

Sunday, March 3, 2024 am

Is Denominationalism God's Pattern for the Church?

It has been argued that John 15:1-8 is justification for the concept of denominationalism. The argument is that Jesus is "the Vine" and the branches represent different denominations (or churches). Thus, as long as there is adherence to certain core principles, different denominations is acceptable to God. Hence some will advocate, "attend the church of your choice."

In my studies, I find this concept to be contrary to what the Bible teaches, INCLUDING the very context that we have mentioned. In that text, Jesus was speaking to His apostles. And while I believe the context extends to all believers (Jesus did not apply it exclusively to His apostles), it is clear that the branches represent individual Christians. Consider vs. 8 where Jesus said, *By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples*. ANY application of this text MUST keep that in mind. Therefore, the branches CANNOT be a reference to various denominations. This is true for several reasons.

- 1) The context as we just noted.
- 2) Furthermore, the constant references to the individuals in his audience – "You", "him", "he", "anyone", etc.
- 3) In a vineyard, different branches of a vine will NOT produce different fruits – they all produce the SAME fruit.
- 4) Vs. 2 & 6 declares that unproductive branches will be taken away and burned. This is judgment which in scripture applies to individuals.
- 5) Furthermore, there is no mention of the church in any form.

With this in mind, I would like to talk about the subject of denominationalism today. Is denominationalism God's pattern for the church? In any town of virtually any size, one can typically find multitudes of different churches. While this may seem good, especially in a diverse society, we need to ask the question – Is this really what God wants? In my studies I am convinced that this is not what God wants. In fact, I believe the concept of denominationalism is sinful. In this lesson, I would like to give a few reasons why this is so. I want to encourage you to open your Bible as we consider this question. It is important and could have a direct bearing on one's salvation.

I. Definitions

- a. What is the church?
 - i. To understand denominationalism, we must first understand what the church is.
 - ii. The word church in the Greek was a word (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*) that had reference to an assembly. In the Bible it has reference to **the called-out body of the saved**. The church consists of those called out of the world and into relationship with Christ.
 - iii. The word is used in 2 senses in scripture:
 1. Universal – a reference to all who are saved – added by God. Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:23, etc. Jesus built ONE church as noted in these verses.
 2. Local – a reference to a congregation, a group of the saved in a given location who join together to do the collective work God has given us to do (Acts 8:1, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:2 – plural for many congregations; etc.)
In scripture, each local church (congregation) is independent and autonomous, that is, it stands on its own, answering directly to God. There is no earthly organization, larger than the local church, to whom we answer.
 - iv. These are the 2 ways the word church is used in the New Testament. And this is where we begin to notice why denominationalism is wrong.

- b. What is a **denomination?** – “A large group of congregations united under a common faith and name, usually organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy (AHD¹)
- A denomination would be a group of congregations that join together under some type of governing body that distinguish themselves from others (E.g. S.B.C., Governing Body of the Lutheran Orthodox Church, General Conference & Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, The Vatican, etc.).
- c. **Denominationalism** - the belief that the whole body of Christ consists of the many different denominations. it is “the tendency to separate into religious denominations” (AHD²)
- d. Thus, when we speak of denominations, we are addressing these various bodies that admit they are not exclusively the ONE church we read of in the Bible.

II. **Why is denominationalism wrong?**

- a. It redefines the New Testament church –
 - i. As just noted, the word church in the Bible is used of the universal body (a relationship, no earthly organization or structure), or as a local congregation (aka church).
 - ii. The concept of denominationalism adds a layer of organization or networking that is larger than a local church. Either some earthly headquarters, or governing body that meets and makes decisions for all congregations within that synod, council, or convention, etc.
 - iii. Denominationalism ignores the singleness of the church –
 - 1. The Bible teaches there is only ONE church – Matthew 16:18 – Jesus intended to build just one; Ephesians 4:4, “there is one body...” (1:22-23). NOTE:
 - 2. But one says, “We do admit there is one church, but the body consists of all the denominations.”
 - 3. That is contrary to the Biblical description of the church. Anything larger than a local congregation is not found in scripture. Recall our introduction from John 15.
 - 4. The church universal is made up of individual Christians, not congregations – see, 1 Corinthians 12:27. Romans 12:4-5 says, *For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.*
 - iv. We CANNOT restructure the church and still call it the church of the Bible (church of Christ). Consider Ephesians 3:10-11 tells us that the church is part of His eternal purpose and demonstrates His wisdom. WHAT does it imply when seek to change His pattern for the church? Do we really think we know better than God what is best, even in this?
- b. It conflicts with Biblical unity –
 - i. Denominationalism promotes division. Whether intentional or not, it divides, for reasons we will develop as this lesson proceeds.
 - ii. Consider John 17:20-21 – the prayer of Jesus was one of unity.
 - iii. Note 1 Corinthians 1:10-13. This is as close to denominationalism as we find in the New Testament, and it is condemned.
 - iv. Denominationalism is NOT speaking the same thing. By its very definition, it teaches different doctrines, many of which are inconsequential.
 - v. Paul taught the same in every church - 1 Corinthians 4:17.
 - vi. The message to the 7 churches of Asia was, “Hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 2:11, etc.)
- c. It renders God’s truth irrelevant –

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² Ibid.

- i. The Bible teaches that truth matters. It matters where salvation is concerned, how we worship God, how we live our lives and in determining the ONE TRUE church. Jesus taught this – John 8:32 – the truth shall make you free.
 - 1. Galatians 1:6-9 finds Paul marveling that they were considering following after another gospel – changing the gospel.
 - 2. 2 John 9 warns us to not transgress the doctrine of Christ. To transgress is to set aside or disregard what God’s word says.
 - 3. Passage such as these call for us to respect God’s pattern in all that we do.
 - ii. But consider denominationalism. If someone does not like what God’s word says about some subject, he can go elsewhere until he finds a church that says what he is doing is fine. If He doesn’t like God’s pattern for worship - go elsewhere. IF he doesn’t like the Bible’s standard of morality - go elsewhere. If he doesn’t like the restrictive nature of the work of the church in scripture – go elsewhere.
Denominationalism enables this. Especially when you consider the progressive attitudes toward God and His word that are so prevalent today.
- d. It causes confusion –
- i. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of different denominations that profess to follow Jesus. The number varies depending on the source. Each one formulated based upon its own doctrinal beliefs. Regardless, the number is very large, IN CONTRAST with what we have already addressed in scripture.
 - ii. An examination of the various denominations will show that on virtually every Biblical doctrine there is disagreement – from who Jesus is, how we worship God, how one is saved, how one stays saved, how we deal with the erring and sin, what about the organization and leadership of a church, etc.? I contend that God has spoken, and such subjects are important and can have a bearing on our eternal destiny (cf. Matthew 7:21-23, Luke 6:46, etc.)
 - iii. How many today look at all the different churches in a town and say, “How can I know which one is right?” For many it can be overwhelming. This is a direct product of denominationalism. Especially, when we hear messages like, “Attend the church of your choice” or “It doesn’t matter what we believe”, etc.
Friends, I would prefer that we attend the church of Christ’s choice – the ONE He built and established the pattern for.
 - iv. 1 Corinthians 14:33 - God is not the author of confusion.
 - v. NOR will He tolerate ignorance – Acts 17:30-31.
 - vi. Notice again the prayer and desire of Jesus in John 17:20-21 – in unity, “that the world may believe that You sent Me.” True unity is how we show the world what God desires.
- e. It puts the desires and choices of men above the desires of God –
- i. The Bible gives many examples of man-made religions – The golden calf (Exodus 32:1-10), Jeroboam golden calves (1 Kings 12:25-33), the idolatrous practices of Israel and Judah throughout their history, the Jewish leaders in the days of Jesus (Romans 10:1-3, Matthew 15:3-9, etc.), etc. All of them were condemned.
 - ii. Denominationalism is man centered and often self-serving. Man decides what he wants and then he sets out to find it.
Far too many pick a church based upon externals that they prefer, and preconceived ideas. Many are not interested in changing if what they believe is found to be false. They are like the rich, young ruler that came to Jesus wanting to be accepted, BUT without having to change (cf. Matthew 19:20-22). They come to Christ on their terms, not His!
 - iii. Consider this: If I can do whatever I want to do, why should I challenge my OWN beliefs to ensure that I am right? Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12

- f. It renders worship to God vain –
 - i. Matthew 15:1-2 – Jesus was asked why His disciples did not wash their hands (ceremonially) before eating.
 - ii. Matthew 15:3-6 - He challenged their teachings calling them corrupt, BECAUSE they had taken God’s word and manipulated it to say what they wanted it to say.
 - iii. Matthew 15:7-9, Jesus concludes, “And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.
 - iv. When we base our faith on the teachings and choices of men, God rejects it.

III. How can we avoid denominationalism?

- a. Determine to speak only the truth – 2 Timothy 2:15 – study God’s word. Acts 17:11 – search the scriptures to verify the truth. If you have questions about what someone is teaching, ASK!
- b. Respect God’s boundaries – 1 Corinthians 4:6, Colossians 3:17 – do all in the name of the Lord, etc.
- c. Work at unity – don’t compromise truth for the sake of unity. That’s not the unity God wants as noted. Philippians 2:1-4, Ephesians 4:1-3
- d. Find a church that:
 - i. Places truth over convenience
 - ii. Is properly structured (organized) and governs based upon God’s word alone
 - iii. Worships according to God’s pattern
 - iv. Teaches the true plan of salvation
 - v. Avoids denominational names and doctrines

In this lesson I hope we can see that denominationalism is not what God wants. Understand that I am NOT questioning the sincerity of anyone in this lesson. This lesson is about God’s word and will. If you are not sure about what God’s word teaches about these matters, let’s talk about it. When it comes to the church, who are you following? Think about it!