

THE CHURCH IS NOT A DENOMINATION

By: Cled E. Wallace

The church of Christ is one thing and a denomination is something else. They are both different and antagonistic. The church of Christ is a spiritual body, consisting of all Christians, while a denomination is purely a sectarian setup. A universal acceptance of New Testament teaching regarding the Church would annihilate denominationalism, sink it without a trace; while to the extent that denominationalism triumphs, the apostles' doctrine is outraged and the prayer of Jesus for unity is mocked. This may seem to some a severe statement of the case, but take a frank look at the problem. A denomination is a partisan brotherhood. A man can be a Christian, continue "steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), and never belong to one, endorse it, or have one thing to do with it. In fact, if he is just a Christian, a member of the body of Christ, and sticks to the New Testament, he is a living rebuke to everything of the sort. To even suggest that the Founder of Christianity planned that his followers should break up into partisan flocks, adopt human creeds, and wear sectarian names is absurd. This sort of thing is open rebellion against his expressed will. "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me." (John 17:20, 21). Any man who can prove the righteousness of denominationalism by the New Testament is capable of proving that Peter was a Papist, Paul a Baptist, James an Episcopalian, Luke a Methodist, and Apollos a Holy Roller. These men belonged to no denomination, because there were none in their day, and they roundly condemned even the erring tendencies that squinted in the direction of such things. The disciples of Christ were admonished to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude3). Paul told Timothy to "abide thou in the things which thou hast

learned,” and to “guard that which is committed unto thee” (2 Tim. 3:14; 1 Tim. 6:20). They would have disobeyed had they wandered off into anything of a denominational character.

Let two honest and capable men start out in quest of the truth on the Church question. One takes a New Testament and goes to Jerusalem on Pentecost, where and when the Church was set up; the other goes to a modern denominational-infested city in the year of our Lord 1937. What does each one find? The man in Jerusalem on Pentecost finds Simon Peter freshly baptized in the Holy Spirit using the “keys of the kingdom of heaven”. A short time before the Lord has said: “Upon this rock I will build my Church.” After his resurrection and before his ascension he gave the world-wide commission: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:15, 16). “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,” now presents infallible proofs to a vast and astonished multitude that Jesus Christ has indeed risen, and “that God hath made him both Lord and Christ”. Thousands believed him and cried for mercy. “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The results were truly astounding. “They then that received His word were baptized; and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:37-42). What now do we have here? The church of Christ. Christ has fulfilled his promise to “build” it. What is this church? It is the body of Christ, consisting of all the Christians in Jerusalem, all the Christians in the world at the time. Were there any Christians in Jerusalem who did not belong to the church? Try and find one. The line is clearly drawn between the church and the world -- those who were the Lord’s and those who were not. “And He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). “For in one Spirit were

we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit: (1 Cor. 12:13). Did the church of Christ here have a creed? Indeed, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching.” These Christians in Jerusalem did not belong to a denomination, yet they were baptized believers in Christ, and, therefore, members of his body, the Church. A denomination by common consent does not include all Christians. It is smaller than the body of Christ and larger than any congregation of Christians. It is unauthorized and organized rebellion against the simplicity of the gospel. It is a plant the heavenly Father has not planted, and will be rooted up (Matt. 15:13). The church of Christ is older than all denominations, and Christianity is older than all human creeds. If by any chance they developed from what we find in the New Testament, it was by a sinful perversion of its principles that would justify God in casting angels down to hell should they be guilty of such an usurpation of authority (Gal. 1:6,7). A man can take a New Testament and go to Jerusalem and easily find and identify the Church. Its name, faith, terms of membership, organization, worship are not remotely suggestive of the modern denominational system whose chief function seems to be to eclipse it.

Now let us follow the fortunes of our friend in a modern city where denominations abound. Maybe the general conference or synod or association is in session. He hears much of “our denomination,” “us as a people.” “our usage,” “our Baptist people,” etc. Although the leaders of these parties profess to be tolerant and broad-minded and concede that no party contains all Christians, yet all are headed for the same place, still they are in such fundamental conflict that a Christian cannot belong to two of them at once. The sectarian spirit is seething, especially under the surface of things. No one of these sectarian bodies, nor all of them, is the

church of Christ. The church of Christ was the body of Christ and included all Christians before there were many of them.

If the man in Jerusalem starts down the centuries to this modern city of Babylon, he finds that this side of the New Testament differences arose over matters not in the New Testament. Unscriptural terms had to be invented to describe unscriptural principles. Parties and party dialects are a natural consequence of departure from the New Testament teaching. Such a mess as denominationalism cannot be identified with the church of Christ, “the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth”.

If a man in the modern city where denominations abound starts back to Jerusalem, he will find the denominations dropping off one by one at some date or the name of some man. If he gets as far as Jerusalem and the New Testament, he will find not even one denomination and no sectarian principles whatever. There are no Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and such like in the New Testament, and there ought to be none now. A man who is just a Christian has all the truth that others have and all that others do not have. He has it all, and that ought to be enough to satisfy the most exacting.