

Ordination Paper

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**To the Church and Ministry Commission
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United Church of Christ**

Part 1 – Theological Perspective

Christ and Incarnation

Any meaningful conversation about my theology begins in the person of Christ, who is both the focus and embodiment of theology. As the Word – the eternal *logos* or wisdom made flesh in the world – all Christian theology is properly located in the person and the life of Jesus Christ.

I recognize that claiming Christ as the center of theology does not in any way provide a clear or universal theological foundation. The question remains: if one takes Christ as the starting point, what part of Christ’s life is the entry point for building a theological perspective? I suspect there are many good places to begin – teachings, cross, Resurrection, Ascension – but for me, the starting point of all theology begins in Incarnation. My life and theology changed completely when I wrapped my mind around this earth-changing reality.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹ With this statement, John turns over human and world history – God breaks into the world and walks among us. Of course, I would not go so far as to say that God had not been involved with the world until the Incarnation. The Old Testament bears witness to God’s continual presence in the world, the world’s events, and God’s people. Yet in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, a new pattern of engaging with God and one another has been opened. I am committed to the orthodox formula that Christ is fully God and fully human. In other words, the record of Christ’s life is entirely the actions and the teachings of God, just as they are entirely the actions and the life of a human person.

Some may question why I start with Incarnation, as opposed to the cross or the Resurrection. My conviction is that neither of these events can be understood without a fundamental understanding of Christ’s ontology given in the Incarnation. Without an incarnational understanding, the cross struggles to be anything more than a martyr’s death, powerful in its symbolism but ultimately incapable of bringing about the kind of radical intervention that is needed for salvation. Because of Christ’s divinity, his death on the cross is capable of bringing about the forgiveness of sins. Because of Christ’s humanity, it is capable of being applied to us. In his death to sin, we too have died to sin, as Paul writes, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death...”² Incarnation provides the ontological

¹ John 1:14

² Romans 6:4a

underpinning that allows the cross to bring about the promised transformation in the life of the world.

The resurrection also takes its cues from the Incarnation as well. Certainly the story of the resurrection brings great hope to all who face death, destruction, and disappointment on a daily basis. But without an incarnate resurrection, I wonder about the ability for this story to effect real and lasting change in the life of the world. If Jesus is not divine, then his resurrection, even if truly bodily, is nothing more than the resurrection of Lazarus, a temporary resuscitation, a demonstration of power, but not of eternal hope. In the same way, the apostle Paul makes it clear that Jesus' resurrection is necessarily bodily, "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."³ To tweak an old saying, "What is not resurrected cannot be saved." In my thinking, it is vital that Christ's resurrection be bodily so that we can have confidence that this physical world will be saved, and that we as individuals will be saved entirely, body and spirit.

There remains one more, often forgotten, point of Christ's life that requires some reflection given the realities of the Incarnation – the Ascension. The Ascension provides the necessary and important counterbalance for the Nativity. The Nativity's grand theme is the descent of God to humanity. The Ascension is the anticipated ascent of humanity to God, encompassed by Athanasius' classic formulation, "God became man [sic] that man [sic] might become God."⁴ The Ascension links this physical reality to the spiritual reality that is to come. If the Nativity illustrates the fact that what happens in the physical world is just as spiritually weighty as what happens in heaven, then the Ascension proclaims that heaven will be just as physical and tangible as the world in which we inhabit now. One day, what is perfectly tangible and what is perfectly spiritual will be united once again, to the glory of God and the benefit of God's people.

The Church

If Christ's ontological being and his life have laid the foundation for salvation for the entire created order, physical and spiritual, then it must also lay down some pattern for us who desire to be in deep relationship with God and one another. It is this pattern that leads us into a proper understanding of what the Church is, what it values, and how it functions. It helps us to understand what it means to follow after Christ, providing us with a livable definition of discipleship. It helps us to understand the world and gives us guidance for healthy interaction with all of creation.

I believe in the Church. I believe Christ did as well. As I read the Scriptures and the early history of the Church, I detect a clear and unmistakable commitment on Christ's part to set up His Church, founded on the apostles, to take the local message of Christ to the world and bring the Kingdom to fruition in the world. In order for the Church to do that, it must also be one spiritually and physically.

I believe in the unequivocal spiritual unity of all who are in Jesus Christ. The book of Ephesians makes this crystal clear for me, "There is one body and one Spirit

³ 1 Corinthians 15:14

⁴ Athanasius

– just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”⁵ Regardless of the awful splintering of Christ’s body on the surface, we can and ought to claim a fundamental spiritual unity with all who are known by the name of “Christian.” However, if the truth were told, most people and most denominations do not debate this or have questions about it, particularly in mainline Protestant circles. Even Catholics would call Protestants “separated brethren,” pointing to their shared understanding of our spiritual unity in Christ.

Furthermore, I am committed to visible unity in the Church. I am convinced that Christ did not intend a divided, splintered Church. This is not in keeping with Christ’s ontology; a tangibly broken and spiritually unified Church does not derive from the perfect unity of Christ’s human and divine natures. I also do not believe that Christ “overlooks” a splintered Church because of the truth of a spiritual unity; a broken Church limits our ability to bring the gospel to our communities. As a UCC pastor, I also do not need to remind my own colleagues about Christ’s own prayer, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”⁶ To this end, I am committed to visible Church unity.

Of course, some branches or denominations of the Church practice and proclaim this better than others. I applaud the essential DNA of the United Church of Christ as a body that is also committed to spiritual and visible church unity, as four ecclesial bodies have been visibly one. Others would say that Catholicism or Orthodoxy may not practice unity very well, but they certainly proclaim visible unity and have in their own DNA a means of preserving that spiritual unity. Some might say to me at this point, “If that is your commitment, then why do you not worship and serve in a community with a better track record than Protestantism?” My response is that if I were to move denominations, to a “better” denomination, I would not by that move make any improvement in either my spiritual or physical unity. I would remain as spiritually unified and as tangibly separated as I was previously. My position as a pastor, therefore, is not to be a cheerleader for a particular denomination, as if one denomination were fundamentally “better” than another. Rather, acknowledging the brokenness that we all experience, I commit to a body, and serve within that body, while welcoming and proclaiming one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Church. I have found that this is a way that I can faithfully understand a unified and divided Church, while also providing a meaningful home for those who have been aversely affected by the harmful divisions in Christ’s very tangible body.

Word and Sacrament

It is through the Church, then, that Christ’s physical and spiritual realities are brought to bear on His Body. In my estimation, there are two primary and certain ways that God brings God’s truth to his people. This does not mean that there are

⁵ Ephesians 4:4-5

⁶ John 17

not multiple and myriad ways that God works and influences our lives; only that there are two places where we can be *sure* that God is present – Word and Sacrament. My convictions about these two pillars of Christian life are also informed by Christ's Incarnation.

It will surprise no one that Scripture has been at the heart of the fracturing of Christ's body. Theological perspectives, historical criticism, fundamentalism, literalism, and the like have all left deep gashes in the way we understand this primary tool of God in our lives. I do not suppose to have all the answers as to how to fix this. What I can share is how I have developed in my understanding of Scripture.

I grew up believing absolutely that the Bible is the Word of God – the words, written there, are the utterance of God for the people of God, good news for the world. I have never moved from this conviction that these words are indeed the inspired utterance of God for the people of God. However, as I grew in my faith I began to see how these words were often used as weapons rather than as comfort, division rather than healing, guilt rather than encouragement. Furthermore, I was exposed to a greater diversity of voices, genres, and historical realities through my studies in college and seminary. Of course, I knew some of these things, but I was able to expand and deepen that knowledge over my years of study. These two fundamental changes required some altering of my convictions. However, they needed to function inside my previous commitment to the words as the Word of God.

Again, it was John 1:14 that changed my perspective, "The Word became flesh." The Word, then, is not the Bible, but Christ. The Bible does not derive its authority from its own witness, but only from its witness to Christ. This shows the flaw in those who – some unknowingly – worship the Bible rather than the Christ of the Bible. Because Christ is to be worshipped alone, and because the Bible derives its authority from Christ, then my conviction is that the Bible is the Word of God only when it points to Christ. If it does not point to Christ, then it is not functioning as the Word and it loses its authority on matters of faith and life. Every word, then, has within it the capacity to point us to trust of Christ if we would allow Christ to speak through the text. If approached in this way, then the Bible becomes what we want it to be – comfort, healing, growth, encouragement – because that is what Christ is, and Christ is coming through the pages when we let him speak.

This also provides a helpful corrective to what I believe is the radical destabilization of the Scriptures by modern academic methods. Historical-critical reading of Scripture has unleashed a fountain of knowledge onto the Christian world unlike anything we have seen in generations. This knowledge is essential because Scripture is essential; the more we know concerning the context of these texts, the better we will be able to unpack a holistic faith from them. But far too often, historical-critical reading has been used to destabilize or undermine the faith in troubling ways. If strict fundamentalism is the triumph of the spiritual sense of Scripture over the physical, then strict historical-critical readings are the triumph of the physical nature of Scripture over the spiritual. It has neglected the spiritual and living nature of the texts and the work of Christ and Christ's Spirit in and through these words. What is needed is a full unity between the two.

Christ perfectly models this style of hermeneutics. From Christ, we read back into the Old Testament. Christ was well versed and deeply immersed in the world of the Old Testament; indeed, the Old Testament is the Bible of Jesus. From this we can take seriously the idea that Christians should know their Old Testament deeply. But there is also a hermeneutical principle here. Christ absolutely took the words seriously, “Not one jot or tittle will disappear from the law.”⁷ Here, he sounds like a raging fundamentalist. However, he also took passages and understood them as pointing to something greater than the words themselves; he saw them pointing to him, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”⁸ This is a very spiritualized reading of the Jonah text. Here, Jesus takes the words seriously, yet sees in them witnesses to Christ. The Emmaus Road text (Luke 24) also shows Christ's method of taking Moses and the prophets and orienting them so that they point to himself. As Christians, while respecting the Hebrew origin and nature of these texts, we are invited by our Lord to read these texts in a way that point forward to Christ.

In the same way, we can look forward from Christ to the New Testament. This, in so many ways, is the scourge of the modern church. So many people are accustomed to reading the New Testament as if it were an updated set of commandments. Rather, the New Testament was written out of a deep reflection on Christ. It was not written with America, or the megachurch, or modern political parties as its philosophical underpinning. If we read it without seeking Christ, we will miss its theological underpinnings and turn it into a weapon it was never intended to be. Rather, looking for Christ in its words, we can find life, and life more abundantly there. Philippians 2 is an excellent example of such deep reflection; the kenosis hymn leads Paul to say, “Therefore.” Because of deep reflection on the life of Christ, Paul commends his readers to live their lives in such a way. Furthermore, in Galatians 2, Paul takes the death and resurrection of Christ as the template for the life of faith, “I have been crucified with Christ. No longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me.” Here again, Paul’s reflection on Christ is the foundation upon which to read the New Testament and build a life of faith.

The other sure pillar upon which we base a relationship with Christ is the sacramental life. I recognize two sacraments – baptism (with confirmation) and Eucharist – though I am open to the idea that God can and does utilize other methods to interact with us (I would call them “sacramental” – having a sacramental nature, but lacking the certain promise of Christ’s presence). The sacraments bring the incarnational life of Christ into the life of the believer. In these simple, tangible elements – washing in water, eating of bread, drinking of wine – the cross of Christ is being re-presented to us and is made just as real to us and just as tangible to us as it was on that first Good Friday. It is the presence of the cross that makes these symbols so powerful and necessary for our growth in Christ and our salvation. If we would approach the cross and be sure of Christ’s saving presence, our first steps should be towards the font and the altar.

⁷ Matthew 5:18

⁸ Matthew 12:40

I take a covenantal view of baptism, which has been informed by the covenantal approach of Reformed theology. St. Paul writes, “that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?”⁹ Baptism, then, is fundamentally a participation in the death of Christ. It is the necessary death that precedes the resurrected life for the baptized.

However, I do not believe that baptism is salvific. In the book *Children of the Promise*, the author makes a compelling argument, rooted in classic Reformed theology, that just like circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism is an entry into the covenant people of God. This is why we can baptize infants gladly because, as our baptismal liturgy states, “The promises of God are not only to us, but to our children.” Baptism brings us into the community of faith where the faith that God instills at baptism can be grown, nurtured, and ultimately harvested. But the presence of the seed does not guarantee the ultimate vitality of the seed.

This is the purpose of confirmation. Confirmation helps us walk the delicate balance between law and gospel. Gospel says that salvation is God’s work; the law reminds us that we are active participants, as we read in Scripture, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”¹⁰ Confirmation takes that Christ-initiated action of the cross, given us in baptism, and allows us to grab hold of it for ourselves and make it our own. If baptism is God’s eternal and primary “yes” to us, then confirmation is our necessary “yes” back to God. This pattern of God’s “yes,” followed by our “yes” in obedience lays down the pattern of discipleship for a lifetime of faith. Again, Paul writes, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”¹¹

Alongside the Word of God, the Eucharist is the center of all Christian life, piety, and theology, because it is the cross most plainly re-presented to us in the body and blood of Jesus Christ – the very things of which our salvation is made. On this topic, I will gladly accept the label of a literalist, for I believe Christ was as well, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”¹² In the Eucharist, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is made flesh for us that we might become what we eat. I strongly resonate with the words of John Williamson Nevin, “[Our] participation is not simply in his spirit, but in his flesh also and blood. It is not figurative merely and moral, but real, substantial, and essential.”¹³

The ripple effects of the Eucharist in the life of the community and the believer are too numerous to mention. However, since this is the cross re-presented, we might use the cross as a template for understanding the dual axis on which the Eucharist works. First, the Eucharist undeniably unites us vertically to Christ, so that we internalize his death and anticipate his resurrection. It is the food

⁹ Romans 6:3

¹⁰ Philippians 2:12

¹¹ Romans 6:4

¹² John 6

¹³ Nevin, *the Mystical Presence*, pg. 54.

that strengthens us for discipleship, the manna that keeps us healthy for the journey in the wilderness of life. On the horizontal axis, it functions to unite and strengthen the community of faith. Because it is the cross of Christ re-presented and in which the community finds its identity, it stands to reason that the more we gather around this symbol the closer and tighter the community becomes. The strong and healthy Christian community will have the Eucharist at the very core of its life. This is why I have become a very vocal advocate of an intentionally sacramental local congregation. I believe that the Eucharist should be made available to the congregation every week. I don't believe everyone should receive every week, but it should be made available if you need it.

Worship

There are two more points I'd like to directly address related to my theological understandings. The first relates to worship. If we start from Christ, and Christ's ultimate and preeminent self-giving to us in Word and in Sacrament, then worship ought to be constructed in such a way that these two things are given privilege of place. Nothing should be done to obscure the rich gifts that God gives us in these two acts. Far too often, worship will cover up these gifts, thinking them not sufficient or marketable enough, and so we will cover them over with dramatic sermons, or music performances, or something of that ilk. Word and Sacrament are the realities around which we gather, and should at no point be moved from the center of worship.

The rest of worship is then simply a way to respond appropriately to the gifts of God. If God gives, then we receive, and analogous to our human relationships we receive in culturally appropriate ways. This is the role of liturgy. At its best liturgy leads us and teaches us how to receive the gifts of God appropriately. Confession, praying, singing, offerings – all of this is a means by which we learn to respond to God's primary activity. Just like the sacrament of baptism, God gives to us, and we respond to God, and worship becomes a never-ending cycle of gift giving from God to God's people. In this way, I am committed to good, thoughtful liturgy. Because we are entering realities that are much bigger than ourselves, we should not rest on our emotions or our intuitions about what God wants, but rather rest on the wisdom of the ages that has taught us how to respond to God excellently.

Yet even as committed as I am to liturgical worship, I am aware of the challenges that it presents in the modern day. It is no secret to anyone that follows religious life in America that church attendance is down, and that churches that have a strong tradition of liturgical worship are especially struggling. Some would even say that a commitment to liturgy is a commitment to a loss of relevance in the world. Liturgical language is the language of insiders, as well it should be. Unfortunately, as our nation becomes more diverse and less "churched," this language and style is becoming exclusive.

In my estimation, the strength of liturgical worship is in its ability to engage the head. It is a worship that must be thought – listening to the Word, discerning the body and blood, being aware of what we say in prayer. However, this makes a great many demands on the worshipper, and we should make no apologies for this as it makes for stronger disciples. Yet most of us do not choose to become strong in faith.

It is undeniably true that the churches that are successful in terms of attendance and energy are those for whom a very different model is at work – a model that thrives on the emotional element of faith. Consider the non-denominational churches that I admired as a kid. They were full of music, testimonies, videos, and personal interactions that allowed the worshipper to *feel* the faith more than they were asked to *think* the faith. This makes much fewer demands on the worshipper. Coupled with the emotional lift that the worshipper receives, it is little wonder that this style of worship is compelling to a postmodern era that thrives on emotions.

What we have in America, then, are two insufficient worship models. We have a liturgical worship model that engages the heads of a few, but often fails to engage the decision-making center of this generation, the heart. We also have a model that powerfully engages the heart, but often fails to engage the head, creating a shallow faith. The Church must develop a worship that engages the head and the heart and deepens my commitment to the faith while expanding my heart for God. I believe this is best done in this generation by acknowledging the primacy of the emotions and allowing our worship services to engage the emotions much more readily. Music is the primary (but not exclusive) vehicle for this. I have said to my musicians, “You must open the heart, so that the Word can get in.” Worship that opens the heart allows the mind to be engaged on a much deeper level and invites a much greater retention and commitment. The liturgical church that will be successful in this postmodern era will help people feel the faith as much as they know it.

Justice and Evangelism

The final piece of theological reflection I’d like to discuss is my approach to justice and evangelism, which I believe are deeply related issues. If God is indeed the creator of the universe, and has designed the universe with an order, then justice is seeking to align human behavior with the purposes of God in the world. This also takes its cue from Christ, fully divine and fully human. The Church, therefore, should be engaged in physically improving the lives of the people to which it is called – food, shelter, relationships, finances. All of this is the proper work of the Church because it is the proper work of Christ, who healed the sick, made the blind to see, and the lame to walk. In the model of Christ, it is also the way in which we engage people with the gospel. Engaging the felt needs of people opens the doors of the heart for people to be prepared to hear the gospel more clearly. The Church also has the obligation, then, to invite people into relationship with Christ, to evangelize as Christ instructed, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”¹⁴ In this way, we assist the world in becoming aligned with the purposes of God – justice in their daily lives so that they may live, and aligning the heart with Christ that they may live more abundantly.

Part II – The United Church of Christ

¹⁴ Matthew 28:19

When people ask me how a Southern Baptist kid ended up in the United Church of Christ, I often respond, "I didn't choose the UCC; the UCC chose me." I came to the United Church of Christ through a unique journey that I can only attribute to the work of the Holy Spirit. I was called to come and be the licensed pastor at Lazarus United Church of Christ in Lineboro, MD. After I was received into their fellowship, I began the process of figuring out this strange new world in which I found myself.

I found an excellent reflection of my core beliefs in the Preamble to the UCC Constitution. As I read through it, I not only found comfort that I could exist in this new church that was so far outside of my experience, but I also began to get excited about the role that this church could play in my neighborhood and in the world, and I was excited to see that reach extended because of the core convictions of the United Church of Christ.

From the Preamble, I believe the central commitment, the thing around which everything else in the UCC turns, is "Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior." In the UCC, our worldview starts with Jesus Christ, and it is from the vantage point of Christ that we take our understanding of God ("Son of God") and ourselves ("Savior"). This commits the UCC to a historical, orthodox Trinitarian conviction, and it is encompassing of my conviction as Christ as the *Logos*. Furthermore, it places us in line for Christ's love as we proclaim him as our Savior.

I also find in this statement a brief but powerful proclamation of the Church, "It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession." The UCC acknowledges the importance of the fellowship of all believers in Christ; it has a very wide lens for inclusion in the body of Christ. This was an important moment for me when I realized that I did not have to "become" UCC in any particular way, or that I needed to radically change in order to be acknowledged as a "true Christian" by the UCC. I shared their confession of Christ, which means the UCC had always seen me as a brother in Christ, and it also saw those whom I had grown up with and come to love as brothers and sisters as well.

Reflecting God's preeminent work, the Church is always at work, always moving, always growing. "It looks to the Word of God in Scripture" as the launching point of our understanding of Christ. I hear in that phrase the conviction that Scripture is the bedrock foundation for our reflection on Christ. I also see in this statement my conviction that it is only the Word if it proclaims the Word. However, if the UCC is rooted in the Word, it equally soars to new places because of "the presence and power of the Holy Spirit." The UCC is at its very best when it does these two things in a perpetual balance, because it is then that it finds its "creative and redemptive work" at its very best.

Here again, the work of the Church extends from the work of God. If God's work is rooted in the witness of Christ, then raised up through the Spirit's work, so should the Church be rooted and developing. The UCC unapologetically "claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers." The UCC is bound to that which has come before; we are built from what has been. There is a powerful confession here that the historic creeds have meaning and relevance for today's

Christians. For me, this means that the faithful Church will have the same trajectory as the historic Church, even if the expression and minutiae of it may change. This commitment leads to discipleship; "It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God." The substance of the Church remains the same – the historic Church. But each generation is charged to express this faith in a way that makes sense – culturally, evangelically, and contextually. In this way, the UCC invites the word "development" into the lexicon of the Church today. So we ask the question, "Is there a better way to express the truth of Christ? Is there a better way to communicate the Good News of Christ?" If so, we have a "responsibility" to do so. The Church remains historic while it is always contemporary.

Furthermore, three words stand out to me in this sentence: "reality," "honesty," and "purity." These provide a way of coloring the new and developing Church. First, worship should be "real" – not proclaiming a thought or an emotion, but the reality of the in-breaking Kingdom, brought to us in Jesus Christ in the Word and Sacraments. "Honesty" brings an emotional element. Our faith should include and be supported by a strong emotional component of commitment and dedication. We should be careful about allowing our emotions to guide our faith, for they are far too unpredictable for a firm foundation. But if we never engage our emotions in our faith, we will lack a certain zeal that the followers of Christ through all ages have demonstrated. According to the grace given us, we should show enthusiasm in our thoughts and in our expressions of faith. Finally, there is a moral component – "purity" matters. The UCC has expressed a commitment to ridding ourselves of all sin, as far as we can, and walking hand in hand with God. A historic faith, that is constantly growing, driven by these three ideals, provides a rock-solid foundation for a faith that is orthodox and yet modern, old and new, thoughtful and emotional.

As if it were trying to answer the question, "What do I do now?" the preamble concludes with the sacraments, "In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion." This final statement is packed full of meaning for me. First, it suggests that if we are serious about walking in reality, honesty, and purity, the first place we will turn are the sacraments – claimed in baptism, grown in communion. Much more importantly, the UCC is the first Church that ever combined for me the two most important words of my walk – "evangelical" and "sacramental." My evangelical roots were decidedly non-sacramental. One of the major reasons I felt at home in the UCC was that it was a hearty, sacramental faith. But neither did I want to give up being an evangelical – committed to the Word, committed to seeing Christ's cross proclaimed in the world, committed to being contextually relevant. After eight years in the ministry of the UCC, I can say that this sentence remains a definition of my faith upon which I've built my pastoral ministry – I can indeed be a "sacramental evangelical." And in the context of the Preamble, I can be a historical, modern Christian. I can be an orthodox, developing Christian. And I can be a denominational, catholic Christian.

The Visible Church

A further word needs to be said about my understanding of the importance of the visible unity of the Church. As I've explained earlier, I am committed to the visible unity of the Church, and I believe that one day (probably not in my lifetime) the entire Christian Church will be one. I know not the structure, and I deeply suspect it will be one that we have not yet considered, but I am committed to that idea and I pray for it daily. I find strength in Paul's statement, spoken I believe with great incredulity, "Is Christ divided?"¹⁵ The answer is no. Because of this perspective, I am wary of denominational life. Much of this is rooted in my own experience of never *really* feeling connected to a denominational structure. I have rarely seen real fruit from denominational cheerleading, and I've often been hurt by the arguments that arise between denominational structures. Because of this, my ministry has always been about proclaiming Christ in a denomination, as opposed to proclaiming a denomination with a Christ.

This has directly impacted how I conduct my daily ministry. As a pastor, I value the denominational location in which I find myself, but I never want that to be a stumbling block to participation in this local community. I have often encouraged people to become UCC and yet hold to their own denominational and theological convictions. This allows me to encourage people to understand their own traditions better, because they are responsible for sharing those perspectives with our larger congregation so that we can all benefit. Communion has been an excellent example, where the diversity of perspectives has helped educate us and soften us to our sometimes hardened opinions, so much that now we celebrate this sacred meal with the Church catholic every single Sunday. We have discovered a deeper faith because of the diversity of our perspectives as we gather in the unity of community.

This is why I am excited to continue my ministry as a part of the United Church of Christ, because the UCC is uniquely positioned to become a post-denominational Church. Unburdened by overly powerful forces of cultural, traditional, and national boundaries (we are, after all, only 50+ years old), the UCC opens up space for an exploration of an essential Christianity – a Word-centered, Sacrament-centered, prayer-centered, grace-centered Christianity. This is not immediately apparent for most of our members; we are all well versed in the imposed boundaries of Western Christianity, and most of our congregations are filled with people who remember a time when denominationalism was rampant and divisive. This will not be remedied easily. This is why it is a necessary experiment and an on-going conversation.

I do not mean to suggest that the UCC is a "back to the New Testament Church" idea. That is not its culture or history, and it is neither wise nor advisable to try and recreate a Church from 2000 years ago. We have developed for a reason. The UCC encourages us to see the essential Church as something that has developed because of the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit. The faithful Church of today should not be identical to the church of the book of Acts. It should grow from it and develop because of its important connection to Scripture and tradition, but it should not be an exercise in replication of a tradition long past.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:13

It is also paramount that we remember that the UCC, like every denomination under heaven, is ultimately a temporary thing. One day, the UCC will cease to exist, because God is in the business of uniting His Church. So I root for a day when we decide that for the greater good for the Gospel, we will again join forces with other denominations, just like we did 50+ years ago as four different denominations. I am encouraged to see the UCC participate in the multi-denominational discussions of which it is an enthusiastic partner. I am excited about the full communion agreements that we have with a vast multitude of partners. Certainly, my education with the Lutherans, my friendship with Catholics and Baptists, and my experience with non-denominationals make this a friendly and exciting place for me to be.

Covenant

Such openness to a diversity of opinions and perspectives can create issues. If the visible Church is important to me, then how do we maintain a strong structure that accomplishes the goals we set for ourselves? The UCC has a word, drawn from the pages of Scripture, which provide a helpful template for understanding how we can do this faithfully. At the heart of UCC polity is its commitment to covenant. A covenant binds two parties together through the exchange of themselves, "I give myself to you, and you give yourself to me." This is what happens to the people of Israel. God makes a covenant – I will be your God, and you will be my people. In this covenant, God is forever bound to this people, and the people are bound to God. This is true in human covenants as well, especially our most public of personal covenants, marriage. In the giving of vows, we give ourselves fully to the other. Every marriage functions under its own sets of rules and orders, but we cannot enter marriage without being fundamentally changed and created into something new – one flesh.

This is precisely how I understand ordination in the United Church of Christ. At the heart of the UCC – reflective of Christ, rooted in our historical merger of four denominations - is the commitment to be changed by the mutual giving of one another. This pattern is the stream into which the ordained are submerged. In ordination, I am giving myself freely to the United Church of Christ in the understanding that she will change me. My perspective will develop. My convictions will develop. My engagement with the world will be changed because I am no longer my own; I commit to the catholic Church found in the UCC. In the same way, the UCC commits to being changed by me. I will bring my unique perspective to bear, and the UCC commits to listening and engaging with me as I carry out the call on my life from God. I will conduct ministry in a unique way, and the UCC commits to creating space for me to do that. The UCC commits to supporting me as its child and working towards my thriving as an ordained minister in Christ. All of this change is around the cross of Christ, so that in ordaining me we all enter a process that will draw all of us into greater discipleship with Christ as we hear his voice.

This entails a great many commitments. As in every covenant, the way it plays out will be utterly unique; my ordained ministry will not look exactly like anyone else's, so that the covenant is played out in unique ways. First and foremost is the commitment to listen through the inspiration of Christ. We must constantly

be engaged in the process of proposing, rather than imposing. This assumes a commitment to contribute. Furthermore, we must be committed to receiving seriously the contributions of one another and to engage them in good faith. This assumes a commitment to listening. Once this engagement has happened, the process becomes more complicated, but can still be faithful. Once decisions are made we commit to honoring the decisions of one another (in a covenant, we give ourselves away without ultimately losing ourselves). Sometimes that means participation, and sometimes that means digression.

This entire process can and should be bound, in my estimation, by Augustine's adage, "*In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*" ("In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.") One of the challenges of the UCC is that we are still finding the essentials. Often what I see coming out of Cleveland – its progressive, inclusive stances – are frequently at odds with what I see in the local congregations – family driven, tradition guided. Which is the real core? What is our real contribution to the public square? Our self-understanding is emerging, but not yet obvious to my new eyes. This means that our commitment to listening and contributing must be all the more deep and powerful, slow and steady. The payoff is worth it, as we discern God's will for us for this time, in this place, with this people, and watch lives changed through the gospel.

Congregationalism

There is another side to the UCC that merits attention, and that is our deep commitment to congregationalism. I am encouraged by it even as I am scared to death of it. Congregationalism is the creative, freedom-giving "natural selection" of ecclesial life. Congregationalism is the freedom of a local congregation to be shaped within a community for the most efficient proclamation of the gospel in that community. The "natural selection" process therefore takes what is inherent in our DNA – the covenants we make – and emphasizes parts of that DNA for gospel work. Other parts may weaken, or be expressed less boldly, though it should not atrophy the covenants we make as we do the work of Christ. In this way, congregationalism is a powerful "yes" to a local body of faith. It says "yes" when people ask if it is their job to grow in Christ. It says "yes" when the congregation asks if it is their job to think creatively about ministry. Congregationalism trusts the work of God to the people of God – local people, in a local place, doing local work.

This is precisely what is so terrifying about it. No ecclesial system makes as many demands on the "average" Christian as congregationalism does. It requires that all Christians in a given congregation think critically, deeply, and faithfully about its life in order that the gospel may be proclaimed. In other systems, a bishop will hand out orders, or a governing body will hand down decisions to be obeyed. There are blessings in that system. But congregationalism requires that everyone who comes with a "vote" be prepared to make that vote responsibly and with conviction.

In this system, then, the pastor must be committed to the slow, personal process of making disciples. The pastor must be deeply engaged in relationships that provide a fruitful seedbed for growth in Christ. The pastor is required to pay close attention to the organizational life of the church, and see to it that systems are

in place (as much as systems can change us) to draw people closer to Christ. The pastor must model prayer, Bible study, evangelism, and community concern. Congregational churches must be committed to being healthy churches, and that is a challenge I look forward to, even as I am overwhelmed by the task at hand.

Part III - My Own Journey

Picking an analogy for one's journey of faith sure is a challenge. For my journey, I choose, "the rock in the pond with all of the ripples." My journey has been an up-and-down adventure of growing, concentric circles of faith, but it has never moved from the essential center.

I was born to my parents, Martin and Ruth Chamelin, on October 29, 1982, at Carroll County General Hospital. My childhood was a fairly typical rural upbringing. My parents, both college educated, had come back to Carroll County after graduating Delaware Valley College to be dairy farmers, and they rented the farm we lived on from my maternal grandparents, Vernon and Florence Wolfe. For 20 years I lived on the farm and played an important role in the daily operations of the farm. I would milk the goats, feed the animals, and take care of other chores as necessary. Farm life taught me the value of hard work, particularly the importance of hard work that you did not intend to do on a particular day. I learned a great deal about handling unexpected circumstances. I also learned to love the lifestyle and culture of Carroll County, and even to this day I consider myself a "Carroll County boy."

Not only was farming a part of my life, but faith was as well. I grew up in a small Southern Baptist congregation, and by that I mean that I really grew up. I was born in that church, and attended it regularly from birth until my departure for college. That was my church home, and it was all I ever knew. My faith, therefore, was built upon some important pillars. Above all things, my faith was built upon the trustworthiness and the vital importance of the Scriptures as the foundation of faith. I'll never forget the myriad of Bible verses that I memorized, the number of Vacation Bible Schools I participated in, the 45-minute sermons I listened to while taking copious notes, all in an effort to get the Bible into my head and into my heart. I am deeply grateful for this extraordinary introduction that I was given to the Scriptures, even given its shortcomings. Through this, I was taught not just to know my faith, but also to love it. I understood that in order to have a real relationship with God, I would really need to learn to love God. And I worked hard at that, and I never questioned my perspective. It wasn't that I was ordered to never question anything; in fact, as a good and committed learner, I questioned a lot. It was just that I was certain (in a faithful way) that I was on a good path, a path that would lead to a deeper relationship with Christ and a proper relationship with the world.

I grew a new layer of concentric circles in a little congregation that I attended while in college – Perkiomen Valley Brethren in Christ. They had just called a new pastor, Lew Rinard and his wife Annie, who had just left a position at my aunt and uncle's church in Elizabethtown, PA, so he came with a great recommendation. His first Sunday at the church was my first Sunday at the church, and over time I became very good friends with them and their family. While I would describe Lew as evangelical, he was evangelical with a particular flair. Most obviously, he is very quiet, almost monastic. He did not seem so limited in his focus; he often told me that

there are other Christians around the world who have a great deal to offer me. He also shared with me the riches of the historical Church, and opened to me its history and diversity. He introduced me to a great many authors in many different traditions. Through all of this, I began to revisit and rethink important facets of my faith. Of particular note was the growth of my interest in the sacraments as a fundamental means of God's grace. Lew showed me a Christian world that was significantly bigger and more wonderful than I imagined, and he taught me to be ecumenical without giving up my fundamental faith convictions.

If one were to ask me how I self-identify my faith today, I might say, "an evangelical catholic." I remain committed to fundamental evangelical principles of a personal faith in a saving God, but I do so with a view to the universal and historical Church and a deeper ecclesiology and the vital role of the sacraments in the life of the Church.

Lew also was important in my development in ministry. Even though I was in college, I was a regular attendee at worship, and the church was eager to put such enthusiasm to work. Lew approached me about serving as the youth director for the church, and I began organizing and hosting youth events in the church. Throughout this process, Lew discerned gifts for pastoral ministry in me, and I began to feel a significant call to vocational ministry. When I graduated Ursinus College in 2004, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in biology, but I also picked up a minor in philosophy and a clear sense that ministry was my call.

My first opportunity to live out that call came after my graduation. I had been affiliated with a ministry called the Fellowship of Christian Athletes since I was a teenager. I had attended their sports camps in high school, and I served as an intern in their Maryland office while in college. After my internship, I served as a "huddle leader" (the equivalent of a camp counselor) at a variety of camps. During my last camp, a gentleman approached me about coming to work for FCA in Western Maryland. Initially, I did not want to go; my plan was to return to Collegetown and work at the church. But the more I prayed about it, the more I felt God leading me in this direction, and I took the job of area representative for Western Maryland FCA (and area that spanned Frederick County west, and the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia). My tasks were to build "huddles" in local middle and high schools, participate in and run local and regional camps, build a board, and establish a fundraising base. During this time, I learned a great deal about what full-time ministry was all about and I developed a great many skills surrounding administration, relationship development, and leadership. However, I struggled with being more ecumenically minded in a committed evangelical environment.

Everything changed with a phone call in August of 2006. At that time, FCA was undergoing some major reorganization with which I was not comfortable. In the midst of that, I received a call from Lazarus United Church of Christ in Lineboro, MD, asking if I was available to come preach on a Sunday. Lazarus' pastor had just left for another opportunity, and my wife had grown up in that church. They thought perhaps that I could come fill the pulpit for a Sunday. So I did. It went so well that they invited me back the next Sunday, which I happily obliged. This went on for some time, and the church began to ask, "Can we call this man to be our pastor?" Along with the Catoclin Association of the UCC we worked together to discern the

will of God. On January 1, 2007 I was called to be the pastor at Lazarus, a position I hold to this day. Part of my agreement with the UCC was that I immediately begin seminary, which I did and continue to do, expecting to graduate in 2014. Over the last 6 years, God has seen fit to grow me as a minister of the gospel and as a man of God in ways too numerous to count.

Of course, the UCC is not often a landing point for self-proclaimed evangelicals, and I can say that I had a certain amount of anxiety entering the denomination. Yet as I studied them, I found a denomination that shared my desire to learn from the very best of all Christian traditions. I found a theological thread – Mercersburg theology – that valued the Scriptures and was very sacramental in a way that made sense for me, and I found here a home inside the denomination theologically. I also found a denomination that was committed to reaching a new generation with the gospel of Christ. I believe that it can be a home for me, and that I can be a faithful minister of the gospel under its banner.

As to my personal relationships, I married my wife Jennie on Nov. 13, 2004, and we have been happily married for 8 years. We are also blessed to be parents three times over – Caleb is 6, Charlotte is 4, and Brenna is 3. We live in Lineboro, and are very excited to have just started a rent-to-own on a beautiful property in town, where we hope to raise our children and build a life. In all of this, I see the hand of God in all sorts of places, and I am sure that He who has begun a good work in me will see it through to completion.

Ordination

So as I come to the brink of ordination, it is left to me to consider precisely what that means in an ecclesial sense, and then what that means to me.

Ecclesially, I stand with Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who wrote in his book *Preachers and Preaching*, “...the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called.”¹⁶ It is not for this reason, however, that I pursue ordained ministry. The call to ordained ministry is the unique and amazing call from God to devote one’s life to the proclamation of the reign of Jesus Christ in the world. In order to accomplish this mission, the ordained are given two major tools for the work – the Word and the Sacraments. They are called to take these tools, wrapped in love and seasoned with prayer, and to use them to proclaim the gospel, and to invite others into the path of discipleship for the sake of the world. For me, this is the calling of the ordained. In this way, the ordained are the heirs to the work of the apostles, taking the life of Christ into the world.

This calling takes a particular shape in a particular place. Immediately and most obviously, this will mean taking up my post at Lazarus Church in Lineboro, MD in a renewed and reinvigorated way. I have served the people of Lineboro for eight years, and I look forward to continuing this ministry as I serve the people I have come to love as they have grown into the men and women God has called them to be.

¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones, Martin, *Preaching and Preachers*, pg. 9.

In a larger, broader sense, the rural character of my personal story seems to have intersected with the heavenly character of my ordination call. I believe that my unique call is to take the tools of the ordained to the rural church, as I feel a special call to her. I believe, with great conviction, that the greatest untapped resource in the Church is the small collections of believers tucked away in the many small towns like Lineboro, and that a renewed and reinvigorated rural ministry is the path to a renewal of faith in our world.

As Wendell Berry reflected on his own move from urban to agrarian life, he wrote that the world “would always be most fully and clearly present to me in the place I was fated by birth to know better than any other.”¹⁷ This thought was a profound turning point for my ministerial call. If Christ was born in a particular place, in a particular land, with a particular people, then is it possible that we can follow him best in our own place, in our own land, with our own people? This question led to me to the conviction that agrarian life – life rooted in the land – is the best place for genuine faith to arise because of the basic claims it makes about humanity. To be brief, agrarian life says that we are an integral part of a large system – human community, environment, and economy. Industrial life, by contrast, says that we are easily replaceable cogs in a very large machine. Agrarian life, then, makes basic statements about human value, creation, work, and the meaningful life that are critical for our world to hear. I also believe they are more in line with the vision of Christ. If the rural church became serious about understanding its own life and its benefits, and made a commitment to sharing that vision with the world, I believe we would see not only a renewal of rural Christianity and rural towns, but we would see a renewal of the Church and a potential rethinking of our industrial life.

In order that this might be accomplished, we’ll need to do ministry from a uniquely rural point of view. Far too much of “church revitalization” has taken urban values and principles and attempted to apply them to rural contexts, with almost no long-term success. My conviction is that principles for renewal must come from rural sources. For instance, if these towns are accustomed to serving agriculturally based families, the church is going to have to adjust to the changing face of agriculture. As family farms die away, the church is going to have to encourage and support smaller-scale agriculture. Not only that, but it will also need to teach agriculture not just as a healthy and meaningful hobby but also as a way of allowing our hearts to be shaped by the land and the community. As the world grows more concerned about climate change and its impact on human society, rural areas have the ability to be the forerunners in this, proclaiming a love for the land even as we gain a living and develop a life off of it. Given my beliefs around all of these issues, I am excited to continue my work from seminary and give deep, prayerful thought to the revitalization of rural communities, and to develop faith communities that come from the land, not just find themselves on land (I have written multiple papers on the topic, and would be interested in sharing these ideas in another forum).

¹⁷ Quoted in Smith, Kimberly Ann, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*, pg. 14.

At Lazarus, we have already taken small steps to begin this kind of thinking. We have started a food pantry to feed the poor in our community. Our belief is, "We aren't trying to feed the world, just our little corner of it." We have worked very hard to stock our shelves with local products, so that the benefit goes farther than those who eat. We have also started a farmers' market to celebrate the gifts and talents of local farmers and artisans, to connect them to a market, and to redevelop a sense of connection to a community. In the same way, we have had some thought about starting a rural ministry conference to encourage rural churches to be at the front of a revival in our towns.

In this way, I do not see myself as a "career" person, trying to climb a corporate ladder of church bureaucracy. I see myself rooted in a place, committed to a people, and watching the slow growth of a local community into a powerful force for the gospel in the world. I have begun that work at Lazarus, but I will continue it wherever God leads.