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Blending Traditions: The United Church of Canada

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THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA is commonly regarded as an untraditional denomination. Those who framed its Basis of Union did their work at a time when new philosophies of religion were all the rage and when energies were being devoted to new methods of attack upon moral and social problems. Tradition as such was in disrepute, and there was no Faith and Order movement to urge the study of common tradition. Since union there has not been much time to evolve a new United Church tradition, and the revolutionary temper of our era has not encouraged the search for one. Many would dismiss a study of tradition in The United Church of Canada as a waste of effort.

Upon reflection, however, one realizes that the very existence of The United Church of Canada raises a number of important questions about tradition. Those who propose to unite churches must, consciously or unconsciously, take up positions in relation to the traditions they have inherited. Every decision they make will reflect their attitudes to tradition. And once the union has been consummated the resulting church will betray its assumptions about tradition in the ways it transacts its business and speaks to its situation. One can read many documents relating to the history of the United Church before and after union without coming upon overt references to tradition. With a little alertness, however, one will find many clues indicating whether in the minds of its founders and members the United Church is a new church, a combination of several old churches, or something else again.

A study of tradition in The United Church of Canada naturally breaks chronologically into two sections: the terms in which the united church was conceived by its promoters and founders, and the attitudes and actions of those who have lived within its fellowship. The United Church was actively in formation for approximately twenty years, while thirty-seven have elapsed since union. That is not many years in all, but enough to make possible a few conclusions.

The project of church union took shape at a time when traditional ways had little prestige. During the first decade of this century many writers were predicting that dogmatic theology would yield its place to sociology and the comparative study of religions. The social gospel was the excitement of the hour. Within Canada itself the Church was facing the challenge of new cities and of a new West largely peopled by settlers from abroad. Among

leaders of the church union movement pragmatic motives bulked large. In the West and North, where impatient laymen were anticipating union in wholesale local amalgamations, disgust with the divisiveness of old traditions was almost universal. Antipathy to tradition became in these areas part of the accepted mystique of union. In less extreme forms this untraditionalism was a part of the national character. The Very Reverend George Pidgeon wrote in explanation of the United Church mind:

Devoted missionaries brought the Gospel message to the pioneers in the Canadian forest, and they brought it in the denominational forms in which they had received it. Undoubtedly they expected to establish here the same institutions that had mediated the divine Spirit to them at home, and to see it repeat its former success. But you cannot transfer the spirit, the atmosphere and the distinctive character of a religious community from one land to another. You may plant the seed in the new soil, but the old form will break up whenever the new life germinates. The men who brought the message became different in the new environment; the men with whom they associated and toiled were different; the product of their joint effort must be different, too.¹

The architects of union sensed that "the product of their joint effort must be different." They realized that they were venturing into the unknown and that they were leaving many familiar landmarks behind. At the inaugural service of The United Church of Canada in 1925, Dr. S. P. Rose recognized the break with tradition involved in union by preaching on the text: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die," and his theme must have been taken up by hundreds of preachers across the nation. The motto "What hath God wrought," seriously considered by a committee appointed to design a seal for the United Church, suggests a similar conception of union as a new thing brought about by God.

Popular as it was with the promoters of union, the metaphor of the seed in the soil had surprisingly little effect upon its designers. The Basis of Union betrays no sign of any effort to adapt it to the needs of a twentieth-century church. E. L. Morrow and C. E. Silcox both complained in their studies of the church union movement that the doctrinal section of the Basis took almost no notice of contemporary trends in theology.² Silcox blamed the high average age of the committee members, observing also that biblical criticism was a very ticklish subject in Canada at the time. The same lack of boldness appears in other sections of the Basis. The framers apparently did not feel that it was part of their task to draft a polity or to suggest methods of ministerial settlement that would be appropriate to the peculiar needs of a Canadian church. Eschewing novelty, they undertook merely to construct out of existing materials a generally acceptable statement.

If there is little in the Basis that seeks to anticipate the future, neither is there much evidence of an attempt to test the diverse traditions of the unit-

1. George C. Pidgeon, *The Communion of Saints* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1935), p. 15.

2. Cf. E. L. Morrow, *Church Union in Canada* (Toronto: Allen, 1923), p. 129; C. E. Silcox, *Church Union in Canada* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933), p. 137.

ing churches by a return to origins. There was, indeed, ready recognition of a common heritage shared by Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Dr. Pidgeon observed, with reference to arrangements for local co-operation, "the significant fact that not once, in all the negotiations that followed, was it ever suggested that any vital truth or principle was imperilled by leaving their people in charge of a minister of one of the negotiating churches."³

The framers of the doctrinal section of the Basis of Union were able to compose fairly quickly a statement embodying what they believed to be "a brief summary of our common faith." Those assigned the somewhat more arduous task of constructing polity could, without too much violence to the facts, conclude "that while the officers and courts of the negotiating churches may bear different names, there is . . . a substantial degree of similarity in the duties and functions of these officers and courts."

This sense of a substantial consensus is important as representing a major premise upon which the union was based, but it indicates no more than that the historic controversies that had divided the negotiating denominations were now widely regarded as dead issues. The record suggests that churches were not yet ready to grapple seriously with current sources of division. Otherwise it is difficult to account for the apparent readiness to accept as an insuperable barrier to negotiation the fact that Anglicans and Baptists had distinctive principles they were unwilling to surrender. The bitter division that took place among Presbyterians over the union had many causes, but the most important may well have been a lack of practice in dealing with even minor points of conscientious difference.

In any event, the union was brought about without any searching experience of bringing conflicting traditions before the bar of a common tradition. No one seems to have considered that in planning for a preliminary union it might be important to anticipate issues that would be raised in any project for a larger union. Some attention was indeed given to the problem of defining a valid ministry, but this was done to satisfy the Church of Scotland and the whole discussion took for granted the familiar axioms of reformed theology. This failure to think in terms of the whole Christian tradition has encouraged the United Church to look inward. Despite rather perfunctory references in the Basis of Union to the authority of the ecumenical creeds, there has been a tendency to regard the formularies of the United Church as self-contained, and amateur ecclesiastical lawyers sometimes quote the Manual as if it had superseded twenty centuries of Christian practice.

The dominant note sounded by those who conceived a united church in Canada was neither the novelty of establishing a new tradition nor the authority commanded by a common tradition but the richness to be achieved by bringing diverse traditions together. Implicit in the enterprise, no doubt,

3. George C. Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1950), p. 29.

was the thought that the denominational dowries represented parts of an original treasure that had been parcelled out and needed only to be brought together. The emphasis was on the diversity, however, and on the sharing that union would bring.

As early as 1874 George Monro Grant, later principal of Queen's University, described his vision of unity to the Evangelical Alliance. I quote his words extensively, for they were to set a pattern followed by unionist speakers over the years:

God will give us the church of the future. It shall arise in the midst of us, with no sound of hammer heard upon it, comprehensive of all the good and beauty that He has evolved in history. To this church, Episcopacy shall contribute her comely order, her faithful and loving conservatism; and Methodism impart her enthusiasm, her zeal for missions, and her ready adaptiveness to the necessities of the country; the Baptist shall give his full testimony to the sacred rights of the individual; the Congregationalist his to the freedom and independency of the congregation; and Presbyterianism shall come in her massive, well-knit strength, holding high the Word of God; and when, or even before, all this comes to pass, that is, when we have proved our Christian charity, as well as our faithfulness, proved it by deeds not words, who shall say that our Roman Catholic brethren, also, shall not see eye to eye with us, and seal with their consent that true unity, the image of which they so fondly love? Why not? God can do greater things even than this. And who of us shall say, God forbid?⁴

This eclectic approach to unity commended itself for a number of reasons. One of the favourite words in the religious vocabulary of the period was "life," commonly contrasted with doctrine or organization. Advocates of union found it natural to dwell upon the benefits of sharing living experience rather than on the difficulties of harmonizing doctrine or of combining procedures. The one touchy doctrinal problem involved in the union was most readily dealt with by recognizing the elements of truth embodied in both Calvinist and Arminian formulations.

Controversy within the Presbyterian Church encouraged insistence upon the continuity of the United Church with its predecessors. Through several embattled years before 1925 the great question at issue was whether the United Church or a non-concurrent body could claim to be the legitimate successor to the existing Presbyterian Church, and it was essential to the unionist argument that Presbyterians should be assured that their heritage would be maintained unimpaired. Hard-fought issues tend to attract more than their rightful share of attention, and it may well be that continuity with the past came temporarily to be overvalued.

The decisive factor was the need of establishing a Christian tradition adapted to the needs of the Canadian nation founded in 1867. Canada was a new country, calling for new ways. It was potentially a great country, calling for men of great vision. It was also a country of contrast, a country whose diversity became more marked with each wave of immigration. The

4. W. L. Grant and Frederick Hamilton, *George Monro Grant* (Toronto: Morang, 1904), p. 155.

drive for union was motivated not chiefly by the need of economies in men and money or by fear of other communions but by the desire for a church large enough and comprehensive enough to impress a Christian character upon a nation that looked to the twentieth century as its own. Grant's statement reflects this concern. It is also significant that those who in the early years of this century sponsored an ambitious program of moral and social reform were usually zealous advocates of union; the rationale of both movements is summed up in the national motto, "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth."

Although no one was anxious to claim for the United Church a privileged position in relation to the state, the desire for a church that would be national in the sense of giving the Christian tradition a distinctively Canadian embodiment gave the union movement its necessary dynamism. It was obviously beyond the resources or the vision of any single denomination to impose its own tradition on the nation. There was no inclination, at least in the conservative East, to attempt to create a new indigenous tradition. The only available option was to blend transplanted traditions and so perpetuate in Canada the Christian heritage of all the homelands. And what could be more Canadian than this conception of a Christian mosaic?

Preoccupation with sharing inheritance, rather than mere conservatism, may account for the lack of creative thought in the Basis of Union. The architects of union did not recognize the problems of the twentieth century as items on their agenda. Their task was to put existing beliefs and politics at the service of the new church, ironing out minor inconsistencies and fitting acceptable names to familiar things. We may be fervently thankful today that they saw their task in such modest terms. If they had attempted to codify an up-to-the-minute theology, or if they had tried to envisage a polity for the imagined future, the United Church would be burdened with a constitution hopelessly out of date and a creed far more troublesome to consciences than the Athanasian has ever been.

On June 10, 1925, when The United Church of Canada was constituted at a great inaugural service in the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto, the sharing of denominational heritages was the theme stressed in the official act of Union. The elected leaders of the three churches spoke in turn of the manifestations of the Spirit most prominently associated with their traditions, each concluding with the words: "Receive ye our inheritance among them that are sanctified." The same theme has been recalled at anniversaries ever since.

With this background of discussion, it was natural that one of the first concerns of the new church should be to assert its continuity with the uniting denominations. Delegations were quickly dispatched to Britain to secure from the parent churches recognition for the new offspring. Membership was quickly claimed and granted in the International Congregational Council, the Oecumenical Methodist Conference, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System. United Church

delegates have continued to participate actively in these organizations, although when in the denominational sessions at Amsterdam our representatives were assigned to a group of assorted united churches from the Orient there was some feeling that at last we had found our proper niche.

At home members of The United Church of Canada began to test the mutual cross-fertilization of which so much was expected. They were not disappointed. I have frequently heard veterans of union days describe the thrill of having their horizons lifted in unexpected ways by sharing worship and fellowship in unfamiliar forms and settings. They were prepared to feel the loss of much that was treasured, they said, but the new experience transcended in richness anything they had known. We have grown accustomed to the ease with which we draw upon a variety of traditions. Not many years ago, however, a visitor to Canada was amazed by an incident at the Berwick Camp Meeting in Nova Scotia. One of the features of this typically Methodist assembly was a hymn-sing devoted to requests from the congregation, and the visitor was flabbergasted when four out of the six requests were for the twenty-third psalm in metre set to as many different tunes.

Part of the richness of coming together proved to consist of freedom from the uniting traditions. Denominationalism nourishes a sense of pious obligation to the memories of founders that makes for loyalty but can at times be oppressive. It was with some relief, therefore, that many United Churchmen found themselves unburdened of the rather formidable shadow of John Wesley or escaped from a ceaseless round of psalm tunes. Denominational mannerisms began to be discarded, and soon denominational memories began to fade. Although divisions remained, it was refreshing to be able to say "I am of Christ" rather than "I am of Apollos."

In this release from old limitations there was both promise and danger. United Churchmen felt a new freedom to experiment, and in a rapidly changing society this freedom imparted a mobility and flexibility that was often envied by other churches. The danger was that experiment might consist merely of adopting new gimmicks and peter out in faddishness. For a time the danger seemed to outweigh the promise. Concerned presbyters lamented that the United Church was "going Congregationalist," meaning that ministers and congregations were acting lawlessly in disregard of church courts. Outsiders whispered, "The United Church has no theology." The picture of anarchy was often grossly overdrawn, but there was a real peril that in escaping the bondage of partial traditions the United Church should throw tradition over altogether. No longer hampered by the inertia of inbred religious folkways, contemporary secular patterns threatened to take over.

One seldom hears any more the old gibes about formlessness and unpredictability. For better or worse The United Church of Canada has evolved a recognizable corporate image. A United Church young people's society or men's group is unlikely to be confused with its counterpart in any other denomination. When the musical review *Spring Thaw* set out to

satirize the churches, the actor representing a United Church minister had no difficulty in getting his audience to recognize the caricature. More significantly, the United Church has long had a well-defined public stance on moral and social issues. In worship, too, despite variations in order, one can count fairly well on the general effect. On Sunday mornings an informal seemliness will prevail, with preaching dominant but prayer and praise seldom perfunctory. At Communion seasons the ritual may vary, but since the early years of union an almost universal method of distributing the elements has given a recognizable appearance to the service. Baptisms will take place, almost always now, during the morning service. On Sunday evenings the church will be nearly empty.

It could be argued that the United Church has become one of Canada's most homogeneous denominations. Congregations differ tremendously in background and outlook, but few can be assigned to definite categories like the high and low or the fundamentalist and liberal of other denominations. Party divisions within denominations are usually the result of ministerial initiative. Within the United Church there is little pressure upon a minister to conform as an individual, but it is exceptionally difficult for a minister to mould a congregation to his own image. There is a fair measure of lay control, and initiative for change comes largely from a central bureaucracy. Except in large cities there is a rapid turnover of pastorates, so that over a period individual enthusiasms cancel out and the denominational pattern persists. Radical experimenters have their greatest chance of success in inner-city congregations supervised by the Board of Home Missions, but even in these a core of old-time members is usually able to prevent spectacular innovation.

No communion likes to think of itself as merely one denomination among many, but Christian history records many movements that set out to fertilize the life of the whole church only to settle down to cultivate their new truth in sectarian isolation. This could be the fate of the United Church unless the original vision of union is constantly renewed and pursued. There are many who welcome the appearance of the familiar signs of denominational identity. Never comfortable in a situation where some of the lines of definition were blurred, they have been only too happy to have a local habitation and a name like the rest. The eagerness with which congregations have adapted the United Church seal and crest to liturgical uses never intended for it is striking evidence of this nostalgia for denominational lares and penates. And yet such trends to conformism have always been resisted. Our heritage was meant to be larger than that of a congenial in-group, and many will strive to keep it so. The United Church may be congealing into a recognizable shape, but there are still plenty of openings for new light.

In one sense the United Church has certainly established a tradition of its own. Over the years it has succeeded in attracting the loyalty of its people and in giving them a sense of belonging together. In the early days of union, visitors occasionally remarked that they could see only a mixture

of diverse elements. Congregations seemed as Methodist or Presbyterian as ever, and what sort of union was that? Even then the criticism was largely due to a misunderstanding, for few had learned to distinguish unity from uniformity and to recognize a common intent that made outward diversity irrelevant. Today it is almost never heard. The United Church of Canada began to take shape as a church from the moment of its inauguration, and the challenge of coping with a depression and churching suburbia has completed the process. Morale is so high, indeed, that outsiders sometimes complain that we act as if we were *the* church in Canada.

Reading statements embodying the hopes of those who many years ago urged a union of the churches, and comparing them with the actual record of The United Church of Canada, I have no doubt in my mind that the project has been successfully carried through. The essential values of the uniting traditions have been conserved and blended, and the result as anticipated has been mutual enrichment. Once in a while one hears complaints that one of the traditions, usually the Methodist, has been submerged by the others. Such complaints are infrequent, and derive their plausibility from a misconception of the actual state of Canadian Methodism—and Presbyterianism—in 1925. Doubtless some of the patina has rubbed off the denominational stones in the course of erecting the new structure. Doubtless some denominational enthusiasms have not taken fire in the new fellowship. No one could have expected otherwise. The founders did not anticipate that the United Church would feel like its predecessors.

Granted the success of the union in fulfilling the hopes of its promoters, however, the most important question pertaining to this study has yet to be asked. I have suggested that the framers of the Basis of Union did not find it necessary to do much delving into the sources of the church's faith and life. Have their successors compensated for the omission? As Wesley and Knox have taken their places in the perspective of church history, has there been a corresponding rediscovery of Chrysostom and Aquinas, of Cranmer and Menno Simons? Has there been a reawakening to the importance of what we are learning to call "the Christian tradition" as distinguished from the traditions of the various communions?

The answers to these questions must on the whole be disappointingly negative. The experience of belonging to a united church has not excited as much desire to examine the richness of the entire Christian heritage as one might have expected. From the first, indeed, The United Church of Canada has enthusiastically supported the ecumenical movement in all its phases and has shown itself ready to discuss terms of union or co-operation or mutual understanding with anyone. There has not been a corresponding eagerness to lay claim as of right to all things that are Christ's. For the most part the United Church has regarded itself as substantially the heir of its predecessors: Protestant, evangelical, puritan. In its practice it has borrowed most readily from churches of corresponding tradition in the United States. Theologically it has depended on Barth and Brunner, on Niebuhr and

Tillich, and on the divines of the Church of Scotland. One reason for this apparent readiness to be satisfied with the gains of 1925 may be the presence in strength of the Anglican Church. Relations between United and Anglican churches are friendly, but each tends to define its identity in relation to the other and therefore to emphasize points of difference. If the United Church thinks of itself primarily as the sum of its parts rather than as a microcosm of the Catholic Church, however, the main reason is that its founders so conceived it.

From the beginning, fortunately, there has been some recognition that a church committed to further union has both a right and a responsibility to lay claim to the whole Christian heritage. This recognition has been most explicit among those charged with devising forms of worship, and its outstanding monuments are *The Hymnary* and *The Book of Common Order*. Both of these the church owes largely to the vision of a few individuals. Even before union Dr. Alexander MacMillan had imparted his catholicity of taste to *The Book of Praise* prepared for the Presbyterian Church in Canada. In *The Hymnary*, of which he was editorial secretary, wide representation of "the Hymnody of the Church Universal" became the first principle of selection, taking precedence even over the aim of providing "a hymnody true to the genius, history, and traditions of the Communions which now compose The United Church of Canada."

In *The Book of Common Order*, prepared by Dr. H. Richard Davidson and Dr. Hugh Matheson, the same priority holds. According to the Preface, the aim of the committee was "to set forth orders that are loyal to the Spirit of Christ and loyal to the experience of the Church of all ages and of all lands; orders that carry on the devotional usage of the three uniting Communions in their living integrity." The book carries out the intention. Continuity with orders of the uniting churches is apparent, but the editors frequently corrected Reformed and Anglican idiosyncrasies by borrowing from Roman or eastern usage. An alternate Order of Service restores the broken unity of morning prayer and sermon, and reference to early practice has led to a strengthening of the eucharistic thanksgiving. The committee now revising *The Book of Common Order*, unhampered by pressure to give equal weight to the customs of the uniting churches, is in touch with all aspects of the current wave of liturgical renewal.

Otherwise the most conspicuous sign of awareness of a common Christian tradition is a subtle feeling of churchiness upon which many observers have commented. Church architecture and symbolism, although often betraying theological and liturgical amateurism, have indicated a desire to be in the main stream of the life of the church. Such a gesture as the inclusion of a Russian icon in the chapel of the United Church House, although trifling in itself, indicates a readiness to think of the United Church as more than a union of three Protestant denominations. Our failure to exploit more thoroughly the breadth of the Christian heritage is due to lack of initiative rather than to lack of openness.

The most conspicuous weakness of The United Church of Canada, I believe, has been the lack of any serious effort to test its life and work by the touchstone of Christian tradition, whether in scripture or in the experience of the church in other times and places. The result is that we have too often been contemporary and experimental without being venturesome or radical. Despite our willingness to learn from others we have suffered from a strange lack of self-criticism. We tend to accept the validity of what we say and do because we have said and done it before. Perhaps our prosperity has been our undoing. There are, fortunately, refreshing signs of change. The New Curriculum now being prepared for our Sunday church schools is based upon a set of theological presuppositions that were wrestled over for many months. New programs for laymen and laywomen reflect not merely the trend of the times but a theological rediscovery of the role of the laity in the church.

As yet, however, we do not find in the Christian tradition the possibilities of radical renewal sensed by some of our European brothers of the Reformed tradition. In such experiments as the Iona Community and the French monastic brotherhood at Taizé they are seeking to make the timeless contemporary and to relate the present world to the eternal order. We have no counterparts yet, and I see little evidence that we are ready for them.

We should like to be catalysts of further reunion. I believe that our fitness for that task will depend on our readiness to put our own denominational life in the crucible of tradition. We have justified the belief of our fathers that traditions can be enriched by combination. The next step depends on our heeding their other word that a seed must die if it is to be the bearer of new life.