

IS TOUCHSTONE REALLY NEEDED?

by Mac Watts

In the Editorial of the last issue, which was the final number to be under my editorial care, I indicated that I had been asked by Peter Wyatt, our new editor, to do a retrospective on the journal from its founding, to be published in this issue. I worked on this assignment for weeks and weeks, but each time I reviewed what I had written it always had the smell of defensiveness and self-justification. I couldn't tolerate such a piece appearing under my name. So I finally gave up on it. But, there is a matter I can address, and that is whether a journal like ours is still needed in The United Church of Canada.

Clearly it's useful to have a publication that carries the stories of people who have made significant contributions to our denominational story; it's useful to have a publication that contains reasoned responses to the important documents produced by General Council committees; it's useful to have available reviews of current books; etc. However, I came upon a light-hearted comment in a newspaper column that said people don't go to a Mozart opera for the plot. It's the music that makes those operas such luminous events. But the comment brought home to me the fact that when we go to church the plot is critical and I realized I had come to an urgent reason for the continuation of our journal: the issue of the Christian Plot.

The Christian Plot is grounded in the Jewish one. The latter is summarized in Deuteronomy: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us...we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and...brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...." (Deut. 26:5-10). Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost

provides an outline of the Christian Plot: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs . . . you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law . . . This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear . . .” (Acts 2:22ff).

It is my conviction that the perspectives offered in *Touchstone* are still needed, since a good many in our denomination feel there are elements in our two-staged Plot that need to be changed, and that *they are free to change*. An illustration of the exercise of this freedom can be seen in a recent eucharistic prayer that was prepared by one of our ministers for her own covenanting service. Here’s part of it:

Remembering a single evening when Jesus took bread and broke it, filled a cup and shared it, told stories with his friends and shared you [i.e. God] with them, we remember your unconditional love. We remember your power and presence and know joy.

I’m sure the motivation to alter the scenario in the Upper Room didn’t come simply from within her own soul. She was inspired by what others in our church are doing, people who find the basic biblical narrative unpalatable. They implicitly lift Jesus, and favourite scriptural passages, out of it and place them in a religious framework that is congenial to them. Thus, in the instance of the Upper Room event, they block out the fact that, according to all the synoptic gospels, Jesus and his disciples were keeping Passover. If it were a Passover observance, Jesus wouldn’t be casually passing around stories, but be rehearsing *the*

Story—God’s deliverance of the people from Egypt—as Jews do all over the world on this day of Passover. The synoptic writers simply take that for granted, because everybody was aware of what happens at a Passover meal. What their readers needed to know about, however, were the unexpected words that Jesus *added* to the occasion: that the bread and wine were related to a *new* covenant in his body and blood. This seems to be a component of the Plot which quite a number of our church people, like our covenanter, shy away from like skittish horses.

The Plot—the Story—is not like a package. It is not inert. It is alive with meaning, indeed alive with meanings. Take as a Jewish example, Abraham Heschel, the great 20th century theologian. His lively, engaging, and profound writings have inspired both Jewish and Christians readers with their exciting insights. But Heschel didn’t change the Jewish Story so he could be lively and exciting. It’s not as though nothing in Jewish life could be altered; his daughter, after all, became a rabbi! But the Passover narrative remained intact for him. He still observed the high holidays, including the Day of Atonement. He knew he couldn’t be a Jew otherwise.

Heschel kept telling, interpreting, and re-interpreting the Jewish Story. We Christians need to do the same with the Christian Story; but it is critical that the structure of the Story and the hero of it remain in sight. Keeping the hero in sight, and identifying his real character, were the issues that brought people together in the year 325 for the first general council of the church. That council keeps getting a bad press, much of it related to the political involvement of Constantine. But actually it did something of real import for ordinary Christians. It made a few very significant additions to a creed that the bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, had brought with him to the council. With that amended creed it provided the church with an affirmation (the

Nicene Creed) which offered clarity about who the hero of the Christian Story is, stating that the one who became incarnate in Jesus Christ was none other than God the Son, who was of the very same nature (being) as the Maker of heaven and earth. At a later council, where it was affirmed that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, the gathered members were once again trying to refine the church's understanding of the unique character of the hero of the Christian Story.

But, since I have said that the Christian Story is alive with meanings, I here identify one of them that I think relevant to our situation. An aspect of the Christian modernist movement over the past three hundred years has been the effort to identify a universal god who is cleansed of all tribal contamination. This appears like one of the most commendable of goals, but it is actually another example of how Satan can clothe himself as an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14). The God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son must in the end be acknowledged as a "tribal" deity. Think of that brief comment by Jesus in his encounter with the woman of Samaria—as reported in the Gospel that has been dubbed by some recent interpreters as being anti-Semitic—" . . . for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Jesus was not simply an exemplary citizen of the world; he was the Jewish Messiah. If he was a different kind of Messiah than Jews had anticipated, Christianity is nevertheless still irrevocably bonded with the faith of Israel. Jews observe the Day of Atonement and Passover. Christians observe Good Friday and Easter. When Good Friday is isolated from any perception of atonement we have detached Jesus, and ourselves, from our Jewish roots, *and also from real life*.

The words in John's epistle, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God," are often quoted. The ones that directly follow,

however, are not, even though they contain the point the writer is moving towards. He wants to remind his readers of the new things they now know about this business of love. “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4: 7-10).

When I said earlier that basic parts of the biblical narrative are unpalatable to quite a number in our church, I was thinking in particular of portions of the story that are expressed in passages like this one in I John, and in others like it that are found throughout the New Testament. If all those parts of the New Testament are blanked out, then a different story has to be fashioned and the hero has to be remade. Usually, in this remaking, Jesus can still be portrayed as the Good Shepherd, but no longer as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Historically the church believed the object of its worship filled both of those roles. Our own United Church hymn writer, Sylvia Dunstan, allied herself with that tradition in her splendid text, “You, Lord, Are Both Lamb And Shepherd” (No. 210 in *VU*). I believe we should be following her lead.

In the circumstances, then, there is still need for a publication like *Touchstone* in our denomination, one that encourages fidelity to the ongoing witness of the generations: “it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine in the darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).