

CHAPTER 3

DENOMINATIONAL DEFINITION

The dream can be so vivid that we taste it. The vision can feel so right that we believe it; yet what we know must become, what we hunger for, what we pray for, what we are committed to die for can elude our grasp or become way too costly because of one detail. That was the case for Major Ambrose Burnside of the Union Army in September of 1862. His troops were to invade the Confederate town of Sharpsburg in northern Maryland. He had more than enough resources to easily overpower the small contingent of Confederate soldiers there. Burnside's troops, however, had to first manage a small obstacle. They had to cross Antietam Creek. A bridge near Sharpsburg was the most obvious course, and Burnside determined that his troops would control it. In a colossal tragedy, wave after wave of his troops were cut down as the narrow passage of that bridge neutralized their numbers and fully exposed them to the bullets of the Confederate Army. At the end of the day, the Union Army suffered 22,000 casualties; and they all were unnecessary. Less than a mile downstream the creek was shallow enough for his army to cross and launch their offensive.¹ Burnside, though fully equipped to win, had chosen the wrong battleground.

It was this very type of error that saved King David and his fleeing group of loyalists when his son Absalom led a coup d'état. Ahithophel, David's most respected counselor, had betrayed him and joined ranks with his son. When his advice to immediately pursue and engage David's band was spurned for counsel to wait and raise a large army, Ahithophel left the palace, put his affairs in order and took his life (2 Sam. 15:1 – 17:23). David knew that this one choice saved his life. Ahithophel knew it too. His actions were not that of a frustrated counselor, but of a condemned traitor. He saw what others did not. He saw that the moment and opportunity for victory had passed. He saw that God was with his opponent.

¹ Bob Beckett in *Commitment to Conquer*, 120-121, relays this story in a challenge to investigate and research what we are up against in unleashing the work and power of God in our communities.

In life there often is one decision that proves pivotal. It can be the choice of ground where one fights. It can be what counsel to follow, or what moment to act. In some cases, research is required. In David's case, there was no time for research. His only resource was prayer that Ahithophel's impeccable counsel would be frustrated. In the adventure of leading and unleashing denominational congregations in their work of liberating God's lost and afflicted people, what battleground must be chosen, what counsel must be heeded, what action is pivotal, what question must be answered?

The creek that separates us from our objective and that must be crossed is our definition of church and denomination. If we fail to search out this streambed, we will attempt to cross it at our peril. All our efforts at reform and renewal will not survive the bullets. The casualty list will be horrendous. The foresight of Ahithophel in this matter is vital. The battle will eventually be won or lost over this definition. It is critical that we listen to him, and listen to him carefully, for his counsel is like one who inquires of God (2 Sam. 16:23) and destiny depends on our decision.

Systems or People

Are denominations churches? In the last chapter we focused on the nature and life of the church of Jesus Christ. We discovered that church as a campus and as a corporation were historical developments. At root they were not and are not the "ekklesia" of God. People are the "ekklesia" of God. The church is people who are in relationship with Christ and one another through the work and counsel of the Holy Spirit. The campus and corporation were simply structures employed to support their work together. The church is not a campus. The church is not a corporation. The church is a people. The campus and corporation are parachurch structures that exist alongside the church and are for the church's utility. In a similar manner, we must discern and define the nature of denominations, for their future and the fruitfulness of our efforts ride on it.

Are denominations the people or are they the systems people develop and employ? If denominations are churches, then they are not systems. They may employ systems that give local churches autonomy or defer power to bishops, but those systems do not define them. If denominations are churches, they then are not organizations. They develop and utilize organizational structures, but they can be changed again and again without changing their identity. They organize and reorganize, because they are not the organization; instead,

they are the people or covenant community who both develop and discard systems and organizations as they choose.

When an organization divides, it divides;² but when a people divide, they hurt. Denominational schism offers only the pain of corporate division if denominations are systems; but if they are churches, if they are people, then their schism is tragic and their pain is very personal, both emotionally and spiritually. Organizational division is one means of growth. The division can lead to new creativity, sharper focus, geographical diversity and wider impact. Church division, in contrast, is a way of death, for a divided people walk not with the Spirit of God but in the vision of an umpire. In church division, people walk in the knowledge of good and evil and are oblivious to the redemptive voice and hand of Jesus Christ.

The potential schism currently facing historic denominations results from two lines of thought. First, the contemporary reinterpretation of Scripture strikes conservatives as a rejection of the word of Christ and thus a relinquishment of our redemptive relationship with Him. How we treat a person's word is how we treat the person, for the word is an expression of the person (Christ being the very Word of God). For conservatives, the acceptance of homosexual practice is rejection of God's word to them and thus unbelief in God; and because the church is a body of people expressly submitted to God and one another out of reverence for Christ, it then ceases to be the church. Second, for liberals and conservatives the vision of denominations, as systems and organizations rather than a people, removes the stigma from schism. Division simply amounts to the formation of new wineskins, not the division of the body of Christ. In this line of thinking, the only evil in denominational division is the attitude exposed by disputes over property, money, and control.

The contrast between organizational and church division may seem semantic, but its subtlety ought not disguise its profundity. In an article on denominational renewal, I argued:

Denominational organizations are merely wineskins. They are the structure of relationships that help us drink the new wine of the gospel and then carry it to other thirsty people. As such they are worthy of honor, but not worship. It's the wine that gives life. A wineskin satisfies no one's thirst. Moreover, a wineskin is never permanent and is often best discarded! Although it may be hard to realize, the maintenance and future of the current

² Organizational division always carries some pain. At minimum, there is the pain of separation as people leave to form different teams. The attitude regarding the division determines whether it is a dividing system or a dividing people.

organization of United Methodism is not of great importance. What is of utmost importance is the well-being of United Methodist people. It is imperative that they relate in such a way as to drink the wine and carry it to the thirsty peoples of this earth. *The lasting gifts of our denominational tradition reside not in our organizational structures and postures, but in our God-ordained relationships [italics and underlines mine].*³

I underline for emphasis in the previous quotation, “organization” and “structure” because I do not equate the term “denomination” with the system or wineskin. I contend that systems are disposable wineskins. I assert that organizations are disposable wineskins. I argue that the essence of a denomination is not the organization it employs, but its people who are in God-ordained relationship together.

Unfortunately, the editors missed that critical point and chose to place with the article a special graphic containing a more articulate and opposing view by Carlos Mraida. He wrote:

It is necessary to make a distinction between Church and denomination. The Church is part of the new wine of the gospel, but denominations are mere wineskins. While the essence of the Church is permanent, denominations are forms which the Church has historically structured itself for the fulfillment of its mission. The Church is God’s creation, but denominations are a human creation.

The Church is a spiritual event, while denominations are a social event. The Church is cross-culturally valid, while denominations are culturally limited. The Church must be biblically understood and evaluated. Denominations are sociologically understood and evaluated. The Church manifests its relevance and validity for its spiritual qualities and its conformity to the Scriptures. The validity of denominations, because they are mere structures, resides in their functioning in relationship to the mission of the Church. The Church has an essential and eternal character, while denominations are transitory and temporal. The Church is the result of divine revelation, while denominations are the fruit of human tradition. The purpose of the Church is to glorify God, while that of denominations is to serve the Church. As soon as we understand that denominations are not the Church, but are culturally determined structures, denominational controversies begin to lose their urgency. Denominational differences then occupy a secondary level, and we are free to give the top priority to that which unites, namely the affirmation that the Church is a people with a mission.⁴

³ Wesley J. Gabel, “Catching the Wave of Spiritual Renewal: Unleashing the Church for New life,” *Good News: A Magazine For United Methodist Renewal*, May/June 2000, 13.

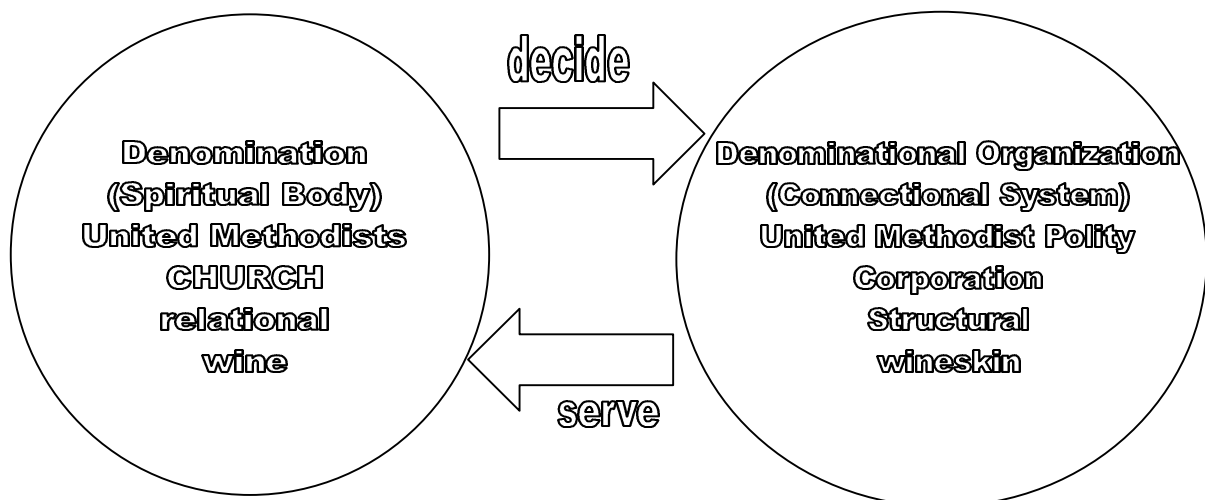
⁴ Carlos Mraida, “Making Distinctions,” *Good News*, May/June 2000, 15.

Mraida's comments are insightful and would have been affirmed in this discussion if he had used the term "denominational organization." Every comment, he makes about denominations could also describe local churches, if the focus of their identity is their structure and organization. Local church organizations are not the wine, but the wineskins. Local church organizations are forms by which the church structures itself for the fulfillment of its mission; they are human creations that result from the faith and experience of God's people. Local church organizations are transitory and temporal and serve the Church of God. They must be judged, used or discarded, on the basis of how they serve their people.

The local church, itself, however, is not a system or an organization and neither is a denomination. Local churches and denominations are relational communities. They are people in relationship with God and one another through the work of Christ's Spirit. The church is a relational body. The church is a spiritual body, but not an immaterial one. The idea that the Church is some mystical, nonphysical entity that is served by the physical is unbiblical. The Church exists with warts and flaws, yet Christ is redeeming and readying her as a bride. We are receiving a righteousness that is not our own. Thus the Church is relational rather than mystical. It is relational, spiritual and physical. We are a spiritual and physical body because God made people spiritual and physical.

Even as a simple diagram was offered to explore mistaken notions of the local church in the last chapter, the following can provide clarity as we consider what denominations are.

Figure 2. Diagram of the Denomination



In denominations, we call ourselves the church: The United Methodist Church, The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the United Church of Christ, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Evangelical Free Church in America. Are we lying? Are we deceived? Are we correct? Could it be that the Holy Spirit led us to name ourselves churches for purposes that are still unfolding today? The United Methodist Church has a revealing self-understanding of its name. The church declares that its name and the term Church “refer to the overall denomination and connectional relation” and the identity of its many subunits.

Under the Constitution and disciplinary procedures set forth in this *Book of Discipline*, “The United Methodist Church” as a denominational whole is not an entity, nor does it possess legal capacities and attributes. It does not hold and cannot hold title to property, nor does it have any officer, agent, employee, office, or location.⁵

In their efforts to stimulate denominational reform among United Methodists, Andy Langford and William Willimon have encountered resistance precisely over the definition of denominations. When they noted that The United Methodist Church, in its present form, is one of the most hierarchical, bureaucratic churches in Christendom and called for decentralization and accentuation of the local congregation as the basic unit of the church, critics warned of “creeping congregationalism.”⁶ They considered these suggestions to be a betrayal of our identity as a “connectional” church. The Book of Discipline identifies United Methodists as a “Connectional People,” and *officially* defines “connectionalism” as “a vital web of interactive relationships.”⁷ However, Langford and Willimon write that “connectionalism” is *operationally* identified with organizational structures and with members’ acceptance, approval, commitment to and use of them.⁸ They write:

The Wesleyan movement has no particular prejudice toward any institutional embodiment except toward that institutional arrangement which enables us to fulfill our theological mandate to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.” We are practical people. Our connectionalism ought to be understood theologically rather than institutionally. Our present system is a historical creation, a relatively recent construction. We invented it for certain

⁵ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 139. The Church

⁶ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 32.

⁷ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 130. The Journey of a Connectional People..

⁸ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 23.

timely concerns, and we can change it in the interest of reinvigorated mission.⁹

The problem these reformers encounter is that defenders of the status quo define denomination as structure rather than relationships. They codify the structure of United Methodism as if it is theologically necessary, as if it somehow *creates* the fellowship rather than *reflects* it.¹⁰ The United Methodist structure or system has become a new form of circumcision. It is the mark of who we are, the promise of what we will become. The presence of the Holy Spirit is insufficient as the marking of who we are and what awaits us. Ironically, the very structures some United Methodists embrace as their identity are historically recent. They do not go back to Abraham, or Jesus, or Peter, or Augustine, or Luther, or Wesley, or Francis Asbury, Philip Otterbeim, Martin Boehm and Jacob Albright. Many are little more than three decades old.¹¹ For the first 150 years of Methodism's denominational presence in America, the only connecting agency was a publishing house.¹² With that history, why would structures become so important to the identity of United Methodists? Why would connectional structures become sacred and require allegiance?

It may be that in the context of denominational decline, the fruit of our work as United Methodists no longer justifies in many minds our existence as an entity. When people's lives are being transformed and communities are being altered, when great numbers come to faith and swell a denomination's rank, there is little reflection on the value of our covenant and relationships. It is obvious. However, when those dynamics are absent, what justifies the commitment demanded and legitimizes the covenant entered?¹³ Why do we exist now as United Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans or Congregationalists? Is there some special or unique reason for our life now as a denomination? Could the missional crisis of denominations be fueling an identity crisis? In this context, could "connectionalism," "congregationalism," "doctrinal purity," "doctrinal diversity," "apostolic succession," some visible aspect of our relationship, some system,

⁹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23-24.

¹¹ Ibid., 33-34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mike Regele (*Death of the Church*, 97) notes that institutions structure our collective efforts. They emerge when leaders work to translate vision into reality. He notes that leaders share a vision and call us together as one in its pursuit. Through the formation of institutions, visionary leaders work to close the gap between what is and what ought to be.

some structure or institutional reality, act as a comforting pacifier by reassuring us that we are unique and necessary?

As long as a denomination is identified as an institution rather than a community, as an organization rather than a fellowship, as a system rather than a people, this crisis of identity will deepen and efforts at reform will fail. The reason is simple. When we misidentify the church with a system, we justify and protect the system at all costs. However, when we recognize that through our redemptive relationship with Christ, God led us into special relationships and a specific covenant as a spiritual body, justification is no longer necessary. We exist as this special community not because of the system, but because of the Holy Spirit, and we simply seek to walk as the Spirit directs. We are now free within this redeeming fellowship to judge the system or institution, to change the system and to bring to birth new institutions. This is absolutely critical. This is our Antietam Creek. This is the foresight of Ahithophel. It is the decisive choice that determines the outcome of all renewal efforts.

When our denominational communities created our current systems, structures and institutions, they targeted a different culture. However, as we discussed in the first chapter, we serve a radically different world today. That is why we ought to be alerted rather than alarmed when a respected cultural observer declares, “We must accept that the traditional place of the institutional church in American society is dying, and with it the institutional church itself.” We can deliberate rather than despair when that authority warns, “We must be willing to let our traditional forms and structures that are the foundations of the institutional church die.”¹⁴ When another observer writes that cultural earthquakes are flattening hierarchical structures all across our society,¹⁵ it is imperative to understand that this is not a threat to our identity, but a challenge for Spirit-led ingenuity. God is again reinforcing the relational nature of our life. God is teaching us, once again, communal dependence on the Spirit.

Generally, cultures are not static. They do change some over time. In addition, human beings struggle with spiritual powers that tempt us to selfishness. That is why Lyle Schaller wrote in *Tattered Trust* about denominational renewal that the normal, natural, and predictable tendency for aging institutions is to become self-centered, obsolete, and

¹⁴ Regele, *The Death of the Church*, 199.

¹⁵ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 12.

irrelevant to the needs and expectations of new generations.¹⁶ The redeeming community must never settle comfortably into a structure or system. They are not our life, our mission, or our identity; and when they become so, we no longer are a relational, Spirit-led people. We are idolaters. We are people who worship and trust a disposable wineskin. We have replaced our dependence on the wine with affection for a wineskin.

Regulations versus Relationships

If the tendency to identify denominations with systems rather than people frustrates all attempts to renew the life and mission of the church, the reliance on regulations rather than relationships steals what life there is. Reliance on rules turns the Church from a community of gospel to a community of law, from a vision of the tree of life to a vision dominated by the forbidden tree. Our reliance upon denominational regulations and our identification of those regulations with our denomination, not only hinder our mission but obliterate our life. Paul writes the Corinthians, “ [God] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

The theology of Paul and the witness of the Bible are that redemption is accomplished by the work of the Spirit. As ministers of a new covenant we bring a relationship rather than a regulation to people. Life is in this relationship with the Holy Spirit rather than in submission to a set of rules. The organizing principle for our life and our community is the Spirit. The empowering principle for our mission as a community is the Spirit. The directive for our actions as believers is not a regulation but a relationship with Christ through His Spirit. Indeed, the more we rely upon rules, the more we abandon and betray who we are.

When denominations define themselves as a web of God-ordained relationships rather than a weave of rules, creativity flows and their life actively depends upon the counsel and work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ When they, however, identify themselves as a people who do things a certain way, they have exchanged the work of the Spirit and God’s brickwork of relationships for a scaffold of human rules that cannot empower.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ For United Methodists, it is significant that their emphasis in the beginning was relationships. Bishop Richard Wilkie (*And Are We Yet Alive*, 91) wrote that the Wesleyan movement has always been communal in nature. Both John and Charles Wesley made their theology and administration an effort to help people grow within Christian fellowship. Methodism, in part, was a commitment to the wine of the Spirit tasted through God-ordained relationships.

It is okay to do something in a certain way. The Spirit always leads us in some way. However, when we codify that way and identify ourselves by that way rather than by “the Way,” we abandon the primacy of our gospel and also our true identity. We become seduced by the uniqueness of our structure, and celebrate it rather than the God who leads us. We invite people to join us in our community of unique rules and structures rather than in our experience of fellowship and liberation through Jesus Christ.

Moreover, when denominations legislate their life and work, they model the type of community Christ opposed, a community focused on godly actions rather than on God.¹⁸ They foster a dependency upon law rather than the Spirit, and they encourage an identity in law rather than the Spirit. I do not suggest that church legislation or law is morally wrong. I do suggest, however, that beyond central affirmations of faith, a theological distinctive the community finds especially helpful, and a bare scaffolding of corporate law to erect a structure to support the church’s life and mission, most restrictive or prescriptive legislation is ill advised, counterproductive and inconsistent with Christ’s purpose for Christian community. This does not preclude denominational leaders from commending proven and useful models to their people. It does, however, caution them not to codify it. Although the issue was very different, Peter’s counsel to church leaders is still relevant for us: “Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10-11)? If salvation comes by grace and not by the observance of law, what makes us think that the message and experience of salvation can best be promoted through law rather than relationships?

Relationships are much messier than rules, and they require greater investment. Rules often become a cowardly means of avoiding the pain of relationships. Rather than getting personal and dealing with a character flaw on a relational basis, we draft rules. Rules offer the cover of impartiality and universality. When we are confronted with the idea that we may be mistreating an individual, we point to the recently imposed, impartial and universal rule. Our personal attitudes and actions in a relationship then escape scrutiny.¹⁹

¹⁸ See our discussion of relational vision in chapter two and Haggard’s observation about the Jewish community.

¹⁹ Rules have been changed to force people out of leadership positions rather than deal with their shortcomings. Term limits are a good example of avoiding painful personal evaluation and dismissing spiritual gifts and calling by the Holy Spirit that might not fit our humanly imposed term.

Have a conflict? Draft a rule. It is clean and easy. Consequently, the longer we are together and the more we age as a church, and the more rules we draft, the more they define us.

The United Methodist rulebook contains an 11-page history, an 18-page constitution, 20 pages of doctrinal affirmations that come from its denominational predecessors, three pages that outline the General Rules of the church (as printed in 1808) and focus on the lifestyle and choices of believers. In addition, 47 pages expound on our beliefs and social witness. There are 598 pages filled with rules for the ordering of our organizational life together.²⁰ It is no wonder that United Methodists tend to see themselves as an organization rather than a people and in terms of rules rather than relationships.

When United Methodism was growing in its early years, it looked very different. Langford and Willimon write:

Originally, our *Discipline* was lean on rules and regulations and thick with doctrine and belief. For years, Methodism lived outside of an established church, seeing itself not so much as a church but rather as a movement. A movement trusts people.²¹

The shift to rules reveals a distrust of people. A people, who organize themselves around a trust of Christ and the Spirit, are betraying something vital when they order their life together around the distrust of one another. Mandated, decision-making committees, for example, illustrate the distrust of decision-making individuals. Rules about the composition of committees demonstrate distrust in those who select committees. On and on goes this orgy of mistrust. Mandatory regulations as opposed to recommendations suggest suspicion about the wisdom, judgment and character of people. Moreover, it quenches creativity, restricts responsiveness and shackles innovators. The very Spirit, active in creation, is unwelcome to innovate in our spiritual body and corporate system when we become a house of rules rather than a community of relationships. Lyle Schaller poses an important and related question. He writes:

What is the primary role of national denominational structures in relationship to (1) congregations and (2) regional judicatories? ...if the central culture of the denomination is (a) structured around vertical lines of authority, (b) based on the assumption that institutions, not people, should be trusted, (c) designed to perpetuate a medieval European heritage, and (d) organized on the

²⁰ *The Book of Discipline 2000*.

²¹ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 134.

assumption that congregational leaders cannot be trusted, the answer is obvious. The number one responsibility of a denominational system is to regulate the role, behavior, and beliefs of individuals, congregations, and regional judicatories... The denomination will determine the standards for ordination, the criteria for determining the final destination of financial contributions, the organizational structure for congregations, the role, responsibilities of regional judicatories, and a thousand other issues.²²

United Methodism, Presbyterianism and Roman Catholicism are Schaller's examples of denominations that are organized primarily to regulate.²³ Schaller continues:

If, however, the core culture of that religious tradition emphasizes (a) horizontal lines, (b) trusting people, and (c) American democratic philosophy, the natural result is to focus on ministry and missional goals for both congregations and regional judicatories. That means the primary role of the national denominational system will be to resource congregations and regional judicatories.²⁴

Denominations that develop their systems and structures to resource congregations do not always stay with that mission. Often they are lured into regulating the congregations they are called to assist. Tony Campolo has experienced that as an American Baptist pastor, and he as a sociologist writes:

At the core of my conclusions is a belief that mainline denominations will survive only if their leaders realize that the time is past for them to function as programming bureaucracies. Over and over again, I will try to drive home the point that in all sectors of our society there is a shifting of power and planning to the local level. Central to all that I am about to lay out for your consideration is a belief that the local church must once again become the primary agent for theological reflection, program planning, and missionary enterprises. Denominations have a future only as support agents for local church ministries.²⁵

When the author read that quotation to a taskforce on connectional funding and suggested that the time has come to reform United Methodist structures to resource congregational priorities and empower congregations to embrace their unique call to global mission, one member responded, "We are not Baptists!" At that moment, for that leader, a tradition of systems and rules rather than a people in covenant relationship defined United

²² Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 59.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Campolo, *Can Denominations Make a Comeback?*, 117.

Methodism.²⁶ That is exactly the issue. At root, what defines us? Are we a system or a people? Are we regulations or relationships? Are we a tradition or a covenant?

Tradition versus Covenant

The term tradition is often used of denominations. The early church used the Greek term, *paradosis*, to describe “customs and practices from the past which are passed on as accepted standards of behavior for the present.”²⁷ In its literal sense, it means a “giving over.”²⁸ Tradition, in the New Testament, represents a mixed bag. Three times the term is employed positively, and ten times it is understood as an obstacle to one’s relationship with God²⁹. The Apostle Paul affirms the Corinthians for “holding to the *paradosis*, just as I passed them on to you.” On the other hand, he warns the Colossians to watch out for ideas that come from human *paradosis*. Jesus observed how religious *paradosis* at times opposed God’s direction for us (Mark 7:3-13).

There is a tension then between holding to tradition that embraces the will and work of God and conforming to tradition that hinders our obedience. When we identify a church as a tradition, we recognize that there is a dynamic of “giving over” within that community of believers. People in that community receive something that is valued and given to them. We also, however, risk elevating to deity what is purely human and must be abandoned in order to walk with Christ.

The New Testament never called a Christian community a tradition. There was a fundamental reason. The church was a community of believers, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, whose direction no one could predict. Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). It is tenuous, at best, to identify a church as a tradition because the unpredictable nature of the church is antithetical to people’s normal experience of tradition. Believers may hold to the *paradosis* of the apostles’ message,

²⁶ Schaller’s distinction between official and operational policy again is relevant (see discussion in previous chapter). I doubt if this leader or most others would ever want to officially define United Methodism in terms of its rules. However, in our day-to-day operation and then finally in our consciousness, the system and rules prevail in defining us. To be fair, however, the woman may have also been reacting to Campolo’s words that equated denominations with parachurch systems. In that case, I would share her reaction.

²⁷ *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Electronic Database* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

²⁸ Merrill Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary, Electronic Database* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

²⁹ To see tradition or *paradosis* in its positive usage, read 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6. Its condemnation is seen in Matthew 15:2-3, 6, Mark 7:3, 5, 8-9, 13, Galatians 1:14 and Colossians 2:8.

but any *paradosis* beyond that in the Church is limited to one's experience of the Holy Spirit, who is identified as the *paracletos*, the one along side us, not the one given over to us.

If denominations are truly churches, they cannot focus on heritage. They must instead focus on the leading of the Holy Spirit in their present mission. The question is never "What did our founders do?" It always is "What is the Spirit saying?" In the church of Jesus Christ, it is the Spirit who leads, not our ancestors. The actions of our founders and ancestors can offer us helpful information on how they responded to their challenge. Their situation may lend insight into our challenge. However, the church is about submission to and partnership with Jesus Christ today. It is a contemporary, relational community. It lives and relates now. It is on a contemporary mission. "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). A contemporary leads it. "I AM with you always" (Matt. 28:20).

Where the Christian community is growing and making an impact on culture, heritage is not the focus. Where networks of churches are mushrooming, institutional history is unimportant. The redemption of people is the focus. "Seeking first the kingdom of God" dominates the agenda. "How things can be" rather than "how things were" fill the minds of leaders. Wagner writes:

Traditional church leaders begin with the present and then look to the past.
New apostolic leaders begin with the future and then look to the present.
Most denominations are *heritage driven*. Most apostolic networks are *vision driven* [italics his]. The difference is enormous.³⁰

Wagner observes a tremendous disparity as a result of those two perspectives. Leaders and churches concerned with perpetuating a heritage have radically different attitudes, possess radically different priorities and make radically different decisions than those focused on the future.³¹ There is a creativity unleashed and a risk embraced when the future rather than the past dominates our perspective. However, when things go awry, people often seek refuge in the past. Peter Wagner offers this analysis of the Assemblies of God's recent struggles with church growth:

The Assemblies of God growth rate had slowed down in the 1990s, which was projected to be their "Decade of Harvest." Here is the way the denomination chose to report progress to their constituency in mid-decade,

³⁰ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 56.

³¹ Ibid.

1995: “The Harvest Task Force, in its first meeting under the new leadership structure, issued a clarion call to ‘retool and refocus for the harvest.’ Specific directives include (1) A spiritual call to revival... While number goals can serve as a measure of progress, the emphasis needs to return to the basics.” Notice how the language of this report focuses on yesterday: “Re-tool,” “Re-focus,” “Re-vival,” “Re-turn.” The prefix “re” means to reinstate something from the past... This sort of appeal is extremely common whenever evangelism bogs down. On the other hand, when evangelism is powerful, when soul saving is on a roll, you simply don’t hear this kind of language from leaders of growing churches and apostolic networks.³²

If denominations are heritage-driven, it is because either their spiritual leaders have encountered trouble and are seeking refuge in their past or they have confused heritage with covenant as the glue for their communities. It is not a heritage that leads people to covenant together as a church. It is the Holy Spirit. Denominational commitment is not affirmation of a heritage. It is Spirit-led investment in a future. No denomination is established to perpetuate a tradition. When they begin, they have none. Instead, they usually are formed to help people overcome theological or ecclesiastical obstacles that hinder their walk with the Spirit, and thus, their experience and ministry of redemption. *A denomination is a people in relationship through a covenant.* They are not in relationship through a tradition. They are not in relationship through a series of rules. They are not in relationship through a system. It is the “called out” people of God in covenant together through the work and leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Like the church that met together at Aquila and Priscilla’s home, a denomination is the church meeting together translocally. That church is not about a system, or some rules, or a heritage. It is about responding to the Holy Spirit, experiencing redemption, ministering redemption and forging the future that God leads us to create.

Disposable or Renewable

In recent years the plight of historic denominations has widened to include nearly every denomination. As the performance of denominational churches worsens, there is growing pessimism. Nearly every cultural observer knows that the downturn, which denominational churches are experiencing, is neither superficial nor temporary. The question is whether denominations can be renewed. Those prospects hinge on something

³² Ibid., 61.

we discussed earlier. Are denominations part of the wine of the gospel or are they wineskins? Are they the church or are they parachurch entities? What are denominations?

Ralph Neighbor's perspective is not comforting. He declares:

When that twenty-first pastor called me from California to tell me his three-year-long struggle to develop relational church structures had ended in his forced resignation, I began to ask myself a serious question: *Can new wine be put into old skins?* The answer is, "No!" Attempts at renewal don't work for one reason... Our Lord told us over 2,000 years ago *it could not be done*. Every time we try to ignore His clear teaching, we fail. In retrospect, I could have saved myself 24 years of dreaming an impossible dream if I had taken His admonition literally. While I was trying to *renew*, He was shaping something *brand new* [italics his].³³

Neighbor accurately captures for us the pain and failures in attempting to renew congregations. To some degree, he is seeing the battle of Antietam Creek replayed in church renewal. Leader after leader is falling wounded as they are sent across the bridge to renew "the church." Is Neighbor also accurate in identifying those churches as wineskins? Are those local churches that his young minister friend served wineskins that cannot be renewed? If so, is not the best strategy to just let existing churches falter and plant an entire new variety? Are denominations wineskins? Is it best not to battle for their renewal? Are they best discarded, scrapped, and abandoned as historical dinosaurs for something totally new? Are denominations best left to our memories?

Schaller counters:

Today's denominations represent a huge accumulation of resources including wisdom, expertise, loyalty, creativity, and money. It would be poor stewardship to write that off by passively watching their continued decline.³⁴

He considers denominations too valuable to the Christian community not to attempt renewal. However, his words fall short in answering Neighbor's concern.

In personal conversations and correspondence, I have found C. Peter Wagner somewhat wistful. He would like to believe that denominations are renewable, but he is doubtful.³⁵ In a recent book, he writes:

³³ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 61-62, quotes Neighbor and presumably adds the italics.

³⁴ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 29.

³⁵ Wagner, from class discussion in "The New Apostolic Reformation," Fuller Theological Seminary (Colorado Springs Seminar) July, 1998 and in a written evaluation of my paper on denominational renewal in an "Independent Study on the New Apostolic Reformation" Fall 1999.

Efforts toward renewal have more often than not ended up in a dead-end street. Despite decades of talk about “renewal,” documented accounts of denominations that actually have been renewed are few and far between. I have seen only one—the Australian Assemblies of God... Renewal more often than not is a lofty thought, apparently having very little substance. It goes back to the questions of old versus new wineskins.³⁶

Dr. Wagner’s pessimism is rooted in the casualty toll among renewal leaders, the history of failed attempts, and his conclusion that denominations more than likely are disposable wineskins.

Mike Regele has observed the high incidence of casualties among leaders in his work with mainline Protestant churches. He writes:

In some mainline denominations, persons who demonstrate too much visionary leadership are often cut off at the knees. Our institutions have been immunized against this kind of leadership... We have taken Jesus’ model of servant leadership and reduced it to insipid peonage.³⁷

Regele’s call to the church is not reassuring although it is hopeful. He calls the church to die. That is not easy, and most people cannot do that voluntarily. Death is messy. Death is painful. However, death for wineskins is inevitable. Regele writes:

The church is moving rapidly toward a moment of decision, a *defining moment*. It is a moment of definition because, whether we like it or not, the church in American culture is being redefined. And our options are very limited. What are the options? *Simply, we can die because of our hidebound resistance to change, or we can die in order to live.* As an institution, the American church must choose between these two. There are no other options. However, it is not as easy as merely examining the two options and choosing. The reality is that the church is already on a direct course toward the first option. If the institutional church does nothing, which it is in fact good at doing, the choice has been made [italics his].³⁸

Neighbor and Regele’s comments were aimed at local churches. They were not saying that denominations are evil or obsolete. They were saying the church, as we know it (locally and translocally, congregations and denominations), is obsolete and has no future but death. Regele makes it clear that he is not speaking of the believing community, but its institutions. He writes:

³⁶ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 61.

³⁷ Regele, *Death of the Church*, 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

The institutional church as we have known it is dying. We do not mean that the church will cease to exist. Theologically we are quite certain that God will be faithful to finish what has been started and that the church will be the primary vehicle through which that will occur. But we are equally certain that it will not be through the existing structures and traditions we have known—that is, through our particular American form of the church.³⁹

Regele and I agree both that the believing community will not die, but that its current institutions, systems, rules and traditions will. The good news for denominations is that the church that meets translocally is not dying either. Lyle Schaller writes: “I am intrigued by the growing interest among the leaders of independent or nondenominational churches to network with one another.”⁴⁰ The fellowship of believers is not becoming parochial with the decline of denominations; instead, it is actually becoming more global and more intimate through radically different structures that currently are described as networks.

What we are observing in the west is not the death of the church, but its radical reformation. The major difference between the last reformation and this one is the compressed time frame as we discussed in the first chapter. This reformation is offering leaders little time to adjust. In view of that, this one may more profoundly reshape the redeeming fellowship because so many of their systems will not survive the rapid transition. Although the last one offered more immediate political implications, this one, with the disappearance of Christendom and its lack of entanglement with national politics, may, with that freedom, prove even more revolutionary and unpredictable. In the last reformation, the redeeming community did not die; but many of its institutions, rules and traditions did. The Church itself, the people, experienced renewal in many locations. People can be renewed. People in covenant relationship through the Holy Spirit can be renewed regardless of where they meet. However, wineskins cannot. They must be discarded when they offer little utility. That is what is happening again. Old wineskins are being discarded. New wineskins are being employed. The Church is developing new forms that are assisting its members in experiencing and sharing redemption.

The Church can be renewed. Its systems, rules and human tradition cannot. They can be appreciated. They can be celebrated and they can be ceremonially buried. The central issue of this discussion then, is, “What is wine and what is wineskin?” What can be

³⁹ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁰ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 28.

renewed? What must be surrendered? In the last reformation, leaders and followers lost their lives in bringing renewal; and other leaders and followers lost their souls in opposing it.

To a great degree, those losses on both sides were determined by the battleground that was chosen. In scouting the territory, the decisive factor in renewal may be the language we use. If we leaders of renewal are imprecise in defining church and denomination, we may be wading into a creek that is above our heads or crossing a narrow bridge where all our strength is squandered. Our choice of words may be the decisive factor that Ahithophel would see. When local churches and denominations are equated with their systems, rules and traditions, their renewal will remain elusive. However, when they are identified as people, as relationships, and as Spirit-led covenanting, all things are possible.