

STUDY SERIES 1

# **THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH**



## **WHAT SORT OF CHURCH ARE WE?**

JAMES O. DUKE

## **An Invitation to Study**

In this book, James Duke has offered a concise presentation on the nature of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as *church*. He has been intentionally theological, but with the definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” And that is the task of every Christian! Indeed, we are all called to be “theologians” and to pursue the faith-ful task of the gospel.

This study is written so that one chapter leads to the next—to deeper and richer meanings of our shared beliefs as Disciples of Christ. In many ways, this book should be seen as a basic resource for members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and for those considering membership in order to understand the key elements which define our life together as church.

The context for this exploration is the whole church of Jesus Christ. The chapters do not begin with “what do Disciples believe about . . .?” Rather, the starting point is “what does the church believe?” And then, and only then, do we turn to what we believe and practice as “Disciples,” as “one of the many ordered communities of believers in which the church of Jesus Christ is manifested.” (Duke, p. 31)

The questions set forth at the end of each chapter of this book are offered to stimulate further probing of the issues and ideas. They may also be used to give direction to discussion in study groups or membership classes.

Council on Christian Unity

# **What Sort of Church Are We?**

**by James O. Duke**

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## Foreword

For centuries Christians have proclaimed “I believe in the church.” Those who hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ discover that he calls them to live in the community of his Spirit. But the confession “I believe in the church” is inevitably followed by the probing question: “But what sort of church? What particular view of the church guides our participation in the congregation and the church universal?” No question is more vital for Christians to explore these days.

This book about the church arises from the work of the theological commission of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1978 the Commission on Theology and Christian Unity embarked on a six-year study on the nature of the church. The purpose is to bring us to a deeper understanding of what it means to live out the gospel in today’s world, and especially to grasp the role of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in fulfilling the vocation of the whole church stretched throughout time and space. While only at the mid-point of its task, this commission of twenty Disciples theologians, both lay and professional, chaired by Dean H. Jack Forstman of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, has already found exciting and relevant insights which will stir Disciples toward claiming both ancient and new dimensions of a doctrine of the church.

Their agenda is focused upon such issues as the biblical view of the church, witness and mission, authority, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, ministry, and unity. These are issues which call the church to its fundamental task, but these are also aspects of discipleship which must be rethought and reclaimed in a changing world situation. Such has been the experience of all Disciples as they have lived together in their restructured church, celebrated in 1968.

This book—the first in a series by the Commission on Theology and Christian Unity—is written for lay persons and ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who want to learn more about the church and for our sisters and brothers in other Christian communions who wish to understand our ecclesiology, our understanding of the church at its

growing edges. This book is intended for study by individuals and groups—elders and deacons, ministers' clusters, adult church-school classes, and a variety of other study groups. It is published now—before the commission completes its work—in order to involve a large segment of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in this theological study. A faithful concept of the church is far too important a task to entrust to theologians, commissions, and plenary bodies alone. Each of us has a stake in the process.

To take the church seriously will draw us out of our provincial views. A church which is sectarian, divided, or culturally bound is not the community where Christ reigns. As the Commission on Theology and Christian Unity has learned, a doctrine of the church for these ecumenical times brings us face to face with hard issues that call us to creative reflections and decisions. These issues include mission as proclamation and witness in a world of oppression and hunger; the relation of the church local and the church universal; the shape of church unity; what it means to be servant churches living under the Cross; and the church as a foretaste of the kingdom of God. These are the big issues ahead for Disciples and other churches.

Ecclesiology, the theological understanding of the church, forces us to think of the gospel and the world as interrelated parts of God's plan for the human community. The church is, or should be, the meeting place between the contemporary world and the message of God's action in Jesus Christ. Any reflections on the nature of the Christian community, therefore, reach their deepest and most relevant level when the church is understood as a community of unity and mission, living for Christ's sake in a broken, secular society.

Disciples have always claimed that their pilgrimage is a witness to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. But that is not an abstract confession. It means our doctrine of the church has practical implications, and speaks with authenticity in the midst of the daily human situation. We are rooted in revelation and history, but we are also the people of God who are called to respond to the new light which the gospel brings—a new light and new affirmations which make known that we are the community of the Spirit, the church truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed.

Paul A. Crow, Jr., President  
Council on Christian Unity

# **An Affirmation of Faith**

**AS MEMBERS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH,**

We confess that Jesus is the Christ,  
the Son of the living God,  
and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.

In Christ's name and by his grace  
we accept our mission of witness  
and service to all people.

We rejoice in God,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
and in the covenant of love  
which binds us to God and one another.

Through baptism into Christ  
we enter into newness of life  
and are made one with the whole people of God.

In the communion of the Holy Spirit  
we are joined together in discipleship  
and in obedience to Christ.

At the table of the Lord  
we celebrate with thanksgiving  
the saving acts and presence of Christ.

Within the universal church  
we receive the gift of ministry  
and the light of scripture.

In the bonds of Christian faith  
we yield ourselves to God  
That we may serve the One  
whose kingdom has no end.

Blessing, glory and honor  
be to God forever. Amen.

—From the Preamble of the  
Design for the Christian Church  
(Disciples of Christ).

## Chapter 1

# The Churches and the Church

What sort of church are we? The question can't be dodged. It comes into play whenever we try to tell others about our church and whenever we try to grapple with concerns in our church. Sometimes, perhaps often-times, it catches us unawares. Just by going around in church circles we say something, to others and to ourselves, about what sort of church we are.

In these pages I want to invite members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)<sup>1</sup> to join me in exploring this question and its answer. To be sure, this kind of invitation threatens to take us into an area as big as all outdoors, and a thorough survey would require that we take stock of everything about our church.<sup>2</sup> But the exploration I have in mind is much more modest. I would like us to scout for what it is that makes our church truly a church, that is, one of the churches which rightly claims to participate in the church of Jesus Christ.

The question before us is at heart theological, and it begs for a theological response. And since for our purposes theology may be understood simply as "faith seeking understanding," we will want to consider first and last how our common faith in Jesus Christ and our common life in the church of Jesus Christ belong together. Whatever we discover about what

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<sup>1</sup>This is the name officially adopted by this body of Christians. For convenience's sake I will also refer to this church as "(the) Disciples" or as "our church." The Disciples are here understood to be one of the many churches (plural) which together participate in "the church of Jesus Christ" or, more simply, "(the) church" (always in the singular).

<sup>2</sup>Many of the specifics about the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are discussed in recent books: *We Call Ourselves Disciples*, by Kenneth Teegarden (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975); *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, by Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975); *The Faith We Affirm: Basic Beliefs of Disciples of Christ*, by Ronald Osborn (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1979); and *Handbook for Today's Disciples* by D. Duane Cummins (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1981).

*sort* of church we are should be noted and appraised in light of this standard.

Faith and church belong together. Here we have an affirmation, an insight, a vision, shared by Disciples from the very beginning. It is part of our birthright as a movement of Christian renewal early in the nineteenth century. It has lasted with us throughout our days, serving as a source of stability and yet as a stimulus for change.

There are many reasons for examining anew how faith and church belong together. Let me cite here three which have influenced this account greatly. First, the Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has put our thinking about the church on a new footing. Although we are still learning little by little how to build on this foundation, the document itself, or rather our adoption of it in 1968, at once bespeaks and demands an increasingly mature sense of our oneness in Christ. Second, the perplexities of living in these times press us to be clear about what it means to be a church. Only in this way can our church hold its course against the crosscurrents of our culture and so avoid the twin perils of nostalgia and future shock. Third, our long-standing commitment to the cause of Christian unity, expressed today in our many ecumenical involvements, leads us to search ourselves. We can come to realize the gifts we bring to this cause and we can cope with obstacles only if we understand the contact point between faith and church.

Self-inspection is not without its pitfalls. Persons who look at themselves may lack the quality of eyesight required for the task. Churches which look at themselves seem prone to suffer tunnel vision. The risk has to be taken. But precautions are necessary. When we strain our eyes to focus on what makes our church truly *church*, we can expect to spy on far more than ourselves: the saving acts of God and the hosts of God's servants, past and present, here and everywhere, should come into view.

The Preamble of our Design acknowledges this point, for it speaks of the church in quite inclusive terms: "Within the whole family of God on earth, the church appears wherever believers in Jesus Christ are gathered in his name."<sup>3</sup> Members of the church, the church universal, are bound to God and to one another by the covenant of love which God has established in Jesus Christ. They are united in one Lord, one faith, one Spirit, one baptism, one table, one mission of witness and service. In common they receive the gift of ministry and the light of scripture.

The church of Jesus Christ manifests itself in ordered communities of disciples, associated in worship, work, and relations of solicitude. This

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<sup>3</sup>This reference and others throughout the book are to The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which is available from Christian Board of Publication, Box 179, St. Louis, MO 63166. 93A1708, 25c.



association, or ordering, remains constant, although the forms, structures, and programs which communities adopt may vary considerably and may be adapted to changing circumstances.

Our own commitments to one another as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are to be viewed within this context. Our church is but one of the ordered communities in which the church manifests itself. We can be recognized by our forms of order—our history, name, institutions, relations, and the like. Yet our identity *as church* rests in those ties which bind us, with other churches, to the church of Jesus Christ.

Both the thrust of our original question and our Design suggest how we are to proceed. To consider what sort of church we are is to consider the nature and purpose of the church itself. We are not pioneers in this effort. From early times on, ordered communities of believers have pondered what it is that makes the church truly the church.

Some of their findings have come down to us as well-known phrases. The church is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” This listing of the four “marks” of the church, approved by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, has to this day guided much thinking about the character of the church. “Where the Word is preached and the sacraments administered, there is the church” is another specification which has remained, since its formulation in the Reformation era, a point of reference for many Christians. Attempts to replicate the “primitive design” of the church have, throughout the history of Christianity, commanded the interest of individuals and groups. Quite recently, the Consultation on Church Union has called for a “church uniting” which would be “truly evangelical, truly catholic, and truly reformed.” Options for an understanding of the church, an ecclesiology, are numerous.<sup>4</sup>

We ignore such findings at our own peril. The best use we can make of them, however, is not to repeat or to disavow the phrases themselves, but to take them under advisement. In so doing, we show that we appreciate the ecumenical dimensions of our venture, resolving to think *for* ourselves but not just *by* ourselves.

Disciples have always urged looking to the New Testament in order to reach an informed theological understanding of church. There is good reason to do so. The New Testament is not only an indispensable resource but the highest court of appeal for Christian judgments on this matter. This much is evident to Disciples.

Perhaps less evident, but equally true, is the fact that reliance on the Bible is not unique to the Disciples. All of the churches vow to be faithful

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<sup>4</sup>These options are discussed at somewhat greater length in my article, “An Ecclesiological Inventory,” *Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal* 19 (July 1980), 263-71.

to the scriptures, although they interpret and apply the biblical records in divergent ways. I suspect that all could admit that the churches, including our church, have been less than fully successful in their attempts to keep their vow. But before recriminations begin, we should recall that the different accounts of the church which the churches have given stem in part from the diversity of ways in which the scriptures discuss the church.

Those discussions make for a fascinating and controversial study in their own right. If we look to some of the best scholarship, we can be alerted to numerous biblical themes, or better, images, which are meant to disclose what the church is. One noted biblical scholar has counted in the New Testament no less than ninety-six such images, ranging from A (Abraham's sons) to almost Z (W—witnessing community).<sup>5</sup> Given these rich veins of material, it is not surprising that differences of opinion have arisen among the churches.

Fortunately, biblical study does not simply cast us adrift. The images play unequal roles within the New Testament, and the large majority can be grouped into several major families of meaning, which individually and collectively illumine crucial aspects of the full reality that is the church. We may therefore in good conscience get our bearings by fastening on these.

Phrases in the Preamble of our Design draw upon these major images and suggest the families of meaning: the people of God, the communion of the Spirit, and the body of Christ. For this reason all three would deserve at least brief attention. But since all of the churches appeal to such biblical resources, our decision to look at these images is far from parochial.<sup>6</sup> We will want first, however, to be aware of the fountainhead of all talk about church: God's covenant in Jesus Christ.

## ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

***1. What do you believe is the true tie that binds Christians to the church? What holds us together as a church?***

***2. What biblical images speak to you in your understanding of church? In your understanding of the "local congregation"?***

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<sup>5</sup>See Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>6</sup>My own discussion of images of the church draws heavily on Paul Minear's work and special attention has been given to the treatment of this topic, and others, by Jack Forstman, a Disciple, in *Christian Faith and the Church* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1965); Hans Küng, a Roman Catholic, in *The Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1976); Donald Miller, a Presbyterian, in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962); and Jurgen Moltmann, the Reformed Church, in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (N.Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1975).

## **Chapter 2**

# **The Identity of the Church**

Whenever the churches have taken account of themselves, they have felt obliged to stress that their very life depends on God. This is bold talk, the sort that can easily mislead those who decide either to join or to shun any particular church. Yet Christians cannot in honesty say anything else. The first word to be said about faith and church is that both derive from a common source—God’s covenant.

### **The Covenant**

A covenant is a solemn pledge that binds two parties into a new relationship. The term is used often in the Old Testament to describe how God, out of love and mercy, has entered into special relationship with the Jewish people. The covenants made with Abraham and his family, with Moses and the company set free from Egyptian slavery, and with the restored nations of Judah and Israel prophesied by Jeremiah make clear the intimacy of this association. The bond is God’s own promise, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

Christians in New Testament times had a lively awareness of the Jewish covenantal traditions and drew upon them in order to speak of the saving work God undertakes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The narratives of the Lord’s Supper announce that a (new) covenant is sealed by the blood of Jesus. Paul, who views the history of God’s dealings with humanity in light of the gospel, affirms that Christians are, like Isaac, “children of promise” and ministers of the new covenant. The book of Hebrews weaves such strands into a distinctive pattern, depicting Jesus Christ as the mediator of the new covenant. There is a recurrent message here. God’s covenant of love is the foundation of faith and church.

### **People of God**

In referring to the church as “the people of God,” the Design of our church resorts to an image that was especially prominent in early Christianity. It is related quite directly to God’s covenant, because covenant-making is at the same time community-building. The biblical notion of covenant arises from the conviction that Yahweh, Lord of heaven and earth, has acted to bring into being from the many peoples of the world a new community—the people of God. Applied to the church, the title

indicates that the covenant-making God has acted once again, in Jesus Christ, to fulfill this design.

The same point is made in the New Testament references to the Christian *ecclesia* (the church), which means “those who have been called out.” In ordinary usage an *ecclesia* was an assembly of persons who had been called together by the summons of a herald. In the context of Christian thinking, God’s covenant is just such a summons. It is the call to faith which draws persons to God and to one another. Faith is of course intensely personal, but it is by no means private. To respond to the covenant is to come to faith in the covenant, and to come to faith in the covenant is to enter into the assembly of the faithful.

The image “people of God” sheds rays of light on the nature of the church, and two are worthy of special notice. First, the church owes its existence to God’s initiative. Apart from the covenant no people can rightly bear this title. And, second, since the covenant expresses a divine decision which pays no heed to worldly status and a divine love which none have earned, the people of God cannot boast of their favored status. Far from putting on airs of superiority, the church is to walk humbly and gratefully before God.

## **Communion in the Spirit**

To early Christians the destiny of Jesus and the origins of the church were fulfillments of the prophetic expectation of the time of salvation. That era, they believed, would come with a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God. According to their understanding the Spirit was granted to Jesus, “breathed” by Jesus upon ten of the disciples (John 20:22), and sent to the whole community gathered on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Through the power of the Spirit, the followers of Jesus become witnesses to the mighty works of God (Acts 2:4, 11). Although dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, they were linked by the Spirit into one church, empowered to proclaim the gospel, equipped with gifts for a variety of services, and strengthened in their faith.

It was Paul more than any other Christian writer who mined most fully the meaning of life in the Spirit. His frequent, often interchangeable, references to God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit indicate that he is always speaking of the same reality—the enlivening, energizing, intimate power of the divine presence. “Communion in the Spirit,” then, extends our understanding of the church by alerting us to God’s own spiritual presence with the covenant people.

The presence of God is made manifest by what it does, working to transform the covenantal promise into reality. It enables persons to come to faith and sustains them in the life of faith. It removes the barriers which

separate one from another—nationality, race, sex, class, and status—so that all might be joined in love. It spurs and equips persons to undertake the ministry which is entrusted to them, granting them authority and power to continue the work of redemption, liberation, and reconciliation throughout the world. Because it is the communion in the Spirit, the church is a “new creation,” a sign and agent of God’s will.

## **The Body of Christ**

In biblical texts associated with Paul and his thought, significant use is made of another image of the church—that of the body of Christ. Like the others, this image is flexibly applied in various contexts and carries many shades of meaning. When it is allowed to interact with the idea that the church is the people of God and the communion in the Spirit, it helps us focus on the unity amidst diversity which characterizes the church.

Paul tells Christians that all are one body belonging to Christ and that each is individually a member of that body, belonging to one another. To be the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27) or “one body in Christ” (Romans 12:4) is to participate in a spiritual unity determined by the person and work of Christ. It is going too far to say that Christ is nothing apart from the church, but it is essential to say that Christ is present in the church and that the church is nothing apart from that presence.

The union of believers in the body of Christ is made real in baptism, “for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). It is also made real at the table of the Lord’s Supper, where “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (1 Corinthians 10:17). In these acts Christians are joined with Christ and, through him, with one another.

The one body, vitalized by one Spirit, is composed of many members with various spiritual gifts for different services and functions. The unity of the church is exhibited not in uniformity but in diversity. Each member is to be prized for his or her uniqueness, and all are to live together in equality and in solidarity: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Plus, each cooperates and contributes in a distinctive, personal way to the well-being of the whole. Further, each needs the others, for only through the interaction of all does the body attain to the full stature of Christ.

## **Images and Reality**

We have dashed off into the area opened up by the biblical witnesses to the church. Have we perhaps wandered too far from home? Covenant,



people of God, communion in the Spirit, body of Christ—the rhetoric is familiar. But do we recognize in it anything of the churches, of our church, which we deal with in reality?

The biblical images are certainly not meant to point to some church unknown to Christian experience. To the contrary, they are to help us spot the very identity of the real church. We will never do so, however, until we consider how the real church lives out its identity within the actual conditions of worldly existence. I will try to describe these conditions by pairs: community and institution, locality and universality, unity and plurality, the already and not yet.<sup>7</sup> Each grouping represents two poles which, despite their opposition, are inseparable and complementary. The church lives out its identity in the world by moving within the extremes.

The church is community and institution. Its character as community is evident in that its members are drawn to one another and relate to one another because they sense a sharing of common commitments, ways of thinking, attitudes, and affections. These intimate ties of common life underlie and transcend any specific organizational structure or any specific program of action. It is an error, then, to define the church strictly in institutional terms. At the same time, this common life does not and cannot exist without some formal characteristics, such as rites of worship and patterns of service and responsibilities, which give expression, shape, and order to interpersonal relationships. It is an error, therefore, to repudiate every vestige of institutionalism in the church. The church partakes of both extremes.

The church is local and universal. The New Testament word *ecclesia* (church) indicates as much, for it refers sometimes to the individual communities of Christians dispersed among the cities and regions of the Roman world and sometimes to the whole company of the faithful wherever they may be. But word usage does not tell the full story. Since the church appears wherever believers are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, such a gathering must be in some specific locale. In this sense the local gathering must be said to be truly the church. And yet the spiritual union with Christ which appears in any given locality implies union with all persons of faith. The church partakes of both extremes.

The church is one and many. There have always been, even in New Testament times, many churches, different not only in where they are located but in how they express their faith in Jesus Christ. The image of

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<sup>7</sup>This approach, and with it my account of these distinctions, comes mainly from H.R. Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1956).

the one body with many members leads us to expect as much. Far from being corruptions of the church, a multiplicity of churches exhibits the manifold riches of the Christian life. Nonetheless, the many churches must never forget that they are only individual parts of an organic whole and that, as such, they are dependent upon every other part. The oneness of the church is therefore no excuse for denying the legitimacy of other churches; the diversity of the church is no excuse for failing to seek out every means to attain unity.

The church is already, but not yet, what it is to be. Here we have a polarity that becomes a paradox. The church is the community of salvation; its members are called the saints, the elect, citizens of heaven. Its creation is part of the dawning of God's kingdom; the lordship of Christ is made known, the Spirit is poured out, sin is forgiven, reconciliation among peoples is established; a new life of freedom, peace, joy, and hope is begun.

But the church is not yet all that it is to be, and the reign of God has not yet come in full power and glory. The covenant people are pilgrims, subject to the temptations, the failings, and the misfortunes of wanderers through this worldly wilderness. Granted forgiveness of sins, they repent constantly of the workings of the sin that remains in them and strive to resist its power. The newness of life given to them has not yet been perfected.

Understanding the paradox of what the church already is and what it is yet to become guards us against claiming too much or too little for the church. To claim too much will be to idealize the church, and the inevitable result will be hypocrisy, embarrassment, or disillusionment. To claim too little will be to undervalue the church, and the consequences will be privatism, cynicism, or indifference.

As the people of God, the communion in the Spirit, and the body of Christ, the church is always to be faithful to its calling. Covenant people live with the memory of what God has done and the anticipation of what God will do. Their continual reliance upon God's promise and God's power makes them a sign of God's active presence in the world.

### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

- 1. On page 10, reference is made to Christians being "children of promise." How do you understand God's promise for your life? For the life of your congregation? For the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)?***
- 2. How does the Spirit link us together in the one church?***
- 3. What gifts do you bring to your congregation? What gifts does your church contribute to the building up of the larger body of Christ?***

## **Chapter 3**

# **The Ties That Bind**

Our glance at biblical images that help disclose the identity of the church and at conditions within which the church lives out its identity leads us to conclude that the church is truly the church by virtue of God's covenant, which creates, sustains, and directs it. This conclusion, in turn, suggests that the primary ties which bind Christians into one company are those that make manifest that covenant: the confession of one Lord, one baptism, and one table. By these all churches are constituted and, beyond variations of thought and practice, are made participants in the one church of Jesus Christ.

## **One Lord**

Because of God's covenant, Christians declare the lordship of Jesus the Christ. If Jesus is Lord, there can be no other sovereign. The powers which vie for our ultimate allegiance—nation, culture, wealth, status, ideals, things natural or supernatural—are displaced from the center of life. In the struggle to fathom the meaning of life and death, Christians place trust in God alone and walk in the light made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

If Jesus is Lord, the church can serve no higher cause than his. Its members associate not because of mutual admiration, common tastes, or even loyalties to schemes of selfish or altruistic interest, but by their common dedication to the gospel. This cause is universal. It extends to all people, for in Jesus Christ, God has acted on behalf of all humanity. It extends to every sphere of activity, for nothing keeps us from, or is to be kept from, the transforming love of God.

The lordship of Christ is at the core of the faith which all churches participating in the one church of Jesus Christ share. Thus they devote themselves, especially in corporate worship but elsewhere as well, to the reading of Scripture and to the preaching and teaching of the gospel. By

these means God's covenantal pledge is recalled, proclaimed, and, through the action of the Spirit, taken up in the lives of those who hear.

It is to announce publicly and to spell out the meaning of their faith that Christians make "confessions of faith." They have done so from earliest times, employing a wide variety of terms, phrases, and formulas. These confessions, or creeds (*credo*, "I believe"), whether they are long or short, oral or written, official or unofficial, are to be constant reminders of the faith of the church.

Members of the Disciples church are probably most familiar with the words of the "good confession" they made before a local congregation. Typically it runs, "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and I take him as the Lord of my life" or ". . . I take him as my personal Savior." By this act we add our testimony to that of Christians of every day and place in affirming who Jesus is and what he does. We offer, moreover, a personal pledge of allegiance to him, surrendering ourselves to his judgment and his mercy. The creed, like every other, is to wed belief and trust.

Among Disciples, the good confession alone, often accompanied by the slogans "No creed but Christ" and "No tests of fellowship," has been prized as a way to emphasize the central content of faith without jeopardizing Christian freedom. Since our faith is in Christ and not in any package of words, we have resolved to take care lest human creeds usurp the place of Scripture and, more importantly, that of the living Lord. The result should be, and in large measure is, a church which not only tolerates but welcomes diverse theological viewpoints.

Yet repudiating "creedalism" does not lessen the risks that come when we try to put our faith into words, and this the church must do. For Disciples, the good confession, or something like it, functions as a "test" in the sense that it specifies *what* faith the church holds to.<sup>8</sup> We know, too, that testimony to the lordship of Christ takes on definite meaning only in the context of affirmations about God, the Spirit, the nature and destiny of humanity, the church, and other matters. We can remember that the words of church confessions are fallible, partial, and imperfect and that they are always subservient to the reality to which they point. And we can insist that they be "kept in their place," as best as we can determine what that is. It would be misleading, however, to give the impression that this context is of no consequence.

The Preamble to our Design is a case in point. In analyzing this statement, Dr. Joe Jones, president of Phillips University, has noted that it

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<sup>8</sup>This observation, along with the discussion of the Preamble to The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which follows, reflects the fine work done by Joe Jones in "A Theological Analysis of the Design." *Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal* 19 (July 1980), 309-21.

makes no claim to be a confession or a creed. Originating among "members of the Christian Church," it is not a rule or test of faith for our church, but a Disciples version of an ecumenical affirmation. Only time will tell what value and use the Preamble will have for us. Its adoption, however, signals that Disciples have taken a bold step. We have made some definite assertions about the faith we affirm, and in doing so we have indicated our willingness to take public responsibility for the task of making explicit the content of our Christian faith.

## **The Sacraments**

Along with the confession of the lordship of Christ, the sacraments are the primary bonds which unite Christians with Christ and with one another. If "confessing Christ" is usually thought of as expressing the gospel by means of words, a sacrament may be thought of as expressing the gospel by means of action as well. It is an act, performed in obedient response to the will of Jesus Christ, which makes a "visible sign" of incorporation into God's covenant.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two sacraments accepted and practiced by the Disciples. Our judgment on this matter is similar to that of most of the churches related to Reformation traditions. Biblical, historical, and theological study convinces us that of the seven sacraments affirmed by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches these two alone deserve special status. Disciples have often shied away from the word "sacrament" itself because it smacked of priestly magic and arbitrary philosophical technicalities. We preferred to call baptism and the Lord's Supper the two essential "ordinances" of the church. Nonetheless, the value placed on these acts has always amounted to what other churches would call "sacramental significance." Shorn of unwholesome connotations, the word has become more common among us.

Because the sacraments involve actions and the use of physical objects, through them the gospel is signified and, by the power of the Spirit, conveyed in a very personal experiential way. But they are not private acts. They are acts of corporate worship, undertaken by and within the church.

The necessity of giving and receiving the sacraments is to be understood in this context. No less than the voicing of the gospel message, its sacramental enactment is a provision, a gift, which God has granted to the church for the benefit of all. It offers participation in Christ. In obedience the church is to administer the sacraments and in obedience all those claimed by Christ are to receive them. These acts are not observed in order to turn on or turn off the love of God. That love has already been granted in Jesus Christ. In the giving and receiving of the sacraments,



however, that same love is signified, conveyed, and appropriated anew in the life of persons today.

In recent ecumenical discussions, efforts have been made to understand the term "sacrament" in an even more fulsome way. As a sign and seal of God's saving acts, Jesus Christ may be called the fundamental sacrament of God's kingdom. And the church, as the body of Christ, is rightly a sacramental body where God's reign is made manifest. In every case a sacrament celebrates the covenantal identity of the church.

## **Baptism**

Baptism, performed in the name of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," is administered in and by the church under the authority of the one God who has covenanted with us. It is an act rich with significance, bringing into focus a host of meanings. It is a dying with Christ, a putting on of Christ, a recollection and imitation of Jesus' own baptism, an obedient response to the Lord's command, a rebirth to new life, and an incorporation into the church.

The baptismal practices of the churches are to be explained and evaluated as attempts to do justice to the character and meaning of the act. It has both an objective side, whereby words and actions re-present the gospel of remission of sins and new life in Christ, and a subjective side, whereby through faith that re-presentation becomes a basis of assurance and of spiritual vitality in the life of the believer. Properly understood, these are two sides of the same coin. It has not been easy, however, for the churches to capture this whole in their practice.

The Disciples church, like some others such as the Baptists, administer only what is often, and most appropriately, termed "believer's baptism," although the phrase "adult baptism" is used as a virtual synonym. We have judged that this practice is rooted firmly in New Testament precedents and properly affirms the element of personal faith which baptism in its full meaning involves. It is important to remember, however, that there is an objective side to the act. When this is forgotten, baptism of self-avowed believers can become merely an external "sign" of an individual's faith instead of an enactment of God's covenantal claim.

All churches will admit the validity of believer's baptism—although church unity has not yet reached the stage when every church will accept the baptism of the others. Nonetheless, the vast majority of them have adopted the practice of baptizing infants. In doing so they call attention to the divine initiative in accepting needy and helpless humanity and in incorporating the individual into the nurture of the church. The full personal benefits of the act are understood to come gradually as the infant matures in faith, and an act of confirmation typically marks the time for

the individual to “own” or personally reaffirm the baptismal commitment. The linkage between baptism and confirmation is crucial, for without it infant baptism can turn into either a magic-like ceremony or a mere formality.

The visible action called for in baptism is that of a “washing” with water. Many churches perform the act by sprinkling or pouring water on the baptismal candidate; others, including the Disciples, administer baptism by immersion. The variations reflect mainly the weightings given to biblical examples, church customs, and practical considerations. Disciples today frequently stress that immersion is the most dramatic witness to “dying with Christ and being raised to new life.” As true as this is, the intent of baptism, whatever its “mode,” remains the same.

Baptism is meant to be a tie that binds Christians together into the one church of Jesus Christ. The differences among the churches regarding when and how baptism should occur are not trivial. But their significance pales in comparison to the fundamental theological meaning of the sacrament, which Christians hold in common. Humility and charity, along with ecumenical concern, have led many Disciples—and not Disciples alone!—to admit the validity of baptism given and received in other churches, while practicing only a single form themselves.

## **The Lord's Supper**

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper brings together many meanings. In it Christians remember and celebrate the death of Jesus “for our sakes,” and so it is rightly called a “memorial” or, more often, the Eucharist (thanksgiving). Persons are also made participants in the very life, the body and blood, of Christ and share in his presence. In this sense the meal is truly a communion with our Lord, with one another, and with all who are in Christ. The Lord's Supper is also an anticipation and a foretaste of the union which will come when God's covenantal promise comes to ultimate fulfillment. The meanings all center on the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, making the Lord's Supper a sign and seal of God's covenant.

Gathered around the table, Christians not only testify to but discover their oneness in Christ. Because this sacrament brings to reality the life in Christ which all share, it has a special status in the church's corporate worship. By celebrating communion weekly in Sunday worship, Disciples join the more “catholic” churches (Anglican, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox) in an effort to signal this truth. Less frequent observance of the act, common in many churches, is to be matched by a correspondingly high sense of its importance. The question comes down to a decision about how its value may best be highlighted.

A number of theories about how Christ is present in the elements of the Lord's Supper have been produced by the churches. Each in its own way is a well-intentioned attempt to guard against likely misunderstandings of the act. From very early times Christians were led to stress the objective character of the sacrament in terms that justify claiming the "real presence" of Christ in the bread and wine. The Roman Catholic theory of transubstantiation, which relates an actual transformation of the essence of the elements into the essence of Christ's body and blood, reflects this concern, as does the Lutheran view that affirms the presence of Christ "in, with, and through" the bread and wine. Other Protestants prefer to speak of a "spiritual presence," received through faith. Still others tend to regard the sacrament as a "symbolic remembrance" in which the elements occasion, but do not themselves impart, a spiritual union between Christ and the believer.

The Disciples take no "official" stand on this issue. The conviction is widespread that it is more important, and proper, to know that Christ *is* present than to know exactly *how*. Yet both our theology and practice have always leaned toward the more "spiritual" and "symbolic" lines of interpretation. Each theory, it is fair to judge, has its advantages and its disadvantages. At the extremes, care must be taken not to emphasize "real presence" so much that the role of faith is discounted or to emphasize the "symbolism" of the act so much that there remains no rationale for speaking of a "visible sign and seal" at all.

### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

- 1. Do you see a difference between a confession of faith and an affirmation of faith? What is that difference?***
- 2. Can the Preamble to The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) serve as a helpful instrument for new members in our church in understanding a common expression of the gospel, the "good news of Jesus Christ," in our times?***
- 3. Do you believe churches can differ in regard to when and how baptism should occur and how often the Lord's Supper should be celebrated and still maintain a unity in fundamental understandings?***

## Chapter 4

# The Purpose of the Church

What is going on in the churches; what are they doing? From observation or hearsay everyone can learn that something is going on in the churches and that something is being done. So to these questions we can get a bewildering variety of responses, usually punctuated by nods of approval or disapproval. Whether what is going on and what is being done is what the churches should be known for is another matter. The answer to this question hinges on our understanding of the purpose of the church. How, then, do we get at that?

The identity of the church is our clue to the purpose for which it exists. The church is not only called but called to be the people of God, the communion in the Spirit, and the body of Christ. It is brought into being by God's covenant so that there might be in the world the covenant people, a servant people, participants in the fundamental ministry of Jesus Christ, who took "the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). Thus the purpose of the church can be summed up by the word "ministry" (*diakonia*—service).

## One Ministry

By virtue of baptism in Christ, which incorporates persons into the covenant, all Christians share in the one ministry given by God for the sake of all humanity. This common ministry of course fans out into many types of service. The spiritual gifts which individuals are granted for carrying out these services vary accordingly. But since every service and every gift comes from the same source and contributes to the same end, all are equal in dignity and importance.

The slogan "priesthood of all believers" signals for many Protestants—and Disciples are no exception—a recognition of the inclusiveness of ministry. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has taken steps to recover this principle, although it uses language more in accord with its own tradition.<sup>9</sup> Every account of the church should

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<sup>9</sup>An intriguing discussion of the ways in which commitment to "the one ministry shared by all" finds expression both in Protestantism and in Roman Catholicism can be found in Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974).

emphasize that its purpose and its ministry involve every member of the body.

In order to strengthen the one ministry shared by all, the church inducts certain of its members, by a formal ceremony such as ordination, into specific “offices” of service. A threefold ordering of ordained ministry—bishop, presbyter (elder, priest, “minister”) and deacon—has become the dominant pattern, even if the titles and tasks assigned to these offices vary. Other patterns, however, have also arisen. The Design of our church, for example, provides for ordaining or licensing women and men to a general “representative” ministry, and for others appointing them to two local offices, the eldership and the diaconate. Biblical study, history, and ecumenical outlook legitimize such provisions, while still urging us toward an ordering that will invite Christian consensus.

Nothing, however, justifies treating ordination as an act that confers superior status upon or transfers ministry itself to a special group. Rightly understood, it is a means to express and to support the ministry common to all. The identification of ordained ministry with “representative ministry” in the Design of our church means just this. The same idea is central also in the “emerging ecumenical consensus” announced by the Consultation on Church Union:

... The church ordains women and men to particular ministries and appoints them in the name of Christ to fulfill needed tasks and purposes. ... These women and men share the whole ministry ... with all the People of God. Their ordination marks them as *persons who represent to the Church its own identity and mission in Jesus Christ*. In this capacity they are authorized to undertake services in, with, and for the church. ...<sup>10</sup> [emphasis mine]

It is through cooperative effort that Christians seek to be people of the covenant. They proclaim God’s will for the world. They contend against the evils which afflict, exploit, and corrupt God’s creation and God’s creatures. They seek the increase of love for God and for neighbor.

We come perhaps a giant step closer to detailing what the ministry of the church involves if we note several types of activities which give expression to it. Echoing both scripture and tradition, the Preamble of our Design calls our attention to worship, mission in witness and service, and the upbuilding of the body through nurture, mutual discipline, and renewal.

## **Worship**

The church is called to worship. The point is worth emphasizing, especially when it seems that so many attend the “worship service” out of

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<sup>10</sup>See *In Quest of a Church Uniting: An Emerging Theological Consensus*, available from the Consultation on Church Union, 228 Alexander Street, Princeton, NJ 08540.



habit and so many others find more important things to do. Since the covenant creates a public assembly, the gathering of that assembly in worship is an expression of the covenantal call. Here the devotions which each individual offers blend to become those of “one people.”

Worship is essentially thanksgiving for God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Everything that goes on is to be directed to the single end of glorifying God. By this we do not engage in some ploy to gain divine favor and to avoid divine judgment. We simply give grateful acknowledgement to what we know to be the case.

Throughout history, churches have included in their worship acts of praise, prayerful declarations of repentance and gratitude, reading and hearing the scriptures, preaching and hearing the gospel message, and the celebration of the sacraments. These elements, and others that are added from time to time, go to make up the liturgy (*leitourgia*, the work of the people) to which every worshiper contributes.

The arrangement of these elements into an “order of service” and the style in which worship is conducted vary according to the church and the occasion. Spontaneity, uniformity, formality, restraint, any combination of the four—all have been embraced by one church or another. The basic pattern for the Disciples worship is to be traced to our Presbyterian roots, but it has to be tailored to fit our basic beliefs, as in the case of weekly communion and our cultural settings. A wide range of styles of worship can be found among Disciples.

Since worship is *our* response to God, variations in worship that are conducive to expressing the devotions of the public gathering of Christians are permissible. Such diversity adds richness to the total life of the church. Yet since worship is a response *to God*, both the elements and the style that are chosen should direct our hearts and minds to this one center.

In worship the church is fulfilling its purpose to make known the lordship of Christ. This fact is strikingly demonstrated in settings where being a Christian is to run the risk of humiliation and even persecution, and so to gather in corporate worship becomes a courageous expression of faith. Persons living in cultures where attendance at worship is freely permitted, convenient, and more or less customary should never forget that church worship *always* carries such meaning.

## **Witness and Service**

The church is called to witness and service. Witness is generally associated with persuading persons to “accept Christ” and to become church members. Service is viewed as doing deeds, meeting the needs of individuals and groups, and improving conditions in the world. This rough and ready distinction is tolerable, so long as the terms are not played off

against each other. Christians should not be tempted to think they may choose among them.

In truth, witness and service are indispensable and intertwined means by which Christians make known God's concern for the world and people in it. The Preamble of our Design highlights this connection well when it speaks of the "mission of witness and service" entrusted to the church.

The church is to spread the gospel to "all nations." This mandate is at root not so much a duty foisted upon the church as it is the natural outcome of having "good news" to share. Like many others, our church has sought to take seriously the evangelistic task, which is to be undertaken by the individual, the congregation, and the church as a whole. In evangelizing the world, sensitivity, respect, and tolerance for others are essential Christian virtues. The gospel is incompatible with witnessing that is coercive, manipulative, and condescending. These virtues, however, should not make us reluctant to proclaim the lordship of Christ, to call persons to decide with regard to their ultimate allegiance in life, and to invite them to become part of the church.

The church is to promote the well-being of the earth and all its inhabitants, struggling against evil and fostering the good. Such services of love are not only responsibilities placed upon us *by* the covenant but outgrowths *of* the covenant. We love because God first loved us. Here, too, Disciples, not unlike many other churches, understand the Christian witness of service to be an effort that engages the total church and all its members.

In undertaking services of love, the church inevitably becomes involved in personal, political, and social affairs. It is true that the gospel cannot be equated with any particular form of government, economic system, or scheme for social planning. It is also true that right relationship with God is the "one thing needful," whatever one's lot in life. These truths, however, are in no way excuses for failing to aid those who suffer and those who struggle against injustice, oppression, and deprivation.

Occasions for our mission of witness and service are limitless. But all too rarely is life so simple and unambiguous as to make obvious what are the most genuine and effective means for carrying out this calling. In this matter sharp debates and even misjudgments can hardly be avoided. Yet the mandate itself is clear, and only through varied and renewed efforts on the part of individuals, congregations, churches, and ecumenical associations can the church press toward the fullness of its calling.

## **The Upbuilding of the Community**

The church is called to care for its health. That is, Christians are to "build up the body of Christ." The word "health" is used here to describe

the quality of life which is to characterize the community as a whole and each member in it. We are to aid one another in our efforts truly to be "the people of God, the communion in the Spirit, and the body of Christ." The types of aid will be many and varied, but certainly the health of the church requires nurture, mutual discipline, and renewal.

Concern for nurture involves us in the sharing of resources—including the greatest resource of all, ourselves—in order to foster growth in the Christian life. It means caring for the children of the community, but it goes beyond this to include offering the education, challenge, and encouragement which persons of all ages need in order to gain increased maturity in the faith.

Concern for mutual discipline means supporting, advising, and correcting one another in our efforts to be true to Christ. Such actions necessarily involve making judgments about what is beneficial and what is harmful to the church, and for this reason mutual discipline should be exercised in a humble and sensitive way. Christians must learn how to tell the truth in love. Recognizing that all of us stand in need of forgiveness and that final judgment belongs to God alone, we understand that the giving and receiving of discipline is to be done in ways that seek to hold together, through patience and toleration, those whom we may judge to be in error.

Concern for renewal encompasses both nurture and mutual discipline and then extends to every effort to quicken the life of the church. At times this will mean investing new energies in familiar patterns and programs; at times, discarding the old in favor of new, more promising approaches. At all times it will mean attentiveness to the gospel and sensitivity to the rhythms of community life in the faith.

Perhaps the hardest part of any concern for renewal is that it requires a willingness to accept a proper measure of personal responsibility for the condition of the church. I am not suggesting that we take credit for every "success" or take on the weight of every guilt. Christian humility forbids the former; Christian forgiveness forbids the latter. But if Christians identify so closely that they grieve and rejoice with one another, they will never remain aloof, but share in moments of defeat and victory.

These requirements are obviously similar to those which any organization trying to survive and flourish has to meet. This is no cause for alarm, since the survival and well-being of the church are rightly of concern to Christians. But these concerns always stand under judgment. The survival of the church and with it size, appearance, and outward appeal are of no consequence unless there is covenantal faithfulness. Thus "building up the body" is never an end in itself. It is part of the ministry given to the church for the sake of the gospel, and everything the church goes about is subject to this norm.

## ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

- 1. What do you believe is the purpose of the church?***
- 2. How do individual Christians discover their particular areas of ministry (service) within the church? Within the world?***
- 3. Make a list of the terms set forth in this chapter related to ministry: for example, worship, witness, service, mutual discipline, renewal. Review how Duke discusses (describes) these. Then seek to express these concepts in your own words.***

## Chapter 5

# The Form of the Church

In light of the mixed reviews given to “organized religion” these days, the fact that the church does have, indeed must have, some form of organization and “government” threatens to become a matter of embarrassment or regret. This is unfortunate because, however correct it is to emphasize that faith and church are “spiritual,” we cannot deny that the faithful are called to live together as a visible church, in the realm of time and space. The church is in history, and like everything else in history, it assumes some historical form, a polity. Certainly organizational forms are risky; they can be stifling, corrupt, ineffective. But only by means of some objective features of organization does the church live out its identity and seek to fulfill its calling. The question is not really whether the church should have a polity, but whether the polity which the church adopts best serves its ministry.

Ordered communities of believers have developed many differing forms of church government. Over the years three have become dominant, each marked by what could be called its own central point of organization. The episcopal form locates the center in the office of the bishop; the presbyterian, in representative assemblies of clergy and laity; the congregational, in the local congregation.

Honesty, if not goodwill, might force us to admit that each polity has distinct advantages and weaknesses. At one time or another partisans of each form have claimed their own to be the one structure ordained by God. Neither biblical scholarship nor ecumenical interchange, however, will sustain such an exclusivist claim. To some degree there are New Testament precedents for each form. Yet the New Testament also indicates that forms of the church are best understood as servants of the Spirit. They are important because they are instrumentalities by which the Spirit works. But it is the Spirit, and not the instrumentalities, that make or break the church. For this reason theologians often say that in dealing with issues of polity one is dealing with a matter crucial for the *well-being*

(*bene esse*) rather than for the being itself(*esse*) of the church. Christians, then are neither to repudiate nor to deify church structure.

The polity set forth in the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) does not fall neatly into any of the traditional categories for church polity. It is a new mix. It understands the church to “express itself” in three manifestations: a general (international) organization, regions, and local congregations. Each manifestation can be properly identified as “the church,” because each is a gathering of believers in the name of Jesus Christ. No single form, however, makes up the whole church. Only the totality, the combination and interaction of the three, can represent the church in its fullness.

This polity relies on no single point as its organizational center. The manifestations are not arranged into a hierarchy of authority or function. Each is to contribute in a special way to the whole ministry of the church, and in carrying out its tasks each is characterized by integrity, self-government, authority, rights, and responsibilities. In lieu of a centralized organ of administration, a web of interlacing relationships—shared commitments, interdependent functions, and mutual accountability—are to hold this church together.

These relations go to make up the covenant which we establish in response to the covenant which God has established with us. As God covenants to live with us, so we are to covenant to live together. As God promises to be faithful to us, so we are to promise to be faithful to God and to one another. Yet we should not confuse the two covenants. God’s has already been validated; the validity of our own must stand the test of time.

This understanding of our church covenant has important implications for our life together. The Design affirms that “the church expresses itself in free and voluntary relationships in congregational, regional, and general manifestations.” How else, in faithfulness to God’s covenant, could the church operate? Because Jesus Christ liberates captives, casts out fear, and condemns coercion, a tyrannical church is a contradiction in terms.

At the same time, an appeal to *Christian* freedom forbids the notion that persons, acting individually or in congregational, regional, and general groups, are captains of their own ships, with liberty to chart any course they please. The “free and voluntary” decisions which Christians make are to be responses to God’s will, and that will desires that faith and church belong together. Thus we cannot speak here of a freedom by which one first decides whether to become a Christian and then decides whether to participate in the church covenant. We are speaking rather of a freedom which is made possible in the faith and in the church.

The Design of our church, like every design, is a human attempt to give specific form to these covenantal relations. As needs and circumstances

change, the structure of our church may need to be reformed. Proposals along these lines, whatever they may be, would doubtless generate heated arguments pro and con. But the Design permits such amendment. And the bottom line for any judgment about church structure should be this: How well does it do justice to the unity of identity and purpose which God grants to the church? Every argument for preserving or overturning the status quo is subservient to this key consideration.

The structure of the church is to attest to the oneness of the church and to enable the church to carry out its ministry. Structure alone, of course, cannot guarantee that the church will be true to its identity and purpose. For this we must rely on the promptings of faith. Our common faith prompts us to acknowledge a unity which overcomes every temptation to separate out into camps labeled "we" and "they." And it likewise prompts us to join with others in efforts to fulfill our calling.

The promptings carry us beyond the confines of "our church," the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), to seek unity among all Christians. They always have and still do. To be sure, a sober assessment of our history should convince us that our urgings in this direction have exceeded our abilities to act on them. But we *are* an ecumenically minded church, and today we express commitment to the cause of unity at many different levels and in many different ways.

It is not easy to say what specific steps the churches can take in order to realize more fully the unity of the church on earth. Several strategies are already being tried, each with some promise and some difficulties. In this respect, perseverance becomes a prime Christian virtue. So does candor. An advance on this front would seem to demand extraordinary resolve, and on the part of more than one group of Christians. Why? The reasons are many and complex, but a few deserve a word of comment.

First, division comes in so many guises and has such powers of regeneration that it cannot be vanquished by one swift stroke. Even as progress is made on one front, setbacks occur and obstacles appear on others. Among many "churches," both "Catholic" and "Protestant," ancient doctrinal differences which once seemed insurmountable have yielded considerably to ecumenical study, dialogue, and charity. At the same time, issues related to belief in the modern world have surfaced anew to cause discord in the churches and to splinter an already broken body. And barriers that separate members of the human family one from another—race, class, sex, nationality, social, political, and economic allegiances—continue to intrude into church life, thwarting full reconciliation.

Ironically, the progress that has been made in ecumenical relations also threatens to sap the church's enthusiasm for unity. In large measure Christians have learned to "live and let live." With few exceptions the churches have abandoned uncompromising exclusivism, open animosity,

and ruthless competition in favor of more tolerant and mannerly attitudes. In many cases genuine friendliness and active cooperation have become the order of the day. Since diversity is welcome and since other concerns press—so the argument runs—unity need no longer be a priority.

This era of increased goodwill among Christians is certainly something to rejoice in. Yet we must not kid ourselves about the status quo. Inasmuch as expressions of unity grow only out of a sophisticated sense of enlightened self-interest on the part of the individual churches and inasmuch as they are kept within bounds which the individual churches judge to be harmless, they fall short of the full unity willed by Jesus Christ. Faith prompts us to go forward toward “organic union.”

There is no blueprint for organic union. In it diversity of theology, practice, and structure is to be embraced within a vital connection, so that differences as well as similarities serve the whole. Brainstorming and experimenting may be the only ways to proceed. But the mandate is clear: the spiritual unity of the church ultimately demands visible actualization. All barriers which separate us from Christ and from one another are to be surmounted. In faithfulness to God’s covenant of love, every sort of church is to participate in the one church of Jesus Christ.

### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

***1. How do you understand the structure of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)? How do you understand covenant? How do you understand “free and voluntary relationships”?***

***2. Do you believe the statement that the Christian faith does not allow Christians to be separated into groups of “we” and “they”? What are the implications of this statement for you?***



## **A Concluding Remark**

Our exploration into what sort of church we are has covered a lot of territory. Early on we took a theological turn in order to search out the identity and purpose common to all churches which participate in the one church of Jesus Christ. We had to, even though that turn has determined our course ever since. We had to because the self-inspection going on here makes sense only if “our church” has a right to call itself “a church.” It is now time to recap what we have found.

What sort of church are we? We are the sort that understands itself to be one of the many ordered communities of believers in which the church of Jesus Christ is manifested. Even if that answer tells us nothing new, it tells us the one thing we need to know. It provides both a rationale and a norm for our church, putting into proper perspective all that we are and all that we do.

This understanding is our response to God’s covenant of love in Jesus Christ, which wills that faith and church belong together. With other Christians we accept our calling to be the people of God, the communion in the Spirit, and the body of Christ. Covenantal ties—one confession, one baptism, one Lord’s Table—bind us together. We accept, too, as the purpose of our church, the servant ministry founded by Jesus Christ, and we undertake that ministry in our worship, our mission of witness and service, and our care for the upbuilding of the body. Our structure is meant to reflect our covenantal identity and to strengthen us in every effort to fulfill our covenantal purpose.

We have here a framework for appraising the particular, sometimes distinctive, characteristics for which Disciples are known. High esteem for the scriptures, a Christ-centered confession of faith, believer’s baptism by immersion, weekly communion, emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and on the representative character of ordained ministry, a mixed polity that weds freedom and responsibility—these and other traits that make us the sort of church we are do not stand in isolation. They repre-

sent our best judgments about how to exhibit in concrete ways the elements essential to any church that shares in the one church of Jesus Christ. They may be treasured, and defended, so long as they serve to keep us mindful of the oneness of the church.

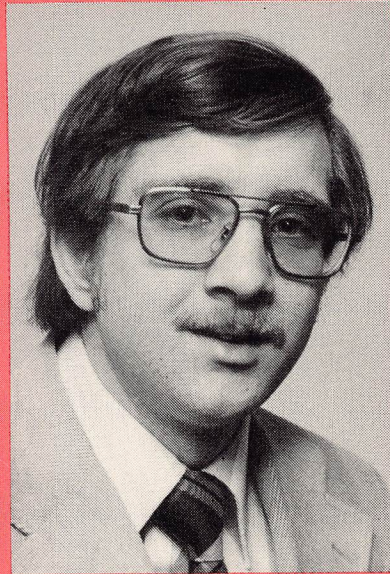
The connection between faith and church, ordained by God's covenant, is not to be broken. It endures, despite the strains placed upon it from both sides. There is the tendency to esteem personal religiosity, whether in "conservative" or "liberal" guise, at the expense of the church. And there is the tendency to esteem the sociality of the church—friendliness, good times, familiarity—at the expense of faith. Pressed by these countervailing tendencies, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) must join with other churches in insisting once again that a church-less faith or a faith-less church is a contradiction in terms. The sort of church we are, and the sort of church we are to be, will depend on how well we understand that faith and church belong together.

### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

***Reread the Preamble to The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on page 5, and then reread James Duke's summary paragraphs on "What sort of church are we?" which begin "This understanding is our response to God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ . . ." (p. 31).***

- 1. How do you respond to Duke's conclusions?***
- 2. Have you come to new insights on Duke's beginning and concluding thesis, that is, "faith and church belong together"?***





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