UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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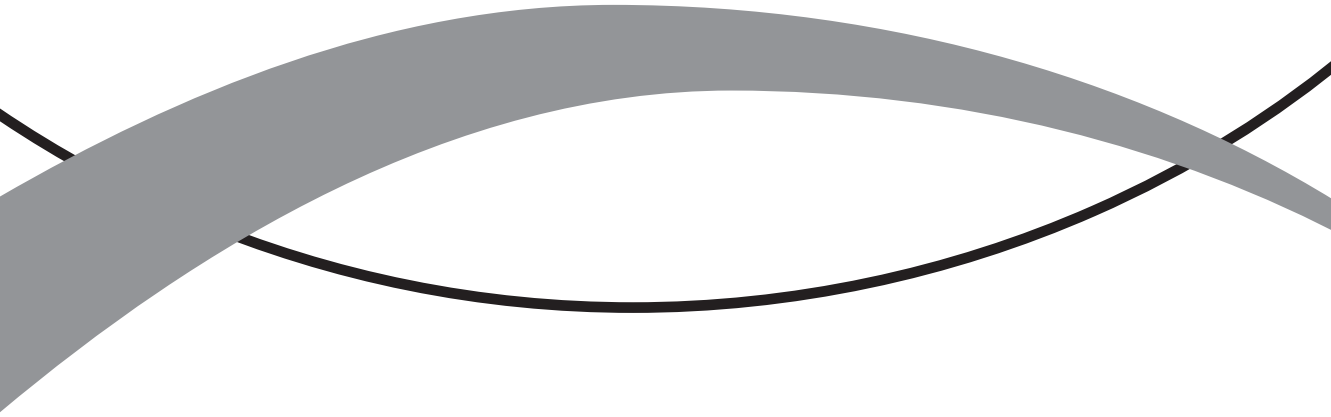

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Creeds and Confessions: Reformed, Evangelical and … Redundant?

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Abstract

The Uniting Church has often described itself as an "Evangelical" and "Reformed" church and in its Basis of Union (BOU), it commits itself to careful study of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. It also recognises four particular Reformed and Presbyterian confessions, understood as "witnesses," and pledges to "listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty–Four Sermons." At the same time, it also "enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry" and expresses a desire to "learn to sharpen its understanding … by contact with contemporary thought." These good intentions may be seen as in tension to some extent, since such creeds and confessions are more in the nature of historical theology than "contemporary thought." Are these source documents, therefore, now simply redundant? If not, how are they to be appropriated today in ways that lead to "fresh words and deeds" in contexts very far removed from their original use and purpose?

Introduction

In this 1700th anniversary year of the Council of Nicaea a great deal of attention has been given to the theology of the Nicene Creed, the history that lies behind its formation, and its subsequent impact upon the church. While much of this has been scholarly and considered, in the democratic world of social media where everybody is an expert on any topic upon which they comment, a good deal of it has been negative and dismissive. Take as just one example the following Facebook comment. "I think of the Nicene Creed as a corrupt dumbing down of an original high wisdom, a political distortion of faith in service to imperial stability and security, a neutering of the profound messianic vision of the Gospels, co–opting the church into the alliance of throne and altar."[1] This is not an unusual point of view, but it raises questions in my mind about the extent to which the theological depth and genius of the Nicene Creed is being overlooked. It is worth noting that the critique touched not at all upon the actual content of the Creed but only made a comment on its supposed use.

Paragraph 2 of the BOU recalls "the Ecumenical Councils of the early centuries [and] looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated, and the Church's unity expressed, in similar Councils."[2] Then paragraph 9 declares:

[1] Facebook user's comment (author's identity removed by me) to John Squires' Facebook page accessed 23 August 2025 https://www.facebook.com/john.t.squires.
[2] *The BOU 1992 edition* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992), #2.

> The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by its use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith. The Uniting Church commits its ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age. It commends to ministers and congregations their use for instruction in the faith, and their use in worship as acts of allegiance to the Holy Trinity.[3]

If the Nicene Creed is, in the language of the BOU, an authoritative statement of the catholic faith which ministers and congregations are to carefully study and use in the worship of God, it seems rather cavalier to dismiss it as no more than an imperial tool of oppression. To what extent may we expect to sharpen our understanding by entering into contemporary thought (an absolutely essential task) without also entering into the inheritance of theological enquiry, that is, without engaging seriously with historical theology? The best contemporary theology arises out of critical and constructive engagement with the historic explorations of the faith, and not from ignorance of them.

The Reformation Witnesses

In addition to the two historic Creeds, the UCA also affirms (BOU, #10) a number of Reformation witnesses – The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and The Savoy Declaration (1658). Moreover, in the same paragraph: "In like manner the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty–Four Sermons (1793)."[4] There is a slight awkwardness here because John Wesley was not among the Reformers and his eighteenth-century theology, though it emerged out of a culturally Protestant milieu, took a turn toward "the person" that gave birth to Evangelicalism as a movement that stressed religious experience over doctrinal orthodoxy. Though Wesley was certainly a cultural Protestant he was a *particular kind* of Protestant. His emphasis on the congruence of divine and human action, his insistence that repentance and good works prior to conversion were acceptable to God, as well as his rejection of unconditional election means that the shape of his theology is in some respects more akin to something like the Council of Trent than to Luther or Calvin. I will consider Wesley momentarily but first I will briefly consider each of the Reformation witnesses referred to in the BOU.

The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)

The Scots Confession is one of the foundational documents of The Church of Scotland.[5] Primarily the work of John Knox, it was officially the work of a committee of six men (all coincidentally named John) and is a

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[3] BOU #9.

[4] BOU, #10. The date of 1793 seems odd. There were several editions of Wesley's sermons published during his lifetime beginning from 1746 but in the Model Deed of 1763, the 44 'Standard Sermons' were declared to be authoritative standard for Methodist preaching. Wesley died in 1791. Might it be that '1793' is a typographical error and that '1763' is the intended date?

[5] "The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)," in Michael Owen, ed. *Witness of Faith: Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1984), 55–79.

summation of the theology of another man named John – John Calvin.[6] It functioned to establish the Reformed faith as the theological foundation of the state church in Scotland. Parliament approved the confession in 1560 against the wishes of the devout Catholic queen, Mary Stuart. It was approved after her overthrow in 1567, by James VI. Only thirteen months old at the time, the young James later became James I of England.

The Confession makes a very large claim for itself when it states that it contains "wholesome and sound doctrine grounded upon the infallible truth of God's Word."[7] The first of the "Subordinate Standards" in The Church of Scotland, it also appears among the doctrinal standards of a number of Presbyterian denominations and remains part of Scottish law through the Ratification Act of 1560. It is somewhat overshadowed by the Westminster Confession which would replace it in August 1647.

The Scottish church is seen as in continuity with God's people extending back to Adam and Eve, so that it is in continuity with the salvation history outlined in Scripture.[8]

> So, if the interpretation, determination, or opinion of any theologian, kirk, or council, is contrary to the plain Word of God written in any other passage of Scripture, it is most certain that this is not the true understanding and meaning of the Holy Ghost, supposing that councils, realms, and nations have approved and received it. We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or yet to the rule of love.[9]

It is interesting to note here that an interpretation may be deemed unacceptable if it is shown to be "contrary … to the law of love," a hermeneutical approach that has a particularly current ring to it.

Ch. 22 on The Right Administration of the Sacraments states that, "This is why we flee the society of the Papistical kirk and participation in its sacraments; first because their ministers are no ministers of Christ Jesus, indeed (which is more horrible), they allow women, whom the Holy Ghost will not allow to preach in the congregation, to baptize."[10] The Catholic doctrine of the Mass, "we utterly abhor, detest, and renounce as blasphemous to Christ Jesus."[11] This kind of language is now, of course, problematic, especially in light of the UCA's ecumenical partnerships and the significant achievements in ecumenism that took place particularly during the twentieth century.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The Heidelberg Catechism, as its name suggests, emerged out of the German Palatinate as a summation of the Reformed faith in the form of questions and answers.[12] Most of the German princes were, of course,

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6 The others beside Knox were John Winram, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, John Douglas, and John Owen, *Witness of Faith*, 58–59.

7 "The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)," 63.

8 "Ch. V The Continuance, Increase, and Preservation of the Kirk," "Ch. XVI Of the Kirk", and "Ch. XVIII The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall Be Determined From The False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine." The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 65, 70–72.

9 "Ch. XVIII The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall Be Determined From The False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine," The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 71–72.

10 "Ch. 22 Of The Right Administration of the Sacraments," The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 75.

11 "Ch. 22 Of The Right Administration of the Sacraments," The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), 75.

12 "The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)", in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, 81–109.

Lutheran but Frederick III (though officially Lutheran) personally adopted the Reformed faith and lent his weight to the support of the Catechism. seeking to unite both Lutherans and Calvinists while keeping Catholics and Anabaptists at arm's length.

Though the Catechism credits the entire theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg for its authorship, its principle authors are thought to have been Zacharius Ursinus (1534–1583) and Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587). Perhaps its chief value is that it brings together into a single document, a number of distinct strands in the larger Reformed tradition – The Calvinist tradition of Geneva, the Zurich Reformation under Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, and the Lutheran tradition particularly as expressed by its developments under Philip Melanchthon (the so–called "Phillipists").

The Heidelberg Catechism is part of the official doctrinal basis of the Dutch Reformed Church and the many Reformed and Presbyterian denominations that have sprung from its influence around the world. The Westminster Assembly of Divines would use the Heidelberg Catechism as the basis for their own "Shorter Catechism." Designed to be learned over the space of 52 "Lord's Days," it begins very personally:

> Question 1 What is your only comfort in life and in death?
> Answer That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully paid for all my sins and redeemed me from all the power of the Devil; and keeps me so safe that without the will of my Father in Heaven, not a hair can fall from my head: indeed, all things must minister to my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of everlasting life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready to love from now on for Him.[13]

It soon takes on darker tones, however with its declaration under the heading "Of Man's Misery" that, "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour."[14] God is not willing to "allow such disobedience and defection to go unpunished" but "is terribly angry with both inherited and actual sins and wills to punish them out of righteous judgement in time and in eternity."[15]

Christ is then set forth as the only Mediator able to meet the demands of God's justice by in his death bearing "the burden of God's wrath" so as to "win for us and restore to us righteousness and life."[16] This focus on retributory justice and penal substitution is unlikely to receive a warm reception in today's Uniting Church though there are probably still some places where it is set out in the form of popular evangelical songs, and unreflective sermons.

The theology of the sacraments is set forth including an explanation of how the Lord's Supper differs from the Roman Catholic Mass describing the latter as "fundamentally nothing other than a denial of the sole sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and an accursed idolatry."[17] The Christian Reformed Church's

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[13] "Question 1 and Question 2," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 87. The capitalisation of the male personal pronoun in reference to God is retained from the text as it appears in Owen, though such use is now, of course archaic.
[14] "The First Part: Of Man's Misery," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 87.
[15] "The First Part: Of Man's Misery," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 88.
[16] "The Second Part: Of Man's Redemption, "Question 16 and Question 17," The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 89.
[17] "Of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ," Question and Answer 80, The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), 99

2006 Synod took the view that such a statement, "can no longer be held in its current form as part of our confession." It now remains in the text of the Heidelberg Catechism but with the last three paragraphs placed in brackets "to indicate that they do not accurately reflect the official teaching and practice of today's Roman Catholic Church and are no longer confessionally binding on members of the CRC."[18] Such caveats could readily be issued by the UCA for many of the statements made in the Reformed Confessions, not only because they may not reflect contemporary Catholic theology, but also because they no longer express our own operative theology. This presents an obvious challenge in light of paragraph 10's insistence that ministers and instructors study these statements for the instruction of congregations.[19]

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

The Westminster Confession was the result of an attempt by theologians within the English Parliament (the "Westminster Assembly of Divines") to reshape the Church of England along more Reformed lines. The Assembly carried out its work between 1643 and 1653 and, though its reform agenda was not (at least in the long term) successful in the Church of England, the Confession it produced was adopted by the Church of Scotland as a "subordinate standard" and also became the basis for the 1658 Savoy Declaration of English Congregationalists and subsequently by many Presbyterian and Reformed denominations.

The world emerging from the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I was going to require a new kind of Church of England, finally purged of the "rags of popery", and the Westminster Divines were engaged in the work of preparing for the building of that new Church. It did not simply reject The Thirty–Nine Articles, however, but built upon them to produce a thoroughgoing Calvinist statement of faith, in dialogue with continental Calvinism, but also drawing upon Patristic and medieval sources, particularly the Augustinian tradition within pre–Reformation Britain.

Its thirty–three chapters set out a comprehensive statement of Reformed theology in which the sovereignty and majesty of God are contrasted with human depravity and weakness in order more sharply to highlight the priority of divine grace. The style of its language is weighty, solemn, and at times quite moving, even if at times also terrifying. We are told, for example, in chapter 3, that:

> By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated [sic] unto everlasting life, and others fore–ordained to everlasting death . . . God hath appointed the elect unto glory . . . the rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.[20]

[18] "Heidelberg Catechism", *Christian Reformed Church*, accessed 9 October 2025. https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg–catechism.
[19] BOU #10.
[20] "Ch III Of God's Eternal Decree," The Westminster Confession (1649) in Owen, *Witness of Faith*, 125–26.

Other statements that might give Uniting Church people pause today include that the Pope is the Antichrist, the Catholic Mass is idolatry and that heretics should be punished by the state.[21]

The Savoy Declaration (1658)

The Savoy Declaration was drawn up by a group of Independents and Congregationalists meeting at the Savoy Hospital in October 1658 seeking self–governing congregations entirely free from any state church. Such luminaries as Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) and John Owen (1616–1683) were among the six theologians who gathered. Most of its chapters are identical to the Westminster Confession. Essentially it affirmed the earlier confession's Calvinist and Covenantal theology with a little tweaking and added a few of its own views, particularly on church government. Though it adds little to the earlier Reformed source documents referred to in the BOU, it well served the purpose of representing the Congregational partner in the 1977 union.

Michael Owen has pointed out how "the relatively relaxed and largely functional approach of the BOU to the Scriptures, the ancient creeds, certain Reformation confession and the sermons of John Wesley," is grounded in the conviction that Christ rules the church without necessary dependence on the church's preaching and teaching.[22] What the church proclaims is always a response to what Christ is doing in the world, never simply a reiteration of creeds and confessions. Such earlier confessions remain worthy of study, as indicators of the church's response to God at given points in history but they are not understood to have captured definitive theological insights from which it would not be possible to diverge.

John Wesley's Standard Sermons

Clearly, sermons are quite a different mode of discourse to creeds and confessions. Wesley's sermons were certainly not cited chapter and verse the way Presbyterians might cite certain chapters of the Westminster Confession to demonstrate a doctrinal point. Perhaps this is why the Basis only asks us to "listen to the preaching of John Wesley." After all, it doesn't cost much to listen. Unofficially at least, Charles Wesley's hymns were at least as determinative in shaping Methodist belief and practice. There was little attempt to police doctrine in Australian Methodist pulpits. There was never anything among Methodists like the prolonged Presbyterian accusation of heresy laid upon Samuel Angus, which dragged on from 1932 to 1943, though in the early twentieth century there could be spirited debates at Conference between revivalists like William Fitchett and liberal evangelicals like Edward Sugden. Generally, Methodists were more tolerant of theological diversity on a pragmatic basis (they were busy doing other things than debating theology). Congregationalists for their part had a long heritage of intellectual enquiry in the tradition of English Dissent. It was left to the Presbyterians with a history of adherence to confessional standards to be somewhat more protective of orthodoxy.

There is a neat encapsulation of the value of all of this historic material in para 10's insistence that "ministers and instructors [are] to study these statements, so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and

[21] "Ch. XXIII Of the Civil Magistrate," "Ch. XXV Of the Church," and "Ch. XXIX Of the Lord's Supper" respectively, The Westminster Confession (1649), 154–55, 157–58, 162–64.

[22] Michael Owen, *Back to Basics: Studies on the BOU of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1996), 169–70.

again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture."[23] Though such convictions, justification by grace through faith, the centrality of Christ, and the authority of Scripture, are not *unique* to Protestantism they are certainly *characteristic* of it and these themes remain constitutive of the UCA's Protestant identity notwithstanding its broad catholicity.

The Status of Wesleyan Theology in the UCA

My admittedly anecdotal impression is that when the Uniting Church wants to undertake serious theological work it appeals to its Reformed heritage. Its appeal to Methodism is usually in the context of social justice or (albeit very rarely) any discussion of evangelism. It does not seem to be an instinct to think of Wesleyan theology as a resource for serious theological work in the Uniting Church. A number of reasons for this occur to me.

First, the discovery that John Wesley's theology could be taken seriously and that Wesley himself might be considered an important and competent theologian seemed to pass Australian Methodism by. The renaissance in Wesley studies that took place in the mid–twentieth century due to the work of pioneers such as Frank Baker and Albert Outler occurred mostly in the northern hemisphere and particularly in the United States. Australian Methodists engaged with John Wesley in a totemic way, inscribing his image on their teapots, stained glass windows, commemorative plates and letterheads, but there was little by way of deep engagement with his thought. There were exceptions of course. Colin Williams, Professor of Theology at Queens College, University of Melbourne in his *John Wesley's Theology for Today* identified the elements of what later came to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as early as 1960, before Albert Outler did so, though Outler invariably gets the credit for it.[24] Important Methodist theologians such as Norman Young and Robert Gribben undertook their doctoral studies overseas in contexts more warmly engaged with Wesleyan theology as a serious form of theological discourse then was the case in Australia. Undoubtedly, such people enriched the Uniting Church, but they did not choose Wesleyan theology as the focus of their work. On the other hand, the dominance of Barthian thought in mid-century theological academies, which undoubtedly found its way into the *BOU*, was a juggernaut in comparison.

Some have (wrongly) identified Methodism with the virulent anti-modernism of groups such as the recently disbanded Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC) as though that particular kind of obscurantism were the ongoing influence of Methodist revivalism. In my limited engagement with the ACC, the dominant voices seemed to me to be almost entirely Reformed. On one occasion it was suggested by one delegate at an ACC Conference that rather than formulate their own doctrinal statement, they should simply adopt the Westminster Confession. Some point to the presence of a more vibrant Evangelicalism in the South Australian Synod (in both its geographical and non–geographical Presbyteries) as evidence of ongoing Methodist impact there. This overlooks the fact that there were always both revivalist and non–revivalist forms of Methodism in South Australia as everywhere else. Evangelical and liberal expressions of the faith co–existed in Methodism just as they did in the other precedent bodies.

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[23] BOU #10.
[24] Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: Epworth, 1960), 23–38.

Then too, any appeal at all to Methodism, Presbyterianism or Congregationalism can be seen as a backward step and a nostalgic hearkening back to the way things used to be. Thankfully we now have a generation of people who grew up in the Uniting Church and have no special allegiance to any of the precedent bodies. The time is long overdue for Uniting and United churches to develop their own particular voice which, without disregarding the gains from the past, give serious consideration to the results of their own ecumenical achievements and how that work now informs constructive theological work. Having said, that surely a great deal has been lost when Uniting Church candidates for the ministry might have a single one–hour lecture on John Wesley and Methodism and that is the sum total of their engagement with Wesleyan discourse.

Elsewhere, I have described Wesleyan theology as "an attempt to give a systematic exposition to a prior experience of grace received as transformative love. It is an affectional theology of experience grounded in the divine actions of preparing, pardoning, and perfecting. On the human level, this arises out of an encounter with divine presence that issues in both reflection upon and yielding of the heart to the reality of Jesus Christ, leading to reconciliation and transformation."[25] From this I have proposed a modest reframing of three key terms in Wesleyan theology, substituting prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace with the alternative terms, "gestating, birthing, and nurturing grace."[26] If the Reformed confessions take as their starting point, the eternal decree of a predestining God as the key to overcoming human intransigence, the Wesleyan tradition begins with the loving intention of the God of love toward all people. This involves a teleological energy that looks forward to the perfection of humanity along with all creation in which the faith filled with the energy of love that believers now experience is a foretaste of the new creation. I do not highlight these features in order to pit the Wesleyan against the Reformed tradition (we have had enough of that over the centuries) but to give just one example of how distinctively Wesleyan theological insights could serve as a resource for Uniting Church theology if we gave it more air to breathe.

Wesleyan theology has never fit neatly into the mode of systematic theology. The European tradition of "dogmatics" reflects the Enlightenment project with the desire to classify, catalogue, and quantify theology into a consistent architectural edifice. This had its roots, of course, in the medieval tradition of Aquinas and others. John Wesley's theology was more like the Patristic writers and the work of Martin Luther in its pastoral orientation and in the variety of forms it took – letters, memoir, sermons, polemical pieces, biblical commentary, and occasional treatises on a variety of subjects. Foremost interpreters of Wesley's theology have included Randy Maddox and Kenneth J. Collins whose work has significantly extended down to our present time the mid–twentieth century rediscovery of Wesley as a serious theologian.[27] The late Thomas C. Oden took Wesley's writings and attempted to shape them as though Wesley had written a systematic theology, with somewhat mixed results. The work itself was very good, but the arrangement somewhat artificial.[28] Efforts to treat Wesley's theology as if it were (or could be made into) an internally

[25] This section of the paper is dependent upon Glen O'Brien, "Gestating, Birthing, and Nurturing Grace: Reframing Wesleyan Systematics," in *Sanctifying Theology: At the Intersections of Wesleyan Theology, Dogmatics, and Practice*, edited by Jacob Lett and Jonathan M. Platter (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023), 21–36.
[26] O'Brien, "Gestating, Birthing, and Nurturing Grace," 25–34.
[27] Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), along with numerous other monographs; Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).
[28] Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*. 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012–2014).

consistent system face the problem of the messiness of it all. In spite of Wesley's insistence that he never changed his mind about anything, he did, in fact, do so over his long and tumultuous career. Historical theologians need to take this into account and any attempt to reconstruct Wesley's theology as though it were an architectural project along the lines of Aquinas's *Summa* or Calvin's *Institutes* is doomed to flounder on the rocks of the source material's innate inconsistencies. It seems not to occur to some Wesleyan theologians that Wesley may have made some errors or been wrong in some of his conclusions. The late William Abraham, of blessed memory, argued that we should stop speaking of Wesley as a systematic theologian altogether but see him instead an ascetic theologian and a saint.[29]

There has been a welcome trend in recent decades for Wesleyan theologians to take a more relational approach to theological work, especially in the discussion of the doctrine of sanctification. Some of this work has built on the trend toward social Trinitarianism a well as in dialogue with Process thought.[30] Explicitly stating that her work was not an attempt at "a British Methodist systematic theology," Angela Shier–Jones grounded her *Work in Progress*, not in John Wesley's theology but in the lived experience, decisions and statements of the British Methodist people, thus underscoring the communal and experiential foundations of the Wesleyan theological enterprise.[31] Tom Greggs has situated theological method in the believer's sanctification as he aims for "a non–competitive and non–prohibitive systematicity" grounded in the God who "lives in dynamic and superabundant relationality."[32] Filipe Maia, Jeorg Reiger, Upolu Lumā Vaai and others have most recently developed Wesleyan theology in a decolonising direction, highlighting its liberative potential.[33] This contemporary Wesleyan discourse is something that the UCA could not only benefit from but also contribute to. After all, when a Methodist denomination enters successfully into a Uniting or United church it is not so much experiencing its own demise as fulfilling its own calling to ecumenism. In 2018, the World Methodist Council (WMC) reported 80 member churches, around 15% (13) of which were Uniting or United churches. The presence of such churches within the WMC is a living reminder of their ongoing value for the global Methodist communion. They stand ready to make a significant contribution to the Wesleyan theological discourse that sustains that community.

The Function and Limitations of Creeds and Confessions

In considering now the function and limitations of creeds and confessions, it is important first to distinguish between them. A creed differs from a confession in that it has broad ecumenical agreement and purports to express dogmatic claims intended to be embraced by all Christians. Confessions on the other hand are more limited in scope, more parochial. Even if they often make global statements meant to be embraced as propositional truths for all times and places, they are usually closely associated with particular historic developments and the exigencies of history. They are, in effect, saying, "This is what we confess at this

[29] William J. Abraham, "The End of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 7–25.
[30] Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord, eds. *Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2001).
[31] Angela Shier–Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (London: Epworth, 2015), 11–12.
[32] Tom Greggs, "On the Nature, Task, and Method of Theology: A Very Methodist Account," *Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 3 (July 2018): 309 [309–334].
[33] Filipe Maia, ed. *Decolonizing Wesleyan Theology: Theological Engagements from the Underside of Methodism. Wesleyan and Methodist Explorations* (Eugene: Cascade, 2024); Jeorg Reiger and Upolu Lumā Vaai, eds. *Methodist Revolutions: Evangelical Engagements of Church and World* (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2022); David W. Scott and Filipe Maia, *Methodism and American Empire: Reflections on Decolonizing the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2024).

point in time in this context." What the Westminster Divines confessed was not intended as a creed that would be binding on all Christians everywhere in all times and in all places. It was intended, rather, as a draft confession for the reconstituted seventeenth–century Church of England patterned on the Reformed model, a vision which as it turned out was never achieved for the Anglican tradition but was successfully adapted in Scottish Presbyterianism and in Presbyterian and Reformed churches in Britain and the United States. It is essentially a confession of Reformed Christians not a creed for the entire church.

Then we must consider the relationship between creeds, confessions, and Scripture. The privileged place given to Scripture in the Protestant tradition means that confessions must always perform a subordinate function. Indeed, in the Presbyterian tradition the Westminster Confession and other confessions are often referred to as "subordinate standards" with Scripture being seen as the sole rule of faith and practise. Reformed churches such as the Church of Scotland are happy for ministers to subscribe to Scripture alone as a sole source of authority. Other churches in the "wee free" tradition insist further that subscription to the Westminster Confession or other Reformed confession must also take place if ministers are to be seen as in good standing.

If, as is now generally consented to, Scripture itself is a collection of writings subject to contextual factors, a variety of authorship, a multiplicity of theological messages and claims brought together over the exigencies of time, how much more must creeds and confessions also be accompanied by such caveats and limitations. It would be particularly odd for any Protestant tradition to cling jot and tittle to a particular confession as though it alone faithfully distilled scriptural teaching. If sixteenth–century Protestants were convinced that popes and councils may err, should not the heirs of seventeenth–century and eighteenth–century Protestants in the Uniting Church also understand that the Westminster Divines or John Wesley may also have erred? This does not in any way render their work of no value. It merely recognises but there is a contingency about such human efforts to distil divine truth. Augustine expressed it so well in the following maxim. "When the question is asked, what three? human language labours altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given, "Three persons", not that it might be [completely] spoken but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken."[34] What we speak must always be limited and the apophatic tradition reminds us never to claim too much for what we think we know about God. At the same time, we are compelled by the Gospel to be a speaking people, to bear witness to Christ.

Holding Together the Inheritance of Faith with Fresh Words and Deeds

Paragraph 11 of the BOU expresses the Uniting Church's commitment to scholarship, and its intention to "enter into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries." It seeks "an informed faith" through "contact with contemporary thought" so that it may be ready "to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds."[35] These good intentions may be seen as in tension to some extent with an accompanying commitment to a study of the Reformed Confessions and the sermons of John Wesley, since these are more in the nature of historical theology than "contemporary thought."

[34] St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5: 9–10, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post–Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1952–1956), cited in H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 211.
[35] BOU #11.

Are these source documents, therefore, now simply redundant? If not, how are they to be appropriated today in ways that lead to "fresh words and deeds" in contexts very far removed from their original use and purpose? How is the tension between historical theology and living witness to be resolved? These questions require some attention to Paragraph 11 of the *Basis*.

The inclusion of Paragraph 11 was prompted in part by Maynard Davies, a Congregationalist member of the Joint Commission who, in 1968 expressed the need for the new church to show that it was "involved through Christ in the modern world, yet would not discard our heritage."[36] Geoff Thompson has argued that the intent of Paragraph 11 was not to encourage scholarship that employed the kind of "tradition–free neutral reason which undergirded the intellectual foundation of the modern university." Nor was it intended to lead to the "abandonment of any orthodox account of the faith." It aims instead for Christian scholarship which "sustains, nurtures, develops and freshly articulates the classic claims of Christianity [across] a wide range of contemporary literary, historical and scientific enquiry." Christian scholarship does not involve gathering together experts who tell us things but scholars who help create a culture of intellectual enquiry, reflection, and action in the service of the Gospel.[37]

In order to hold historic statements and "fresh words and deeds" together, it is important, first, to recognise the value of creeds and confessions, but not to consider them a second canon alongside Scripture. For Protestants who still wish to hold on to the problematic and outdated *sola scriptura* principle (Scripture is never truly 'alone'), they can only ever be subordinate standards, limited by time and circumstance (as indeed is the Bible itself).[38] As for Catholic and Orthodox perspectives, even if a particular creed such as the Nicene Creed might be given special status it can never be understood in itself to contain all that is meant by an appeal to "Scripture and Tradition."

Second, we should see creeds and confessions as opening up to new readings, highlighting their liberative potential in new contexts. Davis McCaughey helpfully used the analogy of a map, which is a reliable guide on a journey but is not the journey itself and will need to be supplemented by historic changes to the contour of the landscape over which we travel.[39] We are not by any stretch of the imagination attempting the kind of task the Westminster Divines were attempting as they sought to reshape the Church of England. At the same time, we can recognise with them that the chief end of humanity is the enjoyment of God. As for the idea that the Pope is the Antichrist, or that the Catholic Mass is idolatry or that heretics should be punished by the state, these we may leave in the dustbin of history where they belong. The temporary blind spots that assailed the elect at a given historical juncture should no longer keep us from recognising Christ in our Catholic siblings or grace in the Catholic sacraments.

Third, we understand that those documents selected for inclusion in the BOU were selected for purposes that suited the three uniting churches at the time they were chosen. They are situated in their time, place, and context. The

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[36] Cited in Geoff Thompson, "The Church's Ministry of Scholarship: Its Basis and Foundation," in *An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, edited by William W. Emilsen (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2014), 72–73 (69–86).

[37] Thompson, "The Church's Ministry of Scholarship," 74–75

[38] For a discussion of John Wesley's approach to Scripture for a Uniting Church context see Glen O'Brien, "John Wesley, the Uniting Church, and the Authority of Scripture," *Pacifica* 27 (June 2014): 170–83.

[39] J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), 51.

Heidelberg Catechism and Westminster Confession were obvious choices for Presbyterians. The Savoy Confession satisfied Congregationalists, and no Methodist (certainly no Methodist minister) was going to set aside Wesley's Standard Sermons. The Creeds and Confessions that are formally recognised in the BOU were not intended, however, to be a cul-de-sac. The founders were not saying, "Here we stand!" Paragraph 11 makes this clear in its gratitude to God "for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr."[40]

The really puzzling thing is why it took so long before the 17th Assembly in 2024, adopted the Continuing Witness process. The Belhar Confession, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and *Laudato si'* are now formally recognised by the Uniting Church as documents of "Continuing Witness" and study materials have been prepared for the use of presbyteries and congregations.[41] The work of the Task Force on Continuing Witness will likely turn out to be as determinative an expression of the UCA's identity as has been our Covenant with Congress, our identification as a multicultural church, and our ability to live with difference over sexuality. This will especially be the case if the Continuing Witness process manages to succeed in its intention to become an ongoing pattern of life in our church. Hearing, receiving, studying, and living from witnesses that originate beyond our own interconnected councils keep us from an unhealthy focus on our own internal ecology so that we can breathe the fresh air of a larger reality.

Conclusion

The Creeds, Confessions, and Standard Sermons identified in the BOU can be understood as "Evangelical", not in the narrow sense that the word has tragically come to convey, but in the classic sense of setting forth the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ.[42] They are "Reformed", not as a synonym for "Five Point Calvinist" (since they include the so–called "Arminian" doctrines of John Wesley), but in the sense that they exhibit the key themes of grace so important to the Protestant Reformers, especially as they were given a new and creative iteration by Karl Barth and others in the twentieth century. They are only "Redundant" when they are left embedded fossil–like in the rock strata laid down in 1977. Like all theological statements, they are limited by their context, by the human weakness of their authors, and by their linkage to a European theological tradition that has now become woven into a far more diverse global patchwork of living faith. They are neither to be slavishly adhered to nor surreptitiously set aside. Ongoing engagement with them enables us both to know, assess, discriminate among, and build upon the ideas they elucidate so that we can be a church that is Evangelical and Reformed, but also Ecumenical.

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[40] BOU, #11.

[41] "Continuing Witness," *Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*, accessed 9 October 2025. https://uniting.church/continuing–witness–resources/

[42] The late Ian Breward provided a helpful portrait of Evangelicalism in the Uniting Church in a chapter entitled, "Evangelical Christianity," in William W. Emilsen, ed. *An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2014), 297–310.

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Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

AssMin	Assembly Minutes
BOU	Basis of Union
CS	Covenanting Statement
RP	Revised Preamble
UCMC	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
UCAConst	Uniting Church Constitution
UCARegs2025	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
UIW2	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

UCA	Uniting Church in Australia
UAICC	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
WCC	World Council of Churches
ASC	Assembly Standing Committee

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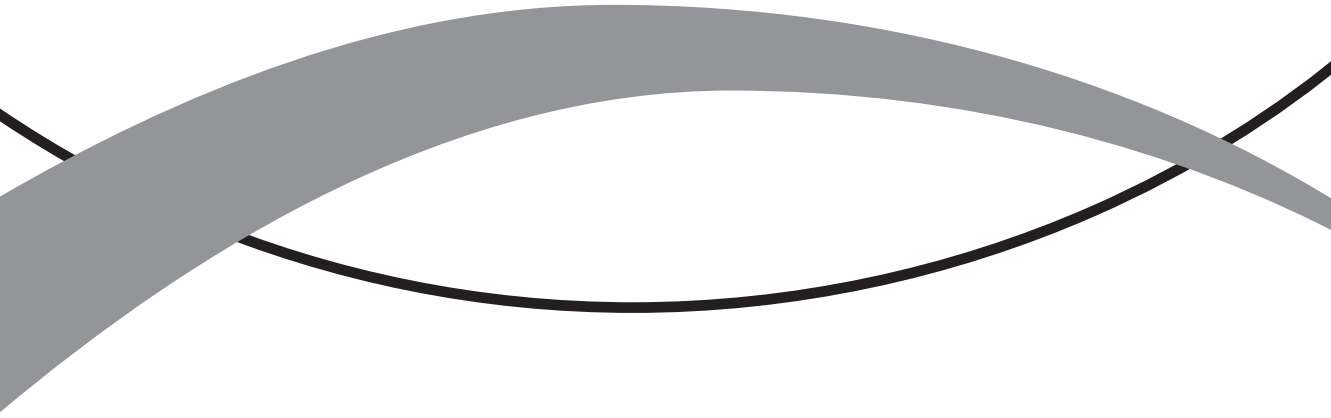

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