

## **The Faith of Phipps**

A hot dog vendor downtown Ottawa has been asking his customers what they think about Jesus. His interest in Jesus was sparked by the Rev. Bill Phipps' remark that "Jesus was not God." The remark is all the more controversial because Rev. Phipps is the newly elected moderator of the United Church, the largest Protestant denomination in Canada.

In an interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*, Rev. Phipps said that the divinity of Jesus is irrelevant and casts doubt on His bodily resurrection. He said that what really matters is the mending of a broken world. His lapel button "Zero Poverty" reflects his views, which resemble more those of a left wing socialist politician than those of a Christian theologian. Phipps does not believe in a hell. And he is not sure whether there is a heaven. He believes that "there is a continuity of the spirit in some way, but I would be a fool to say what that is ... We've got enough problems trying live ethically well here, to have any knowledge or understanding of what happens after we die." In an interview with Gail Reid of the *Fellowship Magazine*, which is dedicated to uphold the historic Christian faith of the United Church of Canada, Phipps was also asked about the divinity of Jesus. He replied that Jesus is unique and that God is acting through Jesus in a unique way.

### **Phipps' tolerance**

Rev. Phipps exudes tolerance. He says that a United Church minister has to understand that there is a whole variety of interpretations of Scripture, many of which he or she would not agree with. "To be a minister in the UC you have to be open to many points of view." But Phipps' tolerance does not include the evangelicals in his denomination. Gail Reid asked Phipps, "Will there be a place for someone who believes this orthodox way (members of the United Church who believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God) to be ordained?" He replied, "It's fine for that person to believe it, but it is not okay for her or him to feel that other people are also required to believe it."

### **A Storm of Protest**

Phipps's publicly stated views created a storm of protest. Hundreds of United Church congregations voiced their disagreement. Dr. Graham Scott, president of Church Alive (a conservative theological association within the denomination) said that "Moderator Phipps' denials, unbelief and agnosticism are not good news. They seem to be an invitation to suicide. They do not even inspire me to care for the poor." Rev. Bob Ripley, the senior minister of the Metropolitan United Church in London, Canada's largest United Church and also one of its most conservative, immediately co-authored and distributed a statement repudiating the moderator's views. The Community of Concern, a small group of orthodox Christians within the United Church, issued a statement which began, "Shocked, disheartened, and grieved do not adequately describe the feelings of the members of the Community of Concern."

Dr. John Stackhouse, former president of the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association, called Phipps a heretic because he "denies the creeds that all Christians have subscribed to, whether they're Catholic, Protestant or Eastern Orthodox." The Ottawa area United Churches persuaded Rev. Phipps not to come to the city for the taping of a CBC television program. Rev. Brian Copeland, chair of the Ottawa presbytery, commented that it was inappropriate to renew the controversy over Jesus' identity as man or God during the Christmas season.

### **Phipps' supporters**

The elders of Toronto's Bloor Street United Church wrote to the denomination's executive that Rev. Phipps' remarks are not new. They said, "We have heard similar statements from our pulpit for the last 30 years ... We do not wish to have some people tell others what they should believe." Rev. Robert Bater, a United Church minister, former principal of Queen's Theological College in Kingston, and a participant in the Jesus Seminars (notorious for deciding whether a statement or a deed by Jesus is fairly attributed to Him by casting coloured beads), wholeheartedly supports Rev. Phipps. Like the moderator, he also denies the physical resurrection of Jesus. Bater says that the bottom line for Christians is a belief that Jesus was a unique messenger from God who revealed God's nature and will, in a way never done before or since. And not surprisingly, Tom Harpur, former clergyman and for many years contributor to the *Toronto Daily Star* praises the leader of "Canada's most courageous church" for dramatically raising the question of Christ's identity. And Harpur says that every Christian should send Phipps a letter of congratulations.

Rev. Phipps was not disciplined by his church. The national executive backed his views "as falling within the wide range of accepted and celebrated by the denomination."

### **Nothing new**

Despite all the protests and cries of heresy, there is nothing new about Rev. Phipps' denial of the essentials of the Christian faith. It's the same old unbelief which has plagued the United Church for more than half a century. When the United Church came together in 1925, with all the Methodists, the majority of the Presbyterians and almost all of the small Congregationalist denomination, they issued as a statement of faith "The Basis of Union" which was evangelical, but it had two major flaws. First, it declared that the Bible contains the Word of God. Second, it tried to accommodate both Calvinist and Arminian theology. Furthermore, the office bearers of the United Church never faced discipline when they departed from their denomination's creedal affirmation. As Mr. Peter Wyatts, the United Church's general secretary for theology, faith and ecumenism, remarked about Rev. Phipps' views, "My own confession of faith is not that of Mr. Phipps, but the United Church has always been a church of diverse beliefs." And Mr. Wyatt referred to the Basis of Union with Presbyterians who believed in predestination and Methodists who believed in free will. Mr. Wytatts commented that this diversity of belief has been the United Church's strength and weakness ever since.

The "New Curriculum" Sunday School material, published by the United Church in 1964 and 1965, demonstrated this lack of doctrinal discipline. It omitted the Virgin Birth, focused on Jesus' humanity while minimizing His divinity, doubted His ascension, ignored His Second Coming, and alleged that the kingdom of God is the ideal society on earth. An evangelical scholar, who reviewed the UC's newly developed curriculum right after it was put on the market, remarked that "to a large extent the New Curriculum promotes a religion of the natural man."

By the 1960s key members of the denominational elite, especially those teaching in the seminaries, no longer placed great emphasis on the new birth of the individual, on the supernatural or on the transcendence of God, but rather on the reformation of Canada through social action. The elite melded with the far left of secular culture. Someone said that the bureaucracy of the United Church had become the New Democratic Party at prayer. The elite, in a desire to remain relevant and keep abreast with the times, accommodated themselves to the secular spirit of the age. And in the process they separated themselves from many people in the pew who still adhered to a form of evangelicalism.

### **Liberal seminaries**

Rev. Phipps said at a press conference that his views are well within the theological mix of the United Church, and have been for some time. And he is right. Former moderator Ann Squire, said that Mr. Phipps' views of Jesus' life and death reflect current scholarship about the Bible that is being taught in theological colleges. And like Rev. Phipps, she too is agnostic on the issues of the after-life.

Already in the 1920s and 1930s, virtually every academically recognized Canadian Protestant seminary was in liberal hands, as were the administrative elite in mainline Protestant denominations. The late Dr. George Rawlyk wrote:

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century ... most Canadian Protestant leaders and ... their intellectual "deputies" – in the seminaries – were determined "to win over the traditional strata" to support their new liberal and modern version of "social, economic, political" and, one might add, religious order.

By 1930, at least at the seminary level, the evangelical hold on Canadian Protestantism had been definitely broken by the secularizing forces of liberal Christianity. In this liberal camp were the new seminaries of the United Church, Emmanuel in Toronto, Pine Hill in Halifax, Queen's in Kingston, the Cooperative College in Montreal, Wesley College in Winnipeg and the United Theological College in Vancouver.

Today, students trained at liberal seminaries may be sensitive to politically correct diversity, gender-biases and inclusive language, but they are incapable of asserting Biblical truth on matters of faith or morals. Their Christology is the product of higher Biblical criticism and the Jesus Seminar. Rev. Dr. Victor Shepherd, past editor of the

*Theological Digest & Outlook* published by Church Alive, relates that when he entered seminary in 1967 sensitivity-training was "all the rage." After sensitivity-training it was bio-feedback. Then it was small group dynamics and then it was environmentalism. This was followed by the new-age movement, and next was "the ridiculous extremism of wilder feminism."

Rev. John Niles, minister at Victoria Park United Church, Toronto, commented in *Fellowship Magazine*:

Sadly and tragically, our United Church Seminaries have been teaching and encouraging the introduction of theology which would incorporate creation spirituality, goddess terminology and radical feminist theology. We have allowed New Age thought to creep into our theology.

### **Membership losses**

When a denomination departs from the historic Christian faith it can expect loss of membership. When church leaders do not actually believe the Gospel they are called to proclaim, decline is the tragic consequence. When a church no longer adheres to the fundamentals of the faith, follows every new theological trend, refuses to oppose abortion and approves of homosexual conduct, it has nothing to say anymore to the nation. And few are listening to the briefs and pronouncements which flow from the head office of the United Church. Rev. Phipps admitted as much in his interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*, when he said that Canada's major churches can no longer be called mainline churches, because they now have very little influence.

Few liberals attend the worship services of the United Church; and most who do are either fairly orthodox Christians or possess a sense of loyalty to the denomination as an institution. It is now the fastest shrinking church in Canada. The Sunday School curriculum controversy in the sixties led to a drop in membership. In 1988 the decision to ordain homosexuals caused the largest exodus in the church's history. The *Fellowship Magazine* noted that many of those who withdrew were renewal-minded Christians who felt they had been pushed out of the United Church. Although about 3 million Canadians claim affiliation with the United Church, there are only about 320,000 worshippers at any given Sunday morning.

The current controversy over the nature of Christ will contribute to further losses. Rev. Phipps himself admits that the United Church continues to lose members. And I believe that if it continues to lose members at such an extreme rate I doubt it will survive another generation. The fastest growing churches in Canada are the conservative evangelical ones, often at the expense of the mainline denominations.

The several renewal groups in the United Church need our prayers as they valiantly seek to uphold the essentials of the evangelical Christian faith. But those Canadian Protestant churches which still seek to worship the living Triune God and proclaim the Gospel of salvation by grace and faith alone – not environmentalism or inclusive

liturgies or whatever else is currently fashionable – should be ready to welcome those United Church members who are tired of fighting heresies.

Johan D. Tangelder