

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 1: The Road To Denominationalism
Chapter 2: Where Did Denominations Come From?

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We have seen that in the New Testament period there was one true church. Sharply contrasting with that is our situation today, in which the church is divided into many denominations. What has happened?

Even during Bible times there were tendencies toward denominationalism. Remember the sin-inspired separations beginning in the earliest days after the Fall of Adam. Remember Jeroboam, the first denominationalist, who made Israel to sin. We saw also that the New Testament rebukes attitudes and actions which lead to division: unwillingness to submit to authority, autonomy, factionalism, lust for power, rejection of reconciliation, failures of church discipline and of doctrinal and practical purity. It emphasizes that there should be no "schism" in the body. Since the New Testament writers issued such rebukes, there were evidently those in the church who deserved and needed them. That is to say, even in the first century, the essential sources of denominationalism were present.

Beyond this, there were also people who left the one true church. Some left involuntarily, as the result of proper discipline (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). Others (whom John calls "antichrists") left at their own initiative (1 John 2:18ff.; 4:3-6). Still others fell away from their initial profession of faith, the texts being inexplicit as to whether these left the church voluntarily or under discipline (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31). Did any of these form sects of their own, claiming to be the true disciples of Christ? We simply don't know; there is no evidence either way.

A Brief History of Denominationalism

In the early centuries following the New Testament period, heresy and schism were more or less synonymous.¹ Heretics, teachers of false doctrine, were church-dividers, schismatics. They sought to attract followers to themselves, either by forming factions in the existing church or by drawing people to leave the church and follow them. The heretic Marcion (ca. A.D. 80-160) who rejected the Old Testament and much of the New, set up many churches dedicated to his philosophy. In the late second century, Montanus, who claimed (but failed to convince the church as a whole) that he brought new revelation from God, attracted many churches to his teaching.

In the mid-third century, however, an event occurred that led to a distinction between heresy and schism. During the Decian persecution, many believers renounced the faith. Afterward, Novatian, a learned priest and theologian, opposed any readmission of these people into the church. The church, however, held that reconciliation could be granted upon repentance. A Roman synod excommunicated Novatian, who then set up his own church which lasted to the 8th century.² The status of the Novatianist church was a matter of some discussion in those days. Those in the Catholic Church agreed that schism, i.e., departure from the one true church and establishing a rival church, was a serious sin. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, went so far as to deny the validity of Novatianist baptisms, but his principle was not upheld by the church in later years.

Novatian was not considered a heretic, though he did hold a view with which the church did not concur. In general, he was recognized as orthodox in theology, indeed a very competent exponent of Christian truth. He was, therefore, an "orthodox schismatic." "Heresy" and "schism" were no longer virtually synonymous. Heresy was considered a sin against truth, schism a sin against unity and love.

Another persecution, in A.D. 303, gave rise to another schism. As in the earlier case, certain people believed that those who denied the faith under persecution were being treated too leniently by the church. Led by Donatus, these formed a schismatic denomination which claimed to be, in fact, the one true church. They rebaptized those who came from the Catholic Church. The Donatist church existed until around A.D. 700. In the original church, this group, like the Novatianist group, was considered generally orthodox though schismatic.

Another schism developed in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) which declared Christ to be one person in two natures, fully God and fully man. The Council's statement was unacceptable to the Egyptian and Syrian

¹ David F. Wright, "Schism," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by David F. Wright and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988, p. 619.

² Douglas Kelly, "Novatian," in *Ibid.*, 472.

churches, and eventually fellowship was broken. That division continues to exist today.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches under the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the Roman Catholic Church under the Pope of Rome, broke fellowship in 1054 over the claims of papal authority as well as the western insertion into the Nicene Creed that taught that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and the Son* (Latin, *filioque*). Patriarch and Pope excommunicated one another. That division also continues to the present.

The excommunication of Martin Luther (1521) began a proliferation of divisions: Protestant from Catholic, Protestant from Protestant, sectarian from sectarian. Bucer, Melanchthon, Oecolampadius, and Calvin sought unity among the Reformation churches, but without success.

Additional denominations came into existence when the denominations from which they came were thought in some measure to be compromising the true doctrine, hence the many Reformed denominations of the Netherlands, the many Presbyterian churches of Scotland, the many Baptist denominations of the United States. Still others appeared when people carried their distinctive traditions from one country to another. Often, these immigrants wanted to worship with others of the same language and nationality. Thus, in the United States, there is an Evangelical Covenant Church (Swedish), an Evangelical Free Church (Norwegian, Danish), a Christian Reformed Church (Dutch), A Russian Orthodox Church, a Korean-American Presbyterian Church, a Church of God in Christ (African-American), a German Reformed Church (the Reformed Church in the United States), etc.

Evaluating the Divisions

How shall we evaluate this complex chain of events? It is not an easy matter. Some evaluations, to be sure, are fairly simple. I do not hesitate to join the ancient church in condemning the schisms of Marcion and Montanus. These men certainly were heretics, and they had no justification whatever for forming their own "churches." On both counts they violated scriptural principle. The same is true for Novatian and Donatus, though these were much more orthodox than Marcion and Montanus. The church was right to reject the "rigorist" position of these men. Novatian and Donatus should have remained in the church, conforming their views to Scripture and/or accepting the church's discipline for their errors.

The post-Chalcedonian schism, however, is a more difficult issue. I do believe that the Council was expressing an important biblical truth. At the same time, their operative language was philosophical rather than scriptural. In my view, philosophical language is not necessarily a wrong means of expressing

theological truth, but it tends to raise as many questions as it answers. The Council said that Jesus is "one person in two natures;" but what, precisely, is a "person?" What is a "nature?" How should we interpret the "one person" so as not to compromise the "two natures," and vice versa? The answers are not obvious. Lutherans and Calvinists later accused one another of different sorts of failure to do justice to Chalcedon, and that debate continues to the present, with intelligent, learned and godly thinkers on both sides. Is this issue really designed by God to be a test of orthodoxy?

The Egyptians who rejected Chalcedon (speaking with their bishop Cyril of the "one nature of the incarnate word") were called "monophysites" (the root of the word means "one nature"). But these also rejected the extreme monophysite position of Eutyches, which the Council had particularly sought to exclude; so their position actually agreed with the Council in what may be the most significant respect. Yet they could not accept the formula required by the Council. It is not inconceivable that the Egyptians and Syrians were seeking to preserve by the "one nature" formula concerns which the majority expressed by the "one person" formula. If so, the differences between the two would be merely differences over choice of words.

In retrospect, too, it is evident that there was a lot of sheer power politics going on in the developments leading to Chalcedon. Personal loyalties played a considerable role in the theological/terminological decisions which were made.

The schism was certainly an evil. But who was to blame? Those on both sides who mixed up theology with partisan loyalty? The Egyptians, for their unwillingness to accept the verdict of the whole church, even though their own convictions were not, perhaps, substantially different? The Council, for imposing upon the people's consciences a difficult philosophical, highly debatable formulation capable of various interpretations and uses? Perhaps there is plenty of blame to go around.

In my Protestant bliss, I can say fairly complacently that the 1054 split between east and west was due to papal arrogance. My Roman Catholic friends are welcome to try to set me straight. But as for the doctrinal issue, whether the Spirit proceeds only from the Father or from the Son as well, it is hard to imagine why that should be the cause of so momentous a division. It is a very difficult question, one hard to resolve from Scripture. And the concept of "procession" is mysterious indeed, part of the mystery of the Trinity itself. The meaning of it is not at all obvious. I think I can defend the western position, but I cannot see why it should be made a test of orthodoxy. Certainly one can be a knowledgeable and effective minister of God's Word whichever position he takes – or without taking any position at all.

Granting that Luther was right in his doctrinal dispute with Rome, was he also right to start a new denomination? "Well, he was excommunicated,"

someone will say. "What else could he do?" Well, he could have continued to teach as an excommunicate Catholic (while rejecting the grounds of the excommunication), praying that God would one day establish his theology in the whole church. Was Luther required to start afresh because the Roman Catholic Church was no longer a true church? But the Reformers did not believe that the Roman Catholic Church had totally lost all the characteristics of a true church. They did not, for example, rebaptize people who had been baptized as Roman Catholics.³

The best justifications for starting a new Lutheran church, I think, were these: (1) the Roman Catholic Church was requiring, as a condition of membership in good standing, commission of sin, namely participation in what Luther came to regard as idolatry in the mass; and (2) the church required as a qualification for teachers, subscription to a view of salvation which Luther believed was flawed at its very core.

Objection: why should he not have remained a Catholic, while recognizing that one with his views could not be in "good standing?" Then, as a "renegade Catholic," he would continue to teach and preach what he believed to be the truth, hoping and praying that in time the church would come to accept his position. But the difference between this and starting a new denomination is not great. One might indeed argue that this is in fact what Luther did. He remained Catholic,⁴ though not in good standing with the Roman authorities; he taught, preached and administered the sacraments to those who would hear him.

Whose fault was it? Certainly (in my own view, of course) it was the fault of the Roman church for allowing its theology and practice so to degenerate. Was Luther also to blame for, perhaps, impatience? Could he not have found a more subtle, gradual way in which he could have brought his ideas to a church for whom justification by faith was shocking and new?

I don't know. Evaluating these matters, especially at more than four centuries' distance, is very difficult. And it is even more difficult to evaluate the various Protestant-from-Protestant splits of the later centuries. It is clear, however, that all denominational division has been due to sin somewhere, either among the founders of the new denomination, or in the previous denomination, or both.⁵ The difference between the church and the denominations is indicated by this fact: the birth of a denomination is always attended by sin, but the birth of the church was attended by rejoicing among the angels of heaven.

³ See Charles Hodge, "Is the Church of Rome a Part of the Visible Church?" available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/papers/chodge_church_rome_visible.html. Hodge answers his question affirmatively.

⁴ Surely he did not concur in his excommunication.

⁵ M'Crie: "When dissensions arise in the Church of God, and it is divided into parties, whatever the occasion or matter of variance may be, there must be guilt somewhere," p. 33. He quotes James 4:1, "Whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?"

Where is the One, True Church?

The difficulty of evaluating these events means that today it is difficult, if not impossible, to locate the "one, true church" which Jesus founded in the first century. It would be so nice if we could pick out one denomination today and say, "This is the one." That would be the denomination that had never been guilty of unjustified division from any other body, nor had ever provoked justified division of anyone from itself. No, there is no such beast. All denominations, so far as I can tell, are guilty in some measure, at some point in their history, of schism or of provoking schism, in some degree.⁶

I'm confident in saying that the one, true church up until the post-Chalcedon divisions was the Catholic church, the main body of Christians. To say that is not necessarily to deny the authentic faith of the members of the Novatianist and Donatist denominations. It is, of course, to say that those people committed sin in leaving the one, true church. But after Chalcedon the picture is not so clear. If the Syrians and Egyptians were unjustly expelled from the fellowship, then they might well claim that *they* were the one, true church. If, on the other hand, they left the body without justification, then they must be seen as schismatics. But what if there was fault on both sides? What if the case cannot be neatly adjudicated? Then it would seem to me that at that point in history both the Catholics and the dissenters were guilty of sin, and that the one, true church from that time on was to be located in both bodies.

Such ambiguity plagues the history of denominationalism as I see it. Therefore I doubt very much if any denomination today represents uniquely the "one, true church" of the New Testament. The one, true church does, however, still exist! Jesus' promise that the gates of Hell will not prevail (Matt. 16:18) has not been broken. But the true church exists today in many denominations, rather than in one. It exists in broken form. It exists, but its government has been injured.

⁶ Some small Reformed denominations of Dutch origin maintain that, because of scriptural promises, even today there is no more than "one true church," in every locality. (I wonder why the "locality" qualification. If Scripture promises "one true church" in an organizational sense, then it is implausible to limit that promise to the local level.) They argue that if there are two apparently true churches in one locality, one of them at least must be a false church; for one or the other of them is guilty at least of resisting God's call to unity. I applaud the concern for visible unity evident in this argument; would that more Protestants thought so deeply about it! Yet the argument assumes that a "true" church must be a sinless church, or, perhaps, that sins against church unity are more serious than other sins, so serious as to be incompatible with the status of a true church. Neither of these premises is scriptural. Think of how Paul addresses the wayward Corinthians in 1 Cor. 1:1ff., and of how the risen Lord addresses the churches of Revelation 1-3. A church can be very sinful indeed, while remaining a church.

Not entirely, of course. In some ways, the church is still governed the way the one true church was governed in the first century. For one thing, we still have local congregations, as they did then. The local congregation is, as it was then, the central bond of Christian fellowship.⁷ This represents the "government by tens and hundreds" of Exodus 18. For another thing, the church today still has the same *supreme* court as did the church in the first century. That is the court of heaven where Jesus, the one head of the church, makes the final decisions. At that level, the church is still united, and, indeed, at that level it has a unified government!

The injuries to the church's government appear, then, at the middle levels, the levels of "thousands" and, we might say, of "ten thousands," "hundred thousands" and "millions." At those levels, the courts of the true church no longer function. In San Diego County, a local church can no longer call for *all* the elders of the region to adjudicate a difficult problem, as I believe the Christians of the first century were able to do. We can only call on the leaders of our own denominations. If I am Southern Baptist I can call only on the ministers and deacons of the Southern Baptist Convention. If I am Orthodox Presbyterian, I can only call on the elders of the tiny Orthodox Presbyterian Church. So, instead of the courts and fellowships God has ordained, we are left with man-made substitutes, namely denominational courts and fellowships. With those we can get by, perhaps; but there will always be something missing. It simply is not what Christ intended.

How do we restore what Christ intended? That is a difficult question; I don't have any very good answer to it, though I will suggest some preliminary steps in Part Two of this book. Perhaps there are others with more practical gifts than mine who can suggest a more complete step-by-step procedure. For now, I want only to insist that we establish unity as our *goal*. Goals are not enough; but they are important. By meditating on them, longing for them, praying for them, we sometimes gain some wisdom on how to achieve them. May that be so in this case.

⁷ To say this is not to embrace Congregationalism or Independency. Presbyterians and Reformed have always granted a certain "autonomy" to the local congregation. M'Crie: "For the ordinary performance of religious duties and the ordinary management of their own internal affairs, (local congregations) may be said to be complete churches, and furnished with complete powers," p. 19.

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