

Keith Watkins. *Eucharist and Unity: A Theological Memoir*. St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2023. 182 Pages.

REVIEWED BY D. DUANE CUMMINS¹

Chronologically gifted at 92 years of age, esteemed by his colleagues and his church, H. Keith Watkins has authored a new book, *Eucharist and Unity: A Theological Memoir*. A clergyman for seven decades—minister, professor, religious scholar—he granted those 70 years to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Graduating from Northwest Christian College, the Butler School of Religion, and then completing his Th.D. at Pacific School of Religion, Watkins chose to focus his ministry on the relationship between Worship and Christian Unity. Profound influences toward this choice came from professors William Robinson and Ronald Osborn and from reading *The Shape of Liturgy* (1945) by George Dix which proclaimed the eucharist “enables church to become, in fact, what it already is in principle—the body of Christ.”

Watkins found himself teaching liturgical worship in a seminary and in a denomination where non-liturgical worship was preferred. He therefore devised a guiding principle, “Liturgical in substance, Free in principle,” proposing a liturgy of “word” and “table,” with the emphasis upon the “table” instead of the Disciples’ historic emphasis upon the “word.” As teacher, pastor, and author, Watkins repeatedly channeled his best energies into researching the subject, including publishing several insightful books, among them *Breaking of Bread* (1966), *Liturgies in a time when Cities Burn* (1969), *Feast of Joy* (1977), and *The Great Thanksgiving* (1995), along with co-authoring *Thankful Praise* (1987), a Disciples worship manual that was a companion to the long-used *Christian Worship: A Service Book* authored by G. Edwin Osborn in 1953. In addition, Watkins published multiple articles on the subject in several periodicals, including “Liturgy and the Free Church,” for the spring 1962 edition of *Encounter*.

¹D. Duane Cummins is visiting scholar in history at Johns Hopkins University and has served as interim president at Brite Divinity School. He is president emeritus of Bethany College in West Virginia, former president of the Division of Higher Education for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), former interim president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, and author of several books on Disciples history.

Watkins' studied grasp of the eucharist (Lord's Supper, Communion) shaped his thought of it as a fellowship with the living Christ, bringing renewal to the church—and in his writings, his teaching, and in his pastoral ministry, Watkins deemed the eucharist as the focal point of liturgy. He believed the eucharist to be *the key to understanding the catholicity of the church—the center of the one faith—and the core around which unity could occur*. The eucharist, determined Watkins in *Eucharist and Unity*, is the means of recalling the sacrifice of Christ, of recovering a fullness of the meaning of church.

November 1960, the month John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States, Keith Watkins was invited to interview at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana to become a member of the faculty. He accepted a faculty appointment as professor of Worship and Church Administration to begin in the fall of 1961. In 1962, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was invited to become a member of the Consultation on Church Union, a significant Christian movement toward ecumenism, a movement which included the Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Episcopal denominations. And in 1968 Watkins, in his 7th year as a professor at CTS, was appointed to the COCU Commission on Worship, joining other representatives from the Disciples rendering service to COCU—including Dale Fiers, George Beasley, Ronald Osborn, and Walter Bingham. Watkins would serve more than 30 years with COCU—a generous measure of his life's ministry—toiling toward unification of these churches into an American Ecumenical Church.

During the years immediately preceding his appointment to COCU, Watkins completed the writing of his doctoral dissertation for the Pacific School of Religion. In the final pages of his dissertation, Watkins framed the issue of unity which would guide his thinking through the initial stages of his ministry at COCU: *"The church is eschatological and historical, and it is spiritual and institutional. In its eschatological and spiritual sense, the church is one. Historically and institutionally, it is divided."*

In later years during his retirement, Watkins authored a history of the 40-year odyssey of COCU published in 2014 under the title *The American Church that might have been*. In *Eucharist and Unity*, he provides a summary of that previous book, a significant phase of his memoir. He tells of the 1970 Plan of Union and of the creation of Interim Eucharistic Fellowships, testing Watkins' confidence in the eucharist being the foundation of unity. The 40-year effort of COCU however, did not achieve a unified Protestant Church. *Eucharist and Unity* contains Watkins' succinct summary of 'why,' "American Denominations were Intractable." By contrast, he concluded his 2014 history of COCU explaining the "inheritance" from those 40 years, including denominations continuing to engage bilaterally, the new freedom with which Baptized members move from denomination to denomination, the ecumenicity of seminary faculties and student bodies, and particularly the creation of a new phase continuing the legacy of COCU—*Churches Uniting in Christ*.

Watkins reveals in *Eucharist and Unity* his multiple experiences serving as pastor of local congregations—in Dayton, Oregon, Somerset, Indiana, Sanger, California, and Mesa de Cristo Christian Church in Fishers, Arizona. He speaks openly and candidly about his personal experiences and disappointments, including his occasional bouts with depression. Watkins identifies the chief guides for his parish ministries including Orman Shelton's *The Church Functioning Effectively* (1946); H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Purpose of Church and its Ministry* (1956); and in both his parish minister and his teaching he was influenced by Langston Gilkey's *How the Church can Minister to the World without losing itself* (1964).

Watkins observed congregations declining, struggling to ignite vitality, which led him to try to understand the reasons for Protestant decline. He reached the conclusion there were three types of Protestantism—Evangelical Protestantism and Liberal Protestantism, and a third type which he argues united the catholic-reformed evangelical streams of classical Christian tradition. This type dealt rigorously and often unconventionally with questions of faith and ethics. He recognized, and stated forthrightly, this “third type” would find it difficult to flourish. Watkins attempted to create a Protestant church of the “third type” at Fishers, Arizona, in the mid 1990s, an experiment that ultimately ended with disappointment. In reflecting on that failed experiment, Watkins shares his concern that some modern approaches to the Bible leave little room for sacramental ecclesiology, even to the extent that the Lord's Supper has lost much of its meaning and depth in many churches.

In the closing pages of *Eucharist and Unity*, Watkins tells of his retirement following the Mesa de Cristo experience. Retirement proved to be a particularly productive period in Watkins' career. In addition to serving an interim pastorate at First Christian Church in Portland Oregon, he also became a prolific author. Among his several publications during these twilight years: *History of Christian Theological Seminary*; *History of Yakama Church in Mission*; *The American Church that might have been*; and in 2023, *Eucharist and Unity*. His writings are disciplined, his word choices exact, his research comprehensive, his venerable and career long subject of interest—*organic unity and the sacred significance of the Eucharist*—the subject of his most recent book, *Eucharist and Unity*, reviewed in this journal. In this ninth decade of his life, that subject remains the heart of his scholarship, reflected in his words telling of his purpose in this, his 92nd year:

The new work that God is giving me to do—focus attention on the transformed understanding of unity that now is at the center of Disciples' statements of meaning, and develop suggestions about eucharistic practice and ecclesial form that will help congregations everywhere use unity around Christ's table as the basis for working for healing and wholeness....