

How Disciples of Christ Implement John 17
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Disciples of Christ have been seeking to implement John 17 since Thomas Campbell published his Declaration and Address in 1809. Key to Campbell's proposal for implementing John 17 was the concept of apostolicity. The call to "take up things just as the Apostles left them" was at the heart of Thomas Campbell's Christian unity overture. By the middle of the twentieth century, many leading Disciples of Christ scholars had come to believe that there was something wrong with Campbell's proposal, not with the concept of apostolicity as instrumental to manifesting the unity of Christ's church, but with the way in which Campbell had defined apostolicity. No one stated the emerging view of Disciples scholars on this issue more clearly than Ronald E. Osborn, dean and professor of Church History at Christian Theological Seminary and later professor of Church History at the Claremont School of Theology. A participant in many ecumenical endeavors, Osborn was also a leader in the 1960s organization of Disciples regional and general ministries known as Restructure. His thinking on the issue of apostolicity is so critical to understanding contemporary Disciples of Christ efforts to implement John 17, that I have



chosen to quote at length sections of his "'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church;' The Continuing Witness of Disciples of Christ," published in 1963 in a volume edited by Osborn titled, *The Reformation of Tradition*. This volume was one of three volumes reporting the work of a Panel of Scholars that had been appointed in 1956 by two of the Disciples general ministries to "restudy the doctrines of Disciples of Christ justifying their conclusions on the basis of the best available scholarship."

Under the heading, *The Apostolic Church*, Osborn wrote "Apostolicity was an explicit ideal of Disciples from the outset . . . but the fatal definition which Thomas Campbell gave it was that of restorationism. While his intentions were catholic, in the interest of freedom and unity, his ideology proved in the long run to be sectarian because of a defective view of the Bible which he shared with many in his day and which he left as a legacy to trouble Disciples. It is most clearly stated in Proposition 4 (a proposition which we must now declare to be mistaken):

The New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.

Instead of the liberation which Thomas Campbell sought in this proposition, Disciples found in the restoration principle a source of legalism, frustration, and endless controversy. The trouble arose from a series of false assumptions . . .

1. The false assumption that the New Testament is a constitution for the church.

A comparison of 1 Corinthians (or any other book in the New Testament) with Leviticus, for example, will quickly reveal that the New Testament is not a constitution, nor does it contain one, in the sense of specific prescriptions for the order, worship, faith, and life of the church. As a compilation of occasional literature, the New Testament is silent on many such matters.

2. The false assumption that the practice of one church as recorded in the New Testament was universal throughout the early church. . . . It is now generally recognized by biblical scholars that patterns of church government, for example, varied considerably in differing geographical regions within apostolic times.

3. The false assumption that the practice of a given church was static and unchanging. . . . the New Testament reveals to us the life of the early Christian community across three generations . . . the period from the earliest books to the latest covers two generations, and . . .noticeable developments in doctrine and practice occurred during that period.

4. The false assumption that the New Testament gave shape to the church. The church was formed by the gospel as proclaimed by the apostles; the New Testament records scattered and unsystematic samplings of their preaching and their directives to the churches. But fidelity to the gospel rather than to deductions about ancient church organization should give shape to the church.

5. The false assumption that the history of the church after the apostolic age represented necessary corruption and decline, and that the nature of the church could be more truly understood by leaping over the centuries rather than going back through them . . .

6. The dubious - I am prepared to say, false - assumption that once the books of the New Testament had been completed the Holy Spirit ceased to guide the church except by these writings.

The church could no longer follow the first-century practice of facing a problem prayerfully and taking counsel in the light of its best understanding of the gospel. (Consider, e.g., the decision to admit Gentiles to the church.) From now on it was limited to the written word . . ."

Osborn continued: "The subsequent divisions within the movement are due not so much to the bad spirit of a people whose professions of unity must be regarded as hypocritical as they are to the ambiguity, confusion, and contradiction arising from the ill-starred attempt to make a constitution out of the New Testament . . . As an interpretation of apostolicity, restorationism is no longer tenable."

If restorationism was no longer tenable as an interpretation of apostolicity, was there a tenable interpretation of this concept? Osborn answered that there was, and that

Thomas Campbell had pointed toward that interpretation when he wrote that "nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion; but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them, in the word of God." Osborn continued that "The concept of the apostolic faith and order has much to commend it. For it suggests at once an emphasis on that which is essential to the life of the church as over against that which is peripheral or transitory."

But what is the apostolic faith? Osborn answered: "The apostolic faith was that utter trust in God resulting from the understanding of his saving deeds wrought through Jesus of Nazareth, whom the apostles gladly confessed as Son of God, Savior, and Lord. Such faith indicates primarily a matter of relationship, but it is a special type of relationship with a unique Reality -- namely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence any discussion of apostolic faith must take into account the essential content of the gospel of God, the whole-souled acceptance of which makes possible that relationship of trust in him which is biblical faith. At their best, Disciples contended for apostolic faith in this sense, as over against the highly intellectualized dogmatic formulations which under the influence of Greek philosophy and of eighteenth-century rationalism the church had come to regard as the sole authentic expressions of the faith." Disciples, he asserted, may "still regard as sound the emphasis on apostolic faith."

And, what of the apostolic order? Osborn answers, "Order refers to those forms of governance and procedure which are at any time considered essential in the life of the church, and embraces such concerns as ministry, sacraments, liturgy, and confessions of faith. The original order of the church (meaning that established by the end of the apostolic period) must by definition have contained all that was essential to its life." He continues, "The church is therefore under obligation to bring a sympathetic and intelligent understanding to the forms of the apostolic church, both to determine what in them was historically conditioned and therefore transitory (footwashing, for example) and also to discern what bore witness to the gospel and how it did so . . . we must be careful neither to insist on elements which the apostolic church did not require nor to overlook the concerns to which it gave attention through its developing patterns of church order."

Osborn comments on four elements of what he understands to be the original order of the apostolic church.

First, ministry: "Careful study of the church's ministry in the apostolic age reveals the ministry of reconciliation borne by the whole people of God, the royal priesthood, and a specialized ministry . . . recognized by the church as qualified and set apart for service. Such a study also reveals that uniformity of orders did not characterize the New Testament ministry, but that the type and duty of officers varied with the needs."

Regarding baptism, he admonishes: "the New Testament attitude toward the sacraments is one of gratitude for these means of grace, not of binding legalism concerning the manner of administration."

As for communion, he posits: "Disciples have rightly understood that the worship of the church is essentially kerygmatic, properly characterized by both word and sacrament, each bearing witness to and mediating the gospel . . ."

Finally, as regards confessions of faith, he declares: "The confessions found in the New Testament are joyful outpourings of whole-souled devotion to Jesus Christ as the Revealer of God, not hair-splitting definitions of dogma."

Osborn concludes: "To contend for the original faith and order . . . guards against declaring essential for the church's life doctrines or orders unknown to the apostles. Disciples may confidently affirm this conception of apostolicity."

The understanding of apostolicity so clearly expressed by Osborn has informed contemporary Disciples efforts to implement John 17. Rather than asserting that the New Testament is a perfect or complete constitution for the worship, discipline and government of the church, the adoption of which will unite the church, contemporary Disciples have looked for evidence of the apostolic order-defined in the ways that Osborn outlines-in other churches. Where Disciples have seen the marks of the apostolic order, such as ministry, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and confession of Christ, they have sought to further the manifestation of the unity of Christ's one body by relationships of different sorts. These contemporary efforts to witness to and further the oneness of Christ's church can be organized under three headings:

Church Union Efforts - Disciples are members of Churches Uniting in Christ (a multi-denomination fellowship of churches that have formally recognized each other's members and ministries) and the Disciples-United Church of Christ Ecumenical Partnership by which Disciples and the United Church of Christ have fully united their overseas ministries.

Dialogues - Disciples have participated in dialogues with the Roman Catholics, the Baptist Alliance, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Disciples are also members of a now ten year old Stone-Campbell Dialogue, which aims at greater understanding and mutual appreciation among the streams of our Stone-Campbell Movement.

Councils of Churches - Disciples are members of the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA; and the Canadian Council of Churches. Disciples are also participants in a new organization called Christian Churches Together. Both the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and Christian Churches Together are currently headed by ordained ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

In these different ways, contemporary Disciples of Christ seek to implement John 17.