



## *The Church, the Denominations, and the Body<sup>1</sup>*

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David Barrett, the Anglican scholar, in his famed *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982) says that there are 20,800 denominations in the world (p. v). These are increasing every year as Christianity spreads into more and more peoples, classes, tribes, and castes. The number of denominations will unquestionably increase. What does this say to the tremendous drive for denominations to unite, thus, structurally speaking, making one Church? To phrase it theologically, What does our Lord's declaration, "I will build my church," say to this multiplicity of denominations? Must the great goal today be a wiping out of these denominational divisions of the Church which pit one denomination against another? Must not a central concern of all denominations be to work toward a single Church of Christ?

The drive toward creating such a Church has been notable in the past. Twenty years ago eight major denominations in the United States resolved to form one great united church with possibly 35 million members. We read much about COCU, Churches of Christ Uniting. My own interest in the matter was greatly sharpened when in 1954 I traveled across Africa from east to west visiting as many mission stations as I could in order to examine the degree to which the tribes were actually becoming Christian. There were no hotels in most of that territory. I had to ask for hospitality at whatever mission station I came to. Sometimes these were Anglican stations. When my genial hosts would inquire which church in America I belonged to and I told them the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, they would respond cheerfully, "Oh, one of those American sects."

That same summer shortly after my arrival in America my board, the United Christian Missionary Society of Indianapolis, sent me to Evanston, Illinois, where I attended the second Assembly of the World Council of Churches. While there I heard prominent ministers of my Church frequently speak of the sects. They did not mean themselves. They meant the Baptists, the Nazarenes, and the Pentecostals! I was forced to consider whether the Church really consists of one great central, structurally united denomination

<sup>1</sup>Editor's Note: This article was originally published in the missions magazine *Global Church Growth* (vol. 28, no. 2) in 1990. This publication has since gone out of print. McGavran's article is re-printed here in full because of the enduring significance of McGavran's reflection on this subject and its relevance to the missiological issues raised in this volume.

and many fringe groups or sects, or whether, as the Christian faith spreads around the world in thousands of different segments of the population, it *necessarily* assumes many different forms, all parts of the true Church. Each is suited to its own segment of society and the structure and development of its nation. Therefore it is structurally different from the others. Sometimes these differences are minute, sometimes substantial. *Are all of these denominations integral parts of the one true Church, or are they sects outside the true Church?*

During the years 1965–85 it has been my privilege to be part of an interdenominational theological seminary. Men and women from more than 80 denominations have attended our School of World Mission. They have come from the United States, England, Germany, Nigeria, Korea, and many other countries. The position of the School of World Mission faculty has been that all these denominations are validly church. Each member of the faculty, coming from a different denomination himself, also was inclined to believe that these other denominations, though *validly* Christian, were not quite as *correctly* Christian as his own.

From these experiences and many others I find the conviction growing that just as my body has a great many dissimilar parts, so the body of Christ has many dissimilar parts. Just as my fingernails do not resemble my eyes, and my tongue does not resemble my knees, so among denominations there are some significant differences. Yet they are all parts of the body of Christ. If they believe in Jesus Christ as God and Savior and the Bible as their ultimate rule of faith and practice, they are parts of Christ's body. Whether they observe Saturday or Sunday as the day of worship, eat meat or do not, or believe in apostolic succession or not *does not exclude them from the body*. It simply means that they are different parts of the body.

Furthermore, as one looks at the worldwide body realistically, he sees that in some denominations more than half of the members are college graduates whereas in some others more than nine-tenths of the members are illiterate. The average income of members in some denominations in America is \$20,000 a year and in India the average income of others is a hundred dollars. The worldwide Church spreads among very different kinds of people and necessarily assumes many different structural forms. Some valid Churches have a congregational form of government, others presbyterian, and still others episcopalian. Yet they are all equally parts of Christ's body.

With this by way of introduction, we can now pose a most important question. Is the Church an organism in which in 1982 there were 20,800 different parts—denominations? Or is it composed only of such parts as confess and believe that they are structurally one? The Roman Catholics would, of course, vote for the second position. The documents of Vatican II, notably in Chapter 2, "The People of God," state very clearly and repeatedly that there is only one ecclesial structure which can be called the Church. It is that founded on "Peter the Rock." While other ecclesial structures are called churches by some and contain many parts of the true faith and may be honored by God to the salvation of souls, Chapter 2 states clearly,

“Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made itself by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in her could not be saved.” The document moves on to state that God the Omnipotent may indeed save some who belong to other religions if He wishes but this in no way diminishes the status of the one true Church.<sup>2</sup> This Church is ruled by the pope at Rome and his bishops. A true bishop is one who has been ordained by three other properly ordained Roman Catholic bishops who have laid hands on his head. Only those are true priests or ministers who are ordained by a properly ordained bishop who can transmit the power which “Peter the Rock” passed down to his successor bishop in Rome. Roman Catholics hold that since the Church was established by Christ on Peter the Rock and since Peter’s power was transferred to the bishop of Rome by the laying on of Peter’s hands and by that bishop to all succeeding bishops, therefore there is only one True Church. The true leaders of the Church have all been empowered by apostolic succession.

As opposed to this Roman Catholic view of the Church, the general Protestant view has been that these matters of church organization and ordination divide various parts of the body, but they do not say that because I am an eye I maintain that arms and legs and hair and skin are no parts of the body. Unfortunately some branches of the Church do maintain, sometimes quite vigorously, that they are the only true Church. All others are not church at all but mere denominations or sects. This was the position of my genial Anglican hosts in Africa in 1954, though they were too courteous to express it so bluntly.

As one sees congregations multiplying all across Africa south of the Sahara, in China, Korea, Guatemala, and many other parts of the world, he also sees that men and women become Christians in denominations of considerably different conformations. Furthermore, as Christianity spreads around the world, and a quarter and then a half of the population of Asia become Christian and the Christian faith spreads into thousands and tens of thousands of segments of populations in all lands, the growth of Branches of the Church markedly different from each other is certain to occur. Indeed, there can be no great growth without a mighty multiplication of minor differences. Consequently, all Christians, in the interest of loving relationships with other Christians, should maintain that the body of Christ does indeed take form in many different ways and that each of these ways is validly Christian. While they are *validly* Christian, they are not *correctly* Christian. They do not hold to interpretations of the Scripture which are held by some careful students of the Word.

How then can we promote loving relationships among all these parts of the body? How can we keep these different segments of the body from competing with each other, taking each other’s members, and denouncing

<sup>2</sup>*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), 32-35.

each other? How can we appear to be one body if we allow such different views of the Church and—to *our minds*—“misinterpretations” of various biblical passages? The only answer adequate to these questions is to maintain that, provided any part of the Church believes in Jesus Christ as God and Savior and the Bible as its only rule of faith and practice, it may hold variant opinions in regard to all other doctrines. Provided that all doctrines are truly based on scriptural authority, they may be held.

For example, the doctrine on believer’s baptism voiced by evangelical, Bible-believing Lutherans will not be the same as that voiced by Bible-believing Baptists. Each branch of the Church will defend its own baptism doctrine on scriptural grounds. Each will believe the other to be wrong. Nevertheless, Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Baptists ought to believe that the other denomination is a genuine part of the body of Christ. Similarly, many Branches of the Church will use only fermented wine in the communion service. Others will hold that fermented wine (unquestionably that which our Lord used on Thursday night) today is immoral. Only unfermented grape juice should be used. “Our Branch of the Church,” it will say, “will not use fermented wine. To do so would encourage widespread use of alcoholic liquors.” Just as in the human body there are many dissimilar parts, so in the body of Christ there are many dissimilar parts. Some denominations (Churches) were established hundreds of years ago in a feudalistic society. Others are today being established in democratic or socialistic societies. Their convictions concerning church government are bound to differ.

Some object that the acceptance of varying interpretations of Scripture can lead easily to heresy and the formation of denominations which are really not Christian. This is certainly true. On the other hand, the Bible does permit different groups of Christians to hold different opinions about many subjects. Let us consider two denominations. Both of them are equally valid denominations (Branches of the true Church). Both of them believe that Christ is indeed God and Savior, and the Bible is indeed the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. Yet one, on biblical grounds, forms doctrines which unquestionably differ from those held by the other which also forms its doctrines on biblical grounds. No heresy is involved. Where to draw the line between different opinions which are clearly heretical and those which are demonstrably biblical is and will always remain a moot question.

Among the 20,800 denominations which Dr. Barrett lists are unquestionably some which would be ruled out of the true Church by others. While different passages of the Bible may be understood differently by different groups of people, certain other doctrines are clearly non-biblical. They cannot be justified by the Bible. That the body has many different parts must not be so widely interpreted that it includes branches which incorporate as essential doctrines clearly non-biblical ideas. The body must be the body of Christ, not that of Venus, Marx, or Krishna.

A church may differ structurally very considerably from other Branches

and yet be a true Branch. This branch may have five leaves on it. That branch may have 500. This branch grafted on to the true vine may bear white grapes. That branch may bear purple grapes, and other branches may bear grapes of varying size, shape, and color. But they are all part of the true vine. They are all true branch. That is, they are true Church (denomination). Opposed to this view of the Church is that which holds that in the true vine there should be only one Branch. That alone is the true Church. Structural unity is the test. Uniformity of doctrine must be maintained. One set of national and indeed international officers must guide the entire "Church."

All agree that structural unity has some advantages. It is in many cases more economical to manage. Since it speaks for many more people, it has more political clout. Its leaders have greater resources at their disposal to do what they consider necessary. Above all it typifies by its structure one Church. The Lord Jesus does not tell us that He is establishing His churches. He does not speak of having many bodies. He said, "I am going to build my church upon this rock"—the confession of Me as Messiah and only Son of the living God." All these facts make a church possessing structural unity attractive. All this makes a multiplicity of Branches of the true Church seem of dubious value. On the other side, however, when one clearly perceives that mankind exists as a vast mosaic of peoples (plural), it becomes immediately apparent that any *structural* unity which maintains that the universal Church has one set of leaders, follows one pattern, speaks with one voice, has one name, and has one hymnal and one liturgy is an impossible concept. Not only must there be multitudinous parts of the true body but also multitudinous leaders who will hold different opinions as to what the Bible requires to be done under their particular circumstances.

For example, the degree of pastoral training needed in a denomination will be one thing in a university community in a highly developed nation and quite a different thing in the illiterate nomadic section of the Turkana tribe in the desert of northern Kenya. We live today on a planet which many believe is moving rapidly toward one world, where all receive equal remuneration, education, employment, and leisure. The old idea of highly privileged societies and savage tribes separated by enormous geographical differences has passed away. To some Christian thinkers, therefore, the idea is most appealing that in this one world, where there is without question one gospel, there must also be one structurally united church. All its parts must bear the same name and be guided by the same set of officers.

In contradistinction to this appealing view, however, there must be placed the unquestioned fact that in this one world, where airplane travel does bring every part within a few hours of every other part, there are enormous social, educational, economic, and political differences which seem likely to continue. With the birthrate unchecked in so many parts of the world, the assurances given by so many scientists that this world will be populated by eight billion people within the lifetime of many now living on earth seems quite reasonable. The inhabitants of a section of planet earth populated by

2,000 people to the square mile cannot live as full a life as those where each square mile is populated by 100. Those in drought-stricken areas cannot live as full lives as those who live in fertile, well watered plains. Nations at peace will live much better than those which engage in constant wars. Norwegians are likely to live much better than Cambodians. As the church takes shape in these very different populations, any structural unity seems an impossible dream.

Supporting this view is the fact that there are in the world today more than 20,000 denominations—Branches of the Church. As the gospel spreads into many segments of society in China, India, the Muslim world, and secularized atheistic multitudes in Europe and North America, it seems certain that the Church will take many forms. Each denomination would like to see all new congregations hold firmly to its own doctrinal statements and ecclesiastical forms. Presbyterians would be delighted to see all newly formed congregations soundly Presbyterian, and Pentecostals would like to see them soundly Pentecostal. Every Branch of the true church would like to see the absolute truth of its position recognized by everyone! But any such outcome is dubious. Quite possibly the 20,000 denominations will in the next fifty years become 40,000 reasonably Christian denominations.

There is, to be sure, a strong counteracting force. The inspired, authoritative Bible cannot for long be interpreted in 40,000 ways. The Bible itself, as it is studied, understood, and obeyed, will eliminate many questionable interpretations. Varying opinions will diminish. This will be particularly true as nations develop and levels of income and education become fewer. As population control is practiced in nation after nation, the various segments of society will unquestionably grow more and more like one another. They will then read the Bible from more and more the same point of view. How fast this force will operate is unclear. It may be that in the next thirty years the 20,000 denominations will diminish to 12,000. Were this to happen, all 12,000 should be considered as genuine parts of the body of Christ.

Facing this probable course of events, what should be the position of practicing Christians of each Branch of the Church toward other Branches of the Church? *We are talking here about valid Branches.* We should accept the fact that the body of Christ takes shape in many different ecclesiastical structures. As long as these are valid Branches of the Church, each Christian should live comfortably with the fact that they are not as correctly Christian as his own! Some of these Branches will multiply exceedingly. Some will remain static. But all Branches of the Church which are pleasing to the triune God are truly Church.