

# The Priesthood of Christ in Church and Ministry:

## A Disciples Perspective

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I set the course of my remarks on this theme by reference to an affirmation in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM §17).

17. Jesus Christ is the unique priest of the new covenant. Christ's life was given as a sacrifice for all. Derivatively, the church as a whole can be described as a priesthood. All members are called to offer their being "as a living sacrifice" and to intercede for the Church and the salvation of the world. Ordained ministers are related, as are all Christians, both to the priesthood of Christ, and to the priesthood of the Church."<sup>1</sup>

This reference is a helpful point of departure for several reasons, I think. It very succinctly states convictions that we Disciples embrace as ecclesial essentials. It also swiftly ushers Christians to a point of particular focus in current ecumenical discussions: understandings of the relationship(s) of ordained ministers both to the priesthood of Christ and to that of the Church. Convergences or consensus on this matter remains, to date, something of a faith and order challenge. Further bilateral exchanges addressing the 'prior question' of what Christians mean by priesthood seem altogether apt.

The reflections I offer here are developed, and delimited, in light of themes in play and matters at issue with regard to BEM §17. To call them *a* Disciples

perspective rather than *the* Disciples position is to exercise my free will as well as to make a *caveat lector* disclaimer that goes along with the Disciples way. Even so, I have formed these remarks along the lines of an standard ecumenical report or position paper, seeking to set forth what I understand to be the thrust, cardinal points, and concerns common to Disciples by heritage and life together today as Church.<sup>2</sup>

### The Disciples and Faith's Language of Priesthood

Affirmations of the priesthood of Christ and that of his church have been integral elements of the teachings of the faith of the Church for Disciples from the origins of the Stone-Campbell movement. Faithfulness to the apostolic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ requires no less. The New Testament's several most highly explicit uses of priestly terminology in characterizing Christ and his Church are in important respects formative of Disciples views and practices. And from the entire, wide-ranging stock of biblical references to priests, priesthods, and their activities in the history of ancient Israel and the rest of the ancient world can be drawn, by way of comparison and contrast, significant insights into the gospel as well as ecclesiology.

The framework and tools Disciples rely on to mine these materials and grasp their authoritative import have varied somewhat over time. Disciples during our early, formative era and well beyond advocated a new 'Reformation' for the

restoration of the church's originary—apostolic— “unity, purity, and peace.” A covenantal-schema of salvation history, grammatico-historical hermeneutics, and emphasis on Scripture's express precepts and approved practices were prominent features—and typically as in these cases, of generically Reformed descent—of efforts to identify *the* biblical-Christian understandings of priesthood. Likewise too they frequently employed the ‘prophet, priest, and king’ formula in Christology and, searching in vain for the apostolic precept or approved precedent for calling ordained ministers “priests,” they roundly (and quite uncharitably) condemned the practice.

Faithfulness to the authoritative witness of Scripture and the apostolic teaching in it is no less important to Disciples today than in the past. Our ways and means of theological thinking, however, are no longer altogether the same as those of our early 19<sup>th</sup> century founders. The Church's on-going concern to construe Christ's priesthood as adequately as possible is a task most fruitfully undertaken, we believe, in light of Scripture and attentive to the course of the Church's faith through the ages, the challenges of effective ministry in ever-changing times, ecumenical engagement, and critical scholarly inquiries pertinent to it. Numerous dialogue partners and multiple hermeneutical methods are, in our view, welcome resources, and invaluable if Christians are to avoid self-indulgent novelty or self-

righteous parochialism as we press to fulfill the Church's God-given calling to teach gospel truth.

Representative of the continuities and changes in Disciples thought that I have in view are two teacher-scholars and ecumenists, William Robinson and Ronald Osborn. Their writings during the revival of ecumenical theology over the long midsection the twentieth century remain for Disciples modern classics. Their expositions of “the priesthood of Christ in the Church and its ministry” are, to my knowledge, the most extensive, and influential, among Disciples, to date. I draw upon them heavily in my account of points to be considered the deepest, most enduring convictions of Disciples from Stone-Campbell origins to the present.<sup>3</sup>

One such conviction is that the biblical language of priesthood affords us insight into faith's meaning as none other is able to do. Several such texts are especially beloved to Disciples, and regularly cited as *loci communes*. They belong, of course, to the larger canonical whole, and are to be considered in that context. The vast amount and gravamen of priest-related terminology, narrative depiction, and discourse in the Church's Scriptures is an alert that “priests and things in and around them” is in effect a New Testament lens *through which* to grasp the gospel's meaning. We are dealing, then, with a portion of Christian faith's original symbol-set—the Church's ‘symbolism of priesthood’, a phrase I use, then, as Paul Ricoeur does the ‘symbolism of evil’.<sup>4</sup>

Affirming Scripture as uniquely normative for the Church, Disciples endeavor to draw upon its symbolism of priesthood with the awareness that canonical context entails wide-angled, yet carefully differentiated, readings. The witness of the New Testament speaks of the priesthood of Christ, the Church, and ministry in terms of connections and likenesses with other priesthoods as well as distinctions from them. These references vary in character—literal, history-like realism, and literal non-literal (including typology), among others. And these references, taken as a group, appear in comparison and contrast with other such groups. So priesthood, e.g., appears as one among ninety-six images of the church that Paul Minear ferrets out for analysis.<sup>5</sup>

By this phraseology, however, I am perhaps unduly complicating what are for Disciples basically quite down-to-earth concerns. First, although faith's language of priesthood plays on the glory, grandeur, and splendiferous trappings associated with the priesthoods of 'the world', its play does not have the same outcomes in view. Second, though valuable in their own right, affirmations of the priesthood of Christ, the Church, and ministry gain their full and proper meaning only in combination with other affirmations of vital significance.<sup>6</sup>

### The Priesthood of Christ

Key convictions of Disciples with regard to the priesthood of Christ are perhaps most readily set forth by pointing to several clusters of biblical texts that

inform our history, theology, and practices significantly. One is the exhortation in Hebrews, “. . . consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also was ‘faithful in all God’s house.’” (3:1-2), in company with other designations of Christ as high—or great—priest throughout this epistle (4:14-15; 5.5,10; 6:20; 7:26-28; 8:1, 3; 9.11,25). Especially significant in this context are the “once for all” sacrifice of Christ” and the adjoined passage, echoing Jeremiah 31.33, on covenant-making (10.1-18).

A second complex is formed by accounts of the Lord’s Supper synoptic tradition and Paul, attesting Christ’s death as covenant-making action. Closely related to it in the Disciples tradition is John 17, as an dramatic account of the last night Jesus spent with his disciples before his death. Like many other Christians, Disciples frequently refer to this as “Christ’s high priestly prayer.” We have found Christ’s petition “that they all may be one” (17.11, 22-23) particularly to be a source of inspiration as well as an express mandate for unceasing efforts on behalf of Christian unity.

To highlight these texts is in no means to deny or ignore others of significance. (Even a very short list must include 1 Jn 2:1, “An advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”; 1 Tim 2:5, ‘one mediator between God and humanity’; Rom 12.1; Phil. 4:18; 1 Pet 2:5; Rvn 1:6 and 5:10. The inventory

certainly expands with the wide sweep of allusions to covenant, sacrifice, temple, house, purification, the washing away of defilement, etc.) But it will suffice here, I trust, to indicate some of the key points Disciples understand and derive from the biblical materials.

The priesthood of Christ is *his* not by worldly descent, occupation, or aspiration. On this historical and narrative-canonical criticisms agree, and the poignancy of many passages about his earthly life and ministry, including that of his youthful instruction of his elders in the Temple, turn on righteousness disregard of priestly credentialing and priestly business as usual. He is ‘high priest’—and uniquely and unsurpassably so—because of his person and his work as the mediator, intercessor, and covenant-renewer, who offers nothing less or other than *himself* as offering.

To exposit Christ’s priesthood under these three rubrics alone is, of course, a mere heuristic device. Just as his ‘priesthood’ itself is inseparable from and intertwined in the totality of his person and work, so too the various aspects of that priesthood are an interwoven whole. And, for Disciples, expressing the meaning of Christ’s priesthood as fully as possible is the Church’s on-going calling, a task always *in via* in the Church’s praying, preaching, teaching, and manifold ministries. It is desirable as well as necessary to try to formulate such matters in

documents of so many words. The outcomes, however, are by their very nature earthen vessels.

Disciples join in affirming, as in the case of BEM §17, that “Jesus Christ is the unique priest of the new covenant. Christ’s life was given as a sacrifice for all.” For us, the linkage of covenant and sacrifice for sins is important, as is the unique, once-for-all character of his covenantal self-offering. It is *this* Jesus Christ, none other, whom Disciples acknowledge in making the “good confession” of faith, accepting Jesus as the Christ, Son of the Living God, Lord and Savior. And it is *this* person and work we affirm as a primary meaning of baptism, incorporation into his body by being ‘buried with him by baptism into death , so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Rom. 6.4-5).<sup>7</sup>

Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice for sins (cf. Heb. 14) is ineluctably bound up in confessing him “the Christ, Son of the Living God, Lord, and Savior. It is a core meaning of baptism— ‘for the remission of sins’, as frontier evangelist Walter Scott and other pioneering Disciples accented).The life-sacrifice of his death is for Disciples central to the Lord’s Supper, the observance of which is central to our corporate worship each Sunday and often other times.

To BEM’s very brief affirmation, at least a few further remarks of clarification and amplification would seem to Disciples appropriate. The crucified



one whose life was given as a sacrifice for all is the risen Lord. His sacrifice was indeed an event in human history, but it is not strictly speaking bygone. He lives as the crucified Lord who continually, eternally, offers himself as mediator between God and humanity and as intercessor pleading on behalf of sinners and whole of creation.

The ‘priestly acts’ of the crucified Lord’s sacrificial offering, mediation, and intercession belong to the whole of his life. They go together with his ‘coming into the world’—his sending by the Father and his incarnation: “. . . Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness; and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2.5-8). As Emmanuel (“God with us”), he is the mediator who brings God’s out-reaching love to the world. And in so doing he is also for humanity the exemplification of perfect obedience to God and the “light” by which to “see” God—cf. esp. John 12.45, ‘And whoever sees me sees him who sent me’.<sup>8</sup>

His intercessions are poured out in his own prayer life, including “the Lord’s Prayer” as well as the Johannine “high priestly prayer.” Much else too that he says and does during his earthly ministry is intercessory—his healings, his words of comfort, blessing, and hope, his openness, kindnesses, and loving care toward

others, even those who were “the least” or despised in the eyes of the world. By his rebukes of evil-doers and callous, self-righteous power elites and in his frequent laments, he *intercedes* by interrupting and challenging the march of oppression and injustice with pleas for the love of God and neighbor.

Disciples seek to take note, then, of the wide range and multifaceted character of Christ’s priesthood. Our convictions on the matter run deep and wide. By the same token, it is also noteworthy that although the typical works of typical priests are in certain way applicable to Christ, and illuminative of him, his priesthood is in many respects conspicuously atypical. He serves mainly in the world, even while ‘lifted up’ on Golgotha. And his salvific services are always for the world and for others, including those too lowly or too defiled to merit priestly attention. His is a truly servant priesthood.

### Christ’s Priesthood in the Church and its Ministry

Disciples understand the Church to be integral to God’s economy of salvation. Alexander Campbell and other of our early leaders often expressed this conviction by correlating the biblical image of the Church as “citizens of the kingdom” with the institution of a community of communities as constitutional monarchy which assures the freedom, dignity, peace, justice, and well-being of all belonging to it.<sup>9</sup>

Disciples today uplift in their accounts of the Church other clusters of biblical images. Prominent among them are the Church as the people of God, as the body of Christ, and as the community (*communio*) of the Holy Spirit. By such means we reaffirm our historic understanding that the Church of Jesus Christ is of God's creation through the power of the Holy Spirit, called into being and sustained in order to witness to the gospel by its words, deeds, and very life.

Also of enduring importance to Disciples in this context is the image of the Church in Peter 2:9-10, a passage complementary to others from Scriptures. Here is found a powerful attestation of the priestly character of the Church: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. From this text particularly (although not it alone), Disciples affirm that the Church is a corporate priesthood. We routinely express this conviction, as do many heirs of the Protestant Reformation, in terms of "the priesthood of all believers."

In making this affirmation Disciples seek to maintain, in contrast to rampant misunderstandings of "the priesthood of all" as a spiritual individualism, that believers are "priests" not in and of themselves but *for one another and others*, precisely because they are participants in one, common, corporate priesthood derived from that of Jesus Christ, their high priest. They are subject to his

authority. And it is because of *his* mediation between and God and humanity, ceaseless intercession, and once-for-all sacrifice that believers in him offer their living sacrifice, ‘holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship’ (cf. Rom. 12.1).

These self-sacrificial, priestly offerings of the Church that are acceptable to God are, for Disciples, not equal to those of Christ or in addition to them. It is he alone, not any of his followers, who is Lord and Savior. The common priesthood of the Church, however, is the continuation of his ministry; for this very reason it is a multifaceted servant ministry in and for the world, a calling to be pursued among the peoples of the world and dedicated to love of God and neighbor. The *Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* refers to this corporately shared ministry as the Church’s “mission of witness and service,” though a wide variety of other terms, the “Church’s God-given calling” among them,” are in common use.

The nature and quality of the sharing constitutive of this corporate ministry are of distinct historic and current concern to Disciples. The message of Paul, and the echoes of it elsewhere in the New Testament, has shaped with special force our convictions regarding the unity and diversity of believers in communion with Christ and one another. His symbolism, organic rather than mechanical, of one living body comprised of many, diverse members, each and all necessary for the whole and making differing yet vital contributions for proper functioning. The

body is animated by one Spirit, who empowers individual members for their diverse services.

The canonical force of such biblical accounts of the Church as the body of Christ, along with many others, commend an affirmation that this body is “the mystical body of Christ” and a “spiritual unity of many members,” including the faithful, God’s saints, throughout the ages. Even so, the Church is truly as well a “visible body, a community of communities, a people each and all *simul justus et peccator*, and engaged in continuing Christ’s servant ministry in the world.

Therefore, for Disciples, the visible forms and the visible quality of *interrelationship* within the community are among the Church’s essential marks. (It is for this reason, I might add, that in ecumenical settings Disciples so often demur when it is said that a ‘spiritual unity’ alone suffices and urge, instead, continuing toward ‘visible unity’.)

This interrelationship is, supremely, that of *love* for one another. As such it is characterized too by the equality, interdependence, complementarity, and mutual accountability of its many, diverse members joined by the Spirit and their varied services empowered by the Spirit.

These affirmations hold for the entirety of the Church’s mission to continue the servant ministry of Christ, including the ‘priestly’ aspects of this ministry. These are mediatorial, intercessory, and self-giving services which the Church

offers in Christ's name. Reaching out with the gospel to needy, sinful humans and making known to them 'the way, the truth, and life' are among the means by which the Church serves as mediator between God and the world. Praying, speaking out, and acting so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven are among those by which the Church makes intercession. Words and deeds of compassion, justice, reconciliation, and peacemaking— though it may even be at great risk or cost, as the Church's martyrs remind us—are among the ways the Church participates in Christ's priestly, self-sacrificial ministry.

The Church shares in the priesthood of Christ in communal worship as well. Indeed, for Disciples the 'priestly' dimension of its total life and mission of the Church comes into special focus in celebrating the Eucharistic in Sunday corporate worship. On this matter William Robinson, I think, has expressed the Disciples understanding more eloquently than perhaps anyone else: “. . . the chief service on every Lord's Day is the Lord's Supper; and in such services the Lord's Table is centrally placed. It is in this service more than in any other than the Church, as a royal priesthood, offers worship to God through the great High Priest her Lord.”<sup>10</sup>

In a subsequent passage, Robinson further clarifies several connections between Christ's priesthood and that of the Church in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

The whole Church being a priestly body, it is its duty and privilege to offer *spiritual sacrifices*. We come not only to receive grace from God, but to

*offer* worship to Him, through the merits of our Lord's sacrifice, which at this service we plead. And so this service is an offering by the royal priesthood of worship, the fruits of our lips, of ourselves, our bodies, souls, and substance, which is a reasonable and lively sacrifice. This is acceptable through His intercession and sacrifice upon which we spiritually feed."<sup>11</sup>

Drawing these themes together, the Church, according to Disciples, continues the priestly servant ministry of Jesus Christ by making the gospel known in and through the totality of life. The living out of its mission of witness and service in authentic faithfulness to Christ is a visible sign and instrument of God's grace. In light of these affirmations, Disciples recognize the appropriateness of speaking of the 'sacramentality' of the Church," and we welcome opportunities for on-going ecumenical exploration of the ecclesial realities to which that phrase points.

The core affirmations of this account of Christ's priesthood and that of the Church as a corporate body establish the framework within which Disciples understand the nature and purpose of ordained ministry. Within this framework, however, the ecclesial communities of Disciples in various lands, some in ecumenically uniting or united bodies, vary with respect to their formal accounts of ordination and the forms or offices of ordained ministry. For this reason, and for brevity's sake, I will limit my remarks to few, focused on the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).<sup>12</sup>

With BEM §17, Disciples affirm that ordained ministry is related to the priesthood of Christ and of the whole Church. Throughout our history we have held that the life and mission of the Church require members of the body who are qualified for and distinctly entrusted with ministerial responsibility that is ‘representative’ in character. By this designation, we mean that they pursue a calling to represent to the Church and to the world *the Church’s identity in Jesus Christ*. God, we believe, has never left the Church without persons, women and men, who are endowed by gifts of the Spirit and exhibit the personal attributes for undertaking representative ministry. Acknowledgement of Church appointment to this trust as well as of the individual’s acceptance of it is made by the public ceremony of ordination with the laying on of hands and prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

Ordained ministers share with other members of the body the whole servant ministry of the Church. Because their ministry is representative in character, they are authorized for services in, with, and for the Church. Chief among these are preaching and other leadership acts in corporate worship, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and community devotions, teaching and nurture in the faith, visitation and a variety of services of congregational support and care, administrative and other tasks of guidance and oversight. As representative ministers, they undertake their calling under mandate to remind brothers and sisters in Christ that we share, each



and all, in Christ's servant ministry. In so doing they seek in every way to assist, encourage, guide, support, and equip the body for this ministry.

For Disciples, then, ordained, viz., representative, ministry is a constitutive feature of the Church. It is indispensable for the upbuilding of the body and for equipping its many members for their mission of witness and service. It is to be conformed to Christ's servant ministry, and exercised accordingly. This means, among other things, that representative ministry carries distinct responsibility to maintain and nurture the *unity in faithfulness* of the Church's manifold ministries, and with it their equality, interdependence, complementarity, and mutual accountability. In fulfilling this calling, ordained ministers are in their person and their work engaged in priestly services of mediation, intercessory, and self-sacrificial giving.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), Ministry, II.C.17, p.23). In the most recent Faith and Order work available to me, the revised wording is, I believe, §84: *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper, No. 128 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, n.d.), p. 23:

Though their participation in Christ, the unique priest of the new covenant (cf. Heb. 9:11), Christians are constituted a royal priesthood called to offer spiritual sacrifices (cf. 1 Pet 2) and indeed their very selves as a living sacrifice (cf. Rom 12:1) after the example of Jesus himself.

<sup>2</sup> My presentation tracks as closely as possible the work of the Commission on Theology of the Council on Christian Unity during its two-score years of research deliberation on Disciples ecclesiology. Its chief documents are collected in Paul A. Crow and James O. Duke, eds. *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking To Be Truly Church Today* (St. Louis: Published for the Council on Christian Unity by Christian Board of Publication, 1998). The Commission

<sup>3</sup> Ronald E. Osborn, *In Christ's Place: Christian Ministry in Today's World* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1967); William Robinson, *What the Churches of Christ Stand For: The Origin, Growth, and Message of a Nineteenth Century Religious Movement* (Birmingham: The Berean Press, 1946) and the *Biblical Doctrine of the Church* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1947). Osborn specifically notes that his study was formulated in light of his work in the Faith and Order Conference in Montreal, 1963, and the Consultation on Church Union (COCU); Robinson, that major sections of his study on biblical ecclesiology were first developed a work for the Commission of the Edinburgh Conference, 1937.)

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

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

<sup>6</sup> In his systematics, Disciples theologian Joe R. Jones sets his discussion of Christ's priesthood within a revived prophet-priest-victor [king] schema. See A

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*Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), vol. 2, esp. pp. 473-474.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding Disciples theology and observance of Baptism, see esp., Clark M. Williamson, *Baptism: Embodiment of the Gospel--Disciples Baptismal Theology. The Nature of the Church*, Study Series 4. (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Joe Jones develops his account of Christ's death as sacrifice by insisting that it must be interpreted "in terms of *the inner-trinitarian life of God.*" This means, he explains:

The whole movement of the drama is founded in the free love of God to come to the rescue of sinful humanity. Godself is affected by this movement and transaction and therefore the situation of humanity before God is place in a new light and reality—God undertake the reconciliation of humanity to Godself. It is internal to the life of God to experience the domination of sin in human life and to face the powers of sin and evil in their intent to destroy life before God as a gift of God. This is the depth of "God's vulnerability to the powers of sin as they stalk human beings, and it is the almightiness of God's triumph and defeat of those powers." Ibid, p. 456.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (1835), chap. 14. The most illuminating, critical study of Campbell's "high church" ecclesiology is W. Clark Gilpin, "The Doctrine and Thought of Alexander Campbell and John W. Nevin" *Mid-Stream* 19,4 (October 1980): 417-27.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *What the Churches of Christ Stand For*, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 85-86. See also pastor-scholar and ecumenist Colbert Cartwright, *People of the Chalice: Disciples of Christ in Faith and Practice* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987), pp. 86-87:

For Disciples the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers stems more from their encounter with Christ at his table than from their call to discipleship at the time of baptism. They are, of course, called to discipleship at baptism and arise from the waters to follow Christ. But the imagery of priesthood comes from the royal priest who became the sacrificial lamb on Calvary in an act to engage all his followers in priestly

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work. The emblems of broken body and shed blood at the Lord's Table most vividly remind us of our one priesthood in Christ.

<sup>12</sup> On the history of understandings of the common, mutual ministry and that of the ordained, see the studies by, D. Newell Williams, "Historical Development of Ministry among Disciples," *Mid-Stream* 24,3 (July 1985): 293-315; and *Ministry Among Disciples: Past, Present, and Future*, The Nature of the Church, Study Series No. 3 (St. Louis: Council on Christian Unity by Christian Board of Publication, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., chaps. 4 and 7, in *Churches in Covenant Communion and The COCU Consensus: Combined Edited* (Princeton: Consultation on Church Union, 1989, rev. ed., 1995).