

DUSTING OFF THE DOCTRINE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to enliven the understanding of doctrine in preaching. It is intended for clergy who preach regularly in denominations that have no strict requirements of doctrine. Written from within the United Church of Canada, it carries much reference to that doctrine and polity. Engaging the homiletical theory of *faith seeking understanding*, it warns of the danger of default doctrine and establishes a discipline to ensure that regular homiletical preparation involves more than simple grace and engages hard questions. The pleasures and depth of theology are rich, and merit reflection not only for the pastoral and intellectual lives of our parishioners but for the fullness of our practice.

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My teenagers Andrew and Hannah sat at table with me as we wrote high school, junior high and ACTS papers. My husband Earl listened to me rattle on about preaching for years and cheerfully put me on a plane for Chicago. My love to them.

This paper is dedicated to my father, the Reverend George Henderson MacLean who was born the year the United Church of Canada was inaugurated; he is the genesis for me of preaching with passion and living with religious imagination.

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In the Beginning

The great western plains where I live were once an ocean. The basin reached from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the Appalachians and the rising of the Canadian Shield in the east. The Western Interior Seaway split North America in half from the western Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico 100-65 million years ago. Evidence of the ancient sea emerges in paleontological digs; tiny marine fish and giant aquatic reptiles are imbedded in the rocks in Manitoba and eastern Saskatchewan. The newly formed, volcanic Rocky Mountains drained into the everglades, tropical and lush, home to the dinosaurs. Most famous perhaps are the Tyrannosaurus Rex and Albertosaurus. The central figure at the Field Museum in Chicago, enigmatically called Sue, came from Faith, South Dakota, which is south and east of my home, also part of these great western plains. ¹

The ocean is long gone. Sue's humid home is a dusty geological memory. Now the flat dry prairie breathes no moist salt air. The rivers drain to the north into the newer Arctic Ocean. The sea leaves only the mystery of the past to surprise and delight scientists and rock hounds.

Often the doctrines of our church seem like these great western plains: vast, dry and altogether unyielding. Somewhere in the annals of history they had meaning that people lived and died for, but like the ancient ocean bed, the life carried by the waves is long gone. Like dinosaurs on this great western plain, historic dogmas get museum notice as large intriguing creatures that once prowled the earth - and elicit curiosity. Where then is the reverence and wisdom? How do we choose what to preach? In our culture of immediate gratification, the long history of Christian doctrine can seem complex and intimidating. It is layered, wisdom upon story, faith upon fact, human experience upon holy revelation. In an era of simple answers and

¹ Sylvie Tissandier, Paleontologist, Calgary, November 8 2008

quick fixes, theological inquiry can appear slow and irrelevant. Interest in interfaith collegiality and functioning praxis call us to laudatory efforts of conciliation and immediate action. What lurks, though, unanswered and insidious, if we leave doctrine underground? It requires careful dusting to reveal intricate fossils; patient as a paleontologist, we look for the energizing power of our heritage.

“If Christianity allows itself to forget its own traditions of wisdom,” writes Doug Hall

it will have little relevance to a society drowning in mere ‘information,’ while suffering profoundly from ‘cultural amnesia.’ ... But unless the churches (particularly the once-mainline Protestant denominations) can learn again how to recollect and struggle with what has been handed over (*tradere*) to them from the past, they will surely disappear from the cultural horizon even more quickly than their present statistics suggest.²

The Church *Tradere*

I am writing from within the United Church of Canada, where the freedom to make meaning and to explore possibilities of faith is valued highly. Fresh, relevant endeavours of philosophical inquiry that make a difference are welcome. Members support their neighbours’ quests for faith and their various interpretations of scripture. We go to interfaith gatherings. We encourage one another in study groups as we learn and change; we happily sit in a pew with others who *differ* in perspective. “An open-minded church” is the clarion call for a population that covers a northern geography from sea to sea to sea and Bermuda, to people who speak varyingly French, Cree, Ukrainian, Mandarin and Welsh, who live in urban centers and isolated rural holdings, who claim theological heritage from the Wesleys, Knox and Calvin, who actively seek fresh word from the divine. Consistently when asked what the governing value of the United Church is, people answer: “it’s inclusive.”

² Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 177

This is the largest Protestant church in the country. The denomination was formed in 1925 by an Act of Parliament, which amalgamated the Methodist and Congregationalist churches with most of the Presbyterians and several Union Churches. Embedded in the Basis of Union document are Articles of Faith, which are relevant to this project. A second Statement of Faith was compiled in 1940. A liturgical creed was written in 1968. I was part of a group that wrote our new statement of faith, *A Song of Faith*, which was adopted in 2006.

The United Church of Canada is awash in theology. So said Victoria University professor *emeritus* Rev. Alan Davies at a symposium on *A Song of Faith* in Toronto in October 2005.

Although we do not acknowledge a single confession or creed, we have no shortage of doctrine: we have four statements, quite a few for a church so young. We have published countless study documents on Jesus, Islam, scripture, sexuality and so much more. Theological conversations abound in congregations as people prepare to *discern* pastoral needs prior to a leadership search, or debate public policy or discuss genetic ethics. With so many sources of theological guidance, where does the preacher look? Unfettered by a single creed or confession, what does one preach in this church? The vista is wide open. The possibilities are endless.

At ordination³, the key doctrinal question has to do with *essential agreement* with the Articles of Faith. It is a hotly debated and moving line among clergy. Precisely because the United Church is bound by no one creed or confession, theology is a hot topic. We are a church that is proud of action, and sees faith expressed most clearly in the doing of ministry. This belief-by-praxis lends itself nicely to a tolerant, interested community that welcomes all and sees itself as a large tent, housing a wide variety of opinion. Functionally, we are a non-confessing church.

³ In the United Church, clergy are ordained to *word, sacrament and pastoral care* or commissioned to the diaconal ministry of *education, outreach and pastoral care*. Although many people give sermons in United Churches, this paper addresses a question for those set apart to preach regularly.

Writing our new statement of faith presented me with a challenge in preaching: I discovered a hunger for theological conversation. I encountered a default theology of grace which I fear may actually be a veneer to cover comfort: comfort is a good thing, surely, but lightweight when left without the wisdom of our heritage to ground us. Issues such as sin lurk under the surface and rear their ugly heads in entitlement – or idolatry. Would a disciplined consideration of doctrine heighten my homiletical leadership? Would looking at entitlement enhance my pastoral practice?

Entitlement

Edmund A. Steimle writes in “The Story of Good and Evil” that our creaturely anxiety is a given. He reminds us of Reinhold Niebuhr’s assertion in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that anxiety is the internal precondition to sin. Anxiety is caused by our knowledge of ignorance, and the realization that we cannot fully control our future including the inevitability of our death. In that creaturely anxiety a human being has two choices. One is “I trust God and God’s will for me and I trust God with my future too” the other, enigmatically, takes form from “to hell with that; by God I’ll take my own future, my own destiny, into my own two hands and I’ll work it out for myself.” This rebellion issues in pride, lust, gluttony, murder, apathy, selfishness, greed, injustice - all forms of evil. “Evil is simply the refusal to trust God and his (*sic*) will for us and for our future.”⁴

I call this entitlement. It is the image of “the self-made man”, physically impossible. We see entitlement addressed in the biblical stories of Joseph’s brothers, Esther’s nemesis Haman, Ezekiel speaking to the Babylonian powers and the visions of Daniel. Entitlement is a pastoral and theological concern. With the privilege in which we live, and the entitlement we arrogate to

⁴ Edmund A. Steimle, “The Story of Good and Evil” in Steimle, Maurice Niedenthal and Charles Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980), 131.

ourselves in it, we assume that with enough willpower and money, we can comprehend God's nature; perhaps we can even become God-like. Where is the respect for the limitations of our own nature?

This is the issue that drove my curiosity about the role of doctrine in preaching. It is not my purpose to limit the possibilities people find for faith or to judge them. It *is* my intention to engage Christian doctrine and guide people toward articulating the theological issues they encounter. Doctrine can lead us to think, rather than telling us what to think. It is my hope that together we enjoy the fresh perspectives we find and move forward together into a substantial faith.

Doctrine: A Buried Treasure

Under the ancient seabed of this province, under the great western plains which appear vast, dry and altogether unyielding, is energy that powers our culture: oil, gas and coal. Based on known proven reserves at the beginning of 2008, there were 1332 billion barrels of oil and 6200 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. At current consumption levels, 86 million barrels per day of oil and 104 trillion cubic feet per year of natural gas, there remain approximately 43 years of oil and 59.6 years of natural gas. In addition, there are approximately 143 years of coal. Apart from these accessible reserves, large discoveries of natural gas in the Arctic and off the coast of Brazil promise to produce even more.⁵ This long-buried, pressurized energy will be pumped to the surface for use.

Could it be that by digging into the reserves of theology under this dry plain we might find energies to grow our faith into the future? What treasure might we unearth? *Awash in theology*, can we tap this ancient reserve?

⁵ John Heida, oil and energy engineer, Edmonton November 11 2008

The Congregation in the Oil Patch

The congregation I serve is St. Paul's United Church in Edmonton. It sits at the edge of a university campus: academics and professionals are in worship Sunday by Sunday. They spend their weeks immersed in chicken gynecology or Antarctic bacteria or Dickensian social politics, and dealing with the ethical and philosophical issues of life – as do we all. They welcome freedom of belief, diversity of opinion and opportunities to grow in faith. This church community of thinkers seeks to deepen the life of faith through small groups, book studies, extensive youth and young adult programming, events for children and parents, and interfaith outreach. It is a solid urban church, and the wider community relies upon it for connection to mission and spiritual nurture. An open acceptance of difference, and the willingness to acknowledge diversity without the compunction to force change, offers an exciting place to preach. The congregation is open to challenge and possibility; members offer insight and experience.

Edmonton is a provincial capital city with a population of a million; the province of Alberta is booming with oil and gas. You won't hear the phrase "We always do it that way". Tradition is not the dominant value here! Self-actualization and expression would be more like it: action, again. St. Paul's United has a solid social mission in this city; for instance, a congregational investment produces \$100,000 in directed annual housing grants, which address visible needs in a booming economy.

Since the autumn of 2005, St Paul's has engaged a local lectionary, which I have prepared. Each annual theme comes from congregational discernment of interests and concerns and a reading of scripture. With subsequent theological reflection, specific doctrines became apparent. *In God We Live and Move and Have our Being: None Shall be Afraid* was the first.

Love without Borders was the second. It was followed by *Love without Borders: that We May Know Each Other*, and then a fourth, *Love without Borders: A River of Faith Growing Deeper and Wider*. The image of borders resonates with a people who travel extensively, research medicine and engineering, offer global outreach, and cross provincial and national borders to visit family.

We have made time to explore some Old Testament stories at length. The autumn offers a long uninterrupted post-Pentecost season, and since most of the ACTS taping Sundays are in the fall, much thinking for my project took place in these Hebrew narratives. Working on this project as I set the lections, I began to identify doctrines to deepen my preaching: from the scripture passages themselves, theological clarity emerged. Corroborations with congregational life reinforced my confidence that these doctrines would be helpful. Twenty-five years into ministry, in the midst of a busy pastoral life, the Doctor of Ministry in Preaching provided the opportunity to engage these thoughts in a sustained and disciplined manner.

Walter Brueggemann speaks of *the gospel as a truth widely held, but greatly reduced*:

The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing that ask little and receives less.⁶

Will engagement with the church's heritage of faith move us beyond our comfortable believing?

Will it call us out of our entitlement into deeper discipleship?

Paul Tillich said in his 1963 Earl Lectures at the Graduate Theological Union,

Faith is the state of being grasped by something that has ultimate meaning, and acting and thinking on the basis of this as a centered person. Beliefs are opinions held to be true, which may or may not really be true.⁷

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 1.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, edited by Durwood Foster (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 15.

Pastoral leadership is a trust. The preacher's commitment is to deepen listeners' *thinking* so that action comes from a basis of *ultimate meaning*, not merely opinions held to be true. A careful examination of doctrine in preaching augments this pastoral leadership.

In this preaching project I have been considering how to move people beyond a default way of seeing God and life, into deeper theological reflection guided by the traditional wisdom of the church. By using one doctrine – grace, say, or hope - often at the loss of others, we preachers fall into *default*. The danger is idolatry, losing sight of the fullness of God and centering our faith on a narrow understanding of theology. I propose that intentionally preaching doctrine shields the congregation from a preacher's hobbyhorse. It provokes biblical study beyond the Common Lectionary. It also protects the preacher from an overuse use of one dogma and default preaching.

Faith Seeking Understanding

This is *faith seeking understanding*. It is dogmatic preaching. The phrase *fides quaerens intellectum* comes from Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) who posited that after faith comes the *call to reason* the faith.⁸ For this questing preacher, this is the search. I have been establishing a discipline to be sure I preach more than simple grace.

Doug Hall is a member of the United Church. In *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* he has a chapter brilliantly titled "Stewards of the Mystery of God: *Preserving Classical Protestant Theology*". (italics mine) Here he speaks of faith seeking understanding not as polite inquiry and certainly not as "spiritual froth", but as a *drive* to understand; he says Barth called it

⁸ David Bartlett, *Apologetic Preaching*, June 25-29 2007, class notes.

a voracious desire.⁹ Clear preaching values a full understanding of our tradition and voraciously engages the questions of our day. O. Wesley Allen writes (italics mine):

As the preacher conceives sermon topics, themes or ideas, she should reflect on their connection to systematic theology and the history of doctrine. The particular sermonic focus she offers to the congregation's conversation will be better received by the hearers if she has a firm grasp on and is able to convey the relationship between that focus and a comprehensive Christian theological outlook. A particularly helpful question for the preacher to ask is, *What are the connections of this potential sermonic focus to this particular denominational tradition's theology and this particular congregation's theological leanings?*¹⁰

Evelyn Waugh once remarked that the West is dying of sloth, not wrath. Marva Dawn noted that and went on to say,

“For the most part institutions are lost, not because they are stormed by hostile outsiders, but because their custodians, overcome by apathy, diffidence and intellectual fecklessness, simply give them away. Will we give away the Church and its gospel power by dumbing it down or by failing to reach out?”¹¹

We turn now to this particular denomination's theology, and why I call it a functionally non-confessing church. Here's why my question blows like a sweeping prairie wind over a vast dusty landscape: it begins with the formation of the institution.

From There to Here

On June 10 1925, a massive communion service was celebrated in the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto. It sealed “one of the most significant and far-reaching church unions since the Reformation” wrote Samuel Dwight Chown, the Methodist General Superintendent from 1910 – 1925. A witness to the event, he observed:

Rivalling in intensity of religious fervour and attendance any Protestant revival which the world has ever witnessed, yesterday morning's gathering will live long in the memory of those fortunate enough to be present. Beneath the lofty arched roof of the great Arena, the sacred covenant of union was signed on sheep-skin parchment by the leaders of the three uniting Churches, the while a sea of upward of seven thousand upturned faces gazed on the spectacle in silent reverence and prayer.¹²

⁹ Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 113.

¹⁰ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 47.

¹¹ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 12

How did they arrive at that august inauguration?

This transconfessional union grew out of Protestant cooperation in nineteenth century Canada. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was the result of nine unions which brought together nearly two dozen separate units and groups; the Methodist Church was the result of eight unions which brought together sixteen bodies; and finally the Congregational Church was the result of four different unions. It was “peculiarly Canadian” says Claris Edwin Silcox, a leading authority on this history.¹³

The Transconfessional Dilemma

In 1908, one hundred years ago, the Joint Committee from the three churches completed the Basis of Union, upon which the new church would be founded. It was made up of four subcommittees: polity, ministry, administration and doctrine. The doctrine section had taken four years to write, and only one significant change would be made, the addition of an article on prayer. Each of the founding denominations “disposed of the issue in accordance with its own polity and genius.”¹⁴ In 1910 the Congregationalists Union gave approval. In 1912 the Methodist General Conference acknowledged their popular vote and made a commitment. In 1916 the Presbyterians at General Assembly received the Basis, with protest; the next year, 1917, they suspended considerations until after the war; in 1921 the Assembly voted in favour with about a quarter of votes against union; final approval was received in 1923. The union passed into federal law in 1925.

¹² S.D. Chown, *The Story of Church Union in Canada* (Toronto, 1930, p 120) quoted in H. H. Walsh. *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1968), 303.

¹³ Claris Edwin Silcox quoted in N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada 1904 – 1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 9.

¹⁴ Claris Edwin Silcox. *Church Union in Canada: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933), 165.

This simple timeline is a thin veil over a complex endeavour. The doctrine section was a delicate balance: John Grant, the outstanding United Church historian, wrote:

This is clear enough in the summary of doctrine, where the assertion that God “makes all things work together in the fulfillment of His sovereign design in the manifestation of His glory”, hedged about with Arminian safeguards, is juxtaposed with the assurance, similarly hedged about with Calvinistic safeguards, that God “in the Gospel freely offers His all-sufficient salvation to all men.”¹⁵

He goes on to say: “the theology that emerges from the eclectic wording of the document is a moderate Arminianism tinged with a strong Calvinistic emphasis on divine sovereignty, and *indeed this is where all three Churches stood in the early years of the century.*”¹⁶ (italics mine)

In this era of burgeoning ecumenism, “a confessional theology that stressed denominational distinctives was seen as passé by most of the key leaders in these denominations.”¹⁷ Church Union was “*to be a sharing of treasure ... for the more effective penetration of national life by the gospel.*”¹⁸ The ecumenical optimism and particularly Christian hope for the nation and the world seem utopian now, a hundred years of vigorous history later! That was a time when sociology and psychology were emerging as social sciences, a Christian century was anticipated, and unity movements were popular. The Uniting Church of Australia would take the United Church of Canada as a model. Anglican and Baptist churches expressed interest in pursuing an organic relationship with this fledgling North American denomination. Transconfessional union was a reality in an ethos of convergence.

In the June 10 Act of Inauguration, a series of declarations were made by denominational representatives:

The Presbyterian Moderator brought “the manifestation of the Spirit in vigilance for Christ’s Kirk and Covenant, in care for the spread of education and devotion to sacred learning”; the chairman of the

¹⁵ John Webster Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), 33.

¹⁶ Grant, 36.

¹⁷ John H. Young. “Sacred Cow or White Elephant? The Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union” in *Touchstone* Volume 16, number 2 (Winnipeg: Touchstone: Heritage and Theology in a New Age Inc. May 1998), 33.

¹⁸ Grant, 34, italics mine.

Congregational Union “the liberty of prophesying, the love of spiritual freedom and the enforcement of civic justice”, the Methodist general superintendent “evangelical zeal and human redemption, the testimony of spiritual experience, and the ministry of sacred song”. The chairman of the General Council of Local Union Churches hinted at the philosophy of union in bringing “the furtherance of community life within the Kingdom of God, and of the principle, in things essential unity, and in things secondary liberty”. The culmination of each offering was the significant phrase, “*receive ye our inheritance among them that are sanctified.*”¹⁹

Transconfessional Theology

The theology in the doctrine section of the Basis of Union was varyingly regarded as an excellent summation of the Christian faith, and as a limpid and vacant tool, a cobbling together of three quite distinct traditions.

The Preamble begins: “We ... do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us.” It concludes with an assertion that the doctrinal statement was “in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures”.

They were trying to make clear what they saw as the essential aspects of the Christian faith, essential aspects they believed were shared by all three denominations. Further, they endeavoured to so in as simple a form as possible. Burwash, in an article defending the statement, described the committee’s intent as follows: “The guiding principle of the Committee was this – to make our new statement embrace every important topic of our several creeds or standards which we found clearly and explicitly set forth in Scripture, and which forms a part of the evangelical way of salvation and religious faith.”²⁰

Nathaniel Burwash was the Chair of the Doctrine subcommittee, Chancellor of Victoria University and the leading Methodist theologian of the day. A Presbyterian theologian on the committee, Thomas B. Kilpatrick, wrote:

Let it be well understood that it does not contain, and does not profess to furnish a system of theology. It contains, indeed, the essential Christian verities, and does desire to give them sufficient expression. But it is not drawn up after the fashion of a treatise on systematic theology; and it avoids the elaboration of those Confessions, which belong to what we may call the Scholastic Period of Protestantism.²¹

Burwash went on to write: “Scriptural elements of the faith we held to be essential, the theories

¹⁹ Grant, 35.

²⁰ Nathaniel Burwash, “Church Union – Objections to the Basis”, *The Christian Guardian*, 7 February 1912 in Young, 36.

²¹ Thomas B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith*. Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1928, page 60 in Young 36.

human and at best imperfect, and changing with the progress of human science and philosophy.”²²

Here are a few telling comments about the specifics of the doctrine section:

S.D. Chown lauded the “practicality” rather than theology of the union. “I have long felt we could do without much dogmatic theology. After all, theology is only the bill of fare while religion is the good square meal.”²³ Burwash said “religion was in the first place a matter of experience, not doctrine”.²⁴ Samuel P. Rose, professor at Wesleyan Theological College, Montreal wrote that doctrinal statements need always to be interpreted through the spirit prevailing in the Church at any given time in history.²⁵ There was enthusiasm: the Presbyterian unionist W.J. Clark called it “one of the most wholesome things in the Union document”.²⁶ Of course there were differences of opinion: S.D. Chown wrote: “Calvinism is a creed outworn in any respects and many of our Presbyterian friends were glad to drop its more uncouth aspects and place their present views in the genial garb of Methodist phraseology.”²⁷ Richard Roberts, a Presbyterian who later would become the sixth Moderator of the new church, offered a *scathing critique* of the doctrine section:

The new doctrinal point of view in the basis of union is in my judgment a rehashing of all the antique theology that was ever heard of, with here and there a slight bow to the liberal spirit. My first reading of it nearly plunged me into despair, and I should have found it entirely impossible to accept it, were it not for the fact that the formula for subscription for ministers leaves considerable elbow room for interpretation.²⁸

Other dynamic and entertaining statements from leaders of the time are recorded:²⁹

²² Burwash, “Objections to the Basis”, 14.

²³ Young, 32.

²⁴ Young, 33.

²⁵ Samuel P. Rose, *The Things that Remain: A Confession of Faith*, the Ryerson Essays, no. 20 Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1923, pages 5-6 in Young, 38

²⁶ “Report of the Committee on Union with Other Churches”, in *Acts and Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (1909) Appendices, page 280, in Young, 42.

²⁷ Samuel Dwight Chown Papers Box 3, File 67, p. 7 in Young, 33.

²⁸ Morrow, 153.

²⁹ All from Morrow, 147 – 153.

“The doctrinal basis of union has its ecclesiastical use, but doctrinally, and theologically, it is of very little value.”

“It is unnecessarily long and crowded with details.”

“There is no attempt at creating a creed, but simply the gathering together of points of theology which do not constitute burning questions.”

“The creedal basis is a compromise quite unworthy of intelligent men. It is true that a candidate is not required to give his assent to the letter of the doctrinal basis, but a great many of the younger and more liberal ministers of our church are thoroughly dissatisfied with such an antique production: for example – The story of the Garden of Eden is not treated as a pre-Christian Semitic poem but is laid down in cold-blooded fashion as a matter-of-fact statement.”

“The general feeling among our congregational men was of considerable disappointment at the doctrinal basis laid down. ... representing the general belief held by the majority of our people, although somewhat conservative in the view of our leaders.”

“The United Church will simply be an enlarged Methodist Church.”

“The doctrine is largely Presbyterian.”

“I have not as much as read the basis of union. The explanation of this remarkable fact is probably that I am neither a theologian nor the son of a theologian.” (This comment from a Presbyterian minister!)

Transconfessional Praxis on the Ground

Modern biblical scholarship and scientific research had led some to hope that the doctrine section would offer fresh theology. Others were interested in asserting the classical creeds. The result was rather doctrine pieced together in hope of an authorized union and the fulfillment of 19th century ideals. A growing public sense of the Basis of Union was of a means to an end: to wit, the institutional union of sufficiently like-minded churches. Community churches were already in full swing in the west. “The task of the Joint Committee was for all intents and purposes to regularize a situation that was rapidly getting out of hand, particularly on the prairies.”³⁰ On this western plain, church union was already a functioning reality.

Here, then, is the introduction to the Basis of Union:

³⁰ Walsh, 290.

We, the representatives of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational branches of the Church of Christ in Canada, do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us. In doing so, we build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. *We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life.* We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further *maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation,* as set forth in common in the doctrinal standards adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada, by The Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and by The Methodist Church. We present the accompanying statement as a brief summary of our common faith and commend it to the studious attention of the members and adherents of the negotiating Churches, as in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.³¹ (italics mine)

The theological congruence of the Twenty Articles contrasts significantly with our contemporary lens of postmodernism, but more about that later. It is the official theological position of the United Church of Canada. Its peculiar mix of traditions, with its orthodox foundation, is the bane of preachers in our church – or could be, if we paid it heed.

This “brief summary of our common faith” was not intended to be “a prohibition against honest wrestling with the tradition,” writes John Young, who is responsible for ministry formation at as Professor of Practice of Ministry at Queen’s Theological College in Kingston, Ontario. Our time and context raise questions about situations not anticipated a generation ago.³² We are called to honestly wrestle with our tradition. Yet in this lively tradition, do we pause to examine the “antique”³³ doctrine dusted over with time and convention?

Professor Kilpatrick gives us the genesis of our homiletical challenge:

*Creed revision is the inherent right, and the continual duty, of a living Church. This is our “Confession of Faith.” We are conscious of limitations and inadequacies in the intellectual form of our statement. It will be the duty of those who come after us to find a more fitting intellectual expression for the unchanging and inexhaustible truth of the Gospel. We have sought, humbly and earnestly, to serve our own generation; and now we hand on the result of our toil, with prayer and hope, to the generation following.*³⁴ (italics mine)

³¹ United Church of Canada, *Basis of Union*. Article 2.0.

³² Young, 44.

³³ Roberts *et al*, page 13 above.

³⁴ Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith*, pages 63-64 in Young, 38-39

Our duty then, in this generation following, is to find a more fitting intellectual expression for the unchanging and inexhaustible truth of the Gospel.

Essential Agreement or Creedal Subscription?

The doctrine section was finished. The content of these Twenty Articles, this summary of the Christian faith, would not present further challenge to union, but the use of it would.

Methodists and Presbyterians required subscription to their denominational confessions as a prerequisite to ordination. The Methodists were inclined to inquire carefully into the personal habits of a candidate to ministry such as practices of smoking and drinking liquor: an incarnational sort of inquiry, built upon character. The Presbyterians were less concerned with personal habits but rather an “oath of fealty to the doctrine and courts of the church”. The Congregationalists accepted an examination of theological readiness for ministry, in so much as candidates could articulate the faith of the church as well as their own theological beliefs and religious experiences. They would not, however, require formal subscription.³⁵ The movement of the Spirit must not be limited, they insisted; authentic new expressions of faith could be blocked if ministers were not free to listen to the call of the Spirit. The relatively small Congregationalist contingent almost abandoned the effort when faced with testing the faith of members or clergy.

The Congregational Union of Canada made this resolution in 1907:

...That in the matter of ordination to the Christian ministry, we consider that it will best safeguard the *intellectual integrity of ministers*, and at the same time preserve the Church from formalism, if at the ordination of candidates to the ministry they shall not be compelled to give an absolute subscription to a creed, but, having before them the Doctrinal Statement of the Church, may frankly and in their own language, *indicate their relation thereto*. It shall then remain with the ordaining body to decide as to the acceptance of a candidate, great importance always being attached to his general spirit and character. ³⁶ (emphasis mine)

³⁵ Walsh, 293

³⁶ Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Committees on Church Union” In Report of the Committee on Union with Other Churches” in *The Acts and Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (1908), Appendices*, page 327 in Young, 42.

John Grant intriguingly points out that on the question of creedal adherence they could scarcely have made their point if they had not been able to rally support with the others.³⁷ A leading Methodist advocate of non-subscription, curiously nameless to maintain peace perhaps, wrote:

There must be no ‘must’ as to subscription. There is no place for coercion. It is infamous impropriety to deal with reasoning, thinking ministers or people as children. The pages of human history have been blackened by ‘must’. The thumbscrew, the boot, the fires of Smithfield, are still fresh in our memory. The church has been the greatest sinner in the matter of intolerance. We must crush it now in the interest of *scientific open-mindedness and of Christian charity*.³⁸ (emphasis mine)

After a full year of anxious discourse – and the writing of the Basis of Union only took four years, from ‘04 to ‘08 – the Committee members agreed that the final stage before ordination³⁹ would be the examination of each candidate by the regional Conference Education and Students Committee concerning the doctrinal statements in the Basis of Union:

the Conference shall ... be satisfied that such Candidate is in essential agreement therewith, and as a member of the Order of Ministry of the United Church accepts the statement as being in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.⁴⁰

This “essential agreement” has become an identifying factor in the United Church, a peculiar matter of denominational character. It is significant for two reasons. It affirms Reformation theology and the authority of the Church. It also makes room for honest, articulated theological difference. It is brilliant, both a gift and a dilemma. It has shaped generations of clergy.

A Theologian Called to Reflect Upon Doctrine

In her lecture at the Festival of Homiletics in May 2004, Cynthia Rigby, Professor of Theology at Austin Seminary, addressed a thousand preachers. She stated: “a preacher is a theologian called to reflect upon doctrine.” I began to wonder about theological ambiguity in my sermons, and took up the challenge of a stricter discipline.

³⁷ Grant, 39.

³⁸ E. Lloyd Morrow, *Church Union in Canada: Its History, Motives, Doctrine and Government* (Toronto: Thomas Allen), 1923, 135-6.

³⁹ and admission to ministry from another denomination

⁴⁰ Basis: The Order of Ministry IV II.2, *The Manual*, 32.

Gerald Hobbs, professor *emeritus* of history and church music at the Vancouver School of Theology, prepared an essay "The Nature and Exercise of Authority in The United Church of Canada" which spoke to my question. There is a

widespread belief on the subject of church membership, that one's beliefs are a personal matter, not to be called into question, nor examined, by another. ... Such indifference to doctrinal shibboleths is encouraged in the pew by an ordained ministry that reflects every conceivable shift of theological thought in an age of change. ⁴¹

With regard to essential agreement with the statement of doctrine,

it is an erroneous assumption that the determination of essential agreement is meant to be left to the judgement of the candidate himself. The conclusions of the examining committee in this regard are determinative, and its decision binding. ... Two elements are involved in these questions: the "call" of the ordinand, and his submission to the authority of scripture. ... two differing concepts of call – Presbyterian and Methodist – are in play here; and that these questions must be understood primarily from a Methodist point of view, that is, that the ordinand is asked to affirm before conference his belief in his possession of the call of God. ⁴²

He brings us to our dilemma:

If the UCC is a loosely disciplined church, it has been so by choice. Its latitudinarian spirit, owing something doubtless to the liberalism of the age but more to its Congregational heritage, has held that the benefit of spiritual liberty outweighs the disadvantages conferred by an absence of discipline. ⁴³

How and why do we preach doctrine in a church with a latitudinarian spirit? Awash in theology, how do we avoid being tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of change?

In a growing secular culture with a prevailing notion that the Bible is outdated or irrelevant, we have come far from the theologies that shaped the church. Humankind has made rapid scientific discoveries: disappearing species, expanding universes, and indeed salvation history itself would see some progress, spirit-led, toward a perfection, a perfected world. Yet the cruelty of war and the daily news make us wonder about a depraved human nature. Too rational

⁴¹ R. Gerald Hobbs, "The Nature and Exercise of Authority in the United Church of Canada" in *The Bulletin* (Toronto: The Committee on Archives of the United Church of Canada. No. 22, 1973), 29.

⁴² Hobbs, 30-32

⁴³ Hobbs, 32.

for the mysteries of theology, and overly enamoured with a multi-truthed postmodernism, how do we sit quietly with the minds of old and listen for a word for today? Douglas Hall writes,

...the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity present in our American and Canadian context today are misunderstandings perpetrated and perpetuated by Christian bodies themselves. The ancient, pre-Constantinian apologists had to contend with erroneous conceptions of the faith originating in pagan hearsay and rumor; today's apologists have to deal with simplistic, one-sided, and misleading representations of Christian belief and practice stemming from avowedly *Christian* sources.⁴⁴

Here we are, in a church that expects a lively theological conversation, and expects that from ordained preachers who are in *essential agreement* with the Basis of Union, vetted by a regional Conference committee, and set apart by ordination to freely do so. Here we are, facing a world of new questions with the tools of a dusty heritage. Here we are, awash in theology.

The United Church has articles of faith yet we are not bound to preach them. True to the spirit of the Congregationalists, the purpose of this project is not so much to assert as to engage the doctrines, to let them speak with wonder and uncertainty, in this age. The intention is not so much to prove something against anyone else, but to let the idea play in this great western plain.

From my Parish Project Group comes this point:

If I'm prodding anyone it's the UCC, whose current beliefs seem to be totally at variance with their published doctrine (which includes specific belief in original sin and Christ as the redeemer). It would make sense to me that the current views of the UCC should be preached in context with what they see as outmoded beliefs, and why they are outmoded. Otherwise the current views tend to come across as feel good reassurance that avoids the central and historic questions of Christianity. Catherine's last sermon was very helpful in giving some of that context.⁴⁵

The theologian called to reflect upon doctrine looks to the ancestors in faith for help. Augustine wrote, "There are two things necessary to the treatment of the Scriptures: a way of discovering those things which are to be understood, and *a way of teaching what we have*

⁴⁴ Hall, *Why*, 175.

⁴⁵ Ruth Glancy November 2 08 email to Parish Project Group

learned. We shall speak first of discovery and second of teaching.”⁴⁶ The way of teaching is the way of preaching. The way of preaching is about *meaning*. Richard Lischer writes, “the most important hermeneutical category is not sociological, psychological, or political – but theological.”⁴⁷ This preaching issue runs deep. It runs deep for “preachers who are theologians called to reflect upon doctrine.”

De Profundis: On Going Right Deep Down into Life

At a spellbinding lecture during the ACTS residency in 2008, the Reverend Doctor H. Beecher Hicks, Jr. addressed *Some Challenges and Promises of Contemporary Black Preachers or "The One You Be Calling for in These Last and Evil Days!"* “If there was ever a time God needed a preacher, this is it!” he said. “Preachers need a solid grounding of theology for a church embalmed in theological irrelevancy.”

That is why it matters that we pay attention to doctrine.

Harry Emerson Fosdick published “What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?” in *Harper’s Magazine*, of all places, in 1928. “Preaching is wrestling with individuals over matters of life and death,” he wrote. Life and death! He went on to say that if people aren’t asking for pastoral visits after your sermon, you’re not effective.⁴⁸ The material we choose to preach has to be substance that matters. Like a vast western plain, it has to range across a wide breadth of concerns. Like a breath of wind, it has to bring fresh life.

Fred Buechner wrote four pieces in *The Longing for Home* “aimed particularly at men and women who every Sunday face the task of somehow showing forth from the pulpit that (Faith, Hope, Grace and Jesus) are not just theological ideas but are as real as they, the preachers,

⁴⁶ Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 CE, *On Christian Doctrine* Book One 1:1, italics mine.

⁴⁷ Richard Lischer. *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 57.

⁴⁸ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?” in Mike Graves, editor, *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19.

are real, which it is crucial that they somehow show forth.”⁴⁹ Later in the book he writes, “let them speak of those moments not like essayists or propagandists but like human beings speaking their hearts to their dearest friends who at any point will unerringly know whether they are speaking truth or only parroting it.”⁵⁰

Sermons are not triviality nor entertainment, intellectual exercises nor nicely comforting stories, moralizing nor entitling. “If we want our worship services to reach out to the nonbelieving, we must present the real God in all his (*sic*) fullness and not just a thin layer of generalized spirituality” says Marva Dawn.⁵¹ We must teach people theology. She also says,

This is a critical lesson for preachers. The way we model how to unpack biblical texts, to think about God, to ask better questions, to raise theological issues about social ills, to apply texts to life/world situations, to care for the poor and suffering – in all of these we teach attitudes and habits and actions that listeners can apply to their own biblical study and theologizing and lives.⁵²

Doug Hall, in a chapter enigmatically titled: *De Profundis: On Going “Right Deep Down into Life”*, talks about the writing of theology:

The late English humourist P.G.Wodehouse had the following to say about the writing of novels: “I believe there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right deep down into life and not giving a damn.”

Such a generalization could, with a little adjustment, be applied to the writing of theology.⁵³

This generalization can be applied to the writing of sermons, too. They can go “right deep down into life.” With attentiveness, one can preach *Christian hope* and the *sovereignty of God* at the time of a suicide, and *predestination* to God’s realm by *God’s grace* at a time when people feel entitled to greatness by their own achievements. Going right deep down into life, we can strip the veneer off comfort theology. We can look sin and depravity straight in the eye. We can get

⁴⁹ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1996), 2.

⁵⁰ Buechner, 173.

⁵¹ Dawn, 288.

⁵² Dawn, 238.

⁵³ Hall, *Bound and Free*, 147.

beyond default preaching and find the energies bubbling up out of the ground of our being. Life decisions are made in the deep down places. We can preach solid doctrine with which listeners can go right down deep with confidence that they'll come back up.

Augustine's directive to be about "discovering those things which are to be understood, and *a way of teaching what we have learned*" is work, deep work – digging for treasure, drilling for oil, seeking the energy for the profound depths of life.

As Fosdick intimated, pastoral care is a measure of the effectiveness of sermons. At St. Paul's I have found people listening differently since I began this project. Visiting with Madge and Bill McCallum, they asked, "How is your project coming?" My answer about these interests quickly led to concerns about their family life and the *principles* under it. How do their adult children deal with entitlement and commitment? How do the parents respond? ⁵⁴

The privilege and responsibility of the ministry of preaching is inextricably intertwined with pastoral care. It goes right down deep into life and death, marriage and faithfulness, use of money and mind, service to others and the pleasures of one's own living. Here on the plains of life, amazingly capable, smart and informed people come for pastoral care.

In his article, "What is the Matter with Preaching Today", Fosdick says that the preacher has understood people, their problems, troubles, motives, failures and desires, and in his (*sic*) sermons he has known how to handle their lives so vitally that week after week he has produced real changes. People have habitually come up after the sermon, not to offer some bland compliment, but to say, "How did you know that I was facing that problem only this week?" or "We were discussing that very matter at dinner last night," or, best of all, "I think you would understand my case – may I have a personal interview with you?"

This, I take it, is the final test of a sermon's worth: how many individuals wish to see the preacher alone? ⁵⁵

We go right down deep into life, right where it matters.

⁵⁴ Pastoral visit with Marge and Bill McCallum, Edmonton, April 17 2007.

⁵⁵ Fosdick in Graves, 18.

De profundis is about paying attention and preaching thoroughly. The constant call of preaching can be a trap, a rut of easy theology and preachable popular truths. There'll be trouble: default preaching may sustain listeners and the preacher for a time, but it becomes shallow and predictable. Then indeed there will be trouble, because the preacher herself will get disheartened or jaded. What kind of vocation is that? This project is preventative medicine!

Marva Dawn writes:

Do our sermons nourish believers in foundational doctrines of the faith to equip them to resist heresies and idolatries and 'folk religion,' with its too simplistic formulations of how faith applies to life? William Hendricks, after interviewing people to find out why they left churches, encourages pastors to teach people to think theologically so that they can resist what is essentially 'McDoctrine' – spiritual fast food of proof-texts and clichés that are filling and fattening, but not particularly nourishing.⁵⁶

The *trouble* is the risk of preaching the same – very good and noble – messages all the time. The trouble is leaving aside the rich collection of theology, leaving it on a shelf like the rare collection rooms in the library, and borrowing familiar books over and again. Dust collects. Even though default theology is hopeful, life-affirming and grace-filled, is it enough to sustain people on the journey, when we *pass through the waters, and through the rivers?* (Isaiah 43) It's a long journey, this life, and we need nourishment from the whole Canada's Food Guide, all sides of MyPyramid. The library is huge and we need to wander through all the stacks.

Back to Augustine: "There are two things necessary to the treatment of the Scriptures: a way of discovering those things which are to be understood, and a way of teaching what we have learned." He goes on to say, "This is a great and arduous work, and since it is difficult to sustain, I fear some temerity in undertaking it." He calls on Matthew's gospel, "for to those who have, much will be given" as a way of instructing us to rely on the Holy Spirit in this "great and arduous work" and reminds us that the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is what we can

⁵⁶ William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People Are Leaving the Church*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1993, p.284) in Dawn, 238.

expect! “So that in this task of mine I shall not only suffer no poverty of ideas but shall rejoice in wonderful abundance.”⁵⁷ We shall be fed and in turn offer a meal of plenty. Truth is broad and widely encompassing. Within that breadth is the familiar wisdom that is comfortable. If other truths of our heritage are left out, the breadth narrows and we are left gasping for breath on the open prairie.

The ultimate test is whether sermons turn the hearers into theologians and activists. Do they grapple with texts and teach the people how to question? Do they wrestle with faith and invite the listeners to know that victory is assured? Do they struggle against the world’s pain and challenge believers to create justice? Above all, do they bring us all into God’s presence to hear his (*sic*) Word to us?⁵⁸

This life is replete with stories begging to be told, meaning calling to be made, tears waiting to be shed, laughter bottled up inside. This life is bursting with love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, God’s sovereignty, eschatology, hope and beauty.

John Young laments the CSI approach to preaching. He says *the crime scene investigation* approach presents a problem and wraps it up in an hour: questions of faith are not so easily wrapped up. He believes as I do that we in the United Church of Canada can be more mindful of doctrine. Encouraging preachers to nurture the roots of theological meaning is not a task for Canadians alone: Robert Hughes and Robert Kysar speak of the “doctrinal defoliation” that is happening in many American churches.⁵⁹ Stripped of its leaves, a tree dies.

John and I presented a lecture at our national church worship event. It was called “Shortening the Distance between Podium and Pulpit”.⁶⁰ We tested the interest in preaching doctrine more clearly by offering a doctrine, a biblical passage, a pastoral incident, and the

⁵⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* Book One 1:1

⁵⁸ Dawn, 238.

⁵⁹ Robert Hughes and Robert Kysar, *Preaching Doctrine in the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 1.

⁶⁰ Catherine MacLean and John Young, *Shortening the Distance between the Podium and the Pulpit*, a lecture on preaching the dogma we loved to learn in school, at “Worship Matters”, a United Church of Canada event, London Ontario, June 2007.

outline of a sermon we would preach. We chose doctrines that are not usually identified in United Church pulpits to keep the address engaging. Then we asked: how does this theological concept preach? One of our doctrines was the Sovereignty of God: we connected it to Isaiah 35 and a suicide. A second was depravity: we connected it to Romans 7: 14-25 and a choir director's interest in replacing the word "grace" in *Amazing Grace* with something "less tired".

Our lecture received a standing ovation.

Peers

"Shortening the Distance" addressed the importance of doctrine in preaching. The enthusiastic reception indicated that my concern is not mine alone. I recognize the unavoidably subjective nature of certain aspects of this paper: for instance, the distinct denominational question of essential agreement, the singular congregational base, the contribution of parishioners and my personal reflections. This professional project is a test of a homiletical theory, *faith seeking understanding*, in a particular dilemma. "Ministry is not objective and dispassionate. ... this is my voice, these are my lenses, this is one descriptive account of what is taking place in this particular setting."⁶¹ Having said that, I do find resonance with peers in ministry. "Shortening the Distance" was one such experience. Here are a few others that indicate my concern is part of a larger, dynamic conversation.

Ron Jeffrey recognizes that our homiletical burden goes back to doctrinal questions. Ron is a pastoral minister in Canmore, Alberta. He speaks of congregational members caught in their brokenness, their inability to articulate it theologically, and the regrettable silence from the pulpit: he laments the congregational ethos of a "dispensable spirituality", which is a

⁶¹ William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor Of Ministry Program*. Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000), xi.

community's eagerness to let go of the hard questions for the sake of peace, goodwill or finances. This desire for "peace" silences the pulpit.⁶²

I consulted a number of peers about these questions. I outlined my doctrinal themes for the ACTS sermons, and asked whether these topics had been at play in their preaching in the last six months. I wrote:

I am challenging myself to consider the theological underpinnings to my current preaching and I have a question for you. I hope you would be willing to give me a moment, to consider it. This request is in no way a judgment on you! I want to see how the doctrine I preach weekly fits in with that of my peers.

In the last six months, fourteen preachers in the United Church preached on:

<u>Doctrine</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Depravity	3	11
Sin	12	2
Grace	13	1
Identity	14	0
Discipleship	14	0
Hope	13	1
Eschatology	5	9
Rapture	0	14

Who we are (identity), what we do (discipleship), and what gives us the energy (grace, hope) are pretty popular themes. I was surprised that so many of my peers speak of sin.

Depravity has some air time, too. The last things (eschatology, rapture), however, hold less interest. Curtis Tufts, from Spruce Grove, Alberta, added:

Not too surprisingly I suppose, being (I think) a fairly typical United Church of Canada preacher, depravity, eschatology, and rapture all had to receive "no" votes. It sounds like this challenge you have put yourself to, of considering the theological underpinnings of your preaching, would be a worthwhile exercise for most of us. I'm sure there is a theological underpinning there (!), but it's not often lifted up or consciously or critically thought about or described.⁶³

⁶² Ron Jeffrey, telephone conversation August 28 2008.

⁶³ Curtis Tufts, email correspondence 4 September 2008.

The Doctrines

Father Richard Higgenbotham of the Church of the Ascension in Chicago tells the story of the great theologian Jaroslav Pelikan learning theology as a child. “He began learning it *a posterī*” says Higgenbotham. In order to get sufficient height at the dining table, his father - a Slovak Lutheran pastor - sat him on a thick book of Luther’s writings! We too do theology by the seat of our pants sometimes. ⁶⁴

Seat of our pants theology! *Probably* our default preaching is fine most of the time, but what of the deep teaching we might miss? What of a denomination, a congregation, and a preacher craving a solid, broad foundation? What sermons will build up our minds and spirits in the winds of change, and hold us steady on the shifting sands of superficial ideas?

Over the years of the project, I traced my homiletical themes in six classical doctrines that came out of the life of my congregation. They came from my pastoral work, the outreach of the community, and the activities of the individual members. I experimented with preaching the heritage of faith in bright, engaging sermons.

<u>The readings were</u>	<u>The project year was</u>	<u>The doctrines were</u>
Joseph	1	sin
Joseph	1	sin
Boy Jesus in the Temple	1	hope
Esther	2	identity and discipleship
Beatitudes	2	grace and discipleship
Ezekiel	2	hope
Galatians	3	grace
Daniel	3	eschatology

Remember the introduction to the 1908 Basis of Union?

⁶⁴ Richard Higgenbotham of the Church of the Ascension in Chicago, in a sermon preached Sunday July 1 2007.

We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation. (emphasis mine)

Here is how the sermon events addressed this project:

Sin and Entitlement

It began with sin.

Consider this: in the province of Alberta, oil has brought great prosperity. Government has eliminated its debt. Salaries are high. Workers come from across the country for employment. House prices are skyrocketing. Yet hospitals, schools and child welfare suffer as government holds money back. At our first Parish Project Group meeting, a member asked, “Is it not enough to simply be decent?”⁶⁵ I began to wonder whether ignoring sin and covering up the doctrine of human depravity results in entitlement. Could I preach about this question? I saw my answer as eyes glazed over. Congregational members and colleagues called upon Creation Spirituality, reminding me that we are formed as a blessing. They told me the old doctrine of original sin is indeed old, *old* they said, intoning dead, done, finished.

“Woe to all of us if we stay only in the bright uplands of the Gospels and avoid, like death, avoid like life, the dark ravines, the cave under the hill.” Fred Buechner writes.⁶⁶ This was going to be a challenge. Dusty dry theology, dead as *dust to dust*: could I make it live?

What *does* happens to our Christian living if we ignore the doctrine of sin? We may be made just a little lower than the angels, but we *are still lower* than the angels – we are so remarkably capable, and yet we are merely human. We are capable of so much destruction and creative nastiness. We assume that with enough willpower and money, we can comprehend God’s nature if not even become God-like, rather than respecting the limitations of our own

⁶⁵ Ruth Glancy, Parish Project Group meeting, August 2006.

⁶⁶ Buechner, 179.

nature. The question is: how do I preach sin when people close their ears at the word or assume that I mean something that I don't? How do I go right deep down into life?

When our General Council Committee on Theology and Faith wrote *A Song of Faith*, it took six years, hundreds of reading hours, even more hours in consultation across the church and beyond it to sister churches and multi-faith partners. It took months of writing: we finally locked ourselves in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Winnipeg until we were done. Then we went to the ballet, but that's another story. The final section we wrote was on sin. It was tough slogging. We tore our hair out, argued whether sin is what we do or a predilection to action, and what it means about grace if the latter is true. We were not completely satisfied with the result. Then again, a Statement of Faith is always unfinished, just like our lives, just like our understanding of God. What reassured us was learning that the last group to write a Statement of Faith for the United Church, the group publishing in 1940, didn't finish the sin bit either.⁶⁷ They, too, were divided, undecided, torn apart. They, too, lost hair and sleep over sin.

For 1908, the writers prepared this:

2.5 Article V. Of the Sin of Man.

We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the penalty of which is eternal death; and that, by reason of this disobedience, all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law and that no man can be saved but by His grace.

I figured that we are disciples whose authenticity begins to disintegrate when we forget our human proclivity to sin. I called in Joseph and the PPG and we went to work. One member later summed it up:

I really don't want to come across as our resident Calvinist. My point has just always been that Catherine herself set out to address the question of sin. In the first year, she stated her intention as wanting "the worshippers to consider our inclination to cover up our sin and thereby to diminish our need for God." This was to be addressed in the Joseph sermon, which would also ask the

⁶⁷ Michael Bourgeois, United Church of Canada General Council Committee on Theology and Faith Chair (2000-2006) and Associate Professor of Theology Emmanuel College, Toronto, at a committee meeting spring 2005.

question, does the beginning of the Joseph story "speak to our desire for grace without recognizing our sin?"⁶⁸

We read the story of the sons of Jacob in Genesis for two sermons in this project. One was about Joseph's coat: he flaunted it, and the brothers were jealous. What a wealth of sin, despair, depravity, lying, and cheating: a hotbed! The simple economy of this narrative exposed hatred as the problem. The humanity of the characters was the crucible. Imagine wearing sleeves when ranching and farming require elbow grease! The failings of all the family members became apparent: Joseph flaunts his favourite son status, and the brothers are consumed with jealousy, attempt fratricide and cover up their actions. There is no good guy – bad guy set up. Are any of us free from the disposition to greed, cowardice and apathy? We desire grace without wishing to recognize our sin.

Joseph's economic plans for Pharaoh were brilliant. The PPG did an incarnational translation on the spot.⁶⁹ How would we carry this success into our relationship with brothers or cousins coming west for work? Hockey figured, too: what do you do when your teammate gets all the goals and all the celebrity endorsements? We know that we are amazingly capable, smart and informed. We feel entitled to everything good we have, for we are little lower than the angels. We certainly pride ourselves to think we are more sophisticated than our forbears. Jacob's sons knew a thing about sin - and we can learn from them.

The second sermon came from the death of Jacob, in chapters 47-50, and the response of his sons, Joseph, Reuben and the others. What do we do with the guilt and shame of our sins, of the hurts we have made? As Olive Elofson, a member of the Bible Study group said, "we're so

⁶⁸ Ruth Glancy, Autumn 2008.

⁶⁹ *Incarnational translation* is a method taught by Dow Edgerton and Charlie Cosgrove in Core I of this ACTS program. It involves an imaginative *entering into* the scripture by telling it in a personal, contemporary setting.

human, we're not good all the time.”⁷⁰ Joseph's brothers' carried a thin and bitter chill from their fear, their actions and their sorrow. The tools of poetry, silence and metaphor served this sermon well: how do we account for the radiant grief that shines in our lives? Can we be still in the bright sadness of memory? The freshness, the surprise and the lightheartedness of it caught people's imaginations. I caught them unawares, and found a fresh way into sin.

Modern anthropology, as Charlie Cosgrove pointed out in his remarks to me, impels us to see grace rooted in one another rather than in God.⁷¹ What people are, or even could be, is not the basis for our love and forgiveness. God is. Dawn writes, “Sermons cannot form the character of believers when sin is treated merely as an addiction and redemption is only therapy.”⁷² Rather than working on self-improvement or self-actualization, so popular and effective, we need also to remember Christ's objective work of redemption. Our need for God is not diminished.

The storms of life run hard across our lives. Our ecosystem, our school boards, our sexual relationships, our children's friends: in our daily lives we encounter sin. We would rather not admit that it was there, we would rather resign it to growth, addiction or perspective, but sometimes it's just plain sin. People who seek me out for counseling often recognize it in their spirits. When we fail to address it in preaching, it runs free, unacknowledged. It gets out of control like a prairie hailstorm.

I like it: sin, fresh and clear, saved from our therapeutic self-indulgence, laying open the entitlement we arrogate unto ourselves. I was still worried, though, about easy grace. When we believe - as we should! - that God loves us unconditionally and that we are fundamentally blessed, how easy it is to slide over the depth of grace.

⁷⁰ Olive Elofson, November 2006.

⁷¹ Charles Cosgrove, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, letter of evaluation, October 12 2006.

⁷² Dawn, 210.

Grace

Deb Olmstead said: “I came into the United Church and I heard, to my amazement, that God loves everyone, no strings attached. I heard in sermon, hymn and prayer and the people I met that I am wonderfully made, made in the image of Christ, a divine blessing. I was told I am a blessing. I learned I was good.” What a pleasure to hear those words in a pastoral visit.⁷³

Here’s how the 1908 committee wrote it:

2.6 Article VI. Of the Grace of God.

We believe that God, out of His great love for the world, has given His only begotten Son to be the Saviour of sinners, and in the Gospel freely offers His all-sufficient salvation to all men. We believe also that God, in His own good pleasure, gave to his son a people, an innumerable multitude, chosen in Christ unto holiness, service, and salvation.

Twenty-five years into ministry, I am looking at grace more closely. Where do we find grace rooted? Can I say even more clearly that our nature is not measured from our own energies, but from the sovereignty of God? Grace without an understanding of sin leaves us open to entitlement. Do I preach an easy grace, a love of God that I take for granted? Richard Lischer writes “... ritualized practices establish a pattern for distinctively Christian behavior in the world.”⁷⁴ Preaching grace is only a part of it of course. Worship, the sacraments, pastoral care, outreach: the habits we learn at church flow over into our daily living and change the world.

I preached two sermons in this project *intentionally* on grace. It keeps popping up: Cynthia Rigby said in her Festival of Homiletics lecture, that many of us probably do preach on grace unintentionally, and that’s a good thing. Marva Dawn warns, though:

If people are introduced to a Christianity composed only of happiness and good feelings, where will the staying power be when chronic illness, family instability, or long-term unemployment threaten? If worship is only fun, how will those attracted to such worship have enough commitment to work on the conflicts that inevitably develop because all of us in the Church are sinful human beings?”⁷⁵

⁷³ Deb Olmstead, pastoral visit, January 2007.

⁷⁴ Lischer, 151.

⁷⁵ Dawn, 280.

Indeed happiness, good feelings and fun are my dilemma! We have the second century wisdom of the apologist Irenaeus: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Furthermore, *I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.* Is the skeptical preacher in Ecclesiastes simply accruing to us the right to pleasure and happiness? I exhibit a great deal of joy in faith; I fear, however, that a vulnerable person might confuse my solemn joy with naïveté or shallow thinking. Worse yet, the privilege in which we live becomes an entitlement that inflates our human limitations into the comprehensiveness of God.

I preached the first grace sermon from the Beatitudes, namely: “Blessed are the peacemakers”. I offered apologetics in five incidents, to evoke grace in hard times:

Helen Catherine Moase, my mother, who responded to World War II by going to Japan to meet the enemy and returned with friendship;
A goth teenager who guided a small child lost at school to a familiar place;
A congregational member who cannot bear being hugged and whose story calls us to become peacemakers in our Affirming Congregation identity;
Busy households where peace and quiet seem an illusion or worse yet, a lie, even though we pray for deep peace in our souls;
The murder of a police officer in the Arctic and our reactions.

It was my intention to do as Fred Buechner taught us in seminary classes and as he later wrote about preachers’ personal experiences:

Or if for some reason they shy away from preaching *about* those moments – either because they seem too precious or perhaps too threadbare and elusive to tell – then at least let them preach *out of* them because not to speak from the heart of where their faith comes from is to risk never really touching the hearts of those of us who so hungrily listen.⁷⁶

In a subsequent sermon I focused my thoughts on prevenient grace. Augustine speaks God’s grace “going ahead” (*preveniens*) which is to say grace is active before we are aware of it. The challenge for me was to avoid an entitled perspective that lets us off the hook for

⁷⁶ Buechner class Harvard Divinity School 1981, and *Home*, 177.

discipleship. I also wanted to avoid works righteousness; in a congregation that is active to the extent that St. Paul's is, works righteousness is a shadowy presence. A PPG member commented that when we act with God's grace ourselves sometimes we feel like a doormat.⁷⁷

Moralism, too, is a danger. Tillich warned that unfortunately, "The teachings of Jesus are offered as centering in and confirming his moral commandments. ... They have lost the essence of what the gospel originally meant – the good news that a new reality is present, which gives before it demands, which accepts before it transforms."⁷⁸

We were working with Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." I used the new book, *Good to Go* which is a pointed and humorous guide to adulthood for young people – and those of us who live with them. Somehow the long-standing metaphor of the parent seemed fresher, less tired and more appealing in this way. *Good to Go: A Practical Guide to Adulthood* deals with winter driving, ear wax, zero percentage financing, sexual health, turkey roasting and what to wear to an Islamic funeral – these things do make for good reading! It seemed a timely segue from the nuts and bolts of our living to the philosophy behind it. And what a title! "Good to go": not only the kind of affirmation casually given by a grocery clerk, but a theological statement.

"Nothing gives us more trouble than the unmerited grace of God."⁷⁹ We cannot earn grace, neither ought we take it as license for laxity, nor do we have authority to say who merits that grace or how. That is the dilemma. We get to keep going, to be *good to go*, not burdened

⁷⁷ Frank Robinson, PPG member, September 15, 2008.

⁷⁸ Tillich, 17.

⁷⁹ From "God is Not Practical", a sermon preached by the Rev. Kelly Brill for the ACTS DMin in Preaching Program, summer 2008 and Avon Lake United Church of Christ, 13 July 2008.

with our mistakes. We can trust God to carry us on: *Before the hills in order stood or earth received her frame, God saw that it was very good.*

Grace is my default theology. I know that now.

Now On to Other Doctrine

My dilemma with default theology took me beyond sin and grace. It has to do with “ascertaining the proper meaning, and the mode of making known the meaning when it is ascertained.” (Augustine) It has to do with preaching *Christian hope* and the *sovereignty of God* at the time of a suicide, and speaking of *predestination* to God’s realm by *God’s grace* at a time when people feel entitled to lord their achievements over others. It has to do with “going right deep down into life.”

Hope

In paying attention to the doctrine I was preaching, I discovered that hope sprang eternal. It made sense to figure out what that meant in this project. Is it a default theology? If so, what exactly am I saying? Doug Hall writes with some sarcasm about the excitement when the English translation of Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* arrived in North America in 1967. “Here was another splendid religious motto, made in Germany and therefore undoubtedly deep. We could easily adapt it to our very hope-affirming, nay, our hope-demanding North American society.” It was difficult to read, so many celebrated an obvious meaning from the title alone. “The slogan was enough!” Moltmann, however, was writing about Hope coming to us from God’s future. Hope moves us beyond our past, our performance, our “works”, our history.⁸⁰

Intriguingly I discovered that *hope*, which was the foundation of our 2006 document, doesn’t appear as an article in our Basis of Union. Times have changed. Our task was to write a

⁸⁰ Hall, *Bound and Free*, 55-6.

“timely and contextual” document. We came toward the crying despair we discerned in our contemporary time with the word “hope” six times. It occurs only once in each of the Basis of Union, Statement of Faith and Common Creed. Article 2.3 comes the closest:

2.3 Article III. Of the Divine Purpose.

We believe that the eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that, while the freedom of man is not taken away, nor is God the author of sin, yet in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfilment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His glory.

I chose two decidedly *not* “hope-demanding” passages to work from: one was the boy Jesus in the Temple, the other was Ezekiel.

Luke 2: 41-52 is the only story we have of Jesus as an older child or an adolescent. He stays behind in Jerusalem; he is lost to his parents. I addressed loss. When we get lost, God’s grace still holds us. I expressed the sovereignty of God and Christian hope in phrases such as: “God’s call is not always the easy thing”, “We can find him”, “Moreover Jesus is searching for *us*”, “Jesus is exactly where he is supposed to be - which is to say with us.”

A suicide had happened in the community. Sometimes we don’t get found; sometimes we lose people who are dear to us. Fred Buechner writes to preachers in an essay about hope, “If preachers are going to talk about hope, let them talk as honestly as Saint Paul did about hopelessness. Let them acknowledge the darkness and pitiableness of the human condition, including their own condition, into which hope brings a glimmer of light.”⁸¹ Loss and sorrow bring us to a poignant hope that is deep, not merely an optimistic response to our hope-demanding culture. Faithful pastoral care requires us to preach this.

Shortly before his death, Barth said in a radio broadcast: “My whole theology, you see, is fundamentally a theology for parsons. It grew out of my own situation when I had to teach and preach and counsel a little.” ... He never got beyond his pastoral origins. His ministry began as a

⁸¹ Buechner, 173.

preacher, as a pastor at Safenwil, where he laboured for ten rather frustrating years. His work was born out of the homiletical question: How is preaching possible? ⁸²

Barth is good company. This is *faith seeking understanding*. It is dogmatic preaching. It is a pretty fine default! Faced with a stunning pastoral circumstance, what do I preach? Sovereignty of God, grace, Christian hope.

In the second sermon event, chariots descended and angels were coming after us. Wheels were within wheels. Visions, empire and exile dominated the scripture. We leaned into the angels and were transported with Ezekiel by the chariot and paused at the valley of the dry bones. Our hearts of stone were turned back to flesh. We sang like we'd never sing again: *Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Ezekiel Saw a Wheel*. This sermon was part of St. Paul's congregational theme *Love without Borders: That We May Know Each Other*. The annual theme offered a year of studying the doctrines of identity, discipleship and grace. Ezekiel rails at the people to get it together. His word to them is "obedience." In terms of *faith seeking understanding*, I expected to preach a doctrine of discipleship, of following the ways of God and being *called to respond* by making a difference in the world.

I tested that assumption: is that the truth Ezekiel offers us? What came through was a doctrine of hope. I was surprised. Joseph Blenkinsopp and the other biblical commentators were right: through us all moves *Ruah*, "the spirit activated through prophetic preaching which bonds the community together and gives it the will to live and accept its future." ⁸³ Ezekiel is a book of hope! What I learned was that the impossibly hard times which fell upon Ezekiel ring true for many people in the here-and-now. Faith-filled hope, not mere optimism, lives and - in that fabulous scene - puts breath back in a valley of dry bones.

⁸² William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 143.

⁸³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 173.

Walter Brueggemann connects hope and prophecy: the “artistic speech voiced in the prophetic construal of the Bible is the primary trust of the church and its preaching. This speech, entrusted to and practiced by the church, is an act of relentless hope ...”⁸⁴

When God calls, we are expected to answer. When we call upon God, we trust that God responds. This is our hope. In the early chapters of Ezekiel, call and response are major themes. Chariots, dry bones: the prophet is called and in turn calls the people. Ezekiel responds. God, too, responds: God determines to change the people’s hearts of stone back to flesh. Then they will be people of God, again: response. The children and I set up a vivid demonstration of call and response: a playground game called Marco Polo. The appointed It calls “Marco!” and expects the response: “Polo!” Blindfolded, I called “Marco!” The response “Polo!” gave away their location. Always, the spoken response leads It home.

Faith-filled hope, not mere optimism, shines through like the sun scattering winter clouds, illuminating the whole landscape before us.

Christian Identity

For a congregation that had decided to become an Affirming Congregation within the United Church of Canada, the issue of Christian identity is significant. St. Paul’s had just voted on issues of sexual orientation. *We reach out with love and acceptance to all those who come through our doors regardless of sexual orientation, age, gender, racial or ethnic background, differing abilities, economic or cultural background. As a community of faith, we strive to make St. Paul’s United Church a safe place for all and a voice for social justice.*⁸⁵ It is not simply about what we *do*, but about who we *are*. It is also about who *God is*. Our current theme was “Love without Borders: that We May Know Each Other”.

⁸⁴ Brueggemann, 7.

⁸⁵ St. Paul’s United Church *Statement of Affirmation*, adopted winter 2007.

2.11 Article XI. Of Justification and Sonship.

We believe that God, on the sole ground of the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Christ, pardons those who by faith receive Him as their Saviour and Lord, accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the adoption of sons, with a right to all privileges therein implied, including a conscious assurance of their sonship.

Esther is part of a minority people under threat. She uncovers her identity, removing the costume of empire and harem. We read the story of Esther, Mordecai and Haman with the noisy cheers and hissing that accompany it during Purim. “Artfulness” perhaps: certainly I was working to make “the public reading of scripture an act of proclamation.”⁸⁶ We read Psalm 139: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.” I let the Esther story illustrate that “you knit me together” and even “if I take the ... wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me ...” (Psalm 139: 13, 9-10) The Jerusalem Bible translation reads more vividly than other translations. I read from a stool, not the pulpit, as a means of showing – not merely saying - that Esther is a unique book. “How you tell the story changes how you live it,” the PPG reminded me. *Veritas pateat, veritas placeat, veritas moveat*, “make the truth plain, make it pleasing, make it moving,” Augustine wrote.⁸⁷ It was readily understood, fun and poignant.

In the sermon I used questions as a rhetorical tool: “Who are you really? Who are we really? Who are we who move upon the face of this marvelous, created earth – together – really?” I used the image of costumes to catch imaginations and to look beyond our surface into our existential identity. Costumes hide who we are *and* can express something of who we would like to be. We believe we are essentially created in God's image. We belong to God, never needing to worry that we are outside God's love and agency.

⁸⁶ Notes from *Preaching as Performance* class with Claire Nolan and John Dally.

⁸⁷ Augustine quoted in Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching Without Notes*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, 33.

If we forget to preach this doctrine, we forget who we are. We miss times for action. “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have *come to royal dignity* for just such a time as this.” (Esther 4: 14, emphasis mine) Royal dignity, “sonship”, children of God, identity: it is not simply about what we *do*, but about who we *are*.

Discipleship

Part of not taking our theology for granted means articulating things we do indeed take for granted! In an active *doing* church, we infer meaning from action and understanding from experience. I wanted to clarify that.

2.20 Article XX. Of Christian Service and the Final Triumph.

We believe that it is our duty, as disciples and servants of Christ, to further the extension of His Kingdom, to do good unto all men, to maintain the public and private worship of God, to hallow the Lord's Day, to preserve the inviolability of marriage and the sanctity of the family, to uphold the just authority of the State, and so to live in all honesty, purity, and charity, that our lives shall testify of Christ. We joyfully receive the word of Christ, bidding His people go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, declaring unto them that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, and that He will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We confidently believe that by His power and grace all His enemies shall finally be overcome, and the kingdoms of this world be made the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

Although it is my discipline in this project to focus on a doctrine, I am well aware that life is not static and one doctrine leads to another. When Esther uncovers her identity, removing the costume of empire and harem, and she makes a difference. This action *because of her identity* is discipleship. From this discipleship comes the charity that is part of the Purim celebration.

The sermon on the Beatitudes was another opportunity. It was Remembrance Day, a national armistice commemoration. “Blessed are the peacemakers” was the lection.

Peacemaking is an overwhelming task. This week it seemed especially bleak: Canadians witnessed our government unable to determine a popular timeline for maintaining our peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan; a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer was killed in a

normally quiet Arctic hamlet, which incidentally I had visited when my brother-in-law held that very position; the city began winter attempts to warm the homeless; oddly enough, the dry weather void of snow caught people off-guard and affected moods, both a despair about global warming and a circadian response to missing the snow that intensifies the dimming winter light. These things were all too easy to identify.

One way to tackle the dilemma of preaching as bad news is to limit the badness we try to deal with on any particular day. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, said our Lord, and sufficient to most Sundays is careful, thoughtful attention to one issue that tests the faithfulness of our people.⁸⁸

“Blessed are the peacemakers” carries our hope into the wide, wide world where there is a crying need ... and we disciples make peace.

The Last Things, the End Times: Eschatology and Rapture

Two-headed calves really do happen. When 100,000 chickens are bred at a time there is always one missing an upper beak.⁸⁹ Odd things, the signs of apocalyptic literature, appear in the real world. Daniel is the only apocalyptic book in the Old Testament. Its images are vivid and the stories of lions and fiery furnaces are memorable. As part of a series on Daniel, I chose to work with his dreams and visions for this project.

*I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another....
As I watched, thrones were set in place,
and an **Ancient One** (the Ancient of Days) took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. (Daniel 7: 2,9)*

While sin may have been a bit of a stretch for a United Church minister, eschatology was really shooting for the moon. In our church we live with a realized eschatology, yet our

⁸⁸ David L. Bartlett, “Showing Mercy” in Graves, 27.

⁸⁹ Frank Robinson, Associate Dean (Academic) and Professor, Poultry Production and Physiology, Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Alberta and PPG member, October 2008.

culture keeps the apocalyptic question alive for us. Loss of species from our ecosystem, war, popular books and a general sense of hopelessness bring questions of the last things to light.

I wanted to preach about the end times because they are part of our tradition. Here it is from the Basis of Union:

2.19 Article XIX. Of the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the Future Life.

We believe that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust, through the power of the Son of God, who shall come to judge the living and the dead; that the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into life eternal.

Few in our congregational are anxious about end times. Those two reasons may be sufficient to preach on eschatology, but hardly compelling. “Teaching for the sake of knowledge,” Craig Satterlee warns, can explain scripture or doctrine but may not necessarily connect to contemporary life⁹⁰. Indeed, that would be dull. The best reason to preach it is that it is in the culture, and we can say “Yes, I have thought about this,” to a neighbour who wonders about how our church looks at apocalypse. “God dwells with us in the here and now. God cares about our crises and we are called by earth and sky and by every created thing to do what we can, rather than wait for intervention from somebody who lives elsewhere,” I said. It is a difficult doctrine – although certainly not dull!

Cynthia Campbell graciously lent me an audiotape in which she addressed eschatology as popularly seen in the “Left Behind” series. She lectured at the Chautauqua Institution in 2001.⁹¹ From her work I focused on two points. The most pertinent is that *God is with us and makes our home with us* rather than dropping in from elsewhere. The problem is living *as though* God did not live here; as though we are separate from God’s spirit. “I don’t believe that” I said, “and from visiting with many of you, I know you don’t either.”

⁹⁰ Craig A. Satterlee. *When God Speaks Through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), 102.

⁹¹ Cynthia M. Campbell, *What’s Next?* audio tape. Chautauqua, New York: Chautauqua Institution, summer 2001.

Rapture followed: it is a small step in one's imagination from Daniel's images to the destructive cleansing of the world. We rarely read this material, and its unfamiliarity makes it vivid. So I addressed it with Professor Campbell's wisdom: *We love this world, and we believe God does*. I interrupted myself as a contrivance, and called attention to how we speak about a second coming. We pray *thy kingdom come*, yet we do not believe we will be the only ones to benefit by the coming of God's kingdom. I let my voice break intentionally as I spoke of an understanding that God would open a book to read who among us would pass and who would fail, that God would let anybody *go* or would leave anybody behind: *that breaks my heart*, I said. "I don't believe that" I repeated, "and from visiting with many of you, I know you don't either."

I'm not sure when I have had as much fun planning and leading worship!

On a personal note I was satisfied that I stretched myself beyond grace and hope. How might I ascertain whether that made significant impact for the listeners?

Conclusion of the Six Doctrines

As a tool to elicit this information in the second and third year of the project, the PPG and I prepared sermon summary sheets, asking people to identify the doctrine in the sermon. They are recorded in Appendix Two. We asked for brief summaries in the form of a finish-the-sentence exercise: *The spiritual truth I take from worship today is: _____*. Would people tell us something I preached that could be identified as *problems, troubles, motives, failures and desires*⁹² that connected with the doctrine of the day? My hope was that this exercise would be a spiritual tool for personal discernment, as well as a helpful evaluation for me, so I framed it in spiritual language, rather than in evaluative language. I was also concerned that the process might disrupt the worship experience. Jana Childers writes, "A theatre critic's bottom line has to

⁹² Fosdick, 18.

do with what the playwright, director, crew, and actors achieve; but if there were such creatures as ‘worship critics,’ they would care only about what happens to the congregants.”⁹³ Each time, the PPG and I were pleased to see that most people articulated the theology in their own way.

In the eight sermons I preached for the ACTS program, I intentionally considered each doctrinal theme. I am satisfied that I am not preaching a default theology, but rather enlivening an understanding of doctrine in a United Church.

It takes most of us preachers a number of years before we feel that we have found our “voice” in the pulpit, before we have confidence in ourselves and in our own way of speaking that enables us to claim our gifts as preachers. Constant involvement with the biblical text and the congregational context becomes the catalyst whereby the gospel strikes fire in our hearts, whereby we receive a message that needs to be given, and thereby we find the means to deliver the message. When a message grips the heart and mind of the messenger, that messenger will find the means to speak it.⁹⁴

Twenty-five years into gospel fire, I looked at the message again. Where do we find grace rooted? Do my sermons say clearly that our identity is not measured from our own energies, but from the sovereignty of God? We seem to live and move and have our being from a place of privilege. This sense of entitlement inflates our human self-understanding; we need to be reminded of the comprehensiveness of God. Our practice of preaching needs to be attentive to *faith seeking understanding*.

Faith Seeking Understanding

The key to figuring it out was a class with David Bartlett. He taught *Apologetic Preaching*, which is making a case for the Christian faith. Apologetic Preaching speaks to *understanding seeking faith*.

Professor Bartlett offered Acts 17 as the biblical model for apologetic preaching. Paul speaks: “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Paul does not

⁹³ Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 123-4.

⁹⁴ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 155.

presuppose belief but supposes interest; he starts with their experience and their own literature and persuades them into faith. The purpose of apologetic preaching is to persuade. They respond to his sermon: “we will hear more about this matter.” He was winning them over. Said Professor Bartlett: “We too, of course, bring people to faith - but over the course of time, not in one day!”

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Doug Hall calls his book *Why Christian* an exercise in Christian apologetics. It “aims to clear away misunderstandings of Christian faith current in its context, and establish points of common concern between the Christian message and the human situation.”⁹⁶ He subtitled the book “For Those on the Edge of Faith”.

The other way round, though, it is *faith seeking understanding*. It is interpreting Christian faith through doctrine. The class in Apologetic Preaching helped me define what I mean by “preaching doctrine”. *The difference is that of offering Christianity to a seeking community (Apologetic Preaching) and that of teaching it in a community of believers (Dogmatic Preaching)*.⁹⁷ Dogmatic Preaching is not stubborn-headedness! It is interpreting Christian faith through doctrine. Doug Hall writes:

The Reformation’s *sole fide* is thus not a statement about Christian acceptance of religious “truths” in the absence of any clear proof. Rather, it is a statement about the centrality of an existential trust in God that is made in the full awareness of an ongoing temptation to existential distrust: “I believe, (Lord), help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24 RSV).⁹⁸

The core members of St. Paul’s congregation are believers who are interested in deepening their personal and corporate faith. The outreach, study groups, youth programming and discernments are *minds seeking spirit*. “Most people have something of the believer and the unbeliever in them,” says Professor Bartlett, “most people are in different places different

⁹⁵ Class notes, *Apologetic Preaching*, June 29 2007.

⁹⁶ Hall, *Why*, 175.

⁹⁷ Bartlett class notes, italics mine.

⁹⁸ Hall, *Bound and Free*, 117.

days.”⁹⁹ Keeping the old words and helping people understand them is the method he chooses. In his estimation, so does Barbara Brown Taylor:

Gradually I remembered what I had known all along, that church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God’s presence in this world. By offering people a place where they may engage the steady practice of listening to divine words and celebrating divine sacraments, church can help people gain a feel for how God shows up – not only in Holy Bibles and Holy Communion but also in near neighbours, mysterious strangers, sliced bread and grocery store wine. That way, when they leave church, they no more leave God than God leaves them. They simply carry what they have learned into the wide, wide world, where there is a crying need for people who will recognize the holiness in things and hold them up to God.¹⁰⁰

Clarity in preaching gives listeners something solid to work from as they contemplate their *faith seeking understanding*. In being clear, we respect our responsibility to hearers of the gospel. Doctrine can lead us to think, rather than telling us what to think. Anna Carter Florence gives me courage: “Our authority as preachers doesn’t come from having answers or making sense. It doesn’t come from being *right* about a text; it comes from being *true* to it.”¹⁰¹ Preaching beyond a default theology in a functionally non-confessing church is offering sermons that are well-grounded, broadly-based in solid theology, and engaging to provoke thought and action.

Andy Stewart, a member of the congregation, said to me, “Catherine, you wear your heart on your sleeve. Don’t lose that.” Preaching with my heart on my sleeve: paying attention, giving people thoughtful theological sermons, speaking with passion. Augustine, the early teacher of Christian homiletics, quoted Cicero: “a certain eloquent man said, and said truly, that he who is eloquent should speak in such a way that he teaches, delights and moves.” (*docere, delectare, flectere*) “Then he (Cicero) added, “To teach is a necessity, to please is a sweetness, to persuade

⁹⁹ Bartlett class notes.

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco: 2006), 165-166.

¹⁰¹ Anna Carter Florence, “Put Away Your Sword” in Mike Graves, 103.

is a victory.”¹⁰² The preacher “should seek to teach, to please and to persuade.” She can preach with her heart on her sleeve.

A Nod to Postmodernism

Any discussion of truth at the opening of the twenty-first century would be incomplete without considering postmodernism. We live in a postmodern context, and most of us both welcome and resist it. “By postmodernism, we mean that people lack the kind of faith they had in science a generation ago, look more to unmediated experience than rational thought to give meaning to their lives, and doubt that one single metanarrative can explain the world.”¹⁰³ Postmodernism honours our pluralism, respecting the integrity of each person and community. It recognizes that our social location (our race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical abilities, education) shapes our perception of reality. It challenges tradition and privilege. It learns from the past.¹⁰⁴

Postmodernism is more than gentle accepting of the Other. It comes partly from an incremental understanding of the limitations of the Enlightenment: despite our increasing illumination through the sophistication of reason and science, humankind has not been able to categorically and universally claim the answer to ultimate questions or solve all our problems.

This study of preaching doctrine calls for two particular reflections in that regard. What is theological congruence in the presence of *relative truths*? Is remembering articles of faith from another time and context *cross-generational conversation*?

My first reflection has to do with relative truth and “theological congruence.” John Young writes in *Sacred Cow or White Elephant? The Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union*,

¹⁰² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* Book Four, XII 27.

¹⁰³ Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish* in Satterlee, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ronald J. Allen in O. Wesley Allen Jr., viii.

“members of the Doctrine subcommittee, and other advocates of union, often alluded to the commonly held view of theological congruence, and this reality certainly helped the committee accomplish its task with an ease that now astonishes.”¹⁰⁵ Does this theological congruence speak to postmodernism? Does the flexible nature of essential agreement make postmodernism more palatable to United Church preachers?

The critical thing to remember is that church union was “*to be a sharing of treasure ... for the more effective penetration of national life by the gospel.*”¹⁰⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, when the Fathers of Confederation coined a term for their new country, they used the biblical term “dominion”. In Psalm 72: 8 and Zechariah 9:10, they found: “his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” Canada was to become the Lord’s dominion and a model to the world. The architects of Church Union, a brief few years later, did *not* have a relativist vision in mind, but a Christian one. A century later, our questions are about our place in the midst of faiths in dialogue and truths in competition. To the architects of union, there was no competition.

My second reflection brings us back to the cross-generational conversation. The postmodern ethos offers “a willingness to converse with voices from the past in the hope of encountering wisdom to help us make our way through pluralism and relativity.”¹⁰⁷ This *cross-generational conversation* is essential to dusting off the doctrine.

Christianity offers mysticism to the postmodern mind. Peter Rollins is a cogent and engaging spokesperson for something that has come to be called the Emergent Church. He explores the relationship between mysticism and post-modern thought in a worshipping

¹⁰⁵ Young, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Grant, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Allen *ibid.*

community called *Ikon* in Belfast. He cites the ritual practice of worship as the connection. “The territory I thought I was helping to chart was actually discovered a long time ago by my ancestors. It is both frustrating and comforting that no matter how fast I run, those who have long since died have already arrived at where I am attempting to go.”¹⁰⁸ In a generation when we are yearning for worship that transforms us and the world, when we are seeking inspiration and living faith, he reminds us that *this old answer works*: our deep love of God gives rise to compassion, acceptance, even love for one another. “I see real hope for a robust, challenging and inspirational form of Christianity, one with *roots in the past*, a sensitivity to the present, and a vision for the future.” *Ikon* offers an experience of mysticism. “Mystery can overcome difference,” Rollins writes.¹⁰⁹ Difference is a cornerstone of postmodernism. Mystery that calls out of our heritage connects us, hand over hand, with the people who went before us.

This *cross-generational conversation* stimulates the preaching imagination. There is merit in looking at the old ways and finding vivid expression in a new day. Old stories bring a mystical voice to contemporary conversation. Joseph and his brothers, Esther and Mordecai, Ezekiel and Daniel and their flaming visions all speak to the postmodern imagination. Preaching dogma pulls back layer after layer of truth: sin, identity, the last things, grace, hope.

Our congregations are largely postmodern. In United Churches, progressive Christians engage the religious right. Traditionalists, theological liberals and literalists, classical evangelicals, mystics, feminists, eco-feminists and green Christians sit together in our pews and choirs and balconies. We have all kinds of ways of naming our various religious values, *and* we intend to create an inclusive and transformative Christianity. Dusting those pews for a heritage brings commonality to light. Digging into the articulated faith of the past gives us a collective

¹⁰⁸ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006, xv.

¹⁰⁹ Rollins, iv, italics mine.

question to explore. This motley crew, this gathering of mixed minds, this worshipping community of faith connects and relates. Anna Carter Florence says, “After all our fussing about lack of certitude and finitude, it turns out postmodernism is actually the climate we are best suited to, and maybe even the climate that best reflects Christianity itself!”¹¹⁰

Preaching to post-modernists is not only a dilemma but an acknowledgment of a heritage. It is not merely a lingering heritage but a living faith. O. Wesley Allen writes,

The tasks of the postmodern preacher are to help congregations *re-member* – in other words to recall and to piece together again – the *presence of God (emphasis mine)* in their lives, participate in the struggle to name *how* God is present in any given moment, and determine the significance of the experienced divine presence to their understanding of God, self and the world. ... in other words, the preacher who points to God’s omniscience is inviting those who have gathered to worship to make meaning, indeed to make ultimate meaning, of their lives and their world.”¹¹¹

This is not for the faint of heart. Glennis Munro, a member of the congregation in Yellowknife, said to me after worship one winter day in 1991: “Meaning? I hardly have time to get breakfast and boots in the morning!”

Faith Seeking Understanding, Again

This project concerns the content of sermons. It is about paying attention and preaching thoroughly. The people who graciously listen to my sermons week after week do not need categorical answers. They are *thinkers*, and postmodern thinkers at that. The theological clarity I can offer honours their God-given intellect; it is my responsibility to deepen possibilities for hearers of the gospel. A regular in the pew, Bichu Fras said, “Every time I walk out of worship I’ve learned something.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Anna Carter Florence. *Preaching as Testimony*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, 65.

¹¹¹ O. Wesley Allen, 45.

¹¹² Bichu Fras, St. Paul’s United Church, autumn 2008.

Graham Standish writes in *Humble Leadership*: “Beliefs righteousness is the subtle and seductive idea that the purity of our beliefs can save us.”¹¹³ I do not seek to present purity of belief but rather to engage listeners with a fullness of doctrinal conversation, for the United Church is awash in theology. Like the deep reserves of oil under the dry prairie ground, it runs freely. Good preaching taps it and brings it, useful, to the surface. Preachers are leaders. “We live in divisive times, but as leaders we are called to rise above this division and truly to become uniters, not dividers, for *humble leadership is unifying leadership*. Unifying leaders lead people to seek a common good that is rooted in God’s good.”¹¹⁴

Back on the Ground

The working title for this paper was “Depravity, Sin, the Rapture and Other Things I Forgot to Preach”. Forgetting, though, was not strictly the issue; neglect is more truthful. My purpose was to enliven the understanding of doctrine through regular Sunday preaching. Bearing in mind that default preaching leaves out a range of human understanding, I looked through layers of tradition, seeking other ways the holy has been known to move. We are awash in theology.

I imposed a discipline on my preaching practice. Dusting off articles of theology that were buried in tradition, I discovered necessary truths. I found life: sin, grace, hope, identity, discipleship, eschatology.

A paleontologist digs patiently, labouriously, through rocky layers deposited by time and climate. She finds tiny marine fish and giant aquatic reptiles imbedded in the rocks. These great

¹¹³ N. Graham Standish, *Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God’s Guidance and Grace* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2007), 99.

¹¹⁴ Standish, 92.

western plains across the Midwest to the Rockies reveal an ancient sea, the face of the deep. We sift this buried treasure.

Take a shell away from the ocean: sometimes it carries an echo of the tide. Pick a white stone from the beach: often the taste of the salty sea stays on a smooth piece of quartz for years. Let the ocean recede and drain away into time. Buried deep in the recesses are stony memories, fossilized life. Dig it out and dust it off: in the echo, there is still a story left to tell.

APPENDIX I

The Basis Of Union, Doctrine Section

2.0

We, the representatives of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational branches of the Church of Christ in Canada, do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us. In doing so, we build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation, as set forth in common in the doctrinal standards adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada, by The Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and by The Methodist Church. We present the accompanying statement as a brief summary of our common faith and commend it to the studious attention of the members and adherents of the negotiating Churches, as in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

2.1 Article I. Of God.

We believe in the one only living and true God, a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being and perfections; the Lord Almighty, who is love, most just in all His ways, most glorious in holiness, unsearchable in wisdom, plenteous in mercy, full of compassion, and abundant in goodness and truth. We worship Him in the unity of the Godhead and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons of the same substance, equal in power and glory.

2.2 Article II. Of Revelation.

We believe that God has revealed Himself in nature, in history, and in the heart of man; that He has been graciously pleased to make clearer revelation of Himself to men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; and that in the fullness of time He has perfectly revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person. We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God's gracious revelations, and as the sure witness of Christ.

2.3 Article III. Of the Divine Purpose.

We believe that the eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that, while the freedom of man is not taken away, nor is God the author of sin, yet in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfilment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His glory.

2.4 Article IV. Of Creation and Providence.

We believe that God is the creator, upholder and governor of all things; that He is above all His works and in them all; and that He made man in His own image, meet for fellowship with Him, free and able to choose between good and evil and responsible to his Maker and Lord.

2.5 Article V. Of the Sin of Man.

We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the penalty of which is eternal death; and that, by reason of this disobedience, all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law and that no man can be saved but by His grace.

2.6 Article VI. Of the Grace of God.

We believe that God, out of His great love for the world, has given His only begotten Son to be the Saviour of sinners, and in the Gospel freely offers His all-sufficient salvation to all men. We believe also that God, in His own good pleasure, gave to his son a people, an innumerable multitude, chosen in Christ unto holiness, service, and salvation.

2.7 Article VII. Of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe in and confess the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man, who, being the Eternal Son of God, for us men and for our salvation became truly man, being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, yet without sin. Unto us He has revealed the Father, by His word and Spirit, making known the perfect will of God. For our redemption, He fulfilled all righteousness, offered Himself a perfect sacrifice on the Cross, satisfied Divine justice, and made propitiation for the sins of the whole world. He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven, where He ever intercedes for us. In the hearts of believers He abides forever as the indwelling Christ; above us and over us all He rules; wherefore, unto Him we render love, obedience, and adoration as our Prophet, Priest, and King.

2.8 Article VIII. Of the Holy Spirit.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who moves upon the hearts of men to restrain them from evil and to incite them unto good, and whom the Father is ever willing to give unto all who ask Him. We believe that He has spoken by holy men of God in making known His truth to men for their salvation; that, through our exalted Saviour, He was sent forth in power to convict the world of sin, to enlighten men's minds in the knowledge of Christ, and to persuade and enable them to obey the call of the Gospel; and that He abides with the Church, dwelling in every believer as the spirit of truth, of power, of holiness, of comfort, and of love.

2.9 Article IX. Of Regeneration.

We believe in the necessity of regeneration, whereby we are made new creatures in Christ Jesus by the Spirit of God, who imparts spiritual life by the gracious and mysterious operation of His power, using as the ordinary means the truths of His word and the ordinances of divine appointment in ways agreeable to the nature of man.

2.10 Article X. Of Faith and Repentance.

We believe that faith in Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive Him, trust in Him, and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered to us in the Gospel, and that this saving faith is always accompanied by repentance, wherein we confess and forsake our sins with full purpose of and endeavor after a new obedience to God.

2.11 Article XI. Of Justification and Sonship.

We believe that God, on the sole ground of the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Christ, pardons those who by faith receive Him as their Saviour and Lord, accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the adoption of sons, with a right to all privileges therein implied, including a conscious assurance of their sonship.

2.12 Article XII. Of Sanctification.

We believe that those who are regenerated and justified grow in the likeness of Christ through fellowship with Him, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and obedience to the truth; that a holy life is the fruit and evidence of saving faith; and that the believer's hope of continuance in such a life is in the preserving grace of God. And we believe that in this growth in grace Christians may attain that maturity and full assurance of faith whereby the love of God is made perfect in us.

2.13 Article XIII. Of Prayer.

We believe that we are encouraged to draw near to God, our Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and on our own behalf and that of others to pour out our hearts humbly yet freely before Him, as becomes His beloved children, giving Him the honour and praise due His holy name, asking Him to glorify Himself on earth as in Heaven, confessing unto Him our sins and seeking of Him every gift needful for this life and for our everlasting salvation. We believe also that, inasmuch as all true prayer is prompted by His Spirit, He will in response thereto grant us every blessing according to His unsearchable wisdom and the riches of His grace in Jesus Christ.

2.14 Article XIV. Of the Law of God.

We believe that the moral law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments, testified to by the prophets and unfolded in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, stands for ever in truth and equity, and is not made void by faith, but on the contrary is established thereby. We believe that God requires of every man to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God; and that only through this harmony with the will of God shall be fulfilled that brotherhood of man wherein the Kingdom of God is to be made manifest.

2.15 Article XV. Of the Church.

We acknowledge one holy Catholic Church, the innumerable company of saints of every age and nation, who being united by the Holy Spirit to Christ their Head are one body in Him and have communion with their Lord and with one another. Further, we receive it as the will of Christ, that His Church on earth should exist as a visible and sacred brotherhood, consisting of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, together with their children, and other baptized children, and organized for the confession of His name, for the public worship of God, for the administration of the sacraments, for the upbuilding of the saints, and for the universal propagation of the Gospel; and we acknowledge as a part, more or less pure, of this universal brotherhood, every particular church throughout the world which professes this faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him as divine Lord and Saviour.

2.16 Article XVI. Of the Sacraments.

We acknowledge two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were instituted by Christ, to be of perpetual obligation as signs and seals of the covenant ratified in His precious blood, as a means of grace, by which, working in us, He doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and comfort our faith in Him, and as ordinances through the observance of which His Church is to confess her Lord and be visibly distinguished from the rest of the world.

2.16.1 Baptism with water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the sacrament by which are signified and sealed our union to Christ and participation in the blessings of the new covenant. The proper subjects of baptism are believers and infants presented by their parents or guardians in the Christian faith. In the latter case the parents or guardians should train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and should expect that their children will, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, receive the benefits which the sacrament is designed and fitted to convey. The Church is under the most solemn obligation to provide for their Christian instruction.

2.16.2 The Lord's Supper is the sacrament of communion with Christ and with His people, in which bread and wine are given and received in thankful remembrance of Him and His sacrifice on the Cross; and they who in faith receive the same do, after a spiritual manner, partake of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ to their comfort, nourishment, and growth in grace. All may be admitted to the Lord's Supper who make a credible profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus and of obedience to His law.

2.17 Article XVII. Of the Ministry.

We believe that Jesus Christ, as the Supreme Head of the Church, has appointed therein an Ordained Ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care and a Diaconal Ministry of Education, Service, and Pastoral Care and calls men and women to these ministries; and that the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, recognizes and chooses those whom He calls, and should thereupon duly ordain or commission them to the work of the ministry.

2.18 Article XVIII. Of Church Order and Fellowship.

We believe that the Supreme and only Head of the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ; that its worship, teaching, discipline, and government should be administered according to His will by persons chosen for their fitness and duly set apart to their office; and that although the visible Church may contain unworthy members and is liable to err, yet believers ought not lightly to separate themselves from its communion, but are to live in fellowship with their brethren, which fellowship is to be extended, as God gives opportunity, to all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

2.19 Article XIX. Of the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the Future Life.

We believe that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust, through the power of the Son of God, who shall come to judge the living and the dead; that the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into life eternal.

2.20 Article XX. Of Christian Service and the Final Triumph.

We believe that it is our duty, as disciples and servants of Christ, to further the extension of His Kingdom, to do good unto all men, to maintain the public and private worship of God, to hallow the Lord's Day, to preserve the inviolability of marriage and the sanctity of the family, to uphold the just authority of the State, and so to live in all honesty, purity, and charity, that our lives shall testify of Christ. We joyfully receive the word of Christ, bidding His people go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, declaring unto them that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, and that He will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We confidently believe that by His power and grace all His enemies shall finally be overcome, and the kingdoms of this world be made the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

APPENDIX II

A Song of Faith: **A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada**

God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge
above perfect description.

Yet,
in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.

So God creates the universe
and with it the possibility of being and relating.
God tends the universe,
mending the broken and reconciling the estranged.
God enlivens the universe,
guiding all things toward harmony with their Source.

Grateful for God's loving action,
We cannot keep from singing.

With the Church through the ages,
we speak of God as one and triune:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
We also speak of God as
Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer
God, Christ, and Spirit
Mother, Friend, and Comforter
Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love,
and in other ways that speak faithfully of
the One on whom our hearts rely,
the fully shared life at the heart of the universe.

We witness to Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.

God is creative and self-giving,
generously moving
in all the near and distant corners of the universe.
Nothing exists which does not find its source in God.
Our first response to God's providence is gratitude.
We sing thanksgiving.

Finding ourselves in a world of beauty and mystery,
of living things, diverse and interdependent,
of complex patterns of growth and evolution,
of subatomic particles and cosmic swirls,
we sing of God the Creator,
the Maker and Source of all that is.

Each part of creation reveals unique aspects of God the Creator,
who is both in creation and beyond it.
All parts of creation, animate and inanimate, are related.
All creation is good.
We sing of the Creator
who made humans to live and move
and have their being in God.
In and with God,
we can direct our lives toward right relationship
with each other and with God.
We can discover our place as one strand within the web of life.
We can grow in wisdom and compassion.
We can recognize all people as kin.
We can accept our mortality and finitude, not as a curse,
but as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter.

Made in the image of God,
we yearn for the fulfillment that is life in God.
Yet we choose to turn away from God.
We surrender ourselves to sin,
a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice, or apathy.
Becoming bound and complacent
within a web of false desires and wrong choices,
we bring harm to ourselves and others.
This brokenness in human life and community
is an outcome of sin.
Sin is not only personal
but accumulates
to become habitual and systemic forms
of injustice, violence, and hatred.

We are all touched by this brokenness:
the rise of selfish individualism
which erodes human solidarity;
the concentration of wealth and power
without regard for needs of all;
the toxins of religious and ethnic bigotry
the degradation of the blessedness of human bodies
and human passions through sexual exploitation;
the delusion of unchecked progress and limitless growth
which threatens our home, the earth;
the covert despair which lulls many into numb complicity

with empires and systems of domination.
We sing lament and repentance.

Yet evil does not — cannot —
undermine or overcome the love of God.
God forgives,
and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings
with honesty and humility.
God reconciles,
and calls us to repent the part we have played
in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other.
God transforms,
and calls us to protect the vulnerable,
to pray for deliverance from evil,
to work with God for the healing of the world,
that all might have abundant life.
We sing of grace.

The fullness of life includes
moments of unexpected inspiration and courage lived out,
experiences of beauty, truth, and goodness,
blessings of seeds and harvest,
friendship and family, intellect and sexuality,
the reconciliation of persons through justice
and communities living in righteousness,
and the articulation of meaning.
And so we sing of God the Spirit,
who from the beginning has swept over the face of creation,
animating all energy and matter
and moving in the human heart.

We sing of God the Spirit,
faithful and untamable,
who is creatively and redemptively active
in the world.

The Spirit challenges us to celebrate the holy
not only in what is familiar,
but also in that which seems foreign.

We sing of the Spirit
who speaks our prayers of deepest longing
and enfolds our concerns and confessions,
transforming us and the world.

We offer worship
as an outpouring of gratitude and awe
and a practice of opening ourselves:
to God's still, small voice of comfort;
to God's rushing whirlwind of challenge.
Through word, music, art, and sacrament,
in community and in solitude,
God changes our lives, our relationships, and our world.
We sing with trust.

Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word
passed on from generation to generation
to guide and inspire,
that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place
from the human experiences
and cultural assumptions of another era.
God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

The Spirit breathes revelatory power into scripture,
bestowing upon it a unique and normative place
in the life of the community.
The Spirit judges us critically when we abuse scripture
by interpreting it narrow-mindedly,
using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.

The wholeness of scripture testifies
to the oneness and faithfulness of God.
The multiplicity of scripture testifies to its depth:
two testaments, four gospels,
contrasting points of view held in tension—
all a faithful witness to the One and Triune God,
the Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.

We find God made known in Jesus of Nazareth,
and so we sing of God the Christ, the Holy One embodied.

We sing of Jesus,
a Jew,
born to a woman in poverty
in a time of social upheaval
and political oppression.
He knew human joy and sorrow.
So filled with the Holy Spirit was he
that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.
We sing praise to God incarnate.

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign —
a commonwealth not of domination
but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

He healed the sick and fed the hungry.
He forgave sins and freed those held captive
by all manner of demonic powers.
He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.
He preached and practiced unconditional love —
love of God, love of neighbour,
love of friend and love of enemy —
and he commanded his followers to love one another
as he had loved them.

Because his witness to love was threatening,
those exercising power sought to silence Jesus.
He suffered abandonment and betrayal,
state-sanctioned torture and execution.
He was crucified.

But death was not the last word.
God raised Jesus from death,
turning sorrow into joy,
despair into hope.
We sing of Jesus raised from the dead.
We sing hallelujah.

By becoming flesh in Jesus,
God makes all things new.
In Jesus' life, teaching, and self-offering,
God empowers us to live in love.
In Jesus' crucifixion,
God bears the sin, grief, and suffering of the world.
In Jesus' resurrection,
God overcomes death.
Nothing separates us from the love of God.

The Risen Christ lives today,
present to us and the source of our hope.
In response to who Jesus was
and to all he did and taught,
to his life, death, and resurrection,
and to his continuing presence with us through the Spirit,
we celebrate him as
the Word made flesh,
the one in whom God and humanity are perfectly joined,
the transformation of our lives,
the Christ.

We sing of a Church
seeking to continue the story of Jesus
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

We are called together by Christ
as a community of broken but hopeful believers,
loving what he loved,
living what he taught,
striving to be faithful servants of God
in our time and place.

Our ancestors in faith
bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living;
upon their lives our lives are built.

Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints,
experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign
even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.

The church has not always lived up to its vision.

It requires the Spirit to re-orient it:

helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition,
challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement,
for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.

We sing of God's good news lived out,
a church with purpose:

faith nurtured and hearts comforted,
gifts shared for the good of all,
resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,
fierce love in the face of violence,
human dignity defended,
members of a community held and inspired by God,
corrected and comforted,
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,
creation's mending.

We sing of God's mission.

We are each given particular gifts of the Spirit.

For the sake of the world,

God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry.

Within the church,

some are called to specific ministries of leadership,
both lay and ordered:

some witness to the good news;

some uphold the art of worship;

some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering;

some build up the community of wisdom;

some stand with the oppressed and work for justice.

To embody God's love in the world,

the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship
of all believers.

In grateful response to God's abundant love,
we bear in mind our integral connection
to the earth and one another,
we participate in God's work of healing and mending creation.
To point to the presence of the holy in the world,
the church receives, consecrates and shares
visible signs of the grace of God.
In company with the churches
of the Reformed and Methodist traditions,
we celebrate two sacraments as gifts of Christ:
baptism and holy communion.
In these sacraments the ordinary things of life
— water, bread, wine —
point beyond themselves to God and God's love,
teaching us to be alert
to the sacred in the midst of life.

Before conscious thought or action on our part,
we are born into the brokenness of this world.
Before conscious thought or action on our part,
we are surrounded by God's redeeming love.
Baptism by water in the name of the Holy Trinity
is the means by which we are received, at any age,
into the covenanted community of the church
It is the ritual which signifies our rebirth in faith
and cleansing by the power of God.
Baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining,
and transforming power of God's love
and our grateful response to that grace.

Carrying a vision of creation healed and restored,
we welcome all in the name of Christ.
Invited to the table where none shall go hungry,
we gather as Christ's guests and friends.
In holy communion
we are commissioned to feed as we have been fed,
forgive as we have been forgiven,
love as we have been loved.
The open table speaks of the shining promise
of barriers broken and creation healed.
In the communion meal, wine poured out and bread broken,
we remember Jesus,
We remember not only the promise but also the price that he paid
for who he was,
for what he did and said,
and for the world's brokenness.
We taste the mystery of God's great love for us,
and are renewed in faith and hope.

We place our hope in God.
We sing of a life beyond life
and a future good beyond imagining:
a new heaven and a new earth,
the end of sorrow, pain, and tears,
Christ's return and life with God,
the making new of all things.
We yearn for the coming of that future,
even while participating in eternal life now.

Divine creation does not cease
until all things have found wholeness, union, and integration
with the common ground of all being.
As children of the Timeless One,
our time-bound lives will find completion
in the all-embracing Creator.
In the meantime, we embrace the present,
embodying hope, loving our enemies,
caring for the earth,
choosing life.

Grateful for God's loving action,
we cannot keep from singing.
Creating and seeking relationship,
in awe and trust,
we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love.

Amen.

APPENDIX III

Sermon Summary Sheets

September 16 2007, St. Paul's United Church

Doctrines: Identity and Discipleship (Esther)

Ankle Bones: Integration from the Sole Up

Sermon preached in connection with Core II: Preaching as Performance

The spiritual truth I take from worship today is:

It is important to be true to who we really are, including our loving/spiritual identities and natures.

The identity of God is so closely interwoven in our own identities.

How does or should my identity make a difference in the world?

I am also hiding behind a mask.

Thank-you for this timely, touching, and thought provoking sermon and service. The God in us all works in us and through us to create and transmit courage, faith, and truth so that we may be of inspiration to each other.

God's strength

I felt challenged and encouraged: two gifts.

That God is with me always and I am loved for who I am.

An excellent, enlightening way to present an "unknown" book.

Our costumes reveal a hidden part of us – our hopes and longings. But also our actions – like the first queen – can have the power to affect many – we are role models.

In a world filled with challenges and injustices, God gives us the strength to say "no", and helps us to "set our spirits free".

The light-hearted joy of feeling at one with God.

To ensure one is more aware of both sides of every situation, concern, issue.

Better know the costumes I hide behind; to better know the costumes I would like to wear to show with God's help who I really am.

We are all unique and have good qualities that are not always recognized by others.

Who am I really and how do I sing my life. How is that identity wrapped up with my relationship with God.

That God in her magnificence can be in me and all around me.

Love pictures of hearts were drawn all around this word.

The fact that political and social injustice under Haman as described in the book of Esther, still exist as seen under leaders like Hitler, Stalin and Hussein, and in places like Cambodia and Africa, show that ancient stories of the Bible are relevant today.

God is part of who I am. God's presence in me gives me the courage to stand up for what is right.

I am the child and the agent of God, called on to act in her name.

There is recognition of the questions many of us share about "why we are here", but no simple common answer(s). God's assistance/direction is looked to.

I am surrounded and filled with Divine Presence always. My essence is in God and God is in me. I can learn to express this essence in all that I do.

How often we hide behind a costume.

Strength comes from God – God as a part of me reminds me to stand up for what is right.

November 11 2007, St. Paul's United Church
Doctrines: Grace and Discipleship (Beatitudes)
Preaching Apologetics on Remembrance Day
Sermon preached in connection with Elective II: Apologetic Preaching

The spiritual truth I take from worship today is:

Blessed are the peacemakers ... we inherit the earth as peacemakers, but also create the world as a peaceful place by following the example, truth, and way of Christ. Thanks be to God.

Connection.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they are our hope.

Peace is community activity.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. Christ's gift to us was his peace. We are all children of God – with the opportunity to bring peace through our love and devotion to one another – and to our God.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

Peacemaking is necessarily collaborative. Enemies are made out of hatred. Peacemaking is lovemaking.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

“Children of God” – collective not individual. Church is/should be a safe place to practice peace, welcoming etc. and then take these actions out into the rest of our lives.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

There is hope and a commitment to hope at St. Paul’s.

We all have personal peace.

God is with us always – thanks be! Thanks, Catherine. You are such a blessing.

That each of us do have a role to play in bringing peace to the earth.

That there are no foes. Taking up “one’s quarrel with the foe” is not helpful. The love which the Divine has implanted within us will eventually prevail as we come to love one another as God loves all creation.

That peace is an active verb. It is dynamic.

Peace in my soul.

The beatitudes brought into our present day life.

I can live peace.

We can all do a lot more to be peacemakers.

How to speak Peace and Fullness. Sift intentions, energize actions – political, social, personal, spiritual practices ¶ deep peace. Protocols. “Not as the world gives”

An abiding sense of peace.

We are made for peace and love.

The approach of peacemaking can be is often best made openly and honestly so that all invited have choice in how to be a part of it.

We are all peacekeepers or peacemakers or have the opportunity to be in our daily lives.

The significance of blessed are the peacemakers.

- an amazing sense of peace.

Christian peacemakers are everywhere, in war zones, at home, in schools. We can all be peacemakers wherever we are.

Your words are truly inspirational (but don’t overdo it!) - too much!

Peacemaking takes the work and prayers of many joined together to follow God’s way.

Catherine knows how to handle delicate issues – to hug or not to hug!

I need to make peace in my heart and home in order to make peace in the world. Thank you for an inspiring service.

January 20 2008, St. Paul's United Church
Doctrine: Hope (Ezekiel)
Ezekiel in the Mid-Winter Blues: Faith Seeking Understanding
Sermon preached in connection with Colloquy II

The spiritual truth I take from worship today is:

God is.

Hope.

That you have to keep focused even in the long tough times.

Challenge to live in God's way of Love and Compassion.

Trust that God is always there. Have hope! Listen for God's call and respond. Choose faith instead of doubt.

God is always with us; be vigilant and live in hope.

In times of sorrow and joy God is there. Listen for God's voice.

There is a call for each of us.

Constant vigilance: live in hope of restoration of the world (as we work towards it).

The significance of "constant vigilance" in our day-to-day (mundane, at times) activities. Constancy in our faith and reaching out to others is inner need. Thank-you.

That there is hope for this troubled world today

"Are we there yet?" There is a children's book by that name and I am reminded of it today. I have reassurance that we are indeed on the way.

There is hope.

I'm in a hard time – on medical leave – and I have seen some glimmer of hope today. I'll build on that.

Last week you gave me a sliver of hope – you used the phrase "sliver of hope like the waxing moon".

There are other people who hold hope with me.

I appreciated that God has left the Temple yet is still accessible. That's true for me: I left a Mormon Temple and God came with me – or I found God out here.

Why are we looking at Ezekiel?

Catherine ---- I am so glad we sang your hymn – the words are wonderful and so perfect with that music. I hope you are going to copyright it. The Ezekiel theme is going well too.... Services are so well put together with the music, the way the scripture readings are done and the very good food for thought in your messages. St. Paul's is lucky to have you and your talents..... thanks for doing such a great job.

September 14 2008, St. Paul's United Church

Doctrine: Grace (Galatians)

Good to Go: Grace as the Foundation for Social Transformation

Sermon preached in connection with Core III: Preaching as and for Social Transformation

The spiritual truth I take from worship today is:

God's unconditional love and the joyous opportunity we have to share our God-given gift with others, guilt free. (I also really covet Catherine's shoes. They are fantastic.)

The work of our hands should be a labour of love, not duty (obligation) or seeking a return.

An affirmation of my faith

We must be part of the transformation of the world. How – using our gifts – following our vocation – being thoughtful stewards – being who we are. Because I can!

I am “good to go” because of God's grace. (I also liked the reference to “the pause” off and on with the hymns chosen and the prayers.) God's grace is in the not doing!

We are unconditionally loved by God.

I appreciated Catherine describing the “More Voices” book – very helpful for newcomers. Acknowledging people who are no longer able to give.

I would prefer to be taken advantage of, rather than to shut off.

That we consider what motivates us to do things and do what we can because we can do it happily and gladly.

With God's love I am “good to go” and serve.

We live by grace and faith, not sight! (not our own merits) Hallelulai.

God is with us (me) always. My question is – if we believe this why do we resist death to such an extent? God is with us!

To be clear about where my motivation is when I choose to do what I do, so I can stay in it for the long haul.

Life can be fuller where guilt is not the motivation for action.

What motivates us? God's grace.

Even though I am not a member of St. Paul's I am welcome here.

You don't have to live by rules, guilt, obligation, to live in God's grace.

Grace "just because!" How uplifting – thanks, Catherine!

"God's grace is enough." However, this was really a lecture on good stewardship which was not too preachy.

With God's grace we're good to go!

What a miracle the unconditional love of God is!

The spiritual ~~truth~~ (sic) concept I take from worship today is: abundance overrides scarcity as an understanding of grace.

We are part of a vast universe. We live our lives in trust and grace.

Act from grace rather than guilt, or "if I'm good to God, he will be good to me."

I am good to go because of God's grace and can do/assist because of (sic)

Live the life of faith by being gracious and if we act in faith, simply do because we can!

We do not have to do anything to deserve the love of God.

God is everywhere "even" here.

God's love, since our beginnings, inspires us to be loving in our lives and our interactions in life and what we do and say.

She gave me confidence at difficult times – a friend is dying.

The Grace of God comes from giving of ourselves.

God loves us, no strings attached – learning to be not motivated by guilt is a huge burden to be free of. Years to accept.

Remove guilt from life.

October 26 2008, St. Paul's United Church
Doctrine: The Last Things, Eschatology and Rapture (Daniel)
Banks Go Bust and Beasts Snarl:
One Sunday of Old Testament Eschatology in a United Church of Canada
Sermon preached with connection to *Elective Faith Convictions, Preaching and Mission*

The spiritual truth I take from worship today is:

We can't put limitations on God or what God thinks or plans.

God lives with us now, in the present. We needn't wait for his return.

Be not afraid. There is hope.

The presence of God's love and hope during, and in spite of, crises.

Marvelous talk: I love a happy, just ending as the world turns - for God!

God dwells among us in the here and now.

The Godglance (*sic*) is here and around and within.

We are not alone. God is with us. Hallelujah!

God is among us. We live in trust and hope because God is with us here and now.

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