INTRODUCTION

Title

This thesis examines the historical argument for organizational church unity. *The New Testament Basis for the Non-Denominational Church: The Historical Argument* is used as the title for two reasons especially: (1) clarity–a concept is most definite in the context of contrast; (2) relevance–denominationalism is a feature of contemporary Christendom that stands in contrast to what will be presented as the nature of the church's unity according to the New Testament.

Importance of Christian Unity

With relevance comes importance. Jesus himself prayed for the oneness of his disciples even before the church was established.[1] His apostles sought to preserve its original unity by teaching, exhortation, labor, and warning; consequently, a significant portion of the New Testament deals with Christian unity. *"In unity there is strength"* endures as a principle for all social endeavor. One may add that in unity there is peace, a most prominent thought in the minds of men today.

Americans especially need to be concerned about division because of their influence in foreign missions, lest they spread division into pioneer areas. Furthermore, as the world becomes one community through mass media and international travel, the inherent oneness of mankind becomes more evident, and the unity-of-mankind function of the church makes its own lack of unity more incongruous.[2]

Definition of Denominationalism

Denominationalism is marked by at least five related features: (1) exclusivistic attitude, (2) peculiar doctrine, (3) restricted fellowship, (4) distinguishing names, (5) organizational separateness. Perhaps the most basic and deadly of the five is the attitude of exclusivism. Presumably doctrinal disagreement also contributes largely to disunity. These two marks, one personal and the other doctrinal, produce the other three and are reinforced in turn by them. All these characteristics are not always present in a given Christian fellowship, but together they form the complex involved in contemporary denominationalism as a whole. To the last of these this thesis addresses itself most particularly.

Purpose of the Thesis

Within the larger topic of denominationalism, the first special concern of this study is to outline the organizational form of church unity in the first century. In order to do that meaningfully, the thesis seeks to show the relationship of organization to other topics connected with it (Chapter 1), to delineate clearly the characteristics of authority vs. influence, and to define local vs. general (Chapter 2).[3] Then a positive presentation of first-century non-denominational structure is given (Chapter 3).

The second special concern is to present evidence and argument for the normativeness of apostolic church pattern (Chapter 4). Reasons will be given for concluding that the original form should continue today. This last matter seems to be assumed in treatments of twentieth-century polity by those who may agree essentially with the view presented herein. The author therefore seeks to give particular attention to the normativeness of first-century form.

Biblical Perspective

New Testament Limitation

Whereas certain arguments and observations favoring non-denominationalism may derive from <u>theological</u> necessity and <u>practical</u> expediency,[4] this study deals only with relevant <u>historical</u> considerations contained in the New Testament.[5] Therefore the thesis is limited in three ways: (1) subject–only the <u>organizational aspect</u> of denominationalism is considered; (2) approach–only the <u>historical argument</u> is used; (3) source–only the <u>New Testament evidence</u> is examined.

View of the Bible

The Bible is the word of God written. It is the accurate record of redemptive history, the authoritative statement of propositional revelation. It is the account of the deeds of God among men and the message of God to men. It both narrates event and interprets meaning. The scripture is verbally God-breathed in the sense that every man's word in it is appropriate for expressing the reality-truth God intended to convey to men through human language. It is adequate to lead men into all the truth they need to know in order to meet the responsibility they have been given. Therefore, the Bible rightly divided is now constitutionally authoritative over the hearts and minds and lives of free men in all matters whereof it speaks. The total approach of this thesis is within the historico-grammatical Biblical hermeneutic.[6]

Approaching the Problem of Division

The doctrine of church unity must be considered in terms of the correct set of distinctions. The problem of disunity cannot be resolved on what may be called the "visible-invisible" distinction. "Invisible church" means the people who are really saved; "visible church" means those who are viewed as Christians. "Invisible unity," therefore, refers to the oneness of the saved in their being saved. It is essentially a definitional statement that joins soteriology and ecclesiology. "Visible unity" refers to the functional association of those seen as the church. Resolving division by an appeal to the invisible-church concept attempts to give a semantic answer to a real problem.[7] It attempts to solve the problem with the <u>mind</u>.

The problem of unity must be resolved in terms that include distinctions between the <u>kinds</u> of organizational oneness. Proliferation of denominations in the last four hundred years has prepared evangelicals today to resolve the problem of division in the mind rather than in the world. The corresponding behavioral response is a pattern of interdenominational cooperation or a movement toward no church organization at all. In reacting against the wrong <u>thesis</u> regarding church unity (a corrupt, visible, hierarchical authoritarianism), Christians have adopted the wrong <u>antithesis</u> (an incorruptible, invisible status) so that they practice an inadequate <u>synthesis</u>

(interdenominational cooperation).[8] In the words of W. A. Visser't Hooft, *" . . . we cannot and dare not go back to the 'as if' theology which demands that we shall act 'as if' we were one faith."*[9] Whereas historically interdenominationalism may prove to be one possible route toward non-denominationalism, evangelicals may never get beyond it if the need for universal, visible, functional, organizational oneness is not kept before the attention.[10] Disunity is not solved simply (1) in <u>concept</u> or (2) in <u>cooperation</u>, but (3) in <u>conformity</u> to a given standard that includes organization as well as other, dynamic factors.

The problem of unity must be resolved in terms of a divine standard. Christians within mutually exclusive polities will probably not be able to discover and adopt a mutually satisfactory polity. This writer is of the opinion that Christian unity, including its organizational expression, will never exist aside from a prescriptive divine standard.[11] There seems to be no <u>prima facie</u> reason for supposing that the New Testament presents insufficient data for determining either the content or form of apostolic unity. On the contrary, the strong concern for visible oneness creates the opposite presumption. If the form of church unity cannot be resolved from the New Testament, it will not be resolved.

Fluctuation of Terminology

The New Testament was written from a historical context that did not contain the organizational problem herein considered; hence, one complication in this study is terminology. There is evident fluctuation between technical and general usage of the same word and the seeming multiplication of terms for the same office. Since the primary sources do not accommodate themselves terminologically to the distinctions and sets of contrasts inherent in problems arising later, candor requires caution in some passages and general avoidance of conclusions based solely on words. (1) Principles inherent in the nature of the subject and (2) descriptive material must play a decisive role in the analysis.

The Affirmative Burden of Proof

In all matters of dispute the burden of proof rests on the affirmative to establish reasonable assurance in the conclusion. The obligation to believe does not derive simply from the inability to disprove. In matters respecting the church, one accepts only what there is sufficient positive evidence to establish.

Antecedent Propositions

The following six statements are major propositions on unity as they correspond to doctrine, practice, and history.

The Theological Necessity for
the Non-Denominational Church

<u>Proposition one</u>. The <u>form of the church</u> must be compatible with the <u>form of salvation</u>. There is only one system of salvation promised in the New Testament (Ephesians **4**:4). One <u>basis of salvation</u> has been laid and "there is no other name under heaven given among men by whom it is necessary for us to be saved" (Acts **4**:12). One <u>appropriation of salvation</u> has been offered

whereby God particularizes and applies the salvation principle to the individual: *" . . . justified by faith apart from works of law"* (Romans **3**:27). There is one faith–the faith (Ephesians **4**:4; Jude 3). Christians are those baptized into one body, who drink from one Spirit (1 Corinthians **12**:13), and partake of the same cup and loaf (1 Corinthians **10**:16-17; **12**:4-6). If there is only one salvation process and status, saved people collectively should not order themselves so that the world may ask any one of them, "To which church do you belong?" The church cannot be characterized in its <u>form</u> by what is contradictory to its <u>content</u>.

Proposition two. The <u>real form</u> of the church must be compatible with its <u>ideal purpose</u>. The goal and purpose of the church is to create a new, united mankind (Ephesians **2**:15). In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile (ethnic), bond nor free (societal), male nor female (physical), rich nor poor (economic) because Christ broke down the "middle wall of separation" between them (Galatians **3**:28; Ephesians **2**:11-18). An agent of unification cannot itself be characterized by division. Furthermore, denominationalism tens to follow the rifts in secular society[12] so that the church is influenced by the world in this matter rather than vice versa.[13] The church cannot be characterized in its <u>form</u> by what is antithetical to its <u>purpose</u>.

Proposition three. The <u>visible form</u> of the church must be compatible with its <u>invisible content</u>. Although with the mind a person can distinguish between the visible and invisible church, God did not intend any real distinction in extent or character. People enter the church visible and invisible at the same time and on the same conditions, and only those who possess righteous status and character are to be considered part of either. With reference to these things, it is because of human uncertainty that the visible-invisible distinction is made, rather than because of divine intent or real truth. As to extent and character, the difference exists in the perception, not in the reality. If division is definitionally impossible and descriptively wrong, it cannot be made indifferent in the visible church on the basis of the visible-invisible distinction. "The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one."[14] The church is invisibly one, hence, visibly one. It cannot be characterized in its <u>expression</u> by what is eliminated from its <u>essence</u>.[15]

Proposition four. The functional form of the <u>universal</u> church must be compatible with the required character of the <u>local</u> body of Christ. The whole cannot be characterized by what is condemned in its parts. Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians at the local level are therefore applicable by extension to the universal church. As to the problem of <u>peculiar doctrine</u>, he beseeches them to *"say the same things"* (1 Corinthians **1**:10; **15**:12). As to <u>distinguishing names</u>, he commands them not to "glory in men" (**3**:21) saying, *"I belong to Paul"* (**3**:22; **1**:12) because they all *"belong to Christ"* (**3**:23). As to <u>exclusivistic attitude</u>, he reminds them that one Christian does not differ from another because everyone has received what he possesses (**4**:7). As to <u>restrictive fellowship</u>, there is one loaf for the many members (**10**:17; **11**:17ff.). There is to be no pride in the attitude (**4**:7), no factions in the fellowship (**11**:18), no distinctions in the nomenclature (**1**:12; **3**:22), no schism in the body (**12**:25), for the temple is holy (**3**:16-17). As in one church, so in all; hence, so in the whole. What is condemned in the <u>parts</u> cannot be condoned in the <u>whole</u>.

The Practical Need for the
Non-Denominational Church

The <u>organizational structure</u> of the universal church must be compatible with its <u>effective functioning</u>. Division is weakness and brings destruction (Luke **11**:18). This truth gives rise to the strategy statement "divide and conquer." The impression on the world is not so strong when division exists in the ranks of the church. One purpose in Christ's high priestly prayer for Christian unity was "that the world may know . . . ."[16] Efficiency is also reduced to whatever extent cooperation against the common foe is lessened by interdenominational proselyting. These considerations taken collectively detract from the ultimate glorification of God, who would have his people holy and therefore one.[17] The church cannot be characterized in its <u>form</u> by what is detrimental to its <u>functioning</u>.

The Historical Basis for the
Non-Denominational Church

The <u>contemporary pattern</u> of the universal church must be compatible with the <u>apostolic precedent</u> for the body of Christ. The essential idea of this thesis is that the ordering of the church in the apostolic age was not <u>a</u>, <u>humanly</u>, <u>acceptable</u>, <u>example</u> of what was done, but <u>the</u>, <u>divinely</u>, <u>ordained</u>, <u>precedent</u> that was to be followed. Theological and practical observations militate negatively against denominationalism, but they do not determine positively what form that unity will take. The historical argument, however, provides the positive replacement for contemporary division by describing the original pattern and arguing for its normativeness. The organization of the church is normative by virtue of prescriptive divine origin, intended permanence, and necessary exclusiveness. It cannot be characterized today by anything foreign to its <u>original</u> character.

A general harmony must exist between church form and salvation form; between the church's form and its purpose, content, and function; between its local and universal expression, and between its past and present pattern.

Endnotes

[1]The author takes the view that the church came into being on Pentecost. It was not established before or during the ministry of John or Jesus. (1) Christ himself made straightforward statements to the effect that the church was yet to come: Matthew **16**:18; cp. Luke **19**:<u>11</u>-15. (2) The law of Moses was still binding (Matthew **23**:1-3). There cannot be two constitutions in effect simultaneously over one people. With the coming of the New the Old was <u>removed</u> (Colossians **2**:13-15; Hebrews **7**:12, 18; **8**:9, 13; **10**:9). (3) A testament is not in force till the death of the testator (Hebrews **9**:16-17). (4) It was not appropriate that the founding of the church should have preceded the historical foundation on which it is based: the death-resurrection of Christ. (5) The Jewish limitations were still in force during Christ's earthly ministry (Matthew **10**:5-6).

[2]Christ abolished the law and broke down the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles for the purpose of creating from the two <u>one</u>, <u>new</u>, <u>man</u>. One purpose, therefore, of the church is to be a <u>new</u>, <u>united</u>, <u>mankind</u> (Ephesians **2**:15).

[3]The amount of attention given to organizational form in this thesis derives from the fact that form is the subject at hand, and does not correspond to its relative importance in

denominationalism as a whole or in Christianity itself. Though form deserves serious consideration, it is not the primary essence of church nor <u>the</u> touchstone of orthodoxy. It is nevertheless a part of revelation regarding the church.

[4]See endnote 43 at the conclusion of Chapter IV.

[5]Certain expediency considerations might be developed in connection with the local-autonomy element in non-denominationalism. (1) It helps to provide for greater cultural adaptability (an important issue as seen by Ralph D. Winter, *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years: 1945-969*, pp. 77-79).

(2) It helps to avoid the perils of ethnocentric decisions from afar (a topic addressed by Marvin Mayers, *Change and the Church in the 70's*, pp. 24-29 and 104-17.

(3) It helps to enhance dynamic spontaneity (a need pointed out by J. Marcellus Kik, *Ecumenism and the Evangelical*, pp. 21-23; and Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It*, pp. 96-157 especially).

(4) It helps to establish a mechanism for limiting the destructive power of apostatizing leadership (Z. T. Sweeney, "The Ecclesiastical Crisis," *CS*, April 28, 1923, p. 5). Examples of a need for such limitation may be observed in James DeForest Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise: A History of the National Association of Evangelicals*, pp. 17-47.

(5) It makes state control of the church more difficult since there is no "handle" by which political forces can control it (a peril implicit in the comments of Clarence W. Hall, "Must Our Churches Finance Revolution?" *RD*, October, 1971, pp. 95-100; "Which Way the World Council of Churches?" *RD*, November, 1971, pp. 177-84).

[6]Biblical quotations are the author's translation from the original languages.

[7]Cp. the brief discussion by Hans Küng in *The Church*, trans. by Ray Ockenden and Rosaleen Ockenden, pp. 34-39, especially the remark "By being visible the church is being true, not false, to its essential nature." For other discussions of visible-invisible church, see C. Cyril Eastwood, "*Luther's Conception of the Church*," *SJT*, Vol. XI (March, 1958), pp. 24-26; H. H. W. Kramm, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 68-70; U. Saarnivaara, "Church of Christ According to Luther," *LQ*, Vol. V (May, 1953), pp. 138-42.

[8]The author does not intend to depreciate efforts to achieve a sense of unity in this way, nor to belittle the improving attitude and fellowship between people of different denominations in the present day, nor to suggest that no one is concerned about organically unifying the church. The only point is that interdenominational cooperation is not the end of the growth process.

[9]W. A. Visser't Hooft, "The Significance of the World Council of Churches," in *The Universal Church in God's Design: An Ecumenical Study Prepared Under the Auspices of the World Council of Churches*, Vol I of *Man's Disorder and God's Design: The Amsterdam Assembly Series*, ed. by W. A. Visser't Hooft, p. 184. The "as-if" approach of which he speaks is the mechanism behind interdenominational activities like saturation evangelism and evangelism-in-depth. Such activity is better than open hostility, but tends to delay the achievement of full, or true, unity by minimizing the need for it since a tolerable state of relationship has been reached. It becomes an alternative to conflict that falls short of peace. The social mechanisms involved are discussed in Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt, *Sociology*, pp. 311-17.

[10]For an example of dispensing with visible, organizational oneness as essential to the oneness of the church, note John A. Machay, "Thoughts on Christian Unity," *CT*, April 14, 1972, pp. 10-12. Evaluating the <u>C</u>onsultation <u>on</u> <u>C</u>hurch <u>U</u>nion, he says on p. 10,

" . . . Christian oneness need not and should not be identified with a single institutional structure; rather, oneness is a matter of collective commitment to Jesus

Christ, the Gospel, and the simultaneous manifestation of the rich human friendship that Christians can and should engender."

Instead of combining the two aspects, he attempts to restrict the definition of Christian oneness to less than the biblical standard. The <u>kind</u> of organizational oneness he has in mind (the COCU type) is not necessary, but organizational oneness itself is biblical. Determining the pattern of that organizational aspect of unity is the burden of this thesis.

[11]The problems COCU is having seem to indicate this fact; cp. "COCU: Call the Hearse?" *CT*, April 9, 1971, p. 29.

[12]For an elaboration of the thesis that denominations reflect the divisions of secular society and are generated by lower social classes, see H. R. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

[13]H. W. Schneider in *Religion in 20th Century America* has the thesis that the church is reacting and reduplicating the practices of society at large so that religion is often environmentally conditioned.

[14]An excerpt from Proposition 1 in *Declaration and Address* by Thomas Campbell.

[15]Arguing the need for visible order and unity on the basis of mystical, or invisible, unity is a pattern seen in 1 Corinthians **1-4** (unity) and **12-14** (order). Divisions in Corinth (visible; 1 Corinthians **1**:10) are opposed by the question "Is Christ divided?" (mystical; 1 Corinthians **1**:13).

[16]John **17**:21, 23; this fact is particularly the theme of Francis Shaeffer in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century and The Church Before the Watching World. Cp. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The Basis of Christian Unity: An Exposition of John 17 and Ephesians 4*.

[17]Cp. Matthew **5**:16; John **15**:8; 1 Peter **2**:12; cp. also Matthew **9**:8 (= Mark **2**:12; Lk. **4**:24, 26); **15**:31; Luke **7**:15; **13**:13; **17**:14; **23**:47; Acts **4**:21. God's people–hence, the church–are to be such that the world will glorify God because of them.

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