Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 32 · Number 4 · October 2008

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Breaking with Cyprian's Paradigm:
Evangelicals, Ecclesiological Apathy, and Changing Conceptions of Church Unity

George W. Harper

MY WIFE AND I ARE career missionaries. From 1994 until 2005 we served in the Philippines, where I taught church history and historical theology, initially in a seminary and later in a graduate program run by a seminary consortium. Not long before we left that country, I received a phone call from one of my former students, 'Juan de la Cruz' (the Philippine counterpart to 'John Doe'). A year earlier, Juan had received his Th.M. from the consortium; I had been his thesis advisor, so I had got to know him quite well. He was an ordained minister in a small denomination that had been planted in the Philippines thirty years earlier by foreign (but non-American) missionaries, and he was a member of the faculty of their semi-nary, located in a town several hours' drive south of Manila, as well as the pastor of a small congregation that he himself had planted.

Juan said he was calling to ask for my advice. He was very unhappy at the behaviour of several of the foreign missionaries who controlled his seminary's board of trustees. According to him, those missionaries had taken a number of actions that violated the school's bylaws, and, try as he might, he had been unable to persuade any of his denomination's Filipino leadership to take a stand against what was being done. He had responded, he said, by resigning his position at the seminary and surrendering his ordination in the denomination. He really felt he had no choice. His congregation had withdrawn from the denomination as well, they had asked him to stay on as pastor, and he was in the process of organizing a new denomination. He had already recruited a number of other

George W. Harper serves with Action International Ministries as Professor of Christian History and Theology at Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia and taught with the Asia Graduate School of Theology-Philippines. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA) holding a PhD (Boston University) and MDiv (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary). He has published A People So Favored of God: Boston's Congregational Churches and Their Pastors, 1710-1760 *(2007) and articles in journals such as* New England Quarterly, Calvin Theological Journal, *and* Journal of Asian Mission. *His last article in* Evangelical Review of Theology *appeared in Volume 30:4 (October 2006).*

ministers, including several whose prior ecclesiastical affiliations were quite different. He said he wanted my opinion about this, but it was clear that what he really hoped for was my blessing. Should I have given it to him?

According to another of my former students, 'Jaime de la Estrelya', the answer to that question is, Absolutely not! Several years before Juan, Jaime had also received his Th.M. from the seminary consortium; as with Juan, I had been his thesis advisor and got to know him quite well. He was a member of a prominent Pentecostal denomination, and the subject of his thesis was the sectarianism that Philippine Pentecostals often display in their dealings not only with non-Pentecostal churches but even with one other. Why, he asked, are there so many such groups, with most of their clergy viewing the clergy of other Pentecostal denominations not as brothers and sisters in Christ and colleagues in ministry, but as rivals fishing from the same pool of potential converts? Can such competition possibly be justified?

In a word, no, insisted Jaime. In fact, he went so far as to argue that the mere existence of multiple denominations, each with its own distinct leadership and discrete authority structure, is a standing affront to Christ's prayer in John 17:21 that we might be one, just as Christ and the Father are one, and thus serves as a hindrance to our testimony on behalf of the gospel. Is Jaime correct?

I worked very hard to persuade him to soften his language. I pointed out that if he followed through on the logic of his position, he might end up a Roman Catholic—something that would give pause to any Filipino evan-gelical. But the question remains. Is our membership in so many individual denominations and independent con-gregations fundamentally incompatible with our membership in the one body of Christ? Is it a sin to be a Presbyterian or a Baptist or a Methodist or even a Catholic and not just a Christian? And does our tendency to think of evangelicalism as a movement that cuts across all these denominational lines rather than standing apart from them imply that our movement suffers from a sort of ecclesiological myopia? Or is something else at work?

I Denominational Proliferation and Church Unity

If structural pluriformity in Christ's body is indeed a sin, then we are in serious trouble, and the problem can only get worse. Scholars estimate that in the US today there are more than five hundred denominations and quasi-denominational organizations, with that number constantly on the rise.[1] Is this a particularly or even uniquely

---

1 Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, 4 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977-1979), includes articles on 546 Christian bodies in the US (my count). J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 3rd. ed. (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1989), includes articles on 1588 religious bodies, including non-Christian organizations (see p. xv), an increase of almost a third over the book's first edition, published in 1978; Melton notes that some of the increased count is due to expanded coverage but some is due to the continuing establishment of new groups (see p. xi).

American problem? Such has been the claim of a number of scholars, most of them stressing that from their point of view it certainly is a problem. For example, Charles Clayton Morrison, the long-time editor of *The Christian Century*, referred scornfully to what he called the US 'ecclesiastical zoo' and claimed that 'no other country presents a comparable picture'.[2]

However, the fact is that even if the multiplication of denominations is a problem—and I will return to this point later—there is nothing particularly American about it. David Barrett and his colleagues who prepared the *World Christian Encyclopedia* estimate that in 1970 there were already 10,680 'traditional denominations' worldwide, along with 15,670 'paradenominations and networks', yielding a total of 26,350 Christian organizations. In 2000, they estimate, there were 11,830 'traditional denominations' worldwide, along with 21,990 'paradenominations and networks', yielding a total of 33,820 Christian organizations.[3] This is an increase of 7,470 organizations, 28[3] percent, in just thirty years, with the bulk of the proliferation in places like sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia where the Christian community is growing very rapidly.

In fact, the multiplication of denominations seems to be an inevitable concomitant of the renewal and expansion of the church. So if denominations' mere existence is indeed a kind of 'plague',[4] their rapid reproduction must represent a kind of spiritual contagion, and we evangelicals who pray for the church's revival and work for the spread of the gospel would also be praying and working, albeit inadvertently, for the spread of what amounts to a deadly ecclesiastical pestilence. But are we?

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that what might be called the epidemiological understanding of denominationalism is almost taken for granted by the Roman Catholic magisterium. For example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes the existence of large communities 'separated from full communion with the Catholic Church' but insists that the 'ruptures' which have produced them 'do not occur without human sin'.[5] Similarly, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's recent declaration, *Dominus Iesus*, describes what it sees as the demonstrable 'lack of unity among Christians' as 'a *wound* for the Church; not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but "in that it hinders the com-

---

2 Charles Clayton Morrison, *The Unfinished Reformation* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1953), pp. 2, 3.
3 David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions, AD 30-AD 2200*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:10. They define a denomination as 'any agency consisting of a number of congregations or churches aligning themselves with it' (1:27) and a paradenomination as 'a recent network of churches that is becoming a new denomination but resisting denominationalist shortcomings' (1:29).

4 Albert C. Outler, *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 11.
5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), §817.

plete fulfilment [sic] of her universality in history'".[6]

Also predictably, this perspective has been embraced by conciliar and ecumenical Protestants committed to structural (re)union. For example, the By-Laws of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission simply assume that the lack of such union is incompatible with John 17:21, stating that Faith and Order's aim is 'to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, in order that the world might believe'.[7] H. Richard Niebuhr's description of denominationalism as 'an unacknowledged hypocrisy' that reflects Protestantism's 'moral failure'[8] is echoed in the recent 'Princeton Proposal for Church Unity' issued by sixteen theologians associated with the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology: '[F]riendly division is still division. We must not let our present division be seen as normal, as the natural expression of a Christian marketplace with churches representing different options for a variety of tastes. Consumerist values and an ideology of diversity can anesthetize us to the wound of division.'[9]

Less to be expected is the similar outlook on denominationalism taken by some progressive evangelicals. For example, Brian McLaren argues that what he calls Protestantism's 'dividing frenzy' has given rise to '*a kind of market economy for religion, where religion [is] commodified.* This competitive Protestant religious market [has] spawned a kind of infomercial reality, where each group advertise[s] its unique features, seeking loyal customers....The unfortunate side effects...[have] included distor-

---

6 *Declaration 'Dominus Iesus' on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 2000), p. 36; italics in original. Quotation is from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's letter, *Communionis notio*, §17, which describes the wound as 'even deeper in those ecclesial communities which have not retained the apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist', i.e., Protestant denominations.

7 By-Laws, Faith and Order Commission, World Council of Churches, quoted in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), Preface, p. 1. See also *A Plan of Union for the Church of Christ Uniting* (Philadelphia: Consultation on Church Union, 1970), pp. 10, 17.

8 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing, 1957), pp. 6, 25.

9 Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Church Unity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 43; see the prior discussion of what is described as the undermining of witness for the gospel by Christian 'tribalization', pp. 33-42. The most extreme expression of this position by a Protestant of which I am aware is by Ephraim Radner, who goes so far as to claim that the Holy Spirit has abandoned the church because of its structural divisions; see Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 26, 27, 28, and passim.

tion…and arrogance.'[10] Stanley Grenz contends that evangelicalism's equanimity in the face of the church's division into 'various confessional groups, each of which constitutes only a part of the one Church of Christ', is both a cause and a consequence of what he sees as its ecclesiological apathy.[11]

George Hendry notes that this abhorrence of denominationalism, shared as it is by Roman Catholics, conciliar Protestants, and at least a few evangelicals, rests on a shared heritage: 'The Churches of the West, by both temperament and history, have been disposed to think of unity in terms of organic consolidation or doctrinal consensus, the former being more characteristic of Rome [and, today, conciliar Protestantism] and the latter of [today, evangelical] Protestantism. It is not easy for them to recognize a unity which is anterior both to the organization of the Church and to the articulation of its faith',[12] a unity which

would thus allow for and even encourage a degree of both connectional and confessional pluriformity.

II The Fathers and the Reformers on Church Unity

Why have Western Christians tended to think in terms of unity that is primarily structural, whether the structure be that of the episcopate or the catechism? They have done so, I would argue, because of the foundational teaching of several Fathers of the second and third centuries, including Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, and especially Cyprian of Carthage.[13] 'As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.' Early in the second century, Ignatius was a strong defender of episcopal unity on at least the local level: '[S]hun divisions, as [they are] the beginning of evils. All of you are to follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and [follow] the presbytery as [you would] the apostles….He who honors the bishop is honored by God; he who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil.'[14]

---

10 Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), p. 125; italics in original.

11 Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), p. 296. See also Andrew Purves and Mark Achtemeier, *Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church* (Louisville, Ky.: Witherspoon Press, 1999), p. 65.

12 George S. Hendry, 'The Theological Context of the Church Today', in *The Ecumenical Era in Church and Society: A Symposium in Honor of John A, Mackay* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 48-49.

13 J. S. Whale, *Christian Union: Historic Divisions Reconsidered* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 15-16; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 117-118, 159-160; Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 1955), pp. 302-304.

14 Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 8.1-2, 9.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Jack Sparks (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1978), pp. 112-113, altered.

Note that for Ignatius, the bishop's primacy over the local church was not an end in itself; instead, he saw fidelity to the apostolically ordained episcopate as above all a means of defending fidelity to the apostolically imparted truth.[15] Over time, unfortunately, the subordination of the former goal to the latter tended to be forgotten, so that the two were set alongside each other and departure from the episcopate was even taken as an instance of departure from the truth.

For example, this tendency is evident in Cyprian's landmark mid-third-century treatise, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, which extended Ignatius's logic from the local to the universal church, identifying the latter with the bishops taken together just as Ignatius had identified the former with the bishop taken individually.[16] Cyprian stated his position very forcefully:

> The authority of the bishops forms a unity, of which each holds his part in its totality. And [thus] the Church forms a unity, however far she spreads and multiplies by the power of her fecundity....Whoever breaks with the Church and enters into an adulterous union, cuts himself off from the promises made to the Church; and he who has turned his back on the Church of Christ shall not come to the rewards of Christ: he is an alien, a worldling,

an enemy. You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the Church for your mother....Can anyone then be so criminal and faithless, so mad in his passion for quarreling, as to believe it possible that the oneness of God, the garment of the Lord, the Church of Christ should be divided, or dare to divide it himself?...Do you think a man can hold his own or survive, when he leaves the Church and sets up a new place and a separate home for himself?[17]

Ideas have consequences. At least partly because of this insistence that the church's unity as posited in Ephesians 4:4-6 and other biblical texts both presumed and required its structural unity,[18] the Donatist controversy, triggered by differing responses to the final round of Roman persecution half a century after Cyprian's own martyrdom, left the North African Christian community permanently crippled. Since his theology construed episcopal pluriformity as an intolerable manifestation of ecclesiastical disunity, the clash over control of what had been his own see, the episcopate of Carthage, led, not merely to competition between what would be seen today as two rival denominations, but to the government-backed yet ultimately futile attempt by

---

15 Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 2.1-2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 104-105.

16 See the discussion of this treatise in Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 236-241.

17 Cyprian of Carthage, *The Unity of the Catholic Church* 5, 6, 8, in *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church*, ed. and trans. Maurice Bévenot, Ancient Christian Writers 25 (New York: Newman Press, 1956), pp. 47-51.

18 Cyprian, *Unity of the Catholic Church* 4, in *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church*, p. 47.

the smaller of these, the 'Catholic' party, to forcibly suppress its larger, better-inculturated rival, the 'Donatist' party. One unintended consequence was that several centuries later, when Islamic armies overran their lands, rather than following the example of the Christian community of Syria and settling into relatively protected 'dhimmi' status, the disaffected Christian community of North Africa simply melted away.[19]

Yet the logic—and illogic—of Cyprian's argument continued to carry weight in the sixteenth century, so that even John Calvin used much the same terminology:

> [L]et us learn even from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her [i.e., the church]. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance.[20]

None of the Reformers, Protestant or Catholic, would have been content with a sixteenth-century counterpart to Stalin's 'socialism in one country'.[21] All of them aimed at the reconstruction of the church universal, each after his own pattern.[22] In this, of course, they failed, with their failure first conceded, at least provisionally, in the Peace of Augsburg, ratified in 1555, and finally enshrined in the Peace of Westphalia, ratified in 1648. The idea of Europe as Christendom was no more; its place was taken by the idea of Europe as an interlocking complex of miniature Christendoms, a confessional mosaic whose pattern was defined by the principle of '*cuius regio, eius religio*'.[23] Cyprian's idea of the church's visible, structural unity was reduced to a kind of theological cudgel which representatives of Europe's various confessional families wielded against their theological adversaries, each blaming the others for the rending of Christ's 'seamless robe' (Jn. 19:23-24).[24]

In time, confessional uniformity at even the local level broke down as religious toleration and eventually religious freedom were implemented. And

---

19 Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, revised ed. (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 1986), pp. 274-275. For an overview of the Donatist controversy and its aftermath, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1952).

20 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.4, 2:1016.

21 Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 122; Marcel Liebman, *The Russian Revolution*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 342-351.

22 Howard P. Louthan and Randall C. Zachman, eds., *Conciliation and Confession: The Struggle for Unity in the Age of Reform*, 1415-1648 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

23 Bruce Hindmarsh, 'Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron? A Historical Perspective', in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), p. 20.

24 Cyprian, Unity of the Catholic Church 7, in *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church*, p. 49.

wherever the coercive arm of the state was lifted, wherever it became possible to organize new Christian bodies, religious innovators did exactly that, so that the number of what we today would recognize as denominations tended always to increase. For example, this scenario played out in England during the Commonwealth period, with the flourishing of Independent and Baptist churches and the emergence of radical groups such as the Quakers and the Fifth Monarchy Men.[25]

At the time, few saw the consequent competition for members in the newly bustling religious marketplace as anything but a curse. It might be true that, as Catholic critics charged, apart from government intervention, such steadily mounting structural pluriformity was Protestantism's natural state of being.[26] However, good Protestants who continued to read their Bibles through Cyprianic spectacles fought a bitter rear-guard action against the inevitable, doing their best to slow what they could not stop.[27] Some of them would even stand the logic of the situation on its head, concluding that since the early church had been undivided, the only proper response to the ecclesiastical divisions they saw all around them was the restoration of the early church in their own time and place.[28] Paradoxically, these primitivists who started by rejecting denominationalism ended by organizing what were in effect new denominations.

III Reconciling Pluriformity with Church Unity

But supposing that Protestantism's, and indeed Christianity's, natural state of being really is one of ever-more-elaborate pluriformity,[29] is this really such a bad thing? Does the steady increase in the number of religious bodies that Melton, Barrett, and other scholars have documented truly demonstrate nothing more than the steady increase of entropy in the spiritual universe, serving as a kind of ecclesiological parallel to the steady increase of entropy in the physical universe described by the Second Law of Thermodynamics?

25 Hindmarsh, 'Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron?', p. 21; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1972).

26 Johann Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), pp. 10, 48.

27 Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. A. S. McGrade and Brian Vickers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 193.

28 Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The Primitive Church in the Modern World* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

29 Roger E. Olson, 'Free Church Ecclesiology and Evangelical Spirituality: A Unique Compatibility', in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, p. 176; Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 17-20; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 19-67; Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 121-153.

Is denominationalism merely a form of disease, as so many have claimed, or might it instead serve a useful function in the struggle against the undoubted disease of religious nominalism?

Over the centuries, a number of theologians have broken with Cyprian on this point, arguing that although unity, even visible unity, surely is Christ's will for his church, this is not the same as structural unity. For example, Richard Baxter, one of the leading voices of seventeenth-century Puritanism, insisted on the importance of the former: 'Unity is the very life of the church….As that is no body whose parts are not united among themselves,…so that is no church…which is not united in itself.'[30] Quests for the latter, however, he described as generally misguided and even, ironically, as a common source of further division:

> [I]t must be carefully noted, that one way by which Satan tempteth men into church divisions, is by an over-vehement zeal against dividers;…he that cannot bear with the weaknesses of the younger sort of Christians,… but will presently let fly at them as schismatics,… shall increase the zeal and the number of dividers, and prove himself the greatest divider.[31]

The Puritan theologian John Owen, a contemporary of Baxter, took much the same position: 'The principal cause of our divisions and schisms is no other than the *ignorance or misapprehension that is among Christians of the true nature of that evangelical unity* which they ought to follow after, with the ways and means whereby it may be attained and preserved.'[32] Owen, like Baxter, urged that visible and structural unity must not be equated. Diversity was inevitable:

> We do confess that…all the members of this church are in many things liable to error, mistakes, and miscarriages; and hence it is that… in the profession which they make of the conceptions and persuasions of their minds about the things revealed in the Scripture, there are, and always have been, many differences among them. Neither is it morally possible it should be otherwise, whilst in their judgment and profession they are left unto the ability of their own minds and liberty of their own wills.[33]

More than this, though, Owen sagely observed that diversity was often an aid to the church in the pursuit of its mission:

> The members of the body have divers forms or shapes, divers uses and operations, much more may be diversely clothed and adorned; yet are they one body still, wherein their unity doth consist. And it were a ridiculous thing to attempt the appearance of a dead, useless

---

30 Richard Baxter, *The Reasons for Christian Unity and Concord* (1679), in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, 4 vols. (London: George Virtue, 1846; reprint, Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 4:708.

31 Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (1673), in *Practical Works*, 1:614.

32 John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace, and Unity* (1672), in *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols., ed. William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-1855; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 15:105; italics in original.

33 Owen, *Evangelical Love*, p. 79.

unity among the members of the body, by clothing of them all in the same kind of garments or covering. But granting them their unity by their relation unto the Head, and thence to one another, unto the constitution of the whole, and their different forms, shapes, uses, operations, ornaments, all tend to make them serviceable in their unity unto their proper ends.[34]

When nineteenth-century church historian Philip Schaff, a pioneer ecumenist, first arrived in the US, he was appalled by the sectarian rivalries roiling the religious marketplace, referring to denominationalism as a

grand disease…. To the man who has any right idea of the church, as the communion of saints, this state of things must be a source of deep distress…. The most dangerous foe with which we are called to contend, is… not the Church of Rome but the sect plague in our midst; not the single pope of the city of seven hills, but the numberless popes…who would fain enslave Protestants once more to human authority.[35]

Forty years later, though, he saw things very differently, arguing, much as had Baxter and Owen, that 'every Christian church or denomination has its special charisma or mission, and there is abundant room and abundant labor for all in this great and wicked

world….[N]one of the leading denominations of Christendom which faithfully do their Master's work could be spared without most serious injury to the progress of the gospel at home and abroad.'[36]

More recently, a number of theologians have made the same point. For example, G. C. Berkouwer insists:

The extreme concentration and responsibility of the Church's whole life does not require a forced, unattractive uniformity….The Lord of the Church, Who is the Shepherd of the flock, knows all the sheep—in all variation, in need and threat, and in the dangers of doubt and temptation. In only one thing are they 'uniform': He cares for them all, in their individuality, their history, their problems, their time, their cares, their new tasks, their gifts, and their lacks. This care makes room for an unexpected, enriching pluriformity, which is manifold and inexhaustible.[37]

---

34 Owen, *Evangelical Love*, p. 106.

35 Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism* (1845), ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, trans. John W. Nevin, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964), pp. 140, 151, 154.

36 Philip Schaff, 'Discord and Concord of Christendom, or Denominational and Christian Unity', in *Christ and Christianity: Studies on Christology, Creeds and Confessions, Protestantism and Romanism, Reformation Principles, Sunday Observance, Religious Freedom, and Christian Union* (New York: Scribner's, 1885), pp. 299-300, quoted in Stephen R. Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos: Philip Schaff's Interpretation of Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 40.

37 G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, trans. James E. Davison, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 75; see p. 56 n. 18 and p. 57, in which Berkouwer cites and quotes Abraham Kuyper to the same effect. See also Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The Unity and Disunity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958), pp. 19-20.

Robert Webber echoes Schaff:

> [T]he insistence that the church must exist in a single form is a denial not only of the richness of creation, but also of the complexities of the human response…. The full church is not seen in any one denomination or body. Rather, every branch of the church should be seen as a part of the whole. The church catholic therefore needs every branch of the church to be complete.[38]

Michael Jinkins traces Christianity's pluriformity to its very first generation:

> The idea that theological/ecclesiological diversity entered the history of the church at the Protestant Reformation (or after) is fundamentally at odds with the realities of the preceding millennium and half of the church's existence. From the pages of the New Testament through the rise of various monastic traditions, the church has been blessed (not plagued) with a variety of ecclesial forms of life….However uncomfortable ecclesial diversity may be at particular moments, judging by the profound diversity of God's creation, I have a hard time imagining that such diversity is a curse. Rather, even the diversity among Christian forms of community seems to me a blessing and evidence once again of the wisdom and wonder of the Triune Creator.[39]

IV Apostolic Church and Church Unity

As Jinkins's comments illustrate, scholars' embrace of the ecclesiological pluriformity of the present-day church reflects their realization that the apostolic church was ecclesiologically pluriform as well. James D. G. Dunn's landmark treatise, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, summarizes his findings on this point: 'In our study of first-century Christianity *we have discovered no greater diversity than that apparent in the various concepts of ministry and community*.'[40] Oscar Cullmann agrees: 'There was no uniformity even in earliest Christianity.'[41] This is conceded by the authors of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, issued by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches: 'The New Testament does not describe a single pattern of ministry which might serve as a blueprint or continuing norm for all future ministry in the Church. In the New Testament there appears rather a

---

38 Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Unity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 57, 64.

39 Michael Jinkins, 'The "Gift" of the Church: *Ecclesia Crucis, Peccatrix Maxima*, and the *Missio Dei*', in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, p. 185 n. 11.

40 James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 121; italics in original. See also Everett Ferguson, ed., *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, Recent Studies in Early Christianity (New York: Garland, 1999); and Everett Ferguson, ed., *Forms of Devotion: Conversion, Worship, Spirituality, and Asceticism*, Recent Studies in Early Christianity (New York: Garland, 1999).

41 Oscar Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity: Its Foundation, and a Contribution to the Discussion concerning the Possibilities of Its Actualization* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 29. For an earlier statement along these lines, see John Owen, *Some Considerations about Union among Protestants* (1680), in *Works*, 14:527.

variety of forms which existed at different places and times.'[42]

Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown goes so far as to grant that the traditional Catholic account of the origin of the threefold ministry and the apostolic succession has little or no basis in history: '[T]he affirmation that all the bishops of the early Christian Church could trace their appointments or ordinations to the apostles is simply without proof—it is impossible to trace with assurance any of the presbyter-bishops to the Twelve, and it is possible to trace only some of them to apostles like Paul.'[43]

Yet, curiously, though by now scholars generally concede the pluriformity of government in the church's first generation, though even Catholic scholars generally concede that the particular form of government associated with their own church originated not in the first but in the second and third generations, both Catholic and conciliar Protestant authorities continue to urge adoption of that form of government as useful and perhaps even necessary for achieving church unity today:

> Although there is no single New Testament pattern, although the Spirit has many times led the Church to adapt its ministries to contextual needs, and although other forms of the ordained ministry have been blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we see and also as a means for achieving it.[44]

But is this at all likely? Consider, first, that, as Baxter and Owen noted long ago, the quest for structural union on this basis is likely to end, most incongruously, in further disunion.[45] For example, when denominations accustomed to a congregational or presbyterian pattern of leadership choose instead to be led by bishops, and especially when they merge with other denominations which have already made that choice, as a rule the end result is more rather than fewer denominations, since opponents of change will often break away and form new institutions.

Consider, second, that since the pace at which new denominations are being established is demonstrably so fast while the process of denominational merger is necessarily so slow, if visible unity truly does require structural unity, then the end for which Christ prayed and ecumenists strive must grow ever more unattainable.[46] In a sense, Zeno's famous paradox of Achilles and the tortoise would be reversed, with the plodding tortoise of church union vainly pursuing the fleet-

---

42 *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), M19, p. 37.

43 Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), p. 73.

44 *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, M22, pp 38-39.

45 Baxter, *Christian Directory*, pp. 614-616; Baxter, *Christian Unity and Concord*, p. 704; Owen, *Evangelical Love*, pp. 105-106, 112-114. See also Bromiley, *Unity and Disunity*, pp. 29, 31.

46 Angus Dun, *Prospects for a United Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 27.

footed Achilles of denominational pro-liferation.

V Church Unity and the Religious Marketplace

Consider, third and most importantly, that Christianity's structural pluriformity is demonstrably a great boon to its worldwide growth and an aid to its deep penetration of specific cultures. John Macquarrie observes: 'It is interesting to notice…that Christianity seems to have thrived much more vigorously in countries where there has been denominational diversity than in countries where the great majority of the people are embraced within a single church.'[47]

This insight is not original to Macquarrie. As far back as the late eighteenth century, Adam Smith put a sardonic spin on toleration's consequences, arguing that 'if the government was perfectly decided both to let [denominations] all alone, and to oblige them all to let alone one another', if competition were allowed free sway and diversity were thus permitted to flourish,

> [t]he teachers of each little sect…would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect, and the concessions which they would mutually find it both convenient and agreeable to make to one another, might in time probably reduce the doctrine of the greater part of them to that pure and rational religion, free from every mix-ture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established.[48]

A little over half a century after Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville identified religious liberty as the source of American Christianity's strength and religious establishment as the source of European Christianity's growing weakness:

> [T]here are men among us who have ceased to believe in Christianity, without adopting any other religion; others are in the perplexities of doubt and already affect not to believe; and others, again, are afraid to avow that Christian faith which they still cherish in secret.…Such is not the natural state of men with regard to religion at the present day, and some extraordinary or incidental cause must be at work in France to prevent the human mind from following its natural inclination and to drive it beyond the limits at which it ought naturally to stop. I am fully convinced that this extraordinary and incidental cause is the close connection of politics and religion.…In Europe, Christianity has been intimately united to the powers of the earth. Those powers are now in decay, and it is, as it were, buried under their ruins.[49]

---

47 John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 16.

48 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. Edwin Cannan (1904; reprint, New York: Bantam, 2003), p. 1001.

49 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (1835, 1840), ed. Phillips Bradley, trans. Henry Reeve and Francis Bowen (New York: Knopf, 1945; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1954), 1:325.

Building on Tocqueville's argument, Rodney Stark proposes that precisely because European ecclesiastical leaders allied themselves with secular authorities in order to ward off pluriformity and forcibly maintain the church's structural unity, at first throughout the region and after the Reformation on at least a country-by-country basis, Europe's evangelization was generally shallow, with the masses mainly coming to practise various forms of hybridized 'folk Christianity'. Eventually this facilitated their abandonment of the church, first of its institutions and later of even its most basic tenets, leading to the current post-Christian situation, with very low rates of church attendance and all-time-high rates of atheism across the continent.[50]

By way of contrast, Stark and Roger Finke contend, the US Constitution's ban on a national religious establishment and the eventual dismantling of state religious establishments enabled the emergence of dozens and ultimately hundreds of denominations, all of them competing on equal terms in a dynamic spiritual marketplace. Stark and Finke argue that this competition has the effect of improving most denominations, inducing them to offer better preaching, more effective pastoral ministry, and so on; denominations that cannot or will not compete find themselves losing members and influence. The end result is the highest rate of church attendance in the industrialized world.[51]

Though most other religions exhibit at least a degree of doctrinal and cultural pluriformity, none of them can match the intentional structural pluriformity of Christian denominationalism.[52] If Stark and Finke are correct, we ought to see this, not as a source of sin, not as a mere reflection of ecclesiastical entropy, but instead as a powerful tool for the advancement of the gospel. Rather than foreswearing that tool's use, we ought to wield it all the more vigorously.

However, if such pluriformity is not to degenerate into ecclesiastical chaos, if the church's unity is to be more than an empty slogan, there must be clarity as to what this means and entails. Brian E. Daley notes four common conceptions of church unity: first, 'the spiritual oneness of those who call Jesus "Savior"'; second, 'agreement on the fundamental content of the faith'; third, 'unity expressed in sacramental structure and practice', including the historic episcopate; and fourth, 'unity of theological and spiritual emphasis', as in a particular denomination or denominational family.[53]

---

50 Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 66-78; Stark, *For the Glory of God*, pp. 15-119. See also Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

51 Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 17-21; see also Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity*, p. 32.

52 Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2:10-12.

53 Brian E. Daley, 'Rebuilding the Structure of Love: The Quest for Visible Unity among the Churches', in *The Ecumenical Future: Background Papers for 'In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Church Unity'*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 76-78.

The first of these I have already ruled out as insufficiently concerned with the visible; the fourth I would also rule out as overly narrow and unfriendly to doctrinal diversity. Of the remaining options, the third, which focuses on the sacraments and ecclesiology, finds maximalist expression in the traditional Catholic position[54] and a more moderate articulation in that of conciliar Protestantism.[55] But I have argued that this makes church unity unattainable and even its pursuit unhealthy.

What remains? Only the second option on Daley's list, which stresses agreement, not on theological fine points, but at least on doctrinal basics. As it happens, this was the position of John Owen, who argued that while visible church unity did require 'precise and express profession of the *fundamental articles* of Christian religion', these were

> but few, plainly delivered in the Scripture, [and] evidencing their own necessity.…[I]n other

things…" every man [must] be fully persuaded in his own mind", and walk… according to what he hath attained,… follow[ing] peace and love with those who are otherwise persuaded than he is…. [F]or the unity of faith did never consist in the same precise conceptions of all revealed objects; neither the nature of man nor the means of revelation will allow such a unity to be morally possible.[56]

Such an approach is similar to that of Oscar Cullmann, who argues for what he calls a 'community of (harmoniously separated) churches' in which 'each would preserve its valuable elements, including its structure'.[57] Other approaches that instead stress structural unity are vulnerable to Howard Snyder's criticism that in laying such stress on visible oneness they tend to minimize the importance of visible diversity, implicitly aiming at a church that is at least relatively uniform or homogeneous. To the contrary, Snyder insists that the church's pluriformity is just as fundamental as its unity.[58] Stark makes the same point in more dramatic language: '[E]ven if there is only One True God, there can never be only One True Church.'[59]

---

54 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All Its Aspects* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), p. 131; *Unitatis Redintegratio* 2.4; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §815.

55 'Gathered for Life: Official Report, Sixth Assembly, World Council of Churches', in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, ed. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 121, endorses a 1978 proposal from the WCC's Faith and Order Commission describing three necessary marks of church unity: 'common understanding of the apostolic faith'; 'full mutual recognition of baptism, the eucharist, and ministry'; and 'common ways of decision-making and ways of teaching authoritatively'.

56 Owen, *Evangelical Love*, p. 108; italics in original. See also Owen, *Union among Protestants*, p. 527. Richard Baxter's perspective was much the same; see Reno, 'The Debilitation of the Churches', in *The Ecumenical Future*, p. 59.

57 Oscar Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity*, pp. 35, 15.

58 Howard A. Snyder, 'The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology', in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, pp. 85-86, 89. See also Webber, *Common Roots*, pp. 57, 64.

59 Stark, *For the Glory of God*, p. 119.

VI Church Unity and Shifting Metaphors

I would stress that in taking this position, in contending that the early church offers us a model for maintaining visible unity while embracing structural pluriformity, I am not advocating a novel form of Christian primitivism. In fact, my position is diametrically opposed to that which primitivists have traditionally defended. After all, I am proposing, not that we draw on any particular pattern of early church government as normative, but instead that we draw on the fact that in the early church no particular pattern of church government was normative. This means that ecclesiology should be a secondary concern for us, as indeed it is, with the evangelical community making room for a wide range of stances in regard to church leadership.[60]

Such an approach is not a sign of ecclesiological apathy, as some critics have claimed; instead, quite apart from its fidelity to the stance taken by the apostolic church, it reflects the obvious fact that our community cuts across the lines of denominations strongly committed to rival ecclesiologies.[61] C. S. Lewis has argued that individual believers' relation to the universal church is like that of members to a family; they are not 'units of a homogeneous class', hence the Christian community's oneness 'is a unity of unlikes, almost of incommensurables'.[62] I would argue that the same could and should be said of individual denominations' relation to the universal church.

In this I am drawing on the thought of the eighteenth-century Pietist leader Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. According to Zinzendorf, each orthodox communion has a unique contribution to make to the universal church, a precious jewel whose proper place is alongside the jewels contributed by its sister-communions in a beautiful necklace adorning the bride of Christ.[63] Cyprian's idea of unity would require that this collection of gems be fused together to form a single enormous gem with a uniform crystalline structure throughout; only Zinzendorf's idea of unity, his vision of 'a commonwealth of Churches within the one Church of Christ',[64] allows for the structural diversity that is inevitable and even, according to Stark and Finke, beneficial.

Shifting the metaphor, I would propose that we think of church unity not in terms of a painting in which the

60 Paul F. M. Zahl, 'Low-Church and Proud', in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, p. 214.

61 Olson, 'Free Church Ecclesiology and Evangelical Spirituality', p. 162.

62 C. S. Lewis, 'Membership', in *Fern-Seed and Elephants*, ed. Walter Hooper (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, Fontana, 1975), p. 16.

63 A. J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer: A Study in the Moravian Contribution to Christian Mission and Unity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 102, 104; Stephen R. Hammond, 'Zinzendorf: Our Legacy and Liability', M.A.T.S. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1982, pp. 12-13. See also Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), p. 58; Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity*, pp. 16, 17, 33; and Macquarrie, *Christian Unity*, p. 15.

64 Lewis, *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer*, p. 14.

artist's brushstrokes are deliberately invisible, combining to create a single image, but in terms of a mosaic in which the individual tiles remain intentionally visible, retaining their integrity while at the same time contributing to the design of the larger work.

Conclusion

In closing, let me return to the illustrations with which I opened—to my two students, one of whom responded to problems in his denomination by starting a denomination of his own while the other argued that the very existence of denominations reflects division in the body of Christ and is thus inherently sinful. Obviously I reject the latter student's position; regarding the former student, though I think in his particular situation the establishment of a new denomination was at best premature, I must say that I have no problem with the existence of denominations as such nor even with the creation of new denominations in situations that seem to call for this.

Mao Zedong once famously proclaimed, 'Let a hundred flowers bloom! Let a hundred schools of thought contend!'[65] Paraphrasing Mao, I would proclaim, 'Let a hundred orthodox theological traditions bloom! Let a thousand or eleven thousand or thirty-three thousand denominations contend!' Painful though their contention may sometimes become, whether in friendly forums such as local and national councils and the World Evangelical Alliance or in the hurly-burly of the global religious marketplace, it serves the health of the body of Christ and the advance of the gospel.

---

65 John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1992), p. 364; Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 568.