

"and to his deeds we testify" -- UCC Statement of Faith

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"claims as its own the faith of the historic church....affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own" -- Preamble of the UCC Constitution, appearing in many loci, including the UCC Yearbook (1993, p.4, a marvelously compact & accurate statement of who we are in terms both of what we believe & how we came to believe it (ie, our four-strand historical roots)

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## CAN THERE BE "THEOLOGICAL STANDARDS" IF THERE IS NO "TEST OF FAITH"?

The U.S. Bureau of Standards "keeps in its care all standards of weights and measures...and tests, constructs, compares, and applies them" (Web.Unabr.2).

OCCASION: Both inside & outside the United Church of Christ, the phrase which appears as the first line of this Thinksheet is widely **misunderstood**, to the detriment both of our church's good order & of our ecumenical relationships. This serious difficulty has surfaced in Craigville Theological Colloquy X (on "Theological Standards for Ministry in the UCC"), now in session.

INTENTION: By lexical-historical understanding, to remove this obstacle.

1 "I testify" means that I personally bear witness, in or out of court, to something. I do so in freedom, in personal autonomy I surrender when I participate in saying "we testify." The difference is as great as that between marbles in a bag & cells in a body. A candidate for UCC ordination would be self-excluded by refusing to testify with us to what we believe as laid down in the UCC's founding documents as focused in the Preamble to our Constitution.

The problem with this is that American hyperindividualism is as anticomunal as it is anti-intellectual. A "joiner" afflicted with this disease will, in the very act of assent, hold dissent as a mental reservation. And it's not only the UCC that this disease afflicts. Pope Leo XIII condemned it as an element of the heresy of "Americanism" in the American Roman Catholic Church (*testem benevolentiae*, 1899, criticizing a tendency associated with the great American prelates Carroll, England, Gibbons, & Ireland).

2 The British background of the English-speaking strands of the UCC colors, sets the conotata, for the use of "testimony" & "test" in the UCC lexicon. The English Acts of **Uniformity** (1549, 1559, 1562 [proscribing all public worship not using the Book of Common Prayer]) unsuccessfully sought to coerce, a government pressure unrelieved till the Act of **Toleration**, 1689, which gave freedom of worship to voluntary religious associations. The separatist Puritans ("Congregationalists" on both sides of the Atlantic) naturally associated "test" with the former Acts & "testimony" with the latter act. The same feelings appear also in the second English strand of the UCC, the "Christian" churches (specifically among them, the Churches of the Christian Connection), as the NT as the "only rule of faith" (again, p.4 of our current UCC Yearbook). Note: not suggestion of faith, but **rule** of faith. Since the NT is polymorphous, the "rule" wasn't easy to apply: it's limits were more negative (what's ruled out) than positive (what's ruled in). But that applies to the etymology of "test," from the Latin meaning a pot (& derivatively the shell of invertebrates: under the Acts of Uniformity, the official church's mascot should have been the turtle).

The UCC's two churches of German background add illumination. The German Reformed Church carried the irenic spirit of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), emerging in the Mercersburg Movement as evangelical catholicity emphasizing Christian unity. And the German Evangelical Synod of North America had (ibid.) a "noncontroversial emphasis on pietistic devotion and unionism." Both churches were firm for the gospel, in conformity to the American spirit of free association but nonlatitudinarian (translation: not "laid back" about doctrine, as the UCC is falsely yet in part justly accused of being).

3 A current debate within the UCC is whether we should hold lightly our intention to be "a uniting as well as a united church" (a stance that requires an open & **irenic** stance vis-a-vis other churches) or a "church of the future" (requiring us to be **polemic** for tomorrow against all who are "mired in the past" & live in the present without the "integrity" of independence). It's a survival issue: the UCC will not survive if the latter wins.