

The Harm of Denominationalism

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(This article is an excerpt from the author's *Fellowship: with God & His People, The Way of Christ without Denominationalism*, available from Amazon.com)

The basic premise of this entire volume is based upon the desire to be just New Testament Christians, i.e., without any denominational ties or allegiance whatsoever. But some may not be impressed with the desirability of the nondenominational way of Christ, so this appendix considers the harm of denominationalism.

The Atheist's Unanswerable Argument Against the Way of Christ

Several years ago I debated a professor in one of our state universities who was the faculty sponsor of a group called The League For the Promotion of Militant Atheism. This group challenged religious groups to debate the evidences for the existence of God and the inspiration of the Bible. A local group of Christians selected me to respond to his challenge. In preparation for the debate I read several interviews with this professor. One contained an argument against the existence of God and the inspiration of the Bible that is unanswerable. As a matter of fact, it is the strongest argument atheists and skeptics can use. It has produced more atheists than all the militant atheists put together!

The Atheist's Argument

This professor based his argument upon religious division. He said:

Common sense tells us that atheism is a much more rational stand in the face of the conflicting claims of the world's religions than fleeing to the Bible.

The fact that there are so many religions shows, at best, that human beings have a weakness for irrational beliefs.

The Atheist Agrees with Jesus

This argument is unanswerable because this militant atheist agrees exactly with what Jesus said about the harm of religious division! This militant atheist preached exactly like Christ on this subject. As a matter of fact, he preached more like Christ on this subject than many preachers do.

In Jn. 17.20-21, on the night before He died, Jesus prayed for all the believers in Him who would come after Him. Thus, if you believe in Christ, this is Christ's prayer for you. Jesus began by praying in His own behalf, then in behalf of the apostles. Then He said:

Neither for these 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.

Paul, in I Cor. 1.10, 11, taught much the same thing when he told the Corinthian Christians:

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.

Likewise, Paul prayed in Rom. 15.5, 6:

that with one accord ye may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then in Gal. 5.20, Paul said concerning religious division:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions,...of which I forewarn you, even as I did forewarn you, that they that practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

With these passages fresh in our minds, we must ask ourselves some questions, “Do all believers in denominations speak the same thing? Are there any divisions that are works of the flesh? Do all denominational believers speak with one mouth?”

The answer to all these questions is a dismal, “No!” Over 760 separate religious denominations exist in the United States alone, all claiming allegiance to Christ. But they all teach different things that contradict the others. Yet they all claim to teach their distinctive doctrines right out of the Bible.

Greatest Enemy of True Religion Is Religion Itself

A person doesn't have to look very far to find examples of how modern denominations ignore Jesus' prayer for unity.

Newsweek Magazine

What do you imagine any intelligent person thinks about this notice in *Newsweek* magazine several years ago?

The Good Shepherd Baptist Church in Denver, Colo., has refused to meet the payments on a small stucco building it contracted to buy from the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1965—precisely on the ground that the property already belongs to God. The Baptists say “the Holy Spirit revealed to them that once you buy a church property, it belongs to the Lord and nobody can sell it.” The Lutherans say, “But the Holy Spirit did not speak to us in this way. The Baptists got it from a special revelation and there is no way to deal with that.” (“*Divine Property?*” *Newsweek*, July 5, 1971, p. 51.)

What did the several million people who read this in *Newsweek* think of the concept that the Holy Spirit taught these two denominations two different and contradictory doctrines? What do you think?

Martin Luther

What happens when people realize that the great reformation leader Martin Luther wrote:

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 I Cor. iii, would not allow Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I, poor, foul carcase 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 Thomson Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943], p. 135. Also cited by Lewis W. Spitz, Ph.D., *Our Church and Others* [Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1969], pp. 23-24.)

yet people who call themselves Lutherans are in blatant disagreement with Luther himself, who on this point was in agreement with Christ?

John Wesley

What transpires when people hear Charles Spurgeon, one of the great Baptist preachers who ever lived, say:

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, n.d., p. 168.*)

Instead of Spurgeon's desire coming true, we have at least twenty-six different Baptist denominations in this nation alone.

Likewise, Calvinists today disagree with Calvin, and right on down the line.

Preachers Teach Contradictory Doctrines

Many people seem to have no problem with all the contradictory doctrines in the religious realm, and yet if a single preacher taught all those contradictory doctrines himself, all would realize he had serious mental problems. Imagine what happens when an intelligent person sees so-called Christians claiming that the Bible can be understood hundreds of different ways, and the amazing thing about it, each way is right if religious division is right!

In truth, denominationalism has produced more atheism than all the atheists, militant atheists, hypocrites, and false teachers put together. Jesus knew it, Paul knew it, most of the founders of these denominations knew it, and pleaded it wouldn't happen.

Fruits of Denominationalism

With respect to religious division, compare the teaching of Jesus Christ with the statements of many prominent atheists:

Jesus

...that they may all be one...that the world may believe.
(Jn. 17.20-21)

Benedict Spinoza

This prominent Dutch Philosopher blamed theological creeds with all their contradictions as his rationale for becoming an atheist.

Voltaire

This famous French philosopher blamed the contradictions and abuses of Roman Catholicism for his atheism.

David Hume

This foremost Scottish philosopher blamed the creeds of Calvin and Presbyterianism for his unbelief.

Diderot

The eminent French encyclopedist blamed the creeds of orthodoxy for his atheism.

Robert Owen

Robert Owen was the greatest European atheist of the 19th century. He was a genius and a philanthropist, and concerning his background before debating Alexander Campbell on the evidences for the existence of God, historian Bill J. Humble says:

At the time when Robert Owen came to debate Campbell in 1829, he was 58 years of age and already a world figure of renown, appealing to the popular imagination by his schemes for the betterment of humanity, and arousing the ire of united clergy by his denunciations of all religions. This international figure was born in New Montgomeryshire, North Wales, on May 14, 1771. At an early age the boy was enrolled in a day school where he evidenced a precocious mental development; for at seven he had mastered all the information which his instructor could impart and was himself teaching. The intellectual growth of the young man was so rapid that before attaining his tenth birthday, he had investigated a number of theological works and examined their contents so critically as to lead himself to doubt the fundamental nature of all religion. (Bill J. Humble, *Alexander Campbell and Controversy* [Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Book Club, 1952], p. 81.)

The Bible didn't produce this distinguished atheist. The contradictions in denominational creeds did!

Charles Darwin

Many do not realize that the renowned agnostic Charles Darwin at one time studied at a seminary to become a clergyman in the Church of England. How did Charles Darwin, a believer in Christ and a creationist, become an agnostic whose name is inevitably connected with the

hypothesis of evolution? What swayed the man who has swayed so many? Why did Darwin, who prepared for the work of a clergyman, become the chief apostle of evolution?

His son, also his biographer, wrote:

We had an earnest conversation about going into Holy Orders; and I remember his asking me, with reference to the question put by the Bishop in the ordination service, “Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit, etc.” whether I could answer in the affirmative, and on my saying I could not, he said, “Neither can I, and therefore I cannot take Orders.” (Francis Darwin, *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Vol. I* [New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898], p. 147.)

Darwin didn’t reject Christ, or the Bible. He rejected a doctrine that was not even in the Bible, something in the creed book of the Church of England! Darwin’s works influenced the minds of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler, and gave them the “ethical basis” for many of their horrible actions. Who would dare say religious division isn’t really so bad?

Robert Ingersoll

The greatest American atheist of the last third of the nineteenth century claimed that theological creeds led to his religious downfall.

Charles Smith

Charles Smith, the first president of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, explained how he became an atheist:

Let me tell you something of how I came to be an Atheist. I used to live in Maud, Oklahoma—was there before the town was built; and have lived in Shawnee. I was in this town some twenty years ago, working for the Farmer’s Union. I joined the First Methodist church. A few years later, I went to a Methodist school, Epworth University, in Oklahoma City...The next session I went to the State University at Norman. I tried to continue to believe the Christian religion, but began to investigate its doctrines. One day when watching a football game with my pastor, I asked him if he believed the virgin birth story, and the Adam and Eve story. He said, “Why, of course not.” I demanded: “Why do you not tell your congregation that?” He re-

plied: “That would do a great deal of harm, and no good.” (Charles Smith, *Oliphant-Smith Debate* [Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Company, 1952], pp. 23-24.)

In every case, these renowned atheists and skeptics became unbelievers, not because of the Bible and the teaching of Christ or His apostles, but because of their lack of ability to believe religious confusion came from God. People’s allegiance to human creeds produced their unbelief.

This is why Jesus prayed that His followers would not be divided. This is the reason we ought to avoid man-made religion: names, doctrines, institutions, organizations, and practices that come from man, not God. This is why Jesus said, in Mt. 15.6-9:

...And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition...This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.

Creeds Produce Denominationalism

Many times people think denominationalism is produced by an inability of mankind to agree on how the Bible ought to be interpreted. Rather, it is produced by allegiance to something other than God and Christ: allegiance to human creeds.

Webster’s New World Dictionary, says concerning the term “creed”:

(...Latin, *credo*, lit., I believe...) 1. a brief statement of religious belief; confession of faith; 2. a specific statement of this kind accepted as authoritative by a church; 3. a statement of belief, principles, or opinions on any subject. (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition [New York: The World Publishing Company, 1970].)

It is important to realize a distinction between a personal creed and an organizational one. I have the right to state what I believe, and other

men may state their beliefs as well. However, denominational creeds are not statements of personal belief, but statements of what someone says you must believe to be in fellowship with them. It follows from this that a denominational creed must be a condition of communion in a specific coalition of congregations. This concept did not exist among New Testament Christians.

Thus, *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (Presbyterian), *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches*, *The Methodist Discipline*, etc. are not personal statements of belief, but authoritative (that is, based upon human authority) standards of fellowship other than the Bible. When one is involved in denominationalism, he is subject to human authority rather than divine authority.

For example, the *Discipline of the Free Methodist Church* prescribes allegiance to it as a condition of fellowship in that denomination:

Let none be received into full connection unless they give evidence of a renewed heart, by living up to the requirements of the General Rules,...(6) Do you subscribe to our articles of religion, our General Rules, and our Discipline, and are you willing to be governed by the same? (*Discipline of the Free Methodist Church* [North Chili, NY: B. T. Roberts, Publisher, 1887], p. 24.)

Be assured, none of Christ's apostles or other early Christians, nor any Christians for eighteen hundred years after Christ subscribed to the requirements of the General Rules of the Free Methodist Church. They never heard of the rules, or the denomination! These simply did not exist in New Testament times.

Similarly, one must hold to the creeds of the Lutheran church to be in that denomination. In *Our Church and Others*, published by the Evangelical Lutheran denomination itself, we read:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the total of all who unreservedly accept all canonical books of the Old and New Testament as God's revealed Word and who confess agreement with the teaching again brought to light through Luther's reformation and presented concisely in writing to Emperor and Empire at Augsburg in 1530 and repeated and expanded in the

other so-called Lutheran symbols (*Our Church and Others*, p. 23.)

If someone asks a Lutheran: “What does the Lutheran Church teach?” or: “What do you as a Lutheran believe?” he can direct the inquirer to the Lutheran confessions.

The Lutheran confessions may also be regarded as a standard around which Lutherans rally in their common defense of the doctrines of the Scriptures against error, or they may be regarded as a flag to which the teachers of the church pledge loyalty. Every member of the Lutheran Church is expected to subscribe not only to the Bible but also to the confessions as a correct presentation of Biblical doctrines...

Therefore pastors and professors are asked at the time of their ordination or installation: “Dost thou accept the three Ecumenical Creeds—the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian—as faithful testimonies to the truth of the Holy Scriptures, and dost thou reject all the errors which they condemn?” and: “Dost thou believe that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is a true exposition of the Word of God and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church; and that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the two Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord as contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one Scriptural faith?” *To both of these questions the candidate must answer, “I do.”* The officiating minister then asks: “Dost thou solemnly promise that thou wilt perform the duties of thy office in accordance with these Confessions and that *all thy teaching* and thy administration of the Sacraments *shall be in conformity* with the Holy Scriptures and *with the afore-mentioned Confessions?*” (*Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.)

In addition, one who holds to the Bible and *The Methodist Discipline* will become a Methodist, not a Baptist. To be a Baptist, one must hold to the *Baptist Manual* plus the Bible. However, you cannot follow that course and become a Mormon. Mormons are those who hold to both the Bible and the *Book of Mormon*.

One last illustration that shows denominationalism is not produced by difficulties of interpretation but by adherence to denominational creeds is found in the following statement from Edward T. Hiscox's *Standard Manual for Baptist Churches*:

It is most likely that in the Apostolic age when there was but "One Lord, one faith, and one baptism," and no differing denominations existed, the baptism of a convert by that very act, constituted him a member of the church, and at once endowed him with all the rights and privileges of full membership. In that sense, "baptism was the door into the church." Now, it is different; and while the churches are desirous of receiving members, they are wary and cautious that they do not receive unworthy persons. The churches therefore have candidates come before them, make their statement, give their "experience," and then their reception is decided by a vote of the members. (Edward T. Hiscox, D.D., *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* [Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890], p. 22.)

It's an absolute impossibility to follow just the Bible and become involved in these denominations or any others. None of them existed in Bible times.

The Harm of Denominational Creeds

We've all been around denominational creeds all our lives. Are they as innocuous as many think?

Creeds Hinder Fellowship

One of the arguments for the existence of creeds is that they are necessary for unity. While they produce unity *within the denomination*, on a scale larger than the denomination, they produce exactly the opposite. *Creeds are walls that prevent the fellowship of believers in*

Christ in different denominations, in the sense that fellowship is contemplated in the Bible.

Creeds Impeach the Wisdom of God

Will the Bible as God gave it produce the unity God desires? If it won't, we imply that men must write creeds because God didn't know what to say.

Creeds Impugn the Good Will of Christ

If Christ were wise enough to give us everything we needed (which He promised to do in Jn. 14.26, 16.13, and that the apostles affirmed he did, II Tim. 3.16; II Pet. 1.3; Jude 3), but He didn't, then if God's wisdom is not impeached, Christ's goodness must be. Did Christ deliberately reveal the Bible in such an ambiguous fashion that it remained for men to write creeds to make God's meaning understandable?

Creeds Harm Believers in Christ

Creeds not only harm the reputation of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who brought the complete revelation into the world, but they cause inestimable harm to believers in Christ. Rather than obey Paul's command to test everything to see if it's genuine (I Thes. 5.21), and "prove what is well pleasing to the Lord" (Eph. 5.8-11), those who place their confidence in creeds are obliged to approach the Bible with an interpretation already placed upon it. Obeying the apostle's teaching requires Christians to examine the scriptures with no established opinion. Those who place their confidence in creeds are not so free to examine the scriptures for themselves. They are compelled to conduct their investigations in light of the creed. Thus, creeds are opposed to independent Bible study and those believers who would profit thereby. Human creeds simply did not exist in the time of Christ, his apostles, or early-day Christians.

The argument of the atheist from religious division is still unanswerable. When one understands its great harm, he cannot entertain a benevolent attitude toward denominationalism and maintain his allegiance to Christ.

What Is a Denomination?

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

A Denomination Is Not Just Something “Named”

Webster defines a denomination as “The name of a class of things; a class or kind (especially of units) having a specific name or value.” Thus, we speak of currency consisting of several denominations: five dollar bills, tens, etc. Each denomination of money consists of a category of bills.

However, a denomination is more than something named. I have two children, both of whom I have named, but I am not the father of two denominations.

A Denomination Is An Organizational Concept

Donald G. Tinder, in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* gives the following definition of a denomination in the religious sense:

Denominations are associations of congregations—though sometimes it might be said that congregations are localized subdivisions of denominations—that have a common heritage. Moreover, a true denomination does not claim to be the only legitimate expression of the church. (Donald G. Tinder, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing House, 1984, p. 310.)

Thus, *a denomination is a collective of congregations*. When congregations function as a unit, they function denominationally. Tinder admits our naivete about the rise of the denominational concept:

Even though denominations within Protestantism have come to be the largest expression of organized Christianity beyond the level of the congregation, there has never been much theological reflection on denominationalism. A look at theological textbooks or church creeds confirms this. Probably the simplest explana-

tion for this omission is the Bible in no way envisages the organization of the church into denominations. It instead assumes the opposite, that all Christians—except those being disciplined—will be in full fellowship with all others. Any tendencies to the contrary were roundly denounced (I Cor. 1.10-13). Paul could write a letter to the Christians meeting in various places in Rome or Galatia with every assurance that all would receive the message. Today, for any city or country, he would have to place the letter as an advertisement in the secular media and hope. (*Ibid.*, p. 310.)

History of the Denominational Concept

In view of such widespread lack of understanding about the origin and rise of the denominational idea, we now want to notice its origin. It is intimate with the rise of Roman Catholicism.

Local Churches

In the New Testament, Christians joined themselves to local congregations that were self-ruling and independent (Ac. 9.26). They were overseen by elders, bishops (overseers), or shepherds whose authority Christ limited to a local church (Ac. 14.23, I Pet. 5.1-2). No idea existed of allegiance to another congregation, a collection of congregations, or a denomination. The New Testament speaks of the church in only two senses: (1) the universal sense, where one enjoys fellowship with all who share fellowship with God, and (2) the local church, where one shares fellowship with other Christians in a specific locale. No idea of fellowship (a working relationship) existed larger than a local congregation.

Metropolitans

However, as the simplicity of organization of New Testament Christians deteriorated, local leaders began to exercise authority over other local congregations. As religious historian George Park Fisher said:

After we cross the limit of the first century we find that with each board of elders there is a person to

whom the name “bishop” is especially applied. (George Park Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1827, p. 51.)

Later, Fisher said:

The bishop of the chief city of each province was called the metropolitan. (*Ibid.*, p. 104.)

Regional Church Councils

In the second century, an inexorable movement began toward organizing the universal church. Phillip Schaff, in his celebrated *History of the Christian Church*, showed how early believers wanted some type of church government:

A form of government (as the superiority of the bishop) so ancient and so widely adopted, can be satisfactorily accounted for only on the supposition of religious needs, namely, the need of a tangible outward representation and centralization, to illustrate and embody to the people their relation to Christ and to God, and the visible unity of the church. (Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, II*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887, p. 133.)

Mosheim, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, also pointed out the “bishops” of churches in various provinces began to meet to deliberate on doctrinal issues and to coordinate provincial activities among the churches:

These councils—of which no vestige appears before the middle of this (2nd) century—changed nearly the whole form of the church. (John Lawrence Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History, I*, Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Book Club, 1959, pp. 116-117.)

Thus, by the end of the fourth century, 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 constitutes a denomination. As Mosheim correctly said, the whole form of the church had changed. This change was critical to the concept of a denomination, alt-

though *modern* denominations did not arise for at least another twelve hundred years!

Universal Church Councils

The first “universal” (Ecumenical) Council was held at the order of the Roman Emperor Constantine in Nicea in 325 A.D. This Council of Nicea produced the Nicene Creed. Mark it well, the Apostles of Christ and first century Christians never attended a conference of congregations, nor ever laid eyes on such a creed.

By the fourth century, the metropolitans of the four leading cities of the Roman empire, Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria competed for oversight of the universal collection of congregations. At the end of the sixth century, Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, denounced John the Faster (Patriarch of Constantinople) for his assumed title of “Universal Patriarch.” In 606 A.D., Boniface III was proclaimed “Universal Bishop” over all the churches.

In only five centuries, men completed the transition from the simple organization of the autonomous local church to the universal coalition of local churches now seen in Roman Catholicism. *Rather than the body of Christ that consists of Christians, the concept now was the body of Christ that consisted of churches, which themselves consisted of Christians. This is the essence of denominationalism.*

The European Reformation Movement

In the reformation movement of the sixteenth century and beyond, this denominational concept extended into Protestantism. Leaders like Luther, Wesley, and Calvin, while they courageously fought many of the excesses of Roman Catholicism, unfortunately retained many other doctrines and ideas of Catholicism. While they rejected the Pope as the visible head of a universal collection of congregations, they kept the concept of the universal church composed of congregations. Thus, the denominations that resulted from the work of these men and their followers simply added more collections of churches!

Conclusion

We are in the midst of denominational division, and we have described briefly how we got here. In another book, *Fellowship: With*

God and His People, the author gives an extended treatment of the non-denominational way of Christ. If you pursue His way, that volume will help your quest. It is not concerned with doctrinal issues, as is this one, except for doctrine associated with the relationship of Christians to Christ and to each other. On the other hand, this companion volume examines many basic denominational doctrines which confront us in the religious realm, in hope that our mutual study on these topics will aid us in a search to be “just Christians.”