).<sup>4</sup>

The preamble raises issues about where the church locates itself in relation to the history of Australia, and present relationships. Whose telling of the story of the clash of communities will the church allow to find voice in its life and witness, and whose voice will it suppress or allow to be silent? Will the church defend itself and its mission history, and will it insist on a version of history that acknowledges or denies the language of “invasion and dispossession”? What are we saying about who God is and where God is in Australia?

#### *Providence*

The church’s claims about the providence of God are an affirmation that God governs all events. It is an expression of confidence, in the face of the most challenging and horrendous evil and suffering, that God does reign, and that God will achieve God’s purposes for the world and all people. While there are many ways in which the church has dealt with this enormous tension between God’s sovereign life and suffering,<sup>5</sup> it is not possible to ignore the claim of God’s providential activity.

The new preamble wishes to affirm that what has happened in the church and in the lives of First Peoples has to do with God. It was not simply fate or accident, but something more. At the very least there was a call to cooperate with God’s purposes.

The preamble reminds the church that the providence of God cannot be restricted to the church, but must encompass the whole created order. In Australia it must ask about God’s care of First Peoples. It affirms God’s providence in the face of those who wish to relegate God to being simply a sorrowful but, uninvolved, watcher.

<sup>4</sup> I have explored this issue of the location of God more fully in *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 116; Eugene: Pickwick, 2009) ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup> In his chapter on “providence” Daniel L. Migliore reminds us of how complex the issue is. See *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) ch. 6.

Yet, given that part of the background to the preamble is an account of history that speaks of invasion, any discussion of providence must be more complex than a God who finds car spaces and is in charge of every minute historical event. The preamble offers a challenge to the church to engage in a renewed discussion of what it means to affirm God’s providence in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *Revelation*

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s way. (Clause 3)

In his *Theology of the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the God to whom Israel bears witness is always God-in-relation.<sup>6</sup> God is both the strangely and completely other and sovereign, and always faithfully engaged with the nation and the people. There are times when this relationship is public and immediate, such as with Moses (Exodus 3:1-6), or the theophany at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:9-25), but generally such meetings are too direct and fearful. The presence of God needs to be mediated, and in Israel they understand themselves to be related to God in the communal practices of Torah, temple, kings, wisdom and prophetic activity.

Part of the claim of the Christian faith is that the primary mediation or self-revelation of God is found in the human life of Jesus Christ. One of the important conversations, for which there is no space in this article, is how Christ is known, met and related to. The claim of the church is that the definitive way in which we encounter God is Jesus Christ in his humanity and place in the world. The true place where we meet God—the true temple—is the body of the crucified and risen one (John 2:21). The place where we encounter Jesus is in the lives of others,

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 567.

in those who are our neighbour, and in the most forgotten and marginalized in society (Matthew 25:35-46). To the extent that we speak of the scriptures as revealing of God this can only be in a secondary sense. The Holy Spirit can bring alive the words of Scripture so that they can make us aware of the Word who is Jesus Christ.

The challenge in the preamble is that in our tradition we have not only claimed that Jesus is the primary revelation of God, but (i) that there can be no natural knowing of God, but only what God reveals, and (ii) that Jesus is the only right revelation. The preamble

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makes the claim that Indigenous peoples in Australia had a knowledge of God, a knowledge of God's love and grace that reflected what was later revealed in Jesus Christ. How do we defend that claim in the face of what we have usually claimed about the uniqueness of Christ?<sup>7</sup>

It is important for us to affirm that, to the extent that we can acknowledge that other people have knowledge of God, we are not simply claiming that they are able to understand God by reason. This is not about natural religion, but only what can be known through revelation and the Word of God who is Jesus Christ. It is about the way in which the Word who was present at creation, through whom all things came into being (John 1:1-3), and who became flesh in Jesus (John 1:14), is present and able to be known in other

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this issue is not simply important for the preamble and the UCA's relationship with Indigenous people, but for all forms of interfaith dialogue. Can we recognise God revealed in other faiths? What place does a plurality of religions have within the purpose of God, and the place of Jesus Christ within that plurality?

places and ways. That is, while we claim that Jesus is the most extraordinarily unique way in which God's Word finds expression, are there other ways that reflect this Word less clearly?<sup>8</sup>

In his later writings Karl Barth suggests that the Word which is heard in Scripture and preaching, and which the church has often wanted to keep only within the church, is found outside the church.<sup>9</sup> It is God's desire to reconcile and renew the whole creation, and so “we cannot possibly think that he cannot speak, and his speech cannot be attested, outside this sphere”.<sup>10</sup>

I think the need to be open to this other speaking of the Word also has something to do with the claim that God is always in particular relationships. God enters relationship with people and communities. God enters peoples' particular situation and struggle, and speaks the Word for that place and time. God never leaves people alone. It is hard to imagine God leaving the First Peoples in Australia without any knowledge of God's creative and life-giving Word, or any capacity to know and flourish within a relationship with God; however broken and struggling (like all human life) that might be.

While Barth affirms that God is revealed outside the church, we are still left with the question as to why we claim that Australia is one place where this occurred. How do we know that law, custom and ceremony genuinely mediate or reveal the presence of God as God is known in Jesus Christ? And

<sup>8</sup> In some earlier writing on this theme I suggested that it was helpful to distinguish between what we can know of God in other religions (revelation), and whether these religions are a source of salvation. (*Following Jesus in Invaded Space*, 100.) On further reflection I think that distinction is too simple. Knowing God bears on the meaning and fulfilment of human life; it has something to do with salvation and wholeness. Yet it is a struggling, incomplete thing. Only in knowing God through the Word incarnate in Jesus can there be complete salvation, a total opening up of a relationship with God that brings salvation and life.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromley and T. F. Torrence (Edinburgh: Clark, 1962) 114-134.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

the answer is: the witness of First Peoples who are Christians, who have committed themselves to following Jesus. Their affirmation is that there is a sameness or similarity between what was known and what they know of Jesus. Looking back from the vantage point of faith in Christ they name what was known as showing the grace and love they associate with Jesus. Part of the challenge of the preamble is for the church to develop the practice of trust, and the willingness to honour the witness of others to an experience of God that is different.

There are two important pieces of work that need to be done in the light of the preamble. Indigenous theologians need to explore further what they understand about God seen in “law, custom and ceremony” viewed through the lens of Christian faith and discipleship. And theologians from both First and Second Peoples need to explore together how claims about God in Australia raise questions about the way Christian theology speaks about Jesus. That is, there needs to be a renewed engagement about who and where Jesus is in the light of the affirmation of clause three.

#### *Law and Grace*

Clause three says that “the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to people through law, custom and ceremony” and that “the same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples”. Reformed and Evangelical theology, forged in struggles over authority (Church versus Bible) and what people are required to do to be saved, has made a quite strong distinction between “law” and “grace”. Does this affirmation of the positive place of law in the society of First Peoples create some tension for Reformed theology?

I actually do not think it does. The concern of the reformers was for any use of the law which was used as the basis for “work-based” righteousness, and which denies that people are saved by grace alone. The concern of this clause is that God has chosen to reveal Godself in and through law, without any suggestion that obeying the law will lead to salvation. Second, the “law”

and “grace” position of the reformers was often developed in the context of conflict. A less contested situation might lead us to a much more nuanced understanding of law, and its place in shaping the life of a redeemed people. Indeed, this affirmation may push theologians to continue to visit the issue of law in Christian life.

#### *Truth-Telling and Community*

The new preamble raises significant issues about the way in which the church understands truth-telling, confession and whose story we are willing to hear. It says that the church cannot be a faithful community of the followers of Jesus while-ever some people cannot tell their story. The church is that community where people should be able to come and tell of their pain. That pain for First Peoples in this country involves racism, exclusion, massacre, stolen children, imprisonment and death in custody, and a church that

would not always stand beside them in their search for life.

The point of trying to name our history rightly is not to make people feel guilty, or to denigrate achievements and good actions. It is to acknowledge that First Peoples have experienced history quite differently, even what Second Peoples see as good and kindly history, and have often been made invisible as history is written. We need to honour people’s stories and lives, and to include people in a shared history. There needs to be space for confession and penance, for forgiveness and new relationships.

The preamble calls the UCA to a new truth-telling that makes relationships possible, that allows people to speak and listen, that honours people’s stories, that commits the church to being in a place where it can hear stories of past pain. It is a challenge to the social location of the church, to finding its life naturally among those with power rather than those without voice.

#### **Conclusion**

We cannot return Australia to some pre-1770 situation. As Second Peoples we cannot go elsewhere. We can do two things: tell the history as a broken and contested time, not just the story of successes and benefits; and wrestle with what it means to be guests on other people’s land, rather than owners and occupiers who can do as they wish. As a church we can honour the experience people have had of God, and engage in a conversation about what this means for the way we speak of God and are church in this land. We can ask ourselves where we really should be in Australian society, and whose side we will take as people continue to struggle for justice inside and outside the church. This is about our practices, our “habitus”, and not only the words we speak.

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*Tim Matton-Johnson*

## **Reflecting on the Theology of the Proposed Preamble**

The notes that introduce the proposed new preamble to the Constitution of UCA indicate that it is a story about who we are, where we have come from and where we may go. It tells us:

The purpose of a preamble may be to rehearse those historical facts, features of the community (including beliefs and values), and other issues which better enable the community to understand what is enacted in the constitution ... A preamble can give expression to what a community considers important and formative for its life, and can be educative and have a significant symbolic value.<sup>1</sup>

The proposed preamble begins by telling us that we are the “Uniting Church in Australia”. The early paragraphs speak to us about what it means to be the “Uniting Church”, describing the coming together of three former

traditions. These paragraphs pick up the ecumenical theology of the *Basis of Union*, and also describe the Uniting Church’s unique polity of interrelated councils and responsible representative governance by men and women of diverse gifts with the intention of confessing “God’s will for the life of Christ’s Church”.

The proposed preamble then begins to tell the story of who we are in a contextual way, giving content to the last word in our name, “Australia”. The story is given its focus by an event that changed the human story in this continent. In 1788 the British arrived without invitation and established a colony.

This event has been viewed from many different perspectives by historians and the general population of Australia. One perspective is to see, in the event, the transplanted of many

of the social, legal, economic and political institutions of British and European civilisation. Many of these flowered here where there was less restriction and more opportunity than in Europe. Even today many people seek to come to Australia by any means possible in order that they may find prosperity, freedom of belief, safety and security for themselves and their families made possible by the growth and development of these institutions; and the church has been a part of all of this.

Yet this is not the perspective that the proposed preamble chooses to take. Instead it takes a perspective, through ten “recognitions”, that tells the story of relations between what it calls the First and Second Peoples, that firstly acknowledges that this was a “land that had been created and sustained by the triune God they knew in Jesus Christ” (Recognition One) and so reminds

<sup>1</sup> Assembly minute 09.08.

us that God was present in Australia before 1788. It goes on to remind us that the relationship between First and Second Peoples has not been just. It concludes by pointing to the covenantal relationship between the whole church and the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress as a place of hope for the future.

### Recognitions One to Three

The first two recognitions speak of the presence of God as creator and sustainer of the land and its people. This is an obvious point as the triune God is acknowledged in Christian theology as both the creator of all that is and as its sustainer, although reminding us of this from time to time does not hurt. It is perhaps the third recognition that has the potential to generate more active discussion. It states:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony.

It goes even further by saying:

The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.

As one reads this third recognition it is clear that the fullness of the triune God's activity in relation to creation is present as creator, as revealer, and as the one whose action is gracious. This might open up a series of questions that goes something like this: Does this mean that before 1788 the First Peoples of this land were already in some sense Christian by virtue of their relation to the land and their observance of law, custom and ceremony? Does this undermine the uniqueness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ by opening up an alternative pathway to the truth in some way?

These may well be questions that are worthy of further debate but when such questions have been asked in the past in relation to other systems of belief they have not proved easy to resolve. They all too often end up being about attempts to draw a boundary that will determine who is in and who is on the outside. The perspective here is about human anxiety not that of a gracious God.

A more fruitful approach to this third recognition is to see in it a declaration that the triune God is doing what the triune God always does. This is a God who creates with purpose, valuing every element of that creation with the passion of a jealous lover. This is a God who seeks the salvation and transformation of the whole creation in the community of God's love. This is a God who acts with grace irrespective of our human ability to answer difficult questions. This is a God who always seeks to make Godself known. It would be absurd to assume that God was not active in these ways before 1788 in Australia. That would be to assert that God somehow stops being God until a missionary preaches the gospel. To affirm that God was active, as God is always active, in the relation to land, law custom and ceremony is simply to claim that God reveals Godself in and through that which God creates. This is precisely the question that the early church confronted in relation to Jews and people of other faiths (see Romans 1-2 and Acts 17 in particular).

**"This unique culture and story may have valuable insights and perspective to offer as we all seek together to better understand the purposes and nature of God."**

In saying this are we elevating the pre-1788 story of this country and the culture of the First Peoples to some idealized status? Not at all! Aboriginal theology affirms that their culture and history is both judged and affirmed by the light of the gospel in the same way as the culture and history of any other people, including that of the church. What is being affirmed is that this unique culture and story may have valuable insights and perspective to offer as we all seek together to better understand the purposes and nature of the triune God we meet in Jesus Christ.

### Recognitions Four to Seven

Recognitions four to seven describe the story of the relationship the pre-union churches and the Uniting Church

in Australia with the First Peoples in the context of dominant western culture's relations with indigenous Australia. This part of the story is not a comfortable one for many of us. The words "paternalism" and "racism" are used, and the dispossession from land, language, culture and spirituality is spoken about. That the church was in large part complicit in this process is also acknowledged. That the First Peoples resisted this process right from its beginning in colonial times up until the present is also acknowledged.

This telling of the story reminds us that there is still very much a need to seek repentance and forgiveness and that in our church community, as in our national community, there is a need to depend on the graciousness of the triune God as we seek ways forward into more just relations between First and Second Peoples.

In the telling of this part of the story as our church's story we are challenged to make personal connection to this story. This is not simply an institutional matter. Every church member (indeed every person who calls themselves Christian, indeed every Australian) is challenged to find their connections to this story and so come to own their place in it. Are you a person who has a First Peoples' heritage? Are you a person whose ancestors were involved in colonial expansion into other peoples' lands? Does your family have a connection to the earlier mission policy of governments and churches that we now know was so destructive of the culture, language, families and communities of the First Peoples? Is your reason for being a citizen of Australia to take advantage of the freedoms and opportunities that arise from the importation of a new dominant culture during colonial times? Or are you someone who has walked beside the First Peoples in their struggle for justice? Where do you fit into this story? It is in the answering of these questions that depth is given to symbolic actions and public statements that may be made from time to time by various councils of the church.

Here the theology is incarnational. The triune God enters into creation, into all the nitty gritty of the human story, so that all creation, each

individual, may be transformed and renewed. Both the church and those who individually comprise it are challenged to allow this story to become incarnate in their lives. The triune God's action in the incarnation was costly. Our taking up of this challenge may also be costly.

### Recognitions Eight to Ten

Recognitions eight to ten tell the story of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the development of a covenantal relationship with the wider Uniting Church in Australia. This is about seeking a journey where the relationship is based on shared respect.

The theology here is eschatological as the final statement of the proposed preamble indicates:

The Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

One way of interpreting the doctrine of the Trinity is in terms of oneness in community having the character of love. However, the perfection of "oneness in community" involves the capacity to welcome the stranger into that community not as a subordinate but as a friend. This is why we look forward, eschatologically, to the whole transformed and renewed creation entering into the life of the divine triune community. In the same way we recognise the triune God becoming incarnate in creation with Jesus Christ as the stranger entering our brokenness, welcomed by some, rejected by many, so that we might be transformed from strangers into friends. Creation, Incarnation, New Creation are about the stranger being welcomed into perfected

community, about the transformation of enemies into friends.

In entering into a covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress the Uniting Church in Australia is entering into relationship with a stranger who has the potential to become a friend without having to become identical sacrificing their uniqueness. This is also true for Congress. Both partners in this relationship frequently come with radically different perspectives in terms of culture, theology and justice. Yet this covenantal relationship has the potential to model the "oneness in community" that is the eschatological community of God. It also has the potential to give both partners deeper insight into what it means to be the people of God in the Australian context.

How might this hope be illustrated?

Earlier this year I was privileged to be a representative at Congress' national conference. During that conference our Bible studies were focussed around the book of Nehemiah. In the small group of which I was a part we were thinking about the renewal of community which is a theme of the book. One member of the group made the statement that we are "kingdom people", a phrase that has much currency around the church. It was written up on the butcher's paper. Almost immediately another member of the group said, "No, we have got to drop the G. We are kin-dom people." The discussion suddenly livened up and the theology started to happen. In the New Testament the kingdom of God/heaven is a powerful metaphor yet, unlike most New Testament people (and many generations both before and after them), we do not live in a kingdom

but a commonwealth. Our heads may know what a kingdom is but our hearts and souls do not. Kinship relations are a major interpretive metaphor in the culture of the First Peoples that encompasses not only human relations but also plants and animals, even individual features of the land.

The discussion went on to look for relational language in the New Testament that connected with this idea of being "kin-dom people". The passage in John's Gospel (15:15) where Jesus no longer uses the language of master and servant but calls his disciples friends was perhaps the most significant. The movement is away from hierarchical relations (all too often open to distortions towards themes of power and control) towards relationships of equity and mutual respect honouring difference and celebrating uniqueness. Here was the beginning of a new language to bring meaning into our understanding of the relationships into which we are called as we are called into the triune community.

### Conclusion

The proposed new preamble challenges us to extend our vision of the triune God and God's relation to the whole creation revealed through Jesus Christ. It also challenges us to reassess our relationships to and within this land, Australia. It offers us hope through the covenantal relationship and new ways of proclaiming the vision of the triune God. It is a beginning point for a genuinely Australian theology for an Australian Church.

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## Other Links

The following materials provide further background material to the preamble and a selection of comments on the matter to date.

The text of the preamble and "Frequently asked questions" on the reasons for the preamble (an Assembly resource)—see link on p.2.

Statement by Al Macrae, UCA President, "God's Place in the Dreaming": [blogs.victas.uca.org.au/mediaroom/?p=429](http://blogs.victas.uca.org.au/mediaroom/?p=429)

See also a short video presentation on YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=5CNd-MyALew](http://youtube.com/watch?v=5CNd-MyALew)

Comment by Margaret Tyrer, Minister of St. Aidan's UC, Claremont: [www.wa.uca.org.au/files/2009/06/june-revive-22-28.pdf](http://www.wa.uca.org.au/files/2009/06/june-revive-22-28.pdf) [p. 13]

Articles from recent UCA newspapers/publications  
[www.sa.uca.org.au/news/72-uniting-church-sa/1585-this-is-our-story.html](http://www.sa.uca.org.au/news/72-uniting-church-sa/1585-this-is-our-story.html)

[www.confessingcongregations.com/uploads/june2009.pdf](http://www.confessingcongregations.com/uploads/june2009.pdf)

[www.confessingcongregations.com/uploads/2acc014\\_accataylst\\_vol3\\_oct09\\_hr.pdf](http://www.confessingcongregations.com/uploads/2acc014_accataylst_vol3_oct09_hr.pdf)

[mrn.sa.uca.org.au/component/docman/doc\\_download/503-covenanters-news-no-23-august-2009.html](http://mrn.sa.uca.org.au/component/docman/doc_download/503-covenanters-news-no-23-august-2009.html) [passim]

Ian Breward's article in *CP* 19, referred to in the editorial, will appear shortly on the *CP* website, [cp.unitingchurch.org.au](http://cp.unitingchurch.org.au).

Jonathan Button

## The Proposed New Preamble to the UCA Constitution

I write this as someone who is committed to realizing a richer, deeper relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and between indigenous and non-indigenous Christians. I firmly believe that the kingdom of God cannot be complete without the “glory” (i.e., particular culture, and all of its rich expressions) of the indigenous peoples of Australia. They too are one of the “nations” whose “glory” must be brought into the eternal worship of God (Revelation 21).

What follows is also said in the context of Christian revelation—i.e., the universal reconciling work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). This means that reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is a gift already established and given in Jesus Christ. Therefore we all may believe, receive and obey this truth, which indeed God graciously commands us to do. This reconciliation further gives the gifts of the recognition of past and present wrongs, repentance, forgiveness, and appropriate reparations.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the UCA, after limited discussion, passed a new preamble to the constitution of the UCA. This new preamble is detailed, and seeks to acknowledge the historical truths of the original custodianship of the land of Australia by its indigenous peoples. It also speaks frankly of the history of the invasion of this land by non-indigenous peoples, and the Christian churches’ witting and unwitting participation and culpability in this history. This history of course also involved the denominations which came together to form the Uniting Church, and therefore has implications for the Uniting Church today.

The new preamble makes an attempt at this task, yet many believe in far too much detail and length. Others believe that there are legitimate questions to be raised with regard to its interpretation of some of the history covered. However, where it speaks of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ there are much

more significant problems that may have negative consequences for the understanding and life of the church.

These problems are raised in particular by paragraph 3.3 of the new preamble, which reads as follows:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.

The majority of Uniting Church members would desire, and find themselves theologically and biblically obliged, to affirm that the presence of God the Father, the Creator, was with the indigenous peoples of Australia from their very beginning. Also that the rich culture of Australia’s indigenous peoples—including their wisdom and understanding of creation, humanity,

“Precisely for the sake of the good news of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ, the unique character of that revelation must be acknowledged.”

and the good relation between them; and especially the depth, intricacy, and power of their understanding of kinship relations within society—are gifts of God the Father; they are an expression of his divine life and glory, with which he blesses and enriches the earth and his children.

We would also affirm that God the Father’s gracious, shepherding lordship, in and over all creation and history, was with Australia’s indigenous peoples from their beginning and throughout their history. In this God was leading them, with all the families of the earth, to completion in his life-saving, life-redeeming, life-enriching, life-fulfilling

grace revealed and given for the world in Jesus Christ.

Yet precisely for the sake of that good news of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ, and for the sake of the salvation and fullness of life that it brings, the unique character of that revelation must be acknowledged, upheld, and witnessed to. God the Father reveals himself in a particular way through his Son that gives to us the only true, complete, full humanity (“you have the words of eternal life, to whom else can we go?”—eternal in *quality* and *quantity*—i.e., salvation, and fullness of life), because it gives to us the only true, complete, full relationship with God our Father (“no one has seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known”; “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father”; “no one comes to the Father but by me”).

In this matter the language of paragraph 3.3 of the new preamble is ambiguous, lacks clarity, and is open to misinterpretation. For instance, it may arguably be taken as meaning that the truth we can have apart from that revealed in Jesus Christ is the same as that which we have through him. Therefore Jesus Christ and the truth and salvation we have in him may be considered as not necessary, or able to be blended and syncretized with alternative human religious understandings of truth and life. If the new preamble is adopted by the Uniting Church in its present form, it risks leading to a diminishing or loss of the unique character of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and a consequent diminishing or loss of the salvation and fullness of life that we may know and experience only in him.

The Christian faith also understands that the establishment of true relationship with God the Father through the reconciling grace of Jesus Christ is the only basis for true, full, rich relationships between the races of the human family (Ephesians 2). This also guards us against the ravages of all human political attempts to achieve reconciliation based upon guilt and payback. Therefore, upholding the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ also ensures that relations between indigenous and

non-indigenous Australians will be based upon a true foundation, and so be the best that they can be.

The importance of this matter cannot be overestimated. It has to do with the very nature and content of the catholic gospel that we adhere to as the foundation of our church's life as given in the *Basis of Union* (§3). This gospel is defined by God's revelation in Jesus Christ, in accordance with the ecumenical creeds of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (§9), and as authoritatively witnessed to by the Old and New Testaments (§5), in which Jesus is recorded as saying "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). In order for the Church to adopt paragraph 3.3 of the new preamble, I believe it would need to be written in language much clearer with regard to preserving and expressing the unique character of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

The procedures exercised at the 12<sup>th</sup> Assembly did not allow discussion of the vital theological issues raised by paragraph 3.3 of the new preamble. We may well be told by the Assembly Business Committee that discussion was allowed—in the small group discussions that took place. However, none of the theological issues raised in my small group at Assembly came back to the floor of the Assembly; they seemed to be "filtered out" by the facilitation process of the business committee. When the matter of the new preamble came before our synod and presbytery for consideration and response last year, I don't believe we clearly understood the issues, nor were we helped to positively engage in the process of analysis and response. We also need to be aware of the fact that at that time the proposed new preamble was in a very different form and wording to what was presented and passed by the 12<sup>th</sup> Assembly—it had undergone significant redrafting in the meantime.

I hope and pray that the other councils of the church to whom the new preamble is now passed for adoption (i.e., presbyteries and synods) will consider this matter as it truly is—i.e., to do with the very deepest heart and substance of the gospel we believe in and live by as the Church—and, because of its inadequacies, not adopt the preamble. I hope that in the future we can have full and open discussion about these important issues. Then, if a new preamble to the constitution is to be presented, it may bear the truest, clearest witness possible to God's unique revelation in Jesus Christ, both for the sake of the salvation and fullness of life that the grace of Jesus Christ has given to the world and for the sake of the true reconciliation between all people that this grace makes possible.

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*Craig Thompson*

## The History and the Theology

The following reflections do not constitute a comprehensive response to the proposed new preamble to the Uniting Church's Constitution. I will comment on just one aspect of the theology declared by the preamble, although this aspect seems to me to be significant enough to affect the whole of the preamble in its current form, and to warrant a significant revision of what is proposed before it is accepted by the church.

There has been in the last 20 years a considerable revision of the erstwhile standard account of the colonization of Australia. Particularly since the *Bringing them Home* report of 1997, we have heard many stories of the affect of colonization on the aboriginal peoples, ranging from the "uncomfortable" to the outright horrific. Whether or not this has fostered a "black armband" view of our history is neither here nor there—the devastating effects of colonization are there to be seen today

and black armbands for our present would not be inappropriate when it comes to the plight of many indigenous Australians. While the events described in the stories must be lamented, the telling of the stories should not be—indeed this is necessary if we are better to understand how, as a society, we have come to be where we now are, and how that history should affect our response to the current condition of the relationship between indigenous and immigrant Australians.

In the preamble, however, the story of colonial-indigenous encounter and the attendant implication of what would be an appropriate response is interwoven with another one—that of the God of Israel with his people. Yet in this interweaving it seems that the former has largely won over the latter. The powerful ethical urge to tell the truth about the past (as we now believe it to have been) seems to have forced us to privilege the account of colonial

abuse and the stories of the aboriginal peoples themselves to such an extent that the story of God-with-Israel and its particular implications have been uncritically reinterpreted in its light. This is particularly the case when it comes to the preamble's evaluation of pre-Christian indigenous spirituality, but affects also the more "Christian" theological affirmations as well. It may be that some of these evaluations and affirmations could, ultimately, be assented to by the church. It cannot be said, however, that the necessary work has been done to allow the church to accept the theology of the new preamble as it currently stands.

I will confine myself to one main criticism: the idea of God as it appears in the text of the preamble. The first paragraph's reference to the triune God is fairly innocuous other than smacking a little of trying too hard to affirm as much "orthodoxy" as possible, given what is coming in paragraph/

recognition three. The problem with paragraph three is that its reference to the triune threeness (“Creator God”, Spirit and Jesus Christ), while looking orthodox or traditional, is really only a *listing* of the persons/articles in such a way as to be comprehensive, while at the same time failing to demonstrate an awareness of the character of the relationships between the persons of the Trinity and the significance of these relationships for questions of revelation and salvation.

Thus, it is implicit in this paragraph that it is possible to know the first person of the Trinity (the “Creator God”) without knowing the second person. The second identity of the Trinity appears here only in the reduction of his person to the ideas of “love and grace” said to have sustained the First Peoples since time immemorial. The Spirit appears as “revealing God to the people”. The traditional Christian flavour of these statements is obvious, which is why they are included. The relationships implied between the trinitarian persons, however, lacks a deeper Christian insight. There is no “Creator God” in the confession of the Church, apart from the one whom “the Son” addresses as “Father”. At the same time, there is no Spirit who “reveals” other than revealing the historical significance of *Jesus* “the Son” as the perfection of the world. Simple correlations of such general religious ideas as “creator”, “spirit”, “love” and “grace” cannot be made with the specific persons of the trinitarian creed without altering significantly (we might say, catastrophically), the meaning of the historic Christian confession.

The important point here is not orthodoxy with respect to the language used—“Father” versus “Creator God”, or “love and grace” versus “Jesus Christ”—but the deeper assumptions which are reflected by the use of one rather than the other. By shifting the language—at least in the way the preamble does—we indicate quite different basic assumptions about how God deals with us (or how God is “revealed”). In particular, we reflect different stances on the problem of the relationship between historical particularities and universal ideas. Paragraph three suffers

from the same general religious malaise which delivered to us the structure of the historical creeds of the church—the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds in particular. In these statements of faith, it is noteworthy that the middle article—that concerning “the Son”—is far and away the longest. Particularly telling in this connection is the long list of affirmations which appear in the Nicene Creed regarding Jesus: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father”. Belief in a creator and in a divine spirit are generic religious affirmations and so largely uncontroversial in religious confessions; short statements about “God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth” and “The Holy Spirit, the giver of life” suffice in the creeds. The attachment of the things of God to a particular historical time, space and personage, however, is highly controversial—then and now—and is reflected in the relative (longer) length of the middle article in the creeds; more has to be explicitly affirmed in order to make the confessional point about Jesus, and so also about God. This anxiety about the attachment of knowledge of God to a particular person is reflected in the new preamble in its preference for “creator” and “Spirit”, and is not resolved according to the historic confession of the church. Thus paragraph three can only speak of “love and grace”, and must yet wait for the revelation of these generalities “finally and fully” in Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Assembly document “Frequently Asked Questions” (see link on p. 2), published to explain the rationale of the new preamble, seeks to clarify the relation between the revelation in Christ and the revelation in indigenous law, custom and spirituality with the following (p. 6): “This is not to claim that the Indigenous peoples knew Jesus Christ. The revelation that comes in Christ is of a different, even distinct nature. It is the revelation of the salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are how this salvation is made possible. This is what makes the revelation in Jesus Christ unique.” It is far from clear to me what this means, or how it helps to resolve the tensions in the preamble. As it stands, paragraph 3 seems to imply that the Australian Aborigines were uniquely(?) without need of a hearing of the gospel—for

Yet, above all, the driving concern of the preamble seems to be to assert, and require recognition of, not the pre-Christian *theology* of Australia’s indigenous peoples, but their *humanity*. That the First Peoples are fully human might seem to be an obvious thing to assert in our age but in fact it has not always been obvious, which is part of the reason they have suffered so much at the hands of colonizers. Any mistreatment of another person reflects our conclusion that they are somehow less deserving of human rights and freedoms than we are, and so are less human. The preamble reflects the sound judgement that anthropology and theology cannot be separated, and so, in asserting the humanity and corresponding rights of the indigenous peoples it must necessarily speak also of God.

It is at this point that, to my mind, things go awry. The theological mistake is the conclusion that if an indigenous person is equally as human as a non-indigenous person, so also must our respective theologies be equal. That they might be significantly different—even that one or *both* might be wrong—is not entertained. The pathos of the preamble is that, out of all good intention, it takes a wrong turn at the point where it implicitly criticizes the theology of the colonizers by elevating the religious experience of the indigenous peoples. The problem with the “evangelism” of the Australian Aborigines was that the distinction between the culture of the incoming peoples and their Christian confession had been blurred—as will always be the case for all of us, but in this instance with particularly destructive consequences. To be European and to be Christian were deemed by many colonizing Christians to be the same thing, and so also were europeanization and christianization (or “being saved”).

the gospel now seems to be one more “insight” to be added to others already received. If the point is to draw a distinction between (non-salvific) revelation and salvation, then another problem arises: what revelation of God—as a *self*-revelation—is not also already a saving revelation? Revelation and salvation are separated first to preserve space for “the salvation offered to us in Christ” but then to imply that the revelation already had pre-evangelism was also somehow a saving good news.

Yet the preamble applies just the same logic when indigenous socio-religious experience is posited as a viable alternative to the euro-christian option it criticizes. I wonder why, if the West can get faith and culture so disastrously confused, the same cannot happen with indigenous faith and culture. It does not help, but makes the problem more severe, to argue that for indigenous peoples “faith and culture” is an invalid distinction. On the level of mere culture, there stands nothing to tell us why indigenous culture and lore is any more benevolent than the culture and lore of the West which has wrought so much destruction, other than that the latter simply had more firepower.

All the preamble leaves us with in the end is simply a choice between this or that religio-cultural option, for God Godself is apparently unable to stand over against *both* options. As long as “religion” is the basis for our accounting for God and ourselves, then we simply have various groupings of idea to choose between, or to declare to be somehow equivalent. That God might be saviour and *judge of both* indigenous spirituality and western Christendom thinking, with their respective assumptions and orders and practices, is not entertained by the theology of the preamble, and so its blurring of historic Christian confession occurs almost of necessity.

In its proposed revision, the preamble seeks to be a confessional document, in both senses of that description. It is confessional in that it seeks to confess the faith of the church, and also in the sense that it seeks to confess the failures or sin of the church in its engagement with indigenous Australians. In speaking of the failures as historical events, it seems to do reasonably well. On the other hand, I’ve argued above that the necessary affirmation of the co-humanity of indigenous Australians and their non-indigenous oppressors, when separated from God’s character as judge (as well as justifier), leads to a distortion of the confession of faith. However, if the confession of faith is not adequate, neither can the associated confession of faults be. Knowledge of what has gone wrong with us—all of us, in our own particular ways—properly arises from knowledge of how God

has done right. In the preamble almost the opposite logic seems to have been applied: the tragic mistakes of history see God and God’s revelation re-cast in such a way that the significance of God’s life with Israel and in Jesus is reduced to something quite secondary. The effect of this is not merely the loss of “orthodoxy” but the loss of a Word which might address First and Second Peoples alike in judgement and reconciliation. Put differently, the history of our interracial relationships is not yet right if the theology is not.

None of what I’ve written is intended to suggest that a new preamble which seeks to do something along the lines of the present is not important.

The relationship between Australia’s indigenous peoples and its immigrants has largely been pushed far into the hinterland of the consciousness of most of us. Yet the story of dispossession is an important one. We might think of the conquest of Canaan, or of the ethnic cleansings of Ezra, as scriptural problems which offend our modern morality but within which many of us ourselves may be caught up through our very presence as non-indigenous people in Australia. There is much talk these days about “contextual theology” without a lot of attention to the deeper aspects of our context, including pasts which have receded from our memory but remain fundamental to who we are and what we enjoy or suffer today, and may yet require a reckoning. As another example, “the land” is a very important scriptural category, the significance of which is lost on most of us immigrant peoples but about which much might be learned from the indigenous understanding. That being said, we might also imagine that indigenous understand has something to learn about “land” from the Old Testament stories of promise and fulfilment.

I must, of course, give a justification for all of this theological diatribe. Telling the story, saying sorry and getting on with it would seem to be a much more practical response to the pressing needs of many contemporary indigenous Australians. This being the case, what is the point of a whole lot of theological argument which would seem to put the brakes on making such

progress. But the principle which drives this theological work is not simply a desire to preserve orthodoxy for orthodoxy’s sake. Getting the theology right is as much a matter of protecting Australia’s indigenous people as it is to maintain the theological integrity of the church’s historic confession. To the extent that I understand what is being sought in the reconciliation process and proposed new preamble, as a process of human reconciliation through truth-telling, I desire also the same thing, and

“That God might be saviour and *judge of both* indigenous spirituality and western Christendom thinking is not entertained by the theology of the preamble.”

don’t yet want to dismiss the whole new preamble (that is, a modified version of it) out of hand. Yet it seems to me to be critical to get the theology right, because evangelical (little “e”) theological coherence is central not simply to talking truthfully but to truth-*ing*—to a bringing about of better understanding on both sides of ourselves as divided and to be reconciled—inter- racially and intra- racially. The implicit force of the preamble seems to be that the First Peoples had no need of hearing the gospel, imbued with insight as they were; the historical account in the preamble implies that Christians (colonizing ones, at least), are unique in their failure to live what they profess. Yet, whatever might be said about the way in which the gospel arrived and was proclaimed, it has not been established that the *need* for such an arrival can be denied without the whole Judaeo-Christian relation of theological particularity and universality unravelling—including the need for messengers who bring us news which we could not have known or learned by ourselves but without which we are not *yet* ourselves. It is not for the sake of the gospel, but for the sake of those whom the gospel concerns, that we need to get the theology right. Then the story we tell will truly be a common, and healing, one.

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