

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 1: The Road To Denominationalism
Chapter 5: Denominations: Why We Love Them

by John M. Frame

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.

One can sympathize somewhat with my argument against denominations up to this point, yet feel very uneasy about it. The uneasiness is, I think, connected with the fact that my argument has not dealt with the *positive* side of denominationalism. After all, most Christians¹ see denominations as good guys, not bad guys, in our warfare for the kingdom of God. As I indicated earlier, denominations give to individual Christians and congregations many benefits, such as financial assistance, encouragement, fellowship, leadership, mobilizing believers to pray, helping to resolve difficulties.

And some have argued beyond this a view known as "pluriformity" or "complementarity:" that denominations are a God-ordained means of accommodating the diversities among believers. In other words, people who like fast, rhythmic music can join denominations which use such music in worship; people who hate such music can join denominations which exclude it. Christians who believe in infant baptism can join Presbyterian churches; Christians who cannot accept that doctrine can join a Baptist church. That way, according to the theory, each denomination is spared from constant internal bickering and everybody is free to follow his conscience, indeed to indulge his preferences. It's a bit like a zoo, in which high fences keep the natural enemies apart and maintain peace for all. Indeed, the denominational fences enable us, on occasion, to speak civilly to Christians of other denominations, even to work with them in some limited ways, without worrying that their heretical ideas will infect our own congregations. Denominationalism therefore allows for amicable, civilized "divorces" among believers.

¹ Independents are an exception to this. Nevertheless, despite their anti-denominational rhetoric, in my vocabulary they are really one-congregation denominationalists.

But as we've seen, God did not establish a zoo, but a church. His plan for dealing with estrangements is not amicable divorce, but mutual discipline *within* the church (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5) (which can, to be sure, sometimes lead to excommunication when a really serious problem cannot otherwise be overcome). We are to be accountable to one another. And the natural result of that accountability is unity of mind (Eph. 4:1-16; Phil. 4:2), or, in some instances, agreeing to disagree in love, within the fellowship of the one true church (Acts 15:37-40; Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8).

Kinds of Diversities

It is important for us to distinguish between different kinds of diversities if we are to evaluate properly the claim that denominations provide the best ordering of diversity.

1. *Diversities Tolerable Within the One True Church*: Certainly God intended the one true church to include much diversity, for we are diverse people – in culture, personalities, spiritual gifts. There is no reason why, had the church remained united, there could not have been wide differences among congregations as to the type of music used, the style of preaching, the types of ministries provided and so on. On many such matters there is room for differences within the one true church. We certainly do not need denominations to provide opportunities to express such diversity.

2. *Intolerable Diversities*: On some other matters, however, there is no room for diversity. If someone is preaching "another gospel" (Gal. 1:6-9), he is under a curse. Such preaching must be excluded from the church. In this case, it certainly would not be sufficient for the heretic to transfer by "amicable divorce" into his own denomination. The church's relationship to those who deny the heart of the gospel should not be at all amicable. From such we are simply to "turn away" (2 Tim. 3:5). We are not to honor them as interdenominational colleagues.

3. *Difficult Cases*: Sometimes, however, the tolerability of a difference is itself a matter of controversy. Take the difference between those who do and those who do not baptize infants. Some might argue that this difference is tolerable: people on both sides of the question recognize people on the other side as fellow believers, holding forth the true gospel. Others, however, argue that the difference is substantial: for since baptism is, among other things, the public entrance of persons into the visible church, differences over the subjects of baptism are necessarily differences over the membership of the church. Infant baptists and believer's baptists disagree, then, as to who is a Christian and who is not. Is it tolerable to have a church that is uncertain as to its own membership?

Personally, I think uncertainty in this area *is* tolerable. I will say more about that in a later chapter. But what I think is rather unimportant. The important

question is, how does God want us to resolve such questions? And the only answer can be, through the courts of the one true church. Only such courts are fully qualified to judge which side is right, and only such courts are fully qualified to determine the limits within which the church may tolerate error. The existence of such problems, therefore, does not in itself necessitate denominational division. Rather, such problems make church unity all the more important. It is hard to imagine how the church will ever resolve such questions until some measure of unity is restored.

Denominational Services

But what of all the good things denominations do for us – the financial assistance, encouragement, fellowship and so on? Well, isn't it obvious that all these things could be done, and in many cases done better, by a united church? Imagine the resources we would have! If a poor family faces a \$500,000 medical bill with no insurance, very few congregations, indeed very few denominations, would be able to afford to give more than token diaconal assistance. But what if we could appeal to *all the Christians in the world* to give assistance? We could more than handle it. Indeed: why should not the church deaconate set up its own insurance program for all Christians and only Christians? The costs, I should think, would be less than commercial insurance, since it would be non-profit, and since the major risk factors (smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, etc.) would be relatively low. And everyone would be taken care of. Denominations cannot afford to think big in that way, but God's church can.²

The same is true for the other alleged benefits of denominational membership. Imagine the new dimensions of Christian fellowship we would experience, befriending fellow believers from all national and socio-economic backgrounds, with a wider variety of personalities and interests than we have known in our denominational fellowships. Imagine the prayer support that could be raised up for those matters which are important to God.

My Team, My Family, My Home

But perhaps you still aren't persuaded. If so, I think I know why. Most likely it is the feeling of uneasiness we have with any radical proposal. One can call it fear of the unknown; or one can be more sympathetic and call it a deep love for the familiar.

² The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, often called "Mormon," is a cult whose teachings are deeply unbiblical. Yet, through tithing and through a unified worldwide organization, they are able to take care of their poor and needy in a way that should put most Christian churches to shame.

A denomination is a kind of home, a place where we can feel comfortable, where we will not be bothered with pressure to make radical changes. It is like a family, a place where we may always be free to give love and to expect the same in return. And it is like a home team, a team which sometimes wins and sometimes loses, but which we stick with through thick or thin. Like teams, homes and families, denominations are never perfect. But they are ours, and they are enormously precious.

Such relationships are easier to form with people who are like ourselves, people with similar interests, abilities, socio-economic status, ethnic background and so on. As I mentioned earlier, most denominations are fairly homogeneous in those respects. It is hard for us to think of leaving such a homogeneous structure and going into some unknown alternative that may not be as pleasant.

As I said once before, I do think that our legitimate need for homogeneity can be met by relatively homogeneous congregations within an overall relatively non-homogeneous church. Such a congregation can certainly play the role of home and family, while offering opportunities for wider fellowship among our universal "extended family."

Can it also play the role of "home team?" That is, perhaps, the rub. So much of our denominational life is structured according to "us vs. them." It's West vs. East, Protestant vs. Catholic, Presbyterian vs. Episcopal, Dispensationalist vs. covenant theology, charismatic vs. non-charismatic, anabaptist vs. paedobaptist, even "our kind of Baptist" vs. "their kind of Baptist." Some of this is a legitimate attempt to distinguish what one believes to be true doctrine from its counterfeits. But it can mislead believers into thinking that their main warfare is with other Christians. On the contrary, the great gulf is not between anabaptists and paedobaptists, or between Presbyterians and Episcopalians, but between belief and unbelief, between Christ and the evil one.

I do honestly hope that the Presbyterian form of government will eventually prevail in the church over the Episcopal and Congregational forms. You may hope that won't happen. But those concerns, both yours and mine, must be secondary to the prayer of our heart, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus," a prayer for the soon coming of God's righteous kingdom which will rid the world of all evil. In my judgment, denominationalism tends to influence us to reverse this priority.

Our home team, like our family and home, should be nothing less than the one true church. That church is the only institution among human beings which is guaranteed to prevail over its adversaries. We cannot be sure that any denomination will prevail over the others; we can be sure that Jesus' church will triumph. We should get used to rooting more for the *church* and less for our particular denominations.

Toward a Balanced Denominational Loyalty

Does all of this mean that there is no place for denominational loyalty? Must we discontinue all support of our denominations and instead work for their demolition? I think not. Rather, we should support them and work for their demolition at the same time.

Denominations are not the church, but the church is in them and they in the church. They are certainly not God's first choice as a means of governing his church, but they are better than nothing. And denominational officers, whether called pastors, elders, bishops, or deacons, deserve our allegiance because they are not merely denominational officers, but also officers of the church, who God has raised up. We should continue to pray for them and to support them with our gifts and talents. Denominational missionaries are missionaries of the church, and in most cases they deserve our support.

Furthermore, of course, many of us have taken vows to be subject to the denominational bodies of which we are members. A vow is a very serious commitment between ourselves and God. We have no right to break those vows, except when keeping them would force us to disobey God.

Another point is that many of us belong to the denominations we belong to because we conscientiously believe in some or all of that denomination's distinctive teachings and practices. If conscience so constrains us, it will also constrain us to pray and work for the triumph of those distinctives in the church at large. As a conscientious Presbyterian, it is only consistent for me to pray, work and hope for the triumph of Presbyterianism. And I realize that conscientious Episcopalians and Congregationalists must also pray, work and hope for the triumph of their convictions. That is one legitimate form of denominational loyalty.

Indeed, even denominational pride is not entirely wrong; but it needs to be brought into focus. When I was a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), I was very proud of what God had done through that body. Though it was a tiny denomination, it boasted the leadership of a remarkable number of the leading scholars in the evangelical church, men like J. Gresham Machen, Cornelius Van Til, Edward J. Young, Meredith G. Kline, John Murray, R. B. Kuiper, Edmund P. Clowney, Harvie M. Conn, Jay Adams. Evangelicals of many other denominations looked to these men for theological leadership, and I was pleased. I still am pleased at that fact, though I now belong to another denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

The PCA is remarkable too. It recently boasted the fastest growing missionary force of any denomination. It, too, has included a remarkable proportion of ministers recognized as leaders throughout the evangelical world: D. James Kennedy, R. C. Sproul, James Montgomery Boice, the late Francis

Schaeffer, Arthur Glasser, Edmund P. Clowney, George Grant, John H. Gerstner, and many others.³ I will boast of the PCA, and I will also boast of the OPC! And of the Reformed Baptists (Al Martin and Walter Chantry are among the best preachers ever), the Missouri Synod Lutherans who courageously purged their denomination of theological liberalism, and all the rest. It is right to rejoice in God's gifts to our denominations because these are also God's gifts to the one, true church.

I boast of the OPC's steadfast adherence to its doctrinal standards, but not because it happened in the OPC. I boast of that because it happened in the one, true church; in this time and place, by the grace of God, the one, true church was steadfast. (The reference to grace, of course, is important. "Let no one boast about men," 1 Cor. 3:21. "He that boasts, let him boast in the Lord," 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17.)

So denominational loyalty is not entirely a bad thing. It just needs to be brought into balance. Presbyterians ought to be good Christians first, good Presbyterians second, without neglecting either loyalty. They should be good Presbyterians because their Presbyterian denominations are part of the one, true church. But they should be good Presbyterians *second* because our first loyalty is always to God and to that one, true church which he founded.

Methodists ought to be faithful to their Methodist churches but should be seeking for ways and opportunities to eliminate the separate existence of Methodism. We ought to love our denominations while seeking to destroy them. A paradox? No, not really. Perhaps "destroy" is not the best word. On the day when, God willing, all the denominations are re-absorbed into the one, true church, nothing of value needs to be destroyed. All that is good and blessed about our denominations should continue and be raised to a higher level. The only destruction should be of ungodly pride, false doctrine, division, etc., not of those qualities which really make our denominations lovable.

Indeed, for many, perhaps all of us, denominational loyalty *requires* us to seek the reunion of the church of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church, as its name implies, places a very high premium on catholicity, the universality of the church, and it now reaches out to its "separated brethren." Anglican Episcopalianism also aspires to catholicity, to welcoming Christians of many emphases and traditions. Calvin was one of the strongest ecumenists among the Reformers (following his predecessors Zwingli and Oecolampadius), as was the Lutheran Melancthon. Modern Calvinists and Lutherans must continue to work for unity if they are to be true to their own heritage. John Wesley worked with Christians of many different backgrounds and had no intention of starting a new Methodist denomination.

³ It is interesting to note that the "famous names" of the OPC are primarily theologians, while those of the PCA are primarily pastors and popular teachers. That says something about the difference in character, indeed the difference in spiritual gifts, between the two groups.

Congregationalists and Independents have been historically strong critics of denominationalism. Pentecostals often rejoice at how the gifts of the Spirit draw together Christians of different backgrounds. When the denominations are most true to their traditions, they are most ecumenical. But when they allow themselves to be distracted by pride and denominational chauvinism, when they are ruled by the instinct for self-preservation rather than by the self-sacrificial spirit of Jesus, then they erect barriers to reunion. We need to be *better* Episcopalians, better Presbyterians, better Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Pentecostals, Independents, and whatever else there be.

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.