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## “Defending Denominationalism”

By Joe R. Price

The prevailing notion of Protestant denominationalism is that different faith groups (i.e., denominations) bring vitality and diversity to Christianity. Years ago, Billy Graham likened it to men and women wearing so many different hats:

"Whenever anyone points a critical finger and demands to know why there have to be so many different churches all serving the same God, I am always tempted to point out how many different styles of hats have to be designed for both American men and women. We all belong to the same human race, but we all have enough physical differences to make it impossible for us to wear the same style of hat with equal satisfaction" (Peace with God, Billy Graham, 193).

A more recent defense of unity in diversity (the essence of denominationalism) compares the differences among Bible-believers to different accents within a single language. The Christian Reformed Church offers this support of each "accent" of faith: "While all Bible-believing Christians share one single language of faith, as Plantinga points out, we all speak it with our own accent. Be proud of your accent. Thank God for it. Add yours to the rich diversity of tongues that speak of the great things God has done" ("What is Reformed," Christian Reformed Church website, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/...>).

Have you noticed that when one tries to defend a teaching or practice that is not in the Scriptures, they invariably resort to an illustration (such as hats and languages) that appeals to human reason and wisdom? It is simply not true that there is only "one single language of faith" among the denominations (even their use of "Christians" is denominational, not Biblical). The Christian Reformed Church is Calvinistic in its view of God, man, sin, and redemption. Being Protestants, they reject the authority of the Roman Catholic Church (which speaks a very different "language of faith" than Protestants).

The Scriptures affirm there is "one body" and "one faith" (Ephesians 4:4-5; 1:22-23). There is no Scriptural mandate for the church of Christ to be subdivided into different religious heritages or points of emphasis. New Testament Christians endeavor to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Christians are under commandment to "speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Denominations abandon the unity taught in Scripture for the cheap counterfeit of agreeing to disagree and calling it unity (John 17:20-21; Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:1-7).

We continue to plead with those caught up in denominational division to come out of the deceptive clutches of unity in diversity. The wisdom and will of men have shaped it, not the word of God (Colossians 2:8). The gospel that reveals God's grace will save and unite you with His saved, the church (Romans 1:16-17; Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 2:19-22; Acts 2:41-42).

Consider how the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) views its role in advancing its form of unity among the Protestants: "Where does that leave us? We need to stay true to the teaching of Scripture. That's the only way we can stay in Christ. However, we should always, always be looking for opportunities to join with other Christians. We should work with them even if our differences will not allow us, yet, to routinely worship with them. We need to keep reaching out to each other as we continue to reach for our Bibles. We may not always agree on doctrine or on how to worship. But there's plenty we can agree on that God wants us to do in this impoverished, sin-wracked world. So let's join efforts and do what needs doing together" (Ibid).

We agree that staying true to the teaching of Scripture is the only way we remain in Christ (Galatians 5:4-7). But staying "true to the Scriptures" would put the CRC and all other Protestant and Catholic churches out of business, since they are not found in the Scriptures (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:20-23; 4:4; Galatians 1:6-10).

This defense of practical denominationalism by the Christian Reformed Church sounds eerily familiar. Increasingly, brethren in churches of Christ worship with those they know are teaching and practicing error. For example, the false doctrines on divorce and remarriage have been exposed and are on the record, yet many in churches of Christ no longer make this an issue of fellowship.

Some take comfort in their compromise by using the same kind of reasoning held by the denomination quoted above: "We may not always agree on doctrine or on how to worship. But there's plenty we can agree on that God wants us to do in this impoverished, sin-wracked world. So, let's join efforts and do what needs doing together."

God's word says not to have fellowship with those whose teachings and practices go beyond the doctrine of Christ, because they do not have God (2 John 9-11). Therefore, any effort to reach out to them must be grounded in teaching them the truth and warning them of their error (Ephesians 5:9-11).

## Leaving in Anger or Laboring Together in Love

- by Greg Gwin

It is always sad when someone leaves a local congregation in anger. That problem is not new. Even first-century churches dealt with conflict and division (1 Cor. 1:10-13). Still, while disagreements may arise, how we handle them makes all the difference.

There are times when leaving is necessary. If truth is abandoned or sin is openly tolerated, faithful Christians cannot simply ignore it (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Cor. 5:1-7). In such cases, leaving is an act of conscience rather than anger.

But far too often, departures are not about doctrine or immorality. Instead, they grow out of personal grievances - hurt feelings, wounded pride, mis-understandings, or disagreements that were never handled in a biblical way. James warns that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Such anger never improves a situation.

What is especially harmful is when someone decides to "throw a bomb" on the way out - spreading accusations, stirring suspicion, or speaking words that wound. "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out" (Prov. 26:20). Words spoken in anger can leave scars that last long after the speaker is gone.

God calls us to something better. Jesus said to go privately to a brother who has wronged you (Matt. 18:15). Paul urged spiritual people to restore others in meekness (Gal. 6:1). Love is not easily provoked and does not seek its own (1 Cor. 13:4-5). When problems come - and they will - let us labor together in love, pursue peace (Rom. 14:19), and protect the unity which Christ desires for His church (Eph. 4:3).