

DENOMINATIONALISM

“The naming of a division”

Intro

How does God feel about religious division? It is not enough to say He doesn't like it! How does He respond to it, especially among those who call themselves His followers? Many religious and sincere people really do not think it makes any difference to God. They say that “we're all heading for the same place, just taking different roads.” Some also say that “we're all serving the same God, just in different ways.” But what does God say? Are we left without any clear direction from God regarding religious unity? What does the Bible say on the matter? How does God really feel about what modern man calls “denominational Christianity?”

What Is a Denomination?

By Samuel G. Dawson

For an institution that has been among us for so long (approximately five hundred years), it is surprising how little many have reflected on just what a modern denomination is. Even among those who oppose the division and unbelief produced by denominationalism, few have stopped to analyze exactly what a denomination is.

History of the Denominational Concept

In view of such a widespread lack of understanding concerning the origin and rise of the denominational concept, we now want to notice its origin. We know it is intimate with the rise of Roman Catholicism.

In the New Testament, Christians joined themselves to local congregations that were self-ruling and independent (Acts 9:26). They were overseen by elders, bishops (overseers), or shepherds whose authority was limited to that local church (Acts 14:23, 1 Pet. 5:1-2).

However, as the simplicity of the organization of New Testament Christians deteriorated, local leaders began to exercise authority over other local congregations as bishops and metropolitans. Later, regional church councils arose to coordinate the activities among the churches. By the end of the fourth century, the metropolitans of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria had assumed oversight of churches in several provinces. The concept of collective action of churches was now in place – a coalition of churches that constituted a denomination. The whole form of the church had been changed. This change was critical to the concept of a denomination, although *modern* denominations did not arise for at least another twelve hundred years!

The first *universal* (Ecumenical) Council was held at the order of the Roman Emperor Constantine in Nicea in 325 AD. Mark it well; the Apostles of Christ and first-century Christians never attended a conference of congregations. In only five centuries, the transition from the simple organization of the autonomous local church to the universal coalition of local churches now seen in Roman Catholicism was completed. *Rather than the body of Christ consisting of Christians, the concept now was the body of Christ consisting of churches, which themselves consisted of Christians. This is the essence of denominationalism.*

Lesson

1. 1 Co. 1:10

- a. There should be no divisions among you
- b. Should all be *perfectly* united in mind and thought

2. 1 Co 1:12-15

- a. Christ is not divided
- b. Don't call yourselves after men
 - i. Lutherans call themselves after Martin Luther
 - ii. JW's used to be called Russellites, after Charles T. Russel
 - iii. Calvinists follow the teachings of John Calvin

3. John 17:20-23

- a. All of us who have believed through the apostle's message are to be ONE
- b. If we are ONE like Jesus is with the Father, the world will believe in our message
- c. We are to have complete unity to let the world know about Jesus and His love for us

4. Ephesians 4:2-6

- a. Make every effort to keep the unity through peace
- b. God is about oneness in everything

5. Ephesians 4:11-16

- a. Our goal as a local church is to have unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God
- b. Maturity comes from unity
- c. Following men's teachings lead to divisions
- d. The truth must be spoken in love for us to grow in Christ
- e. As each part does its work, the body of Christ grows

6. 1 Co. 12:12-27

- a. The body has many parts, but it is ONE body
- b. We become part of the body through baptism
- c. Each part is different and accomplishes different work in the body
- d. The whole body cannot be all the same part. As our body has different parts, so the body of Christ has different parts
- e. God arranges the parts as He wants them to be in His body
- f. The body needs all its parts, no matter how weak or less honorable they may seem
- g. If the body doesn't appreciate all its parts, then it could be divided; therefore, all parts should have equal concern for each other
- h. Each part of the body is an individual disciple, not a whole group

7. Ephesians 2:12-16

- a. When you were not in Christ, you had no hope. You were excluded from the promise of eternal life.
- b. Through the blood of Jesus you are brought near to God
- c. Jesus destroys barriers and walls of hostility
 - i. Prejudicial and racial walls
 - ii. Religious division
 - iii. Political division
 - iv. Family strife
- d. In Jesus we have peace and reconciliation
- e. The cross puts to death hostility caused by division

8. Romans 15:4-6

- a. The Scriptures' purpose is to teach us to endure because there is hope
- b. The Lord wants you to be united as you follow Christ
- c. We are to glorify God with one mouth (say the same things) and heart (be like-minded).

9. 1 Co. 4:17

- a. Those whom Paul taught continued to teach what he taught in every church
- b. Our teachings are to be the same everywhere we go
- c. We are to teach others to teach the same things

10. 1 Tim. 1:3

- a. Evangelists are to command people not to teach false doctrines

11. 1 Co. 11:18-19

- a. There will always be differences between the people in the local church.
- b. These differences will show who has God's approval

12. Matthew 18:7

- a. Things that cause people to sin (divisions, false churches, etc) must come
- b. Those who bring in these things will be condemned

13. Romans 16:17

- a. Watch out for those who cause divisions
- b. Watch out for those who bring strange teachings different from what you have heard
- c. Keep away from them!

14. 1 Co. 10:16-22

- a. Be careful you do not offer sacrifices to someone else's god!
 - i. By participating in their "worship service"
 - ii. By approving of their teaching
 - iii. You can do these things by omission as well as by commission
- b. Worship services not according to the Bible are offered up to demons
- c. Don't participate with demons!
- d. You can't do both; assemble with the saints and assemble with false churches

15. 2 Co. 6:14-18

- a. Don't establish partnerships with unbelievers
- b. You have nothing in common with them
- c. God has set you apart – made you holy

A number of important passages are listed here for your prayerful consideration. It is important to understand just what God wants us to learn from these passages. The points made by the passages listed should be quite obvious. However, a few very specific questions are asked which refer back to the verses listed. The answers to all the questions can be easily found within the verses themselves. Take the time to compare the Bible's answers to how you or others may have otherwise answered. It is very important that your answers to these questions come right out of God's Word alone! Remember, as taught in the Heart study, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways God's ways (*Isaiah 55:8*). Therefore, mere thoughts and opinions won't tell us what God has said! For our ways are not His ways!

I. John 17:20-23

1. From verse 20, through what are we to believe in Jesus? _____
2. From verse 21, did Jesus pray for His followers to be divided? _____
3. What did Jesus earnestly pray for? _____
4. Are all Jesus' true followers "one" in Him? _____
5. Does Jesus approve of divided believers? _____
6. From verse 23, what does complete unity promote? _____
7. Therefore, how does the world react to religious division and confusion? _____
8. Does division help people to believe in Christ and His message? _____

II. 1 Corinthians 1:10

1. Does God approve of divisions within the church? _____
2. How many divisions does God approve of? _____
3. Is it God's desire that we agree with one another? _____
4. Are we to be perfectly united in mind and thought? _____
5. Are you aware of groups that teach different things from one another? _____

III. Romans 15:4-6

1. What type of spirit must we possess? _____
2. Must we glorify God with one heart and mouth or with a divided heart? _____

IV. 1 Corinthians 1:11-15

1. Is Christ divided? _____
2. Is it wrong to call ourselves after mere men? _____
3. Are you aware of groups that call themselves after men other than Christ? _____

V. Ephesians 4:2-6

1. Are we to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit? _____
2. How many bodies are there (*body=church--see Eph. 1:21-22*)? _____
3. How many Spirits are there? _____
4. How many hopes are there? _____
5. How many Lords are there? _____
6. How many true faiths are there? _____
7. How many authorized baptisms are there? _____

8. Yet how many faiths exist in today's' society? _____
9. How many bodies (or churches) exist today? _____

VI. Ephesians 4:11-16

1. Does God expect us to reach unity of faith? _____
2. Does unity and knowledge of Christ promote maturity in Christ? _____
3. Therefore, what does division and ignorance produce? _____
4. Do false and deceitful teachings come from the craftiness of men? _____
5. From verse 15, in order for us to grow up into Christ, what must we do? _____
6. What is **truth**? (See John 17:17) _____

VII. I Corinthians 12:12-27

1. How many bodies can a person be validly baptized into? _____
2. From verse 27, is the body of Christ (the church) made up of whole denominations or individual persons? _____

VIII. Ephesians 2:11-16

1. Did Christ break down the barrier between Jews (*the circumcised*) and Gentiles (*non-Jews*) ? _____
2. Are Christian Jews and Gentiles expected to live as "one" in Christ? _____
3. Would this teach that there must also be unity among the races in Christ? _____
4. Do you know of situations where people are spiritually divided along racial lines? _____

IX. 1 Timothy 1:3

1. What was Timothy commanded to do here? _____
2. Is doctrine important to God? _____
3. Are there many groups today teaching different doctrines that are foreign to each other? _____

X. 1 Corinthians 4:17

1. Did the Apostle Paul teach different things in different churches? _____
2. Back in Paul's day: Did every church teach the same doctrines? _____
3. How about today? Are the same doctrines taught in every denomination? _____
3. Must we teach the same things everywhere in every church of Jesus Christ? _____
4. Are you aware of churches that teach different things from one another? _____

XI. 1 Cor. 11:18-19

1. Does the Bible acknowledge the existence of factions or divisions among those who profess to be members of the church? _____
2. Why does God allow such divisions to exist? _____
3. Does this agree with what some are saying in defense of denominational Christianity? _____

As seen from Scripture, the churches of the New Testament were of the same doctrine and practice! They were all churches of Christ, acting independently according to their local council of elders, deacons, and evangelists, not some man-made organization ruled by a council overseeing the collective of churches based on man-made principles, doctrines, speculations, or philosophies!

If we were to break down the word denomination, we would get the following:

DE - to break down or separate (like *de-ice*, *detach*, *defrost*, etc.)

NOMIN - to name (for example: "I *nominate* you as president...")

ATION - the act of (for example: *segregation*=*act of segregating*)

Therefore, the term *denomination* is defined as the act of naming a division or sect: Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, Jehovah's Witness, Lutheran, etc.

During the days of Acts, the only groups that existed were Judaism, Paganism, and Christianity – which is the only valid way to God (*John 14:6*). Today we have Reformed Judaism, Orthodox Judaism, Jew for Jesus, Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Protestantism, and so on. There are over 300 different religious denominations! Where did all these groups come from? Did they originate from God or man?

God has made His word clear! He has made His will known to us regarding religious worship. How does He feel about denominationalism? Does the promise of grace await those who defend and remain part of today's religious confusion and division? If Christ were here today: where would He worship? Would He approve denominations? How about Paul the Apostle? Would he worship with any denomination? What does the Bible say? Remember the words of Christ, "Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted will be by the roots" (*Matthew 15:13*), and "...if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into the pit!" (*Matthew 15:14*).

"Yet a time is coming and now has come when the true worshiper will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth!" *John 4:23-24*

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