

- ***READ I Corinthians 1:10-13/PRAYER*** We have all at one point or another been asked what denomination we are a part of. Or we might have even been asked what kind of Christian we are. My usual answer for such question is that I don't belong to any denomination, but am a member of the "such and such Church of Christ." Sometimes the response to that statement will be something along the lines of "oh so you're a part of the Church of Christ denomination." If you have ever had this conversation then you probably understand the frustrations that come with trying to get people to understand that the church we are a part of does not fit into the denominational model that is so prevalent in Christianity today. We don't subscribe to this model of organization and operation of the Lord's Church because we don't see it as being the way the Church in the first century conducted itself. We don't see different kinds of Christians.
- In fact, the text we just read condemned this divided type of attitude that has caused denominations to become the norm of Christianity in our day and age. Unwillingness to only accept the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles leads to so many different groups going by different names and doing so many things in completely different ways. I truly don't believe this is the will of God or the desire of Jesus for the Church that He gave Himself for.
- Instead, I believe that the pattern of the New Testament shows us that the church is to be understood in only two ways. Firstly, can be understood as all of the saved for all time. (*"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."* I Corinthians 12:13; *"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of [a]ngels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect"* Hebrews 12:22,23) It is the fellowship that is held between those current and past who were and are faithful to God in their lives. (*"what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."* I John 1:3) But within this universal church we are separated by geography and thus operate as local congregations who are lead by local leadership that have no power or control over the church other than those who they are among. (*"shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight"* I Peter 5:2) The denominational issue creates this organization that is something smaller than the universal church, but yet bigger than the local churches. This type of organization is foreign to what we can find in the New Testament pattern of the Lord's churches.
- I would feel confident that those sitting here today would agree and understand the problems that are created by this type of organization, and we would never subscribe to having our church be joined with other churches into a true denomination. However, might I suggest that while we would never officially recognize ourselves as a denomination, that there are ways in which we can behave and carry ourselves that would in fact cause others to see us as just another denominational. I would like to take some time considering this idea this evening of becoming denominational. Let's look at how we can become denominational in our approach to the church and what can be done to avoid such a thing so that Paul wouldn't rebuke us for having divisions among ourselves. These thoughts have been on my mind much recently and after having read some excellent articles by Doy Moyer, I felt compelled to share these thoughts with the church and I would greatly encourage you to consider Doy's material if you're so inclined. (<http://blog.moyerpress.com/problems-with-the-church-of-christ/>)

I. How We Can Become Denominational

A. We become denominational when we have a denominational mindset.

1. As is the case with most things, strong influences will end up creeping into our minds if we are not extremely careful to guard against such. The world surrounding the church in Corinth was certainly one that was divided in numerous ways and it ought not be shocking that they allowed that type of mindset to creep into their church, and the same can be very true for us in regards to how we view the church.
2. We must guard against the thinking that we are just another denomination like the vast majority of the churches around us. There is a strong push by many in mainstream Christianity to acknowledge that all churches claiming Christ are on the right path to heaven even if the paths are completely different in their nature. Because some don't want to seem harsh or unloving, they are willing to take on some of that mindset and behave as if all people claiming Christ are accepted by God.

3. If this type of mindset is acceptable then what was the problem with what was happening in Corinth? Many of those individuals were dividing themselves according to different standards, yet Paul rebuked them. All we see today is people dividing themselves by different standards. Some refer to themselves as not simply Christians but they are instead described by something else other than that. We might even refer to ourselves as "Church of Christ Christians." Again, how is that different than Corinth? (**I Corinthians 1:12**)
4. If we have this type of mindset then it ought not surprise us when others see it strange that we claim not to be a denomination when we are thinking just like many who opening claim and embrace to be a part of denominational Christianity.

B. We become denominational when we use denominational language.

1. Not only is a denominational mindset seen in how we see ourselves in relationship to denominations, but it is also seen in the language that we use. When we use phrases such as "Church of Christ preacher", "Church of Christ Doctrine", "Church of Christ", or "Church of Christ Christian" all we are is feeding the notion that the Lord's church is just another denomination.
2. It might even be that we answer the question of "what denomination are you?" by saying something along the lines of "Church of Christ" as if there truly is a Church of Christ denomination. This type of language is completely a denominational expression just like if someone answered with the name of a denominational church, and again just feeds the notions of some concerning the Lord's Church as a denomination.

*****Let me interject that I recognize that the current landscape of denominational Christianity almost makes it impossible to just say that we are simply Christians. However, be that as it be...it ought to be our strongest desire to change that, and it begins by speaking accurate to Scripture even if others are will or don't understand at first.**

3. It might be that when we are asked a question concerning a belief we answer something like, "the Church of Christ teaches...or believes..." When we use that particular language are we referring to the universal church or our local church? If we are referring to the universal church, then how do we determine what the "Church of Christ" believes? Is there some manual that teaches "Church of Christ doctrines?" Or if we are referring to the local church then some could be very confused and think that all church see things exactly as we see them. This language leads to the thought that all churches of Christ all hold to exactly the same beliefs and practices when we know that just isn't the case.
4. Our language matters, and we know this because that is specifically what Paul addresses when he rebukes the Corinthians. When we use the exact same language as denominations, we shouldn't be surprised when others see us as such.

C. We become denominational when we function like a denomination.

1. Lastly on this point, we become denominational when we organize ourselves and function like a denomination does. Remember earlier we mentioned that the church is only known in two senses. It is known as all the saved of all time and it is known as individual local churches. There is nothing smaller than the former or bigger than the latter. Or at least there isn't in the New Testament.
2. However, the denominational structure creates something that is in between the two. While the church might not actually have an earthly headquarters as so many denominations do, and while there is no governing body (with the Apostles long gone and buried)...some can still organize and function like a denomination when they create institutions that take on a name that includes "Church of Christ." It might be a "Church of Christ college", a "Church of Christ group home", or something else along this lines, but the truth is that such things are not found within the New Testament. We would never send money in support of a denominational entity of such, but if the words "Church of Christ" are put on there then we somehow feel justified in supporting it. As a church, we would never send money to a convention, but if it is a school associated with the "Church of Christ" then we will. This shows major inconsistencies in our approach.
3. This type of mindset is exactly what we would find in the denominational world. By supporting such we are doing nothing that look and acting like a denomination and we shouldn't expect for others to see us as anything different. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck...

II. How We Can Avoid Being Denominational

A. seeing the church as God sees the church.

1. If we see the church as God sees the church then I feel confident that we will firmly grasp and understand that God sees a church and the people that make it up as being saved or lost based upon what they teach and practice and not just what is on the sign.
2. I fear that we sometimes put too much emphasis on the name that is on the sign and we make judgements based upon it alone. Of course there are names that are not appropriate because they're unscriptural. However, we need to keep in mind that there is no official name given to local churches, and that any way in which a local church or a collection of local churches are described are just that...they are descriptions.
3. Sure "churches of Christ are used to describe some churches (**Romans 16:16**), but in the very letter we started with, Paul refers to that church as the church of God. (**I Corinthians 1:2**) Then in **I Thessalonians 1:1**, Paul refers to that congregation as *"the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* I share these examples to simply show that the name "Church of Christ" is not something that must be on a sign in front of the meeting place. In fact, no sign is even demanded. If we do have one then it could say a variety of things to simply denote that this is a place where Christians meet.
4. What truly matters is whether or not those making up that church are doing as the Lord wills. God makes judgements based upon the substance of a church and not simply the name on the sign. If we will take the time to judge a group based upon that then we will begin to see churches as God sees churches. *"For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth."* (**III John 3,4**) We, like God, must focus and judge on the substance of the church.

B. speaking about the church as the Bible speaks about the church.

1. Secondly, we need to use language that is Biblical in nature so that we won't be mistaken as having bought into denominationalism. When we are asked what kind of Christian we are, we don't need to answer with anything other than a pure and simple Christian. There are no different flavors of Christian, but a person who has given their life to Jesus through faith and obedience.
2. Those in Corinth were not Pauline Christians or Christ Christians. They were just Christians. They were just disciples and we ought to be sure to convey in our language that is all we are, as well. We simply strive to follow Christ and we don't want to be a part of any division that is not of Christ.

C. holding only to the traditions handed down by the Apostles.

1. Finally, if we want to stay united with Christ then we simply need to subscribe only to the teachings laid forth by Jesus and His inspired Apostles and other writers. Notice that Paul admonishes the disciples in Thessalonica to only hold to the traditions that were handed down from the Apostles. (**II Thessalonians 2:15**)
2. This means that everything we do as Christians and local churches ought to be done as the we are instructed by Jesus's Apostles. It was Jesus who told the Apostles that they would lead the church and teach those who were a part of it in all things that Jesus had commanded them. (**Matthew 28:19,20**) We see them doing this at the beginning of the church in Jerusalem. (**Acts 2:42**)
3. We are to continue in this pattern of following the Apostle's teaching and doctrine. That means we organize and operate churches just as we can see them done in the New Testament. Local churches led by local leaders doing the work they are capable of doing. This is the pattern we see and we must follow that pattern if we want to honor Jesus and be those who will be rewarded according to **Matthew 7:21-23**.

Becoming or behaving as a denomination doesn't require that we have a earthly headquarters or a group of men to govern over multiple local churches. It can be as simple as thinking like them, speaking like them, or functioning and be organized like them. If we are convinced that God's will is not to have his people divided then we must do all things in such a way that we will not give any impression of being such. May God help us to become obedient and not denominational in all things so that we might please Him and reap the rewards reserved for the faithful when this life is over.