

FRAGMENTING THE BODY OF CHRIST - OR UPBUILDING IT?
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Theory and theology of mission must deal with the questions of winning nominal Christians of one Branch of the Church into another Branch and of starting new churchly associations - new bands of Christians, new denominations, new units of shalom, call them what one will. For example, all around the world Roman Catholics without hesitation win Protestants and add them to their Church. And, in Latin America and the Philippines, Portugal, Spain, and North America, Protestants without hesitation win Roman Catholics to Evangelical Faith. In the United States dozens of new denominations have flowered. For example, in 1906 a band of warm hearted Christians, grieved at the nominality of their Church, pulled off and started a new denomination which now numbers half a million communicants. In Africa at least 5000 new denominations have arisen. In Latin America many such flourish. What does theology of mission say to all this?

Such action is not a matter of 'hostility' to some Church. At issue is the question as to whether fervent denominations have a right to win to flaming allegiance to Christ those of any Church who are nominal and cold. For example, in Protestant Jamaica, do fervent denominations and congregations have the duty to gather nominals (Anglicans, Baptists, or Methodists) into vital Christian churches? The Roman Catholics in Jamaica are carrying on vigorous mission at just this point and winning many nominal Protestants to their doctrines and their Church. In Bolivia, do all Churches have the duty of gathering nominal Adventists, Evangelicals or Roman Catholics into vital congregations?

As we ponder the rights and wrongs of such persuasion, we should beware of the great error - agreement between the establishments of various denominations, great and small, that 'once we have a person on our rolls, he and his

children and his grandchildren are ours - and you must not touch them. If you increase their devotion to Christ, you must counsel them to remain in their own denominations.' This carry-over from the totalitarian state Churches is an anacronism and must be seen as error.

Ecumenism at its best is a hearty feeling of cooperation between denominations, a conviction that other denominations are validly if not quite correctly Christian. This is admirable and within wide but clear limitations (non-Christians must not be counted as of Christ) may be followed. However, this 'hearty feeling of cooperation' must not be held to mean that all Christians are branded at the time of baptism (infant or adult) with their owner's name and any subsequent change of conviction is basically wrong. Assisting Christians to change convictions is not of the devil. On the contrary, with hearty cooperation must go the complete willingness for Christians to change their minds, enter other denominations, and for Christians to teach other Christians 'the way of the Lord more perfectly'. (Acts 18:26). No denomination has anything to fear in this process. If some denomination can bring a member of mine to a more accurate knowledge of Christ and more yielding of self to His will, it and my denomination are both benefitted. Free interplay of persuasion and counter persuasion must be the rule. The only casualty in the process is the pride of denominations, who would like to preserve their numbers, not by force of truth, but by naked political and ecclesiological power.

Free interplay of persuasion on the basis of the authority and inspiration of the Scripture, will work for those denominations which are fervent and obedient, and against those which are not. Across the board, in this world of thousands of denominations, God uses such free persuasion to renew and revive His Churches. The Reformation renewed the Medieval Roman Church. The derided 'fundamentalistic' missions and Churches of Latin America - and

not the Ecumenical Movement - have been the most powerful single factor in the remarkable renewal of the Roman Church there. The secession of congregations and individuals from any denomination operates powerfully to lead it to meditate on its ways and, if needed, to recall it to its Master and Saviour.

True, free persuasion can be and often is misused. Unedifying competition for members and ministers is reprehensible. Some denominations in the United States recruit a large percent of their ministers from 'converts' from other denominations - and seldom ask whether higher salary scales and lush fringe benefits play a determining part in the 'conversion'. Millionaires recently excommunicated for adultery in strict denominations become members of lax denominations with ease.

In Afericasia some people movements to Christ have been ruined by Roman Catholics, Adventists, and other denominations rushing in to capture the harvest. Nevertheless, despite this misuse, freedom is good. To see how good it is, one has only to imagine the situation resulting from lack of freedom. Suppose, for example, the Churches were to rule - as the castes in India do - that one is born into them and the greatest sin of all is to change one's hereditary denomination. The stagnation, complacency of ministers and people alike, formalism, loss of initiative, absence of innovation, and the speedy quenching of those heated in revival can scarcely be exaggerated. The greater the monopoly the greater the stagnancy.

The biblical injunction to use freedom wisely must be applied. "You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another". The words were written to two quarreling parties in the churches of Galatia (5:13) but apply on many levels. Freedom is good. Those who do the stagnant Roman

Catholic Church in Latin America most good, are not the professional ecumenicists who exhort Protestants to love all Roman Catholics, but those who create living congregations out of those whom the Roman Church for 400 years has been content to leave in a vast nominality. Those who do any stagnant denomination (Roman or Evangelical) most good are those who create units of shalom, units of Christ's Body, gathered congregations, out of the "born Christians", nominals, and marginal adherents. These vital ecclesiae may be created inside the stagnant denomination - as Campus Crusade and other organizations attempt to do. They may also - legitimately and without blame - be created outside it. Helping congregations become vital is good. Creating vital congregations in existing denominations is good. Creating vital congregations in a new denomination is good.

The Church of Jesus Christ owes a tremendous debt to those who have loved Him so fiercely that they have left the safe shelter of some respectable and somnambulant or moribund denomination (Roman, Greek, German, English, or American) and formed a new fellowship - a Gathered Church made up of those who deliberately intend to be Christ's disciples and seek to be filled with His Spirit.

We beg our brothers in the Ecumenical Wing of the Church to cease pouring vials of scorn on the Gathered Churches who hold their convictions with such intensity that they remain separate and exclusive. It is not enough for the Ecumenical Movement to honor and include Gathered Churches which broke away from parent denominations a hundred and fifty years ago and now regard their original ardency as schism and sin. The Ecumenical Movement - to be really ecumenical - should welcome all who love Christ as Lord and Saviour according to the Scriptures. Our Ecumenical brothers should cease fracturing the Body of Christ by ruling out of it reform movements which feel called of God to separate themselves. The ardent denominations

- scornfully called scismatics and sects - are no more separatistic than the Calvinists and Lutherans in the sixteenth century or the Franciscans and Dominicans in earlier times.

Victor Hayward in the April 1971 International Review of Missions writes:

"As regards the fragmentation of Protestantism, I was increasingly appalled at the number of evangelical Christians (90 percent of all Protestants in Latin America) who seem to think they can be the Church of Jesus Christ while paying no attention to their fellow Christians."

In a similar vein Edward F. Murphy advocating the organization of new urban congregations in the working class barrios of the great Latin American cities, writes,

"All converts should immediately be organized into indigenous local churches. These must be brought into a living relationship with the other evangelical churches found in the area. To hold them aloof from the rest of Christ's Body is a violation of Scripture, a sin against God, and evidence of spiritual pride and sectarianism."

(Opportunities and Guidelines for Urban Evangelization p. 6)

These well spoken words voice a part of the truth. Certainly a sense of the whole Church is a part of being Christian. Yet one cannot forget Paul's stern demand that the Galatian Christians regard themselves as utterly other than the Judaizers who hold to a different gospel, pervert the Gospel, and are to be accursed. Yet the Judaizers were baptized Christians in excellent standing in the Mother Church at Jerusalem. Neither can one forget that had the Franciscans not formed themselves into an utterly separate denomination, the rare insights of Francis would have proved ephemeral

indeed. And had the small group of reformers led by John Knox quickly established genial relationships with the rest of the Church led by Mary Queen of Scots and her clergy But why labor the point? Honest separatism motivated by a desire to incarnate pure devotion to Jesus Christ has played a most significant part in that constant reformation of the Church which marks it off so clearly from the great ethnic religions of mankind. The ecumenical movement - to be really ecumenical - should include both those who are willing to cooperate and those who refuse to cooperate. It should count them all Christian. Ecumenicists should perhaps be specially respectful toward those who, in order to hold their doctrine pure, stay separate from the multitude of the denominations.

Can we not be really ecumenical? Can we not allow and indeed encourage such freedom in the Body of Christ that Christian orders and fervent denominations and exclusive Churches are all counted validly Christian provided only that they accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and the Bible as the authoritative revealed Word of God. Why impose on others our own standard of toleration? Maybe God has taught them something different.

Our Ecumenical brothers do not read the Roman Church out of the Body because it systematically converts Protestants to Roman Catholicism whenever it can. Why then scorn conservative Evangelicals for converting Roman Catholics? Could it be that our brethren, swayed by the power and riches of the Church of Rome, despise the weakness and poverty of the new fervent branches of the Church Universal? And why are some European ecumenicals, who are so tolerant of the 5,000 new African denominations, so cool toward the few dozen new thoroughly biblical, American denominations? Is it because they are American?

Not all the intolerance is on the side of the conciliar denominations. Can Evangelical denominations allow such freedom in the Body of Christ that

'culture Churches' (which have ceased to excommunicate members for fault) may be counted as validly Christian, provided only that they accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and the Bible as the authoritative revealed Word of God? Why impose on others precisely our own understanding of Biblical obedience. Maybe the Holy Spirit really teaches them something different from what we believe He teaches us. Our Evangelical brothers do not read the Friends out of the Body of Christ for cooperating in a city-wide evangelistic campaign. Why then read the ecumenicists out for including in their fellowship some for whose theological convictions they (the ecumenicists) have scant respect? Could it be that some Evangelicals are swayed by love of independent action more than by earnest desire for the welfare of the people of God? And why is the Evangelical Movement so very tolerant of nominality in some illiterate Protestants in Asia and Africa and so haughtily intolerant of the illiterate nominals in the Church of Rome? Could it be because nominality in your Church looks so very much more evil than nominality in my Church?

Whatever the answer to the questions in the last two paragraphs may be, the time has come to recognize that all denominations (large and small, Pentecostal or Roman Catholic) do make and will make their own laws according to which they evangelize. That such evangelism and ministerial recruitment often look like raiding to other denominations is beside the point. They do happen and will continue to happen. The time has come on 'high' theological grounds, to quit fighting free persuasion though of course each congregation and denomination will inevitably do all it can to hold its own members. The time has come cheerfully to admit that winning nominal members of one Branch of the Church to more ardent love for Christ in another is righteous behaviour. It is a duty not a sin. It is pleasing to God. It builds the Body rather than fragments it.