

# A Theological Analysis of the Design

for

## The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

[This essay was prepared for the Commission on Theology of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in May 1979. It appeared in *Mid-Stream*, (July, 1980), Vol. XIX, No. 3, pp. 309-21. This version is slightly edited.]

The document *The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* is supposed to provide the basic rationale for and description of the principles of organization for that church body. As such it can be said to contain the essentials of the polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). While a closer look will show that this polity is deliberately open-ended to the future, it nevertheless does set forth a definite understanding of the church and it does state a definite design. With both forms of definiteness now contained in one common document, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has achieved a new level of institutional self-consciousness. A new body has emerged from the past of implicit creeds, implacable oral traditions, and a confluence of ad hoc institutional by-laws and agreements. The wondrous fact that this document exists at all is symbolically the first salient feature that we must acknowledge in setting out to provide a theological analysis of the Design.

The Design begins' with a "Preamble," and we are safe in concluding that it functions to set forth the explicit theological principles which shape and undergird the organizational design itself. The first section of the Preamble has, however, a special status that we must now fathom. It is set forth in a form which suggests poetic stanzas rather than prose sentences, and from these we can infer that it intends to be something close to traditional confessions of faith. There is nothing to indicate that it is a creed or test of faith or a rule of faith. That is, it does not appear to be a test of fellowship or theological purity. But it is a **definite** statement, and it is at least possible to disagree with it. What sort of statement is it, then?

The United Church of Christ calls its statement of faith a "testimony of faith" and not a rule of faith. Here "testimony" has a definite meaning: a testimony to the object of faith, to the mighty deeds of God. The body of the UCC statement is a recitation of what God has done. But there is no similar recitation in the Design. Instead the subject of every sentence is the confessional "we." Nowhere, not even in subordinate clauses, is "God" used as the subject of an active verb. The rhythmic emphasis is "we confess...and proclaim... we accept... we rejoice... we enter...and are made... we are joined... we celebrate... we receive... [and] we yield..." It is clear that beliefs are contained in and expressed by the statement, but there is no confessional "belief." Instead of this, we more nearly have an expression of what church members do and experience. Perhaps the intent has been to avoid the appearance of definite beliefs, associated as these are with creeds, and to substitute responses and experiences for beliefs.

It is, of course, misleading to suppose that this use of the confessional "we" avoids the question of belief. Theological propositions are still available in the confession, and it remains replete with propositional predicates that can be easily converted into propositions. So there may be the appearance of sidestepping divisive beliefs, but the reality is that beliefs remain embedded in the confession.

The traditional dilemma for Disciples has been the Scylla of "no test of faith" and the Charybdis of the central confession of "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and Lord and Savior of the world." Of course, it has always been clear that the central confession was indeed a test of faith and that one could not reject it and still pretend to be a Christian. But what has not been so clear is the status of the various propositions that give definiteness of meaning to the central confession, "Jesus is the Christ..." Our tendency has been to allow disagreement over the secondary propositions, which purport to state and

expand the meaning of the primary proposition or confession. But analytically we can note that the primary proposition, in order to mean something definite, must imply other propositions. If one disagrees with one of these implied secondary propositions, then one is also disagreeing with the purported meaning of the primary proposition. That is, "Jesus is the Christ..." has its meaning in and with other proposition-stating sentences. It is not an isolated unit of meaning that can be affirmed or denied without implication for other beliefs. What we mean when we utter a sentence is *inter alia* tied up with other sentences.

Now the point of this digression is that **Disciples have had a central confession that has functioned as a creedal test of faith. But we have been unwilling to acknowledge, and therewith to face the implications, that this central confession only has definiteness of meaning insofar as it is logically tied to other propositions.** Hence, we have been willing to abide the appearance of agreement by virtue of the common confessional utterance but have been unwilling to acknowledge that vastly different meanings have been cloaked under this purported agreement. So, we have opposed creeds in the mistaken belief that we were thereby keeping the primary confession free of controversial interpretations.

What then should we call this initial section of the Preamble? It begins with confession, and one is inclined to think it is appropriate to call it a "**confession of faith.**" As a confession of faith it is more than Disciples have been accustomed to allow. But I think our further analysis will show notable weaknesses, not the least being the failure to recite the history of God's activity. To that extent, it lacks the fullness of the creeds and confessions of other traditions. Actually it is more nearly an ecclesiological meditation conveying the experiences of faith and presupposing the substance of traditional creeds. The special use of the confessional "we" to express a multiplicity of human acts and experiences tends to downplay explicit beliefs. But the beliefs that are expressed or implied in the confession are irenic in character. While noting the ecclesial emphasis and the irenic spirit, I am willing to call it a "confession of faith." Yet it is obviously not intended as a strong test of faith. Perhaps the crucial point is that there is no attempt in the Preamble to tell us what the status of this section is. Hence, it is left to contemporary and future tradition to determine what the section finally comes to and how it shall be used.

Before turning to a detailed inspection of the confession, two general features should be indicated. First, it is a thoroughly **Christocentric confession.** It begins with the central Disciples confession: "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and...Lord and Savior of the world." It goes on to say that it is "in Christ's name and by his grace" that the church has its basic mission. Then, there is "baptism into Christ" in celebration of his "saving acts and presence" at his table. Of the eight major confessional sentences, four are explicitly Christocentric.

The second feature is the confession's **universalistic and inclusive tendency.** Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world. The church serves all people. Baptism unites one with the whole people of God. It is within the universal church that ministry and scripture are received. Notice the contrast: Jesus is not just Lord of the church; the church does not serve itself; baptism is not an isolated individual act; ministry and scripture are not just received in Disciples tradition.

It is worth noting that **the Christological emphasis seems to generate the universalistic impulse.** Hence, instead of an exclusivism being generated by this strong Christocentrism, we have the opposite. This has not always been the case in the larger Christian tradition, or in Disciples tradition. It is, however, this very combination of Christocentric and universalistic themes that is evident in much contemporary Protestant and Roman Catholic theology.

Now let us look at the major sentences. The first begins with the clause "As members of the Christian Church." This should tell us that we have a confession explicitly originating from the Church. And the church is not "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)." It is simply the Christian Church, an implicit acknowledgement that the confession is not intended to be peculiarly "Disciples" in character. But, of course, it does intend to confess the faith through Disciples' eyes; hence it must inevitably have a Disciples character. Perhaps the most appropriate way to put it is to say that **it is the Disciples version of an ecumenical confession.**

As already indicated, the **center of the opening statement is Jesus**, to whom four titles are ascribed:

Christ, Son of the living God, Lord of the world, and Savior of the world. I have deliberately interpreted the potential grammatical ambiguity to mean that Jesus is Lord of the world and not just unspecified Lord. This fits with the dignity and power that the titles ascribe to Jesus. It is clear that **this Jesus is fully a divine person bearing a sovereignty of cosmic character.**

However, we should notice how this present phrasing departs from the traditional Disciples confession widely used in congregational worship. This traditional confession says: "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and I accept him as my personal Savior." This intimate emphasis upon acceptance of a personal Savior is now replaced by a proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Savior of the world. The enlarged scope is significant and is part of the confession's universalizing tendency. This does not exclude Jesus being experienced as personal Savior, but it does strongly suggest that it must also be the experience of one who has cosmic power. While I am pleased with this new emphasis upon the world-encompassing Lordship of Jesus, I regret the loss of the existential intent of the traditional confession. Perhaps both could have been retained in phrasing such as this: "and acknowledge Him as personal Savior and Lord of the world."

From the Christological basis the second statement moves to the ecclesial bearing of Christ's sovereignty and call: The church accepts its "mission of witness and service to all people." By virtue of understanding something of the name of Jesus as the Christ and his grace, the church "accepts" its mission. Surely this emphasis suggests that the church's proper response to Jesus is to acknowledge its being sent on a mission and given a service. Further, this mission is one of "witness," and we are led to assume that the witness has to do with the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Now, there are some interpretations of the call to witness of the church that have it including service to people. But this confession suggests a distinction between witness and service. I prefer the more inclusive sense of witness, but I am not sure that any large differences are at issue in the point. It suffices to note that both witness and service have "all people" as their object.

The next sentence is supposedly the **Creator clause** in the confession. Prior to the deletion of purported sexist language at the last General Assembly, this sentence referred to "God our Father." The loss of "our Father" is serious and in my judgment regrettable, but I will not debate that tortuous issue here. But the matter becomes more serious with the loss of personal pronouns, for the older text spoke of "the covenant of love by which he has bound us to himself" (my emphasis). This now reads: "The covenant of love which binds us to God and one another." We have a strangely suspended covenant, binding God and humanity. But it is clear from scripture and tradition that God is the primary subject of the covenant: it is he that binds us and himself in covenant. He is not bound by a strangely common covenant that happens to exist. This new rendering is a net loss to the confession, and misses the grand opportunity of connecting the Creator to his own covenant with humanity. The covenant we now have is not obviously in creation or in redemption; it is just there. Further, though the revised form does add the new dimension of being a covenant that "binds us to...one another," this would have been strengthened were it clear that it is God's covenant which first binds us to himself and to one another. Hence, it would have been clear that covenants, which may exist horizontally, have their foundation and *telos* from God's covenant.

"Newness of life" is entered "through baptism into Christ." And in baptism a unity is posited between the baptized and "the whole people of God." There is a fine ambiguity here. Presumably "the whole people of God" is the church, but this is not explicit. Even so, the most interesting points about this sentence are what it does not say. There is no mention of believer's baptism, just baptism. There is no mention of water or forms of baptism. And there is no mention of sin, forgiveness of sin, or repentance. In short, this is a thoroughly irenic sentence. But if this irenic sentence purports to speak of the real essentials of baptism, then why the omission of forgiveness of sins and repentance?

Recalling II Cor 13.14, the next sentence formerly read: "In the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit..." Apparently "fellowship" is sexist language, so it has been deleted. The result is an odd phrase, "in the communion of the Holy Spirit." Odd though it sounds, it is still appropriate, for the communion of the Holy Spirit is nothing other than the joining together of the church "in discipleship and in obedience to Christ." The Holy Spirit is connected with Christ, and we are not expected to find a relationship to the Holy Spirit which is other than or additional to discipleship and obedience to Christ. This is a good sentence on the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord's Supper, "the table of the Lord," is celebrated in thanksgiving. Hence, there is a strong eucharistic tone. But the eucharistic tone has a major key: "the saving acts and presence of Christ" are celebrated. As readers of the confession we can be thankful for more: the confession completely avoids the "remembrance" theme so prominent in Disciplesdom and so convenient for ignoring the efficacy and presence of a living, contemporary Christ. The Christ in this confession is present to the participants.

The next sentence is, in my judgment, the most remarkable in the confession. Disciples tradition has always given priority to scripture over tradition. Even more it has tended to refuse to assign any positive significance to tradition. But this sentence says that it is "within the universal church [that] we receive... the light of scripture." We must assume that the universal church has not only contemporaneity but also historical extension. Hence, we seem to have **a new recognition that scripture is received in the tradition of the ecumenical church.** So too for the "gift of ministry" (echoing Ephesians 4. 11-12). Scripture has its light and ministry is gift only within the larger reach and influence of the universal church. While this still allows for a priority to scripture, it will no longer be a priority over a vacuous and negligible tradition.

There is **no significant eschatological theme in this confession.** The last of the major sentences comes close by referring to the "One whose kingdom has no end." Certainly that is a good thing to say, but it does not suggest historical movement or consummation. This fits with the tendency of the entire confession to emphasize experiences and states or conditions, but to fall short on divine activity and historical movement. And overall, I judge this lack to be a serious deficiency in the confession.

In the confession we can discern the **basic rhythms of ecclesial faith.** In that respect it is preoccupied with basic ecclesiology, answering the question, 'what are the basic experiences of the church?' Turning from the confession to the other four sections of the Preamble, we have an amplification of the basic principles of Disciples ecclesiology. While the ecclesiology is distinctively applicable to the situation of Disciples, it is obvious that the basic principles are intended to indicate constitutive factors in the church as such. In this respect the principles represent the essential character of the church regardless of the tradition in which it may appear.

The first section of this part of the Preamble begins by emphasizing that the church emerges from a backdrop of "the whole family of God on earth." While it is not said that this is the universal human family as such, the suggestion remains that God's whole family is not comprised of just the religious folk of the world. Even though the church emerges from this inclusive family, it is nevertheless a distinct community. As a distinct community, it "appears wherever believers in Jesus Christ are gathered in His name." Hence, the Christocentric theme continues. However, I would have preferred the matter to be stated otherwise. The church does not just "appear"; **it is called into existence.** The church does not just gather itself in Jesus' name; it is called together in his name. The difference between these two ways of speaking is significant. The language of the Design emphasizes the activity of the believers in gathering, whereas the other emphasizes the divine activity as the prius of the church's being and activity. **And it is precisely this sense for the priority of God's action that is lacking also in the confessional statement.**

In spite of, and in that sense "transcending all barriers within the human family, the church manifests itself in ordered communities of disciples...." It is notable that here we have the first mention in the Preamble of any of the negativities of human existence! Apparently there are real barriers within humanity, but the church appears in spite of them. Clearly, then, none of these barriers could be essential to the church, and the church is not itself to become another barrier.

Now the "church manifests itself in ordered communities of disciples" for specific purposes. Here I shall list those **purposes of the church** enumerated in this paragraph: worship, fellowship, service, mission, witness, mutual discipline, the nurture and renewal of its members. This is not a tidy, economical list. Also, education is notably absent, except as it may be inferred under nurture. A better list would be: worship, mission in witness and service, and the nurture, education, mutual discipline, and renewal of its members. This is a more satisfying explication of the purposes for which the church is manifest in ordered communities.

The Design goes on to state “the nature of the church...remains constant through the generations.” Further, this constant nature is “given by Christ.” Apparently this constant nature is what we have been discussing in the three preceding paragraphs. Hence, the following **marks are of the essence of the church:**

1. believers in Jesus Christ gathered in His name;
2. ordered community of disciples;
3. bound together for worship, mission, etc.

While this nature is constant, the church does have its necessarily changing side. “In faithfulness to its mission it continues to adapt its structures to the needs and patterns of a changing world.” After all, the mission is to all people, and that is a changing object. Some structures of order there will be, but these may and must change in order to be adequate to the changing needs and patterns of the world. Surely this is a good principle, even though particular changes and adaptations will always be subjects of debate within the church. But it is not a misplaced debate, according to the Design; rather it is an essential feature of the church.

This paragraph concludes with a sentence that states yet another essential feature of the unchanging nature of the church: “All dominion in the church belongs to Jesus Christ, its Lord and head, and any exercise of authority in the church on earth stands under his judgment.” **Jesus Christ is the fount of authority for the church.** All other exercises of authority in relationships stand under and must be derived from this authority. It may be that I should not say ‘must be derived from this authority,’ but I infer that from the reference to all dominion in the church belonging to Jesus Christ. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that while all authority is judged by Christ, not all is directly authorized by him. Rather, some authority is only permitted by him. This could be an important issue as we look at the explicit structure spelled out elsewhere in the Design.

The next paragraph becomes more specific about the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), but this specificity is placed “within the universal body of Christ.” Thus the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a particular church body within the larger universal church, which is the body of Christ. The key concept of specification of this church body is “manifestations.” **There are three manifestations of the church: “congregational, regional, and general.”** Each manifestation has a unique “function” and is thereby uniquely responsible for its particular sort of church work. With respect to these functions each manifestation has its legitimate “integrity, self-government, authority, rights and responsibilities.” Further, each manifestation is constituted by “free and voluntary relationships.”

Are these particular manifestations part of the unchanging nature of the church or part of those timely structures that are subject to change? I do not see a clear answer to this question. On the one hand, it may seem that, while the structures of a manifestation may change, the structure of three-fold manifestations is unchanging. On the other hand, the manifestations as such do not have an obvious necessity about them. At the very least, we can say that the structures of the manifestations themselves are subject to change.

Each manifestation has a unique function that is the primary source of its special authority and responsibility. We should not understand “function” to mean one or more of the previously identified purposes of the church. Rather, it is implicit that each manifestation, in its own way, participates in all of the basic purposes of the church. We can anticipate that the bulk of the Design will be devoted to describing the functions and responsibilities that are unique to each manifestation.

Let us now ponder the significance of the expression “free and voluntary relationships.” Surely we are mindful of a long Disciples tradition emphasizing a dual autonomy: the individual and the congregation. The individual is free to believe as he or she sees appropriate. The congregation is free and independent of higher ecclesiastical authority. Accordingly, whatever relationships the individual and the congregation have, they have by virtue of free and voluntary choices. These emphases seem duly acknowledged in the Design. But how are we to characterize the choices made and relationships established? After all, some of these choices are responses to divine behest and not just free-floating human decisions. Here we would have expected the Design to speak of the covenantal character of these chosen relationships, and this would have been a proper balance to the free-and-voluntary emphasis. However, no mention of covenant is made

in this particular connection. In reference to the adoption of the Design itself, the next paragraph does mention “response to God’s covenant” and committing “ourselves to one another.” Surely this is the stuff of covenantal talk, but it still fails to say plainly that the church is in all its manifestations and ordered communities essentially covenantal in character. Here in paragraph four was the opportunity to state this important ecclesial principle, and the omission is regrettable.

Without the explicit emphasis on the covenantal character of the relationships that comprise each manifestation and extend between the manifestations, **the free-and-voluntary theme is allowed to perpetuate what I regard as an unhealthy inclination of the free-church tradition. The church is thereby typically seen as a self-constituting body, comprised basically of free choices by free individuals.** But this subtly works against the notion that the church is first called into existence by God, with the implication that the community is established as a response to this call. To be sure, the response is free, but it is the freedom of those who hear the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not primarily the freedom of a residually free individual who—in his or her autonomous freedom—also decides to become a Christian.

Let us come at this point by raising a related question: is there an internal relationship between the Lordship of Christ over the church and the ordered communities in which the church exists? If the answer is ‘yes,’ then we would expect the ordered communities to be what they are as responses to Christ’s behest. Or, to put it negatively, these communities are not just realizations of free options available to individual believers. Hence, if there is an internal relation between Christ and the ordered communities of the church, then we should not think of the communities as the realization of free and voluntary options. If the church does exist, it exists as response to divine behest. Now, this sort of theme works against the notion that one could in good faith refuse to participate in or embrace the covenantal relations that characterize the church. Hence, **the Free Church tradition has always teetered on the brink of an individualistic theme in which individuals are first converted to Christ and then may or may not decide to become members of some church body.**

But my question concerning the internal relationship involves some further difficulties. If we answer that the relationship between Christ and church is internal, then it suggests that we should be able to derive all the traits of the concrete church from this relationship. This would further suggest that the Design which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is unfolding is in all its particulars directly derivable from the Lordship of Christ. But this would be an extraordinary claim to make for the organizational detail that the Design represents. That is, it would be overwhelming to declare that all the details are directly deducible from (and therewith decisively authorized by) the Lordship of Christ. Surely that is too much to claim for the Design.

How shall we think ourselves out of this dilemma? It can be admitted that it is a dilemma for any ecclesiology, for there is the need to distinguish between those features of the church which are simply necessary to its being and those features which are permitted though not mandated by the Lordship of Christ. Now this distinction has already been implied by the Design’s distinction between the constant nature and the changing structures. What we lack is a clear way of telling the difference in particular instances. But this should be an item on the agenda for further Disciples ecclesiological discussions.

Let us return to the Design by looking at paragraph four of the Preamble in which the Design itself is made the subject of discussion. Here the covenantal theme is used to balance the free-and-voluntary theme, for the Design itself is presented as arising from “a response to God’s covenant” in which “we commit ourselves to one another.” This commitment to one another is intrinsic to the realization of the primary purposes of the church, and the Design is proffered as being the way to realize those purposes concretely in the actual life of the church.

In leaving the Preamble, I do not intend to provide a similar minute analysis of the remainder of the Design. I will be content to select several diagnostic points that will allow the theological character of the document to become more visible. I do not detect any clear inconsistencies between the principles of the Preamble and the rest of the Design. In general, the unity and missional aspects of the church reach appropriate shape in the descriptions of the three manifestations. Further there is a continuing effort to bring the

manifestations under the Lordship and authority of Christ. There is also an ongoing sensitivity to the need for some genuine diversity even in the midst of an unchanging unity. All of these are emphases that can be applauded.

**The most inventive and felicitous concept used in the Design is that of manifestations.** It retains a sense for ordered community at various levels of the church's life and avoids the temptation to reduce the church to the congregational level. It may, therefore, be helpful to indicate some further points concerning the concept of manifestations. First, the manifestations are not hierarchically ordered. Second, they do not have a sacerdotal—priestly mediating—ordering principle. Third, each manifestation has its own legitimate sphere of influence in work, though there is interaction among them. Fourth, each manifestation in its work is an expression of the “whole church.” Hence, wholeness and unity are norms for the action of each manifestation, and we can infer that wholeness and unity are dependent upon a strong sense for the covenantal character of the relationships within and between the manifestations.

However, the concept of manifestations poses an interesting question. Do the manifestations require each other for their own proper work? That is, does a manifestation have a measure of incompleteness about it in separation from the other manifestations? Clearly the free-and-voluntary theme suggests that the autonomy of each manifestation is such that it does not necessarily relate to the other manifestations. But a firm development of the covenantal theme would suggest that the manifestations are intrinsically connected. I think it is implicit that the manifestations require each other, but I would have preferred the sharper expression which the covenantal theme could have provided if it had been more vigorously developed.

Some other observations are in order concerning the treatment of the manifestations in the Design. We are led to believe in the Preamble that each manifestation has a unique function and authority, rights, and responsibilities appropriate to that function. Accordingly, we could rightly expect that the function and correlated authority, rights, and responsibilities would be clearly spelled out in describing each manifestation. But this expectation is disappointed. All of these matters remain unduly vague for the general manifestation, with no section explicitly devoted to any of the topics. Yet the region receives a very clear statement of nature, purpose, and function, though one must infer matters about rights and responsibilities. In contrast, the congregational manifestation has a specific section on rights and responsibilities. It would have strengthened the entire document if there were perspicuous statements of function, authority, and rights and responsibilities for each manifestation. Certainly the prevailing misunderstandings of the nature and authority of the General Assembly are rooted in the vagueness of the Design itself. From this and the other questions raised above, I hope it is clear that further work on the concept of manifestations is needed.

A sound clarification of some issues is forthcoming in the section on “**Ministry.**” It begins with an affirmation that the church is called to participate in the “fundamental ministry...of Jesus Christ.” Every member of the church is called to this ministry. But in addition to this ministry the Design recognizes “an order of ministry, set apart or ordained...to equip the whole people to fulfill their corporate ministry.” This distinctive ministry, therefore, functionally originates in the need to equip the church for its ministry. This ministry is not the fount or paradigm of the church's ministry. If its justification is functional, then that means that the order of ministry is grounded in the capacities for providing the equipping function. To that extent, being set apart or ordained is more nearly a recognition of these capacities instead of a conferral of the capacities.

This is a salutary statement on the ministry, and continues the traditional refusal to open up a sharp dichotomy between the laity and the clergy. This maintains a decisive lay base to the church without decapitating the clergy. But the clergy arise to their proper role as servants of the corporate ministry of the whole church. This corporate ministry has genuine needs that can be met by the special selection of persons who have capacities to meet those needs. This further implies the legitimacy of standards of selection and ordination of ministers. All of this can be emphasized without diminishing the ministerial role of the laity. And the Design shows good judgment in identifying the lay offices of the eldership and diaconate as crucial to the ministerial duties of the congregation.

It also seems to me that wisdom has been demonstrated in the proportional representation assigned to the

laity and the ordained ministry on the various governing bodies of the general manifestation. The temptation to become a clerically governed church has been aptly avoided, without disregarding the leadership capacities and experience of the clergy. Put another way, we have legitimate clerical leadership without neglecting the genuine leadership that the laity can and should provide. This balancing of lay and clerical interests is commensurate with the Design's emphasis on the whole people of God.

In remarkable ways **the Design is a reform document** for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). That is, it reshapes and redirects many of the accepted slogans and practices of that tradition. A notable example of this is the complete silence of the document concerning the grand theme of "restoration." Nowhere is even lip service paid to this old emphasis. There is reform at work in the tradition in the winnowing out of this perspective on the church. I personally welcome this particular reform as a healthier and more candid view of the church. However, I do wish more explicit attention had been paid to the reform theme itself in the enunciation of principles in the Preamble. To be sure, paragraph 51 does mention the need for procedures to enhance the "continual renewal and structural reform" of the church. But the necessity for reformation should have been tied into the emphasis on altering structures to meet changing needs. This could have been explicitly indicated in relevant portions of the Preamble.

But this concern for reform must be seen in connection with another deficiency in the Design. As I mentioned in commenting on the confession of faith, **there is an inadequate sense for divine activity and historical movement. This inadequacy pervades the Design as a whole, for we do not get a strong sense that God is at work in the world, has called the church to participate in his work, and is in fact leading the church.** In older language, we do not have the design for the work of the church placed in a context of God's design in his work of redemption. Or, in language arising from much contemporary theology, we do not have the church's design decisively stamped by what God is doing as the Liberator of the world. Were this sort of theme prominent, then we could also see that ongoing reform is not just a function of changing situations but is a divine behest that the church continue to test itself for true conformity to what God is doing and intends for the world.

The misgivings and questions that I have raised about the Design are genuine. I hope they provoke further exploration and development. But I do not want these caveats to obscure my regard for the admirable achievements of the Design. It marks an impressive coming-of-age for the Disciples tradition, and what clarity it does attain is not only an opportunity for greater self-consciousness about the nature of the church but is an invitation to continuing renewal and reform.