

"FOLLOWING JESUS WITHOUT DENOMINATIONALISM" **Why Is Denominationalism Wrong?**

INTRODUCTION

While many people are attracted to the good news of the grace of God offered through His Son Jesus Christ, certain questions often linger in their minds such as: (1) Why are there so many different denominations?; (2) Can't the followers of Jesus Christ learn to get along? (3) What can be done about the religious division that exists today?; and (4) Is it possible for me to be simply a Christian, following Jesus without being a member of any denomination? In reply to these questions, some make an effort to discount the significance of religious division, suggesting that the differences are not all that great, or that religious division is good, for it enables people to find a church that suits them personally. But there are several reasons why I believe these answers are wrong and do a disservice to the cause of Christ.

So, in this series of lessons, it will be my objective to explain why denominationalism is wrong; to illustrate how one can simply be a Christian, serving Jesus without being a member of any denomination, and to show why anyone who truly follows Christ will do all they can to avoid participating in it

I. DEFINING "DENOMINATION" AND "DENOMINATIONALISM"

A. WHAT IS A "DENOMINATION"?

1. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language:
"A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy.
2. In simple laymen terms, a denomination is a group of congregations that are joined together under some governing body...
 - a. The number of congregations can be as few as two or more
 - b. But by their tie to a governing body above the local congregation, by definition they are "denominated" from all congregations that do not submit to the same authority
3. Some examples:
 - a. The Roman Catholic Church is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the pope in Rome
 - b. The Eastern Orthodox Church is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the patriarch of Constantinople
 - c. The Anglican Church of England is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the archbishop of Canterbury
 - d. The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) is made up of those churches that submit to the synod in Missouri
4. These are just a few of the thousands of different denominations that now exist!

B. WHAT IS "DENOMINATIONALISM"?

1. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, it is:
 - a. **"The tendency to separate into religious denominations"**
 - b. **"Advocacy of separation into religious denominations"**
 - c. **"Strict adherence to a denomination; sectarianism"**
2. Webster's dictionary defines it as:
 - a. **"Devotion to denominational principles or interests"**
 - b. **"Narrow emphasizing of denominational differences: SECTARIANISM"**
3. For the purpose in this series, **I will be applying the term to any approval of the denominational division which exists today**
 - a. It may be concluded that many people in denominations today are not all that devoted to their denominational principles or interests
 - b. But by membership in a denomination they are by implication advocating separation into religious denominations

II. WHY DENOMINATIONALISM IS WRONG

A. FIRST, DENOMINATIONALISM IS UN-SCRIPTURAL...

1. That is, it is without Scriptural support – cf. **1 Pet. 4:11**
 - a. There is no basis in the Bible for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies
 - b. There is no denomination that can go to the Bible and say, "See that passage? There is our church (denomination)!"
2. In the New Testament...
 - a. Local congregations were independent, self-governing
 - b. Church organization was limited to within the local congregation, with elders (also known as pastors, bishops, overseers, presbyters) appointed to oversee only the congregation of which they were members - cf. **Acts 20:17,28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2**
3. The only authority above the local church in the New Testament was Christ and His apostles...
 - a. Once the church began, apostles were not replaced after they died
 - b. But through the Word of God, the authority of Christ and His apostles continues
4. Individuals, synods, conferences, etc., that presume to usurp authority over local congregations today do so without Scriptural authority

B. SECOND, DENOMINATIONALISM IS ANTI-SCRIPTURAL...

1. I.e., not only is it without scriptural support, it is contrary to what the Bible teaches
2. It is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for unity among His believers - **Jn. 17:20-23**
3. It is condemned by Paul in his epistle to the church at Corinth
 - a. There are to be no divisions among believers - **1 Cor. 1:10-13**

- b. Sectarianism is a sign of carnality - **1 Cor. 3:3-4**
- 4. It opposes the efforts of Christ on the cross! – **Eph. 2:14-16**
 - a. Jesus died to break down the wall of division
 - b. Jesus died to reconcile man to God in ONE body

C. THIRD, DENOMINATIONALISM IS HARMFUL TO THE CAUSE OF CHRIST...

- 1. Jesus knew that unity among His disciples would be "the final apologetic"
 - a. Cf. "that the world may believe" – **Jn. 17:21**
 - b. In view of Jesus' words, we should not be surprised when unbelievers are slow to accept the gospel coming from a divided church
- 2. Many people point to the divided condition of those professing to follow Christ...
 - a. Atheists and agnostics often use religious division as an excuse not to believe in God
 - b. Adherents to non-Christian religions (such as Islam, Judaism, etc.) will often use denominationalism as a reason not to believe in Christ

D. UNDERSTANDING THAT DENOMINATIONALISM IS WRONG HAS LED TO THESE INTERESTING STATEMENTS...

- 1. From **Martin Luther**, the leader of the Reformation Movement:

"I ask that men make no reference to my name, and call themselves not Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? My doctrine, I am sure, is not mine, nor have I been crucified for any one. St. Paul, in 1 Cor. 3, would not allow Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I, poor, foul carcass that I am, come to have men give to the children of Christ a name derived from my worthless name? No, no, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names, and call ourselves Christians after Him Whose doctrine we have." - Hugh Thomason Kerr, A Compend of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943, p. 135)

- 2. From **John Wesley**, another great reformation leader, among whose followers are Methodists, Wesleyans, etc.:

"Would to God that all party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world, were forgot and that the very name [Methodist] might never be mentioned more, but be buried in eternal oblivion." - John Wesley, Universal Knowledge, A Dictionary and Encyclopedia of Arts, Science, History, Biography, Law, Literature, Religions, Nations, Races, Customs, and Institutions, Vol. 9, Edward A. Pace, Editor (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1927, p. 540)

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3. From **Charles Spurgeon**, one of the greatest Baptist preachers who ever lived:

"I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living! I hope that the Baptist name will soon perish, but let Christ's name last forever." - Spurgeon Memorial Library, Vol. I., p. 168

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, in spite of what these notable men had hoped for denominationalism still exist today. Our challenge is to help as many as we can to see the error of that way, And hopefully, they will walk away from it and seek to please the God of heaven.

**** Much of this outline was adapted from outlines by Mark A. Copeland, a preacher in the Church of Christ**

(Questions compiled by instructor)

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the implications of these scriptures toward denominationalism: Acts 20:29-31; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 4:1-4
2. One of the reasons offered as to why there are denominations is “we can’t all see the Bible alike”. Do you think God would give us all one book (the Bible) knowing that we can’t see it alike and then judge us objectively by it?
3. Discuss some reasons some people give for being a part of certain denominations. Are these reasons valid?
4. Discuss the antidote that would cure all religious division in the world. (cf. Jer. 6:16; Prov. 3:5-6; Matt. 17:1-5; Jn. 14:6)