

**EVANGELICAL REUNION**  
**Part 1: The Road To Denominationalism**  
**Chapter 3: Toward a Post-Denominational Ecclesiology**

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It seems to me that far too much of our thinking about the church, both in scholarship and in practical church life, fails to make important distinctions between the church and the denominations. Consider the four attributes given to the church in the Nicene<sup>1</sup> Creed: "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church."

Yes, the church is *one*. As we saw in the last chapter, even today the one true church still persists, though with an impaired governmental structure. But the denominations clearly are not one; they are many.

The church is *holy*. This is not to say that all Christians and congregations are morally perfect, but that God has set his church apart from all other institutions in a special relationship to him. But Scripture gives us no reason to believe that God has placed any human denomination in such a special category, except insofar as it is part of the church as a whole. Among those denominations which are truly parts of the body of Christ, none is in this sense any more holy than the others.

The church is *catholic*, i.e. universal. It includes all believers of all times and places. No denomination (even the ones with "Catholic" in their names) can make such a claim.

And the church is *apostolic*. It perpetuates the doctrine and life of the apostles of Christ, building on their foundation. As with holiness, a denomination can be "apostolic" if it is faithful to that foundation. But loyalty to the apostles and loyalty to a denomination are not necessarily the same thing. The apostles,

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, Niceno-Constantinopolitan, from the Council of Constantinople of A.D. 381.

through their writings in Scripture, call us even today to be loyal to that church which God built on their foundation. But they do not demand such loyalty to any denomination.

### **The Gates of Hell and the Free Will Baptists**

Other comparisons may also be illuminating. God has promised that the gates of Hell will never prevail against the church; the church will never perish (Matt. 16:18). There is, however, no such promise for denominations. Indeed, many denominations have perished over the years, and in many cases this has been a good thing.

The church was founded by Jesus Christ, out of his unsearchable love. Denominations were founded by human beings, often for at least partly sinful motives.

The church has, as we have seen, a real authority over believers through its officers. Has God granted such authority to denominations? I would say that denominations have authority insofar as they represent the authority of the church (but that is very difficult to ascertain) and insofar as we voluntarily grant this authority to them in our membership and officers' vows. But this is very different from the authority of the church as such, which is given by Christ himself (Matt. 18:18-20) and is therefore irrevocable.

Scripture promises to the church an ample supply of the Spirit's gifts. To the "one body," God has given sufficient gifts (especially leadership) "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12ff.; note also verses 14-16 and the teaching of Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12). Do modern denominations, as denominations, have the right to claim this promise? I very much doubt it. Surely one cannot assume so on the basis of the text's language. And my experience suggests that not all denominations have a balanced and full complement of the gifts of the Spirit. Rather, some denominations have more and better teachers, others more and better evangelists, and so on.

We owe to our fellow Christians a special love ("love of the brethren," 1 Pet. 1:22; cf. 1 John 2:10, 3:10ff.; 4:20ff.), a special care, which takes precedence over our duty to help unbelievers (Gal. 6:10). Is there a special love that we owe only to members of our own denominations and not to other Christians? To ask such a question is virtually to answer it negatively. But we often act as if it were true. Yes, there are legitimate obligations which we incur to our denominations in our membership vows. And we tend to form our closest friendships within our denominations, and friendships make legitimate claims on

our affections. But the Christian Philadelphia, brotherly love, is for the church, not for one denomination above another.

These comparisons should indicate to us that there are great differences between the church and the denominations: differences in oneness, holiness, universality, apostolicity, power, foundation, authority, gifts, love. Yet it seems that in the ecclesiological literature and in our usual thinking and speaking, we tend to equate the church with the denominations. When Jesus says that the gates of Hell shall never prevail against the church, preachers routinely apply that text to the Free-Will Baptist Church or whatever denomination they may belong to. That is bad exegesis and bad preaching.

We need an ecclesiology that makes some careful distinctions between the attributes, powers and gifts of the church, on the one hand, and those of particular denominations, on the other. We should no longer develop doctrines of the church which are written as if the schisms had never taken place, or as if we were still living before A.D. 451.

When someone seeks to stir in us passions of denominational loyalty, then, by pointing to Scripture's very high view of the church, we must raise questions. The church is a wonderful thing, deserving our deepest loyalty. It is that for which Jesus shed his own blood. But denominations are another thing altogether. I am not saying that we owe no loyalty to our denominations. I am saying that our loyalty to our denominations must be tempered by the understanding that these organizations are the result of sin, inadequate human substitutes for the God-given order of the one, true church. Somewhere in each of our hearts ought to be the conviction that denominations should work, not to their own glorification, but to their own extinction.

### **A Practical Case**

It is fairly obvious that Novatian and Donatus should not have left the one, true church to start their own churches. They were, in truth, "schismatic." Sometimes today, one believer will call another one "schismatic" when he leaves one denomination to join another. Is that fair?

I do believe that it is possible to commit the sin of schism today. Most of the time, when people start new denominations, adding to the divisions in the body of Christ, I do not hesitate to call them schismatic. I also consider them schismatic when they switch denominations for the same reasons that motivated Novatian and Donatus: pride, unwillingness to submit to legitimate discipline, desire for autonomy.<sup>2</sup> But in many, perhaps most, situations where people make such transfers, there is no schismatic behavior at all. The true church is

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<sup>2</sup> Schism also occurs when people unnecessarily resist church union and those practices which lead to further union.

scattered among many denominations today. Often transfer is simply a matter of wanting to go from one part of the church to another, to share the gifts of Christians in a different group. Let us become clear about this: leaving the church is one thing; leaving a denomination quite another. The former is a very serious matter, the latter much less so.

This is the sort of practical case in which it is very dangerous for us to identify the New Testament church with some modern denomination. That confusion can lead to unfair judgments against one another. We should rather seek to make the right distinctions, to judge wisely. The church is found in the denominations; but the denominations are not the church.

In my view it is misleading, indeed, for denominations to take names for themselves with "church" in the singular: Protestant Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church in the USA, Presbyterian Church in America, etc. "Church" in Scripture is never used for anything like a denomination. Better to speak of "churches," indicating an association of local congregations (as in the Dutch "Reformed Churches in the Netherlands"), for it is biblically correct to use "church" to refer to local congregations.

We are in a post-denominational age, and we must apply the scriptures to the times in which we are living, not to a time that is long past. It is not easy to find the precise continuities and discontinuities between the church and the denominations. But we must be willing to take up that task.

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