

What Does the Bible Teach About Denominationalism #1

Introduction:

- A. Why are there so many different denominations?
 1. How can one help denominational friends or family member to know the difference between a denomination and the Lord's Church?
 2. Is it possible to be simply a Christian as they were in the New Testament, following Jesus without being part of a denomination?
- B. The religious world says:
 1. The differences are not all that great; we all believe in the same God and hope in the same Savior.
 2. The differences are meaningless, nothing more than variety in personal tastes in worship.
 3. Religious division is good, for it enables people to find a church that makes them feel at home socially and culturally.
- C. In this series of lessons, we will learn from God's revealed will:
 1. Why denominationalism is wrong,
 2. How one can become a Christian God's way, without being a member of any denomination,
 3. To show how all can be united in one faith under one God in one body,
 4. To show how one can identify that one body for others,

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. Webster's New World Dictionary: "A religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body a number of local congregations."
 3. Practically speaking, a denomination is a group of congregations that are joined together under some governing body. By their tie to a governing body larger than the local church, by definition they are "denominated" from all other congregations that do not submit to the same authoritative body.
 4. Examples:
 - a. The Roman Catholic Church is a denomination made up of the churches that submit to the pope in Rome.
 - b. The Eastern Orthodox Church is a denomination made up of the churches that submit to the patriarch of Constantinople.
 - c. The Anglican Church of England is a denomination made up of the churches that submit to the archbishop of Canterbury.
 - d. The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) is made up of churches that submit to the synod in Missouri.
 - e. The International Church of Christ is made up of the churches that submit to the elders' board of the Boston Church of Christ.
 - f. These are just a few of the thousands of different denominations that currently exist.
 - g. 13 major world religions, 18 major USA Christianity denominations, and multiple subdivisions (Handbook of Denominations, Frank Mead, p 25)

B. What is denominationalism?

1. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, it is: "The tendency to separate into religious denominations; advocacy of separation into religious denominations; strict adherence to a denomination; sectarianism."
2. Webster's New World Dictionary defines it as: "Devotion to denominational principles or interests; narrow emphasizing of denominational differences; sectarianism."
3. Any approval of the denominational division that exists today
 - a. Many people in denominations are not necessarily dedicated to their denominations' principles.
 - b. But by membership in a denomination, they are by implication endorsing separation into religious denominations.
 - c. One cannot serve Christ faithfully nor please God while participating in religious division.

II. WHY IS DENOMINATIONALISM WRONG?

A. It is not authorized by God.

1. There is no basis in the Bible for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies.
2. There is no denomination that can go to the Bible and say, "See that passage? There is our church (denomination)!"
3. New Testament local congregations were independent and self-governing.
4. Church organization was limited to within the local congregation, with elders (or pastors, bishops, overseers, presbyters) appointed to oversee only the congregation in which they were members - Acts 20:17, 28; 1Peter 5:1-2
5. The only authority above the local church in the New Testament is Christ and His apostles.
 - a. The apostles were not replaced when they died
 - b. By the word of God, the authority of Christ and His apostles continues to the present.
6. Individuals, synods, conferences, etc., that presume to usurp authority over local congregations today do so without Scriptural authority.

B. It is a violation of scripture.

1. Not only is it without permission, it is expressly forbidden in scripture.
2. It is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for unity among His believers - John 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 - 1Cor. 1:10-13.
 - b. Sectarianism is a sign of carnality - 1Cor. 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 between Jew and Gentile, and to reconcile all men to God in one body.

C. It is harmful to the cause of Christ.

1. Jesus knew that unity among His disciples was the best defense of the Gospel
 - a. "That the world may believe" - John 17:21
 - b. One should not be surprised when unbelievers are slow to accept the gospel coming from a divided religion.
2. Many people point to the divided condition of those professing Christ:
 - a. Atheists and agnostics often use religious division as an excuse not to believe in God.

- b. Followers of non-Christian religions often use denominationalism as a reason not to believe in Christ.
 - 3. Denominationalism has also given support and encouragement to cults.
 - a. Mormonism started in reaction to the denominationalism of Joseph Smith's day.
 - b. Those who call themselves "Jehovah's Witnesses" use religious division to move people to follow their strictly-controlled organization.
 - c. Common identifying mark of cultism: an alternative to religious confusion. Arrogantly claim to be above denominationalism by a claim of inner harmony actually based on fear and paranoia.
 - d. In short, denominationalism hurts Christ and helps Satan.
 - D. Denominationalism exists because men love to choose up sides that suit their own desires, and not primarily because false teachers ply their trade.
 - 1. 1Cor. 1:12, 3:4; 2Tim. 4:3
 - 2. 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 Compendium of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943, p. 135).
 - 3. From John Wesley, a 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).
 - 4. From Charles Spurgeon, a famous Baptist preacher: "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:

- A. More and more people grow weary of denominationalism. The Community Bible Church and House Church movements are evidence of this.
- B. But just as during the Reformation Movement when men tried to reform the Catholic Church and merely succeeded in forming new denominations, so will these movements that attempt to reform denominationalism only end up forming new denominations.
- C. The solution is reject all denominational creeds, concepts, names and rituals, and open the word of God and do just what it says, no more and no less.
- D. How is this possible?
- E. It begins with two things:
 - 1. A strong desire to follow Jesus Christ's superior authority in order to fulfill His prayer for unity - John 17:20-23,
 - 2. A strong aversion to the carnal nature of division and denominationalism - 1Cor. 3:3-4