

The Nature of Doctrine and the Role of the Assembly – Three Kinds of Theological Statements

This paper has been prepared by the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine as an aid to the church in understanding the nature of Doctrine and the role of the Assembly in matters of doctrine.

Introduction

Theology is vital to the life of the Church. Theology is the Church's reflection on how to speak and live the Gospel. Theology struggles with the question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" It involves prayerful, humble and respectful listening to the Spirit within the community of disciples.

Bad theology has contributed to the oppression and ultimate genocide of Jewish people in Europe; the slaughter of Muslims by Christian Crusaders; the colonisation and economic exploitation of what have become "third world" countries; the denigration, marginalisation and sometimes massacres of Indigenous Australians. Bad theology has justified apartheid, violence towards women and children, and the destruction of God's good creation.

On the other hand, good theology has driven the Church to stand for justice, peace, reconciliation and the integrity of creation. Good theology has offered people meaning and freed Christian people for countless acts of joyful, loving service, enriching the lives of others.

Good theology serves the Gospel and ultimately God's mission of healing and restoring the whole creation. Good theology empowers the Church to love God with all its heart and soul and mind and strength and to love the neighbour as the self. Good theology impels the Church to faithful discipleship in obedience to Jesus the Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Given the importance of theology, it is helpful to be clear about the kinds of theological statements in the Church. This paper distinguishes three kinds of theological statements. It argues that clarifying these allows us to see the nature of some current issues in the Uniting Church in Australia, and so helps us to move forward.

It is helpful to distinguish three kinds of theological issues:

1. Fundamental confessions of the Ecumenical Church;
2. Official positions of a Church;
3. Ongoing theological reflection of a Church.

Each of these will be considered in turn.

The paper suggests that, in the UCA, we refer to issues of the first type as "dogma", the second type as "doctrine" and the third type as "theological reflection".

In considering each of the three types of theological issues, it is important to note that theological issues (what the Church believes) and ethics (how the Church lives and acts) cannot properly be separated. Each must always inform and enrich the other.

1. Fundamental Confessions of the Ecumenical Church

There are certain central beliefs and practices which the church universal has decided are essential to being Christian. They include such affirmations as, that Christ is "of one being with the Father," that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, and that God is the triune One. Most of these issues were decided by the early Ecumenical Councils as they grappled with how best to represent the testimony of Scripture. They have been articulated in creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. They also include some practices (such as the baptismal formula). They have to do with fundamental commitments which churches have in common.

We recognise that the affirmations of the early Ecumenical Councils are often expressed in terminology which assumes a world-view different from our own. They are "framed in the language of their day"¹ (*Basis of Union*, par. 9). We might add that the issues which those who drafted these

¹ For a discussions of the issues here, see Douglas John Hall, 1993, *Professing the Faith*, Fortress, pp. 146ff and Robert Jenson, 1997, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, The Triune God*, Oxford U. P., chapter 6.

statements grappled with were pressing issues at the time, and the conversations surrounding them were therefore a way of doing theology in their context. In order to appropriate them for today, it is useful to consider the social and philosophical context in which they arose, and then go to the underlying concerns, in order to discern what they mean for us in *our* time and culture.

Commitments of this first kind have to do with the central or most fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith and are few in number. They set out what a person minimally needs to adhere to in order to be baptised a Christian. They therefore form the core content for the nurture and formation for discipleship. Were a church to decide contrary to such commitments, it would effectively place itself outside of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church is therefore not free by itself to go contrary to such ecumenical commitments. Nor does the Uniting Church decide such issues by itself. It does approach them from the perspective of its Reformed and Evangelical tradition.

Furthermore, when deciding whether or not to baptise a person from another church, the Uniting Church would not re-baptise a person who comes from a church which holds to these widely accepted ecumenical commitments (e.g. the Presbyterian Church of Korea). On the other hand, it would baptise persons from, say, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), even if they had been baptised within that church.

Our *Basis of Union* tells us that “[t]he Uniting Church lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”² and that “[r]ecalling the Ecumenical Councils of the early centuries, it looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated, and the Church’s unity expressed, in similar Councils” (par. 2). Par. 9 states, “The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church through the ages by its use of the confessions known as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith ...”

Our identity as Christians is largely shaped by these ecumenical commitments. As part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, we consider carefully what other parts of the Church, through the centuries and today, have declared.

The *Basis* commits us to seek to maintain membership of the World Council of Churches. As a member church of that body, the UCA contributes to its reflection and takes very seriously its official statements, such as the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

When the *Basis of Union* speaks of matters which are of “the substance of the faith” (par. 14), it means these fundamental confessions of the ecumenical Church.

2. Official Positions of a Church

Secondly, there are issues that have to do with the officially stated position of a church. They are of the kind, “If you wish to speak for the (Uniting) Church, say X.” Such statements may be held in common by churches, but they need not be.

Such statements are reversible, in that a church may subsequently revise its position, discerning that it did not hear God fully or adequately when its previous statement was made. An example is the Uniting Church adopting a certain ordination practice at the Sixth Assembly in 1991, which was then changed at the Seventh Assembly in 1994.

Alternatively a certain position may be appropriate at one time or in one culture, but the Holy Spirit may lead the Church of another time or culture to a different position.

The Uniting Church Assembly has, since 1977, made many determinations. Our ethos as a Uniting Church is, in part, shaped by these official doctrinal statements.

Clearly, these type of statements need to be not inconsistent with the commitments of the universal church (type 1).

Contemporary statements by a church do not simply repeat what was said in the past. As Douglas John Hall puts it, “Doctrine is created by the coming together, in the discipleship community, of the memory of what has been [given] to past generations and the ongoing experience of being grasped by the divine Spirit in the here and now” (1996:20). Such theological statements have to be recast time and time again in response to new questions, and articulated in fresh language, so as to make

² See the important document received by the Ninth Assembly (2000) and commended for study and action, *Living and Believing within the Unity and Faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church*.

sense within, but not be dictated by, a contemporary world-view. This is one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit leads and teaches the Church.

The *Basis of Union* directs us, as we have seen, to the great affirmations of the worldwide church. It also acknowledges the rich tradition of the Reformation and the Wesleyan Revivals. These had particular emphases, which are an important part of our heritage and ethos.

When it comes to official statements of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Assembly³ has “determining responsibility” in matters of doctrine (*Basis of Union*, par 15e). Logically, this cannot include the types of issues which fall into category 1, because the Uniting Church does not “determine” such issues at all – at least not alone.

So, when the *Basis of Union* speaks of “doctrine”, it means official statements of the Uniting Church. A special kind of doctrinal statement arises when the Uniting Church is a partner in an agreed statement with another Church or other Churches. These, too, are statements about which the Uniting Church has made a decision, and are to be regarded as Uniting Church doctrine. From time to time two or more denominations enter into formal agreements with each other. They jointly set out what they believe. Typically, they deal with one aspect of Christian belief, such as baptism or ministry or the doctrine of justification.

Clearly, in drafting such statements the respective denominations consider carefully if the statement is consistent with the fundamental confessions of the Ecumenical Church (statements type 1).

Ecumenical commitments the UCA has entered into include:

- *An Agreed Statement on Baptism – Uniting Church /Roman Catholic* (1979)
- *The Anglican / Uniting Statement on Baptism* (1985)
- The agreed statements on the *Eucharist* (1985), the *Ministry* (1986) and *Marriage* (1987) with the Lutheran Church of Australia
- Agreed statement on *The Eucharist* with the Anglican Church (1991)
- Agreed statements on *The Church* and *One Christ in Church and World* with the Lutheran Church
- *Lutheran/Uniting Declaration of Mutual Recognition* (2000)
- *For the Sake of the Gospel: Mutual Recognition of Ordained Ministries in the Anglican and Uniting Churches in Australia* (2001)

For the UCA to change its stance unilaterally on an issue that is part of such an agreement would be discourteous at least, but also unfaithful, as it would be contrary to our identity which is shaped by the ecumenical imperative of the gospel. It would also seriously jeopardise a relationship that may have taken decades to build. Therefore, while the Assembly is free to determine its doctrinal position on any issue according to its own wisdom, it should not make determinations unilaterally in matters which are the subject of agreements with other Churches.

3. On-going Theological Reflection of a Church

Theological reflection is the Church’s ongoing conversation about how to speak and live the gospel. Theology, in this sense, is not the officially adopted position of the Church. Many matters of Christian belief and practice are the subject of theological reflection and never become doctrine. On the other hand, a matter of theological reflection may become a matter of doctrine when it becomes the official position of a Church. To cite one example, there were many years of theological reflection in the Churches which came into the Uniting Church about the question of the ordination of women. It was only when these Churches decided officially to approve the ordination of women that this became a matter of doctrine (as it is for the Uniting Church).

Good theology is consistent with fundamental confessions of the ecumenical Church (type 1). It also needs to understand and take into account what the church has discerned across the centuries and in different cultural contexts – the doctrinal positions of various Churches (type 2). To understand and take seriously this rich heritage is to do *historical theology*.

The task of on-going theological reflection, then, includes making accessible in contemporary language and thought-forms, the decisions of the universal Church in the past. But the task of theology is also more than this. Under the guidance of the Spirit, theological discussion may critique

³ Note here that Assembly means the triennial Assembly in session, or its Standing Committee; not the agencies or staff.

what the church has said in the past in the light of Scripture and ongoing discernment (*critical theology*). It may also propose new lines of thinking which are consistent with the past, but address new issues, or express ongoing issues in fresh language. We seek to do so under the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit (*constructive theology*) (Douglas John Hall, for example, clearly and helpfully distinguished the three in *Professing the Faith*, and acknowledges the distinction in the structure of the whole volume).

Good theology:

- (a) is consistent with the church's understanding in the past;
- (b) makes sense of God, creaturely existence and salvation within the current world view; and
- (c) empowers us for the future to which God calls us.

This means that persons or groups who wish to engage in sound theological reflection need a thorough acquaintance with scripture, tradition, culture and contemporary experience (the traditional "sources" or "formative factors" in theology). Good theology is therefore always both traditional (conservative in the best sense of the term) and contextual (speaking to current issues in fresh language). It listens to what the Spirit has said to the Churches in the past to help us hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church in the present.

Conclusion

Sometimes there is confusion, when dealing with theological issues, which stems from not identifying clearly what kind of issue we are dealing with. Furthermore, we have not had a consistently clear terminology. We therefore propose that the Uniting Church:

- (a) uses the term "dogma" to refer to fundamental confessions of the Ecumenical Church;
- (b) uses the term "doctrine" to refer to the official position of a Church – in our case, a statement or position adopted by the triennial Assembly or the Assembly Standing Committee (including inter-Church agreements);
- (c) refers to other theological conversations as "theological reflection."

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