

## Three Streams, One River

*A Statement of Identity, a Model for Our Life*  
by David Harper, May 2003

A number of years ago my predecessor, Renny Scott, popularized a powerful idea that has played a key role in defining the essential character of Church of the Apostles. Three Streams, One River continues to be a defining statement about who we are and how we live out our life in worship, community, and mission.

### The Concept

The three streams concept was originally developed fifty years ago by a missionary bishop in the Church of South India, Lesslie Newbigin. In his book *The Household of God*, he compared the New Testament church to three streams coming together to form one mighty river. He labeled the three streams catholic, evangelical, and pentecostal.

Three Streams is derived from Psalm 46:4: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city (people) of God.” Its water brings God’s people into joy and wholeness—a reality that Ezekiel saw in his vision (Ezekiel 47) where he observed that, growing beside the river of the water of life were trees whose leaves were for the healing of the nations.

These three great streams have flowed throughout Biblical and Christian history. The apostle John identifies them in his first letter: “There are three witnesses—the Spirit, the water, and the blood—and these three agree.” (1 John 5:8)

Some of us come from the “blood,” or catholic stream, with its emphasis on liturgy and sacrament. Others identify more with the “water,” with its emphasis on the washing of the Word and personal cleansing. This is the biblical and evangelical—stream. Still others come from the “Spirit,” or pentecostal, stream, with its emphasis on the person and power of the Holy Spirit.

The differences and even struggles which can arise between us often reflect our inability to understand another “stream” where we feel less at home.

John is clear that these three witnesses are distinct, yet are in complete agreement! What do they agree about? They are unanimous about the person of Jesus Christ: who he is, why he came, and what he has done for us. These witnesses agree because, together, they create a brilliant composite picture of Christ that none of them can manage so completely on their own. Yet though their witness is in perfect agreement, there is also a dynamic tension between them.

Let’s take a look at how each stream typically approaches six key areas of Christian life.

### Standards of Orthodoxy—What it means to be a Christian

Catholic: “By their fruit you shall know them” (Matthew 7:1). Orthodoxy is measured by commitment to living out the Faith by sacrificial service, particularly to the poor.

Evangelical: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Orthodoxy is measured by profession of personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Pentecostal: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1). The Pentecostal standard of orthodoxy is measured by the exercise of discernment rather than by objective criteria.

### Music and Worship

Catholic: Psalms and other liturgical music, which help emphasize and illustrate the liturgy.

Evangelical: Hymns—such as the great hymns of the Reformation, which are rich in doctrine.

Pentecostal: Spiritual songs that arise out of and reflect what God is doing and saying now.

### Authority

Catholic: The Catholic model is hierarchical. It values and respects the office of leader, despite any shortcomings in the incumbent.

Evangelical: The Evangelical model is congregational. It values autonomy and independence.

Pentecostal: The Pentecostal model is spontaneous. Follow the leader who has the anointing.

### Structure

Catholic: Places value on centrally-organized and -led structures.

Evangelical: Wary of central organization. Prefers bottom-up, lay-led structures.

Pentecostal: To the Pentecostal, “structure equals stricture.” Preference is given to unstructured spontaneity.

### Theological Emphasis

Catholic: God, the Father

Evangelical: God, the Son

Pentecostal: God, the Holy Spirit

### Key Aspect of Christ’s Salvation

Catholic: The Incarnation

*Strength: emphasizes Christ’s love for and involvement in the world. It takes this world seriously*

*Weakness: too worldly; can become devoid of transforming power*

Evangelical: The Cross

*Strength: emphasizes Christ’s atoning death and the need for personal conversion*

*Weakness: tends to engage only those parts of the world which are considered already “redeemed”*

Pentecostal: Pentecost and Second Coming

*Strength: emphasizes personal renewal and transformation*

*Weakness: has difficulty relating to and transforming the world*

Here is a brief summary of the distinct approaches adopted by each stream:

	Catholic	Evangelical	Pentecostal
Standards of Orthodoxy	<i>By their fruit</i>	<i>If you confess...</i>	<i>Test the spirits</i>
Music and Worship	Psalms	Hymns	Spiritual Songs
Authority	Hierarchical	Congregational	Anointing
Structure	Top-down, centralized	Bottom-up, diversified	Spontaneous, loose
Theological Emphasis	Father	Son	Holy Spirit
Salvation Emphasis	Incarnation/Cross	Cross/Resurrection	Pentecost

So what will a “three streams, one river” church look like in practice?

### Standards of Orthodoxy

A “three-streams” church won’t separate faith from works. It will be passionate about calling people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through repentance and faith—but it will not be tempted to see that as an end. The goal is also to call people into a life of obedience to Jesus by sacrificial service “to the least of these my brothers.” One of our mission statements—Servant Ministry—captures that truth.

## **Music and Worship**

All the great kinds of music that Paul mentions in Ephesians 5:19—psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs—are welcomed and balanced in a “three streams” church. Each has its own unique place: “psalms”—liturgical music—to enhance the liturgy; “hymns,” which express the grandeur and majesty of God and which are rich in doctrine and biblical imagery; and “spiritual songs”—music which gives contemporary expression to what God is saying and doing to his Church now.

At our Saturday and Sunday worship services we employ all three genres of music, and celebrate Holy Communion every weekend. At The Father’s Blessing and First Wednesdays, which exemplify the Pentecostal stream, greater emphasis is placed on spiritual songs.

## **Authority**

Our model of authority is hierarchical. Bishops have spiritual authority over their clergy. Clergy have spiritual authority over their congregations, under the bishop. A “three-streams” church receives and respects that authority. But it will expect those in authority to recognize the spiritual giftedness of the congregation, and to call all its members to the work of ministry. A “three-streams” congregation also understands the futility of engaging in ministry without the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It will pray for its ordained and lay ministers to be freshly and powerfully anointed, so that their leadership and ministry will manifest the presence and power of Christ.

## **Structure**

The Catholic preference for top-down, centralized structures speaks of the need for spiritual oversight, and submission to the authority God has placed over the church. The Protestant preference for bottom-up (lay-initiated and lay-led) and diversified (shared power) structures insists that the congregation be trusted with real responsibility, and be given a sense of ownership for the life and mission of the church. The Pentecostal preference for spontaneity speaks of a burning desire for life—and a recognition that structures in themselves cannot bear fruit.

These three, apparently incompatible approaches are mutually consistent. Each needs the others. The first, by itself, leads to authoritarianism; the second to anarchy; and the third to chaos. Holding them in dynamic balance is difficult and demanding—but results in life and blessing if done successfully.

## **Theological Emphasis**

The Charismatic Renewal succeeded in bringing back the forgotten Holy Spirit into the Church. Three-streams churches will make generous room for the Holy Spirit. They will welcome the manifestation of all the spiritual gifts. They will value intuitive ways of knowing Truth, not only rational and cognitive ways.

But they will never divorce the Spirit from the Word, elevating manifestations of the Spirit above disciplined Bible study, biblical preaching, and rationality. (The Word must in fact judge manifestations of the Spirit.) Neither will a three-streams church create false dichotomies between spontaneity and freedom on the one hand, and program and structure on the other. Finally, they will not divorce the Spirit and the Word from the Father, who creates order by keeping Word and Spirit in dynamic tension.

## **Key Aspect of Christ’s Salvation**

A “three-streams” church will receive and love Jesus Christ as the scriptures reveal him to us—through his incarnation, sacrificial death, triumphant resurrection, and glorious ascension; through the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost; and through his promised return. It will never prefer his divinity over his humanity, or his miracles to his command to love and serve others.