

DENOMINATIONALISM-Is It a BLESSING or a CURSE?

By Archie B. Craig

You can receive various answers to the above question, depending upon whom you ask, for indeed, the opinions of people vary greatly concerning the matter.

I shall try to be a little cautious in my answer by saying that whether denominationalism is a blessing or a curse depends upon how it is used.

Before giving you reasons for our belief, I want to quote the opinions of others for the sake of comparison.

A typical "independent" wrote as follows: "As you all know there are many denominations and sects or religious groups all purporting to worship one God and/or one Lord Jesus the Christ. In the last World Almanac I found more than 200 listed in the United States, and there may be others not listed there. You may be a member of one of those separate divisions. Let us ask again Paul's question, "Is Christ divided?" Let us put with this an axiom as stated by Jesus: "A house divided against itself will not stand"..." All the teaching of Christ and of the apostles is against division."

Here is a man who fights denominationalism on the grounds that it divides the believers into separate camps. To read only this much of the man's literature you would think he is the greatest advocate of Christian fellowship and unity, but let us examine his work a bit further and see what we find.

He appears to be appealing to individuals to give up their affiliation with organizations and to work entirely alone for the Lord, independent of all other Christians. Just suppose we tried to do what this man seems on the face of it to be advocating. We all quit our churches. If we refuse to work together in groups. We make no "united" efforts to save the lost. Would that not result in much greater division than denominationalism has ever caused?

.Most certainly it would! : -

But don't be deceived. That is not what this man wants, for he is a publisher of Christian literature, and if you will give him your cooperation and financial support it will be gladly accepted. Let me ask then, which is worse, for one man to accept the help and cooperation of others in the Lord's work, or for a group to do it?

Let's hear the same writer a little further. "Now you that are posing as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and Bible teachers, suppose we each ask ourselves, (or myself), "Am I serving the divine purpose of Christ? Or am I building up denominational fences that divide the saints often into antagonistic groups?" Let us also ask a question as follows: Or,

are we preaching "independent-ism" which divides the Lord's people still further and in many cases making them even more antagonistic toward other Christians?

We shall now quote what this minister has to say on unity. "And how can we become unified when we refuse to fellowship with those who do not carry our particular brand of religion...." The thing independent ministers usually object to is that they cannot go to an "organized" congregation and work themselves into the pulpit, take up an offering, and gain a following for themselves. I regret to have to make this observation, but if you will watch, you will see that this is true in nearly all cases.

When I first began to receive this man's literature, I did not immediately recognize his name being that of someone I knew, but finally I remembered that he visited in a community in California at a time when another minister and I were conducting a revival. At our request, he had preached once or twice during the revival. We had enjoyed his fellowship. So, when I remembered who he was, I wrote him a friendly letter. I received no reply, presumably because I did not carry his particular brand of religion. Evidently, the fellowship of one who is a strong believer in organization did not mean much to him. In this case who erected a fence?

I am reminded of a conversation I had with an "independent" minister one time when I was a visitor in HIS church. He boasted that he was his own boss, and said that he would like to see the person or persons who could fire him from being pastor of that church. "Why, I own the building!" he declared.

Briefly stated, there are the reasons why so many ministers prefer to work independently. They do not want to take direction from someone else, and they do not want to be responsible to someone else in matters of finance. Maybe the that does not sound so bad to you, but later on in this study we shall compare such an attitude with what the Bible has to say about such matters.

The man mentioned above had found a community where a church was needed. He held a few cottage meetings in the homes, and received some offerings with which he bought a vacant lot, having the deed drawn in his own favor. Later, he personally excavated for the foundation of a building. He continued to receive contributions of labor and finance toward the erection of a church, and with his own efforts he managed to complete quite a nice building. In many ways this man's efforts and pioneering spirit are to be admired, but notice the selfish attitude back of the whole thing. How much better it would have been if he had built around Christ and the Church instead of himself. This man is not in a class by himself, for many there are who seek to "make merchandise of you" for their own personal interests. The only avenue of escape from such unwholesome situations is organization.

The fact that a man is working independently does not always mean that he does not believe in organization. It may be that there just doesn't happen to be an organization over which he can personally have control. .

I am thinking of a man who broke away from his denominational affiliation several years ago in order to conduct an independent radio program. He made much of the fact that his radio work was not being sponsored by ANY church or denomination. He fought organization on the air and in the printed page as few ministers have, and through the years that have passed, he has built up for himself a very large following. At the same time he has enjoyed the privilege of not having to make a financial report to anyone. Like the other minister mentioned above, he has been his own boss. However the man is now getting on up in years and he realizes that some day his work will have to be left to other hands. So, he is now referring to his group as "The Church" and also setting up "organization" to handle the work from here on.

The beliefs of this man and his group are almost identical with the group from which he split off. So, all of his years of fighting denominations has only resulted in the establishment of another denomination, and I dare say that there are few "independent" ministers but what would do the same thing if they could, for that is exactly what happens in a great many cases. It seems good to a man to be independent as long as he can handle the work by

himself, but such a man will seldom ever consent to letting the work be done independently by another man.

Now let us consider a case that seems to be the opposite extreme. One evening a young man called on me and asked my permission to come in for the purpose of discussing religion. In the course of our conversation he told me that the denomination to which he belongs is THE REMNANT church, that they are the ONE group on earth that is carrying the Gospel to all the world. He would not admit that anyone else could be a part of the remnant Church or that any besides themselves were helping to carry the message. Yet, he could not account for the fact that other organizations have mission stations around the world, and that salvation through Christ and other Bible truths are being proclaimed extensively by radio and through the printed page.

Is this not an example of how our God-given right to conduct an organized work may be abused? Should our belief in organization lead us to make the absurd claim that we are the only people the Lord has? Or, that we alone have the truth? Such inconsistent claims on the part of leaders can only embarrass the members and retard the growth of the Church.

At this point, the question naturally arises, if God honors the work of more than one organization, which is the right Church? I think the idea which seems to be quite generally accepted among Protestant denominations, that it takes all the honest-hearted people of all groups to make up the true Church is the logical answer to this question.

There is no doubt in my mind but what the Lord wants us to all be one Church, one group, one organization. His followers all belonged to one Church when He left them and went back to heaven. They remained one until the "falling away" (2 Thess. 2:3) came, which reached its zenith during the Dark Ages. This left the religious world in a state of confusion, the pure Gospel and the true believers having been reduced to a very small remnant.

Then came the reformation, at which time more and more spiritual light began to be revealed. The remnant, possessing the pure Gospel, in at least one case, tried to persuade one of the "reformers" to go all the way and accept the whole Gospel, but he thought it would be too great a step to take at once. In most cases, other reformers seemed to take very much the same attitude. Thus many denominations were founded upon only a few points of truth, with little or no provision made for the study and acceptance of further light. This indifference toward additional truth is the thing that has erected barriers between the various groups.

Therefore, the quest for Christian unity is one of the great problems of our time. In too many cases the denominational leaders say, "We are THE true Church" and yet they are lacking in Bible truth and have no desire to change the creed, to which honest Christians can never conform. This is definitely a fault of denominationalism, because it (indifference toward new light) retards spiritual growth among its members and reduces the chances of achieving Christian unity.

However, in spite of this handicap, there are better interdenominational relations and fellowship than many suppose. Look at some of the large campaigns that have been conducted in recent years on an interdenominational basis. I doubt seriously if any combination of "un-denominationalists" can duplicate this good spirit of fellowship and cooperation.

We often hear people say, "The Church cannot save anyone"; or, "The Church is not a means of salvation." Actually, those who make such statements are side-stepping the issue concerning the importance of the Church and its mission. The statement is true, but it is a very useless one. Does any denomination claim that membership, without obedience to the Gospel, can bring salvation? If the opponents of organized religion can keep the people thinking, "the Church cannot save anyone," a fact that is readily admitted, it prevents them from recognizing the God ordained purpose of the Church, and makes the Church seem insignificant and unimportant.

The mission of the Church was briefly summed up in the words of the Master, when He said to Paul of Tarsus, "Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do (Acts 9:6). Why didn't He merely say, "Thy

sins are forgiven?" The answer is that the Lord had a work for his Church to do in bringing souls to Him, and in teaching the believers. He had previously commanded, "Go ye into the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). And again, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations,... Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commended you" (Matt. 28:19-20). The nature of this work makes organization necessary, and because it is a world-wide assignment, local church organization alone can never accomplish the mission.

Time and space does not permit us to deal with the details of the type of organization needed. Perhaps it will suffice, for now to say that organization is a "tool" in the hands of Christian men and women to perform the work assigned to them by the Master of the vineyard. The extent of the organizational machinery to be set up should be determined as it was in the days of Jesus and the early Church, by the needs and possibilities in the field. Note that Jesus first sent twelve. Later He had need for seventy others. Still later, a special group of seven were given a special assignment, just as the need arose.

>From a careful reading of the book of Acts we see that the local churches did not assume that they were entirely on their own, but accepted direction in certain matters from one who was in a position of more general responsibility, a typical example of which is found in 1 Cor. 16:1-3. Also we see that even after the Saviors ascension the original apostles continued to maintain a certain vigil and supervision over the other congregations and workers, definitely constituting a type of general organization. See Acts 1:15-26; 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 7:1-4; 8:14, and many more. Even the great apostle Paul, went to Jerusalem to compare his gospel with that taught by those older in the faith "lest by any means he should run, or had run, in vain" (Gal. 2:2). This setup continued as long as we have any inspired record of the activity of the Church.

We cannot imitate the example of the early church with local church organization only. You may ask then, how can we have such a system in our church today, in the absence of inspired apostles and prophets? To which I will answer: The best any group can do is to call a general assembly of its faithful members and invite the guidance of the Master in selecting a committee composed of Spirit-filled men to lead out in that phase of the work which is of common interest to all congregations and individuals.

We cannot make apostles of men by giving them such responsibilities, but we should not select men who do not show the fruits of apostles in their lives and work (2 Cor. 12:12). Such men should have the counsel and cooperation of all the believers, while the entire Church prays for a restoration of the gifts and calling of the Spirit (as they were in the early Church) to further facilitate the Gospel work. Of course, in the meantime, such leaders are not to presume that they have authority to give "commandments" to the Church, but to humbly seek the cooperation of all in planning and executing an effective program of worldwide evangelism.

If you don't plan to do much, perhaps you can get by with pretty simple system of organization, but even then it should conform to the examples and standards of the Church in Bible times. However, we must consider the Church ceased to be recorded when the Church was still in its infancy. Many principles and practices established then were, no doubt, intended to serve a greater purpose when the Church grew in number, spread out into other countries, and conditions changed.

Now, if you desire by the Master's help to really move things for him, you will need a more elaborate organizational setup. Don't run ahead of the Holy Spirit in your planning, but be ready to advance as He opens the way.

A principle established by the early Church in selecting the seven to oversee the distribution of food to widows was the matter of equality. If the entire membership in Judea could have all things in common, certainly the ministers of our time should bear each other's burdens by fair distribution according to their needs. I have seen cases where worthy ministers would have been starved out of the work while others, no more worthy, would have fared well, had it not been for our system of equalizing the support of ministers. To do this requires a system of receipting, reporting, accounting, etc. Here is where the organization comes in for a great deal of criticism by those who do not wish to be so

regulated. In effect, they say as did Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" A very large percent of the opposition to organization comes over this very point.

Concerning the use of receipts, reports, etc., if these were used merely to penalize a minister or to establish a certain amount of work to be done in a day in order to qualify for compensation, I would oppose their use for that purpose, but they are not so used. On the other hand, our system of receipting, issuing receipts in triplicate, protects all those who have to be responsible for the money by making it possible to trace each contribution, a protection to which every worker is entitled. The reports of finance, activity, and accomplishments, enable us to determine the cost of operation and to tell our contributors what they are getting for the money contributed. In this day and age many people, especially those experienced in business, rightly expect the Church to be able to furnish such information.

Another point of controversy is the idea of adopting an overall planned program for the whole Church, we will agree that our plans have to be flexible enough to change or give way to the leading of the Spirit. However, there is irrefutable evidence that the most effective plan for taking the Gospel to all the world is for all units of the Church, local churches, general departments, and all to unite in one program, having one common purpose in mind. We believe this is also scriptural.

The most regrettable thing is that some, because of shortness of vision or lack of experience, oppose these practices, without stopping to find out why they have been adopted by the Church. Also, prejudice and/or pure selfishness often play their part in the contention over these matters. But regardless of what the reason or the excuse may be, those who pull away from the Church because of such things are almost sure to find later that if they are to build up a work that merits the respect and confidence of all concerned they have to resort to the same measures. Now, because their experience has broadened, or perhaps because they are the ones in charge, they are willing to accept the practices over which they once rebelled, but the damage done by the split will remain.

No church should consider its organizational plan, its program, etc. perfect, but study and pray for divine guidance constantly to improve and enlarge it, yet keeping within the scriptural pattern and injunctions concerning the Church.