

Monday, October 23, 2023

02: Are denominations in the Bible?

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1. Denominations are not in the Bible. But That which denominations seek to accomplish is in the Bible. Therefore denominations are a practical way to seek to conform to the pattern of the church in scripture at a corporate level.
 1. In this sense they are like membership. We don't see a membership process in scripture or a list of names. But we do see a self-consciousness of membership within Christians such that they understand themselves to be a part of a local church community which they could also be removed from. (Mt. 18:17, 1 Cor 5:2) Therefore a membership process and list of names is a practical way to bring our church into conformity with that biblical norm.
2. The Bible has a lot to say about how the church is to be structured and where levels of church authority are to reside. God did not create an amorphous blob of believers but brought us together into an ordered body with many members. This structure and the people that fill them are a gift to the church from Jesus Christ. (Eph 4:11) A gift he gave so that we might grow and mature as a people in him.
3. The office given for oversight and teaching of the church is called the office of Elder (gk πρεσβυτερος). Each local church is to be overseen by a group of elders (not just one) who share the responsibility of teaching and overseeing their local church (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). The area of oversight the elders are responsible for is that particular congregation's members (1 Pe 5:2).
 1. This likely feels pretty clear and intuitive. At our church if you're a member you are able to participate in this structure in a tangible way. You'll know the elders in the church, hear us at member meetings, know us at parish dinners and you are in our prayers.
4. Each local church is a part of the broader movement of Christianity in the world in connection with the other local churches. The question is: as the structure of the local church is laid out in scripture, is there a biblical structure for the relationships between churches? Is there a way to tangibly participate with other churches or might we corporately say, "am I my sister's keeper?"

1. Scripture does provide us with living examples of the church's operating at levels above the local church level in ways that are authoritative for the local churches. The pattern that we see in scripture is not a different body or one kingly authority separate from and over all the churches, but rather the very same elders of the local churches gathering together to resolve issues which concern the church as a whole.
2. This method of elders from local congregations gathering together to make decisions for the church as a whole is demonstrated at a pivotal point in the early church to maintain unity amidst a deeply divisive doctrinal issue.
 1. Acts 15:1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
 2. Paul and Barnabus stood in opposition to this sect known as the Judaizers. And they were sent by the church in Antioch to gather together with elders from the churches in Jerusalem and the surrounding region to debate this controversial issue and seek to settle the matter for the church as a whole.
 3. Over the course of about three meetings and debates the case was made by Peter, Paul and Barnabus, and confirmed by James. The matter was settled that Gentile Christians are included in the church by Christ alone and need not fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Law. As Peter says, "Acts 15:11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."
 4. This decision of the elders in this gathered context is sent by letter to the churches in the region who were experiencing this controversy and the decision was binding on those local churches.
 5. This pattern of scripture shows us a church which has multiple levels of accountability built into it to preserve sound teaching without innovating extra-biblical levels of authority beyond eldership.
5. Just as with membership being a practical way of participating in the biblical pattern of the church. So too does the model of local church elders assembling for the sake of the church as whole is a practical means of participating in the biblical pattern of the church. The Presbyterian model in particular adopts this biblical pattern. Local elders are gathered together for regional assemblies

called presbyteries, and these presbyteries participate in the general assembly concerning questions involving the whole congregation.