

The Church of Christ Is Not a Denomination

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Introduction

The church of Christ is not only constitutionally **non**-denominational, but **anti**-denominational.

- Christ built only one church (Mat. 16:18); denominationalism encourages the idea of many churches.
- The way of Christ is narrow with few travelers (Mat. 7:14); denominationalism embraces all of every religious stripe in its broad view of “the church” (v. 13).
- The church of Christ is rooted in the authoritative will of the Son of God (Col. 3:17); denominationalism is accommodative to the whims, desires, and opinions of men.
- The church of Christ is what Christ will save (Eph. 5:23); denominationalism conceives of “church membership” as unnecessary to salvation.
- The church of Christ is God’s unshakable kingdom (Heb. 12:28); denominationalism will be ultimately uprooted because it is not of God (Mat. 15:13).

The truth in the title of this essay is so basic and obvious that every member of the church of the Lord should know and understand it. (How could one truly obey the Gospel without knowing this Truth?) That the millions in Protestant and Catholic “Christendom” equate *church* with *denomination* is not surprising. They have never known anything else and have thus not grasped the ideal of pristine Christianity and the relentless pressure in Scripture to maintain its purity (Mat. 7:15–16; Gal. 1:6–9; Eph. 5:23–28; 1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:1–9; 4:1–4; 2 John 9–11; Rev. 22:18–19; et al.).

One of the greatest of all ironies (not to mention tragedies) is that thousands **in the Lord’s church** now conceive of the church likewise. In previous generations, when we preached against denominationalism, we did so principally in order to help those in the denominations contrast their errors with the beauty and simplicity of the New Testament church. Now it has become necessary to preach as pointedly on this subject **to the church**. This preaching has always been necessary to some degree because some brethren were and are so bereft of Bible knowledge that denominational concepts influenced them more than the Truth (e.g., referring to preachers as “reverend” and “pastor,” speaking of “sacraments,” describing a member of the church as “a Church of Christ,” or “a Church of Christer,” et al.).

However, far more than ignorance now figures into this equation. In recent years numerous influential members of the church have become extremely liberal in doctrine. They

have allowed denominational doctrine (some of it very modernistic) to determine their convictions more than the Bible. Some of these have wielded their ungodly influence through their wealth. Others have been allowed to advance their heresies from large and worldly urban congregations. Yet others have been allowed (and encouraged) to serve their doctrinal poison to immature youngsters in “Christian” universities. Such folk conceive of the church of Christ as a denomination, and they are determined to recast it to fit their conception. This fact explains why we must redouble our efforts to proclaim the New Testament church and to expose denominationalism.

I will develop this subject under the following headings: (1) proofs of intent, (2) points of impact, and (3) precepts of incomppliance.

Proofs of Intent

From the almost endless supply of such statements from various persons, I will cite a few from only two apostate brethren among the many change agents:

Rubel Shelly of Nashville, Tennessee, is one of the most notorious. He once valiantly fought the liberalism he has now been espousing for over twenty years. Note a few of his revealing statements:

I am trying to think my way out of a sectarian spirit. I grew up in the context of one.... I exhibited a sectarian spirit, and I taught a sectarian spirit. I am embarrassed. I am ashamed. I have repented. I am trying to outgrow it. And I'd like to encourage other people to rethink some attitudes and to rethink some matters that pertain to unity of believers. [Note: Shelly's reference to his “sectarian spirit” refers to his thinking and behavior when he was a strong voice for the Truth.]

We [the church of Christ, DM] are about like a flea on the back of a large dog, on our way to becoming a dust mite on the back of a flea on the back of a large dog.

It is important that we be part of the change that is happening in the world and not be left behind by it.... The church must change. The church must change in terms of its form and its methodologies because the world changes.

My children will not stay with the church I grew up in. They will not be part of an irrelevance. We [meaning various denominational groups and himself] come from our different backgrounds and traditions....The kingdom of God is wider, deeper, larger, greater than any of those particular streams or traditions.... So, I want to be a part of anything and everything that I consider holy and of God, and I want to encourage your ministries.... Some of you know my tradition, the churches of Christ, as a very narrow, legalistic, arrogant, “everybody's- going-to-hell-but-us” kind of tradition.... Yet I really do believe the Spirit of God is awakening our fellowship, our little part of the body of Christ. [Note: This statement made in an address to “Christ's Church,” a Pentecostal Holiness sect, in Nashville in 1984.]

Carroll D. Osburn is “Carmichael Distinguished Professor of New Testament” at Abilene Christian University where he has taught for many years. His academic credentials and honors are numerous, but not as numerous as the number of young students’ minds he has victimized. Osburn’s condescending and superior attitude all but slap one in the face in the following statements:

It need hardly be said that the crystallized sectarianism that has pushed the movement into the backwaters cannot speak powerfully to this generation. [Note: “The movement” that is cursed with “crystallized sectarianism” are his words to describe the church of the Lord.]

Instrumental music will remain an issue, but it certainly is not deserving of center stage, and never was. There is something grossly distorted about a religion which depends for its cohesiveness upon paltry issues that kill the spirit.... A non-sectarian rediscovery of biblical theology is mandatory.

Sectarianism is sinful. To remain useful, such terms as *fellowship*, *brotherhood*, and *church of Christ*, require biblical redefinition if they would reflect a non-sectarian internality. [Note: By *sectarianism* he refers to faithful, Truth-loving saints.]

In view of the emerging non-sectarian identity of the church, a significantly revised concept of the mission of Christian higher education is demanded. All components of our faculties must be involved in this redefinition of Christianity in non-sectarian terms.... Working together in uncommon collegiality, we must expect of one another the highest level of academic and spiritual excellence if we would become prophetic thought-leaders among a broadened constituency in a post-sectarian era. [Note: *Emerging non-sectarian identity of the church* describes the effect of his liberal theology on the church. *Broadened constituency* is his code term for fellowship with denominations.]

Rejecting arrogant exclusivism, Christian fellowship is extended to a broader arena.

There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who differ on...whether the Lord’s Supper must be taken every Sunday, or whether instrumental music is used in worship. There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who believe that Christ is the Son of God, but who differ on eschatological theories such as premillennialism, ecclesiological matters such as congregational organization, or soteriological matters such as whether baptism is “for” or “because of” the remission of sins. [In other words, not much of anything should be counted as fellowship issues.]

Anyone with any power of discernment can readily see that if these men have their way the church, as we now know it, will vanish. It will simply enter that murky, muddy religious cesspool of indistinct, accept-everything-and-stand-for-nothing denominationalism. Remember: These are but two of many such powerful voices sowing error and discord in the church.

Points of Impact

Shelly, Osburn, and their comrades have had sufficient impact on the body of Christ that they have in essence divided it. The cleavage is clear between them and the direction they have marked out and those who are determined not to budge an inch from the Scriptural teaching concerning the church. Their major points of impact are as follows:

The Plan of Salvation

They claim that we have preached too much doctrine and not enough Christ. They ridicule as “five-steppers” those who teach the Lord’s plan. They advocate salvation both by grace alone and faith alone (never mind the contradiction). They deny that knowledge of the Scriptural purpose of baptism is necessary for baptism to be Scriptural, thus, by implication, admitting millions of denominationalists to the church.

They say that whether baptism is unto or because of remission of sins is of no consequence.

Worship

They make instrumental music a matter of personal conscience and option. They have introduced “praise teams” and “presentation” music (e.g., solos, duets, choirs, etc.). They revel in other denominational innovations (e.g., responsive readings, parallel worship assemblies, applause, lifting up and waving hands, candlelight communion services, et al.). They serve the Lord’s Supper on other days besides the Lord’s day.

Women’s Roles

They allow women to serve at the Lord’s Table, read Scripture and lead prayers and singing in mixed adult worship assemblies, and teach mixed adult Bible classes. They have no objection to women serving as “deacons,” “elders,” or “preachers.”

Hermeneutics

They insist that the New Testament does not constitute “law” and is not a “constitution”; rather, it is merely a “love letter” of general guidelines. They assert that God holds us accountable for only a few “core” or “bull’s eye” concepts (e.g., the atonement, the Deity of Christ, the resurrection, et al.) and that specific doctrines outside of these are optional. They insist that the Scriptural, logical, and time-tested hermeneutic principles of determining Bible authority by means of direct statement, implication, on-going accounts of action, the law of inclusion/exclusion, and respect for the silence of Scripture are human in origin and are flawed and outmoded. The change agents seek to impose a “new hermeneutic” upon us that will allow the denominations to remain in their errors while we extend fellowship to them.

Moral Issues

They have “discovered” twenty or more “loopholes” for circumventing Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:9. As a result, some congregations have preachers (and doubtless

some elders and deacons) in adulterous marriages, to say nothing of thousands of other couples who have thereby been encouraged to continue in their adulterous marriages. They defend “social” drinking, dancing, wearing of immodest clothing in public, public mixed swimming, gambling, and so forth, in the name of “Christian liberty.”

Fellowship

They declare that we have been too narrow, restrictive, and exclusive. They no longer believe that the *one faith* (Eph. 4:5) refers to the Gospel, **the** faith, but claim that it refers merely to the atonement. They aver that the “teaching of Christ” beyond which we dare not go (2 John 9) is not what Jesus and His inspired messengers **taught**, but it rather refers merely to the teaching **about** the Deity of Christ. Thus they say that one who believes in the atonement and Deity of Christ should be granted fellowship, regardless of his baptism (or lack of it), worship practices, concept of the church/kingdom of Christ, doctrine concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, or any other doctrinal question. They say that the word *fellowship* could not possibly imply endorsement and there is no such thing as “guilt by association” [never mind 2 John 9–11, DM].

The Church

They believe that it is impossible and unrealistic to speak of restoring the New Testament church (“We need a twenty-first century church, not a first-century church”). They deny that there is a distinctive pattern for the church, unless it is the personal life of Christ in Matthew–John. They say that Acts–Revelation only give us a flawed picture of the church—the way it ought **not** to be. They are purposefully and gleefully moving down a road that leads to outright denominationalism, many of them at break-neck speed.

Precepts of Incompliance

God’s faithful people must not comply with the doctrines of these denominationalists among us. We must not sit idly while those guilty of spiritual treason subvert the Truth and destroy the church. There are several things we can and must do.

We Must Understand the Nature of the Church

It is a Divine institution in design, purpose, work, worship, organization, terms of admission, and code of conduct (Mat. 16:18), all of which are set forth in the New Testament by inspired men. It is therefore just as God wants it to be; no human being has the right to tamper

with it. It never was a denomination and never will be. It stands in opposition to every humanly devised religion. It is the only religious institution on earth that exists with the approval of God and His Son; all others will be destroyed (Mat. 15:13). Its work is spiritual because the church is spiritual in nature (John 18:36). As “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), the church must take the Gospel to the lost world.

We Must Understand How Precious the Church Is to Deity

It is included in God’s “eternal purpose...in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11). Jesus purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28). He “gave himself up for it” (Eph. 5:25). It is variously described as the unshakable kingdom of God/Christ, God’s house [family], flock, holy nation, elect race, royal priesthood, and Christ’s bride, all of which demonstrate intimate relationship as well as ownership. Jesus will save only it because He sanctified and cleansed only it by His blood through our baptism (Eph. 5:23, 26). It is “the fulness of him [the Christ] that filleth all in all” (1:22-23). The church must be so precious to us that we seek it and its welfare above and before all else (Mat. 6:33).

We Must Faithfully Stand for the One Gospel

The **practices** have changed in various congregations because the **message** was first changed. As seeds are to plants, so is the religious message to the institution produced. Just as one cannot produce corn from tomato seed, neither can one produce a church of Christ from some “seed” besides the Gospel. God’s Word is still the seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:10-11), and seed still brings forth only after its kind (Gal. 6:7). Where the message is corrupted, corrupt practice is bound to follow. God’s curse is upon all who teach (or follow) a different message (Gal. 1:8-9).

We Must Steadfastly Oppose Those Who Teach a Corrupted Message

Opposition includes exposing and refuting errors (Gal. 2:11-14; Jude 3). It includes identifying (“marking”) those who are still among us, but who have joined the enemy and are striving to denominationalize the church (Rom. 16:17-18). It means refusing to have fellowship with them (Eph. 5:11) or even to associate with them in any way that implies approval (2 John 9-11).

Elders Must Understand Their Pivotal Role and Responsibility

They must take the time and the trouble to keep themselves informed about who the false teachers are and what they are teaching. There is no excuse for not doing so because of the availability of informative and Scripturally sound papers, lectureships, and books. A man who

does not have time to read, study, and keep himself informed does not have time to be an elder. Elders dare not allow a local or visiting preacher, class teacher, or any other member to teach false doctrine unopposed. Elders err who invite unsound preachers for meetings, workshops, or lectureships on the excuse: "He won't teach error while he is here." They are also unwise to reproduce bulletin articles by false teachers, even though a given article may teach the Truth. Such practices give credence to unfaithful men for the error they have taught or will teach on other occasions. Likewise, elders who allow false teachers and the activities of apostate schools and churches to be publicized in their congregations are not thinking clearly. Elders should issue warnings to their members about apostates (men, schools, and churches), rather than encouraging those in their care to participate in the errors of such.

Conclusion

Many among us have ceased to give any heed at all to the Gospel and have already drifted away from it (Heb. 2:1). The full extent of their apostasy is anyone's guess, but it is evident that many of them have adopted seed principles that will result in full-blown denominationalism. We dare not pretend that these things are not happening while the apostates are stealing congregation after congregation. The only hope for this age or any other is the incorruptible seed, "the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever" (1 Pet. 1:23). Let us ever be true to it in our preaching and practice, and the church will remain the church.

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an "Editorial Perspective" in the August 2004 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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