

Covenant: An Ancient Idea for Extraordinary Times

BY BRUCE D. ERVIN

It was perhaps at the Seattle General Assembly in 1969 that I first heard the word “covenant.” It was love at first ... er, sound. I didn’t know what the word meant, but something about it resonated with my fourteen-year-old heart.

In those early General Assemblies, following Restructure and the adoption of the Provisional Design in 1968, we Disciples frequently spoke of the covenant that binds us together with God and each other. But by the St. Louis Assembly in 1979, covenant was not mentioned nearly as often in our biennial gatherings. Nor were we, even at that relatively early date, practicing covenant in many of the ways envisioned by the architects of Restructure.

Nevertheless, the rediscovery of covenant as a key concept within the Stone-Campbell tradition was, arguably, the most important theological and sociological insight of the Restructure process. But the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure (hereafter referred to as the Commission on Restructure) discovered as well a much older covenantal tradition dating back to the Puritans of both old and New England. These free church traditions of covenant have left an indelible mark on what is now the covenantal tradition of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, especially as expressed in the words of the Design.

In this paper, I shall argue a tripartite thesis: 1) that the so-called “Preamble to the Design” was, in fact, envisioned from the start to be a “covenantal affirmation” in the tradition of the church covenants of New England; 2) that while exploring this Congregational tradition of covenant, the architects of Restructure rediscovered covenant as a concept within our own Stone-Campbell tradition; and 3) that periodic rituals of covenant renewal within all three expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) might be conducive to strengthening covenant as both an ecclesiastical principle and a model for a just society in a fragmented world.

COVENANT DEFINED

A covenant is a sacred community of commitment. It is a community of voluntary relationships and mutual obligations. All such communities are human responses to God's covenant of grace. The Holy One has made this covenant through Jesus Christ "before the foundation of the world" was laid (Ephesians 1:4). As such, God's covenant is pure gift, ontologically given, and nonnegotiable. This covenant is made by God with *all people, everywhere*, throughout the *whole, inhabited earth*. For this God shows no partiality to any race or nation (Acts 10:34). Indeed, God does not even show partiality to human beings. When the covenant is first referenced in scripture, following the Great Flood, God says to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and ... *every living creature of all flesh* that is on the earth" (see Genesis 9:12–17; emphasis added). But wait: the covenant, ultimately, is with not just the earth but *all creation*; for the promise of God's covenant is to unite *all things* in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth (Ephesians 1:9–10; Philippians 2:9–11).¹

The sociological form of covenant manifests itself in human community. But covenantal communities are also bound together by an ethos. This ethos could be a set of theological concepts, a shared expression of moral principles, a common political philosophy, or some other shared perception of truth. Thus a covenantal community adheres around both the physical expression of human fellowship and a common set of transcendent norms.²

When one views covenant from the perspective of biblical faith, the ethos in question could be expressed as belief in Jesus Christ as the revealed Word of God and Savior of the world. One could also say that in Christ we have been made covenant partners with the Holy One and with creation whether we like it or not. Such unity in God is a nonvoluntary given. But the specific ways in which we respond to this blessed covenant are voluntary. We may or may not choose to enfold the covenantal nature of existence with human covenants of our own. Nevertheless, God's gracious invitation is there: to enter into covenants with one another and with creation in response to the covenant of love that God has established through the Christ.

¹ For a full development of this notion of God's eternal covenant with creation through Jesus Christ, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, part 1 (T&T Clark, 1956), 22–66.

² Max L. Stackhouse, *Creeeds, Society, and Human Rights: A Study in Three Cultures* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 60–61.

THE COVENANTAL TRADITION IN NORTH AMERICA

By the time the Disciples of Christ rediscovered the concept of covenant during the Restructure process of the 1960s, covenant had been a well-established principle in both ecclesiastical and civil circles in North America for some 350 years. Indeed, as early as the 1580s, Separatist Puritans in England had initiated the practice of forming a true church through the means of a voluntary covenant. The covenanting group might be as few as two or three individuals, but it was not to exceed the number of people who could gather together in one place to worship. By signing such a church covenant, the members of the newly formed congregation typically pledged, in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, to walk together with the Lord and one another in all His ways, made known through God's holy word.³

One group of Separatist Puritans, members of a congregation founded upon the Scrooby (England) Covenant of 1606, made their way to the shores of New England in 1620.⁴ Using the church covenant as their model, they crafted a political covenant to serve as the foundational document of their Plymouth Colony. In so doing, they covenanted with each other, in the presence of God, to form "a civil Body Politick" that would enact "such just and equal Laws ... as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony."⁵ This first political covenant made by Englishmen in North America would become known as the Mayflower Compact.

Soon more Puritans arrived on the shores of New England, establishing both church and town covenants in response to the covenant that they believed God had made with them, a covenant to create a holy commonwealth in what they perceived to be the North American wilderness. The church covenants took the form of a statement of faith, sometimes simply stated, which served as the theological basis (the ethos) around which a group of believers voluntarily joined to form a true church of God on Earth. The oldest of these New England covenants, the Salem Church Covenant of 1629, suffices as an example: "We Covenant with the Lord and one with another; and

³ For the formation of Separatist congregations through the means of church covenants, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Cornell University Press, 1965), 17–26. For the full text of one such covenant, that of the Independent church founded in London in 1616, see Horton Davies, *The English Free Churches* (Oxford University Press, 1952), 38.

⁴ Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (United Church Press, 1977), 139. For a copy of the Scrooby Covenant, see intheworld.wordpress.com/2007/09/24/the-scrooby-covenant-of-1606.

⁵ Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 26.

do bind our selves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himselfe unto us in his Blessed word of truth.”⁶

The theological statement was signed by all those who were joining together to form the congregation, a symbol of fellowship—such as the shaking of hands—was exchanged, and the covenant was considered sealed. It was a voluntary association of believers who had come together around a shared ethos and who were now joined together with one another and with God in community.⁷

These Puritans believed that they had been called to enter into civil covenants as well, covenants that were every bit as sacred as the church covenants, because the civil covenants were also—according to the Puritans—human responses to the covenant that God had made with all who were engaged in their seventeenth-century errand in the New England wilderness. Indeed, the Mayflower Compact of 1620 was the first such civil covenant. The Pilgrim Code of Law (1636) expanded the 1620 covenant into a functional constitution for the Plymouth Colony. The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut (1639) and the Acts and Orders of Rhode Island (1647) are also early examples of the covenantal model being extended to what were essentially civil constitutions for the newly established colonies in the Connecticut River Valley and Rhode Island, respectively.⁸

Among the defining features of these church and civil covenants are the following:

1. God is a partner in the covenant.
2. An embodied people is formed.
3. The purpose of the covenantal body is stated.

⁶ Douglas Horton, *Congregationalism: A Study in Church Polity* (Independent Press, 1952), 34.

⁷ For a more detailed description of the New England Puritan tradition of church covenants, see Morgan, *Visible Saints*, chapters 3–4.

⁸ See Lutz, *Origins of American Constitutionalism*, chapters 3–4, for a detailed analysis of the evolution of civil covenants into colonial constitutions. Professor Max Stackhouse introduced me to the connection between covenants and constitutions when he said, in a lecture at Andover Newton Theological School, probably in the fall of 1976, “the reason that the United States has a written constitution is that we first had the Mayflower Compact.” Stackhouse further develops the linkage between the covenantal tradition of the Reformed churches and the development of democratic institutions in Stackhouse, *Creeds, Society, and Human Rights*, 58–65.

4. One or more foundational principles of the body are expressed.
5. The covenant is presented as a written document, with the signatures of the covenanters affixed.⁹

The self-governing congregations established by these Puritans understood themselves to be in covenant not just with one another and with God in local churches, but also with Puritan congregations throughout New England. Indeed, even after the Puritans' holy commonwealth experiment ended in 1692 with the establishment of the Royal Charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, their descendants saw themselves in covenantal relationships with ecclesiastical associations, synods, and councils formed along town, city, district, state, and national lines. And they took their church covenants seriously, renewing them annually in acts of worship.¹⁰

As we shall see, this Congregational covenantal tradition had a significant impact upon the Disciples Restructure process. But covenant was an important concept in the early days of the Stone-Campbell tradition as well. Alexander Campbell, sounding very much like a Reformed thinker steeped in covenantal theology, argued that "the salvation of sinners" from "the contagion of sin" is the eternal purpose and promise of God. He states further that God's promise of salvation was "covenanted and systematized" in and through Christ "before the foundation of the world."¹¹ Campbell said that those who, by faith, have repented of their sins and have been baptized "consociate" into a community of faith called a congregation. But that congregation is by no means the sum total of the church. On the contrary, the church "is a great

⁹ This list is my own, but it is adapted from a similar list found in Lutz, *Origins of American Constitutionalism*, 25. The primary difference between my list and Lutz's is that Lutz claims that these early church and civil covenants included God as merely a witness, while my reading of both the covenants themselves and the Reformed theology out of which such covenants emerged suggests that the signatories understood the Holy to be engaged in the more active role of partner; indeed, as the *initiating* partner. Lutz also fails to mention the affixing of signatures to the covenanting document.

¹⁰ See Horton, *Congregationalism*, 17–51, on the topic of church councils being understood as covenantal congregations. The covenantal relationships within New England Congregationalism, including those beyond the local congregation, were first given expression as a form of church discipline in the Cambridge Platform of 1648. See Gunnemann, *Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, 143. For a digital copy of "*The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline, 1648*" as archived in the United States Library of Congress, see dn760000.eu.archive.org/0/items/cambridgeplatfo00cong/cambridgeplatfo00cong.pdf.

¹¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (, 48.

community of communities.”¹² Within this “community of communities,” congregations necessarily cooperate “in one county, state, or nation,” with “the conquest of the whole world in its prayers, aims, plans, and efforts.”¹³ This “associational form of cooperating and uniting” consists of voluntary “covenants” that “are morally binding in the fair construction of their respective items or articles of agreement.”¹⁴

A similar form of geographical cooperation emerged among the followers of Barton W. Stone some years before Campbell began to theorize about the church as a “community of communities.” Stone encouraged the gathering of conferences of congregations for fellowship and mutual edification, and for the ordaining of elders.¹⁵ For example, Stone’s Christian churches in Indiana were gathering in conferences by the 1820s.¹⁶ From Stone’s perspective, Christians—wherever they were gathered—were bound together by the Holy Spirit “under the absolute monarchy of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

Among followers of both Stone and Campbell, there were even solemn statements made upon the founding of congregations that were very similar to the church covenants found in New England some two hundred years earlier. For example, the Bear Creek Church (1824) in Boone County, Missouri, First Christian Church (1834) in Noblesville, Indiana, First Christian Church (1843) of Smithville, Missouri, and the Christian Congregation (1849) in Union City, Tennessee, were all organized around covenantal statements that affirmed the theological basis upon which these followers of Jesus were covenanting together, a basis on which these Christians typically (in the

¹² Campbell, *Christian System*, 108.

¹³ Campbell, *Christian System*, 112.

¹⁴ Anthony L. Dunnivant, *Four Historical Ideals in the Campbell-Stone Movement and the Development of the Polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Peter Lang, 1993), 122–23. Dunnivant, in turn, quotes Alexander Campbell, “Church Organization,” *Millennial Harbinger*, no. 4, 1849, 271.

¹⁵ Dunnivant, *Four Historical Ideals*, 94.

¹⁶ Henry K. Shaw, *Hoosier Disciples: A Comprehensive History of the Christian Churches in Indiana* (Bethany Press for the Association of the Christian Churches in Indiana, 1966), 60–71.

¹⁷ Dunnivant, *Four Historical Ideals*, 13–14.

words of the Bear Creek Church's covenant) professed their faith in "Jesus Christ under no other discipline or Rule ... than the old and new testament."¹⁸

It was, in fact, on the basis of covenant as a form of church order that Campbell called for a national convention of Disciples of Christ in 1849. He dreamed of a delegate body of church messengers that would covenant together in such a way that significant cooperation among the congregations and various levels of geographical associations of churches would be facilitated, without compromising the self-governing nature of each local congregation. As noted above, these covenants would be voluntary in nature but morally binding in commitment.

But Campbell's vision of a covenantal body of church messengers was not to be. The meeting that was held in Cincinnati, in October of 1849, resulted not in a national body in covenantal relationship with congregational, county, and state bodies, but rather in a self-governing missionary society, one whose membership consisted not of messengers sent from ecclesiastical bodies, but of individuals. The American Christian Missionary Society, thus formed, became the model for Disciples' polity for more than one hundred years.

Not that Campbell's vision was completely lost. The word "covenant" may have been largely dropped from the Disciples' vocabulary, but the relationships between the various missionary societies, colleges, boards, state organizations, district conventions, congregations, and other associations that emerged over the ensuing decades took on something of a covenantal nature.

One can see a growing recognition of this functional sense of covenant, even though the word was apparently never used, in the work of the Panel of Scholars. This group of Disciples academics and ministers met biannually from 1957 to 1962 for scholarly reflection on the beliefs and practices of the Disciples of Christ.¹⁹ In papers delivered

¹⁸ "A Booklet Looking Toward the Preparation for Brotherhood-Wide Use of Declarations or Acknowledgments or Affirmations of the Covenant Which God Has Made with His People and by Which We Are Bound Together as His Church of Christ on Earth," created by the Task Committee on Basic Documents of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure, June 21, 1965, 8, Commission on Brotherhood Restructure Workbook, 1965, [Box 2, Folder 5], Commission on Brotherhood Restructure Records, approximately 1959–1971, GEN-0008, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Bethany, West Virginia.

¹⁹ See W. M. Wickizer, "A Statement Concerning the Panel of Scholars," in Ronald E. Osborn, ed., *The Renewal of Church: The Panel of Scholars Reports*, vol. 1: *The Reformation of Tradition* (Bethany Press, 1963), 7–9. *The Panel of Scholars Reports* is the title of the entire three volume work. William Barnett

to the Panel by Denton Ray Lindley, PhD (president of Texas Christian University), and William Barnett Blakemore, PhD (dean of Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago), one can especially see a renewal of something like this concept of covenant among Disciples, despite the fact that the word had yet to be rediscovered—or at least not yet spoken out loud in Disciples circles.

Lindley, in his lecture "The Structure of the Church," reminded the Panel of Alexander Campbell's notion of the body of Christ as a "community of communities," including both congregations and conventions. Such communities should be organized not only locally but also in districts, states, and the nation, and they should exist in an organic fellowship of accountability. Lindley argued that by the 1830s, Campbell had abandoned his early rejection of all forms of church gatherings beyond the local congregation. In his mature thought, according to Lindley, Campbell argued that congregations should send messengers to conventions that would oversee the work of colleges and other church agencies such as missionary, publication, and benevolent societies.²⁰

Blakemore's lecture, entitled "The Issue of Polity for Disciples Today," was delivered to the Panel in October of 1959.²¹ By that time the Disciples were seriously considering the possibility of restructure. Blakemore, apparently speaking to this pending work of polity realignment, argued for a "theory of association" as an alternative to the three historic doctrines of church polity: congregational, presbyterial, and episcopal. Drawing upon the emergence of associations in New England Congregational polity, Blakemore advocated for a polity in which there are multiple loci of power and authority. Each group—each locus of power and authority—in such an association has its own abilities and functions, and should carry out only those functions that are appropriate to its abilities. In so doing, each group should voluntarily cooperate with the other groups in the association, without being controlled by any of these groups. Such an association, Blakemore argued, creates new power that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Blakemore is the general editor of the entire work. *The Reformation of Tradition* is the title of vol. 1, edited by Ronald E. Osborn.

²⁰ D. Ray Lindley, "The Structure of the Church: Freedom and Authority in Matters of Polity," in Osborn, *Reformation of Tradition*, 184–98.

²¹ The dated manuscript of the lecture can be found in William Barnett Blakemore Papers, [Box 80, Folder 9], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Blakemore envisioned this theory of association as a polity model not only for a particular denomination but also for the whole church of Christ on earth.²²

There has been disagreement among Disciples regarding just how much influence the Panel of Scholars had upon the actual process of Restructure.²³ But the Panel can certainly be viewed as part of the intellectual and spiritual ferment among Disciples that contributed to the creation of the Commission on Restructure by the Louisville Assembly of the International Convention in 1960 and the launch of the Commission's work in the fall of 1962.

THE CONCEPT OF COVENANT IN RESTRUCTURE

The word "covenant" emerged very early in the deliberations of the Commission on Restructure. In the Commission's first meeting, held at the Statler-Hilton Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, in the fall of 1962, a Commission member asked whether or not "responsible cooperation" among Disciples could be understood as "a covenantal relationship."²⁴ The word is found as well in a glossary of "Terms and Definitions in the

²² William Barnett Blakemore, "The Issue of Polity for Disciples Today," in *The Revival of the Churches*, vol. 3 of *The Renewal of Church* (Bethany Press, 1963), 52–81. Blakemore is both the author of the piece cited here and the editor of vol. 3, *The Revival of the Churches*. Each volume has a different editor.

²³ Dunnavant, *Four Historical Ideals*, 81, notes, "There is a disagreement as to the impact of the Panel of Scholars' thought upon the subsequent Restructure of the Cooperative Disciples" But on 212, Dunnavant quotes Kenneth L. Teegarden (Restructure architect and second general minister and president of the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) saying that the Panel of Scholars *did* provide "the theological and sociological underpinnings for [Restructure]." In support of Teegarden's argument, it is important to note that a copy of Blakemore's 1959 paper was included in the package of orientation materials that were sent to the members of the Commission on Restructure in preparation for their first meeting in the fall of 1962. See Blakemore Papers, [Box 65, Folder 1]. Furthermore, both Blakemore and Ronald E. Osborn reintroduced themes from their respective Panel of Scholars lectures when they presented their lectures to the initial 1962 meeting of the Commission on Restructure. For Osborn's lecture, see "The Structure of Cooperation: Its Development in the History and Thought of Disciples of Christ," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 2 (December 1962), 28–49. For Blakemore's lecture, see "Theological Paper on Disciples Polity," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 2 (December 1962), 64–80. It should also be noted that many members of the Panel of Scholars served as well on the Commission on Restructure.

²⁴ Minutes of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure, October 30–November 1, 1962, 7, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 65, Folder 10].

Vocabulary of Brotherhood Restructure," prepared by Blakemore for the Commission's July 1963 meeting, held at the Pick-Congress Hotel in Chicago.²⁵

The early work of the Commission was also informed by the scholarship of Dr. Douglas Horton and his understanding of covenant in the Congregational tradition. Horton was the minister and general secretary of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches in the United States from 1938 to 1955. In 1952 he published a series of lectures entitled *Congregationalism: A Study in Church Polity*.²⁶ Blakemore made reference to this book in his "Panel of Scholars" lecture.²⁷ Ronald E. Osborn, PhD, noted that other members of the Commission on Restructure were influenced by Horton's work as well.²⁸

Horton argued that even Congregationalism was about much more than the autonomy of the local congregation. On the contrary, his lectures focused on the role of covenant in the formation of congregations, associations, councils, and other ecclesiastical bodies within the Congregational tradition. Horton argued that each of these bodies can be thought of as a congregation, as each one is a place where the saints are gathered in assembly to hear the Word of God, partake of the same holy bread, and be graced by Christ's presence. Each is a meeting of free people, not to be dictated to by any other congregation, yet associated with other congregations (including geographically based synods and councils) through sacred covenant.²⁹

Horton's lectures, including his emphasis on covenant, seem to have greatly influenced Blakemore. Not only did Blakemore himself cite Horton's work in the aforementioned "Panel of Scholars" lecture, but Myron Cole, a member of both the Executive and Central committees of the Commission on Restructure, noted, "Barney Blakemore was

²⁵ Blakemore Papers, [Box 66, Folder 1].

²⁶ Horton, *Congregationalism*.

²⁷ Blakemore, "Issue of Polity," 53.

²⁸ Ronald E. Osborn, "Theological Issues in the Restructure of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): A Not Unbiased Memoir," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 19, no. 3 (July 1980), 291, n. 27.

²⁹ Horton, *Congregationalism*, 15–17.

very excited about covenant.”³⁰ Blakemore carried this excitement into the work of the Commission’s Task Committee on Basic Documents, which he chaired.

But it was arguably Ronald E. Osborn, professor of church history at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, in his three lectures delivered to the Commission on Restructure in the summer of 1964, who played the leading role in recovering and reinterpreting the concept of covenant for the Commission.

The Commission on Restructure met annually, in three- or four-day sessions, from 1962 to 1968. Each day included at least one lecture on a biblical or theological topic germane to the work of Restructure, with the remainder of each day devoted to committee and plenary sessions, panel discussions, and reports.³¹

The 1964 meeting was held from June 29 to July 1 at the Sheraton Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. It was at this meeting that Osborn delivered three lectures, later published as a booklet titled “The Nature of the Church of Christ on Earth.” In his first lecture, “The Calling of the Church (Intention),” Osborn argued that the church is called to a ministry of servanthood under the sovereignty of God. He further argued that the church must be structured so as to be focused *not* on institutional growth and maintenance. Rather, the church’s structure must enable the saints to be involved in the servant work of proclaiming good news and releasing “the miracle drugs of peace-making, of forgiving, of setting things right” in whatever communities they may find themselves.³²

Like any good preacher, Osborn left his audience wanting more. “What *kind* of structure will enable the church to be such a servant?” the Commission members must have asked each other as they opened their workbooks and attended to the remainder of that day’s agenda.

Osborn began to answer that question the next day. It was especially this second lecture that riveted the Commission’s attention. With great anticipation, the Commission members gathered in the Sheraton Hotel ballroom on the morning of Tuesday, June 30. The men wore business suits, the women proper skirts and dresses,

³⁰ Richard H. Lowery et al., eds., *Seeking God’s Design: Disciples’ Quest for Unity and Wholeness* (CBP, 2019), 70.

³¹ See, for example, the schedule of the 1964 meeting of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 67, Folder 1].

³² Ronald E. Osborn, “The Church of Christ on Earth (Essence),” *Mid-Stream*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1964), 43.

as if they were attending church and anticipating a learned proclamation of the Word. And Rev. Osborn did not disappoint. With his dry humor, wise words, and winsome smile, Osborn had the Commission members fully engaged as he lectured on "The Nature of the Church (Essence)." He began slowly, using philosophical terms to explain, "In essence the church of Christ on earth is an inseparable duality, a complex of form and spirit."³³ To seek to break this duality and treat the church as merely a material institution or a spiritual community is to veer off into heresy.

But Osborn was just getting warmed up. Grounding his reflections in Christology, he proclaimed, "In the incarnation Christ was made the visible image of the invisible God. The task of the church ... is to body forth for human sight, in service and in love, the reality of Christ her Lord and Head." The church needs institutional form that will embody this spiritual love in earthly service so that "she will not flee to the never-never land of spirituality above history" but will rather take on flesh through acts of service "in Hell's Kitchen and Hull House and East Harlem."³⁴

The means by which the church can do this, Osborn said, is the biblical concept of covenant. "It is a concept both sociological and theological, expressing the relationship of God's people both to him and to one another." It is also, Osborn noted, a concept deeply rooted in Disciples history. He reminded the Commission of Alexander Campbell's Sermon on the Law, with its references to the covenants made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. He placed covenant in the context of the Table, where the cup of the new covenant is shared. "And we who share in the drinking of it," he said, "are bound not to [Christ] alone, but to one another"³⁵

Yet the question remained: What kind of structure must the church, as a covenantal community, create in order to carry out its servant ministry? In his third lecture, "The Building of the Church (Constitution)," Osborn was not so bold as to provide a detailed answer to this question. It was the responsibility of the entire Commission on Restructure to answer that question through its ongoing work. Rather, Osborn named scriptural images that should inform this search for a new structure for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Furthermore, he reminded the Commission that the new structure must be focused on the biblical calling of edification: building up the body of Christ in a way that honors the primacy of the local congregation in a connectional church structure, while being focused on the ministry of servanthood to the wider

³³ Ronald E. Osborn, "The Nature of the Church," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1964), 49.

³⁴ Osborn, "Nature of the Church," 53, 56.

³⁵ Osborn, "Nature of the Church," 57–58.

world.³⁶ So moved were the Commission members by Osborn's lectures that at the conclusion of this third and final lecture, he was given a standing ovation.³⁷

Osborn's wisdom was evident in both the words with which he spoke and the spirit with which those words were conveyed. And both warm spirit and enfleshed words pointed the Commission in a much more focused direction, as it launched into a period of intense ecclesiological reflection, a process in which they invited all Disciples to participate.³⁸

There were several components to this period of reflection. By the end of its 1964 meeting, the Commission recommended "the development of a declaration that would express the 'covenantal relationship' or 'oneness' of various manifestations" of the church, a recommendation that was subsequently approved by the Detroit Assembly of the International Convention later that year. The Commission's 1965 meeting invited Disciples from across "the brotherhood"—as individuals, congregations, and associations—to participate in this process by submitting their own covenantal affirmations to the Commission. The report to the Christian Churches that included this invitation—"The Direction in Brotherhood Restructure"—reflects the deep commitment to covenant that had emerged within the Commission on Restructure as they passed the midpoint of their work.³⁹

The covenantal declaration envisioned by the Commission on Restructure would be an affirmation that could be made by all manifestations of what was now being conceived by the Commission as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This affirmation would express the covenantal relationship that binds together Disciples congregations, area associations, state organizations, institutions of higher education, and all mission boards and societies affiliated with the International Convention of the Christian Churches. It would provide the restructured church "with words to say and sing

³⁶ Ronald E. Osborn, "The Building of the Church," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1964), 61–77.

³⁷ Minutes of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure, June 29–July 1, 1964, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 67, Folder 1].

³⁸ Osborn, "Theological Issues," 296.

³⁹ "The Direction in Brotherhood Restructure," report of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure to the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), fall 1965, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, especially 7, 16–20.

together as we seek to serve God's mission in this day and in this time."⁴⁰ By making this covenantal affirmation on a regular basis, in worship and on other occasions, Disciples would have opportunity "to renew our lives and respond more fully to God's leading"⁴¹ as Disciples "perform together the mission of God to the world which He has entrusted to His church."⁴²

As the Commission on Restructure engaged in the two-year process of crafting a covenantal affirmation (from the summer of 1964 to the summer of 1966), it was focused on the use of such a covenantal statement as a liturgical act of public affirmation. Much of this work was delegated to the Commission's Task Committee on Basic Documents, chaired by Blakemore. The committee began the work in earnest in May 1965. They emerged from a one-day meeting in Indianapolis that month with the first draft of a covenantal statement, largely penned by Charles H. Bayer, a committee member and the senior minister of First Christian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.⁴³ Copies of this and subsequent drafts were circulated throughout the Commission, and numerous revisions were proposed. These proposed edits fell into three broad categories: theological, grammatical, and especially liturgical. Blakemore was encouraged to gather together some of his students at Disciples Divinity House in Chicago so that they might say the draft covenantal statement out loud. The intent was to get a feel for how the statement might work as a unison reading in worship, "with the kind of cadence and phrasing which makes it easy to use."⁴⁴ It was also suggested that the emerging covenantal affirmation might be included in the next Disciples hymnal and incorporated into a communion liturgy.⁴⁵ Osborn reiterated the suggestion that the affirmation should be structured so as to make it appropriate for unison

⁴⁰ "Progress Report of the Task Committee on Basic Documents to the June 21–24, 1965, Meeting of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure," 5, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 6].

⁴¹ "Progress Report of the Task Committee on Basic Documents," 5.

⁴² "Draft Report of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure to the International Convention, July 1964," 3, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 67, Folder 1].

⁴³ Letter from Charles H. Bayer to William Barnett Blakemore, May 12, 1965, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 1].

⁴⁴ Letter from W. Jackson Jarmen to William Barnett Blakemore, April 7, 1966, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 10].

⁴⁵ Letter from W. Kenneth Hoover to William Barnett Blakemore, November 19, 1965, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 8].

reading in worship. He proposed further that it should be written as poetry and divided into stanzas.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the Commission on Restructure's ecclesiological reflection continued, as did their efforts to draw the entire "Brotherhood" into their work. The Commission shared Osborn's pivotal lectures with all the Christian Churches in booklet form.⁴⁷ Furthermore, some members of the Commission explored the notion of covenant in its Puritan/Congregational context. They discovered anew the notion that free individuals could be bound together to one another and to God in a way that honors both the liberty of the covenanters and the integrity of the community so formed. They rediscovered as well that free congregations could be similarly bound together in regional, national, and international expressions of the church. And they were reminded how such covenants are formed: as "a solemn agreement ... formulated in a document and duly signed, by which a company of believers bind themselves to God and to one another to live together under the Word of God as a true Church of Christ."⁴⁸

While much of this historical analysis had emerged from the Congregational tradition, the Task Committee on Basic Documents was careful to ground its work in Disciples history and tradition as well. Toward that end, they gathered local church covenants from Disciples churches, along with covenant-like statements that served as preambles for the bylaws of a variety of Disciples associations. They also compiled historic creeds of the church (delicately called "affirmations of faith," so as not to offend the sensitivities of non-creedal Disciples), confessions of sin, and other liturgical material that reflected something of a covenantal affirmation. These materials became a mimeographed booklet prepared for the 1965 meetings of the Commission on Restructure's Central Committee in May and the entire Commission in June. Materials from this booklet were subsequently published in *The Direction in Brotherhood Restructure*.⁴⁹

The Commission on Restructure was encouraged by the work of Blakemore's Task Committee through the first half of 1965. At its 1965 meeting, held June 21–24 at the

⁴⁶ Letter from Ronald E. Osborn to William Barnett Blakemore, April 14, 1966, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 10].

⁴⁷ Ronald E. Osborn, *Restructure Toward the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): Intention, Essence, Constitution* (Christian Board of Publication, 1964).

⁴⁸ Osborn, "Theological Issues," 296.

⁴⁹ Task Committee on Basic Documents, "A Booklet Looking Toward the Preparation."

Sherman House Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, the Commission asked Blakemore's committee to move beyond the various draft covenantal affirmations that were being proposed and "compose a 'covenantal statement' ... which Disciples might share as an expression of their covenant with God and one another."⁵⁰ As the committee prepared to do so, Blakemore received a letter in early February 1966 from Kenneth L. Teegarden, the executive secretary of the Commission on Restructure. The letter informed Blakemore that "any covenantal statement developed for the national manifestation [of the restructured church] might well appear as the preamble" of the constitutional document then being drafted by the Commission's Task Committee on Nature, Design, and Authority.⁵¹ This was the first suggestion that the proposed covenantal affirmation might be used as part of a governance document. During the previous eighteen months, the Commission had focused on the use of a covenantal statement as a liturgical affirmation.

On February 24, 1966, the Task Committee convened in a one-day meeting in Indianapolis to craft a definitive covenantal affirmation. As the meeting began, Blakemore asked the Task Committee members to reflect on the covenantal or creedal statements that they had studied over the past year. He then proposed that each member write their own covenantal affirmation for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As Blakemore slowly read each affirmation to the committee, the members were astonished to discover that they had each written essentially the same thing!⁵² Blakemore then put pen to paper, writing out, line by line, a revised affirmation, pausing to read each line out loud before moving on to the next. The words were written in stanza form, as if intended for liturgical use.⁵³ The Task Force analyzed each line thoughtfully and worked by consensus until a draft covenantal affirmation for the restructured church was completed. This affirmation was further revised at the Commission's 1966 meeting, where it was used in worship so that "the commission

⁵⁰ Osborn, "Theological Issues," 297.

⁵¹ Letter from Kenneth L. Teegarden to William Barnett Blakemore, February 2, 1966, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 10].

⁵² Osborn, "Theological Issues." Here Osborn draws upon Mae Yoho Ward's graphic and inspiring eyewitness account of the writing of the affirmation. Ward was a member of the Commission's Task Committee on Basic Documents and was thus an active participant in the drafting of the affirmation. Blakemore's handwritten consensus draft of the covenantal affirmation, along with several of the drafts submitted by other members of the Task Committee, are in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 10].

⁵³ Blakemore Papers, [Box 64, Folder 10].

might experience its liturgical significance, and judge of its ease in public use."⁵⁴ Convinced that the covenantal affirmation would work in liturgical settings, the Commission commended the affirmation to the International Convention Assembly, meeting in Dallas in September 1966, where it was incorporated into the communion liturgy as "The Covenantal Declaration."⁵⁵ After some additional editing by the Commission, the covenantal affirmation became the Preamble to the Provisional Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).⁵⁶

It is clear—based on Osborn's theological memoir of the Restructure process, the Commission on Restructure's reports to the Christian Churches in 1964 and 1965, an examination of the covenantal material drawn together by Blakemore's Task Committee, and considerable correspondence between Blakemore and other members of the Commission—that the Preamble to the Design was never intended to be merely a preamble to a constitution-like document. Indeed, the decision to affix the emerging covenantal affirmation to the draft constitution (soon to be called the Provisional Design) was made nearly two years after the concept of covenant had become central to the Commission's work. Long before the covenantal statement became part of a governance document, it was intended to be a covenantal affirmation to be used in worship; a liturgical ritual designed to bind a free people together within the body of Christ; a declaration of the ethos that binds Disciples together in covenantal community.

In other words, the Disciples' covenantal affirmation was designed to stand in the tradition of church covenants so dear to Congregationalism (and now part of the heritage of the United Church of Christ). Like the New England church covenants, it names God as a covenant partner, forms an embodied people, and states both the purpose and some of the foundational principles of the body. Indeed, this covenantal affirmation functioned as a church covenant when delegates rose in unison and voiced their commitment to God and one another as they read "the Preamble" together as "The Covenantal Response" in Kansas City on the night of October 1, 1968. The occasion was the service of worship in which the International Convention of Christian

⁵⁴ Letter from William Barnett Blakemore to Orval Holt, July 11, 1966, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 65, Folder 1].

⁵⁵ "The Service of Communion," a worship bulletin from the Dallas Assembly, International Convention, September 25, 1966, in the Blakemore Papers, [Box 68, Folder 9].

⁵⁶ Osborn, "Theological Issues," 297–98.

Churches (Disciples of Christ) reconstituted itself as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).⁵⁷ It was the Disciples' moment of covenantal renewal.

WHITHER THE COVENANTAL AFFIRMATION?

Given this rich history, it is astounding that this powerful Covenantal Affirmation was then relegated to a prose format, rather than poetic stanzas, and published as simply the first paragraph of the Provisional Design. Osborn claims that the affirmation quickly became "a staple item in the worship of many congregations."⁵⁸ Perhaps so, but not in any Disciples church in which I participated during the first two decades following Restructure. The Preamble was included as #490 in the Disciples' 1970 hymnal, *Hymnbook for Christian Worship*. But it was again written in paragraph form, not in poetic stanzas, and cited simply as "From the Preamble to 'A Provisional Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).'"⁵⁹ It would be some years before it would reappear in a more liturgical format (as printed since 1995 in *Chalice Hymnal* as "A Disciples Affirmation"). Subsequently, this affirmation *has* been used liturgically in Disciples gatherings throughout the church. But even now, this affirmation is rarely—if ever—offered as *the* Covenantal Affirmation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, a covenant of free individuals, congregations, regions, and general ministries, voluntarily joined together with God and each other as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and mutually committed to a mission of witness and service to all people.

Covenantal affirmations in the Congregational tradition that informed the Restructure process were never intended to be used as one-off pieces of theological reflection or occasional liturgical declaration. The faithful followers of Jesus who solemnly pledged their commitment to God and each other through these affirmations never dreamed of allowing them to be simply filed away or relegated to the back of a book. These affirmations were living documents, to be reaffirmed at least annually in a liturgy of covenantal renewal and to be used as a basis for a covenanted people to join in spiritual fellowship and material service.

Indeed, the covenantal affirmations of New England did live on, as they evolved into the means by which a faithful people came together as associations, conferences,

⁵⁷ Osborn, "Theological Issues," 308.

⁵⁸ Osborn, "Theological Issues," 298.

⁵⁹ *Hymnbook for Christian Worship* (Bethany Press and Judson Press, 1970), 521.

synods, and councils. But this covenantal tradition evolved further, taking on flesh as colonial and state constitutions and then, in 1787, as the Constitution of the United States of America. What, after all, is the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution if not a covenantal affirmation, offered by a free people, as they joined together "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty"? Like the early New England church and political covenants, the U.S. Constitution affirms the embodiment of a people, states the reason for forming this body, lists the foundational principles of the body, and is a written document to which the signatures of the covenanters have been affixed. Furthermore, reflecting this colonial tradition of ecclesiastical and civil covenants, the U.S. Constitution framed a federated order with multiple loci of power and authority, each locus of power and authority (whether individual believers or citizens, congregations or associations, cities or states) retaining their liberty while being part of one community. This "concept of federalism—the creation of a new unified entity that is indissoluble yet preserves the freedom and integrity of its constituent parts—derives from the biblical notion of covenant."⁶⁰ Embodied within both the ecclesiastical polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the civil polity of the United States is the kind of creative tension between liberty and community that the covenantal tradition seeks to enshrine and nurture.

We Disciples say that we are "a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world." Never has a movement for wholeness been more needed than now, within our fragmented nation. If we are to take our identity seriously, and model for ourselves and our society that type of covenantal community that we Disciples claim to be, we must do at least the following:

1. We must periodically renew our covenant as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This we can do through offering our "Covenantal Affirmation" as a liturgical declaration. We can do so frequently as congregations, as general mission units (including the church's ethnic constituencies), and whenever we gather in regional and general assemblies. On

⁶⁰ The quote is found in Lutz, *Origins of American Constitutionalism*, 53 as a summary of the argument that he develops throughout his book. See especially his analysis on 34, 48–49. Osborn, in his 1964 lecture to the Commission on Restructure, likewise connects the covenantal tradition with both the U.S. Constitution and the notion that the United States is a type of covenantal community (see Osborn, "Nature of the Church," 58). While Lutz's textual analysis of covenantal and constitutional documents (which reveals the close connection between these types of documents) focuses on New England documents and the Congregational tradition of covenant, he briefly acknowledges the influence of the covenantal tradition on American constitutionalism as that tradition is found in other expressions of biblical faith in the Mid-Atlantic colonies. See Lutz, *Origins of American Constitutionalism*, 44, 55.

such occasions (at least annually in congregations, and in every regional and general assembly), the Covenantal Affirmation should be offered in the context of a formal liturgy of renewing the covenant. In order to facilitate its use in these ways, the Affirmation should be translated into the many languages that we use in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In fact, we Disciples have the potential for renewing the covenant weekly, as we affirm who we are—in liturgical word and ritual deed—when we gather at the Lord's Table. In these ways we can use the power of ritual and liturgy to forge purpose and meaning and to strengthen the bonds of community.

2. We must regularly gather for worship, fellowship, and service as congregations, areas/districts (where numbers permit), regions, and general expressions of the church. A covenant is renewed and kept alive not just through the spirit of verbal affirmation, but also in the form of physical gatherings. In this regard, both spirit and form nurture the "habits of the heart" (to use Tocqueville's phrase) that lead to the servanthood ministry of reconciliation through associations both ecclesiastical and civil in nature.
3. We must seriously engage in the current experiment in covenantal renewal as enacted in the amendments to the Design that were approved by the Louisville and Memphis General Assemblies in 2023 and 2025. It remains to be seen whether this current effort at renewal can overcome the failure of congregations to be fully engaged in the regional and general expressions of the church, or overcome the failure of the General Assembly to be much more than a debating society, gathered for fellowship and pontification. The resolve of the General Assembly that both online meetings of the General Assembly and the facilitating work of the General Board can become "connective tissue" within the body of Christ (apparently bypassing the regions, where there might be more opportunities for enfleshed fellowship and service) gives one pause as to whether or not this renewal experiment can be successful. But it is certainly worth a try. A not infrequent complaint about the General Assembly, from both architects of Restructure and longtime assembly delegates, is that biennial, in-person assemblies have been too expensive for most Disciples to attend, as too few congregations have put sufficient funds in their budgets to support potential delegates who cannot pay their own way. Furthermore, congregations have devoted too little time and energy to studying General Assembly business prior to an assembly, receiving reports back from delegates following an assembly, and acting locally to implement assembly resolutions. Thus the General Assembly has failed to be a representative body within the Disciples covenant, and the relationship between the General Assembly and the local congregation has failed to be connective tissue within the body of Christ. One can only hope

that the new process of annual assemblies, using electronic media, will succeed in addressing this major failure of Restructure.⁶¹

4. We must take more seriously our covenantal commitment to a mission of *witness* as well as service. It has been said that the Disciples of Christ are one of the best-kept secrets in the world. It has also been further noted that we Disciples have exactly what our nation and our world need. But how can either nation or world gain access to what we have to offer? How can we share our gifts with a fragmented world if we do not become more vocal and more creative about telling people who we are and inviting folks to join us for worship, fellowship, and service? And we can do so very easily, by simply stating—to anyone who might ask—the essence of our covenantal ethos: “We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, 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 have this good news to share! It is high time that we become less shy about sharing it.

Some claim that if you have ten Disciples in a room, you’ll have eleven different ideas about how to move forward. And yet, we *do* discern ways to move forward: as we listen to each other, trust one another, and discern together. Free individuals, in voluntary covenantal relationships, can find common ground if they are willing to work at it and negotiate. Indeed, if Disciples are to take seriously Alexander Campbell’s notion that voluntary covenants are morally binding, Disciples have a moral obligation to do this work. A covenantal community can witness and serve together on common ground so long as none of the individuals or factions that belong to that community assumes that they have a monopoly on truth or virtue, or that they are always the smartest ones in the room. We Disciples, at our best, know how to live, work, and worship within such a covenant. Indeed, we are a people of the Book *and* of the covenant. By faithfully and consistently living as a people of the covenant, and by communicating our covenantal nature to all who will listen, we can show a broken nation and world how to live in covenant as well. In this way we can contribute,

⁶¹ It was specifically Howard E. Dentler, DD, a member of both the Executive and Central committees of the Commission on Restructure and then the first associate general minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who expressed this regret, as quoted in Lowery, *Seeking God’s Design*, 60. But Dentler was not alone in his disappointment that too many congregations have failed to take seriously their covenantal bonds to the General Assembly and other expressions of the church’s covenant. These and other disappointments, as well as celebrations, regarding both the concept of covenant and the entire Restructure process, as expressed by many of the architects of Restructure, can be found in Lowery, *Seeking God’s Design*, 66–75, 88–101.

together, by God's grace, to the creation of wholeness and justice in this fragmented nation and world.