**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**Why Is Denominationalism Wrong?**

While many people are attracted to the gospel of Christ, the good news of salvation from sin by the death of Christ, still there are questions that often linger in their minds – such questions as “Why are there so many different denominations?” “What can be done about the religious division that exists today?” “Is it possible for me to simply be a Christian, following Jesus without being a member of any denomination?”

In reply to these questions, some people make an effort to discount the significance of religious division, suggesting 1) that the differences are not all that great, and 2) that religious division is good, for it enables people to find a church that suits them personally.

But there are several reasons why these answers are wrong and do a disservice to the cause of Christ. In the lesson today I want to talk about reasons why denominationalism is wrong. I want to show from scripture why one who is a true follower of Christ will do all he can to avoid participation in a denomination.

 First, let’s define what we mean by “denomination” and “denominationalism.” According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language a denomination is “a large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy.” In simple laymen terms, a denomination is a group of congregations that are joined together under some human governing body. The number of congregations can be as few as two or more. The congregations have chosen to come under the authority of the governing body, and by definition they are “denominated” from all congregations that do not submit to the authority of that governing body.

Some examples are: The Roman Catholic Church is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the pope in Rome. The Episcopal Church is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to their General Convention. The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) is made up of those churches that submit to the synod in Missouri. The Assemblies of God is a denomination that looks to the authority of their General Council. The United Methodist Church is a denomination that is governed by its General Council. These are just a few of the hundreds of different denominations that now exist.

Now, what is “denominationalism”? Again, 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.” So we might say that denominationalism is approval of the denominational division which exists today.

But is denominationalism all that bad? What I want to show today, from Scripture is that denominationalism is diametrically opposed to what Jesus instituted in the first century.

First of all, denominationalism is UN-SCRIPTURAL, that is, it is without Scriptural support. There is no basis in the Bible for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies. Denominations are not able to go to the Bible and say, “Our denomination is found in this passage and your denomination is found in that passage.”

You see, in the New Testament Scriptures every local church submitted to the same authority, and that was Jesus Christ and His teachings as they were taught by the apostles and prophets. In the first century the words of Christ were in the process of being revealed by the apostles and prophets. The apostles and prophets were directly guided by the Holy Spirit to make known the will of Christ. Jesus said to the apostles before His death, *“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.”* (John 16:13-14) Notice, Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would guide them into “all truth,” and that these words would be His words. That promise was fulfilled. The early church continued steadfastly in the teaching of these apostles (Acts 2:42). In the New Testament, the only authority above the local church was Christ and the teaching He gave His apostles and prophets. There were no general councils or conferences that directed the churches. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 2:20, *“having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.”* Once the church began, apostles were not replaced after they died. There are no successors to the apostles. We do not have living apostles and prophets today. What we have is the “all truth,” written by the apostles and prophets, preserved for us in the New Testament Scriptures. Through the written word, the authority of Christ and His apostles continues. Individuals, synods, general councils, etc., that presume to usurp authority over local congregations today do so without Scriptural authority.

Secondly, denominationalism is ANTI-SCRIPTURAL. Not only is it without Scriptural support, it is contrary to what the Scriptures teach. It is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for unity among His believers. In John 17 Jesus prayed that those who believe in Him be one even as He and the Father are one. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, *“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”* (1 Cor. 1:10) The Lord does not want division in His church. In Ephesians 4:3-6, Paul said to the church in Ephesus, *“endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”* The church of the Lord must keep “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This is a unity that is enjoined by the Holy Spirit and provided by the Spirit. But in order to keep it, the church must recognized these unifying facts – There is only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. You see, the reason for denominationalism is that people are following different lords, different sources of authority. They have established different faiths, as these faiths have been decided by their various conferences, councils and synods. If we would get rid of the denominational governing bodies, and just follow the one Lord as He has made known His will in the Scriptures, and hold to the one faith, we would not be divided into different denominations. And so denominationalism is anti-scriptural because it opposes and works against what Jesus came to establish, a united church.

Thirdly, denominationalism is HARMFUL TO THE CAUSE OF CHRIST. We mentioned earlier that, recorded in John 17, Jesus prayed that those who believe in Him may be one as He and the Father are one. In verses 22 and 23 He prays, *“And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.”* Unity among believers will lead others to faith in Christ. The converse of that is also true. Division among believers in Christ will drive people away from hearing the gospel. We then are not surprised when unbelievers are slow to accept the gospel coming from a divided church. Atheists and agnostics often use religious division as an excuse for not believing in God. Muslims and Jews will use denominationalism as a reason for not believing in Christ. Denominationalism is harmful to the cause of Christ.

Why is denominationalism wrong? It is wrong because it is UNSCRIPTURAL, meaning, there is no basis in the Scriptures for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies. Secondly, it is wrong because it is ANTI-SCRIPTURAL. It is contrary to what the Scriptures teach concerning the unity of the church and the organization of the church. And thirdly, it is HARMFUL TO THE CAUSE OF CHRIST.

The church that we read about in the Bible was undenominational. What do we mean when we say the church was undenominational. We mean that they had no man-made creed, that is they had no catechism, no discipline, no manual, no confession of faith separate from the revealed will of Christ given through the apostles and prophets. They did not have any denominational name. They were just Christians. They had no denominational headquarters, no conferences are councils that would bind the churches together into a denominational entity. They had no denominational hierarchy. They did not have a universal bishop or even a diocesan bishop. They had no conference presidents, no secretaries.

Rather, what we read in Scripture is that each local church with its bishops and deacons, was autonomous, independent, following Jesus as their only head.

Can we be that today? Can we not be just Christians, saved people, a part of the one body of Christ, and then form ourselves into local churches patterned after the local churches of the Bible with no denominational names - we are just Christians, with no denominational creeds - we just follow the teachings of the apostles as it is revealed in the Bible, no membership as a local church in any conference or denominational association of any kind – there being no human hierarchy that we submit to? Can we not be that today? Sure we can. If that is what they were in the first century under the direction of the Lord, that is what the Lord wants us to be today.

Now, I concede that many people in denominations today are not all that devoted to their denominational principles or interests. Someone might say, “I’m a member of this denomination but I really just see myself as a Christian and not a member of the denomination.” But, I suggest to you that by membership in a denominational church he is by implication advocating separation into religious denominations, and advocating that it is right for churches to submit to some denominational governing body. John says, *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”* (2 John 10-11) Let me illustrate it like this. If I am in a car, and the car is in the garage, I’m in the garage. If I am a member of this church and this church is tied to a denominational governing body, such as a synod, or conference, or general council, then my membership in this church brings me also into a membership of this denominational governing body. I can’t deny that.

Many people today have come to see that denominationalism is UN-SCRIPTURAL, ANTI-SCRIPTURAL, and HARMFUL TO THE CAUSE OF CHRIST, and have thrown aside their denominational shackles and are simply following Jesus Christ. So can you.

If you have any questions for us, or would like to talk with us about anything we teach on this program, we would be more than happy to talk with you. You may call us at 573-263-4690. Or you may send us an email. Our email address is sjchurch@sjchurchofchrist.com.