



The Aesthetics of Christian Mission:

New Creation and Mission in *The Basis of Union*

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The *Basis of Union* presents a vivid picture of the church's place in God's mission for humanity. 'The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself".'¹ With this quotation from 2 Corinthians, the *Basis* evokes the universal scope of the church's confession: when we confess Christ as risen, we are saying something not just about ourselves, but about the whole of reality.

Paragraph 3 continues by sketching the earthly mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus announced God's grace to the poor in spirit, and throughout his whole life, culminating in his death on the cross, he performed the proper human response to God—a response of total loving obedience and trust. In a world that has said 'No' to God, Jesus' life and death are one great simple 'Yes'. In Jesus, the fallen creation turns back to God. Here, with just a few bold strokes, the *Basis* sketches out the christological core of the church's faith: that the history of Jesus is both the divine turning towards humanity and the human turning towards God—'truly God' and 'truly human' at the same time, to use the classical language. Because Jesus Christ is both the divine outreach towards humanity and the reciprocal human movement towards God, he unites God and creation in his own life, repairing the broken friendship between the two.

From here, the *Basis* makes its central affirmation about Jesus—an affirmation that pervades the whole document from start to finish. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! This Easter joy is the whole secret of the *Basis of Union*:

In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love. To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith.

For the ancient church, the message of Easter isn't primarily an affirmation of our own personal salvation or our own interior spiritual life. When the early Christians confessed Christ as risen, they didn't mean that he is risen into the hearts of his followers, or that he had become their 'personal lord and saviour', or merely a private way to inner peace. The joy of Easter is universal joy, cosmic joy, joy for all creation. Since the dawn of time, death has exercised a grisly sovereignty over God's creation. Death is universal and irresistible. But Christ's resurrection is the death of death: it is the end of death's regime and the beginning of a new order of life and righteousness and joy. In an ancient Easter hymn,

¹ Quotations in this section are from the *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3.

the Christian community sings: 'Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death!' Likewise in the church's iconographic tradition, the resurrection is depicted as a cosmic event: Christ stands upon the broken gates of hell, seizing Adam and Eve by the wrists and dragging them up from the darkness of hell, while all around him a new human community has begun to form.

What the icon says in line and colour, the *Basis of Union* says in words: the whole creation is being pulled into orbit around the crucified one as he rises to God's right hand. The resurrection of Jesus is God's sovereign 'claim over the whole of creation'. Christ inaugurates not a new religion, but a new world order. This is why the *Basis* immediately adds that 'all people' are now called to respond in faith: there is nobody for whom Christ's resurrection is irrelevant, no human story which is not now part of this great story of the renewal of all things under Christ.

The resurrection penetrates to the very roots of creation in order to transform all things into the kingdom of God. The *Basis* then goes on to articulate the church's role in this cosmic drama:

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring...

The powers of this world—even the sovereignty of death itself—lie defeated by Christ's rising. Confessing this risen one as Lord is thus essentially not a matter of private devotion, or just an expression of the internal priorities of one group within society. It is essentially a cosmic claim about creation as a whole. As the *Basis* puts it, as soon as we have confessed Jesus as Lord over our own life, we find ourselves implicated in a cosmic drama, confessing Christ as 'head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity'. What we experience in the church is not some special 'Christian' experience, but a foretaste of the reconciliation and renewal of all things.

Only from this lofty vantage point can we begin to see what the church's mission is all about. The *Basis* calls the church a community of reconciliation—a community that gives a foretaste of the transfiguration of all things under the light of Christ. In the Uniting Church's inaugural service in June 1977, Davis McCaughey proclaimed this theological vision of Christian mission. Only because Christ is risen does the church have anything to say and anything to do; only because Christ is risen are we involved in mission. The cross, McCaughey said, is the secret of history. 'The living crucified One still reigns. That

casts light on the period of human history in which we live'.² Because Christ is risen, he cannot be viewed merely as the founder of a religious sect. He does not establish a specialised religious society: he overcomes the world and makes everything new. To confess Christ as risen is not an expression of private devotion; it is not the cultivation of the cohesion and identity of a marginalised social group. It is a shamelessly universal claim, a claim about reality, about the whole of history, about the secret truth of every human story.

Thus the church is not another worldly institution alongside others, looking for ways to expand its own power and protect its own interests. The church is not another religious group alongside others, earnestly protecting its own social cohesiveness, its own boundaries and identity and criteria of belonging. Nor is the church itself the centre of God's activity in the world. The divine activity is centred in just one place: the empty tomb of the crucified one, a grave in which the seeds of the new creation were planted.

Christ the form of a new creation

This cosmic vision of reconciliation owes much to the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose theology centres on this theme: that the world has already been reconciled to God in Christ. In his great work on *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer writes: 'There is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God.' We can therefore no longer speak of the world 'as if it were lost'.³ Nor can we speak of church and world as two different realities—as though the church were a redeemed oasis within the secular, godless desert of the world. Bonhoeffer argues that there are not two realities, not two distinct 'realms' of church and world, but only the one realm—what he calls 'Christ-reality',⁴ the world that has been reconciled to God in Christ. The church's calling then is not to bring about the world's reconciliation, not to build the kingdom, not to absorb the world into the sphere of Christian influence—all this would amount to a denial of the resurrection, a denial that there is only *one* reality, the reality of a reconciled humanity. The church doesn't have to achieve the world's transformation. As Bonhoeffer sees it, our role is both more modest and more profound: to show the world its own 'ultimate foundation' in the love of God revealed in Christ.⁵ Our vocation is to be a mirror in which the world sees its own hidden identity. In Bonhoeffer's words:

The church of Jesus Christ is the place ... in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed. This space of the church does not, therefore, exist just for itself, but its existence is already always something that reaches far beyond it. This is because it is not the space of a cult that would have to fight for its own existence in the world. Rather, the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where it is proclaimed

² J. Davis McCaughey, 'Sermon Preached at the Service of Inauguration of the Uniting Church', in *Fresh Words and Deeds: The McCaughey Papers*, ed. Peter Mateson and Christian Mostert, Melbourne, David Lovell, 2004, p. 75.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 6*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2005, p. 65.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 58.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 63.

and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, that God so loved the world that God gave his Son for it. The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God. It is not true that the church intends to or must spread its space out over the space of the world. It desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ.... Otherwise the church becomes a 'religious society' that fights in its own interest and thus has ceased to be the church of God in the world.⁶

So for Bonhoeffer, the church holds up this mirror to the world, showing the world that it is already loved by God, already befriended by God, already reconciled to God.

As soon as the church begins to exist for its own interests—its own numerical size, institutional stability, social influence, or indeed any kind of worldly 'success'⁷—it ceases to be the church and becomes just another worldly power in rivalry with all the others. The way the church remains faithful to its own message is precisely by having *no interest* of its own: the church's only interest is the interest of the whole world. The church occupies no special place in the world, since our commitment is to *every* place. Paradoxically, then, the church becomes distinctive only as it leaves behind everything that would usually pertain to social distinctiveness. We become the church only as we look beyond ourselves to the work of Christ in the renewal of all things. As Bonhoeffer puts it, any distinctive churchly sphere is 'abolished' by Christ himself,⁸ who rises into all the world and draws us with him as his witnesses.

This is what the *Basis of Union* envisages with its language of pilgrimage. We are a pilgrim people, always on the way into the world, simply because we confess that the crucified one is risen and active in all the world. Christ's activity doesn't centre on gathering the church; his mission is to gather all things into the kingdom of God. The light of his resurrection is shed upon the whole human world—indeed, upon the whole creation—and the church is called to testify to that light, to go out on pilgrimage through life, inviting people everywhere—wherever they are still screwing their eyes shut against the light—to take courage, and open their eyes, and see.

The aesthetics of mission

We sometimes think of Christian mission as a form of persuasion: as though what the world really needs is clear ideas, compelling proofs, convincing arguments. Or we often think of mission as something to be achieved: as though what the world really needs is a well organised project, a better method of modifying existing social conditions.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 63–64.

⁷ Bonhoeffer is especially severe in his denunciation of the ideology of success: *Ethics*, pp. 89–90.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 64.

But when we consider Christian mission in the context of the *Basis of Union*, we find that mission is more like an exercise in artistic creativity than a logical argument or a sociological experiment. The church's calling is to *show* something: like those characters in the Gospel of John, our message is always simply, 'Come and see!' Christian mission is an aesthetic vocation. Bonhoeffer remarks that 'all things appear as in a distorted mirror if they are not seen and recognised in God.'⁹ The church's calling is to cultivate truthful seeing: to invite others to see each particular situation in the light of Christ.

The risen Christ is the world's artist: he is a sculptor who takes the raw materials of our fragmented world and refashions them, slowly bringing forth the beauty of a new creation. This isn't the kind of sculpture that uses just a few bits and pieces: the 'whole creation' is being made new, as the *Basis of Union* says. Every bit of creation, every human life, every neighbourhood and institution, is a found object that is lovingly taken up by the artist and incorporated into the finished work. But most of these found objects don't realise that they are part of something new and beautiful: most of the world doesn't yet realise that it is being lovingly transfigured by the one who makes all things new. And so the church's role is draw attention to this, to help each person and place to see its own part in Christ's great reconciling artwork.

This means the church has a dual role: our mission is both to *see* and to *show*. Transfixed by the sight of Christ's creative genius in action, we call others to come and see. We participate in Christ's creativity through our own creative witness. We reveal little glimpses of the self-revealing beauty of the risen one. Our mission is to ambush the world with glimpses of glory: to show that the real secret of the world is not death but life, not chaos but form, not ugliness but beauty, not inert materiality but transfigured humanity.

The church is like a flash mob: planted secretly throughout society, doing all the same ordinary things that everybody does, but waiting for our cue to surprise the world with sudden glimpses of glory. Often enough the church seems invisible, quietly submerged in the ordinary rhythms of society—yet in our hearts we hear a different rhythm, the song of creation made new.

Whenever we gather in worship, we proclaim together, 'heaven and earth are full of your glory!' The secret of everything—the secret of every place, of every human life, of every institution and relationship—is the glory of God in Christ. That moment of liturgical celebration is just the focal point of what we are *always* called to be doing: pointing to glimpses of glory in our world; identifying Christ's artwork in every life and every place; ambushing our world with moments of transfiguration.

So this is an aesthetic vocation. Wherever we participate in Christ's transfiguring work, it becomes apparent—in small, partial glimpses—that the world's deepest foundations are not selfishness or violence or competition or scarcity, but an infinite depth of love and self-giving. This doesn't mean Christians should go around being nice to everybody: part of Christian mission is challenging injustice and subverting

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 48.

oppressive social structures. But the whole rationale for social justice is simply that the world is loved by God. Christ the sculptor is remaking all things. As part of his artwork, we bear witness against the delusional powers of violence and division. Christ the artist is forming all things into glory. As we see that glory, we show it to others by bearing witness against the negative glory of chaos and destruction. Prophetic witness in the name of beauty: that is what social justice means, that is why it matters.

All this crystallises whenever we gather in worship. At the pulpit and the table we see creation made new, and that teaches us to discern Christ's transfiguring activity elsewhere in the world. Because we have heard Christ in the preaching of the Word and seen him in the breaking of bread, we are also able to hear him and see him—and to help others to see and hear him—in our local neighbourhoods, in the public library, the local school, the university, the coffee shop or skate park or housing development. All these local structures and institutions can be reimagined as places of human flourishing, sites of reconciliation, venues of transfiguration. As Christ's work is aesthetic, so the church's engagement with the world is a creative task—a creative showing of the artistry of Christ.

Let me give an example. I know some Uniting Church ministers in Sydney who have formed an online community of Christians who play the online fantasy game, *World of Warcraft*. It is not that they have a straightforward Christian interpretation of the game, or a precise prefabricated strategy of how Christians should engage in that environment. But they have identified a particular social environment in which millions of people congregate every day, and they are looking for ways to reimagine that environment as a venue of reconciliation and human flourishing. In that weird and violent virtual landscape, they are looking about for glimpses of glory, glimmers of a transfigured world. This kind of thing would be impossible if you waited until you first had a perfectly defined mission strategy. It requires flexibility, sensitivity, and creative improvisation. Can even a virtual world be transfigured by the light of the resurrection? If Christ is risen, can we say he is absent from *any* human environment?

Worship: the lifeblood of mission

So the church's identity and its mission are one and the same. The church has no internal identity prior to its engagement with the world. Its very existence—even its poverty, weakness, insecurity—is meant to demonstrate that 'he is not here; he is risen' (Luke 24:6). The word of life and love that Christ addresses to the church is only the echo of a word addressed to the whole creation. Thus the church itself has no good except the common good. Wherever the church becomes withdrawn and introspective and self-seeking, the confession of Christ withers. The life of Christ ceases to be available when we want it only for ourselves. We discover life and joy and the power of resurrection only as we are drawn out beyond ourselves into mission. As Davis McCaughey remarked in his 1995 Norman and Mary Millar at the Queensland Synod: 'After all, God is not sitting here in the Church waiting to be taken out there into the world. He is the One who goes before us in all our doings.'¹⁰

¹⁰ McCaughey, 'Virtue in the World', in *Fresh Words and Deeds*, p. 38.

So while a business or corporation might come up with a 'mission statement' based on its own particular institutional identity, for the church it is really the opposite: our identity as a church is not something we formulate for ourselves. It is something that comes to us—as though by accident—when we forget ourselves and lose ourselves in the joyous work of mission. We will never find out who we are by sitting around wondering, or by delving even deeper into our own identity: our identity is something that will surprise us, ambush us, as we walk through the world proclaiming, 'he is not here; he is risen!'

Congregational worship is the real centre of mission, since it secures our status as pilgrims, calling us beyond the barriers we have built, connecting us with something that lies beyond our own resources. In the preaching of the Word, the church listens to a voice that speaks from beyond itself. In the celebration of the sacrament, the church partakes of a gift that it never possesses but always receives anew.

Mission, then, is not the church's external action. It is what is most *internal* to the church's life: it is the church's 'liturgy', its work (*leiturgia*) of being located where Christ is to be found. Every worship service is a form of letting-go, relinquishing the fantasy that we hold Christ in our possession. For at the pulpit and the table, we find that Christ is already there ahead of us, offering food and drink to 'unworthy but welcome guests.'¹¹ We are guests at Christ's table. The church is not the privileged few who possess Christ. The church is one beggar telling another where to find bread. And we *become* beggars every time we gather to hear holy words and eat holy food. To gather in worship is to be dislocated and dispossessed. Our own identity is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3.3). Our own life is waiting for us beyond ourselves—so that every worship gathering is also a dispossession of whatever sense of belonging we might have made for ourselves. In this way, congregational worship is the very lifeblood of Christian mission: it draws us out beyond ourselves to meet Christ who calls to us and feeds us as he goes ahead of us into all the world.

And there is a big difference between the living beauty of the congregation and the impersonal machinery of the corporation. In worship, we see not techniques of production or methods of social manipulation, but the beauty of transfigured life. In the same way, the church's mission must always be pointing towards the 'humanisation' of the world. The church resists anything that reduces society to mechanistic laws, or something that can be manipulated by management and technique. This means the 'success' of our mission can be gauged only in qualitative terms—in terms of life and joy and flourishing—not in quantitative terms. As soon as we start trying to measure mission numerically, we will find ourselves hypnotised by the coercive methods of sociology and management. But where mission is understood aesthetically, it is no longer a numbers game: would you evaluate a painting by counting the number of brush strokes?

Transfigured lives: the witness of holiness

Art, at its best, does not represent certain ideas or experiences or even personal perceptions: it represents

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Mission and Christology*, Brynmawr, Welsh Members Council, Church Mission Society, pp. 20–21.

life itself—life in all its startling objective clarity. And that is what the church's mission is like too. Is not this the calling of every congregation and of every Christian person? Not to represent certain ideas about God or certain personal experiences of the divine – but to represent, on the canvas of our own lives, the simple *fact* of life with God, life in God's world, life under the relentless drenching downpour of God's blessing. Think of those congregations that really stand out in their local communities. It's not just that these are groups who have succeeded in getting their message heard above the clamour of the world: it is rather that these Christian communities have themselves become a sort of artwork, something vivid and real, something that captures the imagination of our reality-starved world.

Mission plans and strategies and goals have their proper place. We should constantly be returning to this very simple truth: that the real essence of mission is transformed lives—lives transfigured by love and trust and faithfulness to the way of Christ. The Russian theologian Pavel Florensky has described the holy life as 'the art of arts'.¹² The holy life is a living icon, a work of divine art, a striking aesthetic witness to the way Christ's life is transfiguring all things and gathering them into glory. The sanctified life is simply a life aligned with Christ, and therefore with reality. If the perspectives of such a life seem skewed, if its colours seem too bright and piercing, that is only because we have become unaccustomed to reality: holiness seems strange and arresting only because our world is so bent out of shape, so grey and colourless. Holy lives are strange because they are so real, so beautiful, so astonishingly *human*. Karl Barth once said that when people see a Christian life, they ought to be confronted by 'the image of a strangely human person'.¹³ Before anything else, this is the witness that we owe the world—the enticing aesthetic witness of transfigured flesh, sanctified humanity, creation made new.

Criteria for Christian mission

I have been trying to evoke something of the immense cosmic vision of the *Basis of Union*, and of what this might mean for the church's mission today. So let me conclude by offering some criteria for making decisions about Christian mission. We can be tempted to tack the word 'mission' on to anything and everything—but the *Basis of Union* invites us to think quite clearly and specifically about mission as our creative involvement in the transfiguring, reconciling artistry of the risen crucified one. So whenever we are considering specific projects and directions and initiatives, here are some questions that might help us to discern where Christ's mission is to be found in our local communities:

- Are we still presupposing a split between two realities, church and world? Are we trying to expand the church's influence? Or are we showing that there is really only *one* reality, one 'Christ-reality' that encompasses all things?
- Are we trying to make our Christian institutions stronger, more secure, and more successful? Or are we willing to be dispossessed as we reach outwards, following Christ in faithful pilgrimage into an uncertain world?
- In small, particular, local ways, are we trying to make our world a more fully human place? Or are

¹² Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, trans. Boris Jakim, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 9.

¹³ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1981, p. 204.

we capitulating to the techniques of corporate culture, the culture of social manipulation and the 'dead mechanism of things'?¹⁴

- Are we cultivating human life's 'intrinsic claim to joy'?¹⁵ Are we cultivating the capacity for festivity and celebration and blessing—a sense of the sheer joy of being human in God's new world? Community development, for example, is not just about giving people houses, but also about giving them *homes*, and helping them to transform their environments into places of festivity.¹⁶
- Are we promoting reconciliation and integration, and resisting every tendency towards fragmentation, disintegration, and disorder?
- Are we participating in the new regime of the risen one? Are we reflecting Christ's judgment on the false powers of this world?
- Within our worshipping congregations, are we cultivating the disciplines of prayer and Christian faithfulness? Are we deliberately enculturating our members into the church's living tradition of prayer? Are we celebrating the presence of holy lives among us—especially those elderly members who have come to exemplify the way of Christ? (What a difference it might make if we could stop viewing the elderly as part of the church's problem, and start to see them as one of the church's richest spiritual resources!)
- In all that we do, are we somehow clarifying and expounding the church's confession of Christ as risen? When someone asks, 'Why are you doing *that*?', the answer ought to be: 'because Christ is risen!' Whenever the church plans to do something, we might ask ourselves: could *this* plan or this decision be explained by the fact that Christ is risen? If the answer is no, then we're probably just engaged in our own business—and we shouldn't call it 'mission'.
- Finally, in all that we do as a church, are we somehow pressing towards the verbal articulation of the gospel of Christ? I don't mean to sound dull and old-fashioned, but if we are faithful to the theological vision of the *Basis of Union*, we have to say that the church's mission will tend to crystallise around the verbal communication of Christ. Not everything the church does is directly 'evangelistic', but it should all be energised by the direct, unembarrassed, verbal proclamation of Christ as risen. Any activity that *can't* somehow be expounded in words—translated into evangelism—is probably just a good activity, rather than a missional one.

Of course, there is nothing new in any of this. What I am really proposing is simply a commitment to the vision of the *Basis of Union*: the church as a pilgrim people, riding the crest of the wave of a new creation, finding specific local ways to show 'that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation'.

Sergius Bulgakov has described the ultimate goal of Christ's work as 'the pentecostalisation of the world'¹⁷—the transfiguration of all things under the light of the risen crucified one, who shines with

¹⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 214–15.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 188.

¹⁶ On the aesthetic dimension of social justice, see William Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011, ch. 9.

¹⁷ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004.

the glory of the Father in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Let us be alert and discerning, so that we can *see* that pentecostalisation wherever it is at work in our world and wherever we see it, let us point it out to others, calling people in our local communities to 'come and see!'

Finally though, and most importantly, we must never forget that God's glory has a particular shape and form. Christ's cross is his glory; his humility is his exaltation. The hidden depth of creation is disclosed not in strong, successful, admirable lives, but in *cruciform* lives. The church is that community that takes upon itself the form of the cross. The glory that is even now at work, transfiguring all things, is the glory of Christ crucified and risen.

The call to mission, then, is really nothing more or less than the call to discipleship. Christ's glory will flame out from among us when with glad hearts we stoop down, take up the cross, and follow him.