

Redwater Restorer

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness..." (Matthew 3:3)

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The Way Out Of Religious Division

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Church of Christ

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AM Worship 10:45 a.m.
PM Worship 6:00 p.m.

Wednesday

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In our previous articles we encouraged individuals to develop the honest and good heart in which the word of God is able to produce (Luke 8:11-15), and develop a hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt.5:6), a sincere desire for God's word (1 Pet.2:2). These qualities will enable you to prove all things and hold fast that which is good (1 Thess.5:21). When one develops this type of heart, and studies the word of God (2 Tim.2:15), seeking God's will for his life, he will soon realize the problem of division which besets our religious world.

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... Why are there so many different denominations? Can't the followers of Jesus Christ learn to get along? What can be done about the religious division that exists today? 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 important. 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.

In this series of articles, I have several objectives in mind... To explain why denominationalism is wrong. To illustrate how one can simply be a Christian, serving Jesus without being a member of any denomination. To suggest how followers of Christ might be able "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph.4:3). In this article, I wish to explain... Why denominationalism is wrong. Why anyone who truly follows Christ will do all they can to avoid participating in it. All I ask of you is that with an honest and good heart you search the word to see if these things are so.

"Denomination" and "Denominationalism" Defined

What is a denomination? The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines "denomination" as: **"A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy."** From Webster's: **"A religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body a number of local congregations."** In simple terms, a denomination is a group of congrega-

tions that are joined together under some governing body. The number of congregations can be as few as two or more. 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. Some examples: The Roman Catholic Church is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the pope in Rome. The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) is made up of those churches that submit to the synod in Missouri. These are just a few of the thousands of different denominations that now exist! What is denominationalism? 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."** Again, Webster's dictionary defines it as: **a. "Devotion to denominational principles or interests" b. "Narrow emphasizing of denominational differences; sectarianism."** For the purpose in this series, I will be applying the term to any approval of the denominational division which exists today. I concede that many people in denominations today are not all that devoted to their denominational principles or interests. But by membership in a denomination they are by implication advocating separation into religious denominations. But is denominationalism really all that bad? Am I suggesting that one cannot serve Christ faithfully while participating in religious division? The answer to both questions is **"Yes!"**

Why Is Denominationalism Wrong ?

First, denominationalism is unscriptural, that is, it is without Scriptural support. There is no basis in the Bible for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies. There is no denomination that can go to the Bible and say, "See that passage? There is our church (denomination)!" In the New Testament local congregations were independent, self-governing. 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 (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Peter 5:1-2). The only authority above the local church in the New Testament was Christ and His apostles. Once the church began, apostles were not replaced after they died, but through the Word of God, the authority of Christ and His apostles continues. Indi-

The Way Out Of Religious Division (Continued)

viduals, synods, conferences, etc., that presume to usurp authority over local congregations today do so without Scriptural authority.

Second, denominationalism is anti-scriptural. In other words, not only is it without scriptural support, it is contrary to what the Bible teaches. It is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for unity among His believers (Jn 17:20-23). It is condemned by Paul in his epistle to the church at Corinth. There are to be no divisions among believers (1 Cor. 1:10-13), Sectarianism is a sign of carnality (1 Cor. 3:3-4). It opposes the efforts of Christ on the cross! (Eph. 2:14-16). Jesus died to break down the wall of division, Jesus died to reconcile man to God in ONE body. Just as sinning works against the efforts of Christ on the cross (for He also died to put away sin), so it is with denominational division!

Third, denominationalism is harmful to the cause of Christ. Jesus knew that unity among His disciples would be "the final apologetic," as He would say, "that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21). In view of Jesus' words, we should not be surprised when unbelievers are slow to accept the gospel coming from a divided religious world. Many people point to the divided condition of those professing to follow Christ. Atheists and agnostics often use religious division as an excuse not to believe in God. Adherents to non-Christian religions, such as Islam, Judaism, etc., will often use denominationalism as a reason not to believe in Christ. Thus, denominationalism is harmful to the cause of Christ! This has not gone without notice by many historical religious figures. Let's notice what some have said.

Statements From Historical Religious Figures

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)

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)

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

Well, that day has not yet come, and denominationalism with its religious division seems to be as strong as ever! But all is not lost, for throughout the world, more and more people are throwing aside their denominational shackles. They are following Jesus Christ in the freedom of gospel liberty that comes from being simply a Christian! And what may be a surprise to some, they are able to do so "being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Phil. 2:2-3). How is this possible? That is what I hope to demonstrate starting with the next article. But it begins with two things: 1) A strong desire to follow Jesus Christ and His prayer for unity (Jn 17:20-23). 2) An understanding of the carnal nature of division, and why denominationalism is wrong (1 Co 3:3-4). Dear friend, don't you want to be simply a Christian, a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? Continue to study God's word with an honest and good heart and you can be!

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