

4. The Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union

Introduction to the Doctrine Section

The formal discussions among Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists about “Church Union” began in 1904 and concluded in 1908. One of the five sub-committees into which the Joint Committee on Church Union divided itself had the task of writing the Doctrine section of the Basis of Union.

The members of the sub-committee, in writing the Doctrine section, kept a number of principles in mind:

- First, they decided to set out “the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us.”² In other words, they did not try to describe all aspects of church doctrine but only to outline what they judged to be the key points of the Christian tradition.
- Second, they asserted that they saw scripture as “the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life,”³ meaning they also recognized that any “faith statement” or “statement of doctrine” was always a “subordinate standard” (i.e., subordinate to scripture).
- Third, the members of the sub-committee did not see themselves as creating something new when writing the Doctrine section but, rather, as standing in a tradition that stretched back to the beginning of the Christian Church and, indeed, beyond it to the people of Israel. That tradition included the great creeds of the Christian Church during the early centuries of its existence, as well as the doctrinal and credal statements made during and since the Protestant Reformation by the various denominations that were coming together. They understood the Doctrine section as a contemporary effort to state “our common faith” in the context of the age (the early 20th century) and the particular purpose of bringing these denominations together in a United Church.
- Fourth, as Thomas Kilpatrick (a member of the Doctrine Sub-Committee) asserted in a book on the Basis of Union, sub-committee members believed that while the Christian tradition contained eternal truths, the particular words used to express those truths were time-bound. He wrote:

Let it further be noted that this doctrinal statement makes no claim to infallibility or finality. The substance or essence of the Christian faith is here, communicated to believing men by the Word and Spirit of God, and received by them in loyalty and humility. But the form of human speech in which they convey their message to the church and the world has the imperfection, which must belong to all efforts to express in forms of human thought, and language, meanings that are eternal, and divine. 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.⁴

2. “The Basis of Union, 2.0,” *The Manual, 2007*, 34th rev. ed. (Toronto: United Church Publishing House), p. 14.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Thomas B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1928), pp. 63–64. *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, and Living* 10

In composing the Doctrine section, the sub-committee looked in particular at two then-contemporary Presbyterian statements of faith, one from the Presbyterian Church of England and the other from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. They also, however, drew one article largely from a Canadian Congregational document and gave attention to historic Methodist concerns at various places in the Doctrine Statement.

The Doctrine Sub-Committee accomplished its task with relative ease, especially in comparison with subsequent efforts at church union in other parts of the world. Those involved in the process between 1904 and 1908 attributed that relative ease to the fact that theological developments during the latter half of the 19th century had brought the three denominational traditions much closer together, in terms of what members of each denomination believed, than had been the case at an earlier time in history.

The Doctrine Sub-Committee was also influenced, as was the whole movement toward Church Union in these three denominations, by the conviction that Canada, in the midst of dramatic population and industrial growth in the early 20th century, needed a strong national Protestant church to help the nation meet the challenges of the early 20th century. While theology or church doctrine was regarded as important, the movement toward Church Union was motivated primarily by the practical gains that could result from a union of these three denominations.

The result of their work was a preamble that set the Doctrine section in the context of the centrality of Jesus Christ for the Christian tradition, the primacy of scripture, and the tradition of the Christian Church as found in earlier statements of doctrine. Following this preamble, the sub-committee set out 20 Articles that, in its judgment, outlined key aspects of the Christian tradition and also represented “the common faith” of the uniting churches in the early 20th century.

Note: The Doctrine section of the Basis of Union is not the subject of this remit. It is offered here as background material only.

Text of the Doctrine Section

Doctrine

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 endeavour 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 Judgement, 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.