

Denominationalism — Its Causes, Contradictions, Consequences, and Cures

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Introduction

The Apple *Online Dictionary* defines the religious connotation of denomination as “a recognized autonomous branch of the Christian Church.” The honest and perceptive student of Scripture realizes that Christianity in the days of the apostles was vastly different from the maze of today’s conflicting, confused, and convoluted denominational structure commonly called “denominationalism.” An unknown (but appreciated) author has given us the following incisive description of denominationalism:

A denomination is a religious body with extra-Biblical peculiarities distinguishing it from the church revealed in the Bible. It is utterly impossible for any denomination to exist without men believing something, doing something, being something, saying something, or having something that is not in the Word of God. All denominations teach more or less of what is in the Bible. However, the things they teach that are in the Bible do not make them denominations, but the things they teach that are not in the Bible.

The general public’s concept of the church for the past several centuries has been denominational. According to this concept “the church” is composed of all the various denominational bodies of professed “believers.” This identity is granted without regard to the wide spectrum of doctrines, practices, and names of the various denominations. The vast majority of men ignore the fact that the doctrines, practices, and names of these churches directly contradict clear New Testament teaching in numerous ways.

Additionally, diversity and division are innate to denominationalism. *Denominationalism* and *division* are practically interchangeable words in matters religious; they are never found in isolation from each other. The fact that the doctrines, practices, and name of denomination A often directly contradict those of denominations B through Z is considered insignificant by most and is, in fact, lauded by many. Most profess to believe that the denominational structure is at least tolerated, if not actually approved by God.

The existence of undenominational Christianity (the only true Christianity) has not even occurred to the masses. If it has, men have generally considered it either unnecessary or undesirable (“We don’t need a first-century church; we need a twentieth-century [or a twenty-first-century] church.”). Others may deem the goal of restoring pure, undenominational

Christianity worthy, but impossible to achieve. Some (e.g., the Disciples of Christ and liberals in the Lord's church) ridicule even the suggestion.

Because of the pervasiveness of the denominational environment, especially in the Western hemisphere, it is most difficult to interest men in the ideal of the Biblical, undenominational church. Much "unteaching" must be done before actual teaching can begin, and few seem to have sufficient spiritual or mental ambition to thus exercise their investigative, critical, and reasoning abilities. Without intending to minimize the gargantuan task the apostles and their contemporaries faced in confronting their world with the Gospel, in some respects it may be more difficult to convince men of spiritual Truth today than it was then. The devil has so filled the world with counterfeit churches and doctrines that men are content with and protective of them and are generally unwilling to consider what the Bible really teaches about the church. Denominationalism has influenced so many people for so many generations that the people of our time find it most difficult to conceive of any alternative.

Not only do the masses accept denominationalism. One is considered intolerant and mean-spirited to suggest that it is flawed and anti-Scriptural. In this writer's youth his contemporaries considered one's denominational affiliation to be a "sacred cow" to be stoutly defended. However, the current younger generation does not appear to be so loyal to the specific denominational affiliation of one's rearing. Many of them (along with some who are older) have chosen to leave the major Protestant denominations whose roots are in the sixteenth-century Reformation and affiliate with one of the interdenominational "community" churches that have proliferated in recent years. Even some who are of Roman Catholic and Orthodox heritages have done likewise. However, these new churches are no less denominational than the old ones. Though often claiming to be "non-denominational," they are actually multi-denominational, if not omni-denominational, embracing folk from almost any denominational background in their ecumenical spirit. These churches merely add to the overall morass of the denominational landscape. The members of these new churches are still firmly wedded to the general denominational concept of "the church"; they have simply joined a new denomination.

Sad to say, more and more members of the church of Christ, in the last quarter of the 20th century, became extremely liberal in doctrine. In their writing and preaching, they demonstrate an alarming degree of influence by and affinity with the old threadbare concept of denominationalism. That solid truth concerning the church which they once embraced and

defended, they have now abandoned and oppose. Included are those who variously serve as university administrators and faculty, preachers (especially in prestigious and large congregations), editors of journals, Bible “translators” and distributors, radio and television producers/speakers, lectureship/workshop planners, book publishers and distributors, and elders.

A few of these have been honorable enough to admit their changed convictions and have made a clean break with the church, either founding their own denominations or joining an existing one. Most, however, have chosen to remain within the walls of Zion as religious Trojan horses, with the stated intent of moving as many in the church as they can into full-blown denominational status. Let the reader beware: such brethren are as fully denominational in their concepts of the church and in their thinking in general as any third-generation devout Methodist or Presbyterian ever could be. Thus, the issues discussed in this manuscript will apply as much to them and their ungodly work as it will to those who have for many years been in the actual thralls of denominational churches.

Having introduced the subject, our study hereafter will consist of a discussion of the causes, contradictions, consequences, and cures pertaining to denominationalism. I issue a kind warning to members of denominational churches who may read these lines: I have at times written very plainly in the remainder of this article. However, my motive has not been to offend or hurt, but to set forth the teaching of Scripture clearly on this subject so that it cannot be misunderstood. It is my earnest prayer and hope that the reader will thereby be caused to pause abruptly and examine his or her spiritual status and to come out of denominationalism by obedience to the Gospel plan of salvation. This very obedience will result in the Lord’s adding him to His glorious church (Acts 2:38–41, 47).

Some Principal Causes of Denominationalism

Exalting Men Above Christ

While denominationalism is foreign to the New Testament pattern for and description of the church, the seeds of it are observable in various circumstances described in Scripture. The Corinthian Church serves as a case in point. Instead of all following Christ alone, some of the saints had variously decided to follow Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (i.e., Peter), respectively (1 Cor. 1:12). This seems to have been an acute outbreak of the deadly spiritual malady of “preacheritis,” not altogether eradicated even in our own time. These misplaced loyalties had led to contentions and divisions in the church (1 Cor. 1:11–13). They had not yet broken up into

distinct religious groups at the time Paul wrote to them, but had they continued on their course, they likely would have done so. That which Paul describes constituted incipient, embryonic denominationalism; the seeds of it were clearly present.

Paul's action was immediate and his words strong and plain in correcting their destructive conduct. After a few words of greeting and introduction (vv. 1–9), he launched a vigorous plea concerning their behavior:

Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment (v. 10).

Among the numerous serious problems extant in the Corinthian congregation (as the remainder of the epistle reveals), Paul addressed this budding sectarian spirit first. Perhaps this indicates that it was seminal and fundamental to all of the others. At least, it appears that if they were not brought into a state of harmony and unity based on Christ and His Truth, it would do little good to address their other problems. Paul knew that they must be made to stand as one, following Christ alone, rather than any man (even though he and Cephas were apostles). He further knew that if they would follow Christ alone, **they would be one**, because Christ is not divided (v. 13).

Through the centuries men have continued to follow other mere men, rather than the Christ, in religion. The Roman Catholic Church is founded upon the human dogmas and dictates of men, the authority of which resides not in Christ, but principally in one man – the Roman pope. Other religious bodies claiming identity with Christ are obviously devoted to human leadership, even in their names. The followers of Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, have adopted his name for their Lutheran denomination (in spite of Luther's plea to the contrary). The theological system known as Calvinism, which to a greater or lesser degree has influenced the doctrine of practically all of the Protestant denominations, is named after its originator, John Calvin, a younger contemporary of Luther. Wesleyan theology, generally adhered to by the Methodist and Nazarene churches, and to some degree all the Holiness sects, is named after its originator, John Wesley (with some help from his brother, Charles). Only a small percentage of the hundreds of denominations actually bear the name of some individual, although all of them owe their existence to following the teachings of one or more men. When men follow men more than the Christ, denominationalism is inevitable.

Exalting the Doctrines of Men Above the Doctrine of Christ

This cause stems from the previous one. The primary way in which men follow other men in religion is by following their doctrines. This grave error and one of its consequences is evident in the first-century Jewish Pharisee denomination. Jesus rebuked their error by saying,

“But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Mat. 15:9). Paul warned the brethren in Rome that following false, human doctrines would produce unwarranted division, which, as earlier noted, is a primary characteristic of denominationalism:

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them” (Rom. 16:17).

While there were no denominations yet in Rome, Paul knew that the seeds of such were in the doctrines of false teachers. The following principle therefore deserves strong emphasis:

Every denomination owes its existence to one or more doctrines of men that have been given preference over the doctrine of Christ.

No denomination would ever have existed nor could be maintained were men content with only the doctrine of Christ. The fact that the New Testament contains scores of warnings, exhortations, and prohibitions, all aimed at producing strict adherence to the doctrine of Christ, forcefully underscores the principle stated above.

Exalting Selfish Preferences Above Authorized Practices

This *desires-over-doctrine* approach to religion is responsible for the actual beginning and maintenance of some denominations (especially those of the Pentecostal and Holiness varieties) and for many of the unauthorized practices found among all of them. Herein is seen the triumph of subjectivism in religion. That which is subjective originates in the opinions, thoughts, desires, emotions, and feelings of men—all of which are fallible, inconstant, fickle, and as varied as men themselves. Contrariwise, the Word of God is an objective standard, which is constant, stable, unvarying, and unaffected by human thought or feelings or by time or circumstance. The subjective approach in religion is basically a selfish approach:

I like it [whether it is a *faith-only* plan of salvation, so-called tongues speaking, instrumental music, hand clapping, or a hundred other things], so I’ll have it.

One need not be a genius to perceive that insistence on one’s personal preferences in doctrine and/or practice leads directly to denominationalism.

Consider the grievous and totally unnecessary division that was foisted upon the church of the Lord in the 19th century, the motivation for which was the subjective desires of the instigators. About mid-century, when it appeared that the noble plea for restoration of the primitive, undenominational church was posited to practically sweep the nation, a small number of brethren began to clamor for some of the things they desired from surrounding denominational bodies, but about which the New Testament is totally silent. In particular, they

wanted to employ a missionary society in evangelism and mechanical instruments of music in worship. Their desire was so strong for these innovations that they were willing to abandon their once-held respect for the silence as well as the statement of Scripture and to divide the people of God in order to have them. Having settled on these desired items, they then sought to justify them from Scripture **after the fact**. The primary justification they decided to employ was that since the Scriptures do not explicitly forbid these things (i.e., the Scriptures are silent about them), they had the freedom to introduce and employ them. Their behavior constituted the always-disastrous practice of allowing their desires to father their doctrine, rather than conforming their desires to the demands of New Testament teaching. They failed to realize (or perhaps did not care) that by this utterly flawed rule, any and every thing that might please men in religion could be added to the work and worship of the church, **as long as it was not explicitly forbidden**.

The division had so run its course by 1906 that it was recognized by a national census. The *give-us-what-we-want-in-religion-at-whatever-cost* brethren were found to have captured about eighty-six percent of the church membership and to have seized possession of most of the church buildings and practically all of the educational institutions. Faithful brethren had to begin their efforts all over again almost from “scratch.” These digressive brethren begat two new denominations: the Independent Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ Christian Church. Their sole motivation was manifest. They desired certain things in religion and demanded the fulfillment of their desires, with regard for neither Scriptural authority to have them nor for the unity of the body of Christ.

Their posterity have predictably continued to add unauthorized elements to their brand of religion throughout the ensuing decades so that even the less liberal segment of them (the Independent Christian Church) has taken on all of the trappings of full-blown denominationalism, rendering utterly hollow its claim to be concerned with restoring the primitive church. Clearly, they demanded these additions to the work and worship of God’s church, not because the Scriptures ordained or authorized them, but because they liked them and desired them. Furthermore, when we discuss their unauthorized practices with them (particularly mechanical instruments in worship), they still adamantly respond, “We are not about to give them up!” The preference of feelings and desires over the Word of God and what it authorizes is a major cause of denominationalism.

Exalting Sincerity of Heart Above Respect for Scripture

The Bible clearly emphasizes the necessity of sincerity in one's worship and service of God (John 4:23-24; Acts 2:41; Rom. 6:17-18; et al.). The Lord labels as "hypocrites," rebuking and rejecting those who merely "go through the motions" of the outward expressions of worship and service, without involving the heart (Mat. 6:1-8, 16-18; 15:7-9; 23:5-7; 25-28).

However, the Bible never depicts mere sincerity in worship and service as the exclusive measure of faithfulness to God and His Son. In spite of this fact, one of the long-standing guideposts of denominational apologists is the enthronement of sincerity. These folk through the years (in spite of the New Testament's frequent demands for absolute purity in doctrine and practice) have justified the existence of their religious bodies with the cliché, "It makes no difference what one believes as long as he is sincere." This has proved to be a short-sighted (not to mention nonsensical and anti-Scriptural) philosophy. By implication it severs all dependence upon and appeals to Bible authority for one's doctrine and practice. It is represented in the oft-repeated profession of one whose false doctrine or practice is exposed by Scripture: "I wouldn't trade the feeling I have in my heart for a stack of Bibles!" As with the exaltation of selfish preferences cited above, an over-emphasis on sincerity likewise replaces objective Biblical Truth with man's own subjective feelings. Sincerity, rather than the Scripture, becomes the overriding arbiter of doctrine and practice.

Logically, if it makes no difference **what** one believes, why should it make any difference **whether or not** one believes at all? The "mainline" denominations (e.g., Lutherans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, et al.) thus sowed the seeds of their own demise (which they have been increasingly experiencing in recent decades) by repeating the *sincerity* mantra. (After all, if sincerity validates Methodist doctrine, it just as surely validates the doctrine of a zealous female Pentecostal preacher or of a Mormon "elder" who has a "burning in his breast" to confirm his faith in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Why, then, remain a Methodist, except for the sake of tradition or convenience?) One convinced of the primacy of sincerity could thereby as easily justify himself (as some have likely done) in wandering off into agnosticism, atheism, or some Pagan religion. (Admittedly, other factors may have contributed to the membership exodus these religious bodies have experienced, but I am convinced that their undue emphasis on sincerity has been a major factor.)

Also, logically, if it makes no difference what one **believes**, then why should it make any difference what one **practices** or how one **behaves**? This question reflects the *sincerity-alone* dictum as applied to behavior. It implies situation ethics. Could this fact at least partly explain why the mainline denominations give inordinate attention to “social” issues (e.g., the treatment and cure of AIDS, sex education, the plight of the “homeless,” et al.) and typical liberal solutions to them? Does this cliché help explain why they not only champion liberal social causes, but also increasingly support immoral behaviors and liberal political causes? We should not be surprised that their voices were long ago fell silent when it came to such things as alcohol consumption, adultery, fornication, serial divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and abortion. If their generations-old credo be true (i.e., that sincerity is all that matters), then all of the above and many other similar actions are thereby validated, or at least excused.

Some national media commentators have wondered aloud about the permissive attitude and/or silence of most of the denominational leaders in response to the immorality, lying, perjury, abuse of power, and obstruction of justice committed by former President of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton (whose guilt must be shared by his partisan sycophant defenders). At least part of the answer to their question may be seen in the doctrinal relativism the denominations have been spouting for generations (along with the philosophies of evolution, agnosticism, humanism, pragmatism, mysticism, and post-modernism with which our nation has been strongly propagandized in recent years). Doctrinal relativism has now come to dominate their attitude toward morals and ethics as well.

As important as sincerity is to true religion, the exaltation of it remains a prime cause of and justification for denominationalism – and a host of other evils.

Exalting Misplaced Tolerance Above Unyielding Truth

Another significant cause of denominationalism is pervasive tolerance for and non-judgmentalism toward practically any and every sort of doctrine or practice in religion. About the only thing most denominationalists absolutely cannot tolerate, or so it seems, is intolerance of denominational errors.

Sectarians (another way of referring to denominational adherents) have vocalized this facet of their philosophy with another widely used cliché: “One church is as good as another.” Sound Bible students fully agree that when the denominations compare themselves to their rival denominations, their statement is correct. One may as well be a Presbyterian as a Methodist, and there is no spiritual gain or loss whether one is a Lutheran, a Baptist, or a

Christian Church-Disciple. Such religious bodies have forfeited their right to sit in judgment of sister denominations because they all stand alike before the New Testament as unauthorized, anti-Scriptural, human institutions. Though they are at variance with inspired Truth on different issues and to different degrees, **they are all nonetheless at variance with inspired Truth**. As long as one leaves the blood-bought church of Christ set forth in the New Testament out of the comparison, then he is accurate in saying that “one church is as good as another.” But including it, such words are sheer folly, born either of ignorance or bias, and border on blasphemy. When issues of mere option and expediency in religious practice are under consideration, then tolerance is ever a virtue. However, when matters of obligatory doctrine and practice are at stake, tolerance becomes a deadly vice.

When tolerance of anti-Scriptural doctrines and practices prevails over the demands of Scripture, denominationalism will certainly be the result.

Some Contradictions of Denominationalism

Literally volumes could be (indeed, have been) written describing the multitude of contradictory doctrines and other features among the denominations. However, the contradictions I will suggest are some of the many contrasts between denominationalism and the church as it is revealed in the New Testament. The church of Christ is constitutionally non-denominational and anti-denominational, as seen in the following:

Contradiction in Founders

One or more mere men established every denomination. However, Christ, the only begotten Son of God, established the church of Christ. He promised to build His church (Mat. 16:18), and He did so through His apostles by means of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13; Acts 2:1-47).

Contradiction in Time and Place of Beginning

The Protestant denominations all have their own respective (and conflicting) times and places of origin. None of them is old enough to be the New Testament church because none of them predates the sixteenth-century Reformation. The seeds of the Catholic and Orthodox denominations can be seen in some of the departures that began as early as the second and third centuries, but these organizations are not generally recognized as actually beginning until the beginning of the seventh century with the enthronement of the first pope in Rome. These dates (even at their earliest) are obviously too late to be the apostolic church, which began on the first Pentecost following the resurrection and ascension of the Son of God (Acts 2:1-4, 38-41, 47).

Further, all of the denominations, whether Catholic or Protestant, must trace their respective beginnings to various places other than Jerusalem (e.g., Rome, Constantinople, Wurttemberg, Zurich, London, Edinburgh, et al.). The one and only Divinely-sanctioned apostolic church was founded in Jerusalem, as Isaiah and Micah prophesied (Isa. 2:2–4; Mic. 4:1–2) and as Jesus promised it would be (Mark 9:1; Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:4–5, 8; 2:1–4, 14–21, 38–41, 47).

Of course, the fact that a religious body began in Jerusalem on the Pentecost following Jesus' ascension would not thereby make it the Divinely-authorized church of Christ, due to additional important factors involved. However, a religious body could not possibly be the church Jesus built and bought if founded at some other place and time. Each denomination, whether Protestant or Catholic, differs not only from every other denomination as to place and time of origin, but also as to the place and time of origin of the New Testament church.

Consider the following points of contradiction:

- Denominationalism lauds and encourages the existence of innumerable churches, but Christ built only one church (Mat. 16:18; cf. 15:13).
- Denominationalism is a freeway wide enough – in its broad view of “the church” – to accommodate all men who claim to believe in Christ, regardless of their religious stripes, (v. 13). The church of Christ is a straitened way in which few pilgrims travel, with a narrow gate through which few travelers pass (v. 14). The former ends in destruction; the latter leads to life.
- Denominationalism caters to the whims, desires, and opinions of men. The church of Christ is rooted in the authoritative will of the Son of God (Col. 3:17; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:11).
- Denominationalism conceives of “church membership” as optional and unrelated to salvation. The church of Christ is that one spiritual body which Christ will save (Eph. 5:23).
- Denominationalism justifies the existence of hundreds of religious bodies. The New Testament authorizes only the Lord's one spiritual body (Eph. 4:4).
- Denominations were purchased with the efforts, money, and reputations of fallible men. The New Testament church was purchased with the blood of the sinless Christ (Acts 20:28).
- Denominationalism exists due to the sacrifices made by many men and women. The church of the Bible exists because Christ gave Himself up for it (Eph. 5:25).
- Denominationalism is ruled and controlled by mere men. Christ is the head of His church (Eph. 1:22–23; 5:23).
- Denominationalism (and every other false religious system) is a “plant” which the Lord will eventually pull up by the roots (Mat. 15:13). The church of Christ is His unshakable kingdom, which He will at last deliver up to the Father (Dan. 2:44; 1 Cor. 15:24; Heb. 12:23, 28).

The contrasts and contradictions between denominationalism and the Biblical concept of the church, only a few of which I have been listed, are many and stark. They bespeak the grave implications and eternal consequences, as we shall demonstrate below.

Consequences of Denominationalism

The Depiction of a Divided Christ and a Confused Gospel

The only introduction to “Christianity” that billions of people ever had before they passed into eternity was what they saw in the religious babel of denominationalism. This same picture is the only one that millions now living will see. The implicit message to perceptive persons has been that Christ must have been a person of hundreds of separate antagonistic personalities. The impression left with them is that His “Gospel” is a strangely confused and contradictory message. How could the heathen possibly be attracted to such a person and such a message?

The Tragedy of Unbelief

The Lord recognized the soul-damning consequence of division and discord among those who believe in Him:

Neither for these [apostles] only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: **that the world may believe** that thou didst send me (John 17:21–22, emph. DM).

In the phrase, *them also that believe on me through their word*, the Lord referred contextually to all who would truly become His disciples by obedience to the Gospel. He was praying that members of His blood-bought church would be united, which, sad to say, we are not. He is not praying specifically here regarding denominationalism’s fractures — they are not within the purview of His petition. He is acknowledging that division among His true people will be a stumbling block to the world, including those in the denominations, causing them to turn away in revulsion, derision, and disbelief.

However, by extension, that for which the Lord prayed concerning unity and unbelief applies as well to the obviously divided state extant in denominationalism. To the heathen and pagan, *denominationalism* and *Christianity* are inseparable entities. Doubtless many millions in the heathen world have observed the confusions and contradictions in denominationalism, the only representation of “Christianity” to which they have been exposed, and have concluded that it is little, if any, improvement over their own religious systems. In fact, many who were

reared in denominationalism, young and old alike, have lost their faith in the existence of God, the Deity of Christ, and the inspiration of the Bible because of the absurdities, hypocrisies, and contradictions of the denominational industry and structure. There are perhaps few more powerful causes of religious infidelity than the blight of denominationalism.

Wasted Time, Money, Energy, and Talent

Consider for a moment the duplication of effort that is made among all of the denominations in training preachers, building buildings, and preaching their respective messages. Also, consider the immense sums of money that are spent in carrying on these divergent efforts. One can scarcely imagine what great advancements could be made for and by the Truth if all of the time, energy, talent, and money presently spent by the several denominations to propagate their several flawed messages were instead poured into one united effort to preach the simple Truth of the Gospel.

Disrupted and Divided Homes

Anything that tears Scripturally authorized homes apart is a blight on society and a stench in the nostrils of God. Yet, this is one of the awful curses of denominationalism. Denominational loyalties and interests divide millions of homes. When the husband is a devout Baptist and the wife is a dedicated Presbyterian, they (and then their children) must go in different directions, not only on Sundays, but on many other occasions as well. Many couples are miserable, while many marriages have failed completely, due to fierce denominational loyalties—and the children in such homes often are so confused as to lose all interest in religion.

But, of course, it is not the Lord's plan for all of the members of a family to merely be in one denomination, any more than for each family member to be in different ones. He does not want **anyone** to be in **any** man-made religious body. The problem of division in the home also occurs when one who is a Christian by New Testament definition is married to a member of a denomination who resists any overtures and encouragements to study the Bible. In such a case the Christian assumes a heavy burden indeed. Not having experienced such, I can only imagine the grief and frustration that such saints often suffer from the comments they have made to me and the advice they have sought from me over the years.

It cannot be successfully gainsaid that religious division directly affects marriage and the home adversely, robbing its principals of the happiness that can and should exist in the family circle.

Eternal Damnation

These are harsh and biting words in these tolerant and non-judgmental times, but I have chosen them to accentuate the worst of all tragic consequences of denominationalism. Those who are in denominational churches are in a lost condition, and if they do not escape them before death or the Lord's return, they will be lost forever. *Denominationalism* is another word for factionalism, sectarianism, and unnecessary division concerning which Paul wrote: "They who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:20-21). The embryonic denominationalism extant in Corinth when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians was labeled "carnal" behavior (1 Cor. 3:1).

The denominational message will lead men to the damnation of Hell rather than to the salvation of Heaven, because its foundation is a defective "gospel." Its various messages require either more or less of men than the Lord requires for salvation. The denominations were neither sown nor planted by God; consequently, He will uproot all of them (Mat. 15:13). Denominational leaders fit the mold of those described by the Lord as "blind guides." Further, those millions of precious souls who follow them are likewise blind, believing themselves to be saved when they are lost. The fate of both classes is certain: "If the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit" (v. 14).

At the Judgment, the Lord will hear the pitiful pleas of those in the denominations who have done various good works, believing they were serving Him, only to hear Him say, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mat. 7:22-23). He prefaced this description of the Judgment Day with the categorical pronouncement: "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven" (v. 21). The hundreds of millions of people who populate the thousands of denominations are generally relying upon the very thing for their salvation which the Lord declares to be insufficient: their intellectual acceptance of the fact that Christ is God's Son, short of their obedience to His plan of salvation. How our hearts—and voices—should go out to these poor lost souls in their false sense of spiritual security!

We thus see that the consequences of involvement in denominationalism are neither few nor minor.

The Cures for Denominationalism

Earlier I discussed five causes of denominationalism. I now state the obvious: The cures for this spiritually fatal malady are to prevent or reverse the causes, which we now need to briefly discuss in turn.

We Must Exalt Christ Above Any and All Mere Men

When Paul rebuked the division among the Corinthian saints due to their following men rather than the Christ exclusively, he asked them some pointed rhetorical questions: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized into the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). These questions were deadly thrusts against their denominational spirit. They all aimed at one central truth: If they exalted Christ above any man, including the inspired apostles, they would be one. Christ alone died for them, they were baptized into Him alone (Rom. 6:3–4; Gal. 3:27), and they should exalt Him above all others. Division and denominationalism do not exist when Christ alone is exalted and followed, because **Christ is not divided!**

When did Peter, apparently several years after Pentecost, cause a division among brethren in Antioch? He did so when he exalted certain brethren from Jerusalem above the Christ (Gal. 2:11–14). What caused the Galatian brethren to teeter on the brink of abandoning the Gospel for the Law of Moses? They began exalting Judaizing teachers above Christ (Gal. 1:6–10; 4:17; 5:12; 6:13). The same phenomenon is observable in other New Testament congregations where problems arose, as the epistles clearly attest.

Exalting Christ above others must be done without exception, even of those nearest and dearest to us in this world: “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mat. 10:37). The fact of the matter is that denominationalism and every other level of division (even that which is short of actual denominationalism) will cease when – and only when – men are content to exalt Christ consistently above any and all men.

We Must Exalt the Doctrine of Christ Above the Doctrines of Men

This denominational prevention and/or cure is closely related to the previous one but deserves some notice of its own. One of the indisputable implications of the rhetorical question “Is Christ divided?” is that His doctrine is not divided in the sense of its being self-contradictory. Rather, it is a harmonious, unified, singular whole. This truth is well-illustrated by the long-observed fact that the plural term, *doctrines*, is never used in reference to the words

of Christ and His inspired writers, but only when humanly originated dogma is being described.

The most common means by which men exalt other men over the Christ is by heeding human doctrines rather than the Lord's doctrine. The followers of Luther are identified by their allegiance to his doctrines. The disciples of John Calvin are such due to their stubborn adherence to his theological system of doctrines. While few denominations actually bear the name of some man or men, it is nonetheless true that every denomination owes its existence to the fact that the **doctrines** of one or more men have been given precedence over the **doctrine** of Christ.

The significance of exalting the doctrine of Christ above that of any mere man or religious conclave, however august the person or body might claim to be, is accentuated by the following:

1. The Bible issues frequent and strong warnings against (1) doctrines that are contrary to Bible teaching, (2) against those who teach such doctrines, and (3) against departing from Bible doctrine. While these warnings are a frequent theme in the Old Testament, they are even more prolific in the New. Jesus warned of false prophets and the doctrines of men (Mat. 7:15-16; 2-23; 15:7-14; et al.). Paul's epistles are rife with such warnings (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15; Gal. 1:6-9; Eph. 4:14; 5:6, 11; Phi. 3:2, 18-19; Col. 2:8, 16-19; 1 The. 14-16; 2 The. 2:2-12; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 3:1-8, 13; 4:3-4; Tit. 1:9-14; 3:9-11; Heb. 13:9; et al.). Most of the other epistles and the Revelation contain such warnings also (Jam. 5:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 3:3-5, 17; 1 John 2:18-19, 22; 4:1-3; 2 John 7-11; Jude 4, 17-18; Rev. 2:2, 6, 14-16, 20; et al.).
2. The Bible issues constant and powerful exhortations to adhere strictly to the inspired Word. Again, there are many such exhortations in the Old Testament, but the New Testament is especially full of them. The only way one can be a true disciple and know the freedom Truth brings is by abiding in the Word of Christ (John 8:31-32). If we reject His Word, we thereby reject Him and do not love Him (12:48; 14:15, 21-24; et al.). To the Christ we must "hearken in all things whatsoever he shall speak" (Acts 3:22). We are commanded to "stand fast in the faith" (1 Cor. 16:13). This emphasis is seen in passage after passage (e.g., Gal. 1:6-12; Eph. 6:17; Phi. 1:27; 2:12; 4:9; Col. 2:6-7; 3:17; 1 The. 2:13; 2 The. 2:15; 3:6, 14; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:6-7, 16; 6:3-5, 13-14, 20-21; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:2, 14-15; 3:14-17; 4:1-2; Tit. 1:9; 2:1, 7-8; Jam. 1:21, 25; 5:19-20; 1 Pet. 1:22-25; 2:1-2; 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 3:1-2; 3:18; 1 John 1:6-7; 2:3-5, 24; 3:24; 5:3; 2 John 6, 9-11; 3 John 4; Jude 3, 17; Rev. 1:3; 3:9-11; 22:7; 18-19; et al.) Seed produces fruit only after its kind (Gen. 1:11-12; Gal. 6:7). Spiritually – as physically – a corrupt tree will produce corrupt fruit (Mat. 7:17b). The *Book of Mormon* "seed" produces Mormons when it germinates. The *Koran* produces Muslims, the *Methodist Discipline* Methodists, the *Catechism*, Roman Catholics, and so on. None of the above, nor any other humanly produced religious "seeds,"

will ever produce Christians or the church of Christ, because such seeds are flawed and corrupt and can only reproduce flawed and corrupt fruit in religion.

However, “the good tree bringeth forth good fruit” (Mat. 7:17a). The good and pure spiritual “seed” is the Word of God (Luke 8:11). Christians are those who have “...been born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Pet. 1:23, KJV). When the unadulterated seed of the Gospel is sown into good soil (receptive hearts) it will bring forth only the fruit of pure, unadulterated, “unhyphenated” Christians, members of the pure, unadulterated church of the Lord. Just as no corrupt message can ever produce the church of Christ, so the pure seed of the Word of God will never produce any pagan or denominational religious organization. The simple *seed-and-fruit* principle, which is universally acknowledged as operating without exception in the physical realm, just as infallibly operates without exception in the spiritual realm. It is amazing that the masses can so readily accept it in the former, but so glibly and gullibly deny it in the latter!

Whenever any religious congregation decides to follow only the doctrine of Christ and then executes that decision, **it will inevitably cease to be a denomination**. In fact, it will thereby become one of the churches of Christ (Rom. 16:16). Denominationalism does not — cannot — exist where only the doctrine of Christ is preached and obeyed.

We Must Exalt the Authority of Christ Above Selfish Preferences

All authority belongs to Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mat. 28:18; John 17:2). The authority of Christ is expressed and exercised through His own words, spoken while upon the earth (Mat. 17:5; John 6:63, 68–69; 8:31–32; 12:48; 14:6, 15, 21, 24; 15:10; 17:14; Heb. 1:1–2; et al.). However, His authority is **no less** expressed and exercised through the words of His inspired men (Mat. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–20; John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13–14; 1 Cor. 5:3–5; 14:37; 2 Cor. 5:18–20; et al.) The authoritative words of both Christ and His inspired men constitute the New Testament portion of the Bible.

In order to be acceptable to God, men must submit themselves completely to the authority of the Christ, which includes all of the words we speak and the actions we perform: “And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). However, our submission also involves our even “bringing **every thought** into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5b; *emph. DM*). This requires the discipline of “casting down imaginations [“reasonings,” ASV fn.], and every

high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God” (v. 5a). Men who press their doctrinal or practical preferences in religion that contradict those things that Christ has authorized in the New Testament are basically sectarians, factionalists, heretics. If they proceed and succeed in pressing their personal preferences – their own imaginations and reasoning – at all costs, denominationalism will finally result.

Conversely, the only way to prevent and/or destroy denominationalism is for all men to sacrifice their personal, subjective desires in religion and recognize the one, infallible, objective standard of the New Testament. **Where the authority of Christ is genuinely respected, denominationalism cannot and will not exist.**

We Must Exalt Respect for Scripture Above Sincerity of Heart

While acknowledging that sincerity is essential for one to acceptably serve God, it is axiomatic that one can be sincerely wrong. Due to ignorance, misinformation, presumption, and/or other factors, one may be mistaken, yet be sincerely convinced that he is correct in his conviction or behavior. Sincerity does not convert carbolic acid into water, regardless of one’s sincere belief that the acid is water. Drinking the liquid in all sincerity will be nonetheless fatal. So also, is the case in the realm of thought and principle. Sincerity of belief does not convert error into Truth or wrong into right in the realm of religion or morals.

So far as we know Cain was sincere in believing his sacrifice was just as acceptable as Abel’s, but God rejected it nonetheless (Gen. 4:2-5). It appears that Nadab and Abihu sincerely believed they were serving God when they brought forth the “strange fire” for which God destroyed them (Lev. 10:1-2). Saul of Tarsus sincerely believed he was serving God when he persecuted Christians (Acts 23:1; 26:9-11).

To use sincerity as the arbiter of truth or correctness in religion is to reject any real standard of belief and practice. With no invariable standard, how can sincere person *A* question the contradictory belief or behavior of sincere person *B*? Sincerity is but another form of human subjectivism that exalts the feelings, desires, and choices of men, over the independent objective authority of the Scriptures. Denominations flourish in part because respect for the inspired Word has been cast aside in favor of sincerity. The Scriptures set forth the balance of determining what they authorize and then sincerely obeying them. Our efforts to please God must be characterized by the involvement of our spirit (sincerity) in obeying God’s Truth (John 4:23-24).

We Must Exalt Unyielding Truth Above Misplaced Tolerance

Forbearance, long-suffering, and tolerance toward others are urged upon all who would please God. We are to walk “with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:1-2). The denominational application of this beautiful trait represents an abuse of it, making use of it to justify tolerating practically any and every belief and innovation in religion that men can invent. They thus employ a misplaced tolerance for their own departures from the Truth, as well as for those of others.

God’s superior and perfect forbearance is not unlimited, as exemplified on numerous occasions (e.g., the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Canaanites, et al.). When it comes to the matter of hearing and obeying the Truth of God’s Word, at some point tolerance for error becomes a vice rather than a virtue. We are to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). Were it not for tolerance of the wrong things and intolerance of the right things, denominationalism would soon fade away. Denominationalism cannot long continue when men refuse to tolerate those things God cannot tolerate, as revealed in His unyielding Word.

Conclusion

In stark contrast to the chaos of denominationalism stands the beautiful, undenominational church of the Lord.

- The church is one body (Eph. 4:5); denominationalism is thousands of religious bodies.
- The church was built by Christ (Mat. 16:18); the denominations were built by men.
- The church has one head — Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22); the denominations have many heads, all of them mere human beings.
- The church contains those who are saved (Acts 2:47); the denominations separate salvation from church membership.
- The church will be delivered up to the Father by Christ (1 Cor. 15:24); the denominations will not be thus delivered by Christ because they constitute no part of the church of Christ.
- The church will be saved by Christ (Eph. 5:23); the denominations will not be saved by Christ.
- The church is Christ’s everlasting, unshakable kingdom (Dan. 2:44; Heb. 12:28); the denominations are temporary and are destined to be uprooted (Mat. 15:13).
- The church upholds the inspired Word of God (1 Tim. 3:15); the denominations uphold and follow the creeds and doctrines of fallible, uninspired men.
- The church worships in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24); the denominations engage in vain worship because they follow the doctrines of men (Mat. 15:9).

- The church was purchased with the perfect, precious blood of Christ (Acts 20:28); the denominations were “purchased” with mere human resources.
- The church preaches one Gospel (Gal. 1:7-9); the denominations preach many “gospels.”
- The church is according to God’s eternal purpose (Eph. 3:10-11); the denominations exist due to the purposes and plans of men.
- The church is a spiritual kingdom, which originated in Heaven (John 18:36); the denominations are carnal “kingdoms” that originated on earth.

I plead with any and all who may read these words and who are in a religious denomination, to leave it immediately and obey the Gospel plan of salvation so that the Lord can add you to His church!

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Bellview Lectures, hosted by the Bellview Church of Christ, Pensacola, FL, June 12-16, 1999. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Worldliness*, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ).]

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