

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-7

Dear Reader

Going back to Leslie Grant's chart in the fifth Assembly Messenger (97-5), we see the next false ground for Christian collective gathering is *denominationalism*. It is rather a bold step to state such ground to be *false* ground, but we believe that is clearly what the Word of God teaches. It's a bold statement because virtually *all* of professed Christianity maintains some form of allegiance to a denomination. Ask almost anyone on the street or at work or at school as to what "church" they attend, and if at all religious, they will say something like "I'm Lutheran" or "I'm Roman Catholic" or "I'm Greek Orthodox" or "I'm Baptist" or "I'm Episcopalian" or "I'm Presbyterian" or "I'm Mormon" or "I'm with the Assemblies of God," or literally hundreds of others. Many of these denominations have at least several splits in their ranks. A Baptist might say, "I'm Southern Baptist" or "I'm American Baptist" or "I'm Independent Baptist," etc. Let's look at *denominationalism* in the light of Scripture.

DENOMINATIONALISM

The dictionary defines a *denomination* as a "religious sect" -- a division of people into groups adhering to particular religious ideas. A *sect* is an *opinion*. Denominations "proceed on the basis of an agreement as to doctrine, mode of worship and government, by a number of persons who, though they may be many, are not the whole of the children of God."

The premise of this newsletter is that *denominationalism* is not only unscriptural but is a *basic attack* on the principles and practices of the true Church, and that we should see it as God sees it and therefore avoid it.

Denominationalism began *in principle* in 1 Corinthians 10:11-13 where we read of strifes among the believers over their favorite apostle or preacher, or even Christ. They were saying, "I am of Paul; I am of Apollos," etc. Each was trying to justify his *exclusive choice* of a favorite preacher instead of recognizing that all of God's gifts were important. The *Lord* was to be the exclusive gathering-Center for *all* His people, not a select few, but some were even trying to make *Him* their exclusive right. Paul and Peter and Apollos were simply servants of Christ, faithful to Him, and were to be recognized as such. Each had a message from the Lord. The messages might have been presented in different ways and the physical presence of the various servants of the Lord might have been weaker or more commanding, and each one might have had a different "emphasis" in his preaching. But with the Holy Spirit at that time able to use His gifts given to the Assembly, unquenched and ungrieved, the Word of God was being preached freely (although each assembly was responsible to determine whether it was according to God's mind -- Acts 17:11). But some people were deciding they preferred to listen to and follow certain speakers and certain lines of truth to the exclusion of the others.

We see this today. For instance, the Baptist denomination puts extra emphasis on baptism. Baptism is important, but so are all the other doctrines and ordinances of Scripture. The Lutheran denomination puts extra emphasis on the teachings of Martin Luther. Martin Luther was mightily used by God, but so were thousands of other men of God. Why should Martin Luther be singled out? The denomination called *the Church of Christ* claims they alone are the true Church of Christ. The denomination called *the Church of God* and the one called *the Assemblies of God* claim the same thing! They aren't! All Christians belong *automatically* to the one and only true "Church of Christ" or "of God" whether or not we belong to the denomination that wrongly takes such a name.

The Lord through Paul strongly rebuked this *mental-beginning* of denominationalism. He said, “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be *no divisions among you*, but that you be perfectly joined together in the *same* mind and in the *same* judgment” (1 Cor.1:10). Unfortunately, what was only in the mind or in individual action at Corinth, blossomed into a full defection some two decades later. Paul said, “All those in Asia have turned away from me” (2 Tim.1:15). In fact, 2 Timothy was written to show each Christian how to still walk the pathway that was pleasing to God amid the actual beginnings of defection and denominationalism. But even though there still was a God-pleasing pathway, secular Church-history indicates that few found it after the following century or so.

The Christians Involved in Denominationalism

When we write in this way about denominationalism, we are pointing out the unscripturalness of the *thing* -- the system -- but we are to genuinely love the Christians, our brothers and sisters in Christ who are mixed up *in* these systems of men. There certainly are many wonderful, God-fearing Christians in many of the denominations; some denominations or cults appear to have very few if any true Christians. However, to be true to God, we can't support the position of even the true Christians in any of those systems of men, even though many of these dear Christians are commendably walking up to the level of their understanding of the Word of God and might put us to shame in their zeal for the Lord and in their personal holiness. Yet they still are very wrong in their ecclesiastical position and we can't ignore that fact: God won't! We have seen in earlier newsletters how important the true Church is to Christ today! It is God's great plan. It is *revealed*; it is *not* hidden! People are *responsible* for what God has placed in His Word. We have no right to excuse anyone, as if obedience to God in our collective gathering was unimportant -- that God will overlook our ignorance of, neutrality as to, or compromise with the truth.

But I'm Not Involved

Maybe you are thinking, “But I'm not mixed up in denominationalism: I'm seeking to walk on God's true ground. Well, if in the mercy of God, we have seen more light in connection with His Church through study of His Word without the encumbrances of the religious systems of men, *we are responsible to act on that light whether others will or not*. In this, we must not be *overly* critical of our dear brethren elsewhere. It is difficult to give up a Christian position one has been brought up in, specially when people are being saved and helped in the Word in some of the denominations. Yet that is what they *should* do, not as an attack on those still in the denominations, but to maintain the rights of the Head of the Church, our Savior, our Lord!

What Are Some of the Unscriptural Doctrines and Practices of the Denominations?

It is not possible to speak in sweeping terms about all the denominations because there are thousands of different denominations, branches of denominations and independent “churches” or “groups.” However, let's dismiss all the groups that teach and/or practice what we believe to be *fundamental error* such as Roman Catholicism, Christian Science, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness and Eastern Mysticism (such as Hinduism and Buddhism). We will confine our comments to the more fundamental, evangelical denominations that generally teach salvation only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Some of their errors are shown in the following tics. Not all apply to every group.

- Dividing up the body of Christ** (1 Corinthians 1:13, 10). There is only *one* body! We believe this human division to be a very serious sin.
- Independency**: the teaching and practice of the *autonomy* of the local church or assembly (1 Corinthians 1:1-2). As we saw in the previous newsletter, Scripture plainly teaches that each local assembly is responsible to all other local assemblies as well as to the Lord (1 Cor.1:1-2). Many denominational “churches” act on the principle of independency.
- Breaking of bread monthly or less often** (Acts 2:46; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:25-26). The early Christians had to be *constrained* from breaking bread almost constantly: the apostolic practice, and that of

the disciples, was once a week (Acts 20:7). That should be our practice! It should be counted as a great privilege.

•**Not connecting the breaking of bread with church-fellowship** (1 Corinthians 10:16-18). In some denominations one can break bread with few or no questions asked, but many probing questions may be asked if one wants to join their “church.” In Scripture, the breaking of bread is the *outward expression* of our fellowship together. See also Acts 2:42 as to what constitutes a local assembly gathering. The Lord willing, we will devote a future newsletter to this verse. Notice that we break bread with those with whom we have fellowship, and we have fellowship with those with whom we agree on the apostles’ doctrine!

•**Lack of assembly discipline:** a person’s doctrine, practice and associations, unless gross and well known, generally are no hindrance to breaking bread or even joining the denomination. Compare with 1 Corinthians 5. To most, all depends on one’s *personal responsibility* or belief about wanting to break bread, based on 1 Corinthians 11:28 (“Let a man examine [approve] *himself*”). *However, this verse has nothing to do with reception to break bread as part of a functioning local assembly.* It rather had to do with the conduct of those *already* breaking bread in the Corinthian local assembly. Week by week, they were to keep short accounts with God so they could come together “approved” so God wouldn’t have to judge them. So should we! Due to this lack of care, in many denominations, one can be associated by breaking bread with every kind of moral and doctrinal evil and even with unsaved “religious” persons.

•**Ignoring God's order for the sexes** in such things as a head covering and women preachers and elders, etc. (1 Corinthians 11:3-16; 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12). These are not cultural things as widely taught today (and used as an excuse to ignore or reinterpret them), but the clear *commands of the Lord* (1 Cor.14:37) and are wonderful divinely-ordered pictures of both creation and of Christ and His Church.

•**A clergy-laity system** which denies in practice the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6) and which also denies in practice the Holy Spirit in charge to use whomsoever He wills in the ministry and worship of the assembly (1 Corinthians 12:11, etc.). The clergy system will be considered in the next newsletter, the Lord willing. There is absolutely nothing in Scripture to indicate a *pastor* or a *priest* or a *reverend* of a local church, but rather, many brothers with many gifts for the Holy Spirit to use as He pleases. We are so used to this false system of things that we often don’t see it as hateful to God as it must be. The clergy-laity system comes close to *fundamental error* since the work of divine Persons is shoved into the background and man made prominent.

•**Gathered to another name than simply Christ's name** (Matthew 18:20). We are given no authorization for any Church-gathering that is not “unto His name.” To gather otherwise plainly is a slur to Christ the Head of His Church.

•**Often attracting a membership by that which appeals to the soul** (our natural appetites) instead of what appeals to the spirit and to the Holy Spirit within us and to our new nature. We are to *now* worship the Father in *spirit* and in *truth* (John 4:23). Therefore, ornate buildings, beautiful choirs, elaborate organs, bands, preachers in robes, fleshly “religious” excitement, etc. are out of place in our worship in this dispensation. We are no longer under the legal system of Judaism where mechanical things, such as ornate buildings and musical instruments and robed priests and many ceremonies were prominent and necessary for worship. The practices of denominationalism often are a false mixing of Christian and Judaistic principles.

•**False doctrines and practices often tolerated**, such as the widely taught fundamentally false doctrine that our Lord, God manifest in the flesh, could have sinned but chose not to. Also, serious moral evil may be more or less tolerated. God says that a little leaven (sin) of both a moral and doctrinal nature, if allowed to go on unchecked, leavens (permeates and corrupts) the whole lump (1 Cor.5:6; Gal.5:9).

Why Isn't a Gathering on God's True Ground Just Another Denomination, Even Though it is More Scriptural in Some of its Doctrines and Practices?

That’s a very good and fair question! When one is simply seeking to go on in the teachings and practices which the Lord set up through His apostles, that is *not* making a sect or denomination, at least in God’s sight. Those who create divisions *contrary* to the doctrine learned from Paul and the other apostles, were wrong (Romans 16:17). If going on in the Lord’s directions for assembly-gathering and practice causes a

division among Christians because others don't or won't also do so, that is not the fault of those going on in the *Scriptural* pathway. They cannot be charged with *creating* a division. Those who left God's true ground are the ones who caused a division: they divided from Christ. They might try to justify their man-made position by charging those on right ground with *sectarianism* and trying to be better than they. But we are not to be swayed by name calling. Remember Leslie Grant's example of the children who played where they were told to play, or returned to the specified playground. *Such were not division-makers, for they were obeying the teacher.*

The simple truth of the New Testament as to scriptural Assembly practice is that we are to simply meet as Christians, brethren in Christ, around Christ, gathered *only* to His precious and all-sufficient Name, refusing any divisive name or title. We should have nothing man-made that would restrict any other Christian who *wills* to obey God, who departs from that which is unscriptural, to *also* gather in like manner to that wonderful Name, on true Scriptural ground (1 Corinthians 1:10), *with* those already on that pathway (2 Tim.2:22).

Would Gathering on God's True Ground be a Continuation of the Original Church of the New Testament?

It would be a continuation of the *principles and practices* given by the apostles, but except for possibly a few people here and there, the truth of New Testament Church-gathering was lost for about 1500 years, beginning when the early Church joined hands with the world (at about the time of Constantine). This dearth of Church-truth went throughout the so-called *dark ages* and beyond. Luther, Calvin and others of the so-called *reformers* were used of the Lord to *rediscover* the truth of salvation by grace at the end of the dark ages at the *Reformation*, so-called, but the only new thing in church-gathering was the formation of several almost equally unscriptural and often spiritually dead Protestant "state" denominations to oppose the spiritually dead and thoroughly corrupt Roman Catholic denomination. The truth of Church-gathering, the unity of the body of Christ in actual practice, was only rediscovered and proclaimed widely less than 200 years ago. One can walk with those who have come back to the "playground," but those cannot claim to be part of a company that never left the true ground.

Summary

It didn't take long after the formation of the true Church by the Lord (Acts 2) for Christians to begin to divide along the lines of their favorite speakers. Although outward unity among the New Testament assemblies was maintained for several decades longer, it wasn't long before there was a wholesale giving up of Church-truth, so-called. Increasingly, and perhaps never worse than today, Christians are divided along lines of doctrine and practice into literally hundreds of denominations and thousands of splinters of those denominations. Some thankfully preach a sound gospel and stress godly Christian living; others preach more a social gospel of going through certain ceremonies and doing good in the community. Others stress emotional appeal and "spiritual" entertainment, as they would call it. Many of these "experience" denominations are wildly successful if membership increase is a mark of success. Not until the early 1800's was there any mass understanding and practice of biblical "assembly truth" which had been lost for about 1500 years. Many thousands then saw from the Scriptures that they were walking on manmade ground and not on God's true ground, and consequently left their denominations to simply walk together after the simple New Testament apostolic pattern.

Today we have a choice. We can go on in what is popular, what is big, what *seems* to work, what *appears* to be successful, but which has no apostolic sanction and thus is sin! Or we can search for God's true ground and walk together with those few who also seek to do so. "Pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim.2:22).

Yes, there are many godly people in the denominations. Their home (family) life and their personal life may be above reproach. They may be very faithful to their denomination. We will spend eternity with each one who is truly saved. But that does not excuse them for maintaining a false Church position, or

give us an excuse to follow them in that false position. Rather, it gives us a mission field to those dear believers who may be of our own family or neighborhood, etc. We are to love them deeply and seek their spiritual best.

RPD

Suggested Reading

“The Step I Have Taken” by Edward Dennett, mentioned previously, certainly applies to our study of denominationalism since the book details his struggles, culminating in leaving his denomination to simply walk according to New Testament principles. The small pamphlet *“Christ, the Center; Why We Meet to His Name Alone”* by the 19th century Charles Stanley is also very helpful. Available through Believers Bookshelf.