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Atlanta Declaration of Convictions and Concerns, with Commentary by the Atlanta Progress Committee

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ATLANTA DECLARATION of Convictions and Concerns

with COMMENTARY Authorized by the Atlanta Progress Committee

THE ATLANTA DECLARATION OF MAY 4, 1967

We, motivated by the belief that these are times of extraordinary opportunity for spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, meet today in Atlanta, Georgia, to discuss our concern that the Provisional Design proposed by the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure falls far short of measuring up to the opportunity. We have cooperated for many years through the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ).

Many hours of fruitful discussion in an atmosphere of spiritual uplift and inspiration have revealed a unanimity which has been astonishing to us. Briefly stated, we sense a profound need to voice a stronger witness to the New Testament Church in the dialogue of our time, and we are concerned that the Provisional Design fails so to witness.

We express first our convictions.

1. The Scriptures are authoritative for the continuing experience of the church.

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We represent no other organization of any kind. We are a group of cooperative Christians, concerned about the Brotherhood, who have worked through the International Convention for many years. This material is all in the public domain. We have deliberately refrained from copyrighting any of our literature. Permission to reprint is neither given nor refused to anyone.

2. Those who desire to be obedient to Christ are under compulsion to cooperate with others who also love Christ.
3. The historic stream in which we have been nurtured has a plea which is relevant to the needs of our modern world.
4. Every individual is under compulsion to bear witness in love and humility to his understanding of the truth.

We are deeply concerned about much in the Provisional Design for Restructure in these areas:

1. The basis of voluntary cooperation in which we have worked up until the proposed Restructure is being replaced by an authoritarian, connectional system which may endanger our freedom in Christ.
2. The complex nature of what has been presented in the Provisional Design requires us to request that no final action be taken on this at the St. Louis convention.
3. The effect of the present Provisional Design will be, in our opinion, to exclude many who have been cooperative in the past.

We find that we are of one mind in the belief that an institutional and organizational unity does not make Christ's followers "one." Instead, we would declare that it is "oneness in faith and belief" that glorifies Him.

Our concerns have led us to the unanimous conclusion that action must be taken to persuade Agency leaders to change their course. We wish to convey to the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure, and others, our unanimous belief that the whole basis of the Design must be changed so that any restructure will affect only the agencies that need restructuring, leaving local congregations and basic individual responsibility unrestricted.

We propose to implement our voice and our concerns in this way in the development of further Declarations and in additional activities through a Progress Group to be appointed from our number.

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A COMMENTARY ON THE ATLANTA DECLARATION

On May 3 and 4, 1967, a group of devoted Brotherhood ministers and laymen met in Atlanta, Georgia, to consider some of the issues now confronting our congregations as the result of an insistent proposal to "restructure" the Brotherhood. We originated from nearly all sections of America, some representing leadership of depth and compass in the Brotherhood. While we admittedly came from a variety of theological contexts within our Movement, no man there could be accused of irresponsibility towards our cooperative Brotherhood life and work.

As we met, we discovered a unity of Spirit and faith that we had no right to expect. We were one in the Presence of Christ as we had seldom known it; and as we experienced this unity in our Lord, we became aware that we also shared a common ministry of concern for our Brotherhood, its mission and message.

We hope to share our unity and our ministry of concern with our brothers.

Our responsibility lies deep within our commitment to the Brotherhood of Christian Churches, our vocation of witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in a changing and disordered world, and our evangelistic devotion to a new future for mankind in the Kingdom of God, taking our imperatives from the Biblical testimony that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself." (2 Corinthians 5: 19)

We are of one mind and one belief that the Christian faith rests upon the Word of God in Jesus Christ, as that Word is testified to in the Bible, and it rests upon nothing else.

We recognize with renewed fervor that our responsibility has been given unique powers in the living history and the free traditions of the Restoration Movement. This history, combining as it does faith and freedom, unity and truth, offers us a strong plea for the Christian gospel. Our free traditions, unguarded by bishop or creed and judged only by the Word of God, offer us the spiritual resources for the maintenance

of a voluntary, free-consent cooperative Brotherhood whose fellowship lies close to the intention of Jesus and whose structure reflects the original life of the New Testament church.

We further affirm that free men in free congregations shall themselves provide that leadership and love which is required for an ever-widening and more inclusive fellowship of Christian believers, wherever found.

A CLEAR ISSUE OF FAITH

As we bring these fundamental commitments to bear upon our study of the Provisional Design, we discover at once a basic issue. We are reminded with special urgency that in the Christian faith any organizational proposal is itself a statement of faith; it is poised on a doctrinal commitment. It qualifies and expresses the Christian faith itself in the area of life and work.

WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE PROPOSAL TO RESTRUCTURE THE BROTHERHOOD IS THE ISSUE WHETHER THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS A FREE, INCLUSIVE, EVANGELISTIC, WITNESSING FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIAN BELIEVERS, IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OTHER THROUGH THEIR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS CHRIST, FACING EACH OTHER RESPONSIBLY IN FREE CONGREGATIONS, THE STRUCTURE OF WHOSE FAITH IS BIBLICALLY GIVEN: OR, WHETHER THE CHRISTIAN FAITH CAN BE CONSTITUTED AS *THE* CHRISTIAN CHURCH BY THE MAJORITY DECISION OF A GROUP OF DELEGATES WHO MAY ATTEND A PARTICULAR CONVENTION IN A PARTICULAR YEAR, IMPOSING THEIR DECISION UPON HUNDREDS OF CONGREGATIONS WHO MAY NOT EVEN SEND DELEGATES TO THE CONVENTION, THEREBY ERECTING A SYSTEM OF AUTHORITATIVE CONNECTIONS EXTENDING DOWNWARDS FROM THE PRESIDENT AND THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL THROUGH THE GENERAL COUNCIL AND GEN-

ERAL ASSEMBLY TO THE REGIONS, CONGREGATIONS, AND MINISTERS.

On one side of this issue lies the high tradition of a free fellowship of persons and congregations based upon the Biblical testimony that "the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3: 17) Throughout its history this fellowship of brothers in the Christian faith has made a profound witness to the Christian faith as a free, personal response to the Word of God, without mediation of bishop, creed or churchly order.

On the other side of this issue lies an emerging society claiming powers to constitute *the* Christian Church, whose process of decision making is placed in the hands of a few at the "top," who are chiefly, if not entirely, responsible to each other. Thus, it appears, that Restructure is the process of converting a free fellowship or Brotherhood of Christian believers in free congregations into *the* Christian Church, whose structure constitutes both authority and control by "superior" manifestations of the Christian Church over "inferior" manifestations of the Christian life and work. Among these "inferior" manifestations are the regions, the congregations, and the ministers other than the President of *the* Christian Church.

This issue becomes quite clear when we examine the claim often made by advocates of Restructure that the Design best expresses the "wholeness of the church." On the contrary, the restructured Christian Church separates Christian from Christian on the basis of separate and specific functional manifestations. Restructure explicitly denies that regions or congregations can of themselves express the "wholeness of the church." This plainly leaves only the "international" manifestation of *the* Christian Church to constitute the "wholeness of the church."

Under Restructure the ministry of every man other than that of the President of *the* Christian Church would merely be an extension of the ministry of the President of the Christian Church. No man would then have a ministry he could call his own.

SOME AFFIRMATIONS

We who have signed the Atlanta Declaration affirm that only Jesus Christ can constitute the Christian Church, and we deny that any convention can of its own powers constitute *the* Christian Church by a majority vote. We affirm that the Christian Church is Biblically given in its testimony to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

We affirm that only Jesus Christ Himself can symbolize the presence of the Christian Church. We deny that any man is either good enough or wise enough to preside over the ministry of the whole church in Christ's stead. We affirm that every minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, equally with his brothers, is responsible for the pastoral care and nurture of the Christian faith and especially in the immediate challenge and context of his own mission, message, and ministry, derivable only from Christ Himself.

We affirm that persons and congregations, Biblically considered, shall continue to bear an undelegatable duty to consider their Christian responsibility to heed the Word of God in the context of their own mission and ministry without dictation, without legislation, and without "certification" from some "superior" manifestation of the Christian Church. Thus, we deny that the wholeness of the Christian faith can best be manifested by "superior" and "inferior" manifestations of the life and work of the church. We affirm that the wholeness of the Christian faith is expressed only in the Word of God and nowhere else.

The wholeness of the Christian Church is realized only in the Body of Christ, and it is the Presence of Christ Himself which determines whether any body is indeed the Body of Christ, not the presence of a President.

THUS, THESE AFFIRMATIONS AND THESE DENIALS CONSTITUTE A PERSPECTIVE CLOSER TO THE BIBLICAL THAN TO THE "RESTRUCTURE" POINT OF VIEW. WE MUST THEN DENY THAT THE PROVISIONAL DESIGN TO RESTRUCTURE THE BROTHERHOOD OF CHRISTIAN

CHURCHES HAS EITHER VALIDITY OR EFFICACY TO REPRESENT EITHER THE HISTORY OR THE TRADITIONS OR THE PLEA OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES. *IT MUST BE DENIED.*

SOME CLAIMS FOR RESTRUCTURE ARE ANSWERED

The claim is often made by advocates of Restructure that the Design guarantees a greater representative participation by the congregations in the decision-making process. In the first place, this claim assumes too readily that a delegate convention will itself guarantee more representatives from a wider area. It assumes that more, not less, congregations will "send" delegates. This claim has yet to be proved. But more seriously, the structure of the Design itself explicitly denies a greater representative participation by congregations in the decision making process. Anyone who reads the Design can see this fact clearly.

Presently, the Recommendations Committee of the International Convention is formed by the congregations gathered in State Conventions electing their representatives and alternates. Thus, the congregations control the membership of the Recommendations Committee of the International Convention. The Design proposes that the congregations be deprived of making this selection. The Design proposes to give to the General Council (two levels above the congregations in their State Conventions) and the President of the Christian Church the power to "receive, review, and refer with appropriate recommendations all items of business presented to the General Assembly" (Paragraph 19, A PROVISIONAL DESIGN). Additionally, the Design proposes to give to the General Board the power to nominate to itself and elect to itself the members of the Reference and Counsel Committee, "which shall serve as the business committee during the General Assembly (Paragraph 14) and to decide whether such items (proposed as emergency) should go to the General Assembly and if so, make appropriate recommendations as to their disposition." (Paragraph 16)

Discerning people who attend conventions become aware that thought-control often is exercised by the inclusion or exclusion of items in successive programs. Often, when a topic is left unmentioned, it is forgotten. Committees which are now being nominated and elected by representatives of the congregations directly will be removed from their power to vote.

Such controls as we have described directly from the Provisional Design itself are hardly to be considered an increase in the significant representative power of the congregations to conduct their own business. Indeed, the congregations become voiceless either to accept or reject these important committees.

Notice should also be taken of the fact that the nomination of the President of *the* Christian Church is far removed from the delegates of the congregations in the General Assembly. The president is nominated by the Administrative Committee (two levels above the General Assembly), and it is clear that only one slate of officers will be nominated. The General Assembly has no right to nominate its President from the floor.

There are many, many other concerns about the Provisional Design. Responsible lawyers from several parts of the country have not agreed whether the act of sending delegations from the congregations to a restructured Christian Church assembly might have legal consequences in relationship to the encumbrance of the properties of such congregations. It is imperative that those proposing Restructure clarify this point at once.

There could be a possibility that a court of law would rule that local church properties are encumbered by agreeing that "we are *joined* to one another," "we *commit* ourselves to one another in adopting this Provisional Design for the Christian Church," and especially in acknowledging that a "covental relationship . . . sustains the Christian Church." "Covenant" is an old legal word meaning contract, with strong ties of lawful obligation; it is not only a theological expression. The sending by us of elected voting representatives or observers to the St. Louis convention is not intended as a show of acquiescence in the foregoing

quoted portions of the Provisional Design, nor do we agree to be bound by action at such International Convention. While the Design says that *all* churches listed in the Yearbook are *de facto* involved by that listing even when voting against an *action* in a covenantal manner, we refuse to accept this proposition as binding in the absence of congregational action.

The right of the congregation to call its own minister is profoundly involved in the Design's proposal to "certify" ministers. Such certification surely determines which ministers may be considered and those who may not. In addition, the policy making power of the "international" manifestation in regard to the ministry and the powers of the office of President qualify and limit the freedom of the local minister in his congregation.

We are deeply concerned that prior to any vote to constitute *the* Christian Church pressures are being exerted to enforce the adoption of the Provisional Design. We are equally concerned that these pressures added to the radical nature of the Design itself have created deep differences in our congregations, both sectionally and within local congregations. **THE CHARGE CAN NO LONGER BE IGNORED THAT THE DESIGN IS CREATING A DEEP DIVISION IN OUR BROTHERHOOD.**

We therefore call upon the leadership of our Brotherhood to provide leadership and love to *all* our congregations, not merely those who may agree to go along with Restructure.

It is time for candor in recognizing that Restructure is intimately related to the efforts of some to carry our Brotherhood into the proposed Church Union. At the Dallas convention a letter from George Beazley, Executive Secretary of the Council on Christian Unity, was read into the record. It reads, "If you want to hasten Church Union, push Restructure, because that way the local congregations will not have to vote on union. Otherwise, we would have to vote congregation by congregation on a proposed union." And it should be remembered that all area and national properties of *the* Christian Church could be taken over by the Church Union by a majority vote of the General Assembly.

Alarming also is the attempt to discard any consensus of our people as the basis for Brotherhood action. Again, Mr. Beazley writes, "We are in the stage of trying to find some way in which a church truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed can be constituted. At the present state, opinions of people, whether conservative or liberal, are beside the point. You cannot establish such a church simply by consensus."

The Design is furthermore dominated by a shortened logic. The basic appeal of the Restructure proposal is to a sense of *the* church, an entity "more than local." But why stop with its *national* expression? It is to a *world* assembly of the Brotherhood that all final appeals should be made by its own logic. It is not quite honest to refer to the General Assembly, the General Council, the Executive Council and the President as the "international" manifestation of the Christian Church when it is really only the United States and Canada. Fairness requires that any declaration of belief or commitment be released as that of only one area of the Christian Churches, that of North America. Unless such positions could be adopted by the World Convention of the Christian Churches they should be issued with proper modesty.

WE ARE HEAVILY CONSCIOUS THAT MANY MINISTERS AND CONGREGATIONS ARE CRYING OUT FOR LEADERSHIP ON SOME OTHER BASIS THAN THAT OF RESTRUCTURE.

A young minister recently called his former seminary teacher with a cry for help. He said, "My board of elders has just instructed me to draw up a resolution rejecting Restructure in its entirety. Now, what is going to happen to my congregation and to my ministry? Where shall we go?"

IF THE PRESENT "OFFICIAL" LEADERSHIP OF OUR BROTHERHOOD HAS DISCARDED ITS OBLIGATION TO GIVE CARE AND CONCERN TO OUR ENTIRE BROTHERHOOD, IF THEY HAVE FORGOTTEN OUR PLEA FOR THE CHRISTIAN FAITH WITH ITS BIBLICAL IMPERATIVES, THEN IT IS TIME THAT OTHER SHEPHERDS BE FOUND.

A PLEA AND PRAYER FOR CONCILIATION

While we are firm in calling not only for a delay to the present Restructure Proposal, but an end to it, we seek harmony and understanding with all in our Brotherhood. We are conscious that some modification of our past practices among our agencies and institutions may be called for, but we are firm that no "overhead organization" restructure our congregations and ministers.

We pray and believe that a free people can meet a test of their freedom without fear, so long as they remain firm, and we pray for the unity and Brotherhood of our congregations under Christ alone.

WE SHALL REMAIN ONE ONLY AS WE REMAIN FREE
IN THE SPIRIT AND TRUTH OF JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.

Authorized by Progress Committee:

George C. Stuart, Chairman

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Additional copies of this document may be obtained, free of charge, by writing Dr. R. W. Burns, 1580 Peachtree Street, N. W., Atlanta, Georgia, 30309. Any comments or inquiries should likewise be addressed to Dr. Burns.

I have read the Atlanta Declaration of Convictions and Concerns with Commentary and desire to be included as an endorser.

My name may be published

My name may not be published

Signature _____

Address _____

Position in Church _____

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