
WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

**CHRISTOLOGY AND IDENTITY
IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

EDITED BY
SCOTT R. PAETH



Cleveland

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CHAPTER THREE
**JESUS CHRIST IN THE TEXTS OF THE
 UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**
 GABRIEL FACKRE

TEXTS: WHY, WHAT, AND HOW?

The use of UCC “texts” as an approach to the subject of this volume prompts the questions why, what, and how. *Why* would we turn to inherited, written-down things? That may seem obvious to churches with clearly declared dogma, but not for those of us in the UCC with our eye fixed on the horizon rather than the heritage. If an answer is found, then the next logical query is, *what* are these documents? Again, this is a UCC pressure point, given our commitment to diversity and our openness to, in John Robinson’s words, “more light and truth.” Supposing that we do find them, *how* do we interpret them, considering that final doctrinal authority appears to be vested by our denomination’s Constitution in local congregations? We take some time here, initially, to sort out these issues.

The *why* of the matter is tied up with our self-definition as a “church.” When exploring what we believe about Jesus Christ in our denomination, we must take into account the decision made in our founding days to be the *United Church of Christ*, not just *united churches* of Christ. We came into existence, in some sense, as a common body and wrote a constitution to demonstrate it.

We have a corporate reality, and as such we resist the culture’s individualistic ideology and attraction to that fragmentation in our own ecclesial history. Further, our very being, as in our name, is witness to our ecumenical search for life together—not life apart—a church “united and uniting,” as it is often said. Indeed, we are still the only denomination in this country to have brought together four diverse streams of Christian history, not to mention the “hidden histories” included in our life together.¹

If we are a common body, then common texts are significant for the subject at hand. These texts, in which the community as a whole through its designated representatives speaks, help to define what the United Church of Christ, collectively, believes about the fundamentals. As a church, we have drawn on this lore in ecumenical negotiations. We cite our texts when asked to say what we believe, as in the UCC endorsement of the nine-church Consultation on Church Union (*The COCU Consensus*, now named, with language close to or own, “Churches Uniting in Christ”), our response to the World Council of Churches’ study, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” and our position in bilaterals establishing “full communion,” such as the *Kirchengemeinschaft* with the Evangelical Church of the Union in Germany and “A Formula of Agreement” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Reformed Church in America.² In the face of the occasional charges of UCC theological incoherence, it has regularly been said, “Please go by our texts, not by anecdotes.”³

Acknowledging that we have a corporate reality with corporate texts—all of which speak about the meaning of Jesus Christ—just what are they? Implicit in the *what* are *where* and *when* issues.

The first answer to this question, one that enabled the UCC to come to be, was given by our founders when they struggled to produce a “Faith” statement in the Basis of Union of our church. Such a declaration is a short but significant primary text for discerning the corporate UCC faith in Jesus Christ. Its importance is underscored by its use as the framework for a second defining text, the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, officially voted by the 1959 General Synod of the UCC. A third is the collection of authoritative postfounding texts in the United Church of Christ Constitution. Especially germane to our subject is its theological Preamble and the articles that define the pattern of belief in UCC congregations. A fourth text is the *UCC Book of Worship*. The product of widespread and lengthy testing,

though not at the level of authority of the previous three, it includes orders of worship that manifest UCC Christological belief, as well as declarations of faith, ancient and modern, that entail perspectives on the subject of this volume.

In addition to these explicitly formative UCC texts are implicit ones referenced in those texts. If the former are ground-level documents, then the latter represent first, second, and third tiers of texts. The first tier is composed of standards cited in general terms in the Basis of Union as “the ecumenical creeds” and in the Preamble to the Constitution as “ancient creeds,” appearing specifically in the *Book of Worship* as the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, cited also in the Christological services, as is done, similarly, in the Services of Word and Sacrament in the *Hymnal* of the United Church of Christ and versions thereof in *The New Century Hymnal* produced by the United Church of Christ Board for Homeland Ministries.⁴ A case could also be made that the shape of the creeds is reflected in the UCC Statement of Faith.

The second tier, further from ground level in authority, includes texts stated in general terms in the Basis of Union as the “evangelical confessions of the Reformation” and in the language of the Preamble to the Constitution as “the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers.” The Constitution itself recognizes the role of the confessions and declarations of faith of the uniting denominations, stating that the uniting churches of 1957 join “without break in their respective historic continuities and traditions.”⁵ Thus the three symbols of the former Evangelical and Reformed Church (cited below) are given tacit constitutional recognition, as are comparable Congregational texts from the Cambridge Platform with its presupposed Westminster Confession to the Kansas City Statement of Faith. All, however, appear within the context of congregational polity.⁶

A third tier of texts, more distant in their claim to authority, but signed onto by General Synod vote after years of study and negotiation, is made up of ecumenical theological agreements. Prominent among them, as they bear on Christology, are *The COCU Consensus* on key doctrines and “A Formula of Agreement” with the ELCA, PCUSA, and RCA.⁷

If the foregoing are the *why* and *what* of the matter, the question of the *how*, the “hermeneutical” question, is yet to be faced. Traditionally, hermeneutics has to do with the interpretation of scripture, the principles employed in construing its meaning.⁸ Here we are deal-

ing with derivative theological documents, not scripture. But the *how* issue is still entailed as these received texts require interpretation. An organizing principle that functions in UCC interpretation of the texts offers recourse: Texts are to be taken seriously but not imperially.⁹ This is to be understood in two senses.

One sense has to do with the ministerial, not magisterial, status of ecclesial texts. The distinction is often associated with “tradition” *vis-à-vis* scripture, the former serving the latter, and always accountable to it. Thus the UCC texts are always under the scrutiny of scripture and are corrigible in the light of it. The Evangelical and Reformed Church had three doctrinal “symbols” that defined its faith: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession (1530), and Luther’s Small Catechism. However, a constitutional qualifier was added declaring that where they may be seen to disagree, the norm of scripture was to be followed. Thus, even in a church with stated “doctrinal standards” found in discrete confessional texts, scripture was declared magisterial and the texts ministerial. This UCC tradition in textual interpretation judges them to be authoritative to the extent that they conform to scripture. They are a resource in developing a point of view on Christ, not the source; the locus of authority belongs to scripture alone.

The texts in question, on the other hand, are testimonial, not magisterial. This is stated quite explicitly in the Basis of Union regarding any formulation of faith: “Like the ampler statement called for in Article IV, Section F, it is designed to be a testimony, and not a test, of faith.”¹⁰ The “ampler statement” that did appear in 1959 was the aforementioned UCC Statement of Faith, also held regularly today to be a “testimony, not a test.”

We should be clear about why the Basis of Union made this distinction, as it still applies to UCC polity and ecclesiology. Stipulated in the same footnote to its “Faith” section, regarding the status of any church-wide confession, the Basis of Union states: “It is not to be considered a substitute for any confession of faith which may be used in any congregation today.”¹¹ Why so? The answer is that the UCC Constitution vests the final test for doctrinal authority in the congregation. However, the supraparochial declarations of faith do have significant weight, for the Constitution surrounds this paragraph with two others that assert congregational authority to be inseparable from a wider covenant with the larger church, making our polity a

“covenantal congregationalism” in contrast to a pure congregationalism of unaccountable local autonomy.¹²

This stance on the ministerial and testimonial status of received texts appears to separate us from other churches with presumed “binding” doctrinal standards, putting into question any ecumenical affiliations that depend on doctrinal controls charged by critics external and internal. However, an honest look at the state of those standards in most “confessional,” “creedal,” and “connectional” churches will disclose a very similar situation, functionally. Current neo-Congregational tendencies, creedal and confessional illiteracy, and the inroads of current ideologies and individualisms are widespread in mainline churches—Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. Where such is the case, formally definitive church texts become, at best, ministerial or testimonial rather than determining church boundaries or serving as tests of membership. We are all in the same boat, and there is no “safe” ecclesiastical harbor.¹³

THE NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Whatever we have to say about Christology in the UCC, textually, must be placed in the narrative framework that characterizes UCC theology both “on the ground” and in its three tiers. In the first instance, the Statement of Faith is our own retelling of “the Great Story,” as its primary drafter, Roger Shinn, describes it in his important book on the Statement.¹⁴ The story movement of the Statement reflects the way “the faith” is set forth in the Basis of Union, as the former was designed to express the latter. It is also found in the “Communion Prayer” in the Services for Word and Sacrament I and II in the *Book of Worship*. All embody a version of the narrative nature of the classical creeds from which they rise, whose account in three paragraphs of the deeds of God are often portrayed as a drama in three acts. The same structure appears in one way or another in the theological documents of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the “creeds and platforms of Congregationalism,”¹⁵ and in our ecumenical agreements. Behind them all is the movement of the biblical narrative/drama from Genesis to Revelation, creation to consummation, with its centerpoint in Jesus Christ.¹⁶ The understanding of UCC textual Christology requires its placement in the context of this “Great Story.”

The narrative begins with its author and chief actor, the triune God. The three Persons are cited in the opening sentence of the Statement of Faith, in the first paragraph of the “confession” in the Basis of Union, in Article V, 10, in the Constitution on the beliefs of a UCC congregation, and in the formula for baptism in the Service for Baptism in the *Book of Worship*. Further, the flow of the Statement of Faith—reflecting that of the confession in the Basis of Union, the “ancient creeds” cited in the Preamble, the “evangelical confessions” of the Basis of Union, and the “basic insights of the Protestant Reformers” of the Preamble, the ecumenical agreements from the COCU Consensus to the WCC “Basis”—renders explicit what is implicit in scripture itself: the Trinitarian history of God. While employing various terms—Father/God, Son/Lord/Savior, Spirit/Holy Spirit—and stated tersely, both the immanent and economic Trinity are to be found in these grounding texts and all their tiers. The Trinitarian premises in UCC texts are no accident, given the denomination’s prehistory: on the one hand, the strong Reformation *cum* classical roots of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition, and the same for the Congregational tradition with its specific controversy with Unitarianism in the nineteenth century as background.

Using the paradigmatic Statement of Faith, the “chapters” in the “Great Story” that follow the Trinitarian preface are:

- *Creation*, as God “calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image . . .” (Statement of Faith II)
- The *fall*, our response of “aimlessness and sin.” (Statement of Faith, all versions)
- God’s *persevering grace* (denominated sometimes as the covenant with Noah), which “seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin” and “judges all people and all humanity.” (Statement of Faith II)
- The special *covenant* with the Jewish people, with only passing reference in the Statement of Faith as in God’s “righteous will declared through prophets . . .” (Statement of Faith I)

This reflects a missing piece in the ancient creeds themselves, but one retrieved from scripture in the UCC’s 1987 General Synod resolution

on the unbroken covenant with Israel, and its widely circulated 1990 interpretation developed after a two-year study by a select panel,¹⁷ an accent anticipated in Communion Prayer 1 in both Services of Word and Sacrament in the *Book of Worship*.

- *Jesus Christ*, the center of the Story as “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, you [God] have come among us and shared our common lot conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.” (Statement of Faith III)
- *The birth of the church* by the power of the Spirit, as “You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,” calling us “to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table . . .” (Statement of Faith III)
- The gift and demands of *salvation*, as in “You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace” calling us “to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others . . .” (Statement of Faith III)
- The *Last Things*, through which we look forward to “eternal life in your realm which has no end” with a joy able to declare, “Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you!” (Statement of Faith III)

In the texts of the UCC, the meaning of who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ does are inseparable from this Tale of God. To its center we now turn, examining it in terms of the classical dimensions of Christology: the person and work of Jesus Christ.

THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Who is Jesus Christ? Such are the circumstances in the UCC narrative as it moves to its centerpoint that only the Holy One can turn the Tale around. In doxological praise to the loving God we say in the Statement of Faith:

In Jesus Christ . . . you have come to us and shared our common lot . . .

And why this arrival in our midst? Someone had to be about the task of:

conquering sin and death. . . .

The narrative is about the radical action of divine enfleshment. Only by the entry of the Maker of history into that same history can the goal of God for us—a life together that reflects the triune Life Together—be pursued. Only God, firsthand, could and can deal with the opposition mounted by us to the divine purpose—our fall into “sin” and its consequence, “death” as estrangement from God. Here at the heart of the Story, we meet in Jesus “God reconciling” (2 Cor. 5:19). Thus the Statement takes up in narrative form the classical teaching of the deity of Christ, the incarnation of the second Person of the triune God.

Following Old Testament usage of the word “Lord” as a title for deity, the ascription of that title to Jesus in both scripture and tradition is an assertion of the same.¹⁸ In that manner the deity of Christ is affirmed in the language of the Basis of Union:

Jesus Christ . . . our Lord

And in Article V, 11, of the Constitution on the belief integral to a UCC congregation:

profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. . . .

And in the foundational rendering of the Statement of Faith (III):

our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

The same status is declared in the description of Jesus as upper-cased “Son,” with its backdrop of Trinitarian language and pattern of thought, Christ being the Son of the Father, co-eternal and co-equal. So the Basis of Union reads:

Jesus Christ, His Son. . . .

And likewise, the Preamble to the Constitution:

Jesus Christ, Son of God. . . .

These current titles and formulations trace back not only to scripture but also to the “ancient/ecumenical creeds,” “evangelical confessions of the Reformation,” and the “basic insights of the Re-

formers” cited in the Basis of Union and Preamble to the Constitution. So:

“I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord . . .” (the Apostles Creed, *Book of Worship*, 509)

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God . . .” (the Nicene Creed, *Book of Worship*, 510)

“Why is he called God’s Only-begotten Son . . . ?” (Heidelberg Catechism, Question 33)

“It pleased God . . . to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus. His only begotten Son . . .” (Chapter VIII, Westminster Confession/Savoy Declaration)

“We believe in . . . Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord and Savior.” (Kansas City Statement of Faith)

The ecumenical agreements that official representatives of the UCC have signed and General Synod has voted affirm the same status for Jesus Christ, as in the Consultation on Church Union’s “Confessing the Faith”:

The Church lives and finds its identity in thankful confession of Jesus Christ as the one Lord and Savior . . . Christ is God’s self-giving in the Holy Spirit . . . (*The COCU Consensus*, V)

So, too, declares the confession that unites national churches in the World Council of Churches: the belief in Jesus Christ as “God and Savior” (Basis, World Council of Churches).

The titles for Jesus Christ as “Lord” and “Son of God” have been judged patriarchal and hierarchical by some who have been eliminating these terms from hymnody, liturgy, and confessions of faith.¹⁹ More’s the pity concerning their censorship, as the attempts at equivalency by altering these biblical terms consistently fail, and also distance the UCC from the ecumenical relationships so central to our existence and professed intentions.²⁰ In the interest of inclusivity, it is better to use the lead end of the pencil rather than its eraser.²¹

Incarnation means, of course, the carnality of God, and thus the cruciality of the humanity of Jesus Christ. From the Council of Chalcedon forward, this companion theme has been integral to Christian teaching about who Jesus is—true human as well as true God—or in the fifth century Chalcedonian language, not only “very God” but also “very Man of reasonable soul and body . . . two natures,

without confusion, without change, without distinction, without separation . . . together in one Person . . .”²²

The humanity of Jesus becomes crystal clear in UCC Christological declarations:

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth . . . you have come to us and shared our common lot . . . You call us . . . to eat at his table . . . (Statement of Faith III)

The UCC Statement of Faith unambiguously asserts Jesus’ real humanity not only by its explicit statement that Christ shares our “common lot” but also by refusing to eliminate the sexual identity integral to that humanity.²³

The Basis of Union is less well-developed on the humanity, but echoes the earlier themes of the Apostles Creed (“He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried”) and the Nicene Creed (“For us and our salvation . . . was made man . . . was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried”). The Kansas City Statement of Faith was, no doubt, influential in carrying forward the credal language but rendering it more tersely:

In Jesus Christ . . . who for us and our salvation lived and died . . .

The Heidelberg Catechism is more explicit about the humanity, reflecting also the Chalcedonian formula:

The eternal Son of God . . . took upon himself our true manhood from the flesh and blood of the Virgin Mary . . . so that he might be the true seed of David like his fellow men in all things, except for sin. (Question 35)

The Westminster Confession/Savoy Declaration is even more explicit:

The second Person in the Trinity . . . did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him Man’s nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin. . . . So that the two whole perfect and distinct natures, the Godhead and the Manhood, were inseparable joined together in one Person without conversion, composition or confusion . . . (Chapter VIII, 2)

The Evangelical Catechism puts it this way:

Jesus Christ is true God and true man in one person. He thereby entered into human nature and became in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Questions 60, 62)

The ecumenical accords echo these assertions in their endorsement of the classical creeds.

The Person of Christ in UCC texts at all levels? Truly God, truly human, truly one. Only such an incarnation could do the at-one-ing work, to which we now turn.

THE WORK OF CHRIST

Pertinent to the question “Who is Jesus?” is this statement in the Preamble of the UCC Constitution: “The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ . . . Savior.” Savior? Savior has to do with “salvation.” In the long history of Christian thought, biblical teaching on this topic has been developed as “the doctrine of salvation,” or “soteriology.” And soteriology is further ramified as objective and subjective. The former has to do with the work of Christ done for us in his life, death, and resurrection. The latter refers to the work of Christ as it comes home to us, and in us. Sometimes the distinction is described as “redemption accomplished and applied.”²⁴ Historically, the simple word “savior” is a weighty one.

To unpack its meaning, we begin with the obvious question: From what are we saved? As noted, The Statement of Faith uses the language of scripture and tradition by answering that Jesus Christ “has come to us . . . conquering sin and death.” The twin enemies from which we are saved are (1) our “No!” to God’s invitation—sin as our ego trip away from the divine purposes of life together with God, neighbor, and nature; and (2) “death” as the consequent alienation from our Maker and all that entails.

And just how does that happen? Here the distinction between objective and subjective soteriology emerges. Redemption is “accomplished” (the “objective” work) by “the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior” (Statement of Faith, all versions). We thank God for what has been done in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for “reconciling the world to yourself” (Statement of Faith III). Alienation—sin and its consequence, death—is over and reconciliation has begun. “Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you!” (Statement of Faith III).

The triple reference—“man of Nazareth, . . . crucified, risen”—is no accident. It refers to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the three phases of Christ’s saving career among us. In the Reformed tradition that shapes the UCC, this threesome has been expressed as

the “threefold office of Christ”: the prophetic, priestly, and royal roles Jesus played in the work of reconciliation. John Calvin was the premier expositor of this *munus triplex* that has had wide ecumenical impact.²⁵ The triple roles of Christ in his work are part of the confessional lore from both of the uniting streams that flowed into the UCC, as in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession that is presupposed in the Cambridge Platform of 1646.²⁶ The prophetic office is the disclosure in the teaching and example of Jesus of what God wills the world to be: a life together, not a life apart. The priestly office is God, on the cross of Jesus, taking into the divine heart the death we deserve for our sin. The royal office is God raising Jesus on Easter morning and thus validating and announcing that our estrangement is over, new life overcoming the old death.

The reconciliation accomplished for the world has to be received by the world, the objective joined by the subjective, the collective *pro nobis* moving to the personal *pro me*. Reconciliation reaches the “persons” created in the “divine image,” and before whom is set “the ways of life and death” (Statement of Faith III), when what is accomplished in Galilee, Calvary, and on Easter morning comes home to “all who trust in the gospel” (Statement of Faith II) with “forgiveness of sin and fullness of grace” (Statement of Faith II). These are classical Reformation, but not only Reformation, formulations.²⁷ “Trust” is the term key to the Reformers’ understanding of faith.²⁸ *Fiducia* is the trust of the heart in the gospel, the good news of God’s saving work in Christ. Thus we are justified by faith, by grace through faith and not by works, first among the “basic insights of the Reformers” (Preamble to the Constitution). Hence, integral to the Services for Word and Sacrament is the call to confession:

If we say we have not sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us . . .

. . . but if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The confession itself:

. . . we confess we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

And the assurance of pardon:

Through Jesus Christ we are forgiven of all our sins . . . (Service of Word and Sacrament 1)

Justification by grace through faith is a refrain, of course, in all the Reformation confessions and catechisms in our history, Heidelberg Catechism, Question 61 being representative:

Question 61. Why do you say you are righteous by faith alone?

Answer. Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

The ecumenical documents to which we have signed echo that refrain, as in *The COCU Consensus*:

Being justified by faith in Christ, we are reconciled to God and to one another through the faith and love which is bestowed in the Spirit.²⁹

In our Reformed tradition, we insist upon the importance of “sanctification” as well as justification.³⁰ Hence the phrase “fullness of grace” (Statement of Faith, all versions) underscores the importance of works of love as the fruit of faith. This is echoed in the Service of Word and Sacrament 1 when, in the assurance of pardon, the words “and by the Holy Spirit we are empowered to new life” are added. For the Reformed tradition, and now for the UCC, such holiness has never been confined to the personal life but encompasses society as well. Why? Because its stress on the threefold office of Christ was not confined to the objective work, but continued into subjective soteriology, as in the Heidelberg Catechism’s Question 32. Further, as Visser ’t Hooft has shown, the third office has always been construed from Calvin forward as a warrant for Christians to hold the civil order accountable to Christ’s royal rule, the latter not being confined to the church or the soul as in “two kingdom” interpretations.³¹

The social, economic, and political import of the royal office is reflected in the UCC Statement of Faith’s elucidation of the sanctifying “fullness of grace” *vis-à-vis* these realms, as in the trust in Christ’s giving us “courage in the struggle for justice and peace,” and thus the UCC’s history of involvement in justice and peace concerns.³² And as doxology is theology, we hear the affirmation of the same in the leader’s opening sentence of the Eucharist:

Jesus came to preach good news to the poor
to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind
to liberate those who are oppressed
and to proclaim the year of God’s favor.
(Service of Word and Sacrament 1)

Such is part of a Reformed trajectory found initially in the Heidelberg Catechism as it stressed the imperative side of sanctification:

Why are you called a Christian? Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I am to confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life . . . (Question 32)

And from Westminster/Savoy comes the chapter “Of Sanctification” accenting the indicative side, the sanctifying gift given to those justified:

The whole body of sin is destroyed . . . and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of [all] true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.
(Chapter XIII)

NEW LIGHT AND TRUTH

“Well, so we have texts in the UCC. That was fine for folks *then*. But what about *now*? Didn’t one of our founding forebears say we should be open to new light and truth?” Pastor John Robinson is part of our lore, too. And even our Preamble picks up his concern with its words about each new generation developing a relevant faith “in honesty of thought and expression.” And in this twenty-first century we have a national program that asserts God to be “still speaking,” refusing to put a period where a comma belongs.³³ The UCC is a progressive denomination, always open to new insights and not captive to the old ones.

Let’s look a little closer at these urgings and their roots. They do represent important indicators of who we are, and what we believe about Jesus Christ. Actually, they trace back to a long Reformed tradition of accent on the sovereignty of God. The free and majestic God will not be bound by our formulations. As Karl Barth put it regarding the Reformed confessions:

To our fathers the historical past was something which called not for loving and devoted imagination but for careful and criti-

cal scrutiny. . . . There are documentary statements of their beliefs . . . but . . . our fathers had good reason for leaving us no Augsburg Confession authentically interpreting the word of God, no Formula of Concord, no Symbolic books which might later, like the Lutheran, come to possess an odor of sanctity. . . . It may be our doctrinal task to make a careful revision of the theology of Geneva or the Heidelberg Catechism or of the Synod of Dort or . . . it may be our task to draw up a new creed. . . .³⁴

Barth counted the ancient creeds and the Reformation confessions as critical resources for his Reformed faith, but always under the Word of the sovereign God who is never confined to our past deposits of witness to the Word, Jesus Christ.

Yet it should be noted that Barth's call for ever-fresh listening to the Word was always done with the defining witness to that Word in hand, the biblical text in which God has spoken, and still speaks, authoritatively. That is exactly what John Robinson had in mind, as can be seen from his full original words on July 20, 1620: "The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from his holy Word." The new Word spoken is always from the old Word written—and in like manner, touching on the past hearings of the Word as the creeds and confessions of our forebears, which were guides to Barth's own faith.³⁵ The Preamble to the UCC Constitution speaks about "this faith," specifically that of the "ancient creeds" and "the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers," not one we have created *de novo*, that is, to be put into the thought and language forms of each generation. So the UCC has sought to do in its Statement of Faith, in its Basis of Union, in its Constitution, and in the services of its *Book of Worship*. The "more light and truth" are always in continuity with the givens of scripture and tradition, the trajectory to which we connect and which we extend corporately into our own generation.³⁶

Doing this necessitates identifying the textual trajectories that have made us who we are as a church. Conceived as rays, they are the extensions of the one "Sun of righteousness" that illumines scripture, with whatever "more light and truth" there is yet to be in continuity therewith. The person and work to which these texts witness give our name luster. May we always be faithful to that United Church of *Christ*.

PART TWO

ECUMENICAL CONNECTIONS