

THE COMMUNAL NECESSITY OF THEOLOGICAL STANDARDS

EXAMPLE: The United Church of Christ
Craigville Colloquy X.1

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If a community is to continue to exist, its **paradigm** (the form-content-meaning of its "mind") must continue to have **power** (potency vis-a-vis the community's action-needs, its pragma), **plenitude** (richness adequate to feed the community's soul), & **purity** (effective resistance to intrusions of corrosive-corrupting alien ideas).

What must a paradigm have if it's to sustain such power, such plenitude, & such purity? It must have **clarity** (sufficient, in a Jewish figure, to be explained while the witness stands on one leg). It must have **coherence**: it must hang together, provide a sense of unity & order. It must have **comprehensivity**, leaving nothing out: it must be, to use a technical term, polyhermeneutic, able to answer the human cries for meaning, value, comfort, & hope. And it must have **cogency** (energy to convince, constrain, almost compel agreement).

Consider two instances of **paradigm failure**:

1 Current communal fragility in excommunist nations & in nations whose communist paradigm is losing one or more of the notes a paradigm needs to survive.

2 The Churches of the Christian Connection, many of which had drifted off into unitarianism by 1931 when the merger with the Congregational Churches occurred (to form the Congregational-Christian denomination, which in 1957 merged with the Evangelical-Reformed denomination to form the United Church of Christ). The Connection churches, claiming the whole New Testament as their paradigm, were unable to sustain plenitude (the Trinity leaking out because lacking its orthodox creedal intellectual supports), purity (secular humanism leaking in), & cogency (since biblical studies were making it increasingly difficult to see the NT as a unity able to serve as the substitute for creeds).

Looking toward Craigville Theological Colloquy X July 19-23, this Thinksheet....

- 1...affirms that "theological standards" are not optional if a church is to survive
- 2...exhibits some biblical persuasions to (as the Thinksheet's first line puts it) "Be of one mind"
- 3...defines "standards"
- 4...presents the text the Colloquy will use as base for its work, &
- 5...picks up, from the Witness Statements of the nine previous Colloquies, expressions signaling theological standards.

Let's take these in order:

1 Theological standards in the UCC are necessary, yes, but difficult because of (1) the theological diversity at our birth in 1957, despite the standards explicit & implicit in the Basis of Union & in the Constitution & Bylaws, & (2) the liberal, open-minded spirit & ethos of this church among American-&-world churches. The very enterprise of discovering-devising theological standards strikes a few among us as pernicious, a few more as impossible, & quite a few as a project not promising to be productive. But the necessity will not budge! We would not be the first church to founder from paradigm failure. And that failure is assured if we exercise no paradigmatic ecclesiastical discipline--eg, if "anything goes" in the papers of ordination candidates.

2 The King James Version (or, classical-Shakespearian English) uses "mind" much as we now use the scientific-sociological term "paradigm," so I'll use KJV in this exhibit. Note, in the Thinksheet's first line, a tendency in the New Revised Standard Version, a penchant to translate resultantly: if a community's of "the same mind" (KJV, which is closer to the Greek), it lives in harmony.

Love God "with all thy mind" (Deut.6.5 Mt.22.37 M.12.30 L.10.27)

PAUL: Ro.12.16 "Be of the same mind"; 15.16 "with one mind glorify God"; 1Cor.1.10 "together in the same mind"; 2.16 "we have the mind of Christ"; 2Cor.13.11 "be of one mind" (cp. Phil.1.27 2.2); Phil.2.5 "let this mind be in you"; 4.2 "that they may be of the same mind"

PASTORALS: 2Tim.1.7 "a sound mind"

PETER: 1P.3.8 "be ye all of one mind"; 4.2 "the same mind"

REVELATION: 17.13 "one mind"

The NT sees intellectual (or ideological, or doctrinal) unity as less a product of dialectical consensus-building, far less the result of submission to leader-authority, than of an individual-mutual seeking of God's will over against one's own will & the will of the world--a seeking-discerning productive of "the renewing of the mind" (Ro.12.2): we are dynamically of the same mind as a circle's radii have the same center. And, says the same verse, we have, as clues to God's will, what's good, what's commendable as pleasing God, & what's mature (considerate of all the facts-stages-standpoints in the light of the divine purpose). This verse is useful as a base for constructing the concept of theological standards.

3 The metaphor in **standards** is military. It's a conflate of two OE/A-S (Old English, Anglo-Saxon) words meaning "stand-place" (cp. our "standpoint"). A military standard or banner is held high to designate the center of one's unit or army & thus the rallying place-point, as distinguished both from all other places both on one's side & on the enemy's side. Without a standard, troops fall into anarchy, weakness, rout (cp. David's feelings about his armies' standard, the Covenant Box). Militarily, a standard is a life-&-death matter.

In considering issues of "theological standards" it's important to keep the military origin-scene in mind. Standards are nonoptional, a "necessity" (as I put it in this Thinksheet's title). This connotation carries over into such synonyms as model, example, criterion, rule, principle, base, measure, pattern, test. A group's intellectual existence depends on the **idea-cluster** that serves as its identifying banner. When that cluster breaks up, the group breaks up. Maybe a group should break up: that's a second-level question. On the first level is not a question but the iron fact that a group, eg the UCC, cannot survive the loss of its idea-core (nor could the USSR or East Germany, nor can the USA). Every group, certainly the UCC & the USA, has in it both rigorists (who preach the core & resist erosions thereof) & latitudinarians (who preach freedom, inclusivity, pluralism, multiculturalism, & suspect all talk of standards). (I personally am a centrist in that I'm rigorist as an evangelical & latitudinarian as ecumenical [as is G.Fackre, who's coming out with a book on this in the spring].)

But notice that "standard" may be a **simple** concept (as a military standard, or "standard time") or a **complex** involving quantity/quality value-judgments (as "standard English"). Theological standards construed on the former model lead to Procrustean, anti-intellectual fundamentalism, a heresy against worshiping God "with all your *mind*," your analytic-synthetic powers. But overstressing the difficulties of the latter model will land you in anti-intellectual sentimentality, an equal offense against one's God-given mental abilities (& a greater temptation for mainline liberal churches such as the UCC).

4 Here now is the Colloquy's text-base as it appears on pp.404-5 of the UCC BOOK OF WORSHIP (from Preamble & art.V, paragraphs 2,17,19 of the 1984 rev.ed. of the CONSTITUTION & BYLAWS OF THE UCC), the context being the service of ordination):

The UCC acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. ¶It looks to the word of God in the scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant reformers. ¶It affirms the responsibility of the church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. ¶In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and [...] Holy Communion. ¶The UCC recognizes that God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the gospel in church and society. The UCC seeks to undergird the ministry of its members by nurturing faith, calling forth gifts, and equipping members for Christian service. §Ordination is the rite whereby the UCC through an association, in

cooperation with the person and a local church of the UCC, recognizes and authorizes that member whom God has called to ordained ministry, and sets that person apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. By this rite ordained ministerial standing is conferred and authorization given to perform the duties and exercise the prerogatives of ordained ministry in the UCC.

5 Here now, from the Witness Statements of the nine previous Colloquies, are expressions signaling theological standards:

I discern the Spirit's work / the [four] traditions that have formed us / ever new light and truth from God's eternal word / theological disarray and lackluster witness / we trust God's promises / honor the ties that bind us, and learn from the diversities that enrich us / Jesus Christ as our "sole head, Son of God and Savior" / Christ is the Center / We confess JC "as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture" [Barmen 8.11] / Christ speaks to us unfailingly in the prophetic-apostolic testimony. Under his authority, we hold the Bible as the trustworthy rule of faith and practice / confess the trinitarian content of our faith [as in the Mt.28.19 baptism formula] / the triune God is manifest in the drama of creation, reconciliation and sanctification. Following the recital of these mighty acts in our Statement of Faith, we celebrate the creative and redemptive work of God in our beginnings, the covenant with the people of Israel, the incarnation of the Word in JC and the saving deed done in his life, death and resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit in church and world, and the promise of God to consummate all things according to the purposes of God / the divine initiatives cannot be separated from God's call to respond with our own liberating and reconciling deeds in this world, and thus to accept the invitation to the cost and joy of discipleship / Our faith finds its form in the Christian community / need to develop further our polity / Christian community must conform its life and practice to the Lordship of JC / in the UCC the Holy Spirit acts in powerful ways as the communities of faith gather for worship and for work [always with the prayer] "Come, Holy Spirit!" / preach good news to the poor [+], in Is.61/L.4 / Christ stands alongside those deprived of their just claims / beseech our government at every level to be steadfast and persistent in the pursuit of political, economic and social justice / Where justice is withheld among us, God is denied. Where peace is forsaken among us, we forsake Christ, the life of the Church is compromised, and the message of reconciliation is gravely wounded / Where our vision is unclear and the voice of the Church uncertain, we are urged not to indifference or compromise, but to our knees; to repentance, to prayer, and an earnest quest, seeking together the way of Christ for us / in Christ every wall of enmity or hostility is broken down / idolatry...offers us false comfort and false security / We reject "the illusions of self-liberation"...racism and sexism...materialism and consumerism...secularism...relativism...militarism...identification with any ideology of the right or of the left...cultural captivity and accommodationism...the notion that we can turn aside from the world in indifference [Ro.12.2: not conformed but transformed] / [gather] for prayer, study, and mutual care / mutual support of clergy / Church and Ministry committees to nurture Christian love and concern for [under care] seminarians / [need for] retreats and periods of rest, reflection and spiritual renewal / we affirm the gift of faith present in the UCC--evangelical, catholic, and reformed / we belong to our faithful Savior, JC, our "only comfort in life and death" [Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1] / We seek to hold together worship, discipleship, proclamation and service, Word and world.

II what way can it be said that Scripture is God's Word [alongside tradition & lived experience--the three being "inextricably bound together"]? / the centrality of Scripture / [prism as metaphor of unity/diversity] / the sovereign triune God is the source and character of the Word. All our judgments are made with a humility that honors the mystery and majesty of that source / the holy God speaks the self-revealing Word in the holy Scriptures, through the testimony of the Holy Spirit. All our words are accountable to that Word spoken in and through the canon / The Bible is the matrix out of which our testimonies of faith are born...nourished...grow / The clearest expression of God's Word is the life and ministry, death and resurrection of JC,...the primary Word of God, in which we know ourselves judged and reconciled by God, and sent out to be reconciled with our neighbors [--...] the message that stands as the internal interpretive norm for Scripture, and thus for tradition, experience, and life / The canon is inextricably bound to the Christian community...We encounter the living Word in the sacramental and liturgical life of the body of Christ where the word, tradition, and experience are bound together / New testimonies...new earthen vessels / Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the scriptures make known to us JC, the incarnate Word of God. That Word calls us to personal repentance and transformation and meets us as we stand with the suffering and oppressed...to proclaim the gospel in words and deeds...to challenge and confront...evil...to love our neighbors and our enemies.

III O God, our Creator and Redeemer, you send your Son to call us, one by one, into exciting, challenging, useful discipleship / strengthened and renewed for service as faithful disciples of JC our Savior / JC is the minister from whom all ministry derives and to whom it is accountable / Christ calls us to a servant-style of ministry (M.10.45). As witness to the reign of God, sufferer for the sins of the world, liberator from evil and death, Christ claims us for prophetic, priestly, and royal tasks of ministry in the church and the world / [God plans] to unite all things in him [ie Christ; Eph.1.10] / God wills to reconcile a rebel world...This divine intention is the purpose to which our ministry in Christ points...the way of forgiveness [Mt.18.23f] / [All members, the Laos, are] called to ministry through Baptism [ordained ministry being "one" of "a multitude of ministries"] / the ministry of the laity is largely focused beyond the institutional church / The laity call, encourage, and empower the ordained, as well as one another / the Holy Spirit bestows gifts for ministry [Ro.12.4-9]. The church needs to call forth, nurture, and celebrate the gifts of the laity / [the ordained are] called to equip the saints...[Eph.4.4-16] / Christ hidden throughout and within the universe / [if ministry may not be limited to the Body of Christ,] what is the implication for our conversations with representatives of other living faiths? / [need to] develop a theology and spirituality of the laity, and ways of training and accountability / "the ministry of the whole people of God...at all levels of the church's life and mission."

IV the Eucharist as the central act of worship and faith whereby God grants communion with Christ

[in "one great thanksgiving"] / we remember and re-present the great deed of God in...Jesus, the Christ / the Lord's Supper in response to Christ's command and promise / the willing sacrifice of Christ as a self-giving and self-emptying for the salvation of the world, and as a holy act of love which made holy a people / died for our sins and grants us forgiveness...leads us into sacrificial and joyful living and dying / The historical Jesus/eschatological Christ meets us in the Eucharist and is truly present [BEM: "the Spirit makes the crucified and risen Christ really present"] / the Eucharist is the work of the whole people of God...reexamine constantly all conditions of inequality...our stewardship of the earth's resources must reflect our solidarity with all God's people as we are challenged to be a just peace church / a foretaste of the heavenly banquet / the meal of the Kingdom that is and will be.

V In...baptism we are called, judged, redeemed, saved, as well as incorporated into the "one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" / [6 Scripture-based affirmations pertinent to baptism:] God's initiative...Our transformation...The gift of the Holy Spirit...The commission to evangelize...The call to a ministry of realizing the will of God in all realms of life...The inclusive nature of our community in CJ / our baptismal practices need continual evaluative review in light of Scripture, the creeds and confessions of the Church through the centuries, and the world we live in / to be administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with water / unrepeatable / affirm these vows through the right of confirmation and the regular renewal of life in Christ found in the Lord's Supper / includes a creedal or covenantal confession of faith / calls us...to a life of witness and service / liturgical blessing for the stillborn, for infants that die at birth, and for their parents / "to share in Christ's baptism."

VI the ultimate authority for our moral decisions must be God's will as it is revealed in Scripture, understood in the light of JC, and interpreted through experience, reason, and tradition / [abortion should be faced in the light of these "specific biblical motifs":] creation, covenant, stewardship, community, the fall, and grace / increasingly difficult to define either pregnancy or abortion / the sanctity of God's whole creation and of human life as uniquely made in the image and likeness of God / [the individual's] ultimate responsibility / [moral decisions should be made] within the web of our human relationships and our relationship with God / As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to responsible sexual behavior / ["the Christian conscience" has "moral responsibility" independent of "judicial and legislative standards"] / Religious groups have the moral right to use just means to influence public policy / [many differences among participants; for a few, abortion never "a viable option"; government should (1) stay out of it, (2) keep it legal, or (3) prohibit "most or all abortions"] / As we were unable to reach consensus about the moment and meaning of personhood, we could not agree upon the rights of the unborn / shame and guilt are God-given and desirable emotions which can lead us to repentance and healing / God's mercy and forgiveness allow us to hope for the future, and we live toward the day when the trauma of abortion will no longer exist.

VII our prayer and hope that all people may realize the gift of justifying grace and live freely and joyfully in the struggle for justice and peace / Jesus' atoning death and resurrection frees us for faithful witness and joyous service in Christ's name and sets our hearts to singing and longing for the "universal restoration" [Ac.3.21] / our betrayal of the divine love...is the essence of sin...Our disobedience and failure to trust God binds us to a world of sin, evil, and death, and we cannot extricate ourselves....Accordingly, we acknowledge and accept God's reconciling grace in...JC....By this grace alone we are justified [cp. BOOK OF WORSHIP, 45f] / God now accounts us righteous by the righteousness of Christ, [so we can] "glorify and enjoy God forever" [WESTM. SHORTER CATECHISM] / Work for justice flows from this faith....but in our time justification has become privatized and justice, secularized / In the atonement Christ made our sins and sufferings his own / we renounce our involvement in structure of oppression:...race, the misuse of power,...hunger and homelessness, the neglect of children, the abuse of gender, the love of money, and the fabrication of idols / we seek to glorify God in everything / the disunity of the Church in the world and in our communities impedes our doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God [Jn.17.21].

VIII The Holy Spirit brings order out of chaos, calls forth repentance and faith, frees God's people from bondage, speaks a living word through the prophets, is active in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and constitutes the Church at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moves freely...in the conviction of sin, in our sufferings, in our compassion for others / The doctrine of the holy Trinity reminds us that God is constantly present among us and the source of all hope and joy / The Holy Spirit was active in the beginning and continues to sustain and care for the universe / We confess our involvement in the brokenness of the world and admit that our selfishness and greed distort the beauty and balance of the Spirit's creative ordering / The Holy Spirit works toward healing and wholeness by bringing us together with God and with one another. This restoration is the pattern for hope and peace in the world. The Holy Spirit makes history the history of salvation / "Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation" / [the Spirit] will guide you into all the truth [Jn.16.13] / For Christians, truth is a gift of the Holy Spirit...enables us to discriminate between spirits / Greed, lust, and the desire to control can so delude us that we do not hear the truth of the Spirit / [Some Christians] would deny the freedom of the Holy Spirit by making limited truths absolute / We discern the true work of the Holy Spirit through Scripture's witness to JC, heard in the living church and in its tradition as it witnesses in the world. As we listen to the Word, we look for the gifts and fruit of the Spirit / "The Lord is the Spirit" [2Cor.3.17f].

IX Christ is our Lord and Savior / We treasure and affirm the classical teachings about Christ as they are grounded in the biblical witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The fullness of humanity and the fullness of deity are in CJ, the Second Person of the Trinity / the prophetic Jesus preaches, teaches, heals, and calls us to live in obedience to God, setting before us God's will for the world / the priestly Jesus, in obedience to God, giving up everything, suffered a criminal's death on a cross for our sin / the royal Jesus rules over the Church and the world, offering hope in the face of despair and death / Through his atoning death on the cross, He takes our sin upon Himself and thereby frees us for new life in Him / In Jesus we are a new creation / Christ dwelled among us, fully human and fully divine, and we know Him to be with us still / His presence brings praise to our lips / God's love...informs our conversations with those of other faiths / God came to us, as one of us, to make us one with God and one another / Jesus shocks our conventional sensibilities, thereby opening new worlds to us. He calls us to be an alternative community, embodying God's intent for the well-being of all people / our fellow sufferer, the one who understands us, stands by us, and empowers us to withstand the forces of evil within the social, economic, political, and ecological realms.