



Denominationalism

Is Christ Divided?

Denominationalism examined in the light of Scripture

- **The divine commission and character of the local churches.**
- **What is a denomination?**
- **When did denominations begin?**
- **What is the biblical truth on gathering?**
- **Why denominationalism is contrary to the word of God.**

Since you would know by what name I would be distinguished from others. I will tell you I would be, and hope I am a CHRISTIAN. I choose if God will count me worthy, to be called a Christian, a believer, or any other such name which is approved by the Holy Ghost. And, as for the titles of Anabaptist (Baptist), Independents, Presbyterians, and the like, I conclude that they come neither from Jerusalem nor Antioch, but from Hell, or Babylon.”

John Bunyan 1672.

Are “denominational churches” sanctioned by Scripture? If they are, then we ought to be part of them, supporting their services and servants. If, however, they are contrary to Scripture, then we cannot partake of them. This study, and the uncompromising judgment against denominationalism by John Bunyan above, is not about the salvation or sincerity of believers within the denominations. All who are redeemed in Christ, irrespective of their denominational affiliation are eternally part of His **Body**, the Church. Our subject is not presented in ignorance of the zeal for the Lord seen in many denominational believers, a zeal which, in many cases is to be admired. Nor is it undertaken to declare or promote self-righteousness in those gathered outside the denominations. It is not a matter of us insisting that another person walks in our *light*, but of us making sure that we do not walk in another person’s *darkness*. Our purpose is to examine the biblical legitimacy of the **denominational church** (denominationalism) and, in so doing, see something of the divine way of gathering and its blessed privileges and responsibilities. We judge the system and not the beloved saints of God within it.

We must note, that some people, especially those of the younger generation, are perplexed at the very suggestion that denominationalism is unscriptural. They see the myriad of denominations as composing the “natural” character of Christianity. To them, denominationalism has always been the ecclesiastical landscape of Christianity and its representative voice. The major issue, if there has been one at all, has been over which denomination they should join. Furthermore, they know of godly believers within the denominations and are taken aback by the statement that such people support practices that are unscriptural.

These are understandable responses, in the light of which we are obliged to place before all the clear biblical evidence against denominationalism. Many Christians are unaware of the spiritual error and perils associated with it. Growing ecumenism and pleas for “unity” among Christian denominations, means there is today, more than ever, a responsibility to warn the saints of God

of these dangers, and so fulfill the great commission given by the Lord: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt 28:19-20). It is also vital to point out that it is God’s word and not godliness in life that is the test of what is or is not according to divine truth. Another has truly said, “The best of men are only men at best.” We must measure what we do against that “which is written” and not against the creeds, character and codes of men. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16). Are denominational gatherings sanctioned by the word of God?

The divine commission and character of the local church

It is vital that we have a clear understanding and a firm conviction as to the purpose of the local church, or as we often refer to it, the local assembly. The local church is **God’s house** and it is to bear witness to the wisdom and **glory of God** in Christ, “to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph 3:10). It is to fulfill this divine commission as:

- “Pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). When the local church comes together it is to uphold the truth concerning the glory of Christ – His Person and work. Noah, Abraham and Isaac built altars; Jacob built a pillar and anointed it with oil. He called that place *Bethel* – the house of God. As a pillar it served to raise and support a testimony unto God.
- A lampstand, as a light in a dark place, testifying to the truth of Christ to the world, as enabled by the Spirit of God dwelling within it (Rev 1; 2&3).

These verses leave no doubt as to **why** Christians are gathered locally – to collectively present a divine testimony to the glory of God in Christ. We need to keep this divine principle before us continually, lest we fall into the error of believing that the assembly exists to serve the glory of man, his local community and causes.

The matter of **why** we are gathered raises the matter of **how** we are to be gathered. When God bestows responsibility upon man He never leaves man to devise his own way of meeting it. The Israelites were not left to devise their own order of corporate life and witness to Him. “Thus was all the work of the

tabernacle of the tent of the congregation finished: and the children of Israel did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so did they” (Ex 39:32; Lev 8:4). It was always according to the *divine pattern* (Ex 25:9; 40; Num 8:4; Heb 8:5). This is because the divine pattern reflected the divine glory. *Then* and only then did God inhabit the house. Only God can determine the pattern, for only God can determine how His glory is to be upheld and manifested before heaven and earth. This is true for every dispensation. Abraham “looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). How different to Cain, who departed from God’s presence and built the first edifice to serve the glory of man (Gen 4). In this dispensation of the Church, God has revealed in His word how Christians are to gather locally to testify to His glory. What then is God’s appointed way of gathering unto His glory, and is denominationalism in accordance with it?

Biblical Practice

NT believers owned only the name of Christ, individually and collectively

Why was this? It was because the **divine glory** is vested in the name of **Christ**. Let us now look at six vital truths connected with the name “Christian” found in Scripture.

1. It was a name of a unique **association**: This name set the believers in Christ apart from Jews and Gentiles. It identified the *Person* to whom the disciples belonged, and the One they *gathered unto* – **Christ**. “And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called “Christians” first in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). It was clearly the name of a unique association, the name “Christian” being identified directly with the local church.
2. We observe too, that “Christian” was a name identified with a unique **confession**. “Then Agrippa said unto Paul, ‘Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28).
3. To take the name “Christian” is also to make a unique collective **profession**, for it expresses the name of One who is “head over all things to the Church” (Eph 1:22); the One whose name is above every name (Philipp 2:9). It imparts the highest privilege and responsibility to those who take it. “So we, being many, are one body in **Christ**, and every one members one of another” (Rom 12:5).
4. The name “Christian” voices a unique **separation** - “Let every one that nameth the name of **Christ** depart from iniquity” (2 Tim 2:19).
5. It is the name that carries the reproach of Christ in a world that rejects Him, marking a unique **oppression**. Peter writing to believers as pilgrims declares, “If any suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this account” (1 Pet

4:16). "If ye are reproached for the name of **Christ**, happy are you; for the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Pet 4:14).

6. "Christian" is also the name identified with the pilgrim's **expectation** – their hope and glory. "But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of **Christ's** sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Pet 4:13).

Even this brief examination reveals that "Christian" is the name that uniquely testifies to our:

- **Identification** *with Christ* - identifying with Him and with none other.
- **Sanctification** *unto Christ* - separating unto Him and unto none other.
- **Confession** *of Christ* - owning Him and none other.
- **Profession** *for Christ* – gathering unto Him and to none other.
- **Unification** *in Christ* - existing as members in Him and in none other.

The prime distinction and division made by the Spirit of God among mankind in the NT is between those who belong to **Christ** (Christians), and those who do not belong to **Christ** (non-Christians). This distinction brings out the spiritual *position, profession* and *possessions* we have in **Christ**, which we did not possess when we were outside of **Christ**. We are a *new creation* in **Christ** (2 Cor 5:17) – defining our unique *posterity* in Christ, the Second Man. For these reasons, God's design for His people has not changed. "And all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the **name** of the LORD" (Deut 28:9-10). The name **Christ** is not a mere 'tag'. It expresses who Christ is and the facets of His glory. It singularly defines His relationship to those in Him. So we always get in Scripture the *Body* in relation to **Christ** – *Christ* is the Head of the Body – locally and universally (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:12; 5:23; 5:30; Col 1:18). It is too, as we note later, the *Body* as the *Bride* in relation to **Christ**.

What is a Denomination?

A **denomination** arises when *Christians* adopt and gather unto a name other than, or in addition to the name of Christ. They do this in order to *distinguish* and *separate* themselves from others in Christ, so we get "Methodists," "Baptists," "Anglicans," "Church of Christ"; "Christian Brethren" etc. The unscriptural division made here is between **Christian** and **Christian**. This is why denominationalism is called *sectarianism*, the word "sect" meaning division. Christians are identified according to their denomination; they are separated unto their denomination; they gather unto their denomination; they

confess the creed devised by that denomination; they profess and promote the reputation and cause of their denomination. We see here how denominationalism has marred the testimony to the **united** position, profession, possession and posterity believers have in **Christ**. Where God would have a witness to unity, denominationalism has brought confusion which, sadly, is vaunted before an unregenerate and cynical world. Denominationalism makes nonsense of the NT use of the Greek word *ekklesia* used in relation to the Church. In Scripture it identifies those who have been called out of the **world** unto **Christ** as the *Church*, because of salvation in *Christ*. Denominationalism has given it an unscriptural meaning. It identifies those called out of **Christ** unto a **denomination** because of a *creed*. We see again why a denominational church cannot be biblical. Those who belong to it do not constitute a biblical church.

When did denominationalism begin?

The signs of denominationalism were evident in the apostolic days in Corinth, and their appearance brought stern rebuke from Paul. In the early post apostolic centuries, the Roman Catholic Church set itself up as *the* Christian Church, standing apart from all others at the time. In opposition to the Papacy and Rome, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th-17th centuries spawned four major non-Roman Catholic denominations: *Lutheran* (Martin Luther); *Swiss Reformed* (Zwingli); *Anglican* (Ridley, Latimer, Cranmer etc); *Presbyterian* (Calvin – Europe, Knox – Scotland). Many other sects arose out of Protestantism such as the Congregationalists, the Anabaptists and the Methodists.

The NT churches owned only the name of Christ

Again we ask “why?” Once more Scripture replies, “Because the **divine glory** is vested in the divine name – here the name of Christ.” “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another” (Isa 42:8). Christ has associated His blessed name and hence His exclusive glory with the gathering of His people. There were no denominations during the NT church period. Christ and Christ alone was the centre of gathering, for He was all-sufficient. There was an occasion however, when the noxious shoot of denominationalism appeared at Corinth, threatening to deepen divisions between *Christians* headed under other names. It was rooted in carnal soil (1 Cor 3:3). It was error then and it is no less an error today. It was error that Paul had to address ahead of all the other grievous situations existing in that church, because it had the potential to deny the very Centre of gathering – Christ! And, if this were denied, then the church at Corinth would cease to be a church of God (1 Cor 1:1-2; cf Matt

18:20). Some were identifying with Paul, others with Apollos or Peter and some with Christ (1 Cor 1:10-16).¹ The Apostle declares all this to be of the flesh. He ranks denominationalism – *heresy*, alongside other works of the flesh such as idolatry, witchcraft and adultery – such is its evil (Gal 5:20).² His correction appears to have been heeded, for we do not hear of this problem again in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians. The generations of Christianity that followed, however, have not listened to the Spirit-inspired correction from the apostle. We read of many denominations coming into existence and, without exception, all derived and reared from the work of men, with many declaring allegiance to those men or to the doctrines that take their name: Lutherans - Martin Luther; Calvinists (and Presbyterians) - John Calvin; Methodists - John Wesley; Kellyites; Taylorites; etc. Is Christ divided (1 Cor 1:13)? Sadly, it appears to heaven and earth that Christ is divided, even to the disdain of those whose names have been wrongly adopted!³

Despite gross failure in spiritual *condition*, the church at Corinth was still a “church of God.” This was because they, with all the other churches, called exclusively upon the name of **Christ**. They were in the correct *position* and *profession* relative to **Christ**. “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Cor 1:1-2; Matt 18:20). There are three instructive expressions used in relation to the local churches in the NT. They were the *churches* of:

- **God** – revealing their *origin* - in God.
- **Christ** – revealing their *possession* – by Christ, purchased by Him.
- **The saints** – revealing their *composition* – sanctified through the Spirit.

Note firstly, these expressions are *descriptive* revealing the threefold *character* of the local church. Secondly, they applied to *all* of them and were *not* applied

¹ In this context to say “I am of Christ” is improper. It must be “we are all of Christ.”

² Heresies [haireisis] - disunity through sectarianism. The Sadducees were a sect [haireisis] – a division among the Jews, which reflected the disunity among them (Acts 5:17).

³ Luther declared to his supporters, “I pray you leave my name alone, and do not call yourself Lutherans, but Christians.... Cease, my dear friends, to cling to these party names and distinctions; away with them all; let us call ourselves only Christians.” John Wesley declared, “Would to God that all party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world, were forgot...that the very name [Methodist] might never be mentioned more, but be buried in eternal oblivion”; *Universal Knowledge*, Vol 9, p 540. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “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 1 p 168.

exclusively to any group of churches. It was not a case of some churches being identified or gathering as the “churches of God” and others as the “churches of Christ” etc. This would be denominationalism (sectarianism).⁴ Thirdly, they refer to “churches” – in the plural, and so express the unity among them. Scripture also speaks of the “churches of Galatia” and the “churches of Judaea” (Gal 1:2; 22). These expressions are *locative*, and they identify the local churches with a geographical area.⁵

It is clear from the biblical record that denominationalism is of man, and it is opposed to the *experience* and *expression* of unity in **Christ** among the believers and the churches of the NT. We have before us a sure historical and practical basis for our biblical answer to those who seek our support for denominationalism and then question our denial of it.

Biblical Principle

Denominationalism not only conflicts with the experience of the NT, it is also opposed to the *doctrine* in the NT regarding the Church and the churches.

Denominationalism denies the unity of the Spirit

John chapter 17 portrays the Son of God in heart-felt prayer. He is soon to suffer, die, rise from among the dead and ascend to His Father. His Shepherd’s heart reaches out to His own, those present and future. He prays in that dire hour to His Father “**that they all may be one, as We are one**” (Jn 17:11; 22; cf Acts 1:4). He had spoken earlier of the same unity using the tender pastoral expression “**one flock**” (Jn 10:16). In Acts 2 we have the fulfillment of the prayer of the Good Shepherd. When the day of Pentecost had fully come, the Spirit of God descended and baptized every one of those 120 believers into a blessed unity in Christ – the **Body of Christ**. The Church had come, and it had come on the basis of a crucified, risen and glorified Christ. It was formed by the work of the *Spirit of God* as a wondrous and indissoluble unity, united together and to Christ its glorified **Head**. And so the command to all Christians is to *keep*

⁴ When therefore Scripture uses the expression “the church of God at Corinth,” it means that the local church at Corinth was one of many “churches of God.” The latter expression embraces and qualifies the former. In 1 Cor 15:9, “the Church of God” as given by the context, refers to the Body of Christ; “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God [i.e., all Christians].”

⁵ So, too, “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess 1:1). The expression “the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom 16:4) identifies the churches of God that were established within Gentile regions. It is not the “Church of the Gentiles,” signifying a group of churches made up of Gentile Christians. The existence of national or racial federations such as the “Church of Scotland,” or “Chinese Christian Church” is unscriptural. In Revelation 2:1 it is “the church *in* Ephesus” RV.

the **unity of the Spirit** – that blessed unity that *was* made in *Christ* on that day of Pentecost (Eph 4:3-4). Christ’s work was finished and He had gone. His name is left to speak of His glory among men as the centre of gathering and unity of His flock.

Denominationalism, with its man-made divisions, disparate identities and separate memberships, stands in direct opposition to the unity of the Spirit made on the day of Pentecost. Its existence directly opposes that for which Christ died – to gather into one [Body] those that are in Him through His death (Jn 11:52; 1 Cor 12:13). It is a rebuff to the prayer of the Good Shepherd “that they may all be one.” Denominationalism with its separate memberships is a clear denial of the unity of the Spirit as taught and revered by Paul. “So we [Christians], being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another (Rom 12:5). Scripture never speaks of a believer being a member of anything other than the Body of Christ or as members one of another. Such was the work of the Spirit of God at Pentecost. Believers are not ‘members’ of a local church and even less members of a denomination. There can be no dual membership for those in Christ. As members of Christ’s Body and as members one of another, we are not to gather as a separate local *membership*, but as members of His Body in a local *fellowship*.

But what of inter-denominationalism? It is built on the bricks and slime of Babel. Such efforts have nothing whatsoever to do with keeping the *unity of the Spirit*; for the simple reason that denominationalism itself is not of the Spirit. Therefore any *union* within it cannot be of the Spirit. We observe, too, that the emergence and prevalence of the denominations has destroyed the once blessed and bountiful interdependence of the churches of God in the NT, as seen in the spontaneous commending and receiving of believers between them. This reflects adversely on the truth of the unity of the Spirit.

Denominationalism denies Christ as the Head and Centre of gathering

We have seen something of this already. In the OT God was jealous that His house should bear His name *exclusively* - “a house for my **name**” (2 Sam 7:13; 1 Kings 5:5; 8:16-19 etc.). As God spoke to David so He moved Solomon, “And, behold, I purpose to build an house unto the **name** of the LORD my God” (1 Kings 5:5). And again, “that they may know that this house, which I have builded, is called by thy **name**; “that all people of the earth may know thy **name** (1 Kings 8:43). God’s house must carry His name and His name only. Should the Christ of God, the Son of God demand and accept anything less? In all places where I record my **name** I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee”

(Ex 20:24). Should the children of God confess and covet anything less? The answers to these questions, must be a heart-felt, no! *This* is why the Lord's promise in Matthew 18:20 is *conditional*. "For where two or three are gathered together **unto my name**, there am I in the midst of them." Like Jehovah of old, the Son is jealous of the divine glory and He can only dwell in the midst of those who are gathered unto His **name** – solely. There is no other **name** whereby we can be saved (Acts 4:12), and therefore there is no other **name** unto which the saved can be scripturally gathered. In His house the Lord's name must stand supreme and unrivaled. In His physical absence on earth His **name** marks the centre-point of gathering, the place of His dwelling and of His glory. All other names as adopted within denominationalism deny and vie with the divine glory.

The Spirit of God does the gathering as noted; all else is a "get-together" of people of kindred spirits. His work is to glorify Christ, and so He will **never** gather those in Christ to any other name but the name of Christ. How can He do so as the Vicar of Christ, whose divine mission is to preserve the singular glory of that name? "He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you (Jn 16:14). The expression "gathered" in Matthew 18:20 is in the passive voice, meaning that those gathered are acted upon by another – the Holy Spirit. This is consistent with the term for the church used in the NT – *ekklesia*. It was employed in ancient times to refer to those who were called out - summoned for a particular purpose. The Spirit of God calls out, and summons believers in Christ to Christ and to His name. By being gathered *only* unto Christ as *Christians*, the local church gives full and free expression to the truth that Christ is the Centre and Head of the Body. All other names divide and scatter - the sad testimony of denominationalism.⁶ Because of this failing, denominationalism spawns further error in regard to Christ as Centre and Head of the Church.

1. A local church within a denomination has *origin* and *legitimacy* only because of its pledge to that *denomination*. It exists entirely because it is part of a wider ecclesiastical organization defined by man-made charters. It owes *identity* and *continuation* to that institutional system. In some cases, the error is exercised to the blasphemous degree, where an appointed person assumes the title as the head of this or that Church. A biblical church owns only **Christ**. It is raised as a work of the *Spirit*; it stands *autonomous* in Christ, before Him and in Him **alone**; it has its identity, legitimacy, existence and continuance solely in Christ (Rev 1, 2&3).

⁶ The biblical names given to those in Christ – Christians, believers, saints and brethren, are all unifying names (cf Baptist, Anglican, Methodist etc).

2. A local church within a denomination takes its *character* from that denomination. So we get a “Methodist church,” an “Anglican church,” a “Presbyterian church” etc., each with its distinctive order of services, officers, creeds and charters. A biblical church takes its character solely from its *relationship to Christ* – in the MIDST, and its only charter is the Bible! It has a distinctive and holy order because of it – one which is ordained and led by the Spirit of Christ. When he refers to the local church at Corinth, Paul is careful to omit the article. He says of them, “ye are body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27).⁷ If he had said “ye are *the* body of Christ,” it would mean that the local church at Corinth was the *only* body of Christ. This would identify and promote exclusivism. On the other hand, if he had said “ye are *a* body of Christ,” it would promote denominationalism, because the church at Corinth would then be one of a number of “bodies of Christ,” and those within such bodies would constitute separate memberships. The grammar is appropriate given the budding sectarianism at Corinth. The Body of Christ is not made up of a number of “bodies,” which is the unbiblical testimony of denominationalism. But, most importantly, the omission of the article is employed to emphasize the *character* of a particular thing – here the local church. Paul reminds the church at Corinth that they partake of the character of *Christ*. The local church is to display Christ and Him alone – and that character is vested in His name.
3. A denomination confers its particular *character* to a believer in that he/she is identified as a “Baptist,” an “Anglican,” a “Methodist” etc.⁸ We are to be conformed to the image of God’s Son (Rom 8:29).
4. Each denomination has to some degree a man-made charter that defines its beliefs and policies. This charter is used to interpret and rule on all matters relating to the denomination. The word of God is not the *sole* authority. In many cases it is relegated to a mere after-thought. Decisions are made on the basis of “what the *Church* believes,” rather than “thus and thus saith the Lord.” The “Church” becomes the teacher and final word on all matters.⁹
5. A denomination, as an edifice of man takes on the ambitions of men. Its “Church” is an *organization* built and maintained by man, rather than an *organism* (body) with Christ at its head. As such, it serves men, giving them honor, titles, vestures and charters not found in Scripture. The Spirit of God is not given free reign in church order and conduct. The shades of clerisy within denominationalism – all of which are hated by the Lord (Rev 2:15), deny the priesthood of all believers which is a blessed legacy of Christ’s death (Rev 1:5-6).¹⁰ We are to mind the things of the Spirit and not of the flesh (Rom 8:5).

⁷ The definite article “the” is not in the original text.

⁸ The danger and error of this is clearly evident in the following statement, which declares every ‘true’ Christian to be a *Baptist* – even though he/she is unaware of it. “If a person is truly saved and uncompromisingly follows the principles of the New Testament he will in a true sense be a Baptist whether he uses the name or not”; *Independent Fundamental Baptist Churches (Australia)*.

⁹ This has been clearly demonstrated in recent debates within the denominations over the ordination of women etc. Discussion is based on what is permitted or contrary to the Church’s charter.

¹⁰ Refer to the paper *Rule in God’s House*.

Denominationalism denies the relationship between the Bride and Bridegroom

The Church is the **Bride of Christ**. His heart's desire as the Bridegroom is that the Bride for whom He died owns and gathers unto no other name but *His*. The local assembly as "pillar and ground of the truth" is to reflect this divine principle and pledge by owning and gathering *only* unto the name of Christ. Such is the jealous love and law of divine espousal. To do otherwise is infidelity, which grieves the heavenly Bridegroom and His Vicar the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The solemn verdict of Scripture is that denominationalism is not the work of the Spirit of God. It is a serious departure from divine truth. Where in Scripture is the Holy Spirit attributed with setting up a denomination and gathering Christians to it; or credited with creating a number of denominations and allocating Christians between them? Denominationalism *opposes the will of Christ* that there is to be one flock, not many "folds" (Jn 10:16); and that we are to be gathered **unto His name** exclusively, and not unto some denominational name representing its denominational identity and creed (Matt 18:20).¹¹ When the world looks upon the local church it must see Christ and Christ only represented. In Matthew 18 the Lord could have said where two or three are gathered together unto "me" or unto my "Person," but He chose to place the emphasis on His *name*. The local church within denominationalism represents an "ism" to the world – Methodism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism etc. This is never in God's mind according to the Bible. In 1 Kings 8 we have the *name* of God sent out from His *house* to all the nations, so that the stranger comes out of a far country for His *name's* sake (1 Kings 8:42). We note too a particular danger of denominationalism as a system. It has a great propensity to cause people to believe they are saved and sanctified unto God just because they conform to a certain creed. In this denominationalism is not far removed from Judaism!

¹¹ A "fold" refers to sheep contained within a wall, the wall giving them their identity and cohesion. This was Judaism – a people gathered within a fold, separated from all others by a "middle wall." Christ has broken down this middle wall of partition (Eph 2). A "flock" unlike a "fold" does not gather *within* a wall; it gathers *around* the shepherd. So here we have the Church, the Body of Christ as the flock, and the local church as the "little flock" (Acts 20), both with the Lord in the *centre* – the Good Shepherd who gave His life for His sheep.

The divine “presence” or the divine “dwelling”?

It is a searching matter to ask, “Where is God pleased to **dwell**? The question presupposes the truth that God is not indiscriminate as to where He takes up residence. God was *present* throughout Israel’s history and blessing came to them as a result of it. The book of Esther portrays a present and providential God to a people who were in the wrong place and position before Him.¹² The OT reveals a clear distinction between the *presence* of God and His *dwelling*. If there is no distinction then there is no significance in an ever-present God seeking to dwell among His people (Ex 25:8). There is, of course, a clear difference and a vital lesson to be had in the distinction between God being present and Him being resident. It was only when Israel gathered unto to His *name* and according to His ordained pattern that God *dwelt* in their midst. “And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them” (Ex 25:8 cf Rev 3:8, the church at Philadelphia). This is a divine blessing conferred upon a redeemed people. The sanctuary had to be made after the divine “pattern” (Ex 25:9). Unlike His presence, God’s dwelling among His people is distinct *and* conditional! God must have a sanctuary, a divinely patterned one in order to dwell among His people. When gathered according to the proper place and pattern, and with Jehovah in the midst of the camp, Israel enjoyed a peculiar and higher fellowship with Him – such that the glory of the Lord filled the place (Ex 40:34).¹³ We see this again in Leviticus. It was from within the “tent of the meeting,” the divinely patterned centre of gathering that God revealed to Moses those singular provisions of approach and acceptance (Lev 1:1).

The NT assembly is such a place – a divine sanctuary. May we lay hold of the divine purpose and character of the local assembly! It is a sanctuary not

¹² Those who returned to Jerusalem were in the right *place* before God. “And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD said, “In Jerusalem will I put my name” (2 Kings 21:4). This of itself did not guarantee continuing fidelity before God, for we read of departure among them due to failure in heart. However, while there were bad kings in the Southern Kingdom centered at Jerusalem, there were also good kings, who brought the people into a true relationship with God. In contrast, there were no good kings in the Northern Kingdom with Samaria as its centre – the people were away from God, even though God, in grace, sent His prophets among them.

¹³ This was so in regard to the temple built by Solomon. David handed down the pattern to Solomon (1 Chron 28) so that he could build “an house for the name of the Lord” (2 Chron 2:1). When this was done God came in and dwelt within, such that the “glory of the Lord filled the house of God” (2 Chron 5:13-14). So, too, with the building of the house of God during the days of Ezra (Ezra 6). It was built according to the commandment of the God of Israel (the pattern for it) and according to the commandment of the kings (the permission for it). Those who returned from captivity with Zerubbabel in the days of Ezra, we observe, restored not only the house of God to its proper place, but also the feasts of Jehovah. They kept the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread at the divinely appointed time and place (Ezra 6:19). Those who did not return added, in failure, another feast – *they* called these days “Purim” (Esther 9:26).

made of bricks and mortar, but of living stones (1 Pet 2:5). Christ is **present** whenever Christians “meet” and there is blessing to be had because of this. But He can only be in the **midst** in the particular sense when the gathering is exclusively unto His name. Here, too, we have a *conditional* promise, which is given by the Lord Himself as noted above (Matt 18:20). When gathered solely unto His name, He is able to reveal Himself in a way not possible where His glory is veiled by other names, and where the unity of the Spirit is denied. When believers own only the name of Christ and gather to Him as Centre according to the divine pattern, they become a sanctuary built by God, wherein the Lord is pleased to dwell in the midst and through His Spirit reveal to them those divine glories which otherwise could not be revealed. Such is the deprivation within denominational gatherings, wherein men have built a “church” according to their own pattern and centre, and then set about inviting the Lord to dwell within it.

We have the same truth viewed in another way. The local church is to be a sanctuary – a *temple* of God (1 Cor 3:16). It is a temple *because* the Spirit of God is in *residence* (He dwells) within it. But He can only *dwell* among those *He* gathers! ¹⁴ The Holy Spirit can **never** gather the redeemed in Christ to any other name but Christ and Christ alone. When resident, the Spirit brings before the saints the peculiar and precious glories of Christ, which they are to express in worship and bear in sacred testimony to the world. This was the unbridled spiritual blessing and privilege experienced by those who, many decades ago, as led by the Spirit moved out of the fetters of denominationalism. They met in sublime simplicity owning the sufficiency of Christ as the centre of gathering, adhering solely to God’s word as their rule and looking to His Spirit as their Guide, through whom they exercised their priesthood in intimate worship and praise unto God. There was a return to the purity and simplicity of the primitive church – no clergy, no creeds and no denominations. And, may we mark and revere the explosion of Spirit-led revival of truth and tidings concerning the Person and work of Christ that arose because of it. If we have truly experienced the privilege and blessing that comes with gathering solely unto Christ and His name, how can we be content with anything less? Israel tasted the fatness from

¹⁴ Here only is the local church a true lampstand, for here only is the Spirit of God (the Oil) given liberty to work and speak of Christ. The Spirit may be *present* but He can never be *resident* in a denominational gathering. In Revelation 2, the removal of the lampstand does not necessarily mean an *outward* form would not continue. It means that its “light,” its essential testimony would cease because the Spirit would no longer *dwell* within. The church at Ephesus had great zeal, but this second generation had left its first love (*agape*) and was in danger of losing its witness. It has been truly said, it is always easier to continue to be zealous rather than to repent.

God but through failure preferred the lean provisions of the nations. Young believer in Christ, seek to be a Bezaleel, set apart by the Spirit of God to do all manner of work - *according to the pattern*. “And Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made all that the LORD commanded Moses” (Ex 38:22). May this be the earnest desire and blessed portion of us all.

But - some within the denominations have protested to the writer!

1. “*A denominational name is only a name.*” All such names are, as we have seen, contrary to divine will. If it is only a name then why persist with it if it serves no useful purpose and is contrary to God’s pattern? The reality, of course, is that a denominational name is much more than “just a name,” as we have noted. It is the banner under which a denomination gathers; the standard that bears and publishes its identity to the world; and the name in which it expresses unity amongst **itself** and its separation from **other** Christians.
2. “*Denominational names help us to identify the doctrinal beliefs of various groups of Christians and avoid error.*” This claim runs counter to the way in which we are to identify error as intended by the Spirit of God. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Furthermore, given the multitude of divisions and evolving sub-divisions within the denominations, to pursue this assertion with any diligence means we would fail to “walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time” (Col 4:5).
3. “*Look at the many being saved through my denomination.*” This is often the first and last argument used by many within a denomination to justify its existence. Superficially, the claim appears persuasive and can unsettle some who, in their own eyes see relatively little “success” in their labour for the Lord and unto the lost. To use souls saved to validate the way of gathering exposes a lack of understanding of the ways of God in salvation and grace. The essence of divine grace, as vouchsafed through the Cross of Christ, is that sin can be no barrier to it (Rom 5:20). Because of Christ’s all-sufficient work, God can come in *anywhere* and save – even within the stronghold of Jezebel, evident in the conversion of Martin Luther. If all things must be “right and proper” before God comes in to save, then who will be saved? Consider too, the following specific errors in the above claim.
 - a. It fails to grasp that the saving of souls is God bringing glory to the preaching of His *word* – not to those who preach it, nor to the churches or organizations to which they belong. “Neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (1 Cor 3:7). “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa 55:11). Such is the nature of a revival – the *truth* is revived, the *word* is then preached and souls are saved to the glory of *God*.
 - b. It denies that the word of God is the sole and final arbiter on Christian doctrine – even doctrine concerning church gathering.

- c. It ignores the fact that souls are being saved through the efforts of those within a number of denominations. Which of these then is the “more scriptural” and “greater blessed” denomination? All such comparative statistics are, in the light of eternity and the divine prerogative to save, utterly meaningless and serve carnal hearts.
- d. It fosters the erroneous belief that just because people are being saved through the preaching of the gospel by a church, then that church is gathering in accordance with Scripture. “Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Philipp 1:18 cf Isa 55:11).

Unscriptural arithmetic

We do read in God’s word of numbers saved. To avert the self-delusion created by “unscriptural arithmetic,” these accounts avoid the notion that those saved were added to a specific church. We read of the saved being added to the *Lord* – implicitly in Acts 2:41 (“unto them” is not in the original text); and explicitly in Acts 5:14; 11:24. In Acts 2:47 it is the *Lord* who adds to the church, not to the local church but to the Church which is His Body.¹⁵ It is the Lord who does the adding because it is only the Lord who knows who are truly His (2 Tim 2:19). We may identify them by their fruits, but only the Lord who searches the hearts knows if such fruit is unto repentance. When we hear of numbers saved as a result of some denominational work we praise God. But we may never hear this side of heaven of the numbers saved as a result of a believer outside the denominations who, in relative obscurity, has for instance spent a lifetime distributing tracts to the lost.

There is a vital question, the answer to which is a solemn censure of denominationalism. As noted, it was the Lord’s desire concerning His own, “That they all may be one... and one in us” (Jn 17:21). Why did He desire such a thing? As the Lord Himself stated, such a unity has a purpose - to testify “that the world may believe that thou [the Father] hast sent me” (v 21). Every truth grounded on the Father sending the Son into the world is marred by the fragmentation and disunity of the Body evinced by denominationalism. How grievous to God and what a stumbling block is cast before a lost humanity! What then of the numbers lost **because** of denominationalism? Our task is to redeem the time not by engaging in meaningless statistical comparisons, but to “preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim 4:2); not to be downcast, but to be “steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58).¹⁶ Salvation is of the Lord. Pray the Lord then will give the

¹⁵ In Acts 16:5, the number of *churches* is said to have increased. Man’s responsibility is in regard to the “reception” locally of those added by the Lord to the totality – His Body (see the writer’s booklet *Reception*).

¹⁶ An assembly should continually assess its spiritual health and its evangelical activity, but this must only be done in the light of God’s word - never in regard to the number of “souls saved.” The numbers saved is the prerogative of God!

increase to the preaching of His word and let Him do the spiritual arithmetic – *He* knows His sheep and *He* will call the roll up yonder!

4. “*Those who refuse to attend denominational services are dividing Christ.*” If a church takes on a name other than or in addition to Christ, then it has by this action divided Christ, and has gathered in disobedience denying Him as the Head and Centre. It has declared a distinction between *Christians* – a denial of the unity of the Spirit.
5. “*Look at the growth in our numbers – we must be doing it right!*” This is again a case of unscriptural arithmetic. May we be encouraged by the Lord’s commendation to the church at Philadelphia. “I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Rev 3:8).

“Circles of fellowship”

Within denominationalism churches are federated – placed within a circle, which is defined by a union according to creed and/or a common name. The motives appear virtuous – consistency of testimony and unity between churches. However, *any* federation between local churches is unscriptural and has always failed. They are of man and sectarian, and therefore they oppose the unity of the Spirit. Dependence shifts away from the Spirit of God and is vested in some central overseeing body or person. A local church in Scripture is never a member of anything. Scripture teaches clearly, that each local church is administratively autonomous and individually responsible before Christ who is its Centre and Head (Rev 1 – 3).

But there is no NT assembly available!

In some cases believers cannot get to a NT based assembly, so they join or visit a denominational church because “some fellowship is better than none.” But where is the biblical practice or principle that allows a believer to have fellowship with error under “certain circumstances”? If God has taken us to a place where there is no NT assembly, it could never be with the intention we join a system that denies His glory. Rather, it would be to begin or do a work of witness for the Lord in accordance with His word in order to testify to His glory in Christ. We must not use circumstances to side-step divine truth. The divine promise, power and glory are not diminished *even* where two or three are gathered unto His name. Denominationalism is wholly contrary to the glory of God. The Spirit of God can never *lead* a believer into it as a place of *gathering*;

quite the reverse, as has been the blessed testimony of many.¹⁷ Beloved in Christ, if the Spirit of God has brought us to see the glory of God in gathering and has placed us outside a system that denies it, why would we even consider partaking of it – even on the briefest of occasions? “If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me: and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them” (Jer 15:19).

Consider too, that our geographical remoteness may not be of God, but due to our own failure to give priority to spiritual matters. Are we prepared to forgo power, prestige, income and life-style for the holy privilege of having fellowship with believers who gather solely unto His blessed name? The children of Israel during the days of the prophet Haggai were living in their ‘cieled’ houses; they sowed much but brought in little; they ate but were hungry; they drank but were not filled with drink; they were clothed but were cold; they earned wages but the wages were put it into a bag with holes. Why the deprivation? It was because they had neglected the house of God. “Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways” (Hag 1:1-9). Is the house of the Lord and our presence within it a priority in our lives? It is not, of course, material blessings but spiritual blessings that occupy the desire of the saint of God today. If we neglect the house of God, then how can we expect to receive those peculiar blessings pertaining to it? Jacob spent many years away from Bethel, the house of God pursuing his own interests. Upon reflection he lamented his loss. God commanded him to return to Bethel – to His house, the place of the pillar, His name and His testimony (Gen 31). Having set up such a testimony today, the Lord charges all not to depart from it.

Our obligation before God and responsibility to men

Denominationalism – the *system* stands indicted by Scripture; it is a serious departure from God’s word. We cannot but separate from it. It is a matter of great sadness to do so, for we love the dear saints of God everywhere, but do so we must lest we turn the glory of God into shame (Ps 4:2). We would encourage all within the denominations to prayerfully re-visit Scripture and come to know and observe the more perfect way, that way which is according to the paths of righteousness – for *His* name’s sake (Ps 23:3).

¹⁷ Some have asked, “What of those who have gone to denominational meetings and been saved? Were they not led there by the Spirit? Here, too, we acknowledge the Spirit of God cannot be limited by man’s failure and, that it is the preaching of the Cross that is the relevant matter. “What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Philipp 1:15-18).

We recall the great commission given by Christ. “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt 28:19-20). The latter part of this commission must not be ignored or minimized by going no further than the preaching the gospel unto salvation. Some have exclaimed by way of minimizing the importance of proper gathering, “The most important thing is to preach Christ crucified”! However, such assertions fail to understand all that which is entailed in Christ’s crucifixion. It was indeed to save souls from eternal judgment; but it was in its *complete* purpose to gather a redeemed people unto Himself for a testimony to the glory of God! It was so with Israel of the past, the vine that He brought out of Egypt (Ps 80). It will be so in its future day for “they shall declare my glory among the Gentiles” (Isa 66:19). This has been God’s desire since the Fall – to redeem a people unto Himself, for only a redeemed people can witness to His glory before heaven and earth. We see it individually, “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor 6:20). We have it corporately, “to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph 3:10).

A significant portion of the NT is devoted to what lies beyond sins forgiven. The life and pen of Paul, the greatest of all evangelists is devoted to Spirit-inspired instruction concerning the fulfillment of the latter part of this great commission – the observance of *all* things whatsoever Christ had commanded, both directly and indirectly through His Spirit-inspired apostles. So Paul declares, “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37). Once saved and baptized, Paul assayed to join such a testimony to Christ (Acts 9). It is vital that we are mindful of our responsibility to direct those saved to the scriptural place and position where they can observe all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded.

If we believe denominationalism is in error, then we cannot participate in the activities undertaken by its “churches.” To do otherwise is to support that which is not of the Spirit of God and stumble others in Christ. To refrain takes courage and conviction, for there will be accusations of narrow-mindedness. Are we to focus on what we have in “common” with the local denominational church and not upon our “differences”? This is the slippery slope to ecumenism and the ruin of biblical testimony. Some say we should not “criticize other

Christians.” But, as we noted it is the *system* that is in question and not the individual believers within it, who we love dearly because many of them are in **Christ** and among our dearest friends. And, let us not confuse “criticism” with “contending for the faith,” which the Spirit of God exhorts us to do earnestly (Jude 3). Contending involves proclaiming and holding steadfastly to the truth which inevitably confronts and exposes error. Scripture is not only given for teaching but also for *reproof* and *correction* (2 Tim 3:16).

Do we sever all ties with the saints of God within the denominations? Surely not, for how then do we gain our brethren? Do we witness to the beloved of Christ in the denominations about the blessed responsibilities and privileges in gathering locally according to the divine pattern, and so fulfill the great commission of Christ? The writer can recall times of blessed personal fellowship with believers who attend a “denominational church” - *outside of their churches* and *apart from inter-denominationalism*. A few words of warning however!

1. While we can testify to such times and opportunities to witness to believers from the denominations, care must be exercised. It is imperative that the young believer in particular seeks godly counsel when such an occasion is before them.
2. It may be that your stand for the truth is cast as being “legal” or “self-righteous.” No one likes to be regarded in this way, especially by friends and family – but let it not deter you from holding to the truth. “Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Heb 13:12-13). Remember too, graciously, that the onus of proof is on those from the denominations to justify their existence using the word of God, appealing to biblical principle and practice.
3. Beware of the “non-denominational” tag which is claimed by many churches today. When they claim to be “non-denominational” what they are really saying is that they are prepared to accept people among them *whatever* their denomination. This is a great failure of the so-called “community church.” If it is to be true to its name it must accept all people from within the community. Once again, an unbiblical name leads to an unbiblical profession.

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