

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 1: The Road To Denominationalism
Chapter 1: The One, True Church

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We must first be assured that Jesus Christ established on earth one church, not many denominations. Further, the unity of the church is not merely "spiritual," but also organizational.

The First Churches

The first worshipping community was a family: Adam and Eve expressing their love to God and one another in the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. Adam, Eve, and God. Satan broke the unity of the family when he tempted Eve to take the forbidden fruit. Paul later wrote, "And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner" (1 Tim. 2:14). Sin was not a family decision, but a unilateral choice on the part of Eve. She might have consulted her husband, sought consensus. She might have submitted her will to his while he submitted to God. Instead, she separated from her husband; then under her influence he separated from God and made his unilateral decision. And when God came to judge (Gen. 3:8ff.), Eve blamed the serpent, Adam blamed Eve, and ultimately both of them blamed God.

The fall broke the unity that existed between man, woman, and God. The human family set itself against God and against one another. Indeed, the earth itself was estranged from mankind (Gen. 3:17-19). God then showed his great love by promising a redeemer (Gen. 3:15). He would draw a recreated humanity back to himself and back to relations of love for one another. But the promise provoked more division, for many people rejected God's love. The first son, Cain, was a murderer, and he became a wanderer on the earth (Gen. 4:12). But in the days of Adam's third son Seth, and Seth's son Enosh, there was evidently a

worshipping community: "At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord" (4:26).

Scripture tells us little about this early church. But the later pattern of Noah, Abraham, and Moses, together with the contextual preoccupation with genealogies, suggests that the Sethite church was essentially a family congregation, with the patriarch as the chief priest. Therefore it was *one* in an important sense, though it was divided from the rest of humanity because of the unbelief of the latter.

Even the family of Seth, however, for the most part, fell into sinful habits, leading to God's terrible evaluation in Genesis 6:5: "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." But, we learn in verse 8, "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." Noah and his family were saved by God's grace from the judgment which destroyed the rest of humanity.

Noah and his family, therefore, were the next "church." The patriarch with his family received God's covenant promise and law (Gen. 8:15-9:17). And Noah was also a prophet, telling by divine inspiration how God would deal with his descendants (Gen. 9:25-27).

The overall pattern, then, is that sin leads to wandering, estrangement, separation from God and from fellow human beings, even from life itself; obedience to God leads to oneness with God and with God's children. God does not, however, approve of every kind of unity. The Cainite cities described in Genesis 4:17-24 represent unity in sin and unbelief, a unity in which, evidently, the effects of sin are compounded (as often in our modern cities). The tower of Babel episode (Gen. 11:1-9) is also a human attempt to recapture unity apart from faith, one which God rejects. But it is interesting to note in Genesis 11 the extraordinary power of unity. God himself testifies in verses 6 and 7, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

Generations later, after the flood, many of Noah's descendants fell away from the true God (Josh. 24:2) (though not all; hence Melchizedek [Gen. 14:18ff.] and Jethro [Exod. 3:1]). But God again gathered a patriarchal family, that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's covenant separated them¹ from all the other nations and therefore established them as a unified body. Circumcision marked that unity. Later, under Moses, God gave the people additional signs of unity:

¹ Note that the gathering of God's people always involves a separation from the world. Separation and unity, then, are correlative in one sense. Not all separations are bad. But it is equally plain that God wants his people to be together. Even "good" separations are a consequence of the Fall; had Adam not fallen, there would be no need for a separation between one group called "God's people" and another group called "Satan's people."

three feasts, in which the people were to congregate in a central location, Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles; one system of sacrifices; one priesthood, proceeding by hereditary succession from Moses' brother Aaron; one order of religious workers and teachers, the tribe of Levi, also united by heredity; one holy place, the earthly dwelling of God's glory; distinctive garb; distinctive diet; distinctive laws; distinctive promises. In summary, there was one covenant between God and one people, a covenant that distinguished them from all the nations of the earth and therefore united them as one people over against all the other nations of the earth. Certainly all of this reflects the oneness of God himself, a oneness which as such separates the worship of Israel sharply from all other nations (Deut. 6:4ff.). God's church is to be one, as he is one (cf. John 17:11).²

The Central Altar

Much could be said about all the marks of unity, but let us rather consider just one of them: the biblical emphasis on a central altar. Deuteronomy 12 teaches that once Israel reaches the Promised Land, God will choose one place "as a dwelling for his name" (Deut. 12:11). All sacrifices are to be offered in that place, not "anywhere you please" (Deut. 12:13) as with pagan worship. This emphasis continues throughout Deuteronomy (14:23ff.; 15:20; 16:2-17; 17:8,10; 18:6; 21:19; 23:16; 26:2; 31:11).³ Political officials, to be sure, are to be dispersed throughout the land at many locations (Deut. 16:18-20). The Levites, too, are spread throughout the land (Num. 35). But the altar is to be one, at one place.

The central altar did not, however, become a reality for another four or five hundred years. Not until the time of Solomon, the son of King David, did Israel erect a permanent altar in its permanent location Jerusalem. Finally, God had his temple.

Jeroboam, the First Denominationalist

But, remarkably, this religious unity in Israel did not last much beyond the reign of the one king Solomon. Solomon's son, King Rehoboam, was rejected by the ten northern tribes, who founded their own kingdom under Jeroboam. Rehoboam continued to rule in the south over Judah and Benjamin.

² Cf. Thomas M'Crie, *The Unity of the Church* (Dallas, Tex.: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989; originally published in Edinburgh, Scotland, by William Blackwood, 1821), pp. 9-27. M'Crie notes that since worship is given to one God according to one revelation it cannot help but be unified.

³ Note the remarkable pervasiveness of this theme. The Lord is emphatic on this point.

The political split was God's doing (1 Kings 11:26-40). But Jeroboam also created a religious split, abandoning the central altar in Jerusalem in favor of two altars in his own territory. He feared that if the people worshipped in Jerusalem, they might again become loyal to the Davidic dynasty (1 Kings 12:25-33). He made the situation even worse by building images of golden calves for the new worship centers (1 Kings 12:28ff.; cf. Exod. 32). The religious split, as well as the idolatry, displeased God, but Jeroboam made his crime even worse by appointing non-Aaronic priests (13:33ff.). The name of Jeroboam thereafter became proverbial: he was the one who "made Israel to sin" (1 Kings 15:30,34; 16:2ff.,7,19,26,31; 21:22; 22:52; etc.).

To God it was truly important, therefore, that his people be religiously unified: one God, one altar, one priesthood. Even political disunity could not justify a religious division. Scripture makes the point over and over again: worship at the central altar! Abhor the Jeroboam schism! Were we writing the history of Israel instead of the inspired authors, doubtless we would not have made such a big point of this. But God's priorities are often different from ours, and we would do well to listen to him here.

Exile and Restoration

The unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah led to the loss, in some degree, even of that unity which they still possessed as the people of God. That unity could not be lost entirely, as long as Israelite and Jewish believers continued to call upon the one true God. But the prevailing unbelief within these nations led to exile. First the northern, then the southern kingdom was uprooted, and their people made to live among the pagan-ruled nations of the world.

God determined, however, that this time of exile would end. He prepared the way for reunion by prophecy (e.g. Isa. 11:12ff.; Jer. 31:1,6; 33:6ff.; Ezek. 36 and 37), and by reformation and revival (Mal. 3:2-4; Zeph. 3:9; Ezek. 11:18ff.; Isa. 19:18,21,24; Ezek. 36 and 37; Zech. 13:8ff.) – by removing the causes of disunity.⁴ And then, of course, he moved the heart of Cyrus to reopen the Promised Land to Jewish rule and immigration (2 Chron. 36:22ff.; Ezra 1:1ff.; Isa. 44:28; 45:1). God removed the sin of the land (Zech. 3:9). Thus the people returned, no longer divided according to northern and southern kingdoms. They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, the feast of ingathering and reunion (cf. Ezra 3; Neh. 8; Hag. 2; Zech. 14:12-21; Mal. 3:7-12).⁵ The dry bones came together (Ezek. 37:1-14) by the Spirit of God; Judah and Ephraim again become one (Ezek. 37:19 – M'Crie's theme text).

⁴ See the excellent discussion in M'Crie, *op. cit.*, 70-89.

⁵ See James B. Jordan, "One in the Spirit," in *Presbyterian Heritage* 10:Sept., 1986, 1, and his *The Sociology of the Church* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1986), 101ff. He argues that the 70 bulls were sacrificed for the (proverbially) 70 nations of the world, thus suggesting a future ingathering of all the nations.

God's Spirit takes away sin and brings revival. Revival removes old divisions and brings God's people together again. That is the scriptural pattern.

The Church in the New Testament

Unlike my dispensationalist brothers and sisters,⁶ I believe that the church of the New Testament is essentially the same as the church in the Old, with some changes, of course. It is the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). It bears the same exalted titles given to Israel in the Old Testament (1 Pet. 2:9ff.; cf. Exod. 19:6). The people of God are all one olive tree, a tree from which some branches (unbelieving Jews) have been broken off so that others (believing Gentiles) might be grafted in (Rom. 11:17-32). Promises given to Old Testament Israel are regularly applied to the church in the New Testament. Joel prophesied that God's Spirit would one day be poured out on all people (Joel 2:28-32), a prophecy fulfilled by the new presence of the Spirit upon the Christians on Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21). Amos prophesied that God would rebuild the tabernacle of David (Amos 9:11ff.), and the Lord fulfills that prophecy by bringing Gentiles into the New Testament church (Acts 15:16-18).

Of course there are also changes because major events have taken place, namely the incarnation, earthly life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son. The Aaronic priesthood, the "one priesthood" of the Old Testament, gives way to the new priesthood of Jesus himself, a priesthood disconnected from the old covenant in the way that the story of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 is disconnected from its historical context (Heb. 4:14-5:9 and chapters 7-10). The earthly tabernacle and temple, the "central altar," give way to the reality of which they are but shadowy images: the heavenly temple to which Christ brought his once-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 9:11-28); similarly, the feasts, the sacrifices, the distinctive garb, the dietary laws.

But what of unity? Did Jesus come to establish one church, as in the Old Testament, or many denominations? Does the Old Testament emphasis on church unity fall away with the coming of Christ? Certainly, if that is the case, it is very difficult to imagine why it should be so. Jesus' one sacrifice obviously eliminates the need for animal sacrifices, a central altar, a continuing human priesthood.⁷ But why should it eliminate the need for unity among God's people, that beautiful unity about which the psalmist spoke so eloquently (Ps. 133)?

The need is still there. The New Testament is concerned about it as much as is the Old. Please consider the following:

⁶ A good recent study of dispensationalism is Vern S. Poythress' *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). It is critical, yet sympathetic.

⁷ Indeed, the movement from many sacrifices to one sacrifice, from many priests to one priest, suggests a historical tendency in the direction of *greater* unity.

1. As in the Old Testament, the New Testament believer worships at a central altar, for Christ himself fulfills the central altar of the Old Testament, and there is only one Christ (Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 1:13; 8:6; Eph. 4:4-6). The same is true for the priesthood, the temple, and the sacrifices. The church has a single location in one sense, though it is scattered throughout the earth, for it is seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).⁸

2. Jesus does come to build one church. "Church" is regularly used in the singular to refer to the whole New Testament people of God (Matt. 16:18; cf. Acts 2:47; 5:11; 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:32; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Eph. 1:22, etc.).

3. The New Testament church is a unity of a higher order than that of Old Testament Israel. For in the new order, the great schism between Jew and Gentile is broken down. Jesus died not only for the Jewish nation, but (as God had spoken, ironically through the wicked priest-prophet Caiaphas) "also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one" (John 11:51ff.). At Pentecost, Jews from many nations are united in Christ's body; they participate with "one heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). Later, Samaritans (Acts 8) and Gentiles (Acts 10) are added, and the great wall comes down (Eph. 2:11-22; Gal. 2:11-5:26).

4. Other ways in which Scripture teaches church unity include: (a) The New Testament images of the church: a temple, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the flock of the Good Shepherd, the branches of the vine, the people or family of God – all stress unity: unity in the above senses, but doubtless in many other ways as well. (b) There is one Spirit in which we have been baptized, who gives gifts to the church (1 Cor. 12). (c) It is God's love in Christ which binds us together (John 13:34ff.; 1 Cor. 13; 1 John 4:7ff.). (d) There is one gospel (Acts 4:12); (e) one revelation (1 Cor. 2:6ff.); (f) one baptism (Eph. 4:5); (g) one Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:17).

5. The New Testament uses "church" to designate not only the universal body of Christ (above), but also the Christians in a region (Acts 15:3), those in a city (Acts 11:22; 14:23; 18:22; Rom. 16:1; etc.), those worshiping together in a household fellowship (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2), indicating unity among the Christians at various geographical levels.

6. The Lord gives his church a church government. There are first the apostles and prophets (Matt. 16:18; John 20:21,23; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:11), but also evangelists, pastors and teachers (same verse). Elsewhere there are references in other terms to church leaders: elders (i.e. bishops) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2ff.,22ff.; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17). Obedience to such leaders is not an optional matter; it is God's command (1 Cor.

⁸ Note the emphasis in Reformed theology that the church enters heaven in its worship. See Jordan, "One In The Spirit," and his references to Wallace and Calvin.

16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12ff.; Heb. 13:7,17). We do not, therefore, have the option of choosing when we will or will not submit to the government of the church. This is Christ's church, Christ's church government. If we do not like it, we dare not set up our own government to rival his. Thus, Christ's intention was to unite all his people under his officers – one Lord, one church, one church government.

7. Do denominations play any role in New Testament church government? Well, look up "denomination" in a concordance! You won't find it there! More seriously, whether by "denomination" or by some other name, the New Testament says nothing at all about what we would today call denominations. Denominations, in the sense of groups of Christians who differ from other Christians by some distinctives of doctrine, practice, ethnicity, or historical background, play *no* role in New Testament church government.⁹ That is especially remarkable when we consider that there were many diversities in the early church that might have led its leaders to consider a "friendly" denominational division: great differences of ethnicity, languages, etc. But the New Testament seems to make a particular point of stressing that such differences are not to be the basis of divisions in the church (Acts 10; 11; Gal. 2; 3:28; Col. 3:11).

8. To carry the point even further: the New Testament rebukes the mentalities and practices which were later to produce denominational division in the church. These mentalities and practices are: (a) *autonomy*: picking and choosing which leaders in the church will have one's respect (1 Cor. 1:10-17; 3:1-23); (b) *factionalism*: forming partisan groups in the church to advance the program (or supposed program) of one's favorite leaders (same passages); (c) *lust for power*: seeking to be boss (Matt. 20:20-28; Acts 8:9-24; 20:30; Phil. 2:1-11; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; 3 John 9); (d) *unwillingness to seek reconciliation* (Matt. 5:23-26;¹⁰ 18:15-20; Rom. 12:18; Eph. 4:3; Phil. 2:1ff.; 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:13; Heb. 12:14; Jam. 3:17); (e) *failure to maintain church discipline* (Matt. 18:15ff.; 1 Cor. 5); (f) *inattention to doctrinal and practical purity* (1 Tim. 4; 6:11-21; 2 Tim. 1:13ff.; 2:14-4:5; Tit.; etc.); (g) *failure to help fellow believers in need* (Matt. 25:31-46; 3 John).¹¹

9. When Scripture speaks of the church as the body of Christ, it contrasts the harmonious working together of the parts of the body with "schism" or "division" (see 1 Cor. 12:25 in the context of 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12). The figure

⁹ Certainly there is no New Testament basis for using the word "church" to refer to a denomination, as we often do today. Note also that "denomination," as I use the term, includes independent churches. An independent church, in my understanding, is a denomination all to itself. We do not escape denominationalism by adopting independency.

¹⁰ Note here that seeking reconciliation takes precedence even over the worship of God. That should indicate the high priority Scripture places on reconciliation. And overcoming denominationalism is a form of reconciliation.

¹¹ Diotrephes appears to be a proto-denominationalist, refusing hospitality to Christian teachers not allied with his "faction."

of the church as a temple points in the same direction (Eph. 2:21), as does that of the family (Eph. 4:6).

10. Jesus prayed that the church would be one, as he and his Father are one (John 17:20ff.). Now, some exegetes understand him here to be referring to "spiritual" unity rather than "organizational" unity. Certainly organizational matters are not the emphasis of this prayer. The emphasis is upon the vital union of the believers with Christ in the Spirit. However, that union is not wholly invisible; it is visible in the conduct of Christians in their relationships to one another as well as to God himself. Therefore:

(a) It is doubtful whether ancient readers would have naturally made, in such a context, the "spiritual"/"organizational" distinction which we today make so easily.¹²

(b) The unity of which Jesus speaks clearly has a visible dimension, for it is something that even unbelievers can see, and which indeed drives them to faith (John 17:21).

(c) The spiritual and the organizational cannot, in fact, be sharply separated. Our lack of organizational unity is caused by, and in turn causes, that lack of fellowship, harmony and cooperation which are certainly aspects of, or manifestations of, spiritual unity.

(d) Since it is plain from other texts (above, #3 - #6) that Jesus gave a particular government to the church, it is hard to imagine that this (and only this) form of oneness would be excluded from his prayer. Surely he was praying that the church be one in every way that he had established.

(e) Some have argued that since Jesus' prayers are always answered, this prayer must be a prayer for spiritual unity (which has, in some sense, always existed in the church) rather than organizational unity (which has not always existed). Do we really want to say that the Father did not answer Jesus' prayer? I have no doubt that the prayer of Jesus will one day be fully answered, that God will unite the church in his own time, and will unite it organizationally as well as in all other respects. That seems plain from many other passages. But we also know that God does not always accomplish his own will (and that of his Son) immediately. For some reason, God often accomplishes his purpose through a historical process which sometimes tries our patience. There is always at least the beginning of a fulfillment. Biblical theologians speak of "the already and the

¹² The sharp contrast between "spiritual," and "material" or "visible" comes from Platonic philosophy rather than from Scripture. In Scripture, "spiritual" normally refers to the work of God's Holy Spirit, which can be either visible or invisible.

not yet." God has begun to unify his church (even organizationally!),¹³ but there is more unity to come in the future.¹⁴

11. Is unity given by divine sovereignty, or is it something that requires the efforts of human beings? Both! God's sovereignty in Scripture does not negate but rather underlies the efficacy of human efforts. The passages cited earlier make it plain that the establishment of unity is God's work.¹⁵ Yet God himself in Scripture exhorts us solemnly to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) and to avoid attitudes (above) and actions detrimental to that unity.¹⁶ We are always to seek reconciliation with those whom we have offended or who have offended us (Matt. 5:21-26; 18:15-17). God's sovereignty does not entail human passivity. Scripture's emphasis upon God's sovereignty in restoring unity does not undermine human efforts in that direction; rather it encourages them.

New Testament Church Government

I have already established that God gave to the church a government, that Christians were obligated to honor that government, and that denominations played no role in the government of the church. But perhaps we should go into some more detail about the form of government God gave to the church.

The form of church government is, of course, itself one of the debated matters that have led to denominational division. I shall not try here to resolve the long-running disputes within the church concerning government. I shall, however, summarize the major views on the subject and seek to ascertain the bearing of each on the question of denominationalism.

Congregationalists emphasize the autonomy of the local church body. They do not deny the value of gathering representatives of various churches to help each other in making hard decisions, but they deny that there is any continuing institution which has perpetual sovereignty over the local church. In their view, all associations of churches with one another are purely voluntary. In one sense, Congregationalists are extreme denominationalists, for they regard

¹³ As we shall see, the head of the church organization is the exalted Christ. His is the executive, legislative and judicial supremacy. In that sense the church is united *organizationally*. Also, God's people are united by the governments of local churches. Denominational governments are unscriptural in my view, but they are better than nothing, and they do unite as well as divide.

¹⁴ Those who, like me, stress the organizational unity of the church sometimes receive the exhortation not to neglect the unity which the church already possesses. I believe that in the above discussion I have kept a fair balance between the unity which the church presently has, and the forms of unity which the church does not presently have but which will be given to her in the future.

¹⁵ See also M'Crie's excellent observations in *op. cit.*, 57-89.

¹⁶ M'Crie also says some valuable things about the human side of it, especially about the qualities of heart and life necessary for those who would work for union: *op. cit.*, 118-134.

each congregation as a denomination unto itself, in effect. On the other hand, if congregationalism is to function well, it is important that each congregation be in fellowship with all the others. When fellowship is broken, one congregation will be unable to associate with another congregation, even voluntarily, to do the Lord's work. Thus congregationalism is, at another level, anti-denominational. A congregationalism which measures up to the standards implicit in the congregational reading of Scripture would put all the world's churches together in one "Congregational association" or "Baptist convention."

Episcopal government is even more anti-denominational in its basic thrust. Episcopalianism holds that the churches in each geographical region ought to be ruled (with some checks and balances) by a single bishop. But if this sort of government existed in the early church, then the bishop ruled over all the churches in his area, not just those of a particular denomination; and that must still be the ideal for an Episcopalian. This anti-denominational thrust will be even stronger for those Episcopalians (mostly Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics) who believe that the bishops are the successors of the apostles and thus have an additional mandate to rule the churches in their region.

I am myself a Presbyterian. Most likely, I believe, the church was originally organized in a way analogous to the organization of Israel in Exodus 18:17-26, with leaders over tens, hundreds, thousands, etc. The pattern applied also to Israel's religious life, organized according to families and synagogues, with the Sanhedrin as the highest court. The early Christians naturally adopted this model with little change. The "tens" were the house churches: essentially single families, perhaps with others worshipping with them. The "thousands" would be the city churches – the church of Jerusalem, the church of Philippi, etc. – whose leaders Paul addresses as a body in Philippians 1:1.¹⁷ The highest level was the whole church; and indeed at one point in Acts a body is convened which has power over the whole church to deal with a matter that could not be resolved at the local level (Acts 15). As such,¹⁸ the government of the church is composed of various levels of courts, the broader ones dealing with issues that cannot be resolved by the narrower ones.

This structure, like the Congregationalist and Episcopal alternatives, requires organizational church unity. For if the church is divided into denominations, then: (a) there is no highest court by which controversies can be ultimately decided, but rather rival courts; and (b) leaders will be available to help resolve problems only within their own denominations. Denomination B will lack the gifts of the leaders in denomination A, and vice versa. That will be a great

¹⁷ What about the hundreds? Well, perhaps there were "local churches" somewhat like those we know today, wherein members of various house churches gathered on occasion. Or perhaps the church simply skipped the hundreds level in the larger cities. It doesn't matter much.

¹⁸ The reader may consult more elaborate defenses of Presbyterian government if he desires more exposition of these points.

disadvantage for both denominations. The resources of each will be less than what God has promised to his people.

Biblical Presbyterianism, then, requires the abolition of denominationalism. In a biblically Presbyterian church, *all* the area Christians in good standing would vote to elect the elders and deacons. Those officers would rule *all* those Christians, not merely those of one denominational faction. *All* the gifts God has given his people in the area would be available for the ministry. We can see that biblical Presbyterianism is rather different from Presbyterianism as it now exists – so different that the latter's biblical warrant is questionable.

So all three of the major views of church government among Christians require for their best implementation the organizational unity of the church and the elimination of denominations.

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