

Do Denominations Divide Christ's Church?

A few years ago in Indianapolis thousands of men gathered to be spiritually challenged and encouraged. The event was a Promise Keepers rally. Protestants and Catholics joined hands during this weekend retreat. At one point, while emotions were running high, a leader roused the crowd by declaring, "We are one in Christ. Denominations divide us. Christ unites us. Let us pray and work for unity." His declaration received a standing ovation.

Many Christians agree with that statement. The Church's unity is grounded in Christ. Every believer is part of a larger body. Denominations appear to threaten that unity. So, some churches attempt to minimize their denominational ties by removing labels and titles which might point to a religious bias. The argument goes, "Since there will be no denominations in heaven, why have them on earth? We are less effective in reaching our communities when we label ourselves. We don't want to look sectarian. Besides, some people think their denomination is the true one, creating dissension among Christians." Thus, the ecclesiastical landscape is filled with churches named "Community, Evangelical, Bible, Grace, etc.", all in an effort to express the broad embrace of Christianity. But, is this emphasis healthy? Are denominations divisive?

A Bit of History

Generally speaking, most church denominations have their roots in the Protestant Reformation (1500s). Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Baptists are a few examples. Armenian groups such as the Church of God, Nazarenes, Wesleyans and Methodists claim the theology of John Wesley (1700s). There is no denomination, including the Roman Catholic Church, that can claim New Testament origins. Each one began around the teachings of a particular leader (or leaders). Each group developed its own doctrinal statement. However, among the Protestant groups, there is unity on the essentials of Scripture. Their diversity lies in "secondary doctrine", such as Baptism, Communion, Church Government, Spiritual Gifts and Church Leadership to name a few. Historically, Protestant denominations have agreed on Justification by Faith, the Authority of the Scripture and the Person and Work of Christ. The differences are numerous, but, a perusal of their various historical and doctrinal statements reveals a strong unity on Salvation by Grace. Our forefathers contended for the "core" while respecting each other's distinctive teachings. For example, John Wesley (Armenian) preached the funeral sermon of George Whitefield (Calvinist). Both men were used of God during the Great Awakening in America (1735-1740); both men disagreed on certain theological issues; both men had a great respect for each other. Differences do not necessarily divide.

A Growing Problem

With the onslaught of mass evangelism and the popularity of a Billy Graham denominational lines became less important. It was clear that God powerfully worked in nondenominational settings. A new "non-distinctive wind" arose. Christians were beginning to see denominations as a hindrance rather than a help to God's people. The call was for unity and the dismantling of denominational thinking. Today, churches across the land are holding business meetings to remove their denominational name from the church sign. It's not an abandonment of past

doctrine. Rather, it is an attempt to reach a diverse community. But, sincere motives do not protect against potential dangers.

Healthy Denominations

Why would anyone advocate denominations within the body of Christ? There are several reasons. First, denominational ties preserve a commitment to truth. When a local assembly decides to remove some of its former distinctives, it runs the risk of removing too much. The church which says, "Our Baptist name may hinder us in attracting community visitors" is a generation or two away from potentially saying, "Let's be careful about emphasizing verbal inspiration." Why? Because if changes are made in order to be less offensive to the community, it's only a matter of time before other core doctrines are evaluated as offensive. It is a theological "slippery slope." A church cultivating a healthy tie to its denomination reflects a healthy respect for its doctrinal statement. The people sense a connection to their spiritual forefathers. Such a heritage acts as a preservative.

Second, a denomination promotes unity within the local assembly. There are a host of issues which make it difficult for Christians to regularly worship in harmony. How does a church call a pastor when there is "secondary" doctrinal disagreement among its members? Suppose the pulpit committee is comprised of three members who believe in "once saved always saved" and three members who believe the opposite. It's not a matter of who's right or wrong. It's a matter of trying to find a pastor who could satisfy both positions. Obviously, that's an impossibility. While many doctrines are "secondary", they are still very important for unity within the body.

Third, a denominational connection allows a church to have a broader outreach than is possible on the local level. Global projects, multicultural missions, national ministries and conferences are available to a local body unable to access such opportunities on its own.

Unity through Diversity

Denominations can send a clear message to their adherents regarding their beliefs. In a day when theological confusion reigns, a direct and plain message is needed. Nondenominational churches sometimes are characterized by theological ambivalence. It is the consequence of trying to minister in a nonabrasive way to people from every religious persuasion. Such an effort promotes compromise rather than unity. Denominations built on the Bible will respect differences while encouraging a healthy spiritual community.

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