## Catholicity and Denominationalism

Study Questions

The assigned reading for this lesson is Edmund Clowney's *The Church*, pp. 71–98. Here are some questions to provoke your thinking as you read through that material. (We may or may not address these issues in class.)

1. On pages 80 and 81, Clowney cautions against "spiritualizing the Spirit." Reflecting on your own experiences in the local church, how can believers attain genuine unity—more than just camaraderie or singing "we are one in the Spirit"?

2. On page 82, Clowney notes that our consideration of the unity of the church excludes groups that are apostate or heterodox. (We might even call them "cults.") What is the difference between true and false churches?

3. Have you ever been reluctant to profess your belief in the "holy catholic church" while reciting the Apostles' Creed? Does Clowney's comment on p. 91 make that affirmation a little easier for you?

4. The discussion concerning Augustine's catholicity argument (pp. 91–92) is very important. How does it help you answer question #2 above? Can any visible communion of believers be identified as "the" catholic church?
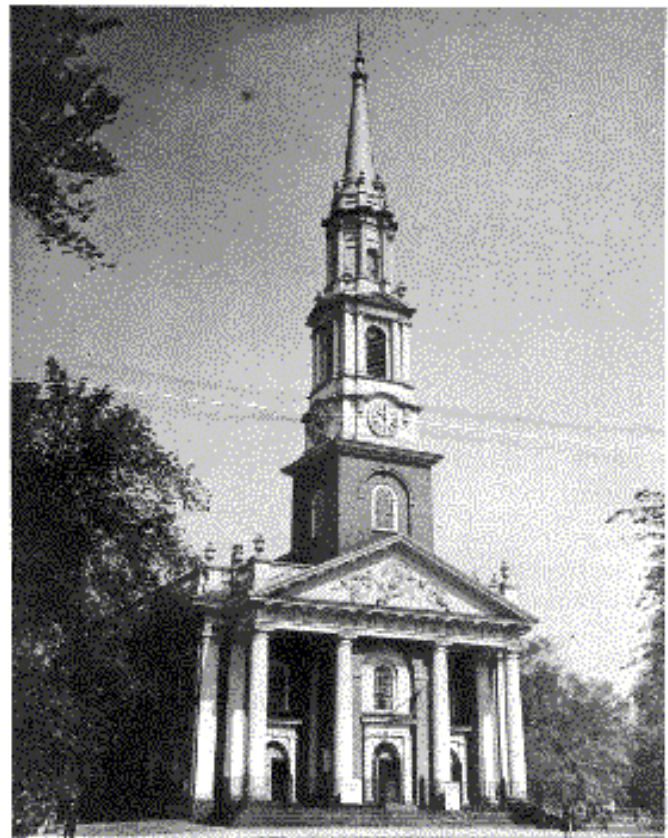
Comment: The Universal Church and the Reality of Denominations

When we profess to believe in the holy catholic church, we are affirming by faith the unity of all genuine believers in the body of Christ—the new covenant community headed by the Lord Jesus Christ, constituted by the shared experience of His Spirit, and grounded on the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. This is the "universal church," as opposed to the "local church." It consists of believers from all times and places, not simply those now living in a specific locality. It might also be described as the "invisible church," for its membership cannot be clearly identified.

Visible Churches
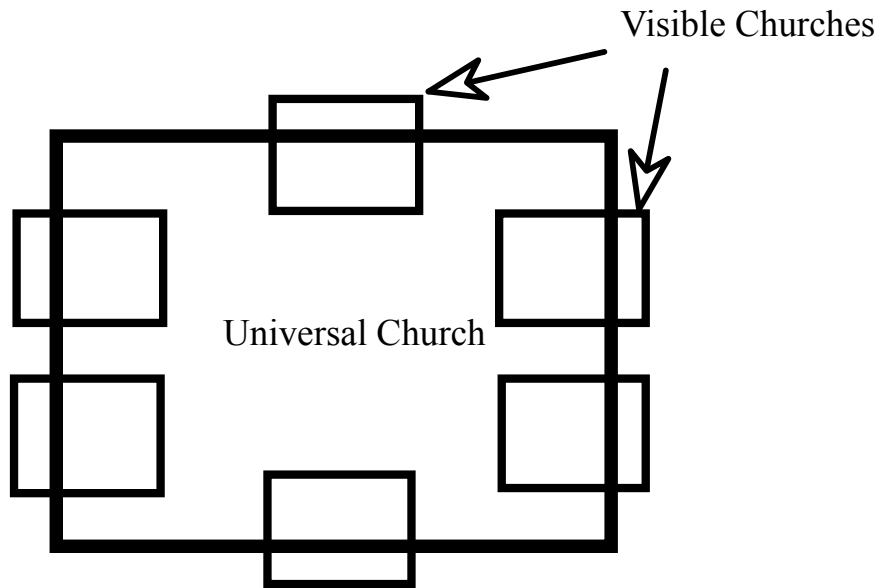
Universal Church

The church universal has an inherent unity. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6). The doctrine of Christian unity affirms, at its root, the preeminence of Jesus Christ. There is one church because there is only one God. There is one church because He provided a single plan of redemption in His Son. There is one church because there is only one Spirit poured out upon believers by the exalted Christ. In this sense we see the very existence of the church as a fulfillment of Jesus' prayer that His people would be "one," "perfected in unity" (John 17:11, 20–23). As Geoffrey Bromiley wrote, our affirmation of the "catholic" church is an affirmation of the universality of the gospel.

> This does not mean that it constitutes a single worldwide organization. It means that Jesus Christ died for all classes without distinction, so that in His Church there are no external qualifications of age, generation, descent, or status. In Him these distinctions have no reality. They still exist, and legitimately or illegitimately they are reflected in the life of the Church. But the Church is not to be ordered by them. It is catholic in its true reality. In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond or free (Col. 3:11), male nor female (Gal. 3:28). The Church is not to be identified with any human grouping, culture, or structure. Its boundaries cannot be drawn in terms of any human differentiations. Despite the need for external manifestations of unity, it is not identical exclusively with any one ecclesiastical construct. Its catholicity is rooted in the representative action of Jesus Christ, the one for the many in whom the many are one" ("Church" in *ISBE*, 1:694).

We must be careful, however. Appropriate as it is, our affirmation of the inherent unity of the Spirit in the universal church must not cause us to neglect tangible expressions of that unity in personal relationships between believers. Paul's letter to the Ephesians urges local churches to live out the unity already established through their shared experience of the Spirit. To "put on the new man" in Ephesians 4:24 is to demonstrate in word and deed that "we are members of one another" (v. 25), having been reconciled both to God and to one another through the cross, in which Jew and Gentile Christians are made "into one new man" (2:15). In the same way, it is because believers are members of one body that Paul urges the Corinthians to employ their diverse gifts with love and humility (1 Cor. 12:12–13). Our unity as believers is not to be thought of as something that is only "invisible" or "spiritual." Like the

(progressive) transformation of our hearts by the presence of the Spirit, we are told that it is already real, but we also rightly expect to SEE it.

While looking for expressions of unity, we too easily stumble over divisions in the church. Local churches often worship next door to each other, separated by distinct architecture and two hundred feet of asphalt. I recently counted 8 churches within a half mile of each other on Ferguson Road. If they differed only in terms of ethnicity, age, or worship style, I would not hesitate to suggest that they find a way to meet together. However, it appears that their differences are primarily doctrinal, for each church represents a different denomination.
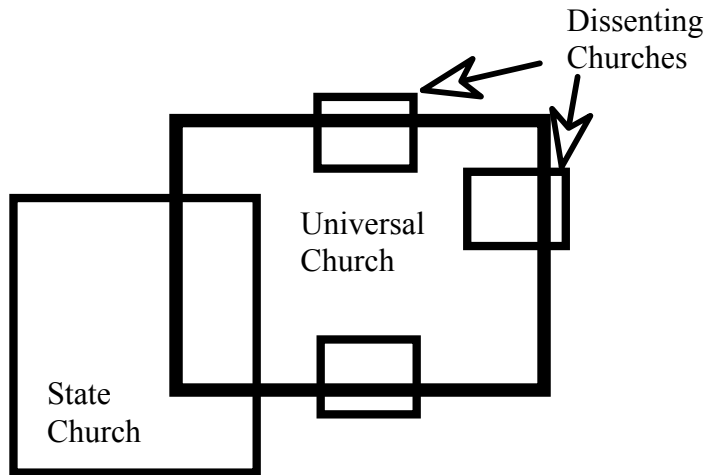
Before decrying the divisions that it has helped perpetuate in the church, we should note that denominationalism is not necessarily a bad thing. In a world in which people disagree over doctrine while confessing their fallibility, the presence of various denominations is a sign of appropriate tolerance. Each group believes it is right, but no group demands the ruin of the others. They have "agreed to disagree," recognizing that mutual tolerance is in the best interest of each group. Those who command exclusive authority through an alliance with the government will survive only as long as the government (remember Constantine?). In the same way, those who attempt to destroy others inevitably risk their own destruction by legitimizing religious violence or discrimination. Denominationalism, an approach which began through the influence of dissenters at the Westminster Assembly, avoids such situations by affirming the following principles (as articulated by Bruce Shelley): "First, considering the human inability always to see the truth clearly, differences of opinion about the outward form of the church are inevitable. Second, even though these differences do not involve fundamentals of the faith, they are not matters of indifference. Third, since no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth, the true church of Christ can never be fully represented by any single ecclesiastical structure. Finally, the mere fact of separation does not of itself constitute schism. It is possible to be divided at many points and still be united in Christ" ("Denominations—Divided We Stand," *Christianity Today* [September 7, 1998], 90).

In other words, denominationalism recognizes that some differences are profound enough to provoke separation *within* the larger, universal church. By contrast, "sectarianism" (in which groups believe they alone possess the essential truth) regards the separation as *between* the true church and apostates. Given the reality of disagreements between persons, denominationalism seems to be a better approach than either sectarianism or the nationalization of the church.
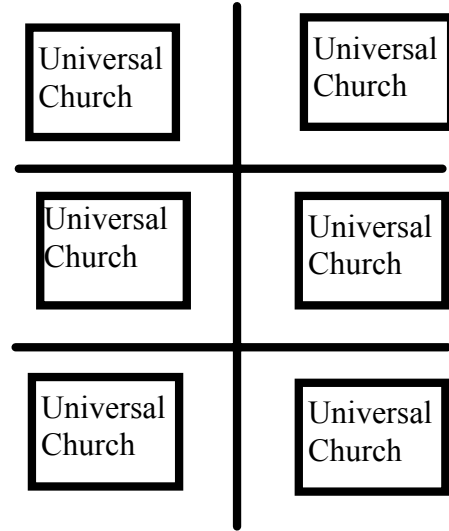
Denominationalism is not without risks, however. Koivisto identifies several potential problems (*One Lord, One Faith* [Wheaton: Victor, 1993]:

- The risk of substituting the denomination for the universal church
- The risk of violation of conscience [by minimizing differences within the denomination]
- The risk of obscuring the visible city-church [when congregations are more loyal to their larger denominations than to the larger body of Christ in their own community]
- The risk of minimizing the local church as denominations become parachurch groups
- The risk of ethnicity [in contrast to the biblical ideal of a multiethnic church, many denominations belong to (and perpetuate the distinctives of) particular cultures]
- The risk of independency [also a risk with autonomous churches]
- The risk of Americanization [that is, a "free market" encouraging church "shopping"]
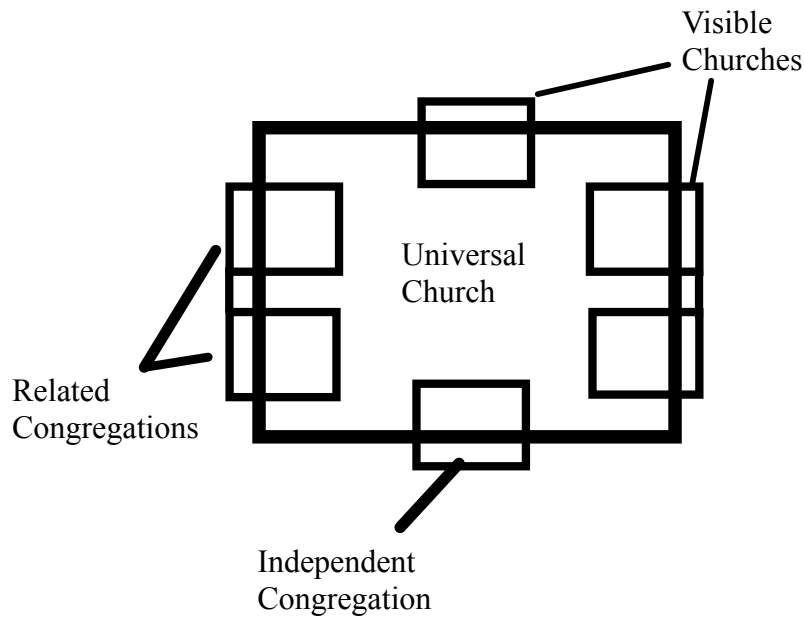
Can you think of other potential problems to add to this list? Is there a better system?

Dissenting
Churches

Universal
Church

State
Church

State Church Model

Universal Church	Universal Church
Universal Church	Universal Church
Universal Church	Universal Church

Sectarian Model
(each sees itself as true church)

Visible
Churches

Universal
Church

Related
Congregations

Independent
Congregation

Denominational Model

Many critics of denominationalism have suggested that denominations and individual local churches should be able to set aside some of their arguments and pursue unity. The ecumenical movement has encouraged that approach, but often at the cost of doctrinal distinctions that most of us would regard as essential. In other words, different groups will likely identify "insignificant" and "essential" doctrines very differently.

> Since 1961, the World Council of Churches has described itself as "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father; Son and Holy Spirit." Would you be able to affirm this confession and purpose? What is left out that you might wish to include?

Organizations such as the World Council of Churches or the National Association of Evangelicals may give positive expression to the essential unity of the church, but they can never make the universal church fully visible. Not only will their membership (like that of the great majority of local churches) unwittingly include unbelievers, but many churches will never be a part of an ecumenical association. Thus these organizations not only fail to resolve the problem of denominational differences between the visible churches, their very presence essentially compounds the problem. They constitute yet another mixed, visible community, just like all the churches and denominations they seek to unite. As Koivisto put it, "any group of related churches which find part of their reason for being a unity in the *opposition* to denominationalism have already *defined* themselves denominationally" (*One Lord, One Faith*, p. 96). Their aims may be noble and their achievements may be notable, but their expectations must also be realistic. The universal church can never be the visible church in this life.

Summary
In January 1965, the editors of *Christianity Today* suggested seven points to consider with regard to the universal, catholic character of the church. They were:

> 1. The Church of Jesus Christ is both an actual reality in history and an invisible number of believers known only to God.

> 2. The existence of the one Church as churches, extended over time and space, is not per se a contradiction of the church's essential unity.

> 3. The Church is one in Jesus Christ, having one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one hope. Deeply held differences have given rise to denominationalism. These differences have not destroyed the inner unity of Christians in Jesus Christ but have impaired the reflection of that unity in the visible churches.

> 4. By the fragmentary denominational reflection of their unity in Jesus Christ, by their rivalry on mission fields at home and abroad, by sometimes denying to others the liberty of conviction they claim for themselves, churches give imperfect witness to the Gospel and create obstacles to the fulfillment of the mission of the Church.

> 5. Churches whose existence derives only from sociological, racial, or cultural differences ought not to remain separate and divided. They should seek, wherever possible, union with other churches of like convictions.

> 6. Churches whose separate existence is grounded in basic theological differences of faith and order should not ignore these differences, but should seek to resolve them by looking toward a

visible manifestation of true unity in Jesus Christ and by recognizing that certain of these differences of faith and order may be as much a part of Christian truth as is the truth concerning the unity of the church.

7. In the endeavor to achieve external, visible unity, any ecumenical effort that evades or ignores essential matters of faith and order will lead only to greater confusion and ultimate failure. Any unity not based upon the common theological affirmation of the faith once for all delivered will be an expression in history of something other than what the Church in Jesus Christ is divinely appointed to be.

Questions for Further Reflection

•Witness Lee, a disciple of Watchman Nee, started a very influential movement in Taiwan that moved to America in the early 1960's and became known as "the Local Church." Theologically, the group has been accused of being a non-Christian cult because they hold to what appears to be a modalistic view of the Trinity and fall into the Eutychian heresy in their Christology. They are a "restorationist" movement in that they believe genuine believers in a given municipality should all worship together. To have separate churches in the same city—even churches that share the same doctrine, but are separated by many miles—is, to Lee's followers, an abomination. How would you respond to them on this point?

•All students coming into (and graduating from) Dallas Seminary are asked to affirm seven "essential doctrines," which are: "the authority and inerrancy of Scripture; the Trinity; the full deity and humanity of Christ; the spiritual lostness of the human race; the substitutionary atonement and bodily resurrection of Christ; salvation by faith alone; and the physical return of Christ." Are these doctrines an adequate statement of evangelical orthodoxy? Are they equal in importance? Should any doctrines be added or deleted? The doctrinal statement for the Evangelical Theological Society is much more rudimentary. Members must affirm belief in the Trinity and in inerrancy. (It used to be just inerrancy, but the Trinity was added to keep "cults" from joining.) Compare that standard to the one used by the World Council of Churches (see box above).

•Roman Catholics have historically held that the church dispenses the grace of salvation, primarily through the sacraments. Hence there is "no salvation outside the church." Vatican II has decentralized that doctrine to some degree, conceding the possibility that those outside Roman Catholicism, even those outside confessing Christianity, may be genuinely saved. What is the relationship between the visible and the invisible church? May someone be a part of the invisible church without being a part of a visible one? Why would earlier Catholic theologians have resisted that notion?

Additional Reading

•For a very helpful discussion of denominationalism and the nature of tradition within evangelicalism, see Rex A. Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993). The diagrams in these notes were modeled after Koivisto's.

•Though he recognizes that it is not practical, John M. Frame (*Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991]) hopes for the full organizational unity of genuine believers. He writes, "It is clear . . . that all denominational division has been due to sin somewhere—either among the founders of the new denomination, or in the previous denomination, or both" (p. 38). He has an excellent final chapter in which he offers practical suggestions for individual believers as we seek to better express our unity in Christ.

•For a broader discussion of evangelicalism and its place in the universal church, see Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity Amid Diversity* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).