

# Is Denominationalism Scriptural?

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

What is a “denomination”? Does God approve of denominations? These are extremely significant and critical questions. They deserve answers from the Word of God.

When we go to the New Testament and examine God’s Word with a view toward ascertaining what His will is with regard to religion, we find that there is a clearly defined system of religion—**God’s** religion—in the New Testament. It is the religion of Christ that has come to be called Christianity. We also find that Satan does everything he can to blur the distinctions that God wants observed. We should not be surprised at that. Think about the great hoaxes that have been perpetrated upon mankind. For instance, the doctrine of evolution is almost universally believed by the scientific elite of many societies. So it is with many political, philosophical, and religious systems of thought like Communism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Those who have examined the evidence—objective truth—on these matters know that those systems of thought simply are not true. Yet large numbers of people adhere to them. Large numbers of people believe the tenets of those systems.

In 2 Corinthians 2:11, Paul spoke about the fact that Satan endeavors to take advantage of people. He said that we should not let Satan take advantage of us, “for we are not ignorant of his devices.” The word “devices” could easily have been translated “schemes.” We must be aware of the fact that Satan uses deceitful, deceptive ploys in an effort to trick people to get them to believe and practice various things that simply are not true. In a similar statement, Paul used the phrase “wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). Most people are oblivious to this fact. Many people do not even believe that Satan exists—any more than they believe that God exists. Yet if the New Testament is true, it is clear there is a Satan, and he will do all he can to fool, trick, and deceive people. He wants to blur distinctions that God wants observed—distinctions that are scriptural and biblical.

It is clear that this is the case with **denominationalism**. Consider the following dictionary definitions (*American*, 2000, p. 485). The term “denominate” means “to give a name to; designate.” “Denomination” is “[a] large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy; a name or designation, especially for a class or group.” “Denominator” refers to “[t]he expression written below the line in a common fraction that indicates the number of parts into which one whole is divided.” “Denominationalism” is “[t]he tendency to separate into religious denominations; sectarianism.” Think about these meanings for just a moment. The very word “denomination” means a named or designated division. Denominationalism occurs when religious people and groups divide and segregate themselves on the basis of different designations or church affiliations and different doctrines.

Have you gone to the New Testament and read Jesus’ prayer for unity in John chapter 17? There He prayed **against** religious division, and prayed to God that believers in Christ would be unified! Paul made the same point to the church of Christ in Corinth: “I beseech you brothers by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Here is a passage that says denominations are not even to exist! “Let there be no divisions among you.” If a denomination is a “designated division,” then denominationalism is clearly unscriptural! It is against the will of Christ. The passage continues, “but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

I assure you, I have nothing against any particular religious group. I have no biases or prejudices against any one church or denomination. But we must go to Scripture and be objective in our appraisal of New Testament truth. It is clear when we go to the Bible that denominationalism, though viewed innocently by millions of people worldwide, is an approach to religion that is out of harmony with New Testament teaching. **God does not want denominations to exist.** He wants all of us to understand His will in the New Testament, and then to bring our lives into conformity and our spirits into submission to that will.

## DENOMINATIONALISM VERSUS NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY

Denominationalism conflicts with New Testament teaching on a variety of subjects. Consider New Testament teaching on the subject of the one church. Passages like Isaiah 2:1-5 and Daniel 2:44 predicted that one day God would set up a kingdom, a church, a house—what Isaiah called the “Lord’s house.” In Matthew 3:2, John the baptizer preached that people should repent and get ready because the kingdom of heaven was at hand. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” In Mark 9:1, He said, “[T]here are some standing here who will not taste of death till they see the kingdom of God come with power.” These passages speak of the same institution. In Acts 2, we find the actual establishment of Christ’s church on Earth. Jesus Christ

Himself built His church in the city of Jerusalem in approximately A.D. 30 on the day of Pentecost. Its inception is described in Acts 2.

In Colossians 1:13, Paul spoke of Christians as those who had been removed by God from darkness and translated into the kingdom of His dear Son. In Ephesians 1:22-23, the body of Christ is referred to as the church, and later we are told that there is only one (4:4). Those two passages alone should cause us to recognize that the existence of denominations is out of harmony with God's will. Ephesians 4:4 says there is one body. That body is the church of our Lord. He established it; He built it; He purchased it with His own blood (Acts 20: 28). If there is only one church, God is not pleased with the division, the named designations, of competing churches with various names, doctrines, and practices. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul wrote to Timothy that he might know how to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God. Most people just do not realize that New Testament truth is that simple, that plain, and that uncomplicated. The denominationalism that has gripped western civilization is so entrenched and so entangled in the minds of people that they seem to be unable to detach themselves from it, and to go back to the New Testament to get a clear conception of the New Testament church. They seem unable or unwilling to embrace pure New Testament teaching and to repudiate all denominationalism.

Another concept that we find clearly depicted on the pages of the New Testament is the idea of scriptural names, that is, names for both the church itself and names for individual members of that church. In Romans 16:16 we find the expression "churches of Christ." In 1 Corinthians 1:2, we have a reference to "the church of God." In 1 Corinthians 3:16, we find "the temple of God." And in Ephesians 4:12, we have the phrase "the body of Christ."

These expressions are not intended to be technical nor formal names for the church. They are descriptions. They are labels that describe Christ's church. Additional ones may be found as well. Most of the time in the New Testament, Christ's church is just referred to as "the church." But here is the point: Most of the names that people are giving to their churches today are not in the New Testament. They therefore are formulating names and founding churches that cannot be found in the New Testament. That's denominationalism!

The same thing is true with regard to the names that God wants individual Christians to wear. In Isaiah 62:2, the prophet foretold that God with His own mouth would give a name to His people. We find the fulfillment of that prophecy in Acts 11:26. **The name** that God wants individual members of His church to wear is the name "Christian." In Romans 1:7, we find the term "saints," and in Acts 5:14, we find the term "believer." In other passages we find the word "disciple" and family names like "brother" and the "family of God." The names that denominations and their members wear are conspicuously absent from the New Testament.

New Testament truth on the matter of names is simple. How contrary to that New Testament pattern are the churches and the individuals who have taken the names of men and applied them to themselves and their churches. Some churches designate themselves by a particular practice or doctrine. I urge you to study your New Testament and realize that God is not pleased with manmade names. He will not sanction or extend His grace to groups and individuals who have chosen to stray from His will and His pattern for religion. Those who formulate for themselves their own religions, their own churches, and their own names, will be rejected by God. The Bible records that down through the annals of human history, God has never tolerated human invention in religion.

The same is true with regard to worship. The New Testament contains specific instruction concerning how God wants to be worshipped. Yet in the denominational world, all sorts of worship practice may be found. For instance, in the New Testament, Christians met for worship on the first day of the week—Sunday. Acts of worship took place on other days—for example, New Testament Christians could and did pray anytime, anywhere. But Sunday is pinpointed in New Testament Christianity as the special day on which Christians gather together to worship God (Acts 20:7). Christians are required by God to attend worship assemblies. Yet many people in our day never attend worship services, and apparently think, "Hey, I can be a Christian at home and worship God in my own way; nothing says that I have to go to church to worship with other Christians." Most people have not read their New Testaments. The Bible teaches the necessity of assembling in Hebrews 10:25. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33). He was referring to the church. So if I am going to put the church first and seek it first in my life, obviously I am going to assemble with the church—fellow Christians—for worship on Sunday.

A further contrast between denominationalism and the New Testament church pertains to what Jesus would have us to do in the realm of music in the church. In Ephesians 5:19, Paul wrote: "[S]peaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." New Testament instructions for musical worship are that simple and unencumbered. There is no authority in the New Testament for playing musical instruments in worship to God. There is no authority in the New Testament for performance groups like choirs and praise teams. The music in the New Testament is very clearly **congregational, vocal singing**. It's that simple.

We also find that communion, the Lord's Supper, was served in the New Testament to Christians on the first day of the week. Acts 2:46 and 20:7, and 1 Corinthians 11:20-34 and 16:1-3 inform us that the Lord's Supper in the New Testament church was observed **every first day of the week**. All Christians partook of both the fruit of the vine and the bread. In addition, every first day of the week Christians are to contribute a percentage of their income to a general treasury so that the church may carry on its work. Acts 2:42 speaks of the importance of

continuing in prayer. Praying is a part of Christian worship. The same verse speaks of continuing in the apostles' doctrine, i.e., the teaching, preaching, and examining doctrinal truth. These five acts of worship are part and parcel of public worship assemblies—no more and no less.

Yet churches all over the land are not patterned after the one church of the Bible. They have unscriptural names for their church and for their individual members. Their worship services engage in many practices that are not taught in the New Testament. Their activities are mere inventions and doctrines of men (Matthew 15:9). Do we want to be exactly what Jesus wants us to be according to the New Testament?

The same is true with God's plan of salvation. What does the New Testament teach with reference to how one becomes a Christian? So much diversity and widespread misconception exists. Most religious groups teach salvation is solely by faith, without any further acts of obedience. They say that all you have to do is "accept Jesus as your savior," which means orally saying, "I believe in Jesus Christ, I accept him into my heart as my personal savior." Denominationalism teaches that **at that moment** the person is forgiven of sin and he becomes a Christian. The New Testament does teach that a non-Christian must **believe** (Mark 16:16)—but that is not all. He or she also must **repent of sins** (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38), **confess Christ** with the mouth (Romans 10:10), and then be **immersed in water** with the understanding that the blood of Jesus washes away sin at the point of water baptism. Acts 22:16 indicates that it was at the moment that Saul was immersed in water that his sins were washed away (cf. Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21). Most people in the religious world believe that a person is forgiven of sins **before** they are immersed. But, once again, that is a departure from New Testament teaching.

The New Testament is equally explicit on the subject of Christian living. It is frightening that American civilization as we have known it is deteriorating and moving away from the fundamental behaviors that were common to our way of life from our inception as a nation. But it is happening. Many people are showing the same lack of knowledge and disrespect for God's instructions in this area as they are in the other areas we have noted. Our society is getting farther away from the Bible. Many do not even believe the Bible to be a supernatural, inspired (i.e., God-breathed) book. They think it is just a collection of Jewish myths, a bunch of fairy tales, and the writings of mere men.

We have reason for alarm. Any civilization that does not structure itself around the mind of God as revealed on the pages of the Bible, cannot last for long. Look back over the centuries of human history and you will see this truth. Every nation that rejected God and His principles for living, eventually deteriorated from the inside out and fell to pieces, crumbling into the dust of human history. American civilization is rushing headlong down that same course. So what does the Bible teach concerning Christian living and Christian morality?

For example, regarding marriage, Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:9 are sufficient to demonstrate how far our society has deviated from God's will. Those verses show that God's will is that one man (never married before) marry one woman (never married before) and that those two individuals remain married for the rest of their lives. Only death should separate them. And only one exception is given to that rule. If one of those mates is sexually unfaithful, God permits the other mate, the innocent partner, to divorce the guilty mate **for fornication**, i.e., for sexual unfaithfulness, and to marry an eligible partner. The New Testament is that clear and that simple. Yet our society as a whole is so far from that simple teaching that it is frightening to consider whether we could ever recover our spiritual and moral senses.

What about the use of alcohol? People all over our society consume alcoholic beverages in restaurants, in homes, on airplanes, and at ball games. You cannot go to a football game without people freely drinking alcoholic beverages without giving it a second thought. They appear oblivious and unconcerned about the fact that the Bible speaks definitively and decisively against consuming intoxicating beverages (e.g., Proverbs 23:29-35). If you are honest and love God and desire to follow His will, you will examine what the Bible teaches on this matter.

What else is occurring in our society? People use foul language and take God's name in vain. How often do we hear people say, "O my God"? The expression has saturated our society. But the Bible condemns the vain use of God's name (Exodus 20:7; Ephesians 4:29). It is sin, and it offends God. Likewise, the practice of lying and deceiving is commonplace, though God hates such acts (Proverbs 6:17; Ephesians 4:25).

What about gambling? The lottery has been legalized in most states, along with horse racing and other forms of gambling. Large numbers of people flock to these activities as if they are perfectly acceptable and moral. My friend, I don't mean to offend you in any way, but I am telling you that the Bible speaks decisively and clearly against these practices. They are immoral, they are unchristian, and they are ungodly (Matthew 7:12; Ephesians 4:28; 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Our society says, "People ought to be free to believe what they want. Don't be judgmental. You don't have any right to say they are wrong." But such propaganda is wrong. **God** has a right. He is the Creator, and He said in His Word that we must know His truth, and we must be right about that truth, and we must obey that truth (Hebrews 5:9). Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). He also said, "[Y]ou shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Paul spoke about the time when people would not want to hear healthy teaching (2 Timothy 4:3). They would reject it. But God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

The New Testament teaches that we must stay with **God's** words. We are not free to deviate, or to believe and practice whatever **we** choose. We must not do it (2 John 9; 1 Corinthians 4:6; Galatians 1:8). In the final analysis, denominationalism is what results when humans assert their own religious inclinations, formulate their own religious doctrines, and originate their own churches. Solomon's words ought to cause every single person to refrain from affiliation with denominationalism: "Every word of God is pure. He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you and you be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:5-6).

## REFERENCES

*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000), (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin), fourth edition.

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