

Chirping season: Denominational conventions

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

The season of denominational conventions is over for 2003, and not a moment too soon. Forty years ago I covered some for this magazine, and from that experience I learned much not only about the vitality of churches working together but also about conflict and combat. All year long I kept company with friendly Presbyterians, United Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans and others, but when looking in on their tribal meetings I found them unfriendly. Not unfriendly to me or atheists or the Orthodox, but to each other. Bronislaw Malinowski's famous line that "aggression, like charity, begins at home" applies.

Don't get me wrong: I am not in the camp of those who think that denominations are disappearing, or that they should. Much that they do serves Christ and church. But denominational assemblies do need new models and manners. My solution to the problem is simple: Don't let people vote. What leads up to voting is what messes everything up. Participants typically arrive on Sunday evening full of joy, hugging each other. A triumphant opening service follows. On Monday people cheer at reports, however mixed the news. But on Tuesday committees begin their reports, and the clouds roll in. Wednesday, participants debate the committees' recommendations. Thursday they vote. Friday they all go home mad, even the winners, who know that their victories are temporary.

"Resolved: Conventions are Hell" reads the headline of Douglas LeBlanc's article in *Christianity Today* (October). The comparison to hell is a bit strong. For more moderate analogies, I reach into various arts and sciences. Sometimes it's ethnology, sometimes human ecology, but best of all is ethology, the study of animal behavior and how it ties in with what humans do. My most recent foray took me to the world of what Matthew Cobb calls "chirpers and croakers," in his review of H. Carl Gerhardt and Franz Huber's *Acoustic Communication in Insects and Anurans* (*Times Literary Supplement*, August 29) .

We Martys live in an ox-bow of a river where frogs, when there were frogs, did their croaking. When we had dinner on the porch crickets and cicadas serenaded us. Now Gerhardt and Huber tell us what the noisemakers mean, so far as we can know. “As the temperature changes, so too do key elements of [the] song,” they write. So, too, convention halls heat up as tempers flare, and the argumentative bellowing into microphones gets louder and louder. Do we get the truth at such times? Insects, we learn, bluff—and so do those at church conventions. Male frogs change the pitch of their calls in order to convince females that they are larger than they actually are. One hopes the same dynamic isn’t at work at church assemblies.

The pioneer of this kind of acoustic research was the 13th-century Dominican Albertus Magnus, the patron saint of natural scientists, who “observed that if you cut the head off a cricket, it may still carry on chirping.” So theology and neuro-ethology link to help us interpret still another downside of many religious assemblies. Long after they have lost their heads, some partisans keep on chirping. And just before everyone goes home mad, someone croaks out a benediction.

Not all representatives of Christ’s churches lose their heads, bluff or mindlessly chirp and croak, of course. Some of the works of love get reviewed, demonstrated and envisioned. And those who do the works of love can rest a year or more before they or their successors have to regather and again show their “incredible range of blowing, scraping, and vibrating structures.”