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**Denominationalism and Catholicity**

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Denominationalism gets much bad press these days, for a variety of very good reasons. John Frame, professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, has argued that denominations have no biblical warrant and cause much damage to the church. They destroy the unity of the church, always result from sin, and subject us to human organizations that cannot be defended as institutions of Christ. Throughout the world, churches confess every Sunday that the church is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”; throughout the world, the churches spend Monday through Saturday belying this confession.

To these central issues, one might add a political critique of the denominational structure of the church: Denominationalism puts various churches into competition with one another, and thereby promotes intramural strife within the church. This neutralizes any aspiration the church has to shape the political and social landscape. Which of the cacophony of ecclesiastical voices does the modern Theodosius listen to? Southern Baptist Fundamentalists? Pro-choice Presbyterians or Methodists? The Council of Catholic Bishops? Normally, of course, the politician chooses the voice that most suits him, the one that gives him divine sanction to do what he was going to do anyway. Such neutralization is inherent in the American system, with its Constitutionally mandated disestablishment. Whether the Framers intended to neutralize the church in this fashion is a question, and to my mind an open question.

Though I agree with this critique of denominationalism, in its origins the denominational system was an attack on catholicity but a

way of balancing catholicity with the reality of conscientious differences of conviction. No one denomination was conceived as “the church,” but rather each was a particular branch of the church. According to Rex Koivisto, the theory of denominationalism was formulated by the Dissenting Puritans who participated in the Westminster Assembly (1642-49), who rested their case on a number of basic points: Differences of opinion about how to apply the faith to outward order and liturgy are inevitable because of human fallibility and sin; these differences are matters of conscience, and conscience should not be bullied by ecclesiastical authorities; these differences can actually be mutually enriching, as Christians engage one another; no Christian body has a full grasp of the truth, and therefore the true church is never represented in any single denomination; there are godly Christians on both sides of every ecclesiastical and theological difference; and separation of Christian bodies from one another on grounds of conscience is not schism.

A quotation from Jeremiah Burroughes, one of the leaders of the Dissenting group at the Assembly, expresses the “catholic” attitude of the “denominationalists”:

Godly people are divided in their opinions and ways [but] they are united in Christ. Though our differences are sad enough, yet they come not up to this: to make us men of different religions. We agree in the same end, though not in the same means. They are but different ways of opposing the common enemy. The agreeing in the same means, in the same way of opposing the common enemy, would be very comfortable. It would be our strength. But it cannot be expected in this world . . . . [O]ur divisions have been and still are between good men; there are as many godly Presbyterians as Independents.

It is one of the ironies of our current ecclesiastical situation that a “dissenter” should sound so catholic a note, while many who are considered or even labeled “catholics” strike discordant, sectarian harmonies. Consider the words of Peter Gillquist, an evangelical convert to Orthodoxy:

What is it that we who are Orthodox Christians want? What is our vision, our desire? Simply this: We want to be the Church for all the seriously committed Christian people in the English speaking world. . . . Very few have been given the chance to decide if they would like to be Orthodox. We wish to make that choice available and to urge people to become part of this original Church of Jesus Christ.

Gillquist’s combination of modern voluntarism (“make that choice available”) and sectarian hubris (“the original Church of Jesus Christ”) is fairly breathtaking. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have, for their part, been much more generous to their “separated brethren,” but this label itself still carries the whiff of an older form of Catholicism. It says that there is something defective about the Christian faith and life of the non-Roman Catholic churches, something defective that the Catholic church alone has got right. Comparing Burroughes and Gillquist, we have good reason to ask the question, Who the Catholic, who the sectarian?

Thus far, I have simply been engaged in an analysis of labeling and packaging. Perhaps the Catholics or Orthodox are correct, and one or the other is indeed the “true church” to which every believer should seek access. Could they be right?

In sorting through this question, it is helpful to examine the major instance of church division in Scripture – the period of the divided kingdom. After the reign of Solomon, Israel divided into a Northern and Southern kingdom (Israel and Judah, respectively), and the Northern kingdom was further divided when the Lord raised up the prophets Elijah and Elisha and their disciples. During the period of the Omride dynasty (1 Kings 16—2 Kings 9), there were three religious systems operating in the land: Judah’s worship and “church life” centered around the Jerusalem temple; Israel’s life centered on the temple of Baal in Samaria, as well as the shrines of golden calves at Bethel and Dan; and the “sons of the prophets” assembled in communities around the Northern kingdom.

Of these, it would appear that Judah and the prophetic communities constituted the “true Israel.” They were, after all, the most faithful groups at the time. Yet, it is clear that Yahweh continued to consider the Northern Kingdom, idolatrous and wicked as it was, as His people. He sent prophets, not only Elijah and Elisha, but writing prophets like Hosea, Amos, and Jonah. Further, 2 Kings tells us explicitly that Yahweh continued to have compassion on Israel because of His covenant with the patriarchs:

Now Hazeel king of Aram had oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. But Yahweh was gracious to them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them or cast them from His presence until now (2 Kings 13:23).

[Yahweh] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of Yahweh, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher. For Yahweh saw the affliction of Israel, which was very bitter; for there was neither bond nor free, nor was there any helper for Israel. And Yahweh did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash (14:25-27).

The latter passage sounds like something directly from Exodus: Yahweh sees the bitter bondage of His people, and acts to save them through a new Moses, Jeroboam. Clearly, Yahweh still considered Israel His people. It is true that there were better and worse places to worship during the period of the divided kingdom. Many of the priests living among the Northern tribes escaped to Judah when Jeroboam set up golden calves and ordained non-Levitical priests, and no doubt many non-priests followed their lead. To say that one sector of Israel was more faithful than the other, however, did not mean that the other sector was no longer Israel.

So, the question is: Which modern writer would have more likely to have written 2 Kings – Jeremiah Burroughes or Peter Gillquist? To put it more theologically: If God regards idolatrous Israel as Israel, should we not do the same with the various communions with whom we confess faith in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church”?