

Having studied the Craigville Letter, the documentary product of the Craigville Colloquy, adopted 16 May 84, a thoughtful layman wrote his church (through its moderator) that "if the laity is to be concerned, lay language should be used so that we can understand." It was tough-going for him: his PhD in science wasn't much help. He found "largely unintelligible" the first 3/4ths, which he described as an intro with "implications and innuendos which I cannot follow." Further, the meat should be affirmative: it's "entirely in the negative--7 rejections....in peculiar phrasing and not clear," not "logical," and with "many inflammatory words." His memo directed that I receive a copy; and this thinksheet begins my reply to him, whom I've not yet seen face to face (as the memo copy just arrived on my desk)....FOR his argument that "lay language" should be used, I have mixed feelings. He wouldn't insist that all scientific documents be in lay language: there's a place for technical writing. Yet all would agree that messages intended for the special public (such as the parascientific community and the churches) should be in semitechnical language, and all messages intended for the general public should be in lay language. "All"? Perhaps he would insist the the special/general-community distinction does not apply to the churches: church laity are just part of the general public, not an intermediate group between technicians and the general public. I cannot agree, yet I cannot disagree; and so this thinksheet is my effort to prove that what he wants can't be done: I'm assuming the thinksheet is a failure before I write it, "basic English" (not "Basic English") being too limiting for a message to the churches (clergy and laity).

LETTER TO OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Grace and peace to you!

At Barmen, Germany, 50 years ago, some Christian leaders came together and said "No!" to Hitler. Of course they used a few more words than just "no," and the total is called the Barmen Declaration. You might say that in Jesus' name they were against everything. That would not be quite true, but they were against Hitler's government and against the "German Christians," the mass of the church powers and population who were going along with Hitler.

As a memorializing of that courageous meeting, some UCC leaders (theologians, clergy, some laity) got together at Craigville to draw up a list of what we're against in Jesus' name. Is it a bad idea just to come together, sit down, and be as negative as you can manage? Well, everybody agrees now that it was a good idea to be as negative as you could be against Hitler, any way you could be negative. But today there's not much to be negative about, is there? If you thought that way, you didn't come to the Craigville Colloquy: it was just for negative persons (though, as far as I experienced, we didn't have any negative personalities). I'm against a whole pile of things, so I was delighted to go. (COMMENT: Note the tendency of "lay language" to slip from 1st-person to a dialectic of 1st-and-2nd-person and from plural to singular.)

Hang in with me on this, it's an important point: many people are prejudiced against being negative. Some parents twist their children's psyches by saying "If you can't say anything good about somebody, don't say anything." How well that worked in bringing Hitler to power! And think about positive personalities you've known: aren't they disgusting? Going around affirming everything and everybody in sight and even long range. They've a strong argument: Nobody's got immaculate perception, everybody's eyeballs (outer and inner) are "interested" in the sense of self-distorted--so why shouldn't we ignorant, vision-distorted creatures be generous? That I gladly affirm of a gentle wisdom "coming down from God" (as the Letter of James saith). But I cannot push that insight into agnosticism and wan cynicism: some truth, grand as well as petty, is available to us--is made (by God) available to us. And for this truth, great and small, we must fight, we must be warriors--though gentle warriors, ever praying for the peace beyond distortion and doubt, praying for forgiveness where our distorted visions have deceived us into worshiping idols we thought were the living God.

Now, just as "Barmen" had, "Craigville" chose to be negative in the positive way. As the best way to fight plant disease is to make the plant as healthy as you can, the Letter prays to God and appeals to the people for a healthier UCC in faith, order, life, witness, works of mercy, and the struggle for justice and peace.

"We, the People,...": so begins our country's Declaration of Independence. The Craigville Letter is a declaration *from* some in UCC, some gathered from all over the nation on a wide invitation, to *all* in UCC. So the sentences that carry the burden begin, "We _____." We praise, confess, acknowledge, trust, honor, believe, accept, call, celebrate, respond, rejoice, affirm, invite, share, ask, beseech, urge: all positive verbs! (NOTE: These are the verbs, in actual order, of the Letter itself --the only negative verbs being "resist" (used once) and "reject" (used 8 times.))

Note that being against is always in relation to being for: No wonder the Colloquy, an "against" meeting, states itself in this Letter so overwhelmingly as being for the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the purity and power of the whole Church, and our 4-in-1 heritage as the UCC! Here then is the list of what we're against and why. (NOTE: In a 2p. thinksheet, I can't use much space for the whys, which strand together biblical-theological-historical-sociological-psychological-environmental factors.)

1. WE'RE AGAINST substituting action for thought, an error that leaves action mindless and thought flaccid. So we praise God for the theological ferment in our Church! Has UCC been guilty of this error? We believe it has, for a variety of reasons.

2. WE'RE AGAINST both self-concerned withdrawal from "the world" and impenitent, arrogant involvement in "the world" (as though thus we could be pure of "the confusions and captivities of the times"). Are these ills among us? We believe they are.

3. WE'RE AGAINST party-spirit, which rejoices in division more than in unity. (The Greeks had a word for it, and it's in NT, 1Cor.11.16: *philoneikos*, "contentiousness," literally "love of conflict-and-winning.") The UCC is so many-opinioned in its old and new groupings that party-spirit is a perpetual temptation. The two most dangerous parties, in threatening the unity of the UCC, are "The National Office" (which is a bad listener) and "The Biblical Witness" (which is a poor speaker). The Colloquy, thank God, saw some improved listening and some improved speaking, and that not only between those two groups.

4. WE'RE AGAINST letting the world set the agenda. Rather, we seek to hear God's agenda as we confront our worlds, private and public, in the light of Scripture, "the ecumenical creeds, the evangelical confessions, and the covenants we have made in our churches at various times and places." We observe that our beloved UCC, because of its proper world-concern (i.e., caring about the world God loves and Jesus came to save), has a tendency to drift from "in" movement to "in" movement (which Paul accused the Athenians of, in Ac.17.29: *kainoteron*, being in love with "the latest") calling the current bandwagon God's *kairos* (the divine call of the moment), me-too "getting with it." This thin actionism lacks both spiritual and intellectual depth and breadth, fruitlessly disrupts congregations, and wastes resources of talents, hours, and money. Christian education at all levels of complexity can help cure us of this malady--helping us center our lives in the Lord with more energy and intelligence, helping us become more prayerful-reflective-active Christians.

5. WE'RE AGAINST cheap grace, such a low level of commitment to Christ and Church and congregation and congregational mission that one misses both "'the cost and joy of discipleship.'" Much of our UCC weakness and woes derive from our trying to drive into successive battles troops that are both uncommitted and untrained: "Yours not to reason why,/Yours but to do or die." A character in Norton Juster's THE PHANTOM TOLLBOTH (ch. 14) asks, "As long as the answer is right, who cares if the question is wrong?" The question often seems wrong to our uncommitted, and often also to our committed. No wonder our confusions and the attrition of our membership!

6. WE'RE AGAINST, both in theory and in practice, both clericalism (the dominance of the clergy) and laicism (the dominance of the laity). See, here, "against" #3.

7. WE'RE AGAINST dogmas (ideas presented as unopen to discussion toward "new light") vis-a-vis faith, order (government), life, and work (including "justice and peace").

8. WE'RE AGAINST "the idolatries of our time" that offer false messages and hopes, for Jesus Christ is our sole Lord and Liberator: we cannot save ourselves.

9. WE'RE AGAINST prejudices-sanctioned privileges such as are signaled by the words "racism," "sexism," "classism," and "nationalism."

10. WE'RE AGAINST trust in things (materialism and militarism) and pleasure (moral laxity and consumerism) and the God-rejecting-and-forgetting mentality (secularism) and despair of finding truth (relativism) and ideology and cultural captivity.