

Is The Church Composed of Denominations and Sects?

Perhaps there is no group of believers who speak more frequently and adversely of sects and denominations than we of our Movement. We have tried diligently to be undenominational. We have shunned the appearance of being a sect like a fashion model shuns the appearance of being a mother.

As a youth I picked up on all our traditional stance and argumentation, and I taught it all confidently for many years. Today, however, I am classed as a heretic by some for my efforts to reach a more enlightened understanding of the matter. The anticipation that most of you readers will now agree with what I am about to include in this essay emboldens me to express thoughts I would have rejected a few years ago. Thank God and you for being patient with me.

In this discourse we will look at three key nouns: church, denomination, and sect. Of these three words on which we have placed so much stress, only one is found in the Scriptures! In an effort to define these nouns, we will begin with the one in the Scriptures.

The word SECT (Greek: "haireisis") literally means "a choosing." Here I shall adapt in my own words the definition of Vine (A Dictionary of NT Words). It denotes a strong emphasis of a certain truth, or a perversion of one, generally with the expectation of personal advantage; hence, a division and formation of an exclusive party or sect in contrast to the uniting power of total truth. It is a segment of the church claiming to be the whole church.

Such action is heresy. A heretic is not necessarily one who teaches error (All teachers teach some error!), but one who rejects others who do not share his limiting beliefs. Since all groups are formed to separate themselves from other believers who do not accept their predilections, the accusing finger points alarmingly toward all exclusive groups. What a sorry mess we have gotten ourselves into! This applies devastatingly to our different "Restoration Movement" divisions claiming to be the one, true church while rejecting other groups in our own Movement.

The word DENOMINATION is not found in the Scriptures. A denomination is a general name for a category. To denominate is to give a name to, to designate. A denomination makes no claim of being the whole church but considers itself as a designated part of it. The old illustration compares it to a dollar. A dollar may consist of denominated parts such as quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies, with no part claiming to be the whole dollar. A sect claims to be the whole dollar.

No one, I assume, contends that God has created the various denominational and sectarian bodies. We can identify historically when movements developed into the different churches. Most were developed in modern times, and some have begun in our generation. Yet, many are deluded to think God adds members to their own organized group. That would make God the creator and maintainer of division.

In denial that we have given ourselves a distinguishing name, evasive tactics and arguments are still being used which were far from convincing when first conceived. The body of believers has no name. Period! Whether we use "Church of Christ," "church of Christ," or "The Church," we are purposely distinguishing our group from other groups of the body of believers universally. That is denominating it. The misdirection is not so much in giving ourselves a name as it is in purposely designating ourselves as

exclusive from others. Our evasion is an effort to justify our division. In seeking to distinguish ourselves, one name is no more Scriptural than another!

In scores of instances in the OT writings, God's people were referred to as a congregation. With differing shades of meaning, CONGREGATION denoted a meeting place, the meeting itself, an appointed meeting, or an assembly called together.

God's chosen ones were called out into a separate people and later into a separate nation. The connotation is not what they were called out from but that they were called out into a distinct grouping or assembly belonging to God. Granting that the obedient among them were legally righteous, their salvation was not assured until the atonement of Jesus opened their way into heaven. There the heavenly assembly or congregation consisted of all who were saved by Christ.

By Peter and other apostles on Pentecost, through their proclamation of the gospel, God called out others to be made part of his congregation. "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). In Verse 47 it is written, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The text does not indicate if they were just added together (totaled), or were added to a pre-existing number in heaven. To say the least, the congregation or assembly to which they were added was the saved ones. All the saved were in it. They were God's people. God called them into his congregation which was/is a state of being rather than an organization.

The Greek term "ekklesia" used to designate God's people in NT Scriptures means "called out" with the connotation of being CALLED INTO AN ASSEMBLY OR CONGREGATION. Unfortunately, due to ecclesiastical pressures, that word was rendered "CHURCH" in the early English translations and that mistranslation has continued until this day. It has been especially confusing to readers of the King James Version in Acts 7:38 where it speaks of "the church in the wilderness" in Moses' time. The word "church" is translated from the Greek "kuriakos" which means "belonging to the Lord; pertaining to the Lord." That word is never used in the Scriptures in relation to God's people. In a dictionary of NT words like Vine's, there is no listing of the word "Church." So, because of common usage today, when we use the word church in this essay, we are meaning God's congregation or assembly of the saved.

With these clarifying definitions in mind, we go to the question in our title: Is the church composed of denominations and sects? To avoid further suspense, the answer is an emphatic NO! That eliminates every listing of churches in the telephone directory. No exceptions. God's congregation is composed of saved individuals rather than churches, groups, sects, denominations, or whatever you may call them. Contrary to what I believed and taught, the Lord does not add saved persons to divisions which are necessarily less than his whole congregation. We join those groups, if not formally, at least by choosing to associate with them. In my simplicity, for many years I declared to my listeners that I never joined a church. I just obeyed the gospel and the Lord added me to it. Then I would invite disciples who were newcomers to "place membership" with us. And I did not even smell the rat in the woodpile!

Which group is God's congregation? There is no such organized or visible group in existence which is God's assembly of the saved. If there are saved persons on earth today, then they must be among various groups. Not all in those groups (or any group) will be saved, and salvation of any person will be in spite of being in a divided group rather than because of it. However, persons may be in a group that is less than the whole while maintaining a non-sectarian attitude of acceptance of believers generally. One is not

guilty of an error or sin that he/she disavows. None of us agree with everything in our particular group, yet we can maintain a spirit of unity.

The illustration of denominations being like various coins that make up the dollar is invalid, deceptive, and misleading. No thoughtful person can contend that God adds saved people to conflicting groups which supposedly compose his universal assembly. If the church is composed of them, then the church was not complete until they were all started – and they are still being started. Christ died for individuals rather than for groups, whatever or whoever the group may be.

Most all illustrations have their inadequacies, but maybe this one will help clarify what I am contending. Throughout the world, many innocent people are imprisoned. They are not innocent because they are in prison but in spite of it. Being in prison does not prove innocence, nor is imprisonment necessary for innocent people. Some prisons may have no innocent people in them. The prison is not made for innocent people but for criminals, but being in prison does not prove one to be criminal. The innocence or criminality of a person is determined by his state of character and conduct rather than whether or not he is in prison.

Please consider some parallels to that illustration. Throughout the Christian world, many saved persons are in denominations and sects though some groups may have no saved in them. They are not saved because they are in separate groups but are possibly saved in spite of it. Being in a division does not prove one is saved, nor is being in one necessary for salvation. The separate groups are not made for saved people but to satisfy divisive people, but serving God in one does not prove one to be divisive. The faithfulness or lack of it is determined by the spiritual state and conduct rather than whether or not a person assembles with an organized separated group.

Various demanding questions always made any approach like I am making seem totally unacceptable. My foremost one was: How can a person be a part of and support a group that teaches error? Of course, I was assuming that I was in a group that teaches no error! Love hides a multitude of sins, and sincerity hides our own inconsistencies from our selves but not from others. I learned to overlook the divergence of convictions and inconsistencies within my own group while eagerly pointing out those in other groups. I was morally honest but not intellectually honest! I failed to judge myself by the same rule used in judging others. Since I have begun to recognize my own erroneous manner of judging others, I have been served a long menu of humble pie.

In your congregation, does everyone have the same conviction? Do they all teach the same thing? Do you approve of all that is taught and practiced? Not likely! Except for the brain-dead. Then, how can you be a part of and support your group that teaches or practices error? You owe me no answer, but you owe yourself one.

Some of the points of disagreement in your group are of less consequence. You learn to tolerate those by “bearing and forbearing.” That is the only way we can serve in harmony together. Other matters of divergent conviction are of vital importance. They become the inevitable thorns that come with roses of peace and harmony. In all sincerity, you speak out against these things you consider to be wrong and try to teach what you consider to be the truth, even to little avail. Considering that unity and harmony are more important than binding your judgment, you do not press your conviction so as to over-ride the consciences of others and to the point of becoming disruptive and divisive. Thus you deal with your

conviction in a manner that clears you of the guilt you feel rests upon the group. One is not guilty of an evil he disavows and refuses to practice.

Is the group with whom you serve permeated with more sin and error than the congregation in Corinth? How about six of the seven churches of Asia? The Spirit did not declare them to be false churches from which the righteous should flee. They were “true” churches in need of much reform. They needed reformers, not deserters. There are no perfect congregations or organized groups. All are in constant need of reformation. No inspired writer ever advised a group of the “righteous” to leave a group and start a “true, loyal” church. Yet we have attempted that very thing commonly as though a “command of silence” demanded it. By that practice we have continued to segment believers, slicing and dicing, and creating more disunity. Is it not time for us to realize that the saved people of earth are one congregation and that we must learn to live together?

If we can apply these principles to the dealing with different convictions and practices in our own distinct groups, can we not apply them to others who do not wear the same denominating name we wear? Does that mean that I must approve everything the Baptists, Episcopalians, Adventists, and Pentecostals teach and practice? Absolutely not! I am not called upon to violate my conscience by practicing or teaching what I consider to be error. I can and should speak out against what I think is error in any and all churches -- including the one I am in. But if I reject them wholesale, I am doing that on my own fallible judgment instead of letting the Lord do the judging. The Lord adds the saved to his congregation, and he has not placed me at the entrance to judge his action.

My conscience does not allow me to baptize an infant; however, I must admit that I cannot explain how a baby can be born free of sin and not be added by the Lord to his congregation of the saved and that, after the child reaches an undefined “age of accountability,” it may sin, be baptized, and be added by the Lord. No person or group has discovered all the missing links.

Conscience also prevents me from using any method other than immersion in baptizing though the method of baptism of the Holy Spirit was an outpouring. Others as sincere and studious as I am as convinced as I that their practice is as acceptable as mine. I may attempt to be their teacher but not their judge or conscience. They cannot violate my conscience; only I can do that, and that is not demanded of me.

Even though my conscience limits my participation with others in some matters of conviction, I should be able to work with all who profess Christ in activities that honor him and serve the needs of mankind. Generally, we all hold much more in common than we disagree about. It is unwise to let emphasis of the diversity negate all the positive power that unity and harmony generates.

Is the church composed of denominations and sects? By no means. Not one of either is a part of it. The church is saved individuals rather than saved groups or organizations. Are saved people fragmented into different sects and denominations? Yes, without question. May an individual disciple serve with an imperfect group without demonstrating a sectarian attitude or approving division? Yes. If not, there is little hope for any of us. Do all who are in segmented groups have a non-sectarian, harmonious, accepting attitude? By no stretch of the imagination! How tragic it is for all the sincere disciples who continue to reject others whom the Lord has added and to maintain separations. [] (September 2000)