

The Dilemma of Australian 'Non-Uniting' Methodists in the period leading up to 1977

(From a pamphlet written in about 1976 by Rev. Bruce Smyth, at that time Superintendent of the Coffs Harbour Methodist Circuit.)

On June 22nd 1977, The Uniting Church of Australia was formed from those within the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in Australia.

This document is a verbatim retype of a small pocket-sized pamphlet I was given in about 1996, having left an 'Uniting Church' congregation (in fact I had tried three) about a year and a half before. I was given the document for my personal interest by a couple who had also left the Uniting Church about a year and a half before I had.

In turn I gave a copy of it to another couple, the father of the husband being a retired Methodist preacher of many years. Both my friend and his father agreed with the contents as being an accurate picture, which I also felt, from my own 'evangelical' perspective.

It is very important for the reader to understand that this is NOT an exercise in 'denominational bashing', nor is it presented with a view of 'they are wrong and I/we are right'.

The contents of the pamphlet are shown in a different font, to clearly separate my contribution to the page from the author of the document. However, I make the point that I believe the writer's comments at the time were accurate, and that twenty-five years later facts have shown that he was wise to express the concerns he had.

*The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland at the same period of time, the (late) **Rev. Alexander McQuisten Wylie**, was a friend of mine through a chance Brisbane meeting in about 1994, and subsequently our association was maintained by telephone over a 1000-mile distance until he went to be with the Lord some years ago.*

*He was acquainted with this document, and while it had not swayed him at all at the time, the personal view Alex presented to the **Queensland Province of the Presbyterian Church**, where he personally visited almost every congregation to explained the "yes" and "no" cases for joining, resulted in a very much smaller swing to the proposed new and more liberal (less evangelical) organisation than in Victoria and South Australia.*

*Not so in my home State of **South Australia**, where only two congregations refused to join, and they had to give up their cherished property. Some of the inequities in the proposal are discussed in the document below.*

Please remember that the original of this document was written several years prior to the establishment of the Uniting Church in July 1977, and the actual copy I have typed up was written the year before the union, so it is over thirty years old at the time this type of document was created. The reader is reminded to read it with that in mind, and then ask himself or herself if the author was factual in his concerns, or if the changes he feared did not eventuate.

The document...

The following statement was written by the Rev. Bruce Smyth, who was Superintendent of the Coffs Harbour Methodist Circuit. It was first circulated among his people to explain his attitude towards the (future) Uniting Church of Australia. It was afterwards re-printed in 'Evangelical Action', as it was felt that it stated the issues very clearly and deserved wider circulation as a challenge to other Methodists. However, it is not issued to promote the interests of any particular denomination but to call all concerned to think biblically on this subject and prayerfully consider the practical consequences.

On June 22 1977, another denomination is time-tabled to appear on the Australian scene. As it was initially intended to unite into one organisation all (at least most) Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians in our nation, many, in 1972, cast their votes in favour, sincerely believing that they were helping to bring three denominations into one. The motives were noble.

The Uniting Church of Australia (U.C.A.), as it will be called, will not merely be the present Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches (or some of them) working under a new name. A new organisational structure there will be, of course, but more than that, certain changes in doctrine will be involved.

Whether these changes (from the present official beliefs of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches) really matter, or not, each must judge for himself, with Bible in hand.

The Basis of Union

These changes, some of them quite subtle, are contained in the booklet known as '**The Basis of Union**' (as revised, 1971). It was drawn up by the Joint Committee on Church Union, consisting of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational representatives. It is doubtful whether any of these 21 people (whose names are listed on page 3 of the Basis) could be described as holding to the Evangelical Position of believing in, and being committed to, the Bible as the divinely inspired Word of God.

By contrast, the men who drew up the **Westminster Confession of Faith (Presbyterian)**, the **Savoy Declaration (Congregational)** and **John Wesley in his '44 Sermons'** and '**Notes on the New Testament**' (Methodist) without exception bowed to the authority of Scripture.

The Basis of Union, as the name suggests, is the legal basis or agreement upon which those entering the Uniting Church contract to come together. Like any other contract, it can hardly be altered after the 'sale' has gone through. Before committing themselves, individuals must read the fine print now.

Bible-believing Christians in particular owe it to themselves, their families, and indeed posterity, to study carefully what they are being asked to commit themselves to. And 'carefully' is the operative word here.

In places, the meaning of the Basis is obscure. In other places, several meanings are possible. Impressive phrases with an orthodox, evangelical ring, like 'the faith that justifies', and 'the Word of God on whom man's salvation depends' appear here and there in the Basis of Union. And they may well blind the reader to defects that, in the view of some, go to the very heart of the faith.

What Are These Defects?

If you believe that 'truth' is merely a matter of personal taste or opinion, you will not care to read any further. But if you believe, with Jude, that there is 'faith which was once delivered to the saints' to be preserved at any cost, contended for if need be, what follows is not unimportant.

The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church of Australasia are the Apostles' Creed, and the teachings of the Rev. John Wesley's 'Notes on the New Testament' and his first 44 published Sermons. So para 50a in the Methodist Book of Laws (1965) states:

'Before being received into full connexion a probationer shall be required to pass, at the synod, a satisfactory oral examination in theology, and shall declare to the synod that he has read Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and his first 44 published sermons, and that he subscribes to the teaching therein set forth.'

As a condition of ordination, then, all ministers of the **Methodist Church** must make this declaration.

The Basis of Union, likewise, accepts the Apostles' Creed as 'authoritative statements of the Catholic (Universal) faith', but it is clear that there are real differences between the teaching of the '44 Sermons' and the statements of the Basis of Union as illustrated below.

On the Bible's Inspiration and Authority

Wesley says (p 142) 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God; consequently all scripture is infallibly true'; (p18) 'The written Word of God'

Basis says (p11) 'The books of the Old and New Testaments (are) unique prophetic and apostolic testimony in which she (the church) hears the Word of God ... The Word of God is to be heard and known from Scripture'.

On the New Birth And Baptism

Wesley says (p172): 'Say not then in your heart, 'I was once baptised, therefore I am a child of God'. (p522) : 'Baptism is not the new birth; they are not one and the same thing. Many indeed seem to imagine that they are the same...'

Basis says (p12): 'The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates men into His body by Baptism.' Appendix 1 (iv) 'Baptism is by water' (v) 'It should be made clear to all present that baptism makes the baptised person a member of the Holy Catholic Church'.

On Eternal Destiny

Wesley says (p521): 'The New birth is absolutely necessary in order to receive salvation'.

Basis says (p19): 'The law of the Church ... will look to the final reconciliation of mankind...'

From the foregoing extracts, **we see that in the Uniting Church the Bible is no longer the 'infallibly true' Word of God, divinely given.**

Instead, it is a mere testimony -- which may be true, or may be false.

It is no longer the written Word of God, with full authority over men, but a receptacle which (hopefully) contains the Word of God.

Compare our Lord's own words on the subject in such scriptures as John 5:46-47, 17:8, 14 and 17, and Luke 24:25, 44.

Tragically, the Uniting Church is a 'Jumbo Jet' which has lost its rudder and abandoned its compass even before it has left the ground! In these circumstances, to cheerfully go aboard and hope for 'in-flight' corrections, is to indulge in fantasy, not faith.

Furthermore, the grand old New Testament doctrine of salvation by faith alone gives place, in paragraph 7 of the Basis of Union to salvation by sacrament!

Did you know that brave and holy men went to the flames, giving their lives in martyrdom, to deliver the church (and us!) from soul-destroying errors like this?

That the word 'Baptism' in para 7 (p12) of the Basis of Union means water-baptism is evident from the previous paragraph where it is defined as a 'visible act'.

The quotation from the Appendix of the Basis, while not part of the body of the Basis, leaves us in no doubt as to what the framers had in mind - - they said it so clearly. **'Baptism makes (!) the baptised person a member of the Holy Catholic Church'**.

The way is paved for the statement in para 12 dealing with Church membership, where it says 'Membership is open to all who are baptised into the Holy Catholic Church...' (p13.)

Note the total absence of any mention of repentance, and saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and the personal response of the individual that this implies. It is just as though the Protestant Reformation never happened!

Methodists who cannot enter the Uniting Church find the omissions in the Basis of Union as disturbing as the heresies.

There is no requirement in the Basis that the Ministers of the Uniting Church, its Leaders, Deaconesses and Lay Preachers should believe, experience and preach the New Birth (apart from which nobody can enter the Kingdom of God -- John 3:3), nor that they should believe, experience and preach Holiness (without which no man shall see the Lord -- Hebrews 12:14), nor even the Law of God (without which we do not realise our desperate need of the Saviour -- Galatians 3:24, Romans 7:11-13), nor the Atonement of Christ (which alone makes salvation possible -- Hebrews 9:22).

Search in vain for any requirement in the Basis of Union that the Ministers and other leaders of the Uniting Church are bound to accept the verdict of Scripture as the Word of God. They are to **preach 'from' the Scriptures**, they are to **'listen' to the preaching of John Wesley** in his 44 Sermons, **but they are not obliged to follow either.**

Here is a subtle, but most significant, departure from the existing requirements of Methodist law.

One thing is demanded, however, of Ministers in the Uniting Church, as well as the other leaders named above. 'The Uniting Church recognises and **accepts as ministers ... all who ... ADHERE TO THE BASIS OF UNION.'**

What happens to those Methodist Ministers, Leaders, Deaconesses and Lay Preachers whose loyalty to the Word of God does not permit such a surrender?

In the absence of any real alternative, i.e. a Continuing Methodist Church, they are in the process of being unchurched, disinherited and even unemployed, by June 22nd 1977.

As it lurches towards its ecumenical goals, the Methodist Church has not, to date, spared even a sideways glance for those of its members who are choosing to remain true to its foundation principles. Here is a glaring injustice which cries for early rectification. Many are under pressure to compromise conscience through fear of becoming unemployed.

What can they do? The Basis of Union commits the Uniting Church of Australia to seek further unions, on unspecified terms, with unnamed church bodies. Those who submit to what at present appears inevitable, humanly speaking, may be in for some unpleasant surprises when this plant, which the Father hath not planted, bears its full fruit (Matthew 15:13).

Conclusion

We have come a long way since the Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662 requiring every minister in the Church of England to declare his unfeigned assent and consent to everything contained in the Book of Common Prayer, and that every minister should obtain ordination at the hands of a bishop. Some 2000 of the finest ministers refused to take the oath and were ejected from their livings.

But God is sovereign in history. In His gracious providence, the daughter of one of these men, Dr. Samuel Annesley, became the mother of John Wesley. The son of another of these faithful men became the father of John Wesley!

Who is willing to heed what (Wesley) says in his sermon 27?

'Receive nothing untried, nothing until it is weighed in the balance of the sanctuary; believe nothing they say, unless it is clearly confirmed by passages of Holy Writ. Wholly reject whatsoever differs therefrom, whatever is not confirmed thereby. And, in particular, reject, with the utmost abhorrence, whatever is described as the way of salvation, that is different from, or short of, the way our Lord has marked out ... ' (p368. '44 Sermons').

Recommended Further Reading

'The Basis of Christian Unity': D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

'Reformation Today': Klaas Runia

'The Forgotten Spurgeon': Iain Murray

But I still Want to Enter The Uniting Church

Yes, the challenge to think biblically rather than emotionally is not an easy one. To obey in faith is not without cost. Here are some common objections:

1 -- I don't like Splinter Groups!

Reply:

Neither do I, when the reasons for 'going it alone' have more to do with persons and personalities than with principle and truth. On the other hand, blind adherence to a large group which apparently offers security, may be a fear reaction. Jesus understood this, and said, 'Fear not, little flock' (Luke 12:32).

2 -- But the people Will Still be the Same in the U.C.A.

Reply:

Yes, and No. Methodist members will be transferred to the Uniting Church automatically next June, without any reference to their desires or beliefs (even if they voted 'No', in 1972). Ministers and other leaders, however, are required by para. 14 in the 'Basis' to 'adhere' to that Basis if they wish to be recognised by the Uniting Church. I cannot speak for others, but I personally doubt if I would be 'the same' (morally or spiritually) if, to preserve my position, I professed adherence to something that I knew compromised vital scripture truth. Jesus said, 'If anyone serves me, he must follow me ...' (not other people, no matter how eminent nor how religious they might be) ... 'him will my Father honour' (John 12:26).

3 -- Won't the Uniting Church Offer us New and Wider Opportunities for Evangelism?

Reply:

Some ministers feel that they will be free to preach bible truth in the Uniting Church. They tend to overlook the fact that others will be equally free to preach soul-destroying error -- and the Basis of Union accords them ample liberty to do so! Is this the will of God? Or is this an unequal yoke we are commanded to forsake in 2 Cor 6:14 ? 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers ... what communion hath light with darkness?'

In any case, the idea that the church is a mission field, a 'good place to fish in', is altogether foreign to the New Testament.

Our first task, if we are men and women of God, is never to trust in human expediency; we should always be faithful to Christ who wants us to speak boldly of Him and His Gospel, and to expose and reject all error, irrespective of the consequences. We should remember the prophet Samuel's word to Saul: 'To OBEY is better than sacrifice, and to HEARKEN than the fat of rams' (1 Samuel 15:22)

4 -- But if We Don't Go Along With the Uniting Church We Shall Lose Our Property

Reply:

This is the dilemma facing us all. It is without doubt a scandalous injustice to non-uniting Methodists that they should, without compensation, be deprived of any share in the material assets of their church, which,

over the years, they have helped to create, and which were originally dedicated to the preaching and teaching of evangelical and reformed truth. At present, all is to be handed over, without regard to local feeling, to the Uniting Church.

We may be forced to choose, like Moses, between material advantage, and spiritual blessing. (Hebrews 11:25-27). As John Wesley put it in the Covenant service, there are times when we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. **Consider, however, a New Testament pattern congregation can grow without buildings, whereas truth, and love, and loyalty to Christ, are indispensable.**

(Ed. note: I believe that that is precisely what happened in the case of the principal Presbyterian church building in Adelaide, Scots Church, on the corner of North Terrace and Pulteney Streets in the heart of the city.

Although the Presbyterian church still continued, it was denied even the rented use of this cathedral style principal Presbyterian church (which it had established, built, and maintained) in the 'City of Churches' after June 1977, and the two continuing congregations were evicted to the suburbs).

5 -- I May Be Uncomfortable About Entering the Uniting Church, But, After All, What is the Alternative? And What Can One Person Do?

Reply:

Seek out other concerned people, and do what Daniel and his friends did. PRAY for the answer (Dan. 2).

God's answers may well be different from one situation to another.

If we lack wisdom, let us ASK of Him (James 1:5).

It is no business of ours to be criticising others who may not, for various reasons, see the issues as we do (Rom. 14:4).

It is our business to 'always take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men' (Acts 24:16).

'His way is perfect' (Psalm 18:30).

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