

**HOW THE "SECT-TO-DENOMINATION" VIEW
OF HISTORY AMONG CHURCHES OF CHRIST
IN THE UNITED STATES INFLUENCES
PERCEPTIONS OF MISSIONS

ORAL PRESENTATION NOTES**

a paper presented by

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at the Nineteenth Annual

CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS CONFERENCE

Harding University

Searcy, Arkansas

Friday, July 16, 1999

3:15-4:45 P.M.

McInteer Center, Room 234

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by Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., Ph.D.

I have copies of this paper available for anyone who wants one. The time scheduled for this oral presentation is not adequate for a full reading of the manuscript. And that is probably good because the manuscript is better suited for the eye than for the ear. Anyhow, this oral presentation will just *introduce* the paper and touch on a few high points

"Missions at the Millennium" is the theme of this nineteenth annual Christian Scholars Conference. The most fundamental mission of the church in the New Testament is to "make disciples of all nations." Churches of Christ are achieving a good level of evangelistic growth in some parts of the world and we had a good record of evangelistic growth in the United States until recently. However, for the past 20 years, our total membership in the United States has not grown significantly. There has been some growth in the U.S. mission fields, but in the states of the "Bible Belt," membership has plateaued or declined since 1980.

In his book *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, Richard Hughes claims that this decline in evangelism has happened because of the transition of Churches of Christ from *sect* to *denomination*. As religious groups make this transition, they typically lose much of their evangelistic zeal. Hughes thesis is that "Churches of Christ began as a sect in the early nineteenth century and evolved into a denomination during the course of the twentieth century." Since the First Amendment to our Constitution prohibits the establishment of a state church, Hughes claims that religious groups in this nation must exist either as sects or as denominations.

Hughes uses only two defining characteristics to distinguish between sect and denomination: 1) attitudes toward other believers; and, 2) attitudes toward the dominant culture. A sect, according to Hughes, "insists that it--and it alone--constitutes the entirety of the kingdom of God," while a denomination recognizes that "it is only a part of the universal body of Christ." In regard to the dominant culture, Hughes claims that a sect stands in judgment of the larger culture in which it exists, while a denomination has typically made its peace with the dominant culture.

I do not agree with Hughes on this matter. And I would argue, instead, that the uncritical acceptance of the sect-to-denomination typology, within itself, has had a negative influence on the way Churches of Christ have perceived the evangelistic mission. Categories have consequences. The linguistic category systems we use influence our perceptions.

It may be useful to begin by limiting the scope of this study. There are differences between the “little ‘c’ churches of Christ” and the “Big ‘C’ Churches of Christ.” One reads about the “little ‘c’ churches of Christ” in the Bible and one reads about the “Big ‘C’ Churches of Christ” in the telephone directory. The “little ‘c’ churches of Christ” is a theological reality concerning the spiritual fellowship of all the saved. The “Big ‘C’ Churches of Christ,” by contrast, is a social/historical reality concerning a group of people who identify with one another and who are counted together under the name “Churches of Christ” in various almanacs and yearbooks. As a Christian, my greater concern is with the “little ‘c’ churches of Christ.” But in this paper my primary focus is on the “Big ‘C’ Churches of Christ.”

In the first part of this paper, I draw from several other disciplines in order to demonstrate the power of category systems. Writers in several different fields have shown that linguistic categories have consequences. George Kelly demonstrated this in *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. People who have simple construct systems with only a few categories do not see things in the same way as do people who have more complex construct systems. According to Kelly, people do not just respond to the environment: they use language to *represent* the environment to themselves. And the construct systems people use as they represent the world to themselves profoundly influence their behavior.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis illustrates the same point. This hypothesis, now generally accepted in the fields of Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics, suggests that *the structure of a people’s language influences the way those people see the world*.

Kenneth Burke supported this same conclusion about the consequences of linguistic categories. According to Burke, language functions as a filter through which we see the world. Burke called language the “terministic screen.” What we see, according to Burke, is what our language allows us to see.

The value of Hughes' interpretation, in my opinion, is seriously limited by the fact that he recognizes only two possible categories for religious groups in this nation: *sect* or *denomination*. Other scholars have employed at least three other categories: *institutionalized sects*, *cults*, and *fellowships of independent, non-denominational congregations*.

David Edwin Harrell, Jr. claims that the congregations of the non-institutional fellowship with which he identifies have little that even approximates the functions of a central denominational organization. But among the "mainline" congregations, he claims that there are various institutions (Christian schools, child care agencies, etc.) that perform the functions usually performed by a central denominational headquarters. The *institutionalized sect* category has not been employed by many other writers. It does, however, demonstrate that *sect-to-denomination* may be a continuum rather than a dichotomy and there may be categories in between the opposite extremes.

"Cult" is a category that has been employed often by writers in the Sociology of Religion. The characteristics of cults are not adequately explained by either the *sect* or the *denomination* categories and definitions. But the category that is most relevant for this study is what some have called: **"Fellowships of Independent, Non-Denominational Congregations."**

The Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, in its most recent study, identified 245 religious groups that were active in the United States in 1990. Most of these fit comfortably into the categories of *denomination* or *sect*. A few, however, do not.

- ◆ Black Baptist Churches have almost 9 million adherents and these congregations do not belong to any of the 38 Baptist denominations.
- ◆ Independent Charismatic Churches have over 800 congregations with almost 800,000 adherents.
- ◆ Independent Non-Charismatic Churches have over 1,300 congregations with 1.2 million adherents.
- ◆ There are almost 400 Congregational Christian Churches that created a central denominational organization, but there are over 36,000 adherents in 232 Congregational Christian Churches that decided to remain independent.

- ◆ The same thing happened among heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. In the 1950s, when the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) organized a denominational headquarters, many Christian Churches remained independent. Almanacs and yearbooks report statistics on this fellowship under the heading “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ” because some of their congregations use the “Christian Church” designation and : others use the “Church of Christ” designation. They currently have over 5,000 congregations with almost one million members and more than 1.2 million adherents. These congregations use instrumental music in their worship assemblies and thus are distinct from the fellowship identified as “Churches of Christ.” But they are also distinct from the “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).”
- ◆ Also in this independent category are over 13,000 Churches of Christ in the United States, with almost 1.3 million members and 1.7 million adherents. This is the largest of the three heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. It is a non-denominational fellowship in the sense that it has no central headquarters with control over the independent local churches.

Almost 10 percent of the adherents listed in *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1990* were listed in one of these independent, non-denominational groups. All of these people belong to congregations that are not affiliated with any denomination. As a further clarification concerning the organizational definition of *denomination*, it is interesting to note that in the 1990 study by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 22 denominations reported that some of their congregations affiliated with two or more denominations. A *denomination*, by the organizational definition, is an ecclesiastical hierarchy. A local congregation can belong to a denomination, but in that sense of the term, an individual cannot join a denomination.

Hughes uses only two defining characteristics to distinguish between sect and denomination: attitude toward other believers and attitude toward the dominant culture. Other writers who have discussed differences between sect and denomination have usually included more than two defining characteristics.

My own personal reaction when I read Hughes' definitions of sect and denomination was mixed. On the matter of attitude toward the dominant culture, I frankly identify with the definition of sect far more than with the definition of denomination. I believe that the church is, always has been, and always must be counter-cultural. I most certainly have not made my peace with the dominant culture and I believe that this view is shared by most members of the Churches of Christ in America. And if that makes us a sect, then so be it.

On the other matter concerning attitude toward other believers, my own personal reaction is to reject the dichotomy. Hughes says that we must either judge other believers to be lost or judge them to be saved. I believe that there is another dimension involved here. We can simply leave it up to God to do the judging.

Some who accept the "sect-to-denomination" typology as defined by Hughes claim that it is a cop out for anyone to say that we should leave the judging up to God. They insist that we must either judge others to be saved or judge them to be lost. But that is the position that I take and I do not regard it as a cop out. Furthermore, a majority of the people I know in the Churches of Christ take this same position and I believe that they do so honestly. They would agree with the statement that "We do not claim to be the only Christians, but we are trying to be Christians only." Hughes simply does not allow enough alternatives.

When the word "denomination" is used in the popular sense meaning *a group of people who see themselves as a group that can be identified by a name*, I would not deny that the "Big 'C' Church of Christ" is a denomination. But I believe that there are important ways in which most congregations of this fellowship really do not fit the *denomination* category.

Church statisticians emphasize the organizational definition of *denomination*. Having a central denominational headquarters makes it easier to know which congregations to count. But there ARE fellowships of independent congregations in which it is not so easy to know the boundaries.

As noted earlier, there are two heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement that exist without any central denominational organization: Churches of Christ and Christian Churches--the a cappella and instrumental fellowships. There are far more differences *within* each of these fellowships than there are *between* the two. If it had not been for a history of separation for over 100 years, sociologists would probably count these as a single fellowship of independent, non-denominational congregations--some of which use instrumental music and more who do not, some who use only one cup in the communion but more who use individual cups, some who oppose the Bible class arrangement but more who do not, some who oppose church support of child care agencies and other forms of church cooperation but most who do not, and so on with other differences.

One way to demonstrate that central denominational organizations are not essential is to consider some outcomes. There are 15 religious groups in America that have more than 1,000,000 adherents. These 15 groups account for more than 82 percent of the people who are adherents of all the religious groups in the nation. All three of the heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement are in this "Big Church" category. Churches of Christ and Christian Churches are still trying to be independent, and non-denomination. If they are counted together:

- ◆ only the six largest denominations in America have more adherents or members--
The other 237 had fewer;
- ◆ only the three largest denominations in America have more local congregations--
The other 240 had fewer;
- ◆ only four denominations had better growth rate percentages in the 1980s-- The other 239 had lower growth rate percentages or actually declined;
- ◆ only eight denominations had a greater increase in the number of adherents, in the 1980s--
The other 235 had less;
- ◆ no denominations in America were more evenly dispersed throughout the nation--all 243 were less evenly dispersed; and,
- ◆ only one denomination supported more career missionaries and that was the Southern Baptist Convention representing over 19 million members.

These statistics demonstrate that a central denominational headquarters is not essential. Elmer Towns wrote a book called, *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* In that book, he reaches the same conclusion. Towns argues that denominational hierarchies are unnecessary. Big churches can help little churches. Cooperation among independent congregations can achieve everything the church needs to achieve. Towns is not the only religious leader who expressed the dream of a non-denominational church. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the most eloquent of all Baptist preachers, shared the same vision. He told his Baptist congregation in London that he longed for the day when the name "Baptist" would be forgotten forever and people would simply be known as "Christians." He warned his congregation that "There will be no Baptist in heaven." He said that no one will go to heaven because of being a Baptist--but only because of being a Christian. He said that no one will go to heaven *as* a Baptist, but only *as* Christians. Perhaps some of us need to be reminded that no one will go to heaven because of being a member of the "Big 'C' Church of Christ." No one will go to heaven as an heir of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. We will go to heaven *as* Christians, members of the "little 'c' church of Christ."

The organizational definition of *denomination* is not the only defining characteristic that Hughes ignores. There is also an important theological factor--specifically in the area of ecclesiology.. Denominationalism involves a belief that the universal church is made up of all the denominational organizations, or at least that these denominational organizations are approved by God as a part of the design for the universal church. A non-denominational view, however, regards these denominational organizations as being human institutions created without any divine authority. Denominationalism involves a belief that these ecclesiastical hierarchies should continue to exist. The non-denominational view is that they should follow the model set in "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" which said, "We *will*, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large. . . ." The sect-to-denomination ignores the possibility of an ecclesiology that is non-sectarian and non-denominational.

There is a connection between the way a religious group understands its history and the way that group perceives its mission. Sects typically focus their evangelism on correcting other believers. When a sect becomes a denomination, the motive for that kind of evangelism is lost.

If a group sees itself as being a fellowship of independent, non-denominational congregations, it will be much more likely to continue a dialogue with other believers without judging those other believers to be lost the way sects do or judging them to be saved the way denominations do..

One area where such dialogue could be very productive is in regard to the non-denominational plea. There is a growing feeling among religious leaders that Towns was right when he wrote *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* The greatest church growth that is taking place in the United States is among the independent, non-denominational congregations. Several years ago at the American Society for Church Growth, we heard a report on a survey of seminary students throughout the nation. Many of them had read Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church*. A majority of these seminary students wanted to plant independent congregations that would not be affiliated with any denominational organization the way Warren did with the Saddleback Valley Community Church. That is a dream that is shared by many people from many different religious backgrounds. In such a climate, the non-denominational plea has a strong appeal. But that plea will not be well articulated by a people who see their own history through the terministic screen that allows only two categories: *sect* and *denomination*. Those who are ashamed of a sectarian past and proud of their new denominational status will not be effective advocates of a non-denominational plea.

But the "sect-to-denomination" view of history has another negative influence on the perception of mission. People who had focused their evangelism on correcting other believers and now have given up on that kind of evangelism tend to give up on all evangelism. Actually, no religious group in America is achieving much church growth by correcting other believers. The religious groups that are achieving the greatest growth today are focusing their evangelism on the unchurched. The United States has the fourth largest unchurched population in the world with 45 percent of the people not claimed as members by any congregation of any religious group at all. These unchurched masses are potentially the greatest source of church growth. But when people think that they have made the transition from *sect* to *denomination*, they do not typically change the target of their evangelism in an effort to reach the unchurched. Instead they tend to move from being evangelistic to being non-evangelistic.

Churches of Christ that now regard themselves as being denominational are not growing. Furthermore, the congregations that are at the sectarian end of the continuum are not doing any better. The only real evangelistic growth that is being achieved is among middle-of-the-road congregations that are still trying to be non-sectarian and non-denominational. The “sect-to-denomination” typology has some limited value, but when used and accepted uncritically, it can seriously distort perceptions. That view of history is dangerous in that it can cause us to “throw out the baby with the bathwater” and “burn down the barn to get rid of the rats.” It can blind us to all that is good in our heritage.

It can also blind us to the possibility of being non-denominational today. It is the kind of reasoning that debaters call “begging the question.” The proposition being advocated is that it is not possible to have a fellowship of independent non-denominational congregations in the world today. But instead of giving evidence to support this claim, Hughes simply defines out of existence the possibility of having independent non-denominational congregations.

I believe that it is possible for the “Big ‘C’ Churches of Christ” to exist as a fellowship of independent, non-sectarian, and non-denominational congregations.

- We would still fit the popular definition of *denomination* as “a religious group that sees itself as a group and that can be identified by a name.” But that is not objectionable.
- We would still fit Hughes’ definition of *sect* in our opposition to the dominant non-Christian culture. But that is not objectionable.
- If we leave it up to God to do the judging, we would not fit the *sect* definition by judging all others to be lost or the *denomination* definition by judging others to be saved in spite of what we see as serious errors in what they teach and practice.
- We can continue to avoid being a denomination in the organizational sense by refusing to join or establish any kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy or central denominational organization.
- We can continue to advocate a non-denominational ecclesiology and urge all such human institutions to merge into union with the body of Christ at large.
- We can continue to say that we do not claim to be the only Christians, but that we are trying to be Christians only--and really mean it.

- We can continue our dialogue with other believers and make the non-denominational plea a part of that dialogue.
- We can focus our evangelistic efforts on reaching the unchurched.

Churches of Christ can do this. Christian Churches can do it. So can others who may not be known to us, but whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. Non-sectarian, non-denominational Christianity may be an ideal. But if we think that we can only exist as *sect* or as *denomination*, we will not be motivated to put that ideal into practice.