

Build up our common life,  
for the sake of our witness to your Son  
and for the sake of his kingdom.  
In the strength of the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Daily Devotions  
*from the United Reformed Church*

The Basis of Union  
part 1



Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July – Friday 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020

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## Introduction

Unlike Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox or Lutheran churches we don't always recite a credal statement in our weekly worship; sometimes leading to a

These communities in many ways shared a very obvious common life, of meals, service, study and worship spent together. Baptism was a big deal which came with a high cost particularly for those coming to Christian faith from the higher echelons of imperial Roman society. In many ways early Christians had little choice but to stand together.

We might ponder what this idea of 'common life' referred to in the *Basis of Union* means for us now. Perhaps as we live now with Covid 19 and the experience of lockdown and how our churches had to respond to that we are better placed to think again about what it means to live as Christian community. The idea that we might belong to each other is a tricky one for our modern ears. We might well struggle with any suggestion that someone else can tell us what we should(n't) do with our energy, time, and money. A more helpful way of looking at this might be around mutual accountability. I am accountable to you as you are accountable to me. We are called to love and serve each other and all people. We are called to engage in Church through the local church. We are interconnected and interdependent as individuals and as local churches and as denominations. There is a sense that when one limps we all limp but also when one limps others can help carry that friend until they have regained their strength and if they can't we can help carry our friend. Our relationship with Christ is deeper, our friendships are stronger, our service is more effective, when we pray, stand, and serve side by side.

## Prayer

Creator God,  
we give thanks for the relationships between us.  
Help us to remember and celebrate these relationships  
in good times and bad.  
Remind us to celebrate one another.  
Help us to depend on one another  
both in good times and bad.

## Friday 31st July Basis of Union 17

The Rev'd Sarah Moore is Transition Champion for the National Synod of Scotland, and the Assistant Clerk of the General Assembly.

### Acts 5.12-16

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

### Basis

The United Reformed Church gives thanks for the common life of the Church, wherein the people of God, being made members one of another, are called to love and serve one another and all people everywhere and to grow together in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Participating in the common life of the Church within the local church, they enter into the life of the Church throughout the world. With that whole Church they also share in the life of the Church in all ages and in the communion of saints have fellowship with the Church triumphant. (16)

### Reflection

Recently I read New Testament scholar Paula Gooder's book, 'Phoebe', that imagines the story of the deacon named thus referred to by St Paul in Romans 16.1. Gooder, an Anglican laywoman currently serving as Canon Chancellor at St Paul's Cathedral in London, imagines the Church and churches at the time of Acts as tight knit communities of people for whom encounter with Jesus Christ quite literally brought a sense of liberation.

sense that the United Reformed Church doesn't have firm or fixed beliefs. We do, of course, use the *Statement on the Nature, Faith and Order* at inductions and ordinations of ministers and elders and this is reasonably well known in its responsorial form. Less well known, however, is our *Basis of Union*. The *Basis* is a foundational constitutional document which sets out our theology. It was adopted at the formation of the United Reformed Church, can only be amended by the General Assembly after a full consultation process. It is the theological foundation upon which our church is built and deserves to be better known. Over the next few weeks we are going to be reading through the *Basis*, often with a piece of Scripture, and reflect upon each part of our theological foundations.

### Sunday 12th July Psalm 5

The Rev'd John A Young, retired URC minister National Synod of Scotland, member Giffnock URC

Hear O Lord my urgent prayer	3: By Your mercy and Your grace
As I come to seek Your care	I will come before Your face
With each morning light I raise	Fearing foes I bow to pray
Voice and heart in prayer and praise	Lead me Lord make straight my way

2: You do not delight in sin	4: Save me from deceitful ways
Or in tales that liars spin	Liars' throats are open graves
Haughty ones You will defeat	Make them bear their guilt O Lord
With all those who love deceit	For by choice they spurn Your word

5: Let those trusting You sing praise, grant them joy to fill their days;  
those who always seek the right are protected by Your might

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You can hear a verse of the Psalm sung here  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-oqXg-sgC8>

## Reflection

Given Covid 19's unwelcome progress, the Psalmist's urgent plea for God's support during a time of distress and anxiety strikes a ready chord in us.

Verses 1 'You do not delight', 3 'By Your mercy and Your grace', 5 'Let those trusting You sing praise', are directed towards God. They express the singer's need for and faith in God. The remaining two, verse 3 'You do not delight in sin', and, 4 'Save me from deceitful ways', deal with the activity and the fate of the singer's enemies.

The Psalm is an open hearted morning prayer, with the singer watching and waiting for a sign from God. A new assurance is sought, not just that that God will hear and answer, but above all deal with the liars, the haughty, the deceitful; the enemies who so beset life. The singer acknowledges God's own character as merciful and gracious, which contrasts totally with the character of those who spin lies. The psalmist is not above reminding God that they should be hoist with their own petard. While we might balk at describing our enemies as having throats 'like open graves' the singer has no such qualms. This powerful and emotional appeal to God is rooted in the belief that God will judge justly and act to save those who come for help.

God's protection will be extended to all who take refuge in God's merciful and steadfast love. We, on our part, though we cannot but be dismayed from time to time, should know that we shall be given cause to praise God's loving kindness again, and again.

## Prayer

Faithful God, even when we prove faithless, come close to strengthen and support. When doubts and anxieties press in, let your Spirit's calm and comfort relieve. Help us to rise above ourselves and trust you for the future you offer us in the life of your Son, our living Lord, Jesus Christ Amen.

In some traditions of the Church, the daily offering of bread and wine emphasises the closeness of Jesus and the regular receiving of his renewing life which is possible. In other traditions, a quarterly offering emphasises the key significance of the bread and wine, a gift binding the people of God together, but not to be taken for granted by too regular reception.

While in the United Reformed Church, Holy Communion was traditionally offered on a monthly basis, the union with the Churches of Christ brought into the URC the practice of a weekly celebration. The *Basis of Union* does not refer to the regularity of the celebration, only to the significance of this. Local congregations have the freedom to decide how regular this celebration might be.

The Lord's Supper lies at the heart of the Churches' life. It draws together, through the power of the Holy Spirit, both the brokenness of Jesus' body and the new life promised in the resurrection. Holy Communion is both the point of renewal and of the sending out of God's people. At the Holy Table, the people are gathered together as one people in one place, to receive again the new life in Christ, and drawn into God's offering of love reaching out across the world, in each place and at all times.

## Prayer

Loving God,  
You are ever present in bread and wine.  
In and through this holy sacrament,  
may I know again that I am forgiven.  
Renew my life,  
build the life of the community,  
draw me into sharing in your offering for the world.  
Open my heart to receive you.  
as I receive, may my life overflow with your love for all people. Amen.

Show us a vision of your Church with the boundaries you want.  
We pray in the name of the only Head of the Church,  
even Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### Thursday 30th July Basis of Union 16

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired from pastoral charge, active ecumenically and theologically, member of St Andrew's Church, Ealing.

#### St Matthew 26:26-28

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

#### Basis

The United Reformed Church celebrates the gospel sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine poured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. United with him and with the whole Church on earth and in heaven, his people gathered at his table present their sacrifice of thanksgiving and renew the offering of themselves, and rejoice in the promise of his coming in glory. (15)

#### Reflection

The breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine play a key role in Jesus' life and ministry. This offering takes place at a particular moment on Jesus' path of suffering leading to the Cross. Yet it is also a gift given for all of time. It is the gift of Jesus' renewing presence and points to the nourishment Jesus gives, week in, week out, day in, day out.

#### Monday 13th July Basis of Union 1

The Rev'd Dr John McNeil Scott is principal of the Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College in Glasgow

#### Scripture Deuteronomy 6:4 and Psalm 72:9

*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad!*

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!

*Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va-ed.*

Blessed is God's glorious majesty forever and ever.

#### Basis

There is but one Church of the one God. He called Israel to be his people, and in fulfilment of the purpose then begun he called the Church into being through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. (1)

#### Reflection

The *Basis* begins with the Church. But theologically the starting point is with God – God's one-ness and God's purpose and initiative in calling the Church into being. All the rest is, as we might think, footnoted elaboration of that great truth. All that follows is response and outworking.

What the *Basis* claims for the Church is stark, startling and wonderful. The characteristic mode of divine action is shown to be "calling into being". The God who called and calls all that is into being, in due time called the Church.

Are we able to sit with that understanding for a moment? Just a moment before we go teasing out the implications and difficulties, qualifications and functions and limits of the church.

There is time enough for all of that, the *Basis* will tease out some small elements of it all in later sections - not least in that *Statement on the Nature, Faith and Order* that we have heard so often.

The *Basis* begins with the 'one Church', not with the United Reformed Church.

The truth we hear in the first sentences of *Basis* is beautiful in its generative instability. It is supersaturated with meaning and questions. Questions of how this called-into-being community connects with Israel, and with the plural world, and with the Kingdom of Jesus' teaching, are straining to be asked.

But for today: "There is but one Church of the one God"... called into being "through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit".

Prayer

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!

One God of all that is living through history  
always in community calling community into being in your image

Let us love you with all our heart and soul and might  
Blessed is God's glorious majesty forever and ever. Amen

[Tuesday 14th July Basis of Union 2](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow.

Ephesians 5: 25 - 30

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church,

URC, Baptism was a major issue in the negotiations as the Churches of Christ tradition did not recognise infant Baptism. This paragraph explains how this issue was resolved: accepting both stances as legitimate while protecting individuals from being pushed into a position they did not themselves hold.

The paragraph modestly fails to trumpet what an extraordinary agreement this was. Many churches in the Congregational tradition had split in previous centuries because some members came to believe in believers' baptism and it was widely assumed that it was impossible to have a church where both convictions could live alongside each other. The enlarged URC decided it was both possible and honouring God's will.

This struggle has echoes in other Church traditions. The passage in John 3 where Jesus and John are both baptising, leading to questions about what sorts of baptism are valid or superior, shows that such debates have a long history.

While URC debates around Baptism may have been intense a generation ago, nowadays this feature of the URC's life is rarely commented on. Different congregations have chosen their own emphases within the flexibility the *Basis* deliberately offers and we live at peace together.

This part of the URC story might be a hopeful sign on other questions that have perplexed and sometimes divided the Church. Holding within one Body views that seemed irreconcilable to one generation may seem routine to another.

Prayer

Creator God, who chose to make us all different,  
we thank you for our diversity.

Give us graceful patience

with those who fail to understand our convictions.

Make us as keen to test our convictions as we are to test those of others.

going to him.’ John answered, ‘No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.” He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.’

## Basis

...The United Reformed Church includes within its membership both persons whose conviction it is that baptism can only be appropriately administered to a believer and those whose conviction it is that infant baptism also is in harmony with the mind of Christ. Both convictions are honoured by the church and both forms of baptism are understood to be used by God in the upbuilding of faith. Should these differences of conviction within the one church result in personal conflict of conscience it will require to be pastorally reconciled in mutual understanding and charity, and in accordance with the Basis of Union, in the first instance by the elders’ meeting of the local congregation, and if necessary by the wider councils of the church. Whether the baptism is of an infant or a believer, whether it is by pouring or immersion, it shall not be such to which a conscientious objection is taken either by the person administering baptism, or by the person seeking it, or by the parent(s) requesting it for an infant...(14)

## Reflection

The Baptism section of the *Basis of Union* is one of the few that has been substantially revised since the original 1972 agreement. This paragraph hints at the issue.

When Congregational and Presbyterian traditions united to create the United Reformed Church, both had infant baptism as the norm, whilst recognising adult baptism as also theologically valid for those not baptised as infants. However, when the Churches of Christ sought to join the young

without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body.

## Basis

The one Church of the one God is holy, because he has redeemed and consecrated it through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and because there Christ dwells with his people. (2)

## Reflection

The Church likes to describe itself as holy - in the Creeds we say we are One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic but even a cursory glance at Church history calls most, if not all, of these descriptors into question - not least our holiness. Despite many of God’s people having lived lives of heroic sanctity, there are those in every age whose love of wealth, power, and status have led to persecution, hatred, and murder. In our own age we’ve seen the horror of clerical abuse unfold across the Church which, again, makes the claim that we are holy a difficult one.

Our *Basis of Union* situates our holiness in Christ. We are holy as Christ, our head, is holy and He dwells in our midst calling us to sanctity. Paul wrote that the Church would be presented to God radiant, without stain, wrinkle, or blemish - that is a vision of the future when the sanctifying work of Christ is complete. We are holy because Christ our head is holy and because He calls us to holiness. Our faltering, often pitiful, steps towards sanctity are made complete by Christ and are seen in the lives of the saints - past and present - who responded to His call to be holy just as our Father in Heaven is holy. Of course we get it wrong, we fail, and we can be spectacularly unholy yet Christ continues to call, sanctify, and perfect us until we, with the rest of the Church, are presented to God with Christ in our midst.

## Prayer

God of the Church, help us to be holy,  
to face up to the times when we're not,  
when we love power and prestige more than you, give us time to repent,  
that we may be formed into the image of Jesus Christ,  
your son, our Lord, Amen.

### [Wednesday 15th July Basis of Union 3](#)

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood is minister at Trinity-Henleaze (Bristol) and Thornbury.

### St Matthew 11: 28-30

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

## Basis

The Church is catholic or universal because Christ calls into it all peoples and because it proclaims the fullness of Christ's Gospel to the whole world.  
(3)

## Reflection

I spent my first six years on the little island of Rarotonga, part of the Cook Islands. My parents had ventured to these specks of land amidst thousands of miles of Pacific Ocean turquoise in 1952 as missionaries with the London Missionary Society (LMS). They served 18 years amidst various island groups of the South Pacific. It sounds like paradise and, in many ways, it was. But my dad wrote a book about it carefully entitled *Not Quite Paradise* to tell the world truths that, even on palm-fringed beaches of gleaming white coral sand, people are still people and life is still burdened

the supposed faith of the parents was questionable, adult believers often seek another Baptism in which they can witness to their own faith. Different congregations resolve this tension in different ways.

We might want to reflect on how we decide whether and when the Church's stated theology should be bent to suit pastoral pressures. When does choosing to ignore parts of the *Basis of Union* compromise the integrity of the United Reformed Church, which claims to have the Basis as unifying common ground?

## Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
who was baptised in the Jordan,  
I thank you for my Baptism:  
for the faith that embraced it  
and for those who have kept their promises.  
I pray for those preparing for Baptism and entry into your Church.  
And I pray for Ministers and Elders confronted with hard decisions about Baptismal requests. Amen.

### [Wednesday 29th July Basis of Union 15](#)

John Ellis is Secretary of Capel United Church in Kent

### St John 3.22-29

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptised. John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised— John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptising, and all are



receiving baptism, promising to support and nourish them as it receives them into its fellowship. Baptism may be administered in infancy or at an age of responsibility. Both forms of baptism shall be made available in the life of every worshipping congregation. In either case the sacrament of baptism is a unique part of the total process of Christian initiation. When baptism is administered at an age of responsibility, upon profession of faith, those baptised enter at once upon the full privileges and responsibilities of membership. When baptism is administered to infants, upon profession of faith by their parent(s), they are placed under the nurture of the Church that they may be led by the Holy Spirit in due time to make their own profession of faith in Christ as their Saviour and Lord, and enter upon the full privileges and responsibilities of membership. These two patterns of Christian initiation are recognised by the United Reformed Church...(14)

#### Reflection

The Baptism section of the *Basis of Union* places the United Reformed Church squarely in the mainstream of Christian teaching and, in particular, in the Protestant stream. This recognises only two sacraments out of the seven rituals deemed sacraments by the medieval Catholic Church.

Baptism is intended to be one of the unifying features of Christ's Church. It helps reconciliation across other differences, as Paul describes when encouraging the Ephesians to see what united them, rather than what divided them. It was one of the earlier successes of the twentieth century ecumenical movement in Britain to achieve a single Baptismal certificate that was recognised as valid by a wide range of Christian denominations.

The pastoral difficulty of these paragraphs often arises from the unequivocal statement that Baptism is "administered once only to any person". This also reflects common Christian teaching across many traditions. However, in an individualistic age, the idea that the Church not the individual decides whether they can be baptised can seem puzzling and insensitive. Especially if infant Baptism took place in a context where

with plenty of cares. Indeed, some of the places we called home are already being destroyed as climate change, increasingly violent hurricanes, sea level rise, ocean warming and ocean acidification work their lethal consequences to humanity's greed and apathy.

The Gospel reached places like this because women and men, young and old, left our congregations and set sail. Many died on the way, or became martyrs for the faith. I cannot say these glorious words of ours with their universal vision without picturing such little islands thousands of miles away. And, of course, the churches that once sent missionaries only exist themselves because missionaries once came to where we now live, and first converts discovered a yoke that was easier than sin and death, and a burden of discipleship lightened by the constant presence of the Holy Spirit and held in the prayers of the risen and ascended Christ. We now live an interconnected life; the world made ordinary in the palm of our hands. This part of the *Basis* testifies to the abiding truth that there is, rather, something utterly extraordinary about naming ourselves sisters and brothers in Christ across all bounds of time and geography.

#### Prayer

Lord, you have made a marvellous world, rich in diversity, peopled with different cultures; fragile and wonderful. Thank you for loving it all so much that you have come to call all creation home. Give us deep trust to lay down our burdens too and follow you. Amen.

[Thursday 16th July Basis of Union 4](#)

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber is the Minister of Taunton United Reformed Church

St Matthew 28: 16 - 20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and

on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

## Basis

The Church is apostolic because Christ continues to entrust it with the Gospel and the commission first given to the apostles to proclaim that Gospel to all peoples. (4)

## Reflection

Not long ago, I bought a box of apostle spoons from a car boot sale (I was actually rather excited to find them, somewhat to the surprise of the stall holder!). Such spoons were a familiar part of my childhood, though we never had the kind that were different for each 'apostle'; Peter with his keys, Andrew with his cross... I realise now, looking back, that the spoons taught me to elide the 'apostles' with 'the Twelve'. I've learned since that, even in the early Church, there were others who were called apostles; from Paul to Mary Magdalene. And I've begun to take in what it means to think of the Church (today's church too) as apostolic. The apostles were simply (simply!) those entrusted with the message of the Gospel and this means that any of us who have heard and believed the Gospel might be apostles too.

What's vital is that we neither confine apostleship to the first century nor forget that today's apostles need to have a strong connection to those first apostles if we are to be confident that we proclaim the same Gospel. It's liberating, challenging and exciting to discover that you can be an apostle too. It's also vital and strengthening to know that we are connected to the apostles who carried the Gospel through the ages. 'The Twelve', plus Paul and Mary and countless others, are not just interesting historical figures – but co-workers with us in a common project.

in damaged places.

Help us to discover

more of your truth and purpose.

Help us to discern

your demand and promise.

For your love's sake. Amen.

[Tuesday 28th July Basis 14](#)

John Ellis is Secretary of Capel United Church in Kent

Ephesians 4.1-6

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

## Basis

The United Reformed Church observes the gospel sacrament of baptism into Christ as a gift of God to his Church, and as an appointed means of grace. Baptism is administered with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is the sacrament of entry into the Church and is therefore administered once only to any person.

When the Church observes this sacrament it makes explicit at a particular time and place and for a particular person what God has accomplished in Christ for the whole creation and for all humankind - the forgiveness of sins, the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit and newness of life in the family of God. In this sacrament the Church affirms its faith in the action of God in Jesus Christ; and takes corporate responsibility for those

Study matters to our Church. The Bible deserves the most careful attention we can give and the best thinking we can do. But study is not an end in itself. It is a way of tuning our ears to the voice of God.

The ministry of the Word is important for our Church. We help one another to drink deep from the Bible's wisdom - wisdom stored from ancient times, yet ever fresh and never stale.

Preaching matters in our Church. The message of God's goodness is worth sharing, with one another and with the world. Faithful preaching is a bridge between Scripture and living, attending honestly and seriously to both.

Would Jesus have been at home in our Church? Certainly he knew his Bible, his people's Testament of faith in God. He found a fresh word in it, to direct and inform his own living and serving. He believed in preaching, speaking from and through Scripture of God's purpose and power in his own day.

So Jesus might have been at home with at least this bit of our Basis. But when I read his sermon in Nazareth, and his commitment to people whom life had dented and damaged, it challenges and stirs me. It reminds me of God's loving and demanding will. It tests and energises my love for God's world today. It reminds me to follow more truly. For it is in following that we shall be at home with Jesus.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
we ask you to beckon us forward,  
sharing your Word,  
serving your world,  
seeking your will.

Help us to make a difference

The Church is founded upon those first apostles, but in its present earthly community, is formed of apostles too. Not everyone is a natural evangelist, but any of us can live as those who bring good news. As you live your life today take a moment to wonder how you can carry good news. Think about it every time you stir your cuppa...

Prayer

Loving Jesus, who called forth apostles  
by revealing to them the good news of God's saving love,  
call forth in me a voice, a life, and a heart  
that brings good news to your world and love to all the people,  
in this day and all my days, Amen.

[Friday 17th July Basis of Union 5](#)

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber is the Minister of Taunton United Reformed Church

Romans 7: 4 - 20

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Basis

The unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the Church have been obscured by the failure and weakness which mar the life of the Church. (5)

## Reflection

We dare to believe that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It is often said that if ever you find the perfect church (as in perfect congregation) you shouldn't join it, because you'll spoil it. There is a sense in which this is true at an obviously human level, but within the ways of God it is not true that you can spoil the Church. The holiness of the Church cannot be spoiled by my sin, weakness or human frailty, because, in the end, the Church is more than a human society, but is God's divine creation.

Most of us can identify with Paul's sense that, however hard we try, and however much we want to, we just can't always manage to do the right thing. Sometimes that's just because we are weak and frail human beings. And sometimes it's just because, well, life is complicated and you can find yourself in some situations where you can only do the least bad thing. I sense that these verses in Romans are the ones that most of us really do understand well.

Our *Basis of Union* recognises that our failures and weaknesses mar the life of the Church and that sometimes the holiness of the Church is obscured by them. We cannot deny this as we see the impact of scandals and abuses on our reputation and reality. But we also say, with the whole Church, that the holiness of the Church is not a product of our moral rightness, but is a gift, a miraculous gift, from God. This means that, however weak and flawed we are, however bad things get, God is present still within the Church, renewing and reforming and recreating. Where God is present, there is something holy. Even the most flawed among us can hold on to that promise. Take that hope into the weak places of your own life today.

## Prayer

Holy God, forgive us all for the times when we bring your Church into disrepute through our failure and our sin. And, through our belonging to your Church, bless us with your holy love,

## Monday 27th July Basis of Union 13

The Rev'd John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC, belongs to Downing Place URC in Cambridge.

## St Luke 4:16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

## Basis

The United Reformed Church believes that, in the ministry of the Word, through preaching and the study of the Scriptures, God makes known in each age his saving love, his will for his people and his purpose for the world. (13)

## Reflection

Scripture: the Old and New Testaments, as it says in the previous article of the Basis. Our *Basis of Union* does not describe in detail what Scripture is. It talks more fully of what Scripture does, how we should use it and what we might gain from it.

made against the person. Like lion's claws, these false accusations threaten the person. Stanza 3 is a plea to God to check the person's heart for any sense that they may have somehow caused these false accusations or given their accusers cause to accuse them. Stanza 4 asks God to make a "firm but fair" judgement in the matter. Stanza 5 is a call to stop the culture of revenge and a plea for a new way forward that would be better for everyone in the community, where Christ Jesus "sets us free."

False accusations are a vicious form of gossip. Gossip is a community killer - see James 3:5-10 and the Apostle Paul's 'what not to do' lists. Gossip is like a drug that at first makes us feel good with that 'high' of knowing something about someone else, but the effect soon wears off. We need more and more. The old news doesn't quite have the same edge as new news. Gotta get me some of that new news...

Gossip hurts people. The person gossiping is stuck in the lion's claws just as much as the person being talked about. Stopping gossip requires a complete shift in the community's thinking. It requires a desire to seek the real truth and to care about each other enough to know what the truth actually is. It requires justice. Can we make Jesus - aka "The Truth"- the heart of our communications?

If you have a gossip problem, you are not alone, but get help before gossip wrecks you and your community.

Prayer

God of justice and truth  
we have a gossip problem.  
Teach us to use words that give life and not kill (*Proverbs 18:21*).  
Change how we speak to and of each other. Amen

that we may grow in goodness, to the glory of your holy name, Amen.

Saturday 18th July Basis of Union 6

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Basis

Christ's mercy in continuing his call to the Church in all its failure and weakness has taught the Church that its life must ever be renewed and reformed according to the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (6)

Reflection

If we are honest, some of us find ourselves on the edge of the Church not knowing if we should be in or out. Trying to equate the pain and injury caused to some, with the endless hope and joy of Christ's Church at its best, is a real struggle for many of us.

I cannot believe that God would wish us to suffer at the hands of the Church in its weakness, so I cannot blame those who run-to-the-hills in self-protection. It feels brave, if deeply sad.

The most theological conversations I have tend to be with my barber, dentist or postman. Each of them has shared something like this over the years: “I left years ago with all the abuse scandals”, “the Church is so rich and does nothing for the poor”, “the Church is full of hypocrites who talk about love, but show none”. These may be old or inaccurate stereotypes of the Church, but they are certainly signs of the failure and weakness that are part of our history and our present – if we are honest.

It does us good to be humbled and our *Basis of Union* does not shirk from this task, nor does it leave us in the place of shame.

Thank God, that Christ’s mercy is not dependent on our flawlessness! God is always renewing and re-forming the Church, especially when we turn to Scripture to guide us and as we allow the Spirit to lead us in ever-new, creative ways.

Perhaps the *Basis of Union* reminds us that Christ continues to call his Church to be a sign of hope and resurrection to the world, even through its vulnerabilities and failings.

So, this is why I stay.

Because, at its best, the Church is a place of forgiveness, joy and hope. At it’s best, the Church is happy to be reformed to the way of Christ, which is community, love and grace.

I stay, because Christ continues to call us, as we are, to be salt and light in our communities and ambassadors of love to the world.

Why do you stay in the Church?

Prayer

Spirit of the ever-present God  
whose presence turns history into our story,  
break into our lives with new light and truth,  
that we may appreciate all the ways you speak to us  
and that we may experience your story anew. Amen

Sunday 26th July Psalm 7

The Rev’d Angela Rigby, Minister at Christ Church URC Tonbridge and St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks

Plaintive is the song I sing  
Woeful the lament I bring  
All my anguish I lay bare  
God my Saviour hear my prayer

3: Try me put me to the test  
If I ever have oppressed  
Those who taunt me and deride  
Then they might be justified

2: My pursuers take delight  
In their malice and their spite  
They accuse me without cause  
Held as in a lion's claws

4: Seated on Your lofty throne  
Summon all the lands each one  
Hold high court lay motives bare  
Give just judgment firm but fair

5: Leading to a different way where revenge no more holds sway,  
and where Christ will set us free, free to build community

Norman J Goreham © 2010 Faith Alive Christian Resources CCLI Number 1064776

You can hear the tune for this Psalm here:  
<https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/157581>

Reflection

In stanza 1, a complaint is made to God. A lament is not mere whinging or a slight upset, but rather a gut wrenching cry of anguish because no remedy can be seen. Stanza 2 tells us that false accusations are being

the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people. (12)

## Reflection

This clause of the *Basis* contains three statements which emphasize three mantras of Reformed ecclesiology: the proclamation of the Triune God; the fellowship of Word and Sacrament; and the centrality of Scripture. It would do a great disservice to them – and to your devotional activity – to attempt to unpack them here. However, reflection can be made on the one aspect named in all three statements: The Holy Spirit.

Although the coming of the Spirit is associated with the feast of Pentecost, we recognise the work of the Spirit to be associated with more than a historic event. While the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth was confined to a specific point in history, the Spirit's action works through all time, where She is forever involved in history, from the beginning of creation through to the coming of God's Kingdom. Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas reminds us that in this way 'to be involved in history is not the same as to become history', and that while the historic Jesus remains to us a person who has long died, and the Bible a book written long ago, the Spirit makes Christ alive to us, and speaks through the Scriptures and the Sacraments, uniting us in Holy communion with one another – those before and those yet to come.

The Spirit frees us up not to think of a God that has been confined to the past – to the acts of a Jewish Carpenter in occupied territory, or glory days of revivals or enormous Sunday Schools – but rather to a God that shines new light and truth and is still speaking anew. It is the Spirit which continually innovates and inspires, illuminates and improves all that we know and experience of God. That Spirit breaks down barriers, breaks open the Word, and breaks into our lives bringing history to life as we seek the eternal journey with God.

## Prayer

Ever-Creating God,  
we pray that your global Church will constantly be reformed in your image and always be a force of active hope.

We pray for those on the edge of the Church, those who have left and those who have heard nothing but our failings. May the light of your love shine to them through us.

As we go about our day, may we be a sign of what the Church is, when we let you lead.

With you is mercy and in you, we are a new creation. Thanks be to God  
Amen

## Sunday 19th July Psalm 6

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister and member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

Lord chasten not in anger,  
nor in your wrath rebuke me.  
Give me your healing word.  
My soul and body languish;  
I wait for you in anguish.  
How long, how long, O Lord?

3: Pain and distress o'erwhelm me,  
I cry all night for mercy,  
my bed is wet with tears.  
My eyes can weep no longer;  
my enemies seem stronger,  
my awful foes and fears.

2: Turn to me now, uphold me;  
for your love's sake restore me.  
O save me by your grace.  
For death ends all remembrance;  
it wraps the tongue in silence.  
How can the dead sing praise?

4: All who love evil, leave me,  
for God has heard my weeping:  
my foes are put to shame.  
Turned back, no more to grieve me,  
they suddenly shall leave me.  
All glory to God's name.

You can hear a verse of the hymn here

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyLxDol\\_Oos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyLxDol_Oos)

## Reflection

If ever there was a Psalm for a time of pandemic, this is it! Here we have a person who is sick, suffering in body and soul. He prays in anguish for healing, begs God not to be angry with him for being so importunate, but he has to know - how long will all this last?

His sickness leaves him exhausted, suffering from insomnia, close to death. He feels deserted by God. In spiritual anguish he prays for deliverance. It may be hard for him in his sickness to praise God but if he dies it would be impossible. The darkest point for him is in the loneliness of night, when he suspects that his enemies and his fears were correct all along, perhaps God had deserted him. He is overwhelmed by grief.

And then when he is completely exhausted, in the depths of despair, his confidence returns, he knows that God has heard him, his enemies are discredited, they fade away. Whether or not there is any change in his physical condition, his faith and his hope are restored and he gives God the glory.

It is central to our Christian faith that, in rising from the dead, Christ has conquered death for ever. But does this focus on resurrection sometimes lead us to be too casual about our own mortality? Does the Bible not emphasize that the awefulness of the Passion preceded the Resurrection? Psalm 6 reminds us that we need a full appreciation of this life before we can look beyond it. We may well have to undergo the anguish of pain and the sense of separation from God before we emerge with that strong faith that rests confidently on God, on God's love, on God's grace, on God's resurrection power.

## Prayer

God of compassion, give to all whose lives are full of sorrow the firm assurance that you are with them,

place together with one another. There was the same impetus to hold all things in common, and to give priority to those in need.

The *Basis of Union* points to the way in which the United Reformed Church shares her life as part of the wider 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church. The URC came into being through responding to God's call to be united as Christians. This call flows out of the life of the triune God and is responded to in worship and self-offering to the world.

Each URC congregation is encouraged to live out that life as the Holy Spirit leads in each local place. But each congregation, and the URC as a whole, are not alone. That fullness of God's life which was given to the early church is given to the whole church today, to be embodied in many different ways, depending on the context and needs of the local community.

## Prayer

Loving God, in gratitude we receive the life of Christ and the signs of the Spirit. We are not on our own. We give thanks for the many others who participate in what Christ makes possible. Help us to offer ourselves again to you. May we generously share what we have with those in need, and live out your life of caring, forgiving and healing love for all the nations. Amen.

[Saturday 25th July Basis of Union 12](#)

The Rev'd Dr Matthew Prevett, Chaplaincy Coordinator at Newcastle University

## Basis

The United Reformed Church confesses the faith of the Church catholic in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It acknowledges that the life of faith to which it is called is a gift of the Holy Spirit continually received in Word and Sacrament and in the common life of God's people. It acknowledges



possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

## Basis

Within the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church the United Reformed Church acknowledges its responsibility under God:- to make its life a continual offering of itself and the world to God in adoration and worship through Jesus Christ;- to receive and express the renewing life of the Holy Spirit in each place and in its total fellowship, and there to declare the reconciling and saving power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;- to live out, in joyful and sacrificial service to all in their various physical and spiritual needs, that ministry of caring, forgiving and healing love which Jesus Christ brought to all whom he met;- and to bear witness to Christ's rule over the nations in all the variety of their organised life.

(11)

## Reflection

The *Basis of Union* offers an interesting list of the church's many characteristics and responsibilities. Our ancestors were keen to draw it all together. However, doing all that is listed at once could exhaust a congregation!

The early Church, as described in the passage from Acts, was a visible sign of all that the Holy Spirit made possible. People were no longer individuals, struggling on their own. There was a strong sense of social sharing and concern.

Eventually, as the Church grew, people gathered in different places, spread across the middle east. Yet the same signs and wonders held each

looking to that glorious day when sorrow and tears are wiped away and death is swallowed up in life, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen

## Monday 20th July Basis of Union 7

The Rev'd Ruth Whitehead has conducted most of her ministry in LEPs and is currently Moderator of the South Western Synod of the URC.

## Ephesians 4: 4-7

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

## Basis

The United Reformed Church humbly recognises that the failure and weakness of the Church have in particular been manifested in division which has made it impossible for Christians fully to know, experience and communicate the life of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church. (7)

## Reflection

There are many places where we come across the phrase "the strain of holding together a broad church" ...whether it is a reference to the Church of England, the United Reformed Church or even the Labour party. We might think that diversity makes it more difficult to be united, that it would be much easier to be 'one' if we all thought, acted or believed the same.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians does not agree. "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift" – we know we are not given the same gifts of grace, or in the same measure. We are gloriously different...but this very individuality is built together by God in the church, pulled together by Christ, made one in the Spirit so that the whole church may be one and may be blessed.

The *Basis of Union* pulls no punches – division among Christians is not just a natural expression of our individuality and difference, like “different brands of beer” as someone once said to me. Our division is a sign of failure and weakness and we need to recognise this and repent.

As those coming from a non-conformist heritage we might rejoice in difference and abhor uniformity, but this can never be at the expense of recognising our unity and repenting of our division.

#### Prayer

Father of all, we pray that your church may be one body, declaring one faith in one Lord through the power of the one Spirit.

Give grace to us so that we may recognise our failure and weakness.

Re-make us in true unity, so that we may bear the name of Christ, as your church in your world. Amen.

#### [Tuesday 21st July Basis of Union 8](#)

The Rev'd Ruth Whitehead has conducted most of her ministry in LEPs and is currently Moderator of the South Western Synod of the URC.

#### Ephesians 4: 14-16

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

#### Basis

The United Reformed Church has been formed in obedience to the call to repent of what has been amiss in the past and to be reconciled. It sees its

The importance of both Matthew's reprimand of sin and the *Basis* is grounded in the idea of reliance upon an other. Where 'two or three are gathered' in the name of Christ – as The Church – in councils and congregations, we are dependent upon our neighbours in Christ to help us understand what it is that God is calling the Church into. PT Forsyth recognised that we needed something 'outside our personal opinion, will, vision, inclination, or taste' to form the community of the Church, while John Oman knew that the fallible Church nevertheless craves a 'hungering and thirsting after a fuller discernment.' Our quest is wider than ourselves.

We may find ourselves out of step with the Church's discernment and direction, or we can find our convictions are the very grit needed to form a pearl within the Church. As long as we are conscious of each other, in our diversity and freedom, we can discern how God is leading us today.

#### Prayer

God in community, three-in-one,  
your Spirit guides and mediates  
through the complexities of life.

Help us to be attuned to your Spirit's call upon us and upon the Church,  
and give us the words to speak your truth  
as we hunger and thirst to know and reflect you more fully,  
in unity and in peace. Amen.

#### [Friday 24th July Basis of Union 11](#)

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired from pastoral charge, active ecumenically and theologically, member of St Andrew's Church, Ealing.

#### Acts 2: 42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their

evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

## Basis

The United Reformed Church, believing that it is through the freedom of the Spirit that Jesus Christ holds his people in the fellowship of the one Body, shall uphold the rights of personal conviction. It shall be for the church, in safeguarding the substance of the faith and maintaining the unity of the fellowship, to determine when these rights are asserted to the injury of its unity and peace. (10)

## Reflection

'It leaves it up to you to decide what you want to believe... it doesn't impose anything on you.' This was a view expressed on the video entitled 'What is the United Reformed Church?' produced in the 1990s and presented by the BBC's Political Editor John Cole. The URC is described as somewhere that allows the individual believer to take steps to grow into faith rather than sign up to everything straight away. No need to pass an exam to join, but rather learn together as a community of faith.

However, one of the stumbling blocks of this so-called 'Conscience Clause' in the *Basis* is that it has led sometimes too easily to the idea that the individual can believe exactly what they want to the detriment of the Church. Amid the post-modern idea of the centrality of the individual, it's easy to think that the *Basis* points towards believing whatever you want and such belief becoming a legitimate part of the Church's doctrine.

formation and growth as a part of what God is doing to make his people one, and as a united church will take, wherever possible and with all speed, further steps towards the unity of all God's people. (8)

## Reflection

John, a cheerful Methodist Local Preacher, told me "We're all going to be living and praising together in heaven – we might as well start now!" But it is not easy to be people seeking unity.

I still remember, as a very new church member, the crushing blow of the failure of the Churches' Council for Covenanting in 1981, (which would have brought together Methodist and Anglican churches and the United Reformed Church). I confess that even now there are times when I wonder whether we are achieving anything as we sit through yet another Churches Together meeting.

But the *Basis of Union* reminds us that we don't pursue ecumenism because it's easy, or because of how we feel, or because of what we gain. As people who rightly repent past division, we seek reconciliation because we are obedient to God's call. We seek unity because we want to be faithful to God's mission to make his people one.

The reading from Ephesians describes this as 'growing up into Christ'. As we continue to work for unity, this metaphor of growing into one body may be more useful to us than a more mechanistic imagining of bolting together the different parts of our denominations to form a single church. Instead of holding onto our childlike desire to please ourselves, we need to grow more like Christ. Then we will see better how we belong together and how we can be one church, built up in love, by Christ.

## Prayer

God who is the Father of all help us, your children, to grow up into Christ. Through the power of your Spirit make us faithful to the gospel

and a people who seek reconciliation, Amen.

### [Wednesday 22nd July Basis of Union 9](#)

The Rev'd Michael Hopkins, Minister of a group of Methodist and United Reformed Churches based around Farnham, Surrey, and Clerk of the URC General Assembly.

#### Basis

The United Reformed Church testifies to its faith, and orders its life, according to this Basis of Union, believing it to embody the essential notes of the Church catholic and reformed. The United Reformed Church nevertheless reserves its right and declares its readiness at any time to alter, add to, modify or supersede this Basis so that its life may accord more nearly with the mind of Christ. (9)

#### Reflection

The phrase “catholic and reformed” is very important because it asserts the truth that we are a part of the Church universal. Here catholic, with a small c, means universal. We are not asserting that we are a part of the Roman Catholic Church, but that alongside them and other churches, we are all parts of the one universal Church.

If you think of a stream flowing down a mountain, it may break up into different streams as the water makes its way down the side of the mountain. It may do this more than once, so that by the bottom of the mountain there might be a large number of different streams. If any one of those streams claimed that it alone contained the original water it would be preposterous. It would also be preposterous for any of the branches to forget the original from which they come, and of which they are a part with other branches. We share fifteen centuries of Church history together with other Western churches before the Reformation.

When we speak of "catholic and reformed" we're confessing our connectedness and indebtedness to the Church of past ages, to believers in previous generations. This has always been central to the instincts of Reformed theologians from the 16th century to today, not a deviation from them.

The Reformed tradition does not claim to restore a Church that had been eclipsed but to reform the historic catholic (universal) Church. If we miss this, we risk misunderstanding that Reformed actually means continuity. A tree which is reformed is not cut down; it is pruned. It would be a serious mistake to attempt to jump over 1500 years of Church history to recover the faith as though no one had ever written or spoken about Jesus since shortly before AD70.

May God speak to us through the voices of the saints, down the years.

#### Prayer

Loving Father, though you have cast us all from the one mould that is your love, we are a wealth of different shapes; a vast pilgrim people you cherish your own. Unite us as one family, one humanity. May we never stand alone when we could stand together; and never isolate, when we could include. That all may recognise in all your image and your likeness, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

### [Thursday 23rd July Basis of Union 10](#)

The Rev'd Dr Matthew Prevett, Chaplaincy Coordinator at Newcastle University

#### Matthew 18.15-20

‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the