

## The theology of the United Church of Canada Ambiguous Basis Allows for Flirtations

In 1925, the three uniting churches, the Congregationalist, the Methodist and the Presbyterian, agreed on a Basis of Union. This statement of 20 articles of faith is the only official teaching of the United Church of Canada.

Official, though, does not mean mandatory. Candidates for the ministry didn't have to declare their adherence to a written confession, but they had to be only in "essential agreement" with the Basis of Union. The doctrinal statements which made up the Basis of Union were not precisely articulated as such. It is mainly a "mediating theology."

Dr. J. Webster Grant remarked, "The Church reflects the Canadian character even in some of the weaknesses: a lack of clear definition, wide variation from region to region, a notorious inability to raise up leaders it can trust to express its mind." Since the Basis of Union is neither binding nor normative, there has been a marked theological permissiveness.

Radical theology finds productive soil in the UC. Its leaders are often in the first ranks of radicalism. In 1966, students of the United Church's Emmanuel College virtually charged the Rt. Rev. Ernest Marshall Howse with nothing short of heresy for denying the physical resurrection and deity of Jesus Christ. The students were supported in their charge by the Principal Earl Lautenschlager. No wonder that the Rev. Mutchmore, former moderator, could say of the UC, "Anyone can claim membership."

Theology was and is in ferment. Liberalism has made powerful inroads. The sharp edge of the Bible has become blunted in theological faculties and seminaries. The influence of higher criticism changed the approach to the Bible and reconstructed the doctrine of inspiration. It led to the abandonment of the infallibility of Scripture. The Bible became a very human book, including, not only inspirational literature, historical documents, but also legends and myths.

Ben Smillie, writing in the *United Church Observer* in 1967, commented that to deny the higher critical approach "is to fly in the face of facts about the Bible." He wrote, "If Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and Jonah are personages in myth and allegory, they cannot be historical people at the same time no matter how sincere one's faith."

In 1964, a New Curriculum for Sunday schools was published. It took about 12 years to produce this highly controversial new Sunday School material. Four local congregations were chosen in the testing and refinement phase of the program. A. C. Forrest wrote in the *Observer* that through the New Curriculum some of "the tens of thousands of dropouts have gone back to school."

This note of optimism soon turned sour. The New Curriculum became a dismal failure. For the most part, the New Curriculum offered unadulterated theological liberalism,

denial of most of the miraculous elements in both the Old and the New Testament, and denial of the virgin birth. The first eleven chapters of Genesis were relegated "to the category of stories known as myths." Evangelical churches across Canada sharply attacked it. J. B. Rowell of Victoria, BC, a prominent evangelical Baptist pastor, charged that church leaders endorsing the New Curriculum "make themselves responsible for teachings calculated to undermine faith and confidence in the Bible as the Word of God."

A vocal and angry minority opposed the New Curriculum. It was largely abandoned after only two years of a projected six years of use. With the demise of the curriculum a number of churches have turned to Sunday School materials put out by the evangelical publishing companies, Gospel Light, Scripture Press and David Cook.

In 1968, the 23rd General Council studied a proposed new creed. It made no reference to the virgin birth, the resurrection, the crucifixion or hell. The creed started with man and not with God. *Christianity Today* commented, "the new creed astonishingly does not even proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Some might consider that this omission automatically disqualified the United Church of Canada from membership in the World Council of Churches." The proposed creed was returned to the Council's Committee on Christian Faith for a rewrite job.

Many students at Emmanuel College, Toronto, the United Church's largest institution for training ministers, felt that they had much more in common with Roman Catholic professors, who hold to the key orthodox tenets of the Christian faith, than with their own professors. In the early 1970s, Emmanuel appointed Professor Heinz Guenther, a German-born "Bultmannian," to head its department of the New Testament. Wherever possible, those students, who have been influenced by the charismatics or evangelicals, also select courses at Wycliffe College, an Anglican seminary, where the well known Dr. Richard Longenecker teaches.

Where is the UC heading, theologically? In 1979, Dr. George Johnston, professor of New Testament at McGill University, wrote, "theology is a living, changing and developing discipline." In this age of change, "theology will have to be tolerant and ecumenical, while keeping faith with the past. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and also Marxist thinkers will be in conversation with Christian thinkers in relationship to the whole range of the theological spectrum."

The UC will continue to embroil itself in controversial theologies. As the UC began with a mediating Basis of Union, without binding itself to any creeds, it will keep up its flirtation with the new fads that attract current fancy. When a church permits the world to set its agenda, it will be squeezed into its mold.

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April, 1984