

Unitarian Colloquium Discussion Paper III, 7 April 2006,

Towards a Unitarian Christian ecclesiology

Friends, I am honoured to have the opportunity to present a few thoughts on Unitarian Christian ecclesiology. I should, however, preface my comments with a warning. I claim no expertise in this field. I am still relatively new to ministry. I offer these thoughts therefore very much as a reflective practitioner, rather than as any kind of scholar. These views are simply those of a Unitarian Christian minister who is an active member of the UCA. I hope my lack of experience will be given its full and proper weight!

I should also define my terms here. In the context of this colloquium, my comments apply only to the Unitarian Christian Association – and what I feel is its distinctive and unique relationship to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. To be clear, the following does not apply to the GA. I should also acknowledge, from the outset, my debt to the book, *'An Introduction to Christian Ministry'* by Gordon Kuhrt. Reverend Kuhrt is the Director of Ministry for the Church of England, and his writings strongly influence my thinking here.

The UCA, it seems, is at a crossroads. It is re-energised and has rediscovered a deep sense of wanting to be *Church*. It is also showing, no less, a determination to be of some *service* to the wider movement. There is a process of discernment at work. Yet, it is incomplete and fragmentary. We may have some sense of *what* we want to do, but are less clear as to *why* we want to it. We need, I think, to revisit some core-principles, to go back if we are to go forward. My simple contentions are as follows:

1. That our ecclesiology should be Biblically-based

This may seem an odd thing to say. But we have no certainty of relationship with the Bible within the wider movement. That is why, our debates on *canonicity* are so important – they represent an attempt to reclaim, on liberal terms, that connection. So I would wish here to state clearly, that UCA ecclesiology must be rooted in the Bible. We would be a *people of*

God. We are defined and united by the leadership and the example of the Master, of Jesus. Whilst we would affirm the ministry of all believers, we still need to accept that as Unitarian Christians, as Christians, we are set-apart, by faith. As it says in 1 Peter:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness. Once you were not a people at all; but now you are God’s people. Once you were outside his mercy; but now you are outside no longer.” (1)

We are *called* to be Church, by our faith in God and by our desire to follow Jesus. This involves not privilege but rather a powerful responsibility, to prove in our actions the truth of our convictions. To realise, as best we can, the Loving Community. To prefigure, as best we can, the Kingdom of God. The UCA needs to be Church in order to provide a light that others may follow.

Ours will still be a flawed model. For it will comprise flawed people. Each and all of us, will get things wrong. But, by being Church we are accepting that Biblical imperative that we have all been called by God to witness to his Kingdom.

2. That our ecclesiology must be radical

But only because we interpret the Bible in that way, we seek the divine impulse which breathes through scripture as understood, and mediated by conscience. It tells us that the grand-narrative of the Bible is one of *liberation*. It is the Exodus story retold again and again through the lives of individuals. We would share in that story. Bring others to it through *service* and not *leadership*. We need to recognise, as the Bible does, that each and all have gifts to offer. As it says in Romans:

“Let us use the different gifts allotted to each of us by God’s grace: gift of inspired utterance for example, let us use in proportion to our faith, the gift of administration to administer, the gift of teaching to teach, the gift of counselling to counsel. If you give to charity, give without grudging, if you are a leader, lead with enthusiasm: if you help others in distress do it cheerfully.” (2)

This I think, can only but lead to a radical egalitarianism. Our ecclesiology must be about sharing gifts, valuing each and all, eschewing hierarchy, practising community. Such an approach, also encourages service, affirms individuals, as they realise that they matter, matter to God, matter to others. Again, we in the UCA will fail to meet this ideal. Still, it should be ever before us as our aspiration, as Emil Brunner puts it:

“One thing is supremely important, that all minister, and that nowhere is to be perceived a separation or even merely a distinction between those who do and those who do not minister, between the active or the passive members of the body, between those who give and those who receive. There exists in the Ecclesia a universal duty and right of service, a universal readiness to serve, and at the same time the greatest possible differentiation of function.” (3)

3. That our ecclesiology should worship-centred

One of the biggest myths, it seems to me, is that Church structures must be bureaucratic. Indeed, that in a sense, they should be *structures* at all! Now, there is clearly a place for structure – especially in the secular world but often these are about the *love of power* and not the *power of love*! Too often, our own Churches seem more concerned with minutes and matters arising, in maintaining building, in polishing floors than in celebrating worship or practising community. And, a Church is a community; a place where one can be healed, loved, refreshed, forgiven. Perhaps that is why so much of Jesus’ teaching takes place in the open, to remove people from the distractions of buildings and structure!

The UCA must develop affirming practise. Its ecclesiology must have at its centre not minutes or matters arising (though some of this is unavoidable), but rather worship, love and community building. The worship is the key, for as we worship together so is fellowship and community strengthened. It is to use Kuhrt’s phrase our *experience of discipleship* (4). We could again refer to Romans here (5). We need also to understand that as we live, so do we worship; giving praise, value and honour to God.

Of course, many Unitarian Churches have real difficulty with any kind of God-language. We need to offer a conception of God which is both reverential and intelligible. I am sympathetic, to that extent, to James Luther Adams’ understanding of God as that *community-forming power*, working through time and space (6), but the UCA needs to needs to do much work here. In addition, our ecclesiology needs to show an *existential* understanding of faith. That worship represents not an action (for an hour on Sunday, or worse – a discussion on what that action might mean for an hour on Sunday), but rather something revealed in our day-to-day lives. A process began within the context of the UCA but taken out beyond its confines. Our ecclesiology needs to reflect the different sites of worship, as it says in 1. Corinthians:

“There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities, but in all of them and in everyone the same God is active. In each of us the Spirit is seen to be at work for some useful purpose.” (7)

Concluding comments:

Friends, in the best traditions of preaching, I conclude by re-iterating my three points. That the ecclesiology of the Unitarian Christian Association needs to be Biblically-based, radically egalitarian and worship-centred – from this, then, naturally develops our desire to be Church and to seek the Kingdom, together. And, if we successful, if the Spirit really does move amongst us, others will join – not because of any organisational activism, but because of the fruits of our faith. In that way, I would contend, we may yet transform that wider community of Churches of which we are part. After all, were *we* not attracted to the faith by the example of another, I would end with some words from 1. Timothy:

“.. be to believers an example in speech and behaviour, in love, fidelity, and purity.” (8)

And that, friends, requires, not activism, but fresh ecclesiological understanding.

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Notes and references:

- (1) – The Revised English Bible, 1. Peter 2:9-10
- (2) – The Revised English Bible, Romans 12:6-8
- (3) – ‘*An introduction to Christian Ministry*’, Gordon Kuhrt, p.10
- (4) – *ibid.* pp. 20-26
- (5) – The Revised English Bible, Romans 12:1-12
- (6) – See ‘*The Essential James Luther Adams*’, Edited George Kimmich Beach
- (7) – The Revised English Bible, 1 Corinthians 12:4-7
- (8) – The Revised English Bible, 1. Timothy 4:12