

## The Nature of Theology in the United Church of Canada

by Paul W. Newman

The traditional marks of the Church are useful terms with which to examine the theological identity of the United Church. If one tries to discover what constitutes the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the United Church a meaningful profile may emerge. Needless to say, there is a considerable subjective factor involved in reading these signs of the times in the church.

The unity of the United Church is rooted in the Spirit of mutual acceptance and goodwill, the commitment to work together for common purposes, belief in the democratic ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty, and in an ecumenical ethos that has traditionally confessed (albeit in somewhat sexist terms) the "fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." The unity of the United Church is not actively established by any creed or written confession. It is not doctrinal as much as practical. Our theology is primarily a theology of praxis, a theology rooted more in love than in faith, in a dynamic living and working together rather than in a fixed content of traditional ideas. Of course, there is faith implicit in the love and goodwill, but inasmuch as faith means explicit content of belief the United Church is not so much a community of faith as it is a community love. This can be viewed both in terms of crisis and hope.

In 1925 the United Church had a relatively stronger confessional unity than it has now because of the influence of the Westminster Confession which was common to the Presbyterian and Congregational traditions and was largely acceptable to the Methodists as well. The explicit Arminianism of Methodism and the determined belief in freedom of conscience in Congregationalism as well as to some extent in Canadian Presbyterianism, the "melting-pot" mentality of a young country and wide-spread anti-sectarian feelings all contributed to weakening the confessional allegiance of United Church people. At the same time, commitment to unity, as reflected in the name of the United Church, became itself a major tenet of the faith of United Church people. Unity for the sake of unity took precedence over unity for the sake of anything else.

This unity of the United Church could be disparaged as nothing more than liberal pluralism or untheological humanism, but a more accurate evaluation has to recognize the real presence of the Spirit of the Lord who reconciles and unites. The unity of the United Church, like all the essential marks of any church, is ambiguous. It is a creation of the Spirit of Christ and an expression of cultural forces.

The holiness of the United Church is likewise constituted by the Spirit that exists in the people. This holiness does not have the connotation of separateness from the world nor is it the holiness of consecrated mysterious purity. There are relatively few mystics or ascetics or sacrosanct people and things in the United Church. A duplicating machine can be consecrated with as much or more feeling than a baptismal font. The holiness in the United Church is the holiness of righteous endeavour. The social gospel has found more adherents in the United Church than in any other church in Canada. In the New Creed the identity of the United Church and her concept of holiness is faithfully expressed in the second section: "He calls us to be his church: to celebrate his presence, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil..." It is because of the Spirit of holiness in the United Church that she continually stands together with those who are concerned