

## DENOMINATIONALISM

### Abstract

Denominations and non-denominational churches serve the varying needs of differing groups of Christians with various models of polity, piety and worship. The roots of denominations can be traced from Genesis through Holy Scripture and in Church history. Denominations and non-denominational churches serve the unique spiritual needs of diverse groups of like Christians. The mandate of Holy Scripture is that we be one—unity. How does that unity look in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how can it bring increased mission and ministry by the Christians of Bradley County?

### In the Beginning

Genesis, the first book in our Bible, states, “*In the beginning God created...*” The rest of that story and the second story of creation are familiar. What God created in the beginning was - eventually - man and woman, Adam and Eve. After the fall, Adam and Eve, with the help of God, gave birth to Cain and Able. From the very beginning it is interesting and relevant to look at the relationship each individual had with God. What those individual relationships say is that each individual related to God in His/her own individual way. Each was a person in the fullest sense of the meaning of that work. But it is their diverse relationships to God that delineates for us the individual nature of each human being.

Adam was the first created and therefore God taught and nurtured the relationship with Adam. Eve, the first female, also had an unique relationship with God, had co-responsibility with Adam over creation and like Adam was created in the image of God. After the fall, both Adam and Eve found that their relationship to God and God's relationship with each of them was altered. Adam and Eve had many children all but three unnamed. Cain, Abel and Seth are the three named in Holy Scripture. Abel was a shepherd and had a unique relationship with God. He chose an offering that God accepted and therefore God counted Abel as righteous. Cain, on the other hand, had a different, unique relationship with God. Cain's offering was not acceptable and his anger and jealousy resulted in murder.

Of the first four individuals mentioned in Holy Scripture, we find that each had a unique, reciprocal relationship with God. Each was an individual and related to God according to his or her own personality, needs, and emotions. Not one of the four was identical to the other. Not one of the four had exactly the same collaborative, reciprocal relationship with God, yet each was created in the image of God. This leads us to the conclusion that God does not create each human with the same, identical emotional, intellectual, pattern, though all were (are) created in the image of God. In the latter development of Judaism, we will see persons of similar relationship forming parties within Judaism. After the reformation, we will see persons with similar relationships forming themselves into even larger Christian groups that ultimately evolve into denominations. [Adam's individual relationship with God is found in Genesis 1:26 - 5:5. Eve's spiritual journey is found in Genesis 2:19 - 4:26. Cain's story is found in Genesis 4:1 - 17. Abel's story is found in Genesis 4:1 - 8.]

The early development of Judaism is beyond the scope of this position paper. But for our purposes, let us define Judaism in the broadest sense, as the faith and worship of the Jewish people beginning with their unique call by God to be his people as recorded in the Old Testament. By the time of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection it is obvious from the pages of the New Testament that Judaism was diverse in theology as well as patterns of worship. There were "parties" with Judaism. The three best known are Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes. Both the Sadducees and the Pharisees are mentioned numerous times in the Holy Scripture, in particular in the Gospels. Each of these three parties confronted Jesus from their particular, unique theological perspectives. The Essenes are not mentioned in Holy Scripture nor in the Talmud but are mentioned by early Jewish historians such as Philo, Josephus and elder Pliny. They were a Jewish ascetic sect that originated in the second century before Christ and ended some time in the second century after Christ. Many scholars today, though not all, believe the Essenes had some type of relationship with Jesus, John the Baptist and maybe even the Apostle John. I mention these three to demonstrate that there were sects in Judaism. There most probably were others given the nature of Jewish worship. The lack of communication and the number of teachers or rabbis scattered throughout Israel during Jesus' time on earth. Jesus is called Rabbi and teacher by many of his disciples. And we know from the conflicts of the Gospels that Jesus' teaching was not what other rabbis or religious teachers were typically teaching. The diversity within Judaism during the time of Jesus and afterwards was great.

### **Unity in the context of diversity**

After the resurrection of Christ, the Book of Acts records the struggle between the early Jewish Christians and the non-Jewish Believers or Gentiles. This is the first great conflict recorded in Holy Scripture after Pentecost and the bestowing of the Holy Spirit on the individual believer. Unity in the context of diversity is about to become a problem for the early Church and its leaders. Acts 11:1 - 3 details the beginning of this "diversity". *"Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him [Peter] saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"* The solution is reached in Acts 15. *"Peter stood before the council of the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem and said, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.'" God made no distinction between Jewish Christians who were circumcised and kept the Law of Moses and Gentile Christians who were neither circumcised nor kept the Law of Moses. To the Christians, this difference was great, for both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. God's gift of the Holy Spirit is God's mark of unity among diverse Christians. Recognizing that there is diversity, God has called all Christians to unity from the earliest days of Christianity.*

### **The Councilor age**

From the time of the Apostles and Early Church Fathers on, the Church was able to settle most of its differences in theology, piety or polity by the use of councils. These councils helped the Church define faith and gave its clarity as well as unity. The Great Schism of 1054 marked the end of the Councilor age and the first major break in Christian unity. In 1054 the Eastern Orthodox Church under the leadership of its patriarch and the Church in Western Europe under the leadership of the Pope in Rome essentially become two separate churches. This is an oversimplification of the situation. Note, that there were complicated politics and theology at the center of this division.

### **The Western Church**

In the west, the rise of nationalism, the Renaissance, the rise of the middle class and the rise of individualism all contributed to the unrest in the Church. The results were the division of the Western Church into many churches beginning with Martin Luther. On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church and Protestantism was born. As early as 1521, inspired by Luther's rejection of papal authority and his assertion of the supremacy of the individual conscience, others stepped forward and the Reformation of the Church was underway. In Zwickau, Germany, a society formed known as the Anabaptist. Other famous names and great theologians such as Menno Simons, Ulrich von Hutten, Huldreich Zwingli, John Calvin and John Knox emerged to help the cause of reformation. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Church in the West had 6 cohesive, diverse divisions: Lutherans, Radicals, Calvinists, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and in the east, Orthodox. Many of these major divisions were comprised of sub-divisions and since have further divided. One must note the political reality that drove many of these divisions.

### **Definition**

Denominationalism - "The system and ideology founded on the division of the religious population into numerous ecclesiastical bodies, each stressing particular values of traditions and each competing with the other in the same community under substantial conditions of freedom. The collapse of Western Christian unity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century laid the basis for a plurality of competing ecclesiastical institutions." [*The Westminster Dictionary of Church History Edited by Jerald C. Brauer, p. 262*]

### **Bradley County, 2000 CE**

Today, we here in Bradley County Tennessee, United States of America, have a plethora of denominations and non-denominational churches vying for the salvation of the souls of Bradley County. Our ordained ministers are divided into at least four different ministerial associations reflecting local church divisions. We are not unusual in the United States nor in the world. It appears that denominations are in competition rather than unity. Our inability to do ministry together, our focus on head counts, our pride in our own denomination or non-denominational church keeps us separated, spiritually and physically. Denominationalism has become a barrier over which one does not easily cross.

What does God have to say to us today? Most Christians today have come to accept the reality of the many denominations present and active in the world. Differences in perspective about theology, piety, and polity have been with God's people from creation. Individuals each with unique relationships with God cover the pages of Holy Scripture. A study of church history tells us that we have divided and subdivided over

these differences. We have come, because we are individuals, to accept these denomination or non-denominational distinctions. Denominational differences actually meet the diverse spiritual needs of like groups of people with similar spiritual requirements, similar theologies, similar theological points of emphasis and a similar desire to worship God in a particular way. However, these differences should bring us added strength if your similarities are stressed, rather than our differences. We all hold in common the faith that Jesus is Lord, a confession of the early Church.

Most Christians struggle with the concept of unity visualizing one big super-church for all. The 21<sup>st</sup> century vision for ecumenism is all churches recognizing each other as valid expressions of Christianity with a common, focused mission. We are truly all very important parts of the one body - the body of Christ. When churches focus on ministry and mission rather than on size, power, or competition, denomination and non-denominational churches can meet diverse spiritual needs of a diverse people. Spiritual unity is God's call to all Christians. In the great commission of Matthew 28:18b Jesus states: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* Christ did not command us to make Anglicans or Protestants or Roman Catholics or Pentecostals or Baptists. Christ demanded that we make disciples of the one true God revealed to us in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior.

St. Paul in his letter to the Church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4: 1 - 6) makes a plea to them and to us today. *"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."* Passages from scripture like these quoted above and many others have haunted Christians of all persuasions for two thousand years.

We, the many churches who have come together in the Bradley Initiative for Church and Community, have a great opportunity laid before us. First, we have the opportunity to acknowledge each other as full-fledged Christians. This will take much work and education on the part of the pastors, laity and affiliates of BICC. Second, we have the opportunity for a common witness to issues and boundaries that divide this county. Oneness in Christ is the foundation on which we all rest. By recognizing the validity of others as brother and sisters in Christ on the local level, we can witness to our oneness in Christ, and at the same time acknowledge each other with patience in love. Third, we have the opportunity to combine our many, unique strengths and focus on the needs, and systemic causes of the multiple social, political and spiritual problems of Bradley County. In unity of focus, with the help of Almighty God, we can come together in a meaningful, mutual, collaborative relationship. With that accomplished, we can all do ministry and mission as Christian teams with many gifted players. The cost of not following the Lord's command for unity in spirit and focus on ministry will be high. We now live in a secular society. Together in BICC we can and will become a force for the

will of God, give each of our individual churches more credibility and occupy a more central role in relation to political and cultural life in this part of God's vineyard. The Lord is eagerly watching. The world is eagerly awaiting our success.

*We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord,  
We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

*We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land:*

*We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride.*

*All praise to the Father, from whom all things come,  
And all praise to Christ Jesus, His only Son,  
And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one;  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored;  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

[Words and music by Peter Scholtes  
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Can we put aside our denominational differences, emphasize our oneness in Christ's call and move forth in unity of Spirit to do the work God is calling us to do?

Respectfully submitted,  
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David Ketchersid

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