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THE CHURCH AND THE

DENOMINATIONS

by

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1.

The important word "church" is used in current language with at least six different meanings. For example, it is used for a building, a denomination, or a profession. But interestingly enough it is seldom used in its basic New Testament meaning. We need not quarrel with the semasiologist about this variety of use, but we should be on our guard lest what is true of the word in one of its meanings is transferred to its use in another meaning, and in particular we need to be on guard lest the aura of glory which surrounds its New Testament meaning is used to heighten loyalty to institutions other than the New Testament church. It is from lack of reflection at this point that much of the modern confusion in the doctrine of the church arises.

In the New Testament the word "church" always means "a gathering" or "an assembly".

Acts 19 shows it was not a technical ecclesiastical word, for in verse 32 St. Luke used it of the gathering of the mob in the amphitheatre in Ephesus, and in verse 39 of the regular political assembly of the citizens. (1) In the Old Testament the two Hebrew equivalents of the Greek ekklesia are applied to the Old Testament people of God, especially when that people is conceived of as assembling or gathering; for example when gathered around Mount Sinai for the giving of the law, or later on Mount Zion where all Israel were required to assemble three times a year. The usual English equivalents of the Hebrew are "congregation" and "assembly", but Stephen in Acts 7 used the word church (i.e., ekklesia) of this Old Testament congregation of God. In the New Testament the Christian church is the fulfilment of the Old Testament assembly. Jesus Christ is its constituent. Just as in Exodus 19:4,5, God is said to have gathered His people

around Himself as their shepherd. He gathers them through the preaching of the gospel: "The Lord added day by day those that were being saved" (Acts 2:47). It is Christ Who builds His church (Matthew 16:18). He calls into one flock around Him His sheep, whether near or far off (John 10:16, Acts 2:39).

The Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear that the assembly, or church, which Christ is building now is primarily a supernal heavenly assembly. In Hebrews 12:18-24 the writer contrasts the assembly of which his readers are members with the Old Testament assembly of the people of God. That earlier assembly was gathered round God on Mount Sinai but the present assembly into which Christian believers have been gathered is around the Heavenly Zion, the City of the Living God. This assembly is ascribed as "the Church of the Firstborn enrolled in Heaven". This is the essential Christian church

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and it is gathered round Christ where He now is. Our membership of this assembly or church is not some future hope but is a present reality. We have already come to the Heavenly Zion and already are members of this "Church of the First-born enrolled in Heaven". We are already "seated with Christ in the heavenlies" (Ephesians 2:6). The Book of the Revelation gives us several glimpses of this heavenly assembly around Christ, e.g., Revelation 7:9 "a great multitude standing before the Throne and before the Lamb", and 14:1 "The Lamb standing on Mount Zion and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand having His Name and the Name of His Father on their foreheads". The Scriptures make clear that Christ is now primarily to be thought of as in Heaven. There are many passages to this effect, such as "set your minds on things above, where Christ is" (Col. 3:1); "Jesus Christ who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven" (I Pet. 3:22); "Jesus

whom the heaven must receive until the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21); "I see the heavens opened and the son of man standing on the right hand of God", (Acts 7:55); "Absent from the body, present with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8). Cf. also Acts 1:11, 2:33, 9:6, 26:15-19; Phil. 3:20; I Thes. 1:7, 10, 4:16; Hebrews 9:24-28.

Since Christ is now in heaven, it is there that the New Testament thinks of Him as building His church, because the Church of Christ is the assembly which He calls into being around Himself. This supernal church or assembly round Christ is a present, not merely a future reality, and we are to think of ourselves as already members of it, assembled with Him in Heaven. This is the primary reference of the word "church" in the New Testament. It is this church to which Jesus referred in Matthew 16:18 and which He is now building; it is this church or assembly which He loved and gave Himself up for

(Ephesians 5:25). This is the church which Paul persecuted by "breathing threatenings and slaughter" against its members "the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). This is the church in which God has appointed apostles, prophets, teachers and the rest. This is the church affirmed in the Nicene Creed, "I believe in one Holy Catholic Apostolic church". Its principle of unity is, of course, the fact that Christ has assembled it round Himself. It is logically impossible for Him to assemble two churches; for Christ is to be thought of as in one place only, that is, in Heaven, if we are to use Biblical imagery which is the only imagery available. This gathering or church is holy, because it is God's; it has been called out by God for Himself. It may also be called holy because its members are holy, not only in status but also in character, for being assembled into the presence of Christ they see Him, and as they see Him they become like Him, being made

holy as He is holy (I John 3: 2). It is catholic because the Gospel is no longer confined to the literal seed of Abraham, but rather Christ is gathering into His church "out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues". It is apostolic because it is founded on the Apostles, that is to say, Christ's commissioned missionaries who founded the church by the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. It is worth noting that in Revelation it is the heavenly church which is described as a city the foundations of which are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:14). St. Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that they are citizens of this heavenly city along with the rest of God's children. He also described them as members of God's household, which is essentially a heavenly establishment. And as such, he described them as built on the foundation of the Apostles. Thus it is the supernal church which is apostolic, as well as

catholic, holy and indivisibly one.

We are called into membership of this one church of Christ by the preaching of the Gospel. As a consequence of membership of Christ's church there is a duty on Christians to assemble in local gatherings. Interestingly enough this duty was not so obvious to the early Christians that they did not need to be exhorted not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (Hebrews 10:25). And the letters of Ignatius of Antioch are notorious for their constant iteration of the duty of Christians to assemble together rather than each to worship God on his own. These exhortations confirm that in its primary meaning in the New Testament, the word "church" refers to that heavenly assembly which Christ is gathering. To this assembly every New Testament Christian was vividly conscious of belonging, as he awaited his Lord from Heaven. The fact

that these early Christians nevertheless required exhortation to assemble together, shows that their concept for the Church of Christ, of which they all knew themselves to be members, was in essence other than the local group.

Though a derived and not a primary use, nevertheless the most frequent use of the word in the New Testament is of the local gathering of Christians. These local gatherings, whether at Corinth or in the cities of Galatia, or in Jerusalem, were manifestations of the one church of Christ. Christ had gathered them, and He Himself was present according to His promise where two or three were met together in His Name. Thus they were gathered round Christ through His Spirit, and consequently nothing was lacking for a complete church of Christ. They were never spoken of as part of Christ's church because they were Christ's church, gathered by Him round Himself at a certain time in

a certain place. (2) They were manifestations of the supernal church of which every member of the local church was at that very time a member. It is a grave mistake, common in current theology, to reverse the order and to think of Christ's universal church as made up by adding together the total membership of the local churches whether backwards through time or extensively over the earth's surface. It is worth noting that Ignatius who was the first to use the term "the Catholic Church" applied it to the gathering of Christians around Jesus. "Where Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church" (add Smyrn 8). It is the heavenly assembly ("where Jesus is") which Ignatius here designates as Catholic or universal; and he contrasts it with its counterpart, namely its local manifestation in the assembly of Christians round their minister. It is not a spiritualised presence of Jesus to which Ignatius is referring, as this would defeat his argument,

which is, that just as the Catholic Church is gathered round Jesus in Heaven, so Christians should gather round their minister in their own locality. This interpretation of Ignatius' phrase, sufficiently clear from the context itself, is confirmed by the gloss placed on it by the interpolator in the longer recension of Ignatius' letters. The interpolator reproduced the section almost verbatim, but for the clause, "where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church", he has "where Jesus Christ is, there the whole heavenly army is present..." so making clear that it is the heavenly assembly which Ignatius had in mind by the term "the Catholic Church". (3)

The local churches come into being as their members are joined to Christ. These local churches will never be visibly one assembly until the Second Coming. Then, when Christ will be manifested, the church will be seen to be united around Him; and St. Paul

in 2 Thessalonians 2:11 speaks of this quite correctly as our "gathering together" around Him in the air. But just as at the present time Christ's Lordship is not yet manifest as it will be, but remains an object of faith, so His gathering or church is not yet manifest but remains an object of faith, not only in its characteristic of unity, but in all its characteristics as His church, so that quite properly the Creed affirms "I believe in one ... church".

## 2.

A question remains to consider, what is the relationship between the local manifestations of Christ's church, one or more of which all of us are members? The basic and only essential bond between these local churches is the mutual love, interest and prayer that members of one assembly have for members of the others. They receive members of other assemblies as fellow Christians, when they

are assured of the individual faith of those members. They are interested in the Christian progress of one another, not only of those within their own assembly but of those in other assemblies. It is impossible to discover in the New Testament any other link or relationship of the local churches one with the other than this invisible bond of mutual love for the members one for the other. The same is true for the first centuries of the church's history. For example, in the time of Cyprian each Christian assembly, though bound in love one to the other, is completely independent of any other assembly. Things are very different today. The various local assemblies of Christians are grouped in patterns of fellowship, called denominations. These groupings or denominations arose in history for various reasons but what delineates a denomination at the present time and its principle of continuity is the restriction of fellowship by Christians within the

denomination with Christians outside the denomination. A denomination need not consist of more than one congregation, but if this congregation restricts its fellowship in one way or another with regard to members of other congregations, it is rightly called a denomination. In fact it would be difficult to find a Christian assembly today which though not linked in any way with other assemblies, nevertheless recognizes other assemblies as on all points equally Christian as itself. Such an attitude of full acceptance of other congregations is now limited to those within the same denomination. Denominationalism is not solely a modern phenomenon. The ancient church had its pattern of restricted fellowship both at a local as well as on a world-wide level. The Militian schism is an example of the former, the Novation and Donatist and Catholic groupings are examples of world-wide denominational patterns of fellowship. Thus Cyril of Jerusalem

(350 A.D.) took it for granted that in any city which his Catechumens might visit, there would be several churches of different denominations, all calling themselves Christian churches (Cat.Lectures 18:26).

Nowadays denominationalism is greatly strengthened by the centralised service structure which has been built up to serve denominationally linked churches. This service structure very frequently has a control of the denominational property and so is able to apply effective sanctions over the local congregation and its ministers. In fact denominationalism depends very largely for its continued existence nowadays on property ownership. If property were not owned on trust for the use of the denominational "church", denominational edges would soon be blurred, for it is the continuance of this church trust property which perpetuates the separate denominations when the original raison d'etre for their separate existence has

ceased. It is not for nothing that Christ warned His disciples against the danger of owning property. Perhaps the most serious danger which the denominational groupings of Christian congregations presents is that such groupings provide a focal point for loyalty. For many members, especially for the more carnal members, the denomination replaces the true centre of loyalty which a Christian assembly should have, namely Christ Who gathers His assembly together. Thus nowadays we witness Christians assembling, both locally and on a world-wide scale, on the ground of their denominational allegiance, and the issue is confused by the fact that invariably the denomination is called "the church", as though Christ Who assembles His church were also the One Who is assembling the denominational gathering.

A denomination is seen in its best light when viewed from the service which it provides for the local Christ-

ian assemblies. Thus it normally provides expert advice and mediation in many areas; it provides training colleges for the ministers; it provides financial facilities for the purchase of congregational amenities, such as a church building to assemble in, a residence for the minister and such-like. It also provides a channel for supporting missionaries in their ministry overseas, and in this respect it has a New Testament prototype in the aid the Philippians provided Paul for the full time exercise of his ministry.(4) When viewed as a service organisation, the union of denominations is beneficial as leading to greater efficiency, so long as this efficiency is not purchased at the cost of truth or liberty. Thus the union of denominations is normally an object to be encouraged, though it is unwarranted to think that such union in itself is a spiritual objective which Christians are under obligation to strive for.

Denominational organisation increases the influence of the denomination in the community. We have an interesting example of this in the formation of the Baptist Union as reported in the article "Baptists" in the New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge, volume 1, page 466a: "About 1812 a conviction was expressed by a writer in the Baptist magazine that while numerically strong the Baptists of England and Wales exerted little influence because of their lack of union. 'Union of the most extensive, firm and durable nature' was earnestly advocated by him. A number of brethren met in London the same year to plan for a Union." Some denominations, specially those who give high sounding titles to their office-bearers, are more effective than others in securing this influence in the community. But it remains true that influence secured by denominational organisation is worldly influence rather than the influence which arises from the power of the Gospel, and

so it may fail to advance God's glory. It falls under the ban "it shall not be so among you". God's purposes are not advanced by pressure groups, but by prayer, preaching and Christian living and suffering. A strong denominational structure enables a "denominational witness" to be maintained in areas where otherwise the congregation would die out. Thus when there is a prolonged failure to preach the Gospel with the consequential absence of the Spirit of God at work, it is only the existence of a church building, parochial structure, parsonage, and stipend which keeps a congregation in existence. (5) It is normally assumed that such continuity of the "Church's" witness, even though more or less a dead witness is a good thing, and to God's glory. But the assumption is highly questionable.

"Parallel denomination-  
alism" may be defined as more than one denomination having

churches in the same locality. The parallel denominationalism of the early church was terminated by the persecution carried on by Constantine and his successors against all Christians who were not Catholic. Hatch in his Organisation of the Early Church (p.181), gives a long list of these oppressive measures. In our own country parallel denominationalism has arisen again consequent on the relaxation of persecution following the failure of the Clarendon Code and the repeal of the disabilities imposed on Roman Catholics. The blessing that parallel denominationalism brings with it, is liberty of conscience. A single denomination has always been a persecuting denomination and has maintained its monopoly only by persecution. It is well to remember this as we witness the present efforts under the umbrella of the Ecumenical Movement to bring about an amalgamation of denominational structures. Amalgamation through negotiation will never

completely succeed nor be permanently monolithic without the aid of persecution. The old fashioned method of burning at the stake is for the time being at least out of favour, but there are other forms of persecution to suppress liberty of conscience. Moreover the efforts of the Ecumenical Movement in aiming at the unification of denominational structures are directed towards achieving an irrelevancy, and if successful will accentuate the temptations of denominationalism in proportion to the success in creating a big denomination. The real way forward is a return to the ancient pattern of mutual acceptance of one another without negotiating a "union scheme" of the denominations of which the local churches happen to belong. The restrictive character of the denominational link-up should be weakened by allowing with good will, and indeed encouraging, congregations and individual Christians to be in fellowship with each other across the

denominational barriers. Enlarging the link-up by denominational amalgamation or "church union" will only strengthen its exclusiveness.

It will be of great assistance to the clarity of theological thinking if the word "church" were restricted in its use once more to the church which Christ assembles round Himself in Heaven and to the local manifestation in time and place of this one church of Christ. These local manifestations are as numerous as there are assemblies of Christians meeting together in Christ's name with His promised presence in the midst. Thus there may be a church in Corinth and again a church within that church, meeting in a house in Corinth. Each such assembly, meeting in Christ's name, is complete, for Christ's presence makes it a complete church or gathering of Christ; it is not as though the larger were made up by adding together the smaller. But in addition to these two New Testament

usages we have in modern language other uses of the word. The distinctive characteristic of these modern extensions is that the word is applied (in contrast to the New Testament) to entities never thought of as assembling, nor which could in fact assemble. We freely recognise that when we speak of the church as a building or a profession we are not using it in a New Testament sense. But it is not always so clearly recognised that when we use it as a shorthand term to describe all our Christian brethren at present living in the world (as in the phrase, "the church militant here in earth") or when we use it for a denomination, as the Church of England, or the Presbyterian Church, these are also non-biblical senses; and it is here that the confusion arises, because we bring over into these modern non-Biblical uses the theology of glory which applies to the New Testament church. Yet as the late Dr. Gabriel Hebert, well known to Australians as a leading High Churchman, says

in his book, Apostle and Bishop p.148, "It is of course an improper use of words to call denominations churches; for in the New Testament the word ekklesia means 'the Church of God', and 'a church', such as that of Ephesus, is a local unit of the Church".

It would help clarity of thought if wherever the word denomination can be used without altering the meaning of the sentence we used it instead of the word church. Thus we should speak of "Heads of Denominations", rather than use the horrible new fangled phrase "Heads of Churches"; and we should also speak of "Council of Denominations" rather than "Council of Churches", and "the amalgamation of denominations" rather than "church union". Such usage would enable us to see these things more clearly in their true proportions. A distinction in nomenclature between church and denomination would immediately make clear the fallacy of the state-

ment in the proposed basis of union for the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia, "The Uniting Church acknowledges with joy that she belongs to the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church". The sentence should read "The Uniting Denomination acknowledges with joy that she belongs to the one holy Catholic Church", which lacks intelligibility, as Christ does not gather denominational organisations, but persons, to Himself. Nor can denominational officers testify on behalf of their organisation that "she" is a member of Christ. Such witness can only be given by individuals about their own status, as they are conscious of the Spirit's witness with their spirit that they are sons of God. We may affirm that in our judgment the structure and doctrinal basis of association of the denomination to which we belong does not contravene the word of God, but to assert that our denomination, per se, as distinct from

the regenerate Christians associated with it, is part of Christ's church is to attempt to combine concepts utterly disparate. Christ's church is certainly visible on earth (for invisible gatherings on earth is a contradiction) but it is not to be identified with the confederations called denominations.

Moreover the unity of Christians should also be visible on earth, for it should reflect the unity of the one Church of which they are all members. This visible unity is however not to be looked for in the unity of constitutions and documents or in organisational structure and officers but it is the unity of heart and soul. "See how these Christians love one another" was the way Christian unity was visible in the ancient church for all to see, and it is this visible unity of love which will compel the outsider to confess that God is amongst them.

The unity of the members of the Church on earth is a unity of brotherhood. If brotherhood is real its existence is real without the aid of constitutions and canons.

All Christians are members of the one Church of Christ but they are not all members of the one church on earth, though they should be members of at least one such congregation and may be members of several at the same time, (including, for example, membership of a mid-week house church.)

The basic unity between various congregations should be that of accepting one another as Christians and loving and caring for each others members, that all may grow in the knowledge of the faith. Links of association (or denominations) between congregation and congregation (i.e. between church and church in one of the New Testament senses of the word) must always remain secondary, and there is no

reason why a congregation should not be linked with more than one denomination at the same time similarly as a Christian may be a member of more than one congregation. Neither is perhaps usual, but the Church of South India in its continuing relationships to the various denominations out of which it is formed is an example of congregations linked with more than one denomination and as a national denomination (e.g. the Church of South India) may be in fellowship with more than one denomination in other countries. The exclusive character of the Christian fellowship which modern denominations tend to impose, should be resisted as out of conformity with the injunctions of the New Testament. Christians should receive one another into fellowship, and receive one another's ministry, readily across the denominational barriers. It is towards this, rather than to negotiations towards denominational merger, that our efforts towards

Christian unity should be directed.

FOOTNOTES:

1. It was still being used of a secular assembly by Justin Martyr (Trypho 42). The word only occurs six times in the Apologists.

2. The activities ascribed to a local church by the New Testament do not go beyond fellowship, including prayer together and mutual edification. It is a mistake to ascribe to the church functions committed in Scripture to its members. An example of this mistake may be taken from "The Church - Its Nature, Function and Ordering" p.20, "To the church is committed the task of proclaiming Christ by word and deed". This statement would conform more closely to Scripture if it read "To Christians is committed..." Of course, we must have fellowship one with another in the exercise of the various ministries church members receive, just as the Church at Antioch and later the Philip-

prians had fellowship with St. Paul in his ministry which he had received from Christ. But this ministry was not committed to the church, but to the apostle (Acts 22:21). The only corporate activity towards outsiders ascribed to the church in the New Testament is a heavenly activity (Eph. 3:10).

3. Lightfoot in his commentary on the passage missed the significance of this. He mistook Ignatius' phrase to mean "the worldwide church".

4. Missionary societies which operate within a denomination but are not coterminous with it furnish the interesting phenomenon - wrongly regarded by some people as anomalous - of a denomination within a denomination.

5. Amongst migrant groups it is often merely a common nationality which ensures the continuity of the congregation.

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