

A DEFENSE OF DENOMINATIONALISM: ANSWERING THE CRITICS
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The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed aptly describes the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” The church is *one* in that it is united as *the* body of Christ. The church is *holy* because God has set it apart from the world. The church is *catholic* in that it universally includes all true believers in Christ, from all over the world, and from every era. The church is *apostolic* in that it has been built upon the foundation of Christ and His apostles and is sustained thereupon by the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. On the surface, this unity and universality confessed by every orthodox believer seems to run counter to what we find when we look around “Christendom” today. Divisions upon divisions, sects upon sects, splinter groups upon splinter groups—schism seems to be the only consistently resounding mark of the visible church. As Thomas M’Crie proclaims, “It is easy to divide, but not so easy to unite.”¹ The complexity of this issue, in depth and breadth, is nigh on irreducible. In studying it, one will quickly realize that any attempt to effect positive change in this area would be to take upon oneself a task similar to that of unscrambling an egg. This brings many questions to the fore. Is the status quo acceptable? Is there a better way? How do denominations fit into all this? We must admit that denominationalism is often part of the problem. But I would posit that, if approached properly and with an earnest desire for genuine unity, it can be part of the solution.

What I hope to do here is to offer a sound defense of denominationalism. To this end, I will look at the issue from three different angles. Firstly, I will consider the negative elements of denominationalism and its ecumenist opposition. Then, I will offer a

¹ Thomas M’Crie, *The Unity of the Church* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989), 41f.

critique of common non-denominationalist and anti-denominationalist arguments. Lastly, I will try to cast some positive light on denominationalism, charting a biblically-guided path between an overly pessimistic realism and an exceedingly optimistic idealism.

We begin by looking at some common arguments against denominationalism. That the church has become so divided against itself that it can hardly stand is a sad testimony to the effects of the fallen condition that remain in Christians, even after conversion. In all cases, denominational splits are the result of sin on the part of either one or both of the parties involved. Whether right or wrong, we often maintain a defensive posture toward those outside our denominational walls. John Frame opines that denominations “are something of a sacred cow in Christian circles.” He notes that we often see them as a sports fan sees his favorite team. “To others,” says Frame, “the denomination is not so much a team as it is a warm, cozy place to call home.”² But Christ Jesus prayed, in His high priestly prayer, for the unity of the church, “that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you [the Father] sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (Jn. 17:23b, ESV). Paul, appealing to the church at Corinth, wrote to urge “that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

The most damning argument against denominations is that they are schismatic and unbiblical. But this argument wrongly assumes that there is never a good reason to divide. It also wrongly assumes that denominationalism has the same goals as, and is synonymous with, sectarianism.³ Edmund Clowney writes, “Sectarianism denies

² John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 16.

³ I am not dealing here with the “sectarianism” of churches not aligned with the “establishment” (state) church, such as was found in 17th century England. In this sense, we are all sectarian by default.

catholicity, for by its refusal to recognize other communions as true churches of Christ, it denies the fellowship that Christ requires.”⁴ If a group refuses to recognize orthodox denominations as true churches of Christ, it is not rightly denominated a “denomination;” rather, it is a sect, or a cult. “Denominationalism is the opposite of sectarianism.”⁵ Denominationalism does not deny the spiritual catholicity of the church.

We must also set aside arguments for organizational catholicity and ecumenism for ecumenism’s sake. R.B. Kuiper calls it “extreme unionism”⁶ and gives two examples of it: the Roman Catholic Church and the modernist churches of the 20th century. The Roman church, assuming a monopoly on the truth, boldly proclaims that it is the one and only true church and that other churches must repent and return to it. On the other hand, the modernists (as do their successors) sought unity at the expense of the truth. “[B]ehind the modernist plea lurks the flippant notion that doctrinal differences among denominations are negligible, that doctrines, in fact, do not greatly matter.”⁷ The social gospel of the “here and now” takes precedence in this mindset, which is grounded in theological liberalism. They readily would have organizational unity at the price of the eradication of the church. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 3:15 (KJV) that the church is “the pillar and ground of the truth.” A church without the truth is no church at all.

Secondly, we must deal with the various flavors of non-denominationalism and anti-denominationalism that exist today. Anti-denominationalism is perhaps most overtly

⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 97.

⁵ Winthrop S. Hudson, “Denominationalism As a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth Century Conception,” *Church History* 24 (1955): 32–50.

⁶ R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

represented by the various branches of the Restoration movement.⁸ Historically speaking, the churches in these movements so opposed the denominationalism in mainline Protestantism that—unlike the ecumenical liberals—they sought to close themselves off to outsiders. They became autonomous and exclusivistic in relation to other Christians. Anti-denominationalists “will vow that they have no use for denominationalism, but the fact is that they would carry it to the nth degree, for they want every particular church, every single congregation, to be a denomination by and unto itself.”⁹

A novel spin in this line of thought comes from the non-denominationalists of our day. Pastors and churches boast their non-denominationalism as a sort of marketing ploy in their opposition to the divisiveness of denominationalism.¹⁰ Their tendency toward an outright rejection of creeds leaves them disconnected from the historical faith and floating in a “never land” of theological chaos. Many in the conglomeration that is the non-denominationalist camp have a real desire for genuine Christian unity. They believe wholeheartedly that tearing down all denominational walls will bring their ideal to fruition. But this is a *pium desiderium*, an idealism that is unrealizable in this world. Jeremiah Burroughs declares, “If we stay for peace and love till we come to the unity of the faith in all things, we must stay, for ought I know, till we come to another world.”¹¹ Whether or not their idealism is feigned, it is clear that, unawares, the non-denominationalists fall into the same trap as the anti-denominationalists. They are the

⁸ The Restoration movement is not a monolith, but generally is thought to include the Stone-Campbell movement, Mormonism, and, by some, Millerism (from which came the Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses). These groups formed concurrent with and subsequent to the Second Great Awakening.

⁹ Kuiper, *Glorious Body of Christ*, 47.

¹⁰ E.g. Calvary Chapel’s belief statement: http://www.calvarychapel.com/what_we_believe.cfm [accessed November 27, 2009].

¹¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Irenicum, to the Lovers of Truth and Peace: Heart-Divisions Opened in the Causes and Evils of Them* (London: Robert Dawlman, 1653), 256. He quotes Eph. 4:13 to support this statement.

ultimate schismatics; because they are, implicitly if not explicitly, denominations by and unto themselves, with no real connection or unity with other ecclesiastical bodies. A serious study of Acts 15 will prove this arrangement to be wholly unbiblical.

We are left then, in the final analysis, to look for solace in denominationalism. The Scriptures require the unity of the church, both organizationally and spiritually. A helpful distinction held in the Reformed tradition is that of the *visible* church, which consists of all professing believers and their children, and the *invisible* church, which “consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head.”¹² God alone knows all those whom He has united spiritually. So what are we to do for organizational unity? The determinations made here about the extreme unionists (both Roman Catholic and liberal), and the extreme disunity of non-denominationalists and anti-denominationalists leave us to search for a middle way. I would argue, then, that denominations are a necessary consequence of the Scriptural requirement to be organizationally unified. They are little more than a circumstantial necessity, comparable to our local congregations setting a particular place and time at which we will meet for worship each week.¹³ Denominations themselves are not mandated explicitly in Scripture. But, to the extent that they help us maintain some semblance of unity,¹⁴ orderliness, church discipline, etc., they are helpful and necessary to the church universal. Since the ideal of perfect unity is unattainable on this side of eternity, we must ask, “If not denominations, then what?” Denominationalists do not

¹² From the Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.1.

¹³ E.g. Scripture does not tell us to meet at 11:00 A.M. for worship. I am indebted to my pastor, the Rev. Brenton C. Ferry, for this helpful comparison.

¹⁴ This unity is not only organizational. Likeminded believers can have confessional unity with other believers across the globe as members of a denominational church.

deny the spiritual unity of all believers in Christ; nor, do we shirk our Christian duty for genuine organizational unity. If we consider Acts 15 once again, we realize that this is, after all, an ecclesiological matter. It is important that we get our ecclesiology right. Denominations work to this end.

“Schism is sinful division. To leave one denomination in order to found another is an extremely serious matter, and it may be done only for compelling reasons.”¹⁵ We must look forward to that Day when we will be perfectly united together with our Lord (cf. Eph. 4:13). Until then, we must endeavor to preserve unity in the church, but never at the cost of the truth. We must not allow schism for petty reasons. We must seek greater unity within the bounds of orthodoxy. We must serve the Lord within our denominational contexts, with “denominational honesty and honor.”¹⁶ In this way, we can keep ourselves from the extremes on either side, avoiding ecumenism for the sake of ecumenism and division for the sake of division—all to the glory of God.

¹⁵ Kuiper, *Glorious Body of Christ*, 44. Some biblical reasons for separation and disassociation (both personally and corporately) can be found in Mt. 18:17; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:11–13; Gal. 1:8–9; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14–15; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 3:5; Tit. 3:10; 2 Jn. 10. Such warnings are mitigated, of course, by the commands to unity.

¹⁶ W.G.T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 152ff. Shedd writes, “Denominational honesty consists, first, in a clear unambiguous statement by a Church of its doctrinal belief; and, second, in an unequivocal and sincere adoption of it by its members.”