

How Many Protestant Denominations?

by Dr. Eric Svendsen

In the Fall of 1999 I posted a challenge on my web site to any Roman Catholic who could pin down the official Roman Catholic teaching about certain issues. The challenge was issued in response to the oft-argued line of reasoning that Protestantism is illegitimate by virtue of the differences in belief among 25,000 Protestant denominations-or, as Roman Catholic apologist Scott Hahn and others like to call it, the "anarchy" of Protestantism. The results of that challenge make up the contents of a forthcoming book by this author on the epistemological fallacies underlying the authority arguments of Roman Catholic apologists. While I cannot address that entire issue here, I shall address one important aspect that, I believe, demolishes a key brick in the "authority" arguments used by all Roman Catholic apologists.

When examining the common arguments for Roman Catholic authority it is a fairly straight forward process to point out to our Roman Catholic friends that their conclusions are questionable. What is more challenging is to discern when even their premises are wrong. Take the "25,000 Protestant denominations" argument as an example. The argument goes something like this: *Sola Scriptura* is a "blueprint for anarchy" as is witnessed in the 25,000 Protestant denominations in the world today. All of these denominations, it is argued, are guided by the same "Bible alone" principle, and as a result are hopelessly divided. In our answers to these Roman Catholic arguments we have all along simply assumed the soundness of the premise that in fact there are 25,000 Protestant denominations. In fact, the premise is quite unsound.

When this figure first surfaced among Roman Catholic apologists, it started at 20,000 Protestant denominations, grew to 23,000 Protestant denominations, then to 25,000 Protestant denominations, to the currently cited figure of 28,000 Protestant denominations. Indeed, many Roman Catholic apologists feel at liberty simply to calculate a daily rate of growth (based on their previous adherence to the original benchmark figure of 20,000) that they can then

use as a basis for projecting just how many Protestant denominations there were, or will be, in any given year. But just where do they arrive at this figure?

I have posed this question over and over again to many different Roman Catholic apologists, none of whom were able to verify the source with certainty. In most cases, one Roman Catholic apologist would claim he obtained the figure from another Roman Catholic apologist. When I would ask the latter Roman Catholic apologist about the figure, it was not uncommon for that apologist to point to the former apologist as his source for the figure, creating a circle with no actual beginning. I have long suspected that, whatever the source might be, the words "denomination" and "Protestant" were being defined in a way that most of us would reject.

I have only recently been able to locate the source of this figure. I say the source because in fact there is only one source that mentions this figure independently. All other secondary sources (to which Roman Catholics sometimes make appeal) ultimately cite the same original source. That source is David A Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World AD. 1900-2000* (ed. David A Barrett; New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). This work is both comprehensive and painstakingly detailed; and its contents are quite enlightening. However, the reader who turns to this work for validation of the Roman Catholic 25,000-Protestant-denomination argument will be sadly disappointed. What follows is a synopsis of what Barrett's work in this area really says. First, Barrett, writing in 1982, does indeed cite a figure of 20,780 denominations in 1980, and projects that there would be as many as 22,190 denominations by 1985. This represents an increase of approximately 270 new denominations each year (Barrett, 17). What the Roman Catholic who cites this figure does not tell us (most likely because he does not know) is that most of these denominations are non-Protestant.

Barrett identifies seven major ecclesiastical "blocs" under which these 22,190 distinct denominations fall (Barrett, 14-15): (1) Roman Catholicism, which accounts for 223 denominations; (2) Protestant, which accounts

for 8,196 denominations; (3) Orthodox, which accounts for 580 denominations; (4) Non-White Indigenous, which accounts for 10,956 denominations; (5) Anglican, which accounts for 240 denominations; (6) Marginal Protestant, which includes Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, New Age groups, and all cults (Barrett, 14), and which accounts for 1,490 denominations; and (7) Catholic (Non-Roman), which accounts for 504 denominations. According to Barrett's calculations, there are 8,196 denominations within Protestantism not 25,000 as Roman Catholic apologists so cavalierly and carelessly claim. Barrett is also quick to point out that one cannot simply assume that this number will continue to grow each year; hence, the typical Roman Catholic projection of an annual increase in this number is simply not a given.

Yet even this figure is misleading; for it is clear that Barrett defines "distinct denominations" as any group that might have a slightly different emphasis than another group (such as the difference between a Baptist church that emphasizes hymns, and a another Baptist church that emphasizes praise music). No doubt the same Roman Catholic apologists who so gleefully cite the erroneous 25,000-denominations figure, and who might with just as much glee cite the revised 8,196-denominations figure, would reel at the notion that there might actually be 223 distinct denominations within Roman Catholicism! Yet that is precisely the number that Barrett cites for Roman Catholicism. Moreover, Barrett indicates in the case of Roman Catholicism that even this number can be broken down further to produce 2,942 separate "denominations"-and that was only in 1970! In that same year there were only 3,294 Protestant denominations; a difference of only 352 denominations. If we were to use the Roman Catholic apologist's method to "project" a figure for the current day, we could no doubt postulate a number upwards of 8,000 Roman Catholic denominations today! Hence, if Roman Catholic apologists want to argue that Protestantism is splintered into 8,196 "bickering" denominations, then they must just as readily admit that their own ecclesial system is splintered into at least 2,942 bickering denominations (possibly as many as 8,000). If, on the other hand, they would rather claim that among those 2,942+ (perhaps 8,000?) Roman Catholic denominations there is "unity," then they can have no objection to the notion that among the 8,196 Protestant denominations there is also unity. In reality, Barrett indicates that what he means by "denomination" is any ecclesial body that retains a "jurisdiction" (i.e., semi-autonomy).

As an example, Baptist denominations comprise approximately 321 of the total Protestant figure. Yet the lion's share of Baptist denominations are independent, making them (in Barrett's calculation) separate denominations. In other words, if there are ten Independent Baptist churches in a given city, even though all of them are identical in belief and practice, each one is counted as a separate denomination due to its autonomy in jurisdiction. This same principle applies to all independent or semi-independent denominations. And even beyond this, all Independent Baptist denominations are counted separately from all other Baptist denominations, even though there might not be a dime's worth of difference among them. The same principle is operative in Barrett's count of Roman Catholic denominations. He cites 194 Latin-rite denominations in 1970, by which Barrett means separate jurisdictions (or diocese). Again, a distinction is made on the basis of jurisdiction, rather than differing beliefs and practices.

However Barrett has defined "denomination," it is clear that he does not think of these as major distinctions; for that is something he reserves for another category. In addition to the seven major ecclesiastical "blocs" (mentioned above), Barrett breaks down each of these traditions into smaller units that might have significant differences (what he calls "major ecclesiastical traditions," and what we might normally call a true denomination) (Barrett, 14). Referring again to our seven major ecclesiastical "blocs" (mentioned above, but this time in reverse order): For (1) Catholic (Non-Roman), there are four traditions, including Catholic Apostolic, Reformed Catholic, Old Catholic, and Conservative Catholic; for (2) Marginal Protestants, there are six traditions; for (3) Anglican, there are six traditions; for (4) Non-White Indigenous, which encompasses third-world peoples (among whom can be found traces of Christianity mixed with the major tenets of their indigenous pagan religions), there are twenty traditions, including a branch of Reformed Catholic and a branch of Conservative Catholic; for (5) Orthodox, there are nineteen traditions; for (6) Protestant, there are twenty-one traditions; and for (7) Roman Catholic, there are sixteen traditions, including Latin-rite local, Latin-rite catholic, Latin/ Eastern-rite local, Latin/Eastern-rite catholic, Syro-Malabarese, Ukrainian, Romanian, Maronite, Melkite, Chaldean, Ruthenian, Hungarian, plural Oriental rites, Syro-Malankarese, Slovak, and Coptic. It is important to note here that Barrett places these sixteen Roman Catholic traditions (i.e., true denominations) on the very same level as the twenty-one

Protestant traditions (i.e., true denominations). In other words, the true count of real denominations within Protestantism is twenty-one, whereas the true count of real denominations within Roman Catholic is sixteen. Combined with the other major ecclesiastical blocs, that puts the total number of actual denominations in the world at ninety-two obviously nowhere near the 23,000 or 25,000 figure that Roman Catholic apologists constantly assert and that figure of ninety-two denominations includes the sixteen denominations of Roman Catholicism (Barrett, 15)! Barrett goes on to note that this figure includes all denominations with a membership of over 100,000. There are an additional sixty-four denominations worldwide, distributed among the seven major ecclesiastical blocs.

As we have shown, the larger figures mentioned earlier (8,196 Protestant denominations and perhaps as many as 8,000 Roman Catholic denominations) are based on jurisdiction rather than differing beliefs and practice. Obviously, neither of those figures represents a true denominational distinction. Hence, Barrett's broader category (which we have labeled true denominations) of twenty-one Protestant denominations and sixteen Roman Catholic denominations represents a much more realistic calculation.

Moreover, Barrett later compares Roman Catholicism to Evangelicalism, which is a considerably smaller subset of Protestantism (so far as the number of denominations is concerned), and which is really the true category for those who hold to sola Scriptura (most Protestant denominations today, being liberal denominations and thereby dismissing the authority of the Bible, do not hold to sola Scriptura, except perhaps as a formality). Any comparison that the Roman Catholic apologist would like to make between sola Scriptura as the guiding principle of authority, and Rome as the guiding principle of authority (which we have demonstrated earlier is a false comparison in any case), needs to compare true sola Scriptura churches (i.e., Evangelicals) to Rome, rather than all Protestant churches to Rome. An Evangelical, as defined by Barrett, is someone who is characterized by (1) a personal conversion experience, (2) a reliance upon the Bible as the sole basis for faith and living, (3) an emphasis on evangelism, and (4) a conservative theology (Barrett, 71). Interestingly, when discussing Evangelicals Barrett provides no breakdown, but rather treats them as one homogeneous group. However, when he addresses Roman Catholics on the very same page, he breaks them down into four major groups: (1) Catholic Pentecostals (Roman Catholics involved in the organized Catholic

Charismatic Renewal); (2) Christo-Pagans (Latin American Roman Catholics who combine folk Catholicism with traditional Amerindian paganism); (3) Evangelical Catholics (Roman Catholics who also regard themselves as Evangelicals); and (4) Spiritist Catholics (Roman Catholics who are active in organized high or low spiritism, including syncretistic spirit-possession cults). And of course, we all know that this list can be supplemented by distinctions between moderate Roman Catholics (represented by almost all Roman Catholic scholars), Conservative Roman Catholics (represented by Scott Hahn and most Roman Catholic apologists), Traditionalist Roman Catholics (represented by apologist Gerry Matatics), and Sedevacantist Roman Catholics (those who believe the chair of Peter is currently vacant).

In any case, once we inquire into the source of the infamous 25,000-Protestant-denomination figure, one point becomes crystal clear: Whenever and at whatever point Barrett compares true denominations and differences among either Protestants or Evangelicals to those of Roman Catholicism, Roman Catholicism emerges almost as splintered as Protestantism, and even more splintered than Evangelicalism. That levels the playing field significantly. Whatever charge of "doctrinal chaos" Roman Catholic apologists wish to level against Protestantism may be leveled with equal force--and perhaps even greater force--against the doctrinal chaos of Roman Catholicism. Obviously, the Roman Catholic apologist can take little comfort in the fact that he has only sixteen denominations while Protestantism has twenty-one; and he can take even less comfort in the fact that while Evangelicalism has no divisional breakdown, Roman Catholicism has at least four major divisions. If the Roman Catholic apologist wants instead to cite 8,196 idiosyncrasies within Protestantism, then he must be willing to compare that figure to at least 2,942 (perhaps upwards of 8,000 these days) idiosyncrasies within Roman Catholicism. In any case, he cannot compare the one ecclesial tradition of Roman Catholicism to 25,000, 8,196, or even twenty-one Protestant denominations; for Barrett places Roman Catholicism (as a single ecclesial tradition) on the same level as Protestantism as a single ecclesial tradition).

In short, Roman Catholic apologists have hurriedly, carelessly and, as a result, irresponsibly glanced at Barrett's work, found a large number (22,189), and arrived at all sorts of absurdities that Barrett never concluded. One can only hope that, upon reading this critique, Roman Catholic apologists will finally put this argument to bed. The more likely scenario, however, is

that the death of this argument will come about only when Evangelicals consistently point out this error--and correct it--each time it is raised by a Roman Catholic apologist.

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