

Denominationalism

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Is denominationalism a modern problem? And if it is a problem, then the Bible which makes the internal claim in [2 Timothy 3:16-17](#) to be inspired and to completely furnish us for a life of righteousness, must have something to say about it. And that is what we are going to do for the remainder of this hour. We are going to look into God's word and see what it has to say about denominationalism and then we are going to make some practical applications for today.

If you are here today and you are a member of a denomination, then I encourage you to seek what thus saith the Lord with us on this important topic and to observe that which is found within the inspired record and not what men say. Jesus is quoted as saying on one occasion, *"in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men"* ([Matthew 15:9](#), [Mark 7:7](#)). So right there in one sentence, Jesus declared that those who teach the doctrines of men are worshipping in vain. They might as well not bother themselves if they are not following after the commandments or will of God. These words of Jesus regarding the commandments of men are further expounded on in [Titus 1:14](#) which reads, *"not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth"*, and [Colossians 2:22](#) which reads, *"which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men"*.

We have barely begun this lesson and already from the inspired word of God we see that those who observe and follow after the commandments of men are worshipping in vain. How does this relate to denominationalism? To answer this question, we are going to break it down into 4 things.

1. The reality of denominationalism

The dictionary provides the following definitions of the words denomination, denominator and denominationalism. The term denominate in Webster's dictionary means to designate or to name. A denomination is a group or a sect having a name. It is one of a series of units separately labeled. The word denominator means the part of a fraction that shows into how many parts a thing is divided. Denominationalism is a disposition to divide into or form denominations.

The very word 'denomination' means a named or designated division. Denominationalism occurs when religious people in groups divide and segregate themselves on the basis of different designations or church affiliations or different doctrines.

Denominationalism is the division of one religion into separate groups, sects, schools of thought or divisions.

Denominationalism as a modern ideology views some or all Christian groups as being, in some sense, versions of the same thing regardless of their distinguishing labels. These groups are distinguished by beliefs, practices, creeds, confessions, and/or names that differ from each other, and therein lies the problem.

According to one religious encyclopedia, there are over 2,600 denominational groups claiming Christ as their savior. When we examine the beliefs of different denominations we see that they are not all teaching the same thing. They are divided in their theology. They are divided in their belief of what thus saith the Lord. They are not all teaching the same gospel. They are not all teaching the same doctrines. The varied beliefs are characterized by differences of opinion on how one is saved, lives a faithful Christian life and inherits an eternal home in heaven.

When we look out in the religious world today, we see many beliefs; we see many practices; we see many doctrines, we see many churches each distinguished by a denomination or a manmade designation. But when we look in the Bible, we can easily see that it professes only one body, practicing only one faith ([Ephesians 4:4-5](#)). Since the inspired word of God portrays, affirms and supports only one church, and we have thousands of them then it stands to reason that the teachings, interpretations and doctrines of men have crept into the Lord's body. When you have a divinely inspired standard which teaches only one and from that you get 2600 or more, and the inspired standard has not changed, then something outside that divine standard has been interjected into the teachings contained therein. The source for this can only be the teachings and doctrines of men. If the denominations with their different beliefs and teachings did not come from God, they had to come from man. So let's go back and restate the earlier quote from Jesus, "*in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*".

2. The danger of denominationalism

a. Denominationalism is out of harmony with the will of God.

Jesus prays for the unity of His followers in John chapter 17. Paul wrote concerning division to the Christians in Corinth with these words, "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 Corinthians 1:10](#)). Paul was pleading with them, the KJV says "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". Paul was pleading with them over the issue of divisions within. He urged them to speak the same thing, to be unified in doctrine and in belief.

Paul goes on to say in verse 11 and following, "For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" ([1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#)).

Some of the Christians in Corinth were dividing themselves up into groups and saying well, "we're following after the teachings of Paul. Paul is the one who taught us, not those others". Likewise some of them were adhering themselves to the teachings of Apollos or Cephas, who was also Simon Peter, and they were claiming their allegiance to them. They were dividing themselves up into groups within the church based on the teachings of a particular man and were rejecting unity with the rest of their brethren based on who they were following. And they were identifying themselves with these men.

Paul asked the question, "Is Christ Divided"? That's a rhetorical question. We all know Jesus Christ is not divided. Paul is pointing out their division to them by using Christ as the example. Paul goes on to ask, "was Paul crucified for you, or were you baptized in the name of Peter"? The obvious answers to these questions is no. Paul was making the point that to follow after and identify themselves with these men was to divide

themselves from Christ, from the truth of God's overall word. It's Christ they were supposed to be identifying themselves with and serving, not Paul, not Apollos and not Peter.

[1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#) is a passage of scripture which says denominations or divisions are not to even exist in the Lord's body. Paul said, "that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment". Since a denomination is a designated division, then denominationalism is out of harmony with the will of God. The scriptures forbid division, yet the reality of it is, we have division everywhere we look.

b. Denominations teach different requirements for salvation.

The word of God teaches that there is one way of salvation which is called "the common salvation" in [Jude 3](#). Paul wrote to Titus concerning "the common faith" in [Titus 1:4](#). The Greek word in the original text for the word "common" is "Koinos" (koy-nos), which literally means 'shared by all'. This is in harmony with Paul's teachings to the Ephesians in 4:4-5 which reads, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism..."

The Bible teaches one faith, with one set of requirements for salvation which is common to all while denominationalism as a whole contains an array of beliefs. The danger in this is that someone must be wrong. When the Bible teaches only one and from that we get thousands, someone has to be wrong. Someone is worshipping according to the commandments of men and Jesus says this type of worship is vain, empty and of no value. All the different denominations and divisions out there with their contradicting doctrines cannot be right. Somebody has to be wrong. Somebody has to be believing, teaching and living out of harmony with the will of God.

The danger here is obvious. It does not matter how zealous or how devoted they have lived if they have done so according to the teachings of men. Paul wrote concerning the Jews who rejected Christ in [Romans 10:2-3](#), "For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Paul says there are those out there who are zealous, (passionate and fervent) who are trying to establish their own way of serving God. But they are not submitting themselves to the righteousness of God. These people are following after the commandments of men. Jesus says their worship is vain, worthless and of no value.

Jesus said as recorded in [Matthew 7:21-23](#), "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." Jesus says there are going to be those who call Him Lord, who believe in Him and do many wonderful works who will be rejected. They will not be allowed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. They will be told to depart, they will be turned away, they will be denied entrance into the kingdom of heaven because they did not do the will of God.

Denominations teach different requirements for salvation. If we are on the wrong side, and have not lived according to the will of God concerning the requirements for salvation, Jesus says we will be rejected. We will

fall short. We will be condemned. We will not receive the salvation we hoped for. Jesus said there would be many who would not be allowed into the kingdom of heaven because they did not do the will of God.

c. Denominations teach different or conflicting gospels.

The “one faith” Paul wrote of in [Ephesians 4:5](#) can only have one gospel. If one has more than one gospel, then there cannot be only one faith. Denominations are dangerous because they teach conflicting gospels. The word gospel means the good news. Jesus began preaching the gospel during his earthly ministry. In [Mark 1:14](#) at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry we read, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God“. Concerning the gospel in [1 Peter 1:25](#) we read the following, “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you“. The word of God is preached by the gospel therefore the two are one and the same. The gospel is the word of the Lord.

This is very similar to the one we just looked at about the requirements of salvation, which, like the rest of the word of God come to us from the gospel. The reason we are looking at the term gospel in particular is because of what Paul wrote concerning other gospels in [Galatians 1:6-10](#) which reads, “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: 7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.” Paul says the perversion of the gospel is “another gospel“. When we change or alter, pervert the gospel of Christ, we are believing, living and teaching a gospel other than the one taught in God’s word. Paul goes on to say on verse 8, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.” Paul repeats himself in verse 9, “As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.“

The denominations do not all teach the same gospel. They are different, they are divided, they are in conflict. Paul says they are accursed if they preach any other gospel than the one found in the Bible.

d. Denominations teach conflicting doctrines.

The “one faith” Paul wrote of in [Ephesians 4:5](#) can only have one overall unified doctrine. If there is more than one overall doctrine, then there cannot be only one faith as proclaimed in [Eph 4:5](#). Denominations are dangerous because they teach conflicting doctrines. Paul wrote to Timothy in [1 Timothy 1:3](#) to stay in Ephesus and order some there to “teach no other doctrine“. John wrote concerning doctrine in [2 John 9-11](#), “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.” John is saying here that if we do not abide, dwell in, hold to and keep the doctrine of Christ, we do not even have God. We are going to come back and look at this scripture again because in the original language it means not to go onward beyond the doctrine of Christ. It means not to go too far. The NASB translates this, “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God.” John is saying here that one must not go too far, that one must not add to the doctrine of Christ; to go beyond the doctrine of Christ. Keep that thought in your mind as we will be coming back to this later in the lesson.

John went on to say something else about the doctrine of Christ starting in verse 10, “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” Those who go too far and do not abide in the doctrine of Christ are guilty of evil and those who condone and show their approval of their evil deeds are partakers with them in their sin. Paul wrote concerning this in [Ephesians 5:11](#) where he commanded the Christians there to, “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” We cannot approve of those who transgress and abide not in the doctrine of Christ, neither can we extend the hand of Christian fellowship to them either. To do so is to be partakers in their sins. This means we cannot cooperate with them in joint evangelistic endeavors, we cannot attend worship assemblies with them as a member of their denomination. We cannot approve of, nor condone their practices, we cannot support their works because by so doing we give our approval of their doctrine and so doing are bidding them god speed.

Denominations are dangerous because they do not all teach the same doctrine of Christ. They teach doctrines which are in conflict with each other and with the word of God which speaks against division, disunity and secularism.

The one faith of scripture comes to us from God. It does not have conflicting or opposing doctrines, beliefs, gospels nor ways of salvation. There is only one faith, only one way of salvation, only one doctrine of Christ, only one gospel. There were no denominations in the New Testament. There is no such thing as a Christian denomination in the New Testament. The denominations we see today came about long after the first century when the New Testament was written. The word of God does not sanction them, it does not support them, it does not name or designate them in way shape or fashion. They can only have gotten here by one way, and that is through the teachings of men apart from the word of God. Jesus said, “in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men“.

3. The Remedy For Denominationalism

Denominations at their basic level do have one teaching in common with one another. There is one thing that each and every one of them believes that is the same as all the rest of them. Each and every denomination out there, all 2600 or so of them, believe that obedience to God is not necessary for salvation. They believe and teach that obedience to the will of God is not a requirement of salvation. They believe that they can be saved and get into heaven without obedience to the commands of God. That is the one thing that unifies them while, at the same time, sets them apart from the one faith of the New Testament. The remedy for denominationalism is obedience to the will of God. If everyone were to unite over the necessity of obedience to the will of God, we would see every single denomination in existence wither and fade away into oblivion.

The kind of obedience we are talking about here is obedience according to the word of God and not according to man. Does the word of God teach us how God wants to be obeyed? Does the word of God set any guidelines for obedience that we are supposed to observe and follow? Indeed it does. In fact, not only does the word of God give us instruction on how God is to be obeyed, it commands us to handle God’s word correctly. In [2 Timothy 2:15](#), Paul instructs Timothy to, “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*” Timothy was instructed to diligently study the word of God so that he would not be ashamed as a workman for Christ. And he was told to rightly divide or correctly handle the word of Truth.

So for the remedy for denominationalism, step number one is to study and to rightly handle the word of God. How do we learn how to do that? We study. Where do we learn to do that? The word of God. How do we know we can find instruction on how to rightly handle the word of God within the word of God?

[2 Timothy 3:16-17](#) reads, “*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, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*” All scripture is given by inspiration, meaning “God breathed” in the original language. It came from the mind of God and under His supervision when it was recorded. All scripture is profitable, useful for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness. That the man of God may be perfect, complete, lacking nothing and fully instructed. The scriptures thoroughly provide us with everything we need to be perfect, complete and lacking nothing as far as instruction in righteousness is concerned. All the information we need to become Christians and to live a life pleasing before God and inherit a home in heaven is provided and available to us. This has to include instruction on how to rightly handle the word of truth.

Earlier in this lesson we considered the words of John where he wrote that those who go too far and abide not in the doctrine of Christ have not God. We are not to go too far, we are not to go beyond what is authorized. Consider the words of Paul to the Christians in Corinth that we looked at earlier. They were dividing themselves up into groups following and identifying themselves with certain teachers. Paul urged them not to divide and not to follow after the teachings of any one man. Paul wasn’t finished with that. He touched on that subject later in his first letter to them. In [1 Corinthians 4:6](#), Paul made this statement, “*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written*“. The ASV, ESV translates this as, “*not to go beyond the things which are written*“. The NASB translates this as “*not to exceed what is written*“. Paul was telling them not to go beyond what was authorized in the word of God. The application for us today on this is the exact same thing. We are not to exceed what is written or authorized in the word of God. We must not add to what God has said. We must not add to what God has commanded. Paul said the scriptures thoroughly equip us for a life of godliness; “*that the man of God may be perfect*” ([2 Timothy 3:16-17](#)), lacking nothing. If the scriptures contain what we need to be perfect and complete, then how are we going to improve on that? It doesn’t get any better than perfect. We shouldn’t try to add our own ideas and innovations to something that already makes us perfect, lacking nothing. Have we ever heard the human axiom which says, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’? We are not going to be able to improve on something that God says makes us perfect. Don’t think beyond what is written, don’t go beyond what is written, don’t go too far and abide not in the doctrine, the teachings, of Christ.

step number 2 in the remedy for denominationalism is to reject manmade innovations and commandments. In our court system we hear the phrase, ‘*the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*’. That’s a good attitude to have towards the word of God. Let’s have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth when it comes to the word of God.

The next step is to identify ourselves correctly. For this, let us go back to a verse of scripture we looked at earlier. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he was addressing their divisions he wrote this statement in [1 Corinthians 1:11-13](#), “*For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” The Corinthian Christians were identifying themselves with someone other than who was crucified for them and who they were baptized in the name of. We all know it was Jesus Christ who died for them and it was in Jesus Christ’s name they were baptized in.

The Christians in Corinth were on the verge of denominationalizing and Paul stepped in and stopped them. He criticized them for making factions within their church and identifying themselves with men instead of with Christ. Let's look at a verse of scripture which sheds more light on Paul's condemnation of them over this. In Paul's letter to the Colossians in 3:17, he wrote these words, *"And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."* Paul says *"whatever you do"*. What is left out of whatever? The answer; nothing. Paul says *"Whatever You do"*, *"do all"*. What is left out of *"all"*? The answer; nothing. Paul says *"whatever you do, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ"*. Everything we do in our our life and worship must be done in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. When we are baptized, we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ ([Matthew 28:19](#)). We give thanks to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ([Ephesians 5:20](#)). The apostles gave the commands of Jesus in His name ([2 Thessalonians 3:6](#)). Paul wrote that, *"but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God"* ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#)). The original language carries the meaning of 'by the authority of' in connection with "in the name of". There is authority associated with the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We are to conduct our religious and spiritual matters in the name of, by the authority of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul said that includes with whom we identify ourselves with.

So how would we identify ourselves to the world, honoring the command to do all that we do in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ without profaning the name of God? How do we identify ourselves to the world while giving all the glory to God? By calling ourselves what Christians were called in the New Testament word of God. So what were they called? Disciples [which means "learners"] ([Acts 20:7](#)), "saints" ([1 Corinthians 1:2](#)), "brothers" ([1 Corinthians 15:1](#)), "sons of God" ([Romans 8:14](#)), "children of God" ([1 John 3:1](#)), "priests" ([1 Peter 2:9](#))—and several other names. These are scriptural names. Let's look in [Acts 11:26](#) and see what the disciples were called, *"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."* The disciples were called Christians as recorded here and in [Acts 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16](#) as prophesied in [Isaiah 62:1-2](#).

The word Christian contains the word "Christ" within it. The name Christian indicates that one belongs to and lives in Jesus Christ. Those who call themselves Christians identify themselves with Christ in their designation. We believe in, follow, serve and live in Jesus Christ. We're Christians and called that in scripture, by inspiration of God. It is a God given designation.

So step #3 in the remedy for denominationalism is, to reject all manmade names and call ourselves Christians only.

Step #4. We reject all manmade designations for His church. What is the church anyway? Paul teaches us this in words which are impossible to misunderstand in [Colossians 1:18](#), *"And He [meaning Jesus] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."* Having the preeminence in all things means that Jesus is set before, or higher than, exalted above everything and everyone else. Paul went on to write later in verse 24 of the same chapter, *"Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church"*. Paul says the church is the body of Christ. In [1 Corinthians 12:27](#), Paul wrote, *"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."* The church is the body of Christ. Who makes up the body of Christ? We do. Who are we? We are Christians. The body of Christ is made up of those who believe, follow, serve and obey Jesus Christ. We are called Christians. So how do we identify the body of Christ to the world while giving the glory to God and at the same time doing it in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ? How about if we choose a designation for the body of Christ from the scriptures which gives the glory where the glory is due and exalts the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?

That's a great idea. Turn with me to [Romans 16:16](#) and let us see how Paul designated the body of Christ. "*Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you*". The designation "*church of Christ*" is found in the scriptures, thus it is obedient to the command to do all that we do in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It exalts God by being obedient to His will. It exalts Christ as the one who lived, established, suffered for, bled for, died for and heads His disciples and followers who are called Christians. All the Christians make up His body which is called the church. The body of Christians is the church and it is of Christ so in accordance with the scriptures we call it what it is. It is the church of Christ. It's not the building we are in. It is the people who make up the body of Christ. Christians, us, the saved, the redeemed, God's children, the disciples of Christ, together who are members of the body of Christ which is, the church; The church of Christ. We together are the church of Christ.

Step #5 is to be the church of Christ in form and practice, and not just word. This is the most important step of them all. It does no good for us to reject the manmade names and claim to be the one body of Christ, following the one faith, if we are not. Just because we designate ourselves as the church of Christ and identify ourselves with Christ by the designation "Christian" does not mean anything if we are not what we claim to be. Lots of denominations out there claim to be the one church practicing the one faith. If we are not what we claim to be, not only will we find ourselves ashamed at our judgment, we will have lead others to their destruction as well.

This takes us back to step 1. Study to show yourselves approved of God. Implementation is always the hardest part of any plan. It sounds really good to claim to follow the will of God, not adding anything to nor taking anything away. It sounds really good to call ourselves Christians only and to refer to ourselves as simply the body of Christ. From the outside looking in, this looks really appealing to those who are seeking the truth. But if we are teaching and practicing more or less than what is found in scripture then we are divided from the truth just like anybody else. We must recognize that, for us, a departure from the truth is a division from Jesus Christ as much as anyone else.

The most important step of all in this is that we are what we say we are. It is vital that we ourselves live as God would have us live. It is vital that we ourselves know, and live according to, the word of God. Jesus said in [Luke 11:28](#), "*blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.*" James wrote in chapter 1:21-22, "*Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only...*"

The Christian life, faithfully lived is not something done one day of the week. It is a commitment to a lifestyle of living in harmony with the entire will of God 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

So how do we remedy the division we see out in the world today? We know the will of God, we call ourselves what we are and not after a manmade name. We call the body of Christ what it is. We live according to the will of God, rejecting manmade doctrines, creeds, names and beliefs. We follow the word of God recorded for us in scripture, adding nothing to, neither taking anything away. We commit to this lifestyle and follow it diligently and faithfully for the rest of our lives. In a word, we live in obedience to the will of God.

There were faithful Christians in the first century. They were not members of any denominational group. They were members of Jesus Christ's one church following one faith. If we will follow the will of God like they did, believing what they believed, living how they lived, doing what they did, worshipping how they worshipped, then we are assured of being today what they were then. Faithful Christians, nothing more, nothing less.

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