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# Sorry, Athanasius – It's Not Over

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“Today heresy and orthodoxy have changed roles,” remarked Harold O. J. Brown. “It is fashionable, not dangerous, to be a heretic, and dull if not unsafe to be orthodox.”

The truth of Brown's observation is evident as mainline Protestantism continues its slide into doctrinal oblivion. Over the past century, virtually every essential doctrine of the Christian faith has been denied by liberal theologians and church leaders, usually without sanction. Yet, difficult as it seems, we can still be shocked.

One of the latest scandals concerns the United Church of Canada, a denomination formed in 1925 through the union of Canadian Congregationalists, Methodists, and the majority of Canadian Presbyterians. Given the ecumenical nature of the union, theological precision has never been a denominational virtue for the United Church, which boasts that “there is a wide latitude of personal interpretation enjoyed by both lay members and professional ministers.” The church is about to decide just how wide a latitude it will allow.

The current controversy concerns the theological denials of the Rev. Bill Phipps, who is, of all things, the recently elected moderator of the church. Soon after taking the denomination's highest office, Phipps granted an interview with the Ottawa Citizen and promptly denied the central doctrines of the Christian faith. In the interview and subsequent comments, Phipps denied the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the existence of heaven and hell, and, most directly, the deity of Christ.

“I don't believe Jesus was God,” said Phipps, “but I'm no theologian.” On his last point virtually all will agree, but, theologian or no theologian, the moderator is a heretic. He continued, “I don't believe Jesus is the only way to God. I don't believe he rose from the dead as scientific fact. I don't know whether these things happened. It's an irrelevant question.” Well, this may be an irrelevant question to Rev. Phipps, but it is a question central and essential for the Christian Church.

The moderator seems to ask some questions of his own, but they are questions rooted in disbelief of clear biblical teaching. “I have no idea if there is a hell. I don't think Jesus was that concerned about hell. He was concerned about life here on earth. Is heaven a place? I have no idea.”

A firestorm of sorts followed Phipps' denials, and the controversy raged through the Christmas season and right into the new year. Phipps issued an official statement shortly after his notorious interview, and apologized “that the way my faith has been conveyed to you has hurt or damaged some of you.” Of course, it was not the moderator's faith that scandalized but his denial of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

His apology - for hurt feelings rather than for heresy - left the moderator unrepentant. In a statement breathtaking for its absurdity, Phipps claimed “I believe my faith is well rooted in Scripture and Christian tradition, although it is not frozen in the language of early creeds, for example.” Not frozen? Phipps version of Christianity is an absolute melt-down of conviction. “People have to realize that within our church there's a wide range of faith convictions,” Phipps explains, evidently claiming room for unfaith convictions as well.

How has the church responded? Evangelicals are outraged, and have accused the moderator of standing outside both the Bible and the denomination's statement of faith. Their outrage, however, has been lost on the United Church's

bureaucracy. The church's General Council stood behind the moderator, noting that "Rarely, if ever, do we use doctrinal standards to exclude anyone from the circle of belonging." Evidently, the doctrinal standards of the United Church of Canada are there for the taking or the leaving-even for the moderator.

Marion Best, the previous moderator, was absolutely bursting with excitement. "It's quite exciting to hear the United Church think like this," she said, adding that Phipps "is moving us into a serious discussion of who Jesus Christ is."

Just what does Phipps believe about Christ? "I believe that Christ reveals to us as much of the nature of God as we can see in a human being. . . . The whole concept of the nature of God is wider and more mysterious than could be expressed in Jesus." Well, this is strange language for a minister who claims that his beliefs are "well rooted in Scripture." The Apostle Paul instructed the Colossian church that Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." It was the Father's good pleasure, Paul explained, that "all the fullness" would dwell in Christ, and "in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." Perhaps Paul didn't attend the same seminary as Rev. Phipps.

The Phipps controversy is just one more milestone in the theological collapse of the liberal churches. His heresy is no longer remarkable in itself - but we are shocked by the boldness with which he launched his attack upon the faith as the moderator of Canada's largest Protestant denomination. The true scandal is in the church's refusal to deal with the heresy and call the moderator to account. This doctrinal cowardice indicates just how far the church has fallen, and how empty its confession now stands.

The time will soon come when the last evangelical Christians will turn the lights out on the United Church and shake the dust from their feet. Undoubtedly, they will have to ask themselves how they stayed in so long. A church which will not defend the true deity as well as the genuine humanity of Jesus Christ is no longer a church at all - whatever it may claim for its name.

Athanasius, the great bishop theologian who opposed the Arian heretics in the fourth century, triumphed over the heresy at the Council of Nicaea with the clear declaration that the Christian faith required the affirmation of Christ's divine and human natures, without dilution or division. Just a few years later, the heresy was back, and Athanasius wrote in despair to a colleague: "I thought that all vain talk of all heretics, many as they may be, had been stopped by the synod which was held at Nicaea." Sorry, Athanasius, it wasn't stopped, and will not be until the Lord returns. In the meantime the church must contend for the faith - even against its moderators.

