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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS UNDENOMINATIONAL

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There are any number of scriptural reasons that should enable any one to see that Christianity is incompatible with denominationalism and religious division. 1) Christ prayed that division might not exist among believers (John 17:20-21). 2) Paul commanded by the authority of Christ, "Let there be no divisions among you" (1 Cor. 1:10). 3) Division is evidence of carnality of spirit (1 Cor. 3:1-9). 4) Division is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). 5) Division misrepresents Christ as a divided Christ (1 Cor. 1:13). 6) Division destroys the Temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Matt. 12:25).

There is no representation of the church of the New Testament that permits division or denominationalism. 1) There is one head and one body (Eph. 1:19-23; Col. 1:18; Eph. 4). 2) There is one bride and one bridegroom (Rom. 7:1-7). 3) There is one family and one father (Eph. 3:14; Eph. 4). 4) There is one kingdom and one King (Luke 22:29; Heb. 12:28; Rev. 1:5-6).

Denominationalism is not only unscriptural but it is anti-scriptural. Division is sinful and therefore condemned in God's sight. A Christian cannot be a party to it or give it any endorsement or encouragement. It is the product of the wisdom of man and contrary to the will of God.

The church of the New Testament was and is not a denomination wherever it may exist upon this earth because it respects the will of God and is therefore unalterably opposed to religious division and denominationalism. There is no compromise with error that can be made without truth's being forsaken and forfeited and when the Lord's Church is guilty of that, identity with the Lord is lost (2 John 9-11). We must not go beyond that which is written (1 Cor. 4:6; 2 Cor. 4:13).

The word "denomination" signifies a part of something. It is fractional in its meaning and cannot therefore truly represent the religion of Christ and the teaching of New Testament scriptures. The church of the New Testament is not made up of the various sectarian bodies in the so-called "religious world" and, if it were, it would be a living monstrosity for it would be characterized by a mass of contradictions in its doctrine, worship and organization. This concept of the New Testament church can only result in confusion and unbelief. When we preach a different "body," we preach a different Christ and that is unbelief.

The church of the New Testament cannot therefore be characterized by denominational organizations. The churches that men have built have their own established authority and man made regulations and laws. They have their various types of human organizations with their government designed by the wisdom and will of man. The Mormon Church, for example, has a president and the twelve apostles to govern it. The New Testament church had no "president" and it does not today have any living apostles for the reason that there are none living on earth today who can qualify as an apostle of Christ (Acts 1:20-23). The Roman Catholic Church has its universal organization with the universal Pope and his college of Cardinals. But in the New Testament we read nothing of a Pope or a Cardinal or any such authority vested in men as these prelates of Catholicism claim. Such human organizations centered in a single head of government or centralized governing body or some Convention or Association form of government is characteristic of all human religious institutions but no hint or description of such organizations can be found in the New Testament scriptures. Such human organizations did not exist in New Testament days. They are all the result of departures from the teaching of the word of God and cannot be justified in their existence by it.

The church of the Lord or "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16) of the New Testament day knew no earthly head and had no centralized authority to govern it such as a conclave, congress, synod, convention, etc. There is not even an amalgamation or association of local churches known to New Testament scriptures. On the contrary, each congregation in its own locality was an independent body under its own elders or bishops governing itself in the conduct of its own affairs.

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UNITY

Unity in the Local Church

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"Unity" primarily concerns the relationship of the members of a local church one with another. Unity on any other level or upon any other basis without this is unimportant and does not conform to heaven's will.

Unity in the congregational relationship is an individual obligation and grows out of the very nature of God's plan for fellowship among Christians in the church as a body. In New Testament scriptures this local relationship is emphasized in many passages and all of them point up the requirement of that attitude toward one another that brings about and preserves unity.

In Eph. 4:15-16 Paul calls this to our attention in these words, "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ; From who the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

In Eph. 2:19-20 we have this statement, "In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord; In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

Col. 3:12-15 calls attention to the attitude so essential to the unity of any local church, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forebearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness."

Still another such statement setting forth the disposition of Christians toward one another in the congregational relationship is that found in Phil. 2:1-4, "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

Read again such passages as 1 Cor. 12:25-26, and Romans 12:3-10, as well as many other passages and your mind will be impressed with the necessity of humility, lowliness of mind, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we should think, kindly affection toward one another, and having the same care one for another as the body of Christ and members in particular.

Fellow members of the body of Christ are said to be "builded together," "knitted together in love," "members one of another" and all of these expressions emphasize the relationship that Christians must maintain in the fellowship of the local church. When any member takes such an attitude toward himself and his fellow members that creates "schism in the body" and disturbs its harmony and peace, he has committed a crime against God and the temple of God and against his brethren.

In Eph. 4:1-3, Paul emphasizes unity as an individual obligation, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." When an individual member of the body of Christ is not characterized by humility and meekness, there is pretty good reason to expect that he is not making the contribution to the peace of the church in that locality that he is obligated to make.

Our liberal-minded brethren tell us that their brotherhood federations such as Herald of Truth, their human benevolent societies (so-called Orphan Homes and Old Folk's Homes), and their human societies for edification such as Pepperdine College are merely "methods," matters of human judgment, and that they belong in the realm of expedience. But if these brethren are right in claiming that they are matters of expedience, what right do they have to think so highly of their "judgment" that they thrust them into the local church and demand that those who believe they are violations of the Faith of the Gospel, and whose consciences will not allow them to participate in such acquiesce in supporting them or be castigated, exorcised, and mistreated in every conceivable sort of way.

They promote their humanly devised "idols" from the pulpit and through their bulletins and other mediums but deny the voice of opposition the right to any expression in either. Sometimes we witness incidents of such extreme treatment against the best of former friends, the closest of fleshly relationships, and those formerly most beloved of their brethren. This is even sometimes the case when the actual support of such human arrangements has not been begun by the congregation but where there is only a difference in attitude and conviction concerning them.

Such incidents, and there are many of them, evidence a lack of such attitudes as are set forth in the passages cited hereinabove, viz., "lowliness of mind," "meekness," "longsuffering," and "forebearing one another in love." It appears that if such "methods" and "expediences" are not essential and are properly regarded as human expediences and if those who judge them to be permissible have any regard for the "Unity of the Spirit" or recognize any obligation to "Keep the bond of peace" in the local church or have any love and regard for brethren and interest in their souls, they would not assume the attitude of "Lords," not even if they are elders, by demanding that in order to have peace in the church everyone must bow down to their "idols," for this is what they become when they take such an attitude toward them.

UNITY

Endeavoring to Keep the Unity of the Spirit

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Unity is primarily a congregational problem. What the Bible teaches on unity is principally applicable to the local church. Unity in the local church is an individual obligation. It grows out of the obligations that rest mutually on those who are fellow members of the local church.

We are interested in the obligation to restore unity where it has been disturbed and to preserve unity where it exists. Every member of a local church shares with every other member the obligation to contribute to its unity. This obligation is emphasized by the Holy Spirit in Eph. 4:3, "Endeavoring (giving diligence—ASV) to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is a matter in which all must be diligent. Constant attention and effort is required to preserve unity. The devil is always alert to every opportunity to create disturbance, alienate and set at variance those who should be united in the service of Christ. We cannot be too careful to avoid it. The advancement and progress of the Kingdom of Christ and the salvation of souls in addition to our own is involved. Faithfulness in doing the will of God requires it.

In the first letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul spent the first four chapters dealing with a divided condition in that church. The Corinthians were full of false pride and haughtiness. They had grown into a large congregation and were probably boasting of their great program of work. They gloried in the great numbers in attendance, the many additions they were having, their fine building, their wealth, and many other outward signs of their strength as a church. Paul called this attitude "carnality" (1 Cor. 3:1-3)—a fleshly and worldly disposition and rebuked them for their glorying in these outward things rather than being ashamed and mourning for the sad state of the Lord's Church because of their division and sinfulness otherwise (1 Cor. 4:6-13, 5:2).

There is much evidence of such an attitude today among churches of Christ everywhere. We take great pride in our rate of growth and write great swelling words to the various publicity mediums in our country about how rapidly we are growing and have grown. We boast about the great institutions we are building and the great programs of work that are being carried out, expanding them out of all truthfulness and proportion by our imaginations. We raise from the churches staggering sums of money for about everything under the sun, whether it is a part of the mission that God has given His Church or not (all the way from sending great evangelistic parties, including a good percentage of female "missionaries," all over the world, to sending cows to Korea and a veterinarian to take care of them.

One of the modern fads among the big promoters and braggards among us is to take a world tour at the expense of the churches. You can raise money for anything except the simple truth of the Gospel). Thus we are "puffed up" and boast and blow until we convince ourselves that we are "on the march" and really doing "greater things for God" than even He ever planned. When we should rather be "ashamed and mourn" for the division and sin that characterizes us everywhere.

Congregations are dividing over what a lot of brethren are contending are "mere matters of method," "opinion" and "human expediency," yet we go right ahead introducing them, contending for them, and pushing them to the disruption of the peace of local churches. Our schemes and promotions have become such idols in our hearts that we cannot regard our obligation to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

We need to learn all over again, if we have ever known them, the requirements laid down by the Spirit through Paul to these Corinthians for restoring the unity which they were destroying in their "carnality." Read carefully again 1 Cor. 1:10, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

1. *Speak the same thing.* This would eliminate the preaching of opinions, private judgments, human wisdom, "Questionings and disputes of words," "fables," "striving about words to no profit," "vain babbling," "excellency of speech, or of wisdom (our own)," and would cause us in "weakness and fear and in much trembling" to be satisfied with preaching "Jesus Christ and him crucified." There is no possibility of unity where this is not done.

2. *That there be no divisions among you.* Division is not justifiable at any cost save truth and righteousness. We cannot condone sin or compromise with error for the sake of avoiding division. This would purchase peace with men at the expense of peace with God and that is too great a price to pay. But nothing else, including, personal feelings, pride, regard for men, our own preferences, wisdom or judgment, will justify division. Truth and righteousness must be upheld at any cost. (Read Matt. 10:34-39).

3. *Be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment.* This involves the right attitude toward each other. It will not allow parties, cliques, or clans to arise in the congregation. It forbids "respect of persons" (James 2:1-13). It requires generosity of heart, humility of soul, meekness in disposition and enough love for the souls of the brethren to make us willing to always be interested in their spiritual welfare.

These are simple rules but they involve much.

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harmony with the will of Christ. These local "churches of Christ" are all that is known to New Testament teaching. They had no human societies, missionary, benevolent, educational, or of any other kind. When any church of Christ forms, becomes a part to, or affiliates itself with the work of any human institution, that "church of Christ" departs from the New Testament pattern of things and apostatizes and it does not matter what kind of sophistry might be used to justify it in doing so. Human arrangements and organizations without or within the "churches of Christ" are no more justifiable by the Word of God than universal denominational organizations. The church of the Lord can denominationalize itself and does do so when it either establishes or maintains such human organizations. Brethren today who are busy building human organizations to do the work of the Lord's church cannot consistently or sincerely condemn the organizations of human denominations. They are guilty of the same error.

The "church of Christ" of which Paul wrote had no human creed. They rejected all of the doctrines and commandments of men and adhered only to the "doctrine of Christ." When Judaizing teachers went about among them teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be Christians, the Apostles in Jerusalem said, "We gave no such commandment" (Acts 15:23-24). Only the Apostles could bind and loose on earth by the authority of Christ (Matt. 18:18). No Christian can teach anything which the Apostles of Christ did not teach without alienating himself from God and being accursed (Gal. 1:6-8; 2 John 9-11). Human creeds therefore are condemned and when the church of the Lord departs from the truth and teaches the doctrines and commandments of men it loses its identity and its worship to God is in vain (Matt. 15:7-9). What then is the creed of a Christian and what must he teach? Christ is the only authority and His word the only creed a Christian can have.

The "churches of Christ" in the New Testament did not recognize and wear any human name. Paul condemned the Corinthians who claimed to be followers of Paul and raised the question: "Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor. 1:13). The answer to these questions was negative, of course! Paul had not died for them and neither had they been baptized into his name. The argument was then "why wear the name of Paul?" They had no right to do so. But reverse the argument, "Who was crucified for you? and into whose name were ye baptized?" The answer is Christ died for us and into His name are we baptized. The argument then is, "Why not wear the name of Christ?" We have no right to wear the name of man—any man—for none of them died for us and into none of their names have we been baptized, if we are Christians. This simply demands that all believers wear only the name of Christ.

The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Isaiah had prophesied that a new name would be given by the mouth of the Lord when the Gentiles saw the righteousness of God and Kings beheld his glory (Isaiah 62:2). Saul of Tarsus was made a special emissary of Christ to the Gentiles to bear the name of Christ before them and the kings of the earth (Acts 9:15). When he was at Antioch where the Gentiles and the Jews were brought together in the fellowship of a church of Christ for the first time, the new name was given and it was the name "Christian."

The name of Christ is above every name (Phil. 2:9). We can glorify God in this name (1 Peter 4:16). Whatever we do in word or deed is to be done in the name (Col. 3:17). There is no other name in which men can please God and there is no other name in which unity can be possible. Human names are divisive.

Undenominational Christianity can never be characterized by human organizations, human creeds, or human names. Any church of Christ on earth loses its identity with the Lord whenever any of these are adopted or recognized.

THEOPHILUS

