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~~Protestantism in...~~
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PROTESTANTISM
in the
UNITED STATES

by JOHN A. HARDON, S.J.

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PROTESTANTISM IN THE UNITED STATES

By JOHN A. HARDON, S.J.

I. Disunity in American Protestantism*

THE MULTIPLICITY of separate and independent Protestant churches in the United States is something unique in the modern world, which Protestants themselves are the first to deplore. "The fissiparous tendency," they confess, "which has characterized the whole of Protestantism has run riot in the United States."¹

In view of the recent meeting of the World Council of Churches held in Chicago, it will pay to study at close range the condition of Protestantism in the United States, which may properly be called the testing ground of the world ecumenical movement. On the one hand, the problems facing ecumenism are magnified many times in America—so deep have been the ravages of religious liberalism outside the Catholic Church. On the other hand, in spite of these obstacles, if any measure of success is achieved in the United States, then the world ecumenical movement may take heart and not despair that unity is impossible. Moreover, as one Protestant leader observed, "The problem of achieving unity on a world scale will be solved more readily if many lesser units of world Christianity provide actual demonstrations of church union. The most convenient, natural and promising of these units is the church within a particular nation."²

In the following study, therefore, we shall inquire into the divided state of American Protestantism in order to ascertain how deep and extensive is this fragmentation. Evidently the cure must be suited to the disease; so that if ecumenism is the prescribed remedy, its efficacy can be duly evaluated only if the nature of American sectarianism is first properly appraised.

* This is the English version of an article in the Rome publication, *Civiltà Cattolica*, for January 1, 1955, published here through the courtesy of the editor, Rev. Giacomo Martegani, S.J.

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¹ Morrison, Charles C., *The Unfinished Reformation*, New York, 1953, p. 3

² *Ibid.*, p. xi



HOW SECTARIAN IS AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM?

According to the latest statistics, an estimated 91 million Americans out of a total population of 160 million are church-goers, in the sense that they are affiliated with some religious body. Subtracting from this figure 31 million Catholics, 5 million Jews and 2 million Orthodox leaves approximately 54 million people who are professedly Protestants. The official figure is 52,890,992.

No one questions the fact that American Protestants are separated from one another in many ways. In the words of a cynical commentator, "trying to describe Protestantism is like trying to describe the United States; one can say almost anything about it."³ Protestants range in doctrinal belief all the way from the supernaturalism of the right-wing Lutherans to the agnosticism of the left-wing Unitarians. They range in ritual and worship all the way from the near-Catholicity of the high-church Episcopalians to the barren simplicity of the silent-meeting Quakers. They range in emotionalism all the way from the restraint of the Congregationalists to the dervish exuberance of the Pentecostals.

These differences will here be analyzed from two aspects which may conveniently be called the denominational and the individual. In other words, the divergencies in faith and morals which characterize American Protestantism are not mere conjecture, but may be proved to exist, first among the various denominations, secondly among the members themselves. Or, negatively, it is a demonstrable fact that American Protestants are divided on the fundamental truths of religion, not only because their separate denominations teach and practice contrary doctrines, but because individual Protestants, holding contrary opinions, are tolerated within the same denomination.

I. NUMERICAL DIVISION AND MEMBERSHIP OF PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS

It would be tedious and quite unnecessary to go through all 86 Protestant denominations listed in the *Year Book of American Churches*. Many of them are so small that most Americans hardly know of their existence. Christ's Sanctified Holy Church has 28 congregations and 884 members; The Church of the Living God has only 120 members in 6 congregations; The Church of St. Mary the Virgin has one congregation and 800 adherents. In the following classification are listed the 20 largest denominations which represent approximately 90 per cent of American Protestantism.

³ Williams, J. Paul, *What Americans Believe And How They Worship*, New York, 1952, p. 88

MAJOR PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

| <i>Denomination</i> | <i>Church Membership</i> | <i>Number of Sects</i> |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Adventist Churches | 290,898 | 5 |
| Baptist Churches | 17,470,111 | 29 |
| Christ Unity Science Church | 1,112,123 | 1 |
| Church of Christ, Scientist ⁴ | ----- | 1 |
| Churches of Christ | 1,500,000 | 1 |
| Churches of God | 126,844 | 7 |
| Congregationalist Churches | 1,273,628 | 2 |
| Disciples of Christ | 1,815,627 | 1 |
| Evangelical Churches | 1,618,339 | 5 |
| Latter-day Saints (Mormons) | 1,210,336 | 6 |
| Lutheran Churches | 6,313,892 | 19 |
| Menonite Churches | 142,513 | 15 |
| Methodist Churches | 11,664,978 | 21 |
| Pentecostal Assemblies | 300,070 | 7 |
| Presbyterian Churches | 3,535,171 | 10 |
| Protestant Episcopal Church | 2,482,887 | 1 |
| Quakers | 114,119 | 9 |
| Reformed Churches | 373,780 | 3 |
| Salvation Army | 232,631 | 1 |
| Unitarian Churches | 82,420 | 1 |

II. DOCTRINAL AND RITUAL DIFFERENCES

Without attempting a full scale comparison of the fundamental differences among the major Protestant denominations, we can at least touch on their more important discrepancies and classify them according to traditional theological principles:

A) The Nature of God and the Holy Trinity

At least in their official declarations of belief, the principal Protestant denominations unequivocally subscribe to the first article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." A notable exception are the Christian Scientists, whose pantheistic idealism is summed up in the maxim of their foundress, Mrs. Baker Eddy, that "All is infinite Mind and its infinite manifestation, for God is All in all."⁵

On the dogma of the *Trinity*, however, there is less unanimity.

⁴ Statistics for the Church of Christ, Scientist, are not available. The by-laws of the denomination forbid the publication of membership figures. However it is known that in 1954 there were 2,323 Christian Science churches and societies, operating in every state of the Union and, with few exceptions, in every city of more than 50,000 population.

⁵ Eddy, Mrs. Baker, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (no publication date or place), p. 468

Most of the denominations still profess the traditional doctrine; for example, the Episcopalians teach that in the unity of the Godhead "there are three Persons of one substance, power and eternity."⁶

At the other extreme are the Unitarians who deny the Trinity, and profess instead that "We believe in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus Christ."⁷

B) The Incarnation and the Divinity of Christ

In their handbooks of doctrine Protestant churches generally repeat the words of the Nicene and Apostles' Creed declaring belief in "Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary." But not all subscribe to this. Outstanding in their scepticism about the Incarnation are the Congregationalists. Ironically they are the mother church from which the Unitarians seceded in the 19th century because Congregationalism refused to accept the thesis, "One God in One Person only." In its latest declaration of faith, the Congregational Church teaches that, "in knowing Jesus," the early Christians "felt they had come much closer to God than ever before. That was the Son of God."⁸ This is consistent with their modal concept of the Trinity, by which "Christians believe in one God who as Father made all things, as Son showed himself clearly to men in order to lead them away from their sins into a full life, and as Spirit is even now at work in the world and in our own hearts."⁹

C) Scripture, Tradition and Revelation

The majority of Protestants reject Christian tradition as a source of divine faith. Article 5 of the *Methodist Doctrine*, for example, is typical in declaring, "The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."¹⁰ In opposition to this the Protestant Episcopal Church freely espouses tradition. "There is an essential place for tradition," it says, "in the Christian religion," because "the guidance of the Holy Spirit has been with the Church in its development."¹¹

Correspondingly most denominations still recognize the Scriptures as the word of God and of paramount importance for salvation. But there are exceptions. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, as they

⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer*, New York, 1935, p. 603

⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 226

⁸ *Pastor's Manual*, Boston, 1944, p. 22

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁰ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Nashville, 1952, p. 67

¹¹ *The Faith of the Church*, New York (The National Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church), 1951, p. 20

are popularly called, pay their respects to Jesus Christ, but they place personal experience above the Gospels as a source of religious knowledge. Their founder, George Fox, wrote, "You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light, and has thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?"¹²

Different again are the Mormons, whose founder, Joseph Smith, is reported to have had a revelation from the heavenly messenger Moroni, directing him to "a book deposited, written upon golden plates." Translating this mysterious volume into English, he produced the Book of Mormon. Article 8 of the Mormon profession of faith reads: "We believe the Bible to be the Word of God, as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the Word of God."¹³ Nor do they stop there. Since heavenly communications are an essential part of their religion, the Mormons not only believe that which "God has revealed," but "all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."¹⁴

D) Priesthood and Church Government

The Protestant bodies in America commonly reject the papacy as of divine institution; but beyond that there is no agreement on the governing office in the church. In general, however, they may be classified in their descending emphasis on the priesthood:

1. *Episcopalians*, by definition, proclaim that "a bishop is to be a chief pastor in the Church; to confer Holy Order, and to administer Confirmation." They also believe that "a priest is to minister to the people committed to his care, to preach the Word of God, to celebrate the Holy Communion, and to pronounce Absolution and Blessing in God's Name."¹⁵ The Methodists, founded by John Wesley, an Anglican clergyman, are the largest American church which substantially subscribes to the same doctrine.

2. *Presbyterians* reject the episcopate as a man-made innovation. Their system of sacerdotalism is centered around elders, who are elected by the people and ordained by the laying on of hands. A group of elders and laymen form a *Session*; and the *Sessions* of a district—usually 10 to 30—are organized into *Presbyteries*, which substitute for the episcopate in all matters of doctrine and worship and jurisdiction.

3. *Congregationalists* differ radically from Episcopalians and Presbyterians in vesting their authority not in a single person, bishop

¹² Russell, Elbert, *The History of Quakerism*, 1942, p. 54

¹³ *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, Salt Lake City (no date)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Article 9

¹⁵ *The Faith of the Church*, p. 138

or elder, nor in a group of persons like the Presbytery, but in each separate congregation. "We hold," they declare, "to the autonomy of the local church and its independence of all ecclesiastical control."¹⁶ The Congregational idea of church government has been adopted by many church bodies in America, of which the largest are the Baptist communions.

American Protestants are no less divided on the question of admitting women to sacred orders. At one extreme, in the Congregational Church there is no sex discrimination. Women are ordained and have been elected to the highest honorary office in the church, the Moderatorship of the General Council. In the introductory rubric to ordination, the ordinal explains that, "Although the masculine pronoun is used, women are eligible to all stages of the ministry in the Congregational Christian Church."¹⁷ At the other extreme, Presbyterians will have nothing to do with women ministers. Several years ago when a minority effort was made to ordain women, a Presbyterian pastor called the proposal "absolutely contrary to the Bible and to common sense. . . . Women are not temperamentally fit to be ministers." He added that "Women are not especially good at keeping secrets. . . . Women are apt to be influenced by their feelings in matters of belief and . . . women are usually too kind and sympathetic with other women."¹⁸ Similar sentiments have been expressed by the Lutherans who never seriously considered having women ministers in their church.

E) The Sacrament and Rite of Baptism

Baptism in American Protestantism is not generally regarded as essential to salvation. A person is saved dependent exclusively on his interior dispositions, although the Baptismal rite is usually made the first formal step toward becoming a church member. Providentially, when the sacrament is administered, the words used are the correct Trinitarian formula. But there is wide divergence on the manner of administration. Pools for Baptism by immersion may be seen in Baptist, Disciples of Christ and Adventists denominations, which regard Baptism by immersion of the whole body as essential for the valid reception of the sacrament. Most other churches are satisfied with ablution. The *Discipline* of the Methodist Church leaves the matter optional, directing the minister to "Let every adult person, and the parents of every child to be baptized, have the choice of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion."¹⁹ So tenaciously do the Baptists and Disciples

¹⁶ Atkins, Gaius G., and Fagley, Frederick L., *History of American Congregationalism*, Boston, 1942, p. 404

¹⁷ *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, Boston, 1951, p. 101

¹⁸ McComb, John H., *The New York Times*, February 17, 1947, p. 14

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 519

hold to the immersion ritual that Protestant observers consider it one of the main obstacles to sectarian unity in the States: "They invest immersion with the high importance not only of New Testament authority, but of explicit command of Christ. Obviously we have here a really difficult problem as we strive to envisage a united church."²⁰

The same discrepancy exists with regard to infant Baptism. Few if any denominations prescribe Baptism before the age of reason, although most churches encourage the practice, and provision is made for it in the church manuals. Some are unalterably opposed; for example, the Baptists who prefer to be called "Baptized Believers" or "Christians Baptized on Profession of Their Faith." Their contention is that Baptism is useless unless accompanied by the candidate's own confession of faith, which is precluded by infant Baptism. In pursuance of this theory, John Smyth, their founder, "baptized himself by applying water to his own head, and then baptized his followers."²¹ Another strange aberration regarding Baptism was introduced by the Mormons. Persons who died before they had a chance to be baptized into the Mormon faith can be baptized by proxy, living relatives or friends being immersed in water and the formula pronounced, instead of the dead.

F) The Eucharist and Holy Communion

While the denominations are unanimous in rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation and therefore the Real Corporeal Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, they disagree on what the Eucharist means, on who is to administer the sacrament, and even on the proper elements which are necessary for its consecration. Methodists hold that "The body of Christ is given, taken and eaten in the Supper, only after a heavenly and spiritual manner."²² Congregationalists prefer not to speak of the body of Christ, but rather "when we eat the bread and take the cup, we are to remember Jesus."²³

The consecration of the Eucharistic elements follows logically from the concept of the sacerdotal office in the denominations. Thus, the Protestant Episcopal Church would never allow women and, much less, the laity to "consecrate" the bread and wine for distribution as Holy Communion. But the Congregational and Methodist Churches have made both concessions. Women are admitted to ordination with consequent power to dispense Communion to the people. More significantly, they also provide for the "consecration" of the Eucharist by the unordained laity, men or women, when actively engaged in preaching. The pertinent text in the *Discipline of the Methodist Church* reads: "An unordained pastor, while serving

²⁰ Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 167

²¹ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 236

²² *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, p. 30

²³ *Pastor's Manual*, p. 90

as a regularly appointed pastor of a charge, may be authorized to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper."²⁴ And the corresponding text in the *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches* says, "A lay preacher . . . will not ordinarily . . . administer the sacraments unless especially authorized to do so by the church he is serving, with the approval of the association."²⁵ In both churches, therefore, the unordained laity may "consecrate" the Eucharist, provided they are authorized to do so by their local congregation. But where Methodists limit this privilege to students for the ministry, Congregationalists extend it to any preacher, indiscriminately.

More extreme is the difference in the elements used for the Eucharistic rite. All the denominations who still retain the Lord's Supper use leavened or unleavened bread. But there is wide diversity as regards the use of wine. Some churches, like the Episcopalians, use wine. Others, like the Methodists, insist on unfermented grape juice. The Mormons even use water. Behind this substitution lies their inveterate opposition to alcohol. The Methodist Church, which prescribes in the ritual, "Let the pure, unfermented juice of the grape be used,"²⁶ has gone on record to say that, "Our church re-asserts its long-established conviction that intoxicating liquor cannot be legalized without sin. The Church of Jesus Christ from its very nature stands at variance with the liquor traffic."²⁷ The anomaly which this creates is emphasized by the fact that in the Eucharistic ceremony the minister is required to say the Prayer of Consecration, in which he addresses the heavenly Father in the words, ". . . we, receiving this bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ's holy institution."²⁸

I. EVIDENCE OF CONTRARY DOCTRINES WITHIN THE DENOMINATIONS

The principle laid down by the original Reformers that every man has the right to his own interpretation of Scripture has been operating for four centuries, and perhaps nowhere better than in America are the fruits of this principle more painfully evident. It is not only the denominations which are at variance with each other, but individuals within the denominations are tolerated and "in good standing" although they contradict the most solemn convictions of their fellow sectarians.

Some years ago, American Protestants organized the *Institute of Religious Research*, whose task was to inquire into the religious beliefs of outstanding churchmen in each denomination and tabulate their findings with a view to promoting mutual understanding. The

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 106

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 114

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 502

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 639

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 511

results of this study are taken as authentic and serve as a scholarly basis for the ecumenical movement in the United States. Over one hundred tabulations were made, of which the following are typical answers to questions that were asked on fundamental religious beliefs and attitudes:²⁹

A. THE AUTHORITARIAN VIEW OF THE CHURCH
(624 Church Leaders Interrogated)

“Christ founded the Church upon the basis of a final and authoritative body of revealed truth, fixed in content, to which nothing essential may be added, although new implications and applications may be declared by competent authority in the Church.”

| Denominations | Per Cent of Replies Asserting Proposition Is: | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|----------|-----------|------|----------|
| | False | | Undecided | True | |
| | Certainly | Probably | | | Probably |
| Congregational-Christian | 45.7 | 15.2 | 10.7 | 11.2 | 17.2 |
| Methodist Episcopal | 71.9 | 12.5 | 11.4 | 1.1 | 3.1 |
| Baptist (Northern) | 56.1 | 19.5 | 8.5 | 7.4 | 8.5 |
| Disciples of Christ | 47.5 | 15.0 | 15.0 | 12.5 | 10.0 |
| Presbyterian | 42.6 | 26.2 | 11.6 | 9.8 | 9.8 |
| Protestant Episcopal | 41.8 | 16.4 | 13.4 | 10.5 | 17.9 |
| Reformed Churches | 40.0 | 17.1 | 0.0 | 11.4 | 31.5 |
| Methodist Episcopal South | 41.9 | 12.9 | 9.7 | 22.6 | 12.9 |
| Lutheran | 27.6 | 24.1 | 0.0 | 13.8 | 34.5 |
| | 6.0 | 0.0 | 6.1 | 27.3 | 60.6 |

B. THE UNITY AND NATURE OF THE CHURCH
(624 Church Leaders Interrogated)

“There is but one visible Church, holy, Catholic and apostolic.”

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| All Denominations | 37.8 | 16.9 | 17.1 | 9.6 | 18.6 |
| Congregational-Christian | 46.9 | 20.8 | 18.7 | 7.3 | 6.3 |
| Methodist Episcopal | 46.4 | 19.5 | 14.6 | 7.3 | 12.2 |
| Methodist Episcopal South | 44.9 | 17.2 | 10.3 | 3.4 | 24.2 |
| Lutheran | 39.4 | 21.2 | 9.1 | 3.0 | 27.3 |
| Baptist (Northern) | 41.0 | 18.0 | 13.1 | 9.9 | 18.0 |
| Presbyterian | 34.4 | 17.9 | 16.4 | 10.4 | 20.9 |
| Reformed Churches | 19.4 | 29.0 | 22.6 | 16.1 | 12.9 |
| Disciples of Christ | 25.0 | 17.5 | 22.5 | 17.5 | 17.5 |
| Protestant Episcopal | 17.2 | 5.7 | 11.4 | 5.7 | 60.0 |

²⁹ Douglass, H. Paul, *Church Unity Movements in the United States*, New York, 1934, pp. 189, 262 (Tables XXIX, XXXVIII)

II. CONCESSION OF DOCTRINAL FREEDOM GIVEN BY THE DENOMINATIONS

Sectarian apologists claim that the essence of Protestantism is "the freedom of the Christian man," and its appeal is to "those who are willing to assume the responsibilities of liberty as well as enjoy its privileges."³⁰ Consistent with this theory, the denominations openly encourage dogmatic individualism. Unlike the "false freedom" in the Catholic Church, "which consists only in liberty to believe and do what the infallible authority of the church says is true and right," American Protestants are free to accept or reject, as the Spirit moves them, even what their own denomination proposes as the official doctrine.

A good example is the Methodist Church, reputedly "the most representative church in America."³¹ Methodist bishops describe their organization as standing for "an inclusive Christianity," which "believes that the things that unite Christians are far more important than the things that divide. It has no exclusive doctrines, rites or ceremonies."³² The fact is that Methodism professes an elaborate body of doctrine and form of ritual, but without obligation to accept them.

In 1953, the followers of John Wesley published *The Methodist Primer*, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of his birth. The *Primer* is an epitome of Methodism as presently operating in the United States. It is also the most authoritative admission of the dogmatic flexibility of the "most characteristic church" in America,³³ whose "doctrines are broad" and whose broadness covers every phase of religious faith and practice.³⁴

Methodism teaches that all followers of Christ may have access to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; and that ordination by any established evangelical Church is valid. A letter from any Christian Church may be accepted as the only condition of membership. . . . Any minister in good standing may be invited to our pulpits.

The foundation for this amorphous Christianity is the authority of John Wesley who declared that "the distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or

³⁰ Garrison, Winfred E., *A Protestant Manifesto*, New York, 1952, pp. 193-194

³¹ Statement of President Theodore Roosevelt, quoted by Charles A. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, New York, 1930. Vol. II, p. 399

³² Selecman, Charles C., *The Methodist Primer*, Nashville, 1953, p. 36

³³ *Life* magazine, November 10, 1947, p. 38

³⁴ *The Methodist Primer*, p. 36

that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions . . . are all quite wide of the point.”³⁵ What makes a man a Christian is not what he believes, but how he feels. The basis of Christianity is not a “set of notions” immobilized in a dogmatic creed, but a sense of fellowship with “those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.” In the words of Wesley’s famous sermon on Fraternity, “If thy heart be right with my heart, give me thy hand.”³⁶

The divided character of American Protestantism deserves to be better known, not only as a vindication of Catholicism whose unity is a reproach to the sectarians, but in order to stimulate the desire for unification among those who have been kept in ignorance of their own dismembered condition. Protestant leaders are slow to explain to their people how disunited they are. When the Federal Council of Churches recently published a “critical and historical study” of the thirty denominations which belong to the organization, they entitled the book, *We Are Not Divided*. Yet among the members of the Council were Baptists who deny the validity of infant Baptism admitted by all the others, and Episcopalians who admit a valid episcopate which is denied by all the others. In the face of such doctrinal contradiction on matters of divine faith, to still speak of unity is either an abuse of language or an implicit declaration that the Founder of Christianity is the author of inconsistency.

II. American Protestants Investigate Their Disunity

IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE (February, 1955) we have seen the extent to which American Protestantism is disunited on the two basic levels of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and doctrinal profession. Ninety denominations are separated into two hundred and thirty sects, which are further divided into thousands of autonomous churches where the final basis of authority is the board of trustees appointed by the local parishioners. Doctrinal differences cover every phase of Christian revelation, ranging from the condonation and condemnation of divorce to the admission and denial of three Persons in one God.

In the present study we shall examine this “unhappy division” through Protestant eyes, allowing their own church leaders to make the evaluation. In this way we can better appreciate the gigantic problem which faces the ecumenical movement, not only in the United States, but wherever Christianity has broken away from the unity of Roman Catholicism.

³⁵ Anderson, William K., *Methodism*, Nashville, 1947, p. 128

³⁶ Sweet, William W., *Methodism in American History*, New York, 1933, p. 42

REASONS FOR THE DISUNITY IN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM

Protestant scholars have undertaken to analyze the background of the proliferation of their own denominations in America. They are frank in admitting that while Protestants have been divided into different sects from the very beginning, the division has not been so rapid or so radical as in the United States. The original reformers founded different churches in Germany, England, Switzerland and France. They were not only geographically separated, but also doctrinally opposed to each other on many points. Yet, for the most part, European Protestantism has followed the general pattern set by Luther, Cranmer, Zwingli and Calvin, with some, but relatively little, further fragmentation. How explain the abnormal situation in America?

I. The first explanation suggested is that the principle of religious liberty granted by the American Constitution tended to be carried over from the political sphere to the sphere of religion, that is, from the state to the church. This psychological transference was more or less unconscious:¹

The neutrality and impartiality of the American state toward all forms of religion subtly predisposed Protestant people to assume that the creation of a new denomination was not only legally irreproachable but could be religiously approved. "This is a free country, isn't it?" became the colloquial justification by which the withdrawal of a disaffected group to form a new denomination was appreciably relieved of any moral or religious reproach.

James Madison, fourth President of the United States, who was largely responsible for the "religious freedom" amendment to the American Constitution,² had said, "The more independent religious bodies, the more secure would be the government in its freedom from church influence."³ The Protestant mind mistakenly assumed that if this multiplication of sects were good for the government, it was also good for religion. "Sectarian diversity was therefore accepted as an ecclesiastical virtue."⁴

II. Unlike European Protestantism which has a tradition of stability behind its denominations, the American churches had no

¹ Morrison, Charles C., *The Unfinished Reformation*, New York, 1953, pp. 4-5

² The first clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It became part of the Constitution in 1791.

³ Quoted by Morrison, *loc. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

valid objection to make when a disaffected group wished to secede. In fact, secession was part of the American tradition since practically every sect which migrated to the States had broken away from the parent denomination over in Europe:⁵

The parent denomination itself had originated in essentially the same kind of situation as that which it now confronted in the threatened secession of its own children. With what consistency, therefore, could the parent now chide her children for doing what she herself had done a century or two centuries or three centuries ago?

III. Another factor explaining the uninhibited growth of so many denominations on American soil may be found in the pioneer psychology of the nation. Until recent years the American people have always lived on the frontier. New regions had to be explored, new territory cultivated, new homes and institutions established—among them the churches. Except for those who were traditionally Catholic and were blessed with the services of a priest who moved along with them, the majority settled as small religious communities that were distinct from the original denomination, at first only geographically, but, later on, also in doctrine and religious discipline.

Add to this fact the circumstance of size of country, and the multiplication of sects becomes a logical corollary. The table below will illustrate the relative sparsity of population which made sectarianism a natural necessity in the United States.

Even in 1950, the per square mile population in the United States was only one-fourth that of Europe, exclusive of Russia. But in the middle 1800's, with only ten to fifteen persons to a square mile in the States, with intercommunication rare and unnecessary, it is no wonder that small religious groups first migrated and then separated completely from the parent denomination.

| Year | Total Population of U. S. | Population per Square Mile |
|------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1800 | 5,308,483 | 6.1 |
| 1840 | 17,069,453 | 9.7 |
| 1880 | 50,155,783 | 16.9 |
| 1920 | 105,710,620 | 35.5 |
| 1950 | 150,697,361 | 50.7 |

PROTESTANT ATTITUDE TOWARD AMERICAN DENOMINATIONALISM

It is difficult adequately to analyze the Protestant attitude toward the extreme sectarianism which prevails in America. For one thing, it is not uniform, but fluctuates from the perfectly complacent to the very critical, with certain churchmen undecided

⁵ *Ibid.*

where precisely to stand. Fortunately for our purpose, there have been outspoken commentators among Protestant leaders, whose opinions may safely be regarded as representative of the churches themselves.

I. The Complacent Minority Opinion

In 1951 there appeared an illustrated volume, *Protestant Panorama*, which fairly described the minority attitude toward American denominationalism. The United States, with its more than fifty million Protestants, is called "the largest and most virile Protestant nation on the face of the globe."⁶ Ever since the English dissenters reached America in 1620, men in search of religious liberty have been coming to a free land, "each fiercely determined to find sanctuary for his right to believe and worship as he saw fit, and as God seemed to lead." This mixture of religious sects is therefore the outgrowth of a heterogeneous assortment of individuals and groups from a variety of cultures in Europe and other parts of the world. Yet they had one thing in common: "their thirst for religious liberty." Consequently, if America may be called a "melting pot" for diverse social and national customs, "it is even more of a melting pot of denominational diversity."⁷

But this is nothing of which the sectarians should be ashamed:⁸

That diversity, so far from being something to carp at, is Protestantism's glory. Only he who does not comprehend the patterns and processes of democracy can fail to understand and appreciate our profusion of sects. It conforms to the rich pattern of heterogeneity that characterizes so much of life in these United States. Americans glory in their system of economic "free enterprise"; American Protestants glory too in the spiritual free enterprise that is as much a part of the American idea as States' rights and individual initiative.

Not only is such diversity not unhealthy but, we are told, it is part of the original tradition of the American Republic. "Did the Founders [of the country] look aghast at this religious coat of many colors?" On the contrary: "They helped design it." Thus James Madison, previously mentioned, laid down the principle which was endorsed by his compatriots, that "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience." This political expedience "started us on our diversified way."⁹

⁶ Hall, Clarence W., and Holisher, Desider, *Protestant Panorama*, New York, 1951, p. 91

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Arguing on the subject with an Episcopalian who feared that the American Constitution did not sufficiently protect religion, Madison is reported to have said:¹⁰

Happily for the States, they enjoy the utmost freedom of religion. This freedom arises from that multiplicity of sects which pervades America, and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society. For where there is a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest.

American denominationalism, therefore, is not to be deplored, but encouraged. According to Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, difference of opinion in matters of religion is not only politically advantageous, but also beneficial to religion:¹¹

The several sects perform the office of a *censor morum* over each other. Is uniformity attainable? Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity have been burned, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half of the world fools, and the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth.

Behind these formidable statements from political figures whose religion is known to have been de-supernaturalized deism,¹² a sizable portion of American Protestants take pride in their sectarian diversity and call it the glory of democratic liberty.

II. Critical Majority Opposition

The majority of Protestants, certainly the leaders in church circles, are agreed that sectarianism in the States is an evil, and something that needs to be corrected as soon as possible. Outstanding among the critics have been the guest speakers at the University of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94

¹² It is commonly accepted by historians that Thomas Jefferson, for example, was "a deist who shared the views and attitudes in matters of religion that were common to the English deists." John Orr, *English Deism*, Grand Rapids, 1934, pp. 211-212. To quote Jefferson as a champion of Protestantism is a distortion of Christianity. He explicitly denied and called artificial: "... the immaculate conception of Jesus, His deification, the creation of the world by Him, His miraculous powers, His resurrection and visible ascension, His corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity, original sin, atonement, regeneration." Koch and Peden, *Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, New York, 1944, p. 694

Chicago who are invited every year to give a series of lectures on Christian Unity. The lectures are later published in book form and enjoy wide circulation.

The first series of lectures was delivered by the Episcopal Bishop of Washington and entitled "Prospecting for a United Church." They were hailed as a godsend that "will give substance and vitality to the slumbering will for church union." After describing in accurate detail the "division among the churches," which "manifests itself in many forms and degrees," he decried this hostile diversity as a scandal. Divisions among pagans and unbelievers are expected and understandable. "But for those who are called Christ's people to be at enmity with one another, to withdraw from one another, to have no intimate, brotherly dealing with one another, is a scandal. It is a scandal even to the unbelieving and half-believing world around us."¹³

Is is a strange spectacle, he concludes, when those who call the world to be reconciled are themselves unreconciled:¹⁴

We call the world, burdened with its own tragic divisions of race and class and nationality, to find its unity in the one Father and the one Christ, and then we add other divisions to those with which it already struggles. "Woe unto the world because of offenses." The simple are confused and the sensitive are offended by the incongruity between the churches and the Church.

More specific and penetrating were the lectures in 1953, delivered by the ranking Protestant writer in the country, the late editor of the internationally respected *Christian Century*. Dr. Morrison's lectures, published under the title of *The Unfinished Reformation*, were called by the reviewers a "hard-hitting critique" of sectarianism, and, when printed, were said to have been "written as only a great crusading editor, one of the outstanding religious journalists of this generation, could write it."¹⁵

Morrison's message claims to be that of the reformers of the sixteenth century, who earnestly tried for many years to unite the separate branches of original Protestantism. They failed, for historical reasons which he carefully sets forth. Then to bolster his fellow-religionists to take up the cause of the Unfinished Reformation and work toward a united Protestantism, he presents in a series of the following six propositions the evil of denominationalism in the United States, which he boldly stigmatizes as a sin.

¹³ Dun, Angus, *Prospecting for a United Church*, New York, 1948, p. 12

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13

¹⁵ Publisher's advertisement

A. Division and Waste

“Denominationalism is scandalously wasteful of Protestant resources.”¹⁶ The prodigal waste of money applies to the support of local churches and to the overhead expenses of their many denominations. For one thing, there are too many local churches. The fifty-three million Protestants, most of whom are only occasional church-goers, operate a total of 260,000 church edifices, which means an average of only two hundred persons for each building. By comparison, the Roman Catholic Church with thirty-one million members has less than 16,000 churches, with an average membership close to two thousand.

This would be less serious if the Protestant churches were at least evenly distributed. “But this is notoriously not the case. Nearly all of them exist side by side and in competition with other Protestant churches in small and large communities.”¹⁷

Not only are funds thus wasted in too many churches, but the multiplicity of sects adds the further burden of multiplied overhead expense to run the separate organizations. If only the sects united, instead of spending their money in competition with other churches, they could use it “directly to the great enterprise of the Kingdom of God.

B. Division and Missioners

“The missionary expansion of the Christian faith is seriously handicapped and misrepresented by our sectarianism.”¹⁸ Put more bluntly, a divided church at home inevitably, and to a high degree, hinders the spread of the gospel to the people of non-Christian lands.¹⁹

When Christians in mission lands leave father and mother, caste and tribe, and the whole social order that has been home to them, for the sake of Christ, it is grievous and shocking to them to find the Christian community divided against itself. . . . What can it possibly mean but confusion and distress of mind when a Northern Chinese joins the American Southern Baptists, thus adding the divisive heritage of the American Civil War to a country already cursed with its own civil wars! Every experienced missionary knows that this is scandalous.

C. Division and Social Efforts

“Denominationalism frustrates the efforts of Protestantism to discharge the unique responsibility which the social gospel lays upon

¹⁶ Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 29

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31

the Christian Church.”²⁰ Here the author touches on a critical problem which besets the Protestant churches in their conflict with collectivist tendencies in the country:²¹

A disunited church is no match for the tremendous power of the social collectivities that have emerged in modern America. . . . Great magnitudes of social organization have emerged, over against which our denominational churches present a picture of limp futility. Protestantism has not learned to live in the modern world.

The American mind is supposed to be “predominantly collectivist in its structure. It is molded by a relatively few massive blocs of secular interest, each under the control of its own center of propaganda and power.”²² This allows us to make an invidious comparison between the relative strength of the Catholic Church and the Protestant sects. “The contacts of Protestantism with government, the labor unions, the movies and television, the press, industrial management, the educational system, the scientific enterprise, even the family, are tenuous and unimpressive.”²³ By contrast, “these blocs of collectivist power have ample reason to be respectfully conscious of Roman Catholicism.”²⁴ Though fewer in number, Catholics are united and therefore represent a standing threat to the enemies of personal liberty, which Protestant churches cannot duplicate unless they unite.

D. Division and Catholic Strength

“The denominational system robs Protestantism of its inherent strength in its inescapable competition with a formidable and aggressive Roman Catholicism.”²⁵ The writer concedes that Protestantism and Catholicism are both engaged in resisting the gradual secularization of American life. This common purpose, he explains, has led many Protestants to believe that the two are therefore allies co-operating in a common cause:²⁶

This notion, however, is not for a moment shared by Catholicism. The Catholic Church knows that itself and Protestantism represent two profoundly different kinds of religion, and it draws the line sharply between them. In the past, Protestants

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* A fair example is the respect which the movie industry pays to the moral rating of films by the Legion of Decency, which is under the direction of the Catholic Hierarchy.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36

have always been clearheaded on this matter . . . It is only in our generation, under the influence of a sentimental and false conception of tolerance, that a considerable portion of the Protestant mind has been beguiled into the delusion that Protestantism and Catholicism are allies.

But they are not allies. They are competitors in the struggle for the soul of America, in which "Catholicism has been rapidly overtaking Protestantism." The figures quoted are revealing:²⁷

In the city of New York the Roman church membership outnumbers that of Protestantism by 5 to 1—2,225,000 Catholics to 478,000 Protestants. In Chicago, the ratio is 3 to 2. In Buffalo, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Cleveland, San Francisco, Washington, Cincinnati, the ratio is roughly 50-50, with an edge in every one of these cities in favor of the Roman church. Boston, from Plymouth Rock to the beginnings of the twentieth century the proud capital of New England Protestantism, is now overwhelmingly Roman Catholic.

How to meet the challenge? It can never be met, and Protestantism is doomed to failure while it persists in spreading its efforts, dividing its interests and localizing its forces, when the Catholic Church, strong in unity, "is aggressively out to win" America to its side.

E. Division and Spiritual Good

"Denominationalism provincializes Protestant mentality by erecting barriers against the free flow of Christian thought."²⁸ This is another way of saying that "the denominational mind is necessarily narrow, provincial and short-sighted."²⁹ The result is that, instead of being united under Christ and the Gospel, Christian peoples are separated from each other with serious detriment to their moral and spiritual welfare. Despising what others teach, the denominations deprive themselves of the richness of the gospel truth:³⁰

Because the denomination is but a fragment of the church, its feeling and vision of the whole gospel is necessarily truncated. The full witness to the Christian faith finds no adequate expression in the "broken lights" of the denominational system.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37. Official figures submitted by the bishops to the Catholic Almanac survey in 1952, give the following per cent of Catholics in the total population of the following cities: New York 27.1; Chicago 40.6; Buffalo 63.4; Pittsburgh 42.1; St. Louis 30.4; Philadelphia 31.6; Cleveland 45.9; Washington 16.6; San Francisco 34.4; Cincinnati 24.2; Boston 44.9

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

The truth of Christianity is not exhausted by the uniformities to which it is reduced by our sectarian creeds and ideologies.

As an example of truncating the Gospel and suffering thereby, the largest denomination in America, the Baptists, at least on principle deprive their children of sacramental regeneration because they disagree with the rest of the Protestants on the necessity or even the propriety of infant Baptism.

F. Division and Spiritual Specialization

"Denominationalism breeds a subtle and perilous moral insincerity among Protestant Christians."³¹ In the critic's opinion, this is the most serious indictment that can be levelled at American sectarianism. He believes that Protestant denominations "are hardly more than survivals of an era that is well on its way out. The issues upon which they were founded are losing their vitality. Yet the structure, the shell of the denomination persists."³² What happens? In order to maintain their position as ministers of a distinct religious group, churchmen feel compelled to resuscitate obsolete issues into a semblance of importance and reality; thinking there is no better way to inspire and preserve denominational loyalty. Many of the clergy, especially those who have been "enlightened by the ecumenical ideal," recognize the situation as fostering insincerity. Yet they are victims of the system. A sectarian minister "is caught in it and cannot extricate himself from it. Protestantism provides him with no opportunity for a Christian ministry except one that is identified with and results in the strengthening and greatening of his denomination."³³ Thus, instead of promoting the principles of Christ which are or should be the common heritage of all Christians, the sectarians are dividedly preaching their own peculiar specialty. Adventist ministers teach the imminent Second Coming, Baptists the necessity of Baptism by immersion, Quakers the idolatry of church ritual, Methodists the sinfulness of traffic in liquor. They are constrained to defend their denominational position by advocating doctrines and practices which are distinctive of their sect; yet if they are at all

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42. Although coming from a Protestant who presumably knows the mentality of his own people, this sweeping statement needs to be qualified. He admits that it "will require delicate exposition if we are to avoid a reaction of resentment." Yet he fails to distinguish between the average lay Protestant who, even when well educated, is woefully ignorant in religious matters, and the professional church leader in the ministry. The charge of insincerity is aimed at "Protestant Christians," in general, while the proof of insincerity is an appeal to the "enlightened churchman" who, if he "will search his own heart . . . will find a conflict there." *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

familiar with religious history, they know that this distinctiveness was an arbitrary innovation which originated in human caprice. To preach it as though it were divinely sanctioned is simply hypocritical. Without excusing this insincerity, "a fair judgment requires that the major responsibility for it must be placed in larger measure upon the system than upon the churchman who is more victim than free agent."³⁴

The full explanation of sectarianism in America must be looked for in the very nature of Protestantism. From its inception in the sixteenth century down to the present day it has operated on a theory of religious allegiance that is contrary to historical Christianity. While giving lip-service to "church authority" and arrogating to itself the title of a "church," Protestantism is not ecclesiastical—except where and to the extent to which it still retains some vestige of its original Catholic heritage. It is by nature individualistic. In the words of a modern spokesman, "Protestants are committed to religious liberty, not as a matter of temporary expediency, when and where they are weak, but as a matter of principle." Their basic "formula of liberation" is the "assertion of the right of the private Christian to have direct access to the Bible and to read and interpret it himself."³⁵ Given this principle of liberation from all external authority in matters of faith, the wonder is not that Protestant denominations have become so multiplied in democratic America, but that any congruity among them still exists.

On their own admission, the source of Protestant disunity is their denial of an ultimate ecclesiastical authority in matters of faith and morals. The first in a series of principles which "Protestantism rejects as corrupt, corrupting, pagan and false" is: "That God has given infallibility to any man or group of men, or has made any man the 'Vicar of Christ' on earth."³⁶

They frankly admit that:³⁷

We put the pope first among the objects of Protestantism's Everlasting No because Roman Catholicism puts submission to the pope foremost among its requirements. . . . Those who 'submit' to the pope and all his claims are Roman Catholics, those who do not are not. All other differences sink into

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Garrison, Winfred E., *A Protestant Manifesto*, New York, 1952, pp. 117, 132. The author is "well qualified to speak for the many communions of the Protestant faith." Literary editor of the *Christian Century*, the foremost Protestant publication in the States, he taught Church History at the University of Chicago for over 20 years and presently serves on the Theological Commission of the World Council of Churches

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177

insignificance in comparison with this. Rome recognizes no *rapprochement* until its basic dogma of papal infallibility is accepted, and when that is accepted, no further *rapprochement* is necessary because everything else naturally and necessarily follows.

Protestantism, therefore, admittedly has no "united voice" with which to give authoritative answers to "questions that arise concerning systems of doctrine, forms of worship, the polity of the Church, and the specific applications of Christian principles." Only the Catholic Church, "with a high command similar to that of a totalitarian police state," which obliges its members to accept "as final the judgments of a central authority that presumes to speak with the voice of God can achieve that kind of unanimity. Protestantism has no such dictator, and therefore it has no such voice." The fact is that "it does not want it on those terms."³⁸ It prefers to remain disunited but independent, than to lose its freedom of private judgment in matters of faith, even if unity should be thereby attained.

III. The Protestant Ecumenical Movement in the United States

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION of the ecumenical movement in the United States would be to call it the effort to join a divided Protestantism into some semblance of religious unity. Protestant sectarianism has been given many epithets by the critics from its own ranks, but none more critical than the expressive term—sin. Without the suspicion of love for Roman Catholicism, the multiplication of churches instead of allegiance to one Church is judged to be a crime against Christ Himself. "This churchism of the denominations must be perceived as a sin against Christ—against Christ who is the head not of any of our denominations, but of the Church which is his body." The attempt to undo this evil of sectarianism, "to awaken the conscience of the churches to the fact that their churchism is sinful—that is the radical, primary and imperative task of the ecumenical movement."¹

HISTORY OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

While the beginnings of the ecumenical movement in America go back more than a century, the large-scale mergers of Protestant denominations have all taken place since 1900. From 1906 to 1950 there have been sixteen major unions in American Protestantism,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190

¹ Morrison, Charles C., *The Unfinished Reformation*, New York, 1953, p. 64

thirteen of which resulted in the formation of new denominations and three were inter-denominational, in which numerous sects united to form a federated church council.

I. Mergers Forming New Denominations

Since 1900, thirty denominations have merged into thirteen, and these by remerger have been reduced to nine, as shown in the following tabulation, in which it will be noted that the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the Congregationalists, the Evangelical Church and the Reformed Church in the U. S. have each taken part in two mergers.

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Denominations Merged</i> | <i>Present Name</i> |
|-------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1906 | Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Cumberland Presbyterian | Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. |
| 1911 | Northern Baptist Convention Free Baptist | Northern Baptist Convention |
| 1917 | Hague Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran United Norwegian Lutheran | Norwegian Lutheran |
| 1918 | General Synod of Evangelical Lutheran General Council of Evangelical Lutheran United Synod of Evangelical Lutheran | United Lutheran Church |
| 1920 | Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Welsh Calvinistic Methodist | Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. |
| 1922 | Evangelical Association United Evangelical | Evangelical Church |
| 1924 | Reformed Church in the U. S. Hungarian Reformed Church | Reformed Church in the U. S. |
| 1924 | Congregational Evangelical Protestant | Congregational |
| 1931 | Congregational Christian Churches | Congregational-Christian |
| 1931 | Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Ohio Lutheran Synod of Buffalo Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa | American Lutheran Church |
| 1934 | Evangelical Synod Reformed Church | Evangelical Reformed Church |
| 1939 | Methodist Episcopal Church Methodist Episcopal Church, South Methodist Protestant Church | Methodist Church |
| 1946 | United Brethren Evangelical Church | Evangelical United Brethren |

Many other mergers have been proposed but to date have not materialized. However at least two large-sized reunions are expected to take place in the near future. In May, 1954, three major Presby-

terian denominations brought merger negotiations, begun in 1937, to the decisive stage. The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (a national group with 2,575,000 members), the Presbyterian Church, U. S. (a Southern sect which broke away during the Civil War over the Negro question and now has 770,000 members), and the United Presbyterian Church with 300,000 communicants, voted to send a plan of union to their presbyteries for action. Approval by these local bodies would create a near four million member Presbyterian Church of the United States in 1956. Moreover final approval is expected by 1955 for a merger plan which will bring into being a 1,800,000 member Lutheran Church three years from now. Interested parties are the Evangelical (907,000 members), American (791,000), Free (64,000), and United Evangelical (52,000) Lutheran Churches. Significantly, there were once 85 Lutheran church bodies in the United States. Today there are 19. When the prospective merger goes into effect, there will be 13.

II. Mergers Forming Federated Church Councils

Besides the above mergers in which the uniting elements fused into a new society or one element absorbed the others, there have been three other coalescences on a much wider but less intensive scale in which the end product was not a new entity but a co-operative organization:²

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Denominations Merged</i> | <i>Name of Merger</i> |
|-------------|--|--|
| 1908 | Twenty-eight Reformed Churches including the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians | Federal Council of the Churches |
| 1941 | Fifteen Fundamentalist Churches, including the Bible Protestant and Militant Fundamental | American Council of Christian Churches |
| 1950 | Twenty-five Protestant denominations and five Eastern Orthodox Churches | National Council of the Churches of Christ |

² The present membership of the National Council of the Churches of Christ comprises twenty-nine denominations:

African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, American Baptist Convention, Augustana Evangelical Lutheran, Church of the Brethren, Colored Methodist Episcopal, Congregational Christian, Czech-Moravian Brethren, Danish Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical and Reformed, Evangelical United Brethren, Quakers (two denominations), Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Moravian, National Baptist of America, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Presbyterian in the U.S., Presbyterian in the U.S.A., Protestant Episcopal, Reformed in America, Romanian Orthodox of America, Russian Orthodox of America, Seventh Day Baptist, Syrian Antiochian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox of America, United Lutheran, and United Presbyterian.

It is seen immediately that the latter type of federated combination is coextensive with the former, so that a merger may occur within a merger. The present Methodist Church, itself a new creation out of three different sects, is now a fellow member of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, along with other denominations.

THE CHARACTER OF AMERICAN ECUMENISM

I. Mergers Forming New Denominations

With rare and unimportant exceptions, the mergers of two or more denominations was simply the healing of old dissensions. Divided religious groups solved their original differences and came together again. Or if they were never actually together before, they had common antecedents, in stemming from a common religious family. In the last fifty years, for instance, the Lutherans were involved in three reunions of smaller sects that were separated in America largely because of immigration and geographical distance. So also the Presbyterians were rejoined on three occasions, once with a sect of the same denomination and twice with the Reformed Churches, which trace their lineage to the same Calvinistic origin. The importance of this lies in the fact that the historical basis of the ecumenical movement, at least in the United States, is the consciousness of a common source. This is strikingly emphasized in *The Declaration of Union* by which three Methodist bodies reunited in 1939 to form the largest Protestant denomination in America:³

The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church South and The Methodist Protestant Church are and shall be one United Church.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church South, and The Methodist Protestant Church had their common origin in the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784, A.D., and have ever held, adhered to and preserved a common belief, spirit and purpose, as expressed in their common Articles of Religion.

On closer analysis it is found that the Methodist Articles of Religion are nothing else than a redaction of the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles drawn up by the Methodist founder, John Wesley; which Methodist churchmen today honor by including them in their draft of things to be believed, but which they officially declare

³ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Nashville, 1952, pp. 7-8

not to be binding in conscience. Nevertheless a common historical origin and at least token adherence to a common ritual and creed is what generally urges separated denominations to re-combine their forces under a common ancestral name.

The question arises of whether any change occurs in the doctrinal content of the uniting denominations. Do they gain or lose in dogmatic stability? Generally they lose. This is inevitable since the doctrinal differences which separate prospective combiners are frequently deep seated, of long standing, and usually the greatest single obstacle to unification. With authoritarianism rejected on principle, when the merger takes place it is on the basis of mutual—and therefore minimal—agreement. When, for example, the merger between the Congregational and Christian Churches was first proposed in 1895, it was unsuccessful because, among other reasons, the Christian Churches were suspected of denying the Trinity. One apologist for union wrote of them:⁴

Their rejection of all man-made formulas and creeds has sometimes led to the idea that they are Unitarians, because they will not adopt the word *Trinity* which they do not find in the Bible. . . . In the worship of our Lord they do not differ from us (Congregationalists), even although some of them still protest against being called Trinitarians.

It took thirty-six years before this merger was finally accomplished. By that time the Congregational and Christian Churches had both become liberalized to a point where creedal differences no longer stood in the way of "fellowship," where "theology, precisely defined, had ceased to be the primary concern of the churches and their leaders."⁵

II. Mergers Forming Federated Church Councils

The three interdenominational federations are closely related. First came the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, when twenty-eight Reformed Churches were organized along structural lines which duplicated as closely as possible the federal union of the United States. It was difficult at first for the churches of the Federal Council to believe that their autonomy would not be jeopardized. This suspicion kept many sects from joining the union. Actually they had little to fear because the

⁴ Atkins and Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism*, Boston, 1942, p. 351

⁵ *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, Boston, 1951, p. 29

federation was scupulously careful not to encroach on the independence of the member churches.

Two incidents in the forty year existence of the Federal Council will illustrate its character. For years the Unitarians had asked to be admitted and were consistently refused. Their creedal position was said to be too liberal. They deny the Trinity and their concept of God is not far removed from a monistic deity. In a parody on the Apostles Creed, prepared by a high-ranking Unitarian minister, the first article reads: "I believe in a single, eternal, all-inclusive, all-pervading Life Principle whose source and perfect embodiment is God, who finds varying degrees of embodiment in all forms of life."⁶ Ostensibly then the motive for refusing admission to the Unitarians was based on principle. But when the president of the Federal Council was directly questioned, he conceded it was only a matter of expediency: "If we let in the Unitarians, we let out the Lutherans."⁷ In other words, if creedless liberals like the Unitarians were accepted, then conservative groups like the Lutherans would leave the organization. Since the Unitarians even now number less than one hundred thousand, whereas incorporated Lutheran bodies in the Council have had over a million members, the choice was a foregone conclusion.

Again in 1930, the Committee on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council was pressed for a declaration on the morality of contraception. Their official statement was an implicit approval of the practice: "Whatever the final conclusion may be, the committee is strongly of the opinion that the church should not seek to impose its point of view as to the use of contraceptives upon the public by legislation or any other form of coercion."⁸

The second stage in federated ecumenism came when the conservative Protestants, generally called Fundamentalists, formed a union of their own in protest against the liberalistic Federal Council. While the latter would have been happy to admit the Fundamentalists, "provided they came in a co-operative spirit," their opponents claim that the leaders of the Federal Council are really promoting a new denominational effort, based not on the word of God but on the purely natural social principles of man. The American Council of Christian Churches is therefore a rival organization, comprising fifteen national constituent bodies together with independent congregations. The Council believes the Bible to be the infallible word of the Holy Spirit, the sole rule of faith

⁶ Williams, J. Paul, *What Americans Believe and How They Worship*, New York, 1952, p. 226

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130

⁸ Fry, C. Luther, *Recent Social Trends in the U.S.*, Vol. II, New York, 1933, p. 1017

and practice, and urges a return to the great essentials of the Christian faith, especially:

1. The inerrancy and divine authorship of Holy Scripture.
2. The Divinity of Christ.
3. His Virgin Birth and physical Resurrection.
4. His substitutionary atonement.
5. His imminent second coming.

As a social phenomenon, Fundamentalism arose as a "defense of the agrarian culture of the nineteenth century against the developing urban culture."⁹ Theologically, however, Fundamentalism, is an effort to preserve traditional Christian dogma from the solvent of liberalism. As such it is closer to the basic doctrines of Catholicism than the bulk of American Protestantism in the larger, but less dogmatic denominations. Unfortunately the fifth "fundamental" on the imminent parousia has weakened the whole fundamentalist structure in the eyes of American Protestants. Also the fact that Fundamentalists are generally found among the poorer and less educated classes, in rural areas and small towns, has so weakened their hold on the Protestant mind that educated sectarians do not take them seriously. Their aggressive dogmatism is dismissed as antiquarian, "frozen in the crudest form of orthodoxy known in Protestant history."¹⁰

Finally, in 1950, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ enlarged its scope activities and changed its name to the National Council of the Churches of Christ, to become the largest federated union of Protestants in American history.¹¹ At the present writing, it numbers twenty-five Protestant denominations and five Eastern Orthodox bodies, representing over thirty-five million church communicants. Structurally the National Council is the same as the Federal Council, with one notable difference. Among the new agencies which the National Council established for co-operative effort were *Christian Education*, *The Home Missions* and *The Foreign Missions*. Friends of the ecumenical movement regard this as deeply significant:¹²

Their inclusion in the National Council marks an appreciable deepening of the feeling of Protestant unity. For these three functions come nearer being ecclesiastical functions than any which the denominations had ever committed to a federated responsibility. The Federal Council had been constituted in a

⁹ Williams, op. cit., p. 99

¹⁰ Morrison, op. cit., p. 190

¹¹ The most important absentees from the National Council are the Southern Baptists and the conservative Lutheran bodies.

¹² Morrison, op. cit., p. 12

manner that limited its operation to strictly non-ecclesiastical fields. So also, in theory, is the new National Council. Its constitution provides especially meticulous safeguards of denominational autonomy in the functioning of its missionary and religious education divisions. There is no suggestion here that these restrictions could ever be disregarded. What is suggested is that the denominations themselves, having taken this cautious and timid step in recognition of the ecumenical nature of foreign missions, home missions and religious education, will gradually find the way to emancipate them completely from the scandal of sectarian control and administration.

Like its predecessor, the National Council is not a union of denominations but distinctly a merger of their common, external interests. Its avowed purpose is to accelerate the growth of "unity within diversity," to reduce the supervisory expenses and needless duplication of buildings and personnel, to increase the influence of American Protestantism through its "united front," to become a clearing house for exchange of ideas and views aimed at the development of a "sound Protestant strategy." In a word, it is hoped that by means of this federated co-operation Protestants in the United States will retrieve the loss in prestige and influence which they have suffered through more than three centuries of sectarian disintegration.

EVALUATION OF THE AMERICAN ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The most obvious merit of Protestant ecumenism in America has been the lessening of tension among the various denominations. "A century ago Protestant denominations spent most of their time trying to prove one another wrong. With the start of the twentieth century a definite change took place; the denominations decided to accept rather than fight one another."¹³ Instead of opposing one another, they are now co-operating in projects and areas where previously there was little or no collaboration. For example, one of the principal services sponsored by the National Council of the Churches of Christ is "Evangelism," which promotes the spiritual interests of the member churches. Recognizing that promotion work in this field has to be non-sectarian, the Council has kept away from denominational polemics and concentrated on such basic items as prayer with more than ordinary success. The first full week of January has been declared a "Universal Week of Prayer"; during Lent an advertising campaign urges the people to a more faithful observance of the pre-Easter season as a period of sacrifice and prayer. In October of each year, a Church Attendance Crusade is

¹³ *Collier's Magazine*, August 20, 1954, p. 21

sponsored through national advertising media. During Advent there is propaganda work in the form of bulletins and leaflets, "helping communities to put Christ into the center of Christmas, and to make the celebration of the birth of Christ more spiritual, less commercial."¹⁴ A recent development has been the Chaplains' Spiritual Retreats, during which the Protestant equivalent of the Spiritual Exercises is held annually for chaplains of the Armed Forces.

However it is especially in the field of public education that the reduced tension among American Protestants shows promise of spiritual benefit to the country. It is a commonplace in the nation's history that the public school system has become secularized because conflicting denominations could not agree on a standard method of religious instruction. As denominationalism recedes into the background, the chances are improved for introducing at least a minimum of religious training into American public education without the fear of arousing opposition from vested sectarian interests.

On the debit side, American ecumenism suffers from the congenital weakness of Protestantism which is religious liberalism. The denominations frankly recognize the inherent weakness of their divided condition, and they are doing something to correct it. But the foundation of this projected unification is superficial and therefore largely illusory. An example from each type of merger will serve to illustrate.

When the Congregational and Christian Churches united in 1931 to form a new body, they did so in spite of traditional creedal differences. The Christian Churches were long notorious for doctrinal free-lancing and, in fact, this was a main obstacle to an earlier attempted union with the Congregationalists. But the latter had need of a new spirit in their ranks. They were mostly New Englanders, while the Christian Churches were nation-wide; they were generally urban, wealthy and well educated, while the Christian Churches were quite poor and their members were mostly simple people from the farms. The democratic ideal bade the Congregationalists "come down" to the Christian Church level—which they did, not only socially but also doctrinally. The committee for merger of the two churches proposed to "strike out all reference to the 'Kansas City Declaration' (the Congregational statement of faith) that there might not even be the suggestion of a creedal statement to stand in the way of union."¹⁵ While this radical proposal was not accepted, at least verbally, it was equivalently adopted when the Congregationalists conceded that the "basis of union" required by the Christian Churches "be conditioned upon the acceptance of

¹⁴ *Handbook of the National Council of the Churches of Christ*, New York, 1953, p. 20

¹⁵ Atkins and Fagley, *op. cit.*, p. 358

Christianity as primarily a way of life, and not upon uniformity of theological opinion or uniform practice of ordinances. The autonomy of the local congregation and the right of each individual member to follow Christ according to his own conscience should remain undisturbed.”¹⁶

Equally devoid of doctrinal content is the federated union of sects in the National Council of Churches of Christ. While boasting that “the Council represents more people than any other religious body in America,”¹⁷ the official documentation is honest in admitting that the principle of union is strictly pragmatic. The churches collaborate in practice, but without any consolidation of dogmatic differences:¹⁸

The National Council represents the wholeness of the Christian *task*. Co-operation no longer appears as something to be *practiced* in one or another phase of the Church’s *activity*, but as a deliberate policy and a consistent pattern in its entire *work*.

The National Council is the direct creation of the Churches themselves. . . . The Council does not enter into details of doctrine, but stands upon the common ground of historic Christian faith and conviction held by the Churches that comprise it.

The genius of the Council is to foster a united Christian fellowship which will express itself in every phase of the life and *work* of the Churches. It has no authority over the denominations and is in no sense a super-organization. . . . It conserves freedom and diversity, with no thought of dictation or enforced uniformity, while at the same time securing needed unity of *action*.

It is safe to say that American Protestants, at least the ecumenically-minded among them, are not dogma conscious. They look with complacency on the “bickerings over trifles” among the conservatives who believe that the first essential of Christian unity is doctrinal uniformity. “There was a time,” they admit, “when theological differences loomed large to Americans, and they are still important to a few.” But today “the average (Protestant) churchgoer just doesn’t care about technical differences separating denominations.”¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Handbook of the N.C.C.C.*, p. 2

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3

¹⁹ *Collier’s Magazine*, p. 20. The article is entitled, “Will All Protestants Unite In One Church?” and was written to coincide with the Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Evanston, Illinois, August 15 to 31.

Given this laissez-faire attitude towards fundamentals of Christian revelation like the Divinity of Christ and the Real Presence, the Protestant ecumenical movement in America is a misnomer. It may be called a co-operative movement in so far as doctrinally separated religious groups are collaborating in external activities. But until the motive of mere efficiency yields to a sincere desire for creedal conformity, it is not ecclesiastical and therefore not ecumenical.

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may be one**

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