

PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT

Understandings of the Covenant within
the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)



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COVENANT CONVERSATIONS AND PAPERS

REVIEW OF HISTORY OF ON-GOING CONVERSATIONS

Robert Welsh

April 4, 2022

There has been an on-going conversation regarding the meaning of our covenant within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for over 20 years. As best as I can remember, here is my review and recollection of that history:

1. Prior to 2000, when I was the president of the Church Finance Council, the frequent issue/question that I was asked about covenant was in relation to the Basic Mission Finance agreements regarding the general and regional distribution amounts. That is, our “covenant as Disciples” was usually focused on the “mission funding system.”

2. In 2000, Dick Hamm, as then General Minister and President (GMP), presented his “2020 Vision” for Disciples—which was approved by the General Board at its 2000 meeting. That statement outlined our vision, mission, mission imperatives, and four priorities (formation of 1,000 new congregations by 2020; transformation of 1,000 current congregations by 2020; leadership development necessary to realize these new and renewed congregations; and, becoming a Pro-reconciling/Anti-racist church).

Dick Hamn believed that to move this vision and priorities forward, our church would need greater clarity around an understanding of the meaning

of “covenant” for our whole church as a starting point in implementing the “2020 Vision.” This work was taken up by the **Commission on Faith and Understanding** that Dick Hamm had named in 1999 (upon the recommendation of a Steering Committee on the Process of Discernment Regarding Biblical Authority) to work on important Biblical, theological, moral and ecclesial issues. It was seen both as a Commission that would follow up on the earlier work of the Commission on Theology and Unity on Disciples’ ecclesiology, and as a place where issues might be dealt with more helpfully than through sense-of-the-assembly resolutions. With the approval of the Administrative Committee and affirmation by the General Board, the Commission was requested to focus upon the issue of covenant, and to bring a report back to the 2002 meeting of the General Board. Charles Blaisdell, regional minister of Northern California-Nevada at that time, was named as chair of the commission, and I served as the staff to the commission.

3. In 2002, Blaisdell presented a report¹ on behalf of the Commission to the General Board which then spent the better part of a day of its meeting discussing the report/paper by Blaisdell. (I do not recall any specific follow-up work being asked for at that time; however, the General Board did encourage broad discussion around the meaning of covenant and its implications for our church in congregations, regions, and general ministries.)

4. In 2003, Dick Hamm resigned unexpectedly—and during the years of Chris Hobgood’s service as Interim GMP, there was no deliberative or focused follow-up to the work on covenant.

5. In 2005, Sharon Watkins was elected GMP, and during her first years of service she gave major attention to rebuilding and deepening the trust and relationships between the “general church” and the congregations and regions. In 2009, she created a “21st Century Vision Team” to produce a revised and revitalized vision for the church that would reclaim the 2020 vision priorities and focus for our life together. In addition, this vision team worked alongside, and in partnership with, a “mission alignment process” that was designed and staffed by the Office of the GMP.

The report from the 21st Century Vision Team offered a new statement of our identity to be: *“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a*

1 Charles Blaisdell, “On the Notion of Covenant,” p. 7.

fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." It also recommended that we continue to pursue the mission and priorities that had been set forth in the 2020 Vision Statement.

In follow-up to the work of the 21st Century Vision Team and the realignment process, a major issue that was identified in seeking to implement the four priorities was the question of the purpose and role of the General Board in moving this vision forward. [Basically, the General Board was seen to be a body that reviewed the work (already done) by general and regional ministries; and, every other year, to make recommendations regarding resolutions that had been received to go to General Assemblies for vote.] Sharon Watkins (and lots of other leaders) felt that the role of the General Board needed to be refocused and enhanced to hold general ministries and regions accountable for carrying forward the work of fulfilling the 2020 priorities. Thus, in 2010, the General Board approved establishing a "**Covenantal Dialogue Committee**" that would design and test a process whereby the General Board would discover a new way to do its work. Don Gillett was named as chair of that Committee, and (again) I served as its staff. (The Committee was made up entirely of General Board members to make sure that its work was not dominated by either general or regional ministers.)

The first "experiment" in trying out a new design for the meeting of the General Board took place in 2011 where (upon request of the Covenantal Dialogue Committee) all general ministries were to provide as additional input to their typical reports: their Mission statements; a review of the "state of their ministries" at this time; a statement of accountability in relation to the four mission priorities; and, a look to the future of their ministry and the opportunities they saw on the horizon. The initial "test case" was a focused conversation with Gary Kidwell about the Christian Church Foundation as a way to get input and ideas for future meetings of the General Board as part of the covenantal dialogue process.

One recommendation that came out of that first covenantal dialogue was that there should be an introductory presentation on the meaning of covenant to the full membership of the General Board in order to provide a common basis for other "covenantal dialogues" that would take place in the coming

years. (This was the origin of the paper² I presented to the General Board in 2012 on the meaning of covenant.) The conversation regarding the meaning of covenant was also picked up by the General Commission on Ministry in 2011-2012 as part of its work related to the preparation of future ministers and leaders for the church.

6. There were two additional papers³ that were prepared and shared with regional ministers, general ministries and members of the General Board as resources offered for study and discussion related to the important conversations taking place.

7. And at the same time, there was a growing concern within the church's leadership that congregations must be involved in the discussion of covenant, and also to invite congregational input as to how they view as the 2020 mission priorities in relation to their local priorities and ministries. This concern led Sharon Watkins in 2013/2014 to engage congregations in a process of churchwide conversation ("*Mission Conversations*") which resulted in launching a new initiative which Sharon Watkins identified as "*Mission First*." (To my limited knowledge, having retired in 2016, the focus on the meaning of our covenant as Disciples and on the revitalizing/restructuring the General Board shifted to the "*Mission First*" initiative.)

8. In 2017, Sharon Watkins concluded her ministry as GMP, and Terri Hord Owens was named as the next GMP.

2 Robert Welsh, "The Meaning of the Covenant for Disciples," p. 13.

3 Jess Hale and Rebecca Hale, "The Problem with Covenant," p.17, and A. Guy Waldrop, "Disciples and Covenant," p. 21.

ON THE NOTION OF “COVENANT”

Charles Blaisdell

INTRODUCTION: THREE MEANINGS OF “COVENANT”

Much of the work of the Commission on Faith and Understanding during its 2+ year life has focused on the notion of “covenant”—what, in the life of our church, this notion of “covenant” means, what it should mean, what it shouldn’t mean. We were realistic enough to know that to some extent the increasingly prominent talk about “covenant” in these last few years is really the same kind of phenomenon that happens in local congregations when you see folks start to carry copies of the bylaws with them to every meeting; it means something is up and maybe even amiss. Yet at the same time the Commission has been audaciously hopeful—hopeful enough to believe that this General Board-commissioned group, charged with being a “think tank” on the notion of covenant these past couple of years, could bear good fruit by offering this session of the General Board some considerations that might flavor our discussions of all the matters before us.

We hope that this hour is in fact a continuation of our this afternoon’s opening worship in a way, as we focus our minds and our thinking on a larger

context fore the business that come before us. There is an Italian saying (at least it was on the door of an Italian restaurant in Nashville, Tennessee) that says “Good food praises God.” It is the same with good thinking; it too is a joyful praise to God. So during this hour we intend to do two simple things: the first is my presentation now, as chair of the Commission, where I hope to offer some thoughts on the nature of the covenant that binds us together, thoughts which reflect the consensus arrived at by the Commission on this idea of “covenant.” Second, we will invite you have some time together for your own thinking on this notion and to share those thoughts with all. The Commission is under absolutely no illusion that what is offered in this hour will solve the challenges inherent in the idea, practices, and interpretations of “covenant”—for that is a set of challenges that goes back to at least 1832. But then it is not the Commission’s intent to solve the challenges before us in the new forms that arise in our era. Our intent rather is—pick your metaphor—to prime the pump, color the discussion, paint a theological context that might inform our gathering.

When our youngest daughter was about four, she hollered down the stairs from her bedroom, “Daddy, does green paint permanently stain things?” Having been through this parenting thing three times already by that point, I was sharp enough to realize that the question that was being asked of me was probably not the question that was truly being asked. I brought my hermeneutical tools to bear and determined that there were in fact likely several layers of meaning to her question, a number of interrelated if unspoken assumptions, and a set of answers that she was either hoping for or fearing. And while the notion of “Covenant,” as expressed primarily in *Preamble to The Design* for the Christian Church and which I will focus on in these few minutes, is more interesting and certainly more salutary than wayward green paint, it is also true that there is indeed an interrelation of meanings to this term “covenant” as it is expressed and implied in the Preamble and it is worth trying to think well about the relationships among these meanings.

I want, therefore, to identify three distinct meanings to the word “covenant” that are found in the first five paragraphs of *The Design*, which we know as the *Preamble*. Those three meanings are: foundational theology, foundational polity, and foundational organization.

I. THE FOUNDATIONAL THEOLOGY OF “COVENANT”

First, there is what I’ll call the “**foundational theological**” assertions found in the *Preamble* and especially in the first two paragraphs. And “**foundation**” is meant here literally: this is what *everything else* **presumes** and **builds on**. This foundational theological notion of covenant says things both about a) God, and b) humanity. Here are some of the things the first paragraph, in particular, says about the divine: that Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world; that God is gracious; that God is the “maker of heaven and earth”; that God is understood as God, Christ, and Holy Spirit (even if the mechanics of that are not cited); that Christ’s presence and acts saves us; that God has given us the scripture, and that God is eternal. Now, here is the point about these statements: **These are true even if the people known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) did not exist. God would still be these things; Christ would still be these things.** This is a great comfort; God is God is God no matter who we are.

But this first paragraph of the *Preamble* also says things about humanity, and in particular about this denominational family who has gathered in response to God’s being and initiative, for it is by God’s grace that we are who we are. And so what the first paragraph says about humanity and our particular part of that humanity includes the following: that we have a mission of witness and service to all people; that we are related to all God’s people through baptism; that we are called to be joyful because of what God has done for us; and that we are to be “disciples” (small “d”) of and obedient to God. Now, no doubt, all of you could tease out more implications, but the point is this: The first meaning of the word “covenant” has to do with **who God is**, and who, therefore, humanity and particularly us, can be and are called to be. The point might be made this way: **In this first meaning of “covenant,” all of the things that are said of God would be true even if this particular denomination did not exist.** The first paragraph of the *Preamble* expresses, indeed, the foundation of **any** Christian confession. As Professor Jim Duke says, “*These ... are considered realities of the faith ... shared by all those who ... constitute ‘the universal body of Christ.’*”¹

Moreover, if we had more time, I would go on to point out that the second paragraph of *The Design* is more of the same, if less poetic in quality. In that

1 Private correspondence from the author, July 10, 2002

second paragraph, the fundamental nature of **any** Christian community in light of who God **always** is is adumbrated, confessed, and celebrated. Again, quick way of saying all this might be that foundationally, we could assert that **any** Christian could affirm the fundamental and foundational truths of *The Design's* first two paragraphs, and that the reality of God's nature and covenant with humanity would not be changed even if that beginning line "As members of..." were referring to some other group entirely.

II. THE FOUNDATIONAL POLITY OF "COVENANT"

But the Preamble goes on for another three paragraphs, and includes two more notions of "covenant." The second meaning of "covenant" is encapsulated in paragraph 3, where the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) claims and confesses that it is a distinct and identifiable part of the "universal body of Christ." And where the first meaning of covenant was a piece of "foundational theology," **this** meaning of covenant is an assertion of "**foundational polity**." And what are the foundational presuppositions of our corporate self-identification? Paragraph three names them: our "tradition, name, institutions and relationships" which are "expresse[d] ... in free and voluntary relationships in congregational, regional and general manifestations." Under the Lordship of Christ, each of these "manifestations" "is characterized by its integrity, self-government, authority, rights and responsibilities." One way to put this might be: Under Christ, we are who we are because of who we have been and, moreover, as an "extended family" we have **chosen to be in and stay** in relation to one another amidst that plurality of historical traditions and self-governing structures. This would be one example of our early slogan "unity in diversity." So, to summarize, meaning number two of "covenant" is the foundational polity one: **that this church has chosen to be church together, honestly acknowledging its varied "parts" but asserting nonetheless our commitment to be a whole church and one church.**

III. THE FOUNDATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF "COVENANT"

The third and final meaning of "covenant" embodied in the *Preamble to The Design* is found in paragraphs four and five. Here the organizational basics are named. If meaning number one of "covenant" is about foundational

theology and meaning number two is about foundational polity, meaning number three is about **foundational organization for mission**. And these paragraphs rightly note that such organization is never for its own sake, but always for the sake of the mission that God has given to us; we will organize ourselves, the Preamble asserts, so as to “provide comprehensiveness in witness, mission and service,” respecting and “assur[ing] both unity and diversity” in the process of such organizing, and always with an eye towards ecumenical relationships. And so what will our “foundational organizational basics” look like? A General Assembly, a General Board, an Administrative Committee, General Units, and Regions. **We are in covenant in sense number three because we share a commitment to these foundational organizational basics by which we shall be in mission together.**

CONCLUSION

The phrase “covenantal polity” appears nowhere in *The Design*. Yet the Preamble clearly assumes it. But it assumes it, again to use this metaphor, **foundationally** and “the covenant” is fundamentally about what God has done for us, how we will understand the character of all our relationships with one another, and what organizational basics we shall have to structure those relationships to carry out the mission given to us. Now, there are numerous other arrangements and structures spelled out in the next 93 paragraphs of *The Design*. Moreover, again to cite Jim Duke, even then, “... *The Design* discusses only certain of the various forms and terms of **our covenantal commitments to God and one another. Individuals, congregations, regions, and general units have considerable latitude for making agreements, arrangements, and provisions that [their] mission may require. Such arrangements are not “the covenant.” ... In Stone-Campbell tradition, following Anglican-Reformed custom, they [are best] called “expedients” or “expediciencies.”**”

The fruits of a very long discussion by the Commission on Faith and Understanding, then, is the following consensus: The arrangements spelled out in paragraphs 6 through 93 of *The Design* are not “the covenant.” Nor is “the covenant” the countless organizations, arrangements, and structures that our church has developed to further its mission in its variety of

locales and manifestations. On occasion, some of our “arrangements” (for example, financial ones) have been spoken of as “our covenant” or “part of our covenant.” The Commission believes that that is not the case. Such arrangements, as worthwhile, as important, as worthy of being done well as they are, are not matters which are “integral to God’s covenant of love in Jesus Christ ...or to our church’s [foundational] covenantal polity... They are simply ad hoc, negotiated and renegotiated, and expedient means for facilitating the church’s life and work.”³ And, on the one hand, those who do not accept a particular “expedient” or “arrangement” should never, ever decide to do so lightly! But, on the other hand, “It is quite possible, and at certain times or under certain circumstances quite honorable, for loyal covenant partners to dicker or disagree over precisely which arrangements will work best to facilitate the church’s life and work.”⁴

May our thinking together indeed praise God, as we give thanks in word and deed, with heart and mind, for “the covenant of love which binds us to God and one another.”⁵

3 *Ibid*

4 *Ibid*

5 I am indebted in this presentation to Jim Duke’s remarks at the Commission on Faith and Understanding meeting, June 28-29, 2002, and to the contributions of all the Commission’s members in that meeting. I am also indebted to Jeanne Duke’s memo to Ralph Glenn of May 28, 2002, entitled “Response to a Proposal for Funding the Mission of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) from the Team Leadership Conference.”

THE MEANING OF COVENANT FOR DISCIPLES

Robert Welsh

I appreciate being invited to share some thoughts and reflections today as you look to a conversation about the meaning of covenant for the work of this commission.

I was invited yesterday—and so have not had a great deal of time to prepare; but that may be good as it means what I will be offering is still some preliminary thoughts and observations, which I hope will encourage your own thinking about this key concept for our life as a church today.

In work on this presentation, I identified four different areas I would like to offer as background to your discussion. I will cover these quickly, and hope they provide helpful entry points for your conversation:

FIRST AREA

How do we understand the meaning of covenant? In the dictionary, covenant is identified as an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do something. It is often confused with, or contrasted to, the word contract.

Each (covenant and contract) are agreements, based on a promise, that define/shape the rights and responsibilities of persons who are a part of the relationship:

Contracts involve law, covenants involves gospel.

Contracts state rules, covenants identify shared understandings.

Contracts set goals, covenants name expectations.

Contracts are often legal documents; covenants describe a dynamic relationship.

The dictionary also identifies a “spiritual” understanding of covenant that involves not just two parties to the covenant, but three—in which God is one of the parties.

In looking through some material last night I found a quote that I like: “A contract is about binding; a covenant is about bonding.” That is, no matter how much we try to define covenant technically, in reality, it is never something we can define. It is about establishing and building relationships between people. It forms the basis for community, but does not spell out all of the details (or rules or regulations) of how the community will live its life.

SECOND AREA

Some thoughts on Biblical understandings of covenant—3 comments:

1. First use of word covenant was in the story of Noah and the flood. God promises (covenants) not to destroy the whole human race again, and as a sign of that promise, God sets His bow in the story. [Rainbow—transformed the weapon of war (a bow) into a sign of peace].

2. In Scriptures, it is God who establishes the covenant (several of these are made throughout the Old Testament). The movement of these covenants goes from the individual to the nation and finally, with all humanity. For example, God’s covenant moves from Abraham, in Genesis [declaring that Abraham’s descendants will be numerous, will become a great nation; and will inhabit the Promised Land] to God’s promise to the nation of Israel that “I will be your God and you will be my people.” In the New Testament, the

covenant established in Jesus (the New Covenant) that is for all people, all humanity.

3. Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*, derived from the root word meaning “to cut.” One “cuts” a covenant. First used in reference to the cutting or dividing of an animal into two parts—and the covenanting parties would then pass between these two parts as a sign of their making covenant with each other.

It should be noted that there was relationship between cutting and blood as a sign of the promises and commitments made: for example, sacrificing of animals; the covenantal sign of circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant; and finally, in the crucifixion of Jesus, it is his blood that becomes the sign of God’s love for all humankind and is taken up in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper: “the cup is the new covenant in my blood” (I Cor. 11.25).

THIRD AREA

When I think of covenant, I tend to think of the most common usage in our experience today when we speak of the covenant of marriage: the wedding vows and promises we make. When I have counseled couples preparing for their marriages, I frequently lifted up the image of their entering into a covenant (not a contract!) in their future life together. A covenant that would be marked by commitment to each other [“through good times and bad, till death us do part”], not agreeing to a list of “I’ll do this” and “you do that” [I’ll carry out the garbage, you’ll wash the dishes]. The commitment was to each other and to their life together.

Key marks of the covenant of marriage also seemed to me to be those of faithfulness and fidelity in the marriage to one’s partner; and of trust (building and maintaining trust, knowing that lack of trust, or even the suspicion that one’s partner cannot be trusted, can destroy the relationship

Finally, I believe in marriage, the covenant of our human love is to reflect, and express, and manifest the covenant of love that God has made with humankind. The marriage couple doesn’t get to determine the terms of the covenant on our own; but rather their covenant with each other is to reflect and model God’s covenant of love with us. And, as that is lived, it is constantly

changing. [How I understood marriage when I was 25 has changed over the years, its meaning has deepened and expanded from that of two individuals—Nancy and me—to seeing covenant in the larger perspective of family.] What do we learn of covenant in examining the covenant of marriage? It has to do with commitments to the other; of faithfulness and fidelity; of trust; of a relationship that is constantly changing (always under review) in light of new circumstances and experience all reflective of God’s covenant of love.

FOURTH AREA

Our understanding of covenant within the context of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) begins with *the Preamble to the Design* that declares “*we rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in God’s covenant of love which binds us to God and one another.*”

We have declared that we are a covenantal church—our ecclesiology is covenantal, not hierarchical, or connectional, or congregational or presbyter or liturgical, or doctrinal. We are to live and witness to God’s covenant of love, bound together in a relationship that is focused upon God’s love for and God’s mission to the world.

We are not bound together by negotiated agreements, or by a mission funding system. Our policies and *Design* and rules of governance, and yes, our documents for the ordering of ministries—are all subsumed under an understanding of living in covenant relationship that reflects God’s covenant of love.

THE PROBLEM WITH “COVENANT”

Jess Hale and Rebecca Hale

One of the theological words that gets thrown around a lot among Disciples these days is “covenant.” Disciples are in covenant with one another as individual Christians, congregations, and even regions and the general church. It is a nice theological word. It has biblical resonances. For instance, think of the covenant of God with the nation of Israel. There are Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The New Testament is often thought of as a new covenant. Barton Stone and the Campbells were Presbyterians and so were operating out of a good Reformed perspective that was quite comfortable with the notion of covenant. It is a good theological word, though we tend to forget that it is a legal word—even in the bible. (McKenzie; Quell & Behm)

Disciples are a homegrown American Christian tradition. As such we have drunk more deeply than we often admit from the individualism and the democratic impulse in American culture. In American culture, particularly that stream that is still fed by elements of Reformed thought, covenant is a political and legal term. It has roots in social contract thought and liberal democracy and Americans probably cannot utter the word “covenant” without carrying at least some of that baggage. The parties to a covenant, or an agreement or contract, negotiate the terms of the contracts/covenants that establish the relationships with the other parties of the agreement. It is

so in contracts and constitutions, and for Disciples it is so even in our *Design*. As the *Design's Preamble* states that we rejoice “in God’s covenant of love, which binds us to God and one another.” Reflecting on 2005’s revisions to the *Design*, Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President, observed that “our covenantal ecclesiology was made more explicit.” (Watkins 2007, 7). Since Restructure, many Disciple theologians and leaders have contended for an understanding of ourselves in terms of covenant. (Dunnivant; Sprinkle; Cummins, 2007, ch 4; Cummins, 2009, xiii, 220-221)

These negotiations arise out of the separateness of the parties to the contract. Among institutions and interest groups in our communion of the Disciples of Christ this contract nature of covenant has played out over our past half century of history. It was a critical element to denominational Restructure in 1968 and continues to be affirmed theologically by Disciples even to the present. While covenant’s advocates find it tempering Disciples commitments to freedom and liberty with a notion of responsibility (Watkins 2008) elicited by a binding agreement, this same language of responsibility also generates a commitment to rights, perhaps litigiously in American society. It has played out in our general church’s efforts at mission alignment and tables, pastoral and otherwise. One reading of the recent tepid effort at missional realignment in the general church’s Mission Alignment Coordinating Council (MACC) process is that many of those in senior leadership had been exercising power from the institutional center for so long that they were fighting the same old turf battles while the creaky ship Restructure continues to take on water in Titanic-like style. Surely we better serve God’s mission by giving form to our shared call to service and leadership in contemporary formats that nurture and train leaders rather than by automatically preserving our historical bureaucracies?

As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we have an element of covenant in our relationships with one another rooted in the *Design* and even further back—as Alexander Campbell wrestled with Reformed covenant theology in terms that are not as ecclesiological as his later heirs. (Richardson) However, this commitment to covenant is not without its costs. Operating out of that commitment we have spiritually “lawyered up” to address conflicts out of the legal paradigm of rights that covenant brings with it. As an attorney, I (Jess) am committed to law as a means for structuring our life in society in order that we may live together in community, but as a lawyer I also shudder when I think of any community attempting to fundamentally shape

its being out of the rhetoric of contracts and law. While covenant need not and probably could not be erased from our relations with one another as Disciples, perhaps we would be well served to rein it in a little bit. We could start by reminding ourselves that the biblical and Christian traditions have other visions for expressing our relationships with one another. We are the body of Christ; the vine and the branches, we receive gifts for the common good—these images and many more envision a more organic relationship in God’s church.

However, at the other end of the spectrum, the unrestrained use of more organic images can be abusive as well when not tempered by more universal notions of the body of Christ that break down and transcend barriers. The “blood and soil” political use of such images in 1930s Germany demonstrate the idolatrous dangers that can arise. The point is not to do away with covenant but to chasten and balance its use.

How else might we think about ways of being church so that we reflect connectedness apart from negotiated agreements? The point is not so much agreeing with another to be bound in cooperation as it is to give common expression to how the Spirit leads us into mission together.

What implications does this chastening of our appropriation of “covenant” to define our identity as Disciples have for our life together as Disciples—as individuals, congregations, institutions expressed locally, regionally and generally? How else might we think about ways of being church so that we reflect connectedness apart from negotiated agreements? The point is not so much agreeing with another to be bound in cooperation as it is to give common expression to how the Spirit leads us into mission together. For instance, rather than a church camp program, perhaps we might want to think about missionally providing opportunities for the Spirit to shape young people (and a few older ones too) in a manner that fosters community and discipleship beyond the local congregation. That does not mean that there will not be camp facilities and camp programs, but it may mean they take new forms. The mission drives the institutional form instead of the form driving the mission. We will never escape institutions and it is pathetically delusional to imagine that we will. The point is not that we sustain old bureaucracies with declining Disciples Mission Fund (DMF) funds, but rather that we

provide flesh and blood and financial resources to ways of living out God’s mission for us in new ways which bind us together in that mission.

We can be bound together in God’s mission rather than merely be parties to negotiated agreements.

We can be bound together in God’s mission rather than merely be parties to negotiated agreements. As a teacher of ours once said, “the purpose of a body is to express the life of the one whose body it is,” so we should as one body of Christ express the life of Jesus in our corporate body — that sisters and brothers is mission.

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DISCIPLES AND COVENANT

A. Guy Waldrop

The 1965 “*Provisional Design of the Christian Church*” was written and adopted as a call for the Disciples Church to be dedicated to the proposition that our three manifestations—congregations, regions and general units—are one body, deeply rooted in a common community with each accountable to all and all acting on behalf of each. Living into the spirit of the 1965 *Provisional Design* and now in the adopted *Design*, has not been easy for the Church. Disciples have lost the intent and the spirit of many of those early framers of the *Design* who held that the freedom of each manifestation must have significant communal meaning if it is to have lasting value to a particular manifestation and to each member of the Disciples Church. **Let me say that again, the freedom of each manifestation must have significant communal meaning if it is to have lasting value to a particular manifestation and to each member of the Church.**

Let me explain it this way. During the last 40 plus years the boards and executives of general units, the boards and staff of regions, the boards and ministers of congregations have been primarily dedicated to the proposition that the liberty/freedom in the *Design* is a license for them to

act independently. They, these boards and their senior staff, think that they must be independent of one another in order to reflect the values of our Free Church tradition as defined in the *Design*. Therefore, each manifestation exercises its freedom by making private choices. Moreover, each part of each manifestation makes choices with little or no regard, concern or interaction with the other and what is in the best interest of advancing the whole. Each manifestation has pursued its own dreams and even used the *Design* as a “dodge-ball” to throw at others when there is disagreement.

Like the prevailing culture, Disciples are obsessed with individualism, focused on personal survival and institutional autonomy. Our obsession with this type of institutional survival rather than being in conversation with our members, the people in our various communities outside the church, and taking time to listen to the non-church citizens, has led us to the tipping point of irrelevance and to the brink of declining beyond recovery.

Many who are on the church’s payroll seem to be just holding on to “their claim” and managing “their shop” until there is no more gold to pan in that stream or until they can tap their retirement income. Who is looking at the horizon and creatively thinking and planning and working to build up this part of the body of Christ rather than blaming the culture or fundamentalism for our decline? Who is in conversation/dialogue with the “none’s”, the intellectuals, the scholars, the homeless, the old folks and the children and the over worked mothers and unemployed and underemployed dads? Who is working to enrich our democratic heritage in the U. S. and around the world offering an alternative to the divisive voices in government?

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What Disciples have lost in our stampede to autonomy—our autonomous congregations, autonomous regions, and our autonomous general units is the spirit of our *Design* and the meaning of our Covenant. In essence we have lost our “freedom” as a Church with a message and a voice in the world of

competing messages. We have lost our “freedom” to be relevant to people who are searching for meaning, purpose, and belonging.

The *Design* that was written to bind us to one another must now be reinterpreted as a covenantal and communal document calling each manifestation (and all its separate parts) to understand that our individual freedom as a church is based on our commitment to act in the best interest of all and to be accountable to one another.

Instead of living into the spirit of the *Design* and finding our freedom in accountable relationships, we have trivialized the *Design*, misrepresented the meaning of Covenant and confused our members and the world with our message. We have erected silos around the institutions that carry our Disciples name. In practice we are no different from the capitalistic economic systems and the divisive political culture God calls us to redeem.

It is true that we, Disciples, were born out of powerful 19th century religious structures that were both authoritarian and divisive. The Christian practices imported to North America by immigrants from Europe and imposed by autocratic church authorities did not set well in this young nation struggling to determine its own future and separate itself from political and religious tyrants. In that setting human rights and individual liberty were necessary weapons to deploy against oppression.

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Therefore, it is no wonder that Disciples have difficulty converting, transforming, liberal rights used to set us free from the tyranny of “Presbyterian Elders” to living together in the new “freedom” of the *Design*, practicing what it means to be a faith community, a church in covenant, where the whole of our church defines the character and freedom of each manifestation. Today, it is easy for any part of our church to act on its own based on a majority or the vote of the board representing that part. We see it all the time. But it is rare to hear the voices of unity rising above the noise

of division. It is not easy for most to define how being a part of the whole enriches and give freedom to their little part of the church. (I do think that, now, some of our Disciples related college get it better than some of the other parts of the Disciples church.)

In general our failure to understand our freedom and our Free Church tradition in this way is an assault on our *Design* and the meaning of covenant and even what it means to be Church.

Disciples have enslaved the soul of the church to the point that the church has difficulty speaking prophetically to our nation about what it means to be free to act in the best interest of the whole.

Political or religious tyrants outside the structures of the church no longer challenge Disciples. That day is past history. Rather, we are challenged by how we as a church reinterpret and live the meaning of our “church freedom” in a society that reduces freedom to no more than the personal whim to purchase something off the shelf at Walmart. In short Disciples have freed our own structures to do as they want—our congregations, regions and each general unit. Disciples have enslaved the soul of the church to the point that the church has difficulty speaking prophetically to our nation about what it means to be free to act in the best interest of the whole.

Freedom is most often interpreted as freedom from, negative freedom, both in the church and in society. Disciples need to define freedom as a positive not a negative. For example, Disciples let the words, “no creed but Christ” easily and negatively slip off the tongue. But let someone ask, “What do Disciples believe?” and most Disciples rattle off a list of what they do not believe—negative. Disciples usually do not explain positively that the historic creeds of the Church are teaching documents to be studied and interpreted in their historical context and are uniting symbols linking us to Christians of all time and all places. Instead, we invite people to pick and choose their theology and practices like they are selecting an automobile.

The liberty that is in the spirit of the Design is a positive and must be communal and holistic rather than individual and personal. The various manifestations of the Church must become more than a gathering of tribes

competing for dollars from a shrinking membership. Our congregations, regions and general unites are asking the wrong questions when they ask, “What does our little part of the church WANT from the church?” The more important question is, “What does the Disciples Church (whole church) NEED to be a vital part of the body of Christ?” “What does the Disciples Church NEED to be a faithful and relevant voice redeeming the world?” That is the conversation Disciples need to have instead of looking for a quick fix with technology or a program imported from another church tradition.

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Until we acquire the will and the courage to move in that direction, we will continue to function, dysfunctionally, as isolated entities. Living in a convent relationship where freedom is communal rather than private is a learned skill. It is a Christian practice that is in the spirit of the *Design*. Overtime, we have lost this practice of what it means to be a free church bound together in Covenant.

In the absence of people who do not teach and practice how to live in community, in convenient, the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is just a piece of paper.

As long as there were enough members and money, Disciples could survive with autonomous institutions being compulsive about “wants.” That day is over and has been over for sometime. Now, Disciples have to ask, “What are the real NEEDS of the church and the world for today and tomorrow?” “How do we live into the spirit of the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a people in Covenant with God bound to one another?” We will never begin to ask the “needs” question until we turn loose of the “wants.” No outside force makes Disciples hold on to “I want” for my congregation, my region, my unit. Disciples are free; Disciples have authentic freedom in the *Design*; Disciples have the liberty; Disciples have been liberated not only by the grace of God but by the Constitution of the United States, to turn loose of “meism,” the idol of individualism, the attitude of selfishness,

and the dysfunction of unaccountable autonomy. There is no authoritative outside force restraining the Disciples Church. What restrains Disciples is the lack of will to exercise the freedom to live into the spirit of the Design and the Good News of the Gospel.

All the choice we make, one by one individually, one by one congregationally, one by one regionally, one by one general unitely, cause us to suffer together as a whole church. It only seems rational and practical and most of all faithful, that if we suffer together anyway, we should make our choices together in conversation, collaborating with one another about what Disciples NEED collectively, rather than being driven by “I Want.”

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CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)
IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA