

## DENOMINATIONALISM

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### *About the author...*

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### Introduction

In our nation alone, there has been the multiplying of religious institutions to the point that we can find some four hundred different religious bodies. Each of these bodies exists separately with certain distinctions about each one that sets them apart from the others. Usually, they have different names, characterized by different doctrines and practices, and governed by varying governmental systems, yet each of them claim to be faithfully following Jesus Christ. Amid all of this religious confusion, it becomes all the more complicated because too many are not willing to investigate the matter of denominationalism. Simply stated, they are satisfied with what exists!

In view of this we must ask how all of this religious division compares with what is set forth in the New Testament. Does the Lord's will condone or condemn denominationalism? To properly deal with this question it can only be answered properly and fairly by asking the question "*What saith the scripture*" (Romans 4:3; 11:2; Galatians 4:30).

### Some Attitudes Toward Denominationalism

As one might think, the attitude of people toward denominationalism varies. Certainly those who compose the various denominational bodies are unconcerned about divided state of what is termed "Christendom." They are content and they really do not want to compare denominationalism with the scriptures.

On the other hand, there are others who are indeed concerned about the division that exists. Many efforts and suggestions have been implemented in order to set forth an "ecumenicism" to exist in order to do away with the strife and contention that denominationalism has fostered with all the various doctrines and creeds of men. The general thought is that there is no room in religion for that kind of "exclusiveness!"

There are also those honest and sincere people who believe that denominationalism is sinful. Since there is no divine authority in Scripture for such confusion, division and frustration, they view denominationalism as one of the greatest hindrances to the real cause of Jesus Christ.

What do we find in the Word of God? Jesus prayed,

*Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their*

*word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one is us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me (John 17:20-21).*

The Lord prayed that all men who would ever believe in Him (and that would be through the words of the apostles) would be “one”. Jesus also said, *“I and the Father are one”* (John 10:30). Again, *“Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me...”* (John 14:11). And again, *“He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father’s which sent me”* (John 14:24). All of these statements compound the emphasis on the oneness of the Father and Son. This relationship of the Father and Son is shown to be a complete unity and perfect oneness. They are in agreement as to teaching (or doctrine), practice, plan, intent, and purpose. There is not even the slightest indication whatsoever of there being any conflict, contradiction, or variance between them. All of this is presented by Jesus as the standard of unity for all who would be His disciples.

### **A Conflict Between Unity And Denominationalism**

The question must be asked, “Is this unity just mentioned characteristic of the system of denominationalism?” Really, to ask is to answer as far as the scriptures are concerned. Certainly it is not! When we think of denominations, they exist separate and apart, even contradicting each other, with many differences in doctrine, practice, and purpose. No one can be so naive as to think that this picture promotes the will of God and unites people in truth! Thus, denominationalism exists in direct opposition to the prayer and teaching of Jesus regarding the matter of unity. How can anyone truly respect the Lord’s prayer for unity and at the same time be sympathetic toward denominationalism? Obviously, one or the other must be rejected, because it is impossible to accept both.

This is enough to establish the conflict between the unity of believers that our Lord prayed for and denominationalism. To further establish what our attitude ought to be toward denominationalism, let’s notice a couple of more passages that are relevant to our study. The apostle Paul makes the appeal, *“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”* (1 Corinthians 1:10). Also, *“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded toward one another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 15:5-6). The contrast between the requirement of these inspired statements and the condition of denominationalism is very apparent. There is denominationalism with hundreds of divisions, speaking different things, with different standards, with different judgments, attempting to glorify God in many ways. Yet the Scriptures teach one body, with the same message, the same standard, glorifying God the way that He sets forth in His word. Yes, my friends, there is a conflict between the unity set forth in the Scriptures and denominationalism.

### **The New Testament Church, The One Body**

Notice the use of the word “church” in the New Testament. It is used to refer to all who are Christians, or in a universal sense, in such passages as Matthew 16:18 or Ephesians 5:23. It is used

in speaking about local congregations of the Lord's people (Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 1:1). It is used when speaking of the saints in assembly (1 Corinthians 11:18). However, it is never used in reference to a denomination. The obvious reasons why the word "church" cannot refer to a denomination is because no denomination claims to be all the followers of Christ, yet the church consists of all of them; also, no denomination is simply a local congregation or saints in assembly! Thus, we see that a denomination does not fit in any sense of Biblical usage and cannot be scripturally called the church of the New Testament.

It is readily admitted that denominationalism represents a multiplicity of different religious bodies, yet they insist that they exist with divine approval based on the fact that they all recognize Jesus Christ as the one head. When we turn to the scriptures, it must be agreed that Jesus is *"the head of the church"* (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). The scriptures also teach there is but "one body" (Ephesians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 12:12,20). For one to insist that Christ is the head of more than one body, one would also have to insist that Christ has more than one bride since the church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:24-25,33). It is simply amazing, that those who support denominationalism recognize the need of Scripture to recognize Christ as the head of the church, and yet will contend for many brides and many bodies absent of any Biblical authority! We cannot have unity without having Biblical authority for what we say, do, and believe (1 Peter 4:11; Colossians 3:17; Matthew 28:18-20). God has spoken (Hebrews 1:1-2), and when we step outside of His authority and begin to "add to" and "take away from" God's Word it will always result in division and in that which God cannot bless (Revelation 22:18-19; Galatians 1:6-9; Matthew 15:13).

The early Christians, members of the church that belonged to Christ, were one body. Paul instructed that Christ is *"the head over all things to the church, which is his body"* (Ephesians 1:22-23), and that *"There is one body..."* (Ephesians 4:4)! There is no more than that "one body" that is approved by God. Those in that "one body" taught, believed, and practiced the same religion. There is no denomination that can claim that those Christians were a part of their sectarian group. They were not Catholic nor Protestant, but Christian (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). They did not wear any human names and they did not follow human traditions and creeds (Matthew 15:9). They knew that there could be no compromise with error and they would not give place to it *"no, not for an hour"* (Galatians 2:5).

### A Way, or Different Roads?

Many times denominationalism is presented in terms of all of us going to the same place, heaven, but we are just traveling different roads, or different denominations! Certainly, there are some places that can be reached by going any number of different ways. Is that true concerning heaven? The burden of proof rests upon those who contend that one can go to heaven any number of different ways. The Lord said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me"* (John 14:6). Jesus did not say that He is "A way among many ways, and that all ways lead to heaven," and that man is left to choose which way he wants to go! We also know that Christ is not divided (1 Corinthians 1:10), and that *"strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be which find it"* (Matthew 7:14). Immediately we see that one insurmountable problem that the defender of denominationalism faces is Biblical support for their idea that there are many ways which lead to heaven, and that man can simply take his choice. Such an idea did not

come from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's ask another question: "Does it make a difference what one believes and practices?" We are told by some that it does not make any difference, just as long as you are honest and sincere in what you believe and practice. When this view is put to the test, even the most sincere denominationalists will, in all honesty, have to shy away from it. Jacob honestly and sincerely thought that Joseph was dead, but it wasn't so (Genesis 37,45). Saul of Tarsus was honest and sincere in his persecution of the Lord by his persecution of the church (Acts 9:1-2; 22:1-5; 26:9-11; 23:1). In like manner, Buddhists, and Mohammedans, etc., are honest and sincere in their persecution of the Lord by their persecution of the church! Doesn't it matter that they reject Christ altogether? Thus, it must be admitted that honesty and sincerity alone doesn't account for sufficiency in any realm of life. While it is necessary to be honest and sincere, one must also be right before God. What one believes and practices does make a difference. Jesus states, *"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven"* (Matthew 7:21).

We are constantly being told by our denominational friends that we believe in the same God, we are following the same Bible, but we just do not see it ( understand it ) the same! However, Jesus said, *"If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine"* ( John 7:17 ), and *"ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"* (John 8:32). Notice the unity which is to exist among believers in the appeal made by Paul,

*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there is no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment* (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Let us also keep in mind that

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works* (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Based upon the fact that the Bible is God breathed: we can know the truth, the truth provides man with what is necessary for spiritual completeness, and it is possible for Christians to speak the same things, have the same mind and judgment, and there be no divisions among them! To say other than that in contention and defense of denominationalism would be to place the blame on God for the confusion and division which exists. Brethren and friends, God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). Could the confusion and division which exist have anything to do with the fact that many view the scriptures through the blinders of denominational creeds, manuals, catechisms, disciplines, prayer books, confessionals, councils, clergymen, and etc.? Could it be because many are not willing to look at it at all, but would rather go by their own subjective feelings? Are there some who *"have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God"* (Romans 19:2-3)? Tragically, people allow their "denominational ties" and "felt needs" determine what they believe and practice to the extent that

when there is a conflict the Word of God is rejected!

### What Is Needed?

There can be no doubt that denominationalism is a transgression of the will of God, and that's exactly how John defines sin in 1 John 3:4. The only remedy for this problem is to *"speak as the oracles of God"* (1 Peter 4:11). We are not talking about "agreeing to disagree." The goal is not to merely have "union." Our Lord prayed for "oneness" among believers, a "unity" based upon obedience to the Word of God (John 17:20-23). After all, *"Can two walk together, except they be agreed"* (Amos 3:3)?

What is needed is the divine solution to the problem. Romans 15:5 says, *"Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus."* Notice, everything must be according to Christ! An all encompassing verse tells us, *"And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of (by the authority of, BP) the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him"* (Colossians 3:17). Thus, there must be Scripture for what we say, do, practice, and uphold in religious matters. May our question always be, *"What saith the scripture"* (Romans 4:3, 11:2; Galatians 4:30).

### There Is No Fellowship with Denominations

Only when and if people will give up all authorities except Christ and *"Hear ye him"* (Matthew 17:5), then will the confusion and division of denominationalism cease. Only then will people be able to march under the banner of the cross, be united in the cause of Christ, and be lead to victory by Jesus *"the captain of their salvation"* (Hebrews 2:10).

However, we cannot fellowship denominations since they are not of God! We are instructed to *"have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them"* (Ephesians 5:11). Again, we are told

*Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds* (2 John 9-11).

We should take note that the *"unfruitful works of darkness"* are off limits to the faithful child of God, and that we cannot bid *"God speed"* to those that *"abide not in the doctrine of Christ."* Our involvement will be to reprove and expose the doctrines and commandments of men in their attempts to uphold and set forth denominationalism. Christ still says, *"He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad"* (Matthew 12:30).