



Overcoming Denominational Tendencies

[The following excerpts are quoted from the book, *Saving Faith and Other Sermons* by H.A. Dixon (1904-1969), Gospel Advocate Co; First Edition, January 1, 1963). He was president of Freed-Hardeman College (University) during the years 1950-1969. The lesson entitled, “**Overcoming Denominational Tendencies**” is one we desperately need in our time, some 60 years later].

Our subject for this lesson is Overcoming Denominational Tendencies Within the Church. By this we mean (1) that such tendencies do exist in the church of our Lord; (2) that they are out of harmony with the plan which the Saviour intended for his church; (3) that they are dangerous and hurtful to the church; and (4) that they can and should be overcome.

In this lesson we will consider the undenominational character of the church, the evils of denominationalism, evidences of trends toward departure from the scriptural pattern of the church, and the remedy, or plan by which God's saints may overcome.

All Bible students admit that the New Testament reveals a church, and that Christ was the builder of it. They also believe that it had members, and that those members were saved people.

The church of the New Testament is declared to be "the body of Christ" (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18), and inspiration affirms that "There is but one body" (1 Cor. 12:20). This truth was emphasized by Paul to show the evils which very early were causing Christians to become partisan in spirit and practice.

The church is described as "the house of God." (1 Tim. 3:15.) Obviously "the house of God" is God's family. God's children are in his family, and it is inconceivable that a family be made up of sects or parties.

Jesus prayed that oneness prevail among his followers such as that which was demonstrated between himself and the Father in heaven. (John 17:20-21.) The early church manifested that oneness, being "of one heart and soul." (Acts 4:32.) Paul exhorted brethren to "be of the same mind one with another" (Rom. 15:5), "that there be no divisions among you" (1 Cor. 1:10), and that they "be of one accord, of one mind." (Phil. 2:2.)

The student of the New Testament cannot fail to see the emphasis upon the Lord's plan that there be "one fold, one shepherd" (John 10:16). He is mindful, however, that a very different condition prevails in so-called Christendom.

By a perverted gospel many have been led away from the true concept of the church. They have subscribed to doctrines and commandments of men, and have lost respect for the authority of the revealed word. Some, in honesty of purpose, uphold sectarianism while intending to stand for truth. A Babel of confusion prevails instead of the unity for which our Saviour prayed.

All discord and seeds of denominationalism are not found outside of the churches of Christ. We are oft reminded of the possibility that the same seed which produced apostasy long ago is being sown within, and is actually taking root in the minds of Christians today. It can sometimes be observed in work, in teaching the conditions of membership, in organization, in attitude and in the language of those who claim to be the true people of God. Some fear that we are on the verge of a new apostasy.

Your speaker concurs heartily that such apostasy is possible, and that the danger needs to be kept in view. It is well, however, that we be reminded that such dangers are not new. Seeds of denominationalism germinated at Corinth not long after the beginning of the church there. Men became preacher followers and forgot the all-important responsibility of following the Saviour. The restorers had scarcely begun their work before men were warning against denominational tendencies. The church has ever had to guard against these trends, and so it must today. It is a time for watchfulness.

Division among his professed followers is contrary to the prayer which the Saviour prayed in their behalf-that is on behalf of all who would believe on him through the word spoken by his apostles. This includes all Christians, since our faith in Christ has come through the revelations given by those men. We recall that this solemn prayer was made by our Master on the very eve of his suffering and death.

Denominationalism is contrary to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. He bids us to be of one heart and soul, of one mind, and that we all speak the same things. Factionalism which produces denominations is the antithesis of that which the Spirit demands.

Denominationalism hinders the progress of the Lord's work. The people whom we are trying to convert to Christ become blinded to truth because so many different "ways" are presented by men who claim to be following the same Lord. They conclude that good people are in all, and one is as good as another and many decide that one does not have to belong to any church to be saved. Thus, the growth of the true church is hindered.

Denominationalism is wasteful of money and energies. Men, in honesty of purpose, spend themselves and their possessions in building rival buildings and institutions instead of preaching the saving power of God to the lost.

Denominationalism produces atheism and infidelity. The boy or girl from a divided home is at great disadvantage. He loves father, and wants to go to worship with him, but mother goes elsewhere. He loves her, too, and does not want to offend her. He is in a strait, and one that is difficult indeed. Frequently, young people from such homes resolve to have nothing to do with the church, and many infidels are produced by division over religion. It becomes apparent that there is no justifying of denominationalism and that we should give ourselves to the task of removing it. We must overcome every trend in that direction.

There are some denominational trends within the church. We can see it in the speech of many. After Nehemiah had succeeded in leading the Jewish remnant to restore the walls of Jerusalem, he set himself to the task of correcting many of the spiritual defects in her bulwarks. He observed especially that due to inter-marriages and associations with people of other tongues that many could no longer speak the true Hebrew language. Some of them, said Nehemiah, "Spake half in the speech of Ashdod." (See Neh. 15:23-27.) He was disturbed because he knew that such conditions prevented the unity of God's people in their efforts to worship and serve God. The situation called forth severe denunciations and stern charges to the people.

Ashdodic language is ever a true indication of denominational influence upon our minds. The terms "reverend," "doctor," "pastor," and even "elder" (when applied to the preacher) are examples of such language. We have lived so close to those who use these terms that many members have unwittingly adopted these terms in their speech. Our preaching against such has as yet failed to stop their use. The use of the term "Church of Christ" gives another opportunity to see sectarian inroads. The church belongs to Christ, and it surely is permissible to describe it as "Christ's church," or "the church of Christ." The church is also God's, and it is correctly styled "the church of God." Some suggest that if we call it "the church of God" we will be confused with the modern sect of that name. They maintain that we should use only the name "Church of Christ" in order to make ourselves known. Such reasoning indicates how far many have allowed sectarianism to force them into accepting a sectarian view of the Lord's people.

We hear of "Church of Christ preachers," "Church of Christ funerals," and many similar expressions. Our denominational friends are well pleased for us to use such terms to describe those things peculiar to us in contrast with things characterizing Baptists, Methodists and the like. If we should speak of gospel minister as opposed to one of theirs the picture would quickly change.

Occasionally some one speaks of the Church of Christ teaching certain things. They say, "The Church of Christ teaches that immersion is baptism"; "It teaches that the music God commanded is vocal"; "It teaches a right division of the word"; or "It teaches against worldliness." This too is sectarian speech. It is true that members of the church should teach, but the point overlooked is that the authority is not vested in the church. We simply teach what is taught in the word of God. Otherwise we make the church as sectarian as other groups. With such a view we could have no

reason for protesting against the basic fallacy of Roman Catholicism which has ever advocated the authority of the church. Our Ashdodic speech betrays us.

The remedy for denominationalism is not a new one. God's people have ever been destroyed for lack of knowledge, and this lack is responsible for every sectarian error. The need, then, is for a closer study of God's word, and for an increased confidence in, and respect for, the completeness and finality of that word. As the lamented T. B. Larimore might have presented his appeal to a divided religious world, we call upon men to believe all that God says; become and be all that he requires; do all that he commands; worship and serve as he directs; then, lovingly trust him for all he promises.

When men learn of the one Lord, one faith and one birth, they will seek to be members of the one body and to put away partyism and strife.

Such has long been our plea to those who represent denominationalism around us, but we have not considered how important the demonstration of this unity is within our own number. We have often preached unity while practicing division.

Our hope in overcoming the trends toward denominationalism within the church lies in the full demonstration of the same plea which we make to those outside. There is no substitute for knowledge, and we must seek for the wisdom to apply that knowledge in all of our relationships. Free discussion of all issues will help us secure that knowledge if the proper spirit be manifest. The application of the restoration principle: "In faith, unity; in opinion, liberty; and, in all things, love" should still be our aim. Many disturbances in Zion lie wholly in the realm of opinion, and opinion must not become the law. The unity of the faith, God's law, is the standard, and love is the governing force to lead us in the application of the law. Love never seeks to destroy but to save. It does not look for the faults and weakness of others, but bears, believes, hopes and endures that truth may triumph. Love destroys even the roots of bitterness which often are observed among the Lord's people, and helps us to open the eyes of our understanding so that we may perceive the truth. It shows the way to the joy of fellowship as portrayed in Psalm 133:1, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

Eternal reward can come only to those who overcome evil. Sectarianism is evil, and must be overcome, or it will destroy our souls. Let us take up the whole armor of truth and press the battle until victory is secured. By his grace we will overcome.

[A footnote in the book cites that this lesson was delivered at Abilene Christian College. No date given. It needs to be presented at all of the Christian schools!]

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve A. Miller". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

CONNECTED IN THOUGHT

“In everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). The Psalmist declared thanksgiving unto the Lord frequently to God our Creator: “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever” (Psalm 107: 1) “For Your loving kindness is before my eyes, And I have walked in Your truth” (Psalm 26:3) “That I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, And tell of all Your wondrous works” (Psalm 26:7) “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name” (Psalm 100:4) “I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving, And will call upon the name of the LORD” (Psalm 116:17).

The New Testament is replete with declarations of thanksgiving and its importance. “be thankful” (Colossians 3:15); “...abounding through many thanksgivings to God” (2 Corinthians 9:12); “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6-7); “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2); “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 7:12).

Thankfulness is a positive attribute that accomplishes great good among mankind.

Being thankful to one another is just as proper as being thankful to God for His care and provisions, spiritually and physically. Gratitude is a proven “building quality” in relationships.

Are you “thankful” (feeling or expressing gratitude) or “thankless” (not feeling or expressing gratitude)?