

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 1: The Road To Denominationalism
Chapter 4: What's *Really* So Bad about Denominationalism?

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In the preceding chapters, I have given a number of reasons why the church should not have been divided into denominations. First, Christ founded one church and commanded us to preserve its unity. Denominations have no role to play in biblical church government; rather they are destructive of that government. Second, the denominational division of the church has always been the result of sin: either sin on the part of the founders of the new denomination, or on the part of their original denomination, or both. The people involved should have solved their problem by biblical reconciliation, not by denominational division. Third, denominationalism has imposed upon us the burden of subjecting ourselves and our congregations to human organizations, organizations which cannot claim in full the promises and the gifts of God.¹

Those should certainly be sufficient reasons for us to seek the abolition of denominationalism. Clearly denominations are contrary to God's will. Those who are servants of God need to know nothing more.

But some will complain, "Wait a minute. Denominations aren't really so bad in practice. Whatever else can be said, we can live with them. We are able to worship, preach, teach, evangelize, plant churches, share the sacraments, carry out discipline, and support Christian social action in the present denominational structure. Indeed, denominations have often been helpful to the ministry of local congregations, giving them financial assistance, encouragement, fellowship, leadership, mobilizing believers to pray, helping to resolve difficulties. If the system ain't broke, why fix it?"

¹ Students of my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987) will note that these reasons are first normative, then existential, then situational. That fact occurred to me *after* I had written the first three chapters and written the above summary of them.

This kind of talk is, I think, usually a symptom of ignorance or spiritual immaturity or both. It rejects scriptural principle on the basis of essentially pragmatic considerations. Yet it does have some legitimate force. One might agree that denominations are a problem "in principle" (which many mistranslate "in theory") but feel at the same time that since denominationalism is not doing much practical damage the problem may be placed on the back burner. Though God has mandated us to reunite the church, someone might say, we may rightly give that project a lower priority than others that are more immediately pressing.

As I shall indicate later, I do believe that we must make priority judgments even among divine commands, though we certainly may not "prioritize" any of God's commands out of existence as some might prefer in this case. However, I must reject the premise that denominationalism is not doing any "practical" damage. Indeed it is doing a great deal of damage, and the fact that that damage is invisible to so many people makes it all the worse.

Disobeying God always leads to practical damage. Obeying God brings blessing, disobeying him brings curse (Ps. 1). One of my working titles for this book was *The Curse of Denominationalism*. I rejected it as too much of a negative, "downer" type of title, though it certainly had the appropriate kind of shock value. The issue is serious and the church is asleep to it; we need rousing language at times such as these. But even more we need to see the curse up close, the concrete damage that denominationalism does in our midst.

In the next chapter I will discuss the supposed benefits of denominations alluded to in the third paragraph of this chapter. Here, I want to list some very practical *disadvantages* of denominationalism.

1. *Denominationalism has greatly weakened church discipline.* Discipline is one of the traditional "marks of the true church" that I shall discuss in a later chapter. A church without discipline is a church without means of maintaining a united gospel testimony. Scripture requires discipline, which includes teaching, exhorting, rebuking, but which in extreme cases can lead to excommunication (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 2 Tim. 4:1-5). In the first century, when someone was disciplined by the church (granting the exhaustion of all possible appeals) that discipline was respected by all believers. Today, that is no longer the case. Sadly, in most of our churches today there is no formal discipline at all. But even those churches which seek to implement biblical discipline are frequently frustrated by denominationalism. Say that Bill is excommunicated from First Baptist as an unrepentant adulterer. Often, Bill will then be perfectly free to go down the street and attend, say, First Methodist, as a member in good standing.

Part of the problem is that there are no consistent standards of doctrine or morality among our denominations. First Methodist may simply be a more liberal

church than First Baptist. Another part of the problem is that denominationalism hinders communication among churches. First Baptist may conscientiously inform the other local Baptist churches of its action, but they cannot write to all the churches of other denominations, and First Methodist does not receive the message. Bill isn't going to tell them.² Another part of the problem is that denominationalism fosters an ungodly competitiveness, rather than cooperativeness, among churches: First Methodist may be very happy to get someone away from the Baptists, so happy that they don't even trouble to ask the former church about Bill.

Since discipline can be a rather unpleasant business to begin with, and since its purposes are so easily frustrated as in the above example, many churches abandon it altogether, except for preaching and teaching. And without discipline, the whole moral and doctrinal condition of the church of Christ deteriorates. Certainly our denominational divisions must take a good part of the blame for this sad situation.

2. Because of the denominationalism-inspired decline in discipline, *church membership means very little today*.³ People take membership vows to be subject to their brothers and sisters in the Lord, but those vows often mean very little. Members often attend for a few weeks, then disappear without speaking to anyone. They will join other churches without ever bringing their grievances before the church they have left (contra Matt. 18:15ff.). They can get away with this, because denominational division has provided them with many places to go and has (as we noted earlier) broken down communication between churches. So, rather than resolve their grievances in a biblical way, they simply disappear into another denomination, and there is no machinery for finding them and calling them back to their responsibilities. Such people do not perceive the church as having any authority over them, or themselves as having any "one-anothering" responsibility to the body. They have no desire to bear the burdens of the body to which they have sworn loyalty.

Denominations, demand the loyalty of believers to themselves, but they ironically undermine that loyalty which is far more important, the loyalty of believers to their local congregations.

3. Because of denominationalism, there is in the church an *imbalance of Spiritual gifts*. As I indicated earlier, God promises to give his church an

² That scenario may seem implausible, but it has happened often in my experience. Perhaps in a more plausible example Bill would move to the next town, where he is relatively unknown.

³ The situation has become so bad that the very idea of church membership requires defense among some people. Briefly, the defense is this: God calls us to obey our leaders (Heb. 13:17) and to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). These obligations mean nothing if they are not undertaken toward a particular body of believers with their leaders. To undertake such obligations is to take a membership vow. Also, the leaders need to know specifically whom they are responsible to serve (Matt. 20:20-26, Acts 20:28-31); it is not too much for us to allow them to put our names on a list. Such a list, however, is a membership list.

Adequate and full supply of the gifts of the Spirit: leadership, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, showing mercy, etc. (Rom. 12:1-8; cf. 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). He has not, however, made such a promise to denominations. Membership in the church is determined by God's Spirit, as the Lord adds people to his church (Acts 2:47; 13:48). God is also sovereign over the membership of denominations; but he does not guarantee to each denomination an ideal mix of people and gifts. Essentially, denominations tend to be populated by people who have similar interests and backgrounds. Especially today, denominational membership is based less on doctrinal commitment than on ethnic, socio-economic and social factors. Therefore, certain denominations have a disproportionate number of intellectuals, others the salesman-types whom God often uses as effective evangelists, others the big-hearted, generous folk who like to focus on the needs of the poor, others the artistic types who make good organists and choir members.

And often denominational barriers frustrate the communication of these gifts from one denomination to another. A church of one denomination may face formidable barriers in seeking to benefit from the ministry of someone in another denomination, even when the two denominations are very similar in doctrine and practice.

Thus denominations frustrate the expressed purpose of God to provide *all* believers with *all* gifts of the Spirit by giving all believers to one another.

4. Because of denominationalism, *the church lacks common courts to resolve disputes*. Say that Calvary Baptist believes that Trinity Episcopal has been using unbiblical tactics to steal its members. Who can resolve that dispute? It is possible that the Baptist Church may appeal to the Episcopal bishop and obtain some redress. But what if, after all appeals are exhausted, the highest courts of the Baptists and the Episcopalians still disagree? Then the matter must be left unsettled, for there is no common court which has jurisdiction over both churches.^{4,5} Indeed, in most cases, we don't even try to resolve disputes like that, contrary to Scripture's teaching in Matthew 5:23-26; 18:15-20; etc.

This problem also covers the outstanding historical disputes among denominations over doctrine and practice. Shall we baptize infants or not? Or shall each congregation – or each individual – be permitted to do as he pleases? In the first century, if that question had arisen, there would have been courts of the church competent to make a decision for the whole church. Today those courts do not exist. So Episcopalians decide one way, Baptists another way.

⁴ Except, as we mentioned earlier, for the highest court, the court over which the Lord Jesus presides in heaven. But the verdict of that court may come in too late to restore cooperation among the churches in our time.

⁵ Presbyterians should recall my comment in chapter one that the lack of common courts at local, regional and national (even international) levels shows that a truly biblical Presbyterianism has not been practiced in modern times

5. Denominationalism *hardens existing divisions*. In this world, sin will persist until the return of Christ, even among believers (1 John 1:8). Thus there will always be some strifes, some disagreements, some estrangements, among believers. But since in our denominational age there are no common courts to resolve such differences, trans-denominational estrangements can only fester and become worse. Is it not possible that twenty centuries of Spirit-led study of Scripture in a united church might by now have led to some universally plausible consensus on such disputes as infant versus believers' baptism or the nature of human freedom? But the denominations today lack the fullness of the Spirit's gifts, they lack the wisdom of Bible students in other traditions, and they lack common courts. So rather than making progress on these matters, Christians tend instead simply to defend positions taken in the past and to hurl new epithets at their opponents in the other denominations, epithets which must be replied to, and so on it goes. Rather than the church drawing together around the Word of God, its component denominations move further and further apart.

6. Denominational division *makes reconciliation more difficult* — reconciliation, that is, of the estrangements that led to the division. As M'Crie says, "It is easy to divide, but not so easy to unite. A child may break or take to pieces an instrument which it will baffle the most skillful to put together and repair."⁶ Among separated brethren, insults and recriminations multiply. Stories of injuries are retold with more attention to rhetorical force than to accuracy. New decisions are made in each group without consultation with the other, and these often become new sources of controversy, which now cannot really be resolved because of the denominational separation. These new controversies reinforce the separation. Thus, often, denominations remain apart long after the original reason for their separation has disappeared.

7. Denominationalism *creates unholy alliances*. We should not ignore the fact that just as there is a biblical doctrine of church unity, there is also a biblical doctrine of *separation*: separation from evil. Thus ministers often vow to seek not only the "peace and unity" but also the "purity" of the church. Many of our denominations, however, are anything but pure. Their theology is contaminated by liberalism, and often their discipline is too weak to cope with outright immorality. Therefore, Christian believers often find themselves allied ("unequally yoked," as Paul says, 2 Cor. 6:14) to those who have repudiated God's word. Believers' money and efforts go into promoting teaching and lifestyles which in many cases are the exact opposite of biblical Christianity. Thus it is often said that there are greater divisions *within* denominations today than there are *between* denominations. A Bible-believing American Baptist has much more in common with a Bible-believing United Methodist than either has with liberals in his own denomination. So why don't the evangelical Baptists and evangelical Methodists get together and support one another? Why shouldn't they promote one another's mission efforts and literature rather than, in effect, promote

⁶ M'Crie, op. cit., 41f.

missions and literature with which they radically disagree? The answer seems to be denominational loyalty. When denominational loyalty reaches this point, does not God call us to repudiate it? Is it not at this point that Paul's admonition "Therefore come out from them and be separate" has application to professing Christian denominations? However we look at this issue, we must certainly not try to find the solution in a renewed denominational pride. That pride is precisely where the problem lies.

8. Denominationalism *compromises the church's witness to the world*. Jesus prayed, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23). One important reason why Jesus wants his church to be one is that it will thereby be a more effective witness to the unbelieving world. Disunity obviously raises questions about the divine origin of the church. People naturally ask, "If the Gospel is a divine revelation, why are there so many disagreements as to what it means? If Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord of love, why don't his people love one another more? Why all the backbiting, insulting, contending?" Unbelievers have often used the church's divisions to excuse their unbelief. I don't, of course, accept the validity of that excuse; but I very much regret the necessity of having to explain why the church is God's people even though it is so miserably divided.

9. Denominationalism leads to *creedal stagnation*. The ancient church formulated creeds in response to various problems which arose.⁷ The period following the Reformation led to a great many Protestant creeds, and, indeed, to Roman Catholic responses such as the decrees of the Council of Trent. The Roman Catholic Church has continued to publish authoritative documents from time to time, decrees of councils, papal encyclicals on various subjects, episcopal letters. The Eastern Orthodox churches recognize no councils or creeds beyond those of the classic seven ecumenical councils held prior to A.D. 800. Protestant denominations have occasionally published creeds or doctrinal statements even in modern times, but that has been rare, and those documents have not attracted much support outside their original denominations.

Surely there have been major issues before the church in all the ages of its existence. And surely there are many issues in the general society which the church ought to address. The fact that the church has not done so is largely due to the fact that it can no longer speak with a single voice. A creed written by Catholics would have little support among Presbyterians, and so on. Indeed, in the current situation new creeds may be counter-productive to the best interests of the church. The ancient creeds tended to foster unity, drawing the church together to speak with one voice. Today, however, creeds seem more often to attract the criticism of Christians in other bodies. Often they stand in the way of unity: I would oppose any new creed for my own denomination because any such

⁷ If anyone requires a justification for creeds and an account of the best way to use them, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), pp. 225ff., 305ff.

creed would be a barrier to merger with any other denomination. It would be one more thing requiring "discussion" and "negotiation."

Thus, in various ways denominational division discourages creed writing. And that in turn blunts the witness of the church to the world and prevents the establishment of clear standards within the church on current issues. And, since most of the existing creeds are from earlier ages, the church's attention tends to be focused on the past rather than upon the issues which urgently call for attention today.

10. Denominationalism leads to *distorted priorities*. Denominationalism leads Christians to be preoccupied with the affairs of the denomination rather than with the broader concerns of the church. Much energy is devoted to studying the denomination's history, defending the denomination's positions, financing its activities, trying to attract Christians from other bodies into it, showing how bad the other denominations have been. In other words, Christians spend much time and energy on matters that in God's sight are either detrimental to the work of the kingdom or are at best matters of low priority. Thus "majoring in the minors," they develop ingrown outlooks,⁸ focusing on preserving and defending the denomination rather than on bringing unbelievers into the church. Often this process leads to negativist mentalities, in which more energy is put into criticism of other Christians than into the positive proclamation of the Gospel.

11. Denominationalism *leads to superficiality*. Most Christians today take spiritual nourishment only from their particular denominational traditions. Some of these traditions are richer than others, but none is as rich as the tradition encompassing the entire worldwide church throughout history. Many are hungering for something richer than what they have experienced. Some Presbyterians are seeking depth in the traditional liturgies of the Catholic and Orthodox communions. Some Charismatics are seeking a more profound understanding of the Bible and are meeting that need by reading Reformed theology. But all of this is happening in spite of the denominational structure, not because of it. People usually have to go very much against the grain of their fellowships in order to accomplish this. So, the present denominational structure of the church is an impediment to those who would seek greater depth in their Christian lives.

The superficiality exists in many dimensions. I spoke above about worship and theology. Being a theologian, I am particularly struck by the lightweight character of much theology today, as compared with that written in the times, say, of the Puritans, the Reformers, or even of the medieval and post-Reformation scholastics. Surely much of this is due to the growing domination of denominational traditions over theological thought. Here, as in the general life of the church (above, #8), there is a "majoring in the minors" and a

⁸ For a good discussion of this, see C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, Zondervan, 1986).

tendency to labor with past historical issues rather than with those confronting the church today. Also, I note a tendency toward intellectual dishonesty, as theologians engage in special pleading for their own denominational traditions while forcing themselves in spite of actual evidence to find evil in other traditions.

Some have overcome this theological narrowness and have become "ecumenical" theologians, but these are mostly theological liberals who distort the gospel in even more serious ways than the ways noted above.

I am not asking Reformed theologians, for example (such as myself!), to surrender their belief that the Reformed faith is the most consistently scriptural system of doctrine yet devised. I am only suggesting that it is not necessarily a perfect system and we may be able to learn from our brothers and sisters in other traditions. Is it really likely that the Holy Spirit has given such wisdom to one branch of the church so that it will be right about *everything*? Though I love the Reformed faith, and though I believe it to be true on the basis of my current level of knowledge, I do not know all the other forms of Christian theology well enough to say that the Reformed tradition has attained the absolute final truth on every matter. Indeed, I expect to find some theological surprises when I get to heaven. Can we not all seek to be a bit more teachable?

But denominationalism works against us. Most theologians teach in theological seminaries, and those seminaries are expected to prepare students to defend particular denominational traditions. Therefore an "us versus them" mentality develops in the seminaries, and it is not easy for a theologian in such an atmosphere to admit to some defects in his own tradition and to some advantages in someone else's. That leads to superficial theology.

12. This superficiality is naturally connected with *parochialism*. Most denominations are limited to a single country, though the church of the first century was quite explicitly and intentionally transnational. Therefore, most Christians are preoccupied with matters close to home at the expense of a proper focus on the whole world as God's harvest field. Recently the "world Christian" movement has developed, seeking to instill in believers a greater awareness of the needs of countries other than our own. That is all to the good in my view, though I think the world Christians sometimes neglect the diversity of gifts in the body, talking as if all were called to be thoroughly preoccupied with far off lands. But again the problem is made worse by denominationalism. The early Christians were very much aware of the needs of their brothers and sisters in other lands; they were constantly being reminded of it by the apostles, who themselves were leading the missionary movement. It is hard to imagine how any merely national body could stir up equivalent passion for missions.⁹

13. Parochialism, in turn, leads to a *weakening in the worldwide solidarity of Christians*. For there are not only unbelievers in other lands who need to hear

⁹ Miller (op. cit.) also focuses well on this problem area.

the gospel; there are also fellow believers who often need our prayers and support. Of course, we do often pray for those foreign churches where our denominational missionaries labor. But we often forget those of other denominations and traditions. Consider the Roman Catholics of Poland who showed great heroism in the face of terrible opposition by the Communist system. How much did we pray for them in their time of need? Or do we Protestants consider Roman Catholics too far beyond the pale? How about the churches in the Soviet Union, largely Russian Orthodox, Baptist, and Pentecostal? Have those of, say, the Presbyterian tradition adequately upheld these brothers and sisters? Can any of us Christians claim to match the support which American Jews gave to Soviet Jewish dissidents? Many unbelievers would naturally conclude from the facts that Jews love one another far more than Christians do. Do we want that judgment to stand as the last word?¹⁰

14. Denominationalism provokes *unhealthy competition* among denominational groups. Typically we seek to enlarge our own denomination and decrease others by our efforts at church planting and church growth. Often we find ourselves in direct competition: an Orthodox Presbyterian Church competing with a Christian Reformed Church to see who can get the greatest number of local Calvinists; a Baptist church and an Independent Bible Church competing for the local Dispensational population.

A more scriptural outlook, however, is that we desire to plant churches and to see church growth not so we can get a larger share of the population for our own denomination at the expense of another, but so that we may reach more non-Christians for Jesus. In view of our Lord's Great Commission, our concern should be not merely with that portion of the community which belongs to our tradition, but with the community at large, Christian and non-Christian. With that outlook, we can see that there really need be no competition at all, for no denomination can possibly do the whole job. When we see the dimensions of the evangelistic task before us, we will be thankful that there are denominations besides our own to help out. More of this in Chapter Seven.

15. Denominationalism leads to *ungodly pride and snobbery*. We tend to take pride in the accomplishments of our denominations. That is not entirely bad, as we shall see in the next chapter. It becomes bad when that pride leads us to disregard what God is doing in other parts of the church and therefore to look down on Christians from other traditions. Indeed, it is often the case that people from outside a certain denominational tradition are made to feel unwelcome in churches of that denomination. I once visited a church that worshipped according to a much more formal liturgy than did my own church. The people all knew when to stand, sit, respond, kneel, etc. I did not know these things, and no one bothered to inform me. These were not published in the bulletin or anywhere else

¹⁰ After I wrote the above material, God did some wonderful things in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for which I, and I trust all of us, are deeply thankful. I only wish that *my* prayers had been more of a factor in bringing about these changes.

that I could ascertain. I felt very much left out of it all, and I did not discern among the people around me any particular sympathy for my plight. They had their tradition, and it was their church, after all. They knew what they were doing, and if any visitor did not understand, that was too bad for him.

Indeed, sometimes the snobbery is even worse. Since many denominations are based on a common ethnic heritage, visitors who come from a different ethnic heritage often feel left in the cold. Pity the African American who wanders into a Dutch-American church, or the WASP who invades a Swedish-American fellowship. The emphasis on ethnic ties in our nation's churches often borders, at least, on racism.

But if a church is not racist, it is still often in danger of welcoming only those of a particular socio-economic level, those with certain levels of education, etc. Some Church Growth theorists tell us that such relatively homogeneous bodies are the most likely to grow, and so many churches today are *intentionally* geared to reaching only one group of people, classified by ethnicity, economics, education, etc. I am not such a social revolutionary as to insist that these homogeneous units be broken down. Indeed, it is natural that people with common situations and interests make friends with each other; I don't see anything wrong with that. But no one should ever be turned away from a church because of his economic or social status (Jam. 2:1-7). No visitor should ever on that account be unwelcome or unloved.

The homogeneous character of a church is usually a function of its denominational attachment. Presbyterians tend to be wealthier than Baptists, and so on. If there were no denominations, no doubt individual congregations would still be relatively homogeneous. But each upper-middle-class church would be in solidarity with a church, say, a few blocks away which ministered mainly to the poor. And the poor would have a voice in our church courts. The poor, then, would be less easily ignored by the wealthier churches – and vice versa. And there would be less room for the complaint of the liberation theologians that the theology of the west is too much the work of one socio-economic group.

Conclusion

There may be other problems of denominationalism which I have not mentioned. But after this survey, can anyone seriously say that denominationalism does not cause *practical* problems for the church? Can anyone deny that there would be considerable benefits in abolishing denominations?

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