

by Edwin Crozier

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AM Assembly

Introduction:

Read **Acts 2:37-47**. Picture 2 of those 3000 meeting a day or two later. One says, “Wow! You were baptized on Pentecost? Me too.” The other replies, “So, which denomination are you?” Wait! What? That question would not have been asked. It wouldn’t even have been understood. There were no denominations. Those people were just disciples of Jesus. The church they formed was before denominations or pre-denominational. In our Getting to Know Livingston class, we say we are pre-denominational. What does that mean? And how do we stay that way?

Discussion:

I. What is a denomination?

- A. Before assessing what it means to be pre-denominational, we must first learn what a denomination is.
 1. “Denominations are associations of congregations—Though sometimes it might be said that congregations are localized subdivisions of denominations—that have a common heritage. Moreover, a true denomination does not claim to be the only legitimate expression of the church” (Donald G. Tinder, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, p. 310).
 2. “Denominationalism – A term for the continuation of the organizations and emphasis on the divisions and distinctions of Protestantism” (Donald T. Kauffman, *The Dictionary of Religious Terms*, 1967, p 147).
 3. “A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy.” (*The American Heritage Dictionary 4th Edition*)
- B. A denomination is an organization of multiple congregations believing a common creed, submitting to a common governing hierarchy, wearing a common name, claiming to be one legitimate expression of the church among many. When one is a member of a local church within a denomination, that person is a member of three different institutions: the local church, the universal church, and the denomination.

II. Is denominationalism pleasing to King Jesus?

- A. Jesus did not establish denominations.
 1. Jesus established one *universal church*. In **Matthew 16:18**, He declares He will build His church, one church. In **Hebrews 12:23**, the same word (ἐκκλησία/ekklesia) is translated “assembly,” demonstrating this one church is the universal, the complete collection of all people enrolled in heaven. “Firstborn” does not refer to Jesus; notice the plural verb “are.” All members of the one church have firstborn privileges.
 2. Jesus established *local churches*. In **Acts 14:23**, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in multiple churches. The important key for us to notice about what we call “local churches” is found in **1 Corinthians 11:18**. These churches are groups of people who assemble or “come together as a church” (also **1 Cor. 14:23**).
 3. Jesus, never established denominations. He did not organize congregations into groups or collections of congregations. He did not give them this kind of hierarchy or government.
- B. Denominationalism condones and institutionalizes division which Jesus condemned.
 1. When Paul wrote the church of God in Corinth, he condemned division (**1 Cor. 1:10-13**). Admittedly, this was within a local congregation. There were no Paulist, Cephasist (Peterist), Apollian, or Christian Denominations. However, what would happen if they didn’t get division under control?
 2. If we should not have divisions within a congregation, should we divide congregations into denominations? It’s bad enough that churches will include divisions and those divisions will grow so strong they split apart into multiple congregations, but to condone and institutionalize those divisions with creeds, governments, and names is a whole new level. Surely if the former is prohibited, the latter is anathema.
- C. Denominationalism is not pleasing to Jesus. Therefore, we want to be a pre-denominational church.

III. How can we remain pre-denominational?

- A. I’ve made my claim, defended my case: God wants us to be pre-denominational. Now I need to provide a warning based on a shocking and hard truth: *All churches tend toward denominations.*¹

¹ Ed Harrell noted this process in his pamphlet “Emergence of the ‘Church of Christ’ Denomination” (Harwell/Lewis Publishing Co., Lakeland, FL, 2005, p 4).

B. If you don't believe me, look around at the church landscape in America. No denomination out there started as a denomination. They all started when a person or a small group of people determined they had figured out the right way to "do church." Whether "right" meant correcting some doctrinal point, reinstating or ceasing some practice, following some different organizational structure, appealing to the lost more effectively, accomplishing a better mission, they were going to do it right, and they didn't care what anyone else thought about it. A great many of those groups, like most start-up businesses, collapsed. However, some of them had success, if by success we mean they attracted more and more adherents and followers. Then some of those followers moved to some other location and started another church that was going to do it right like the first one. Some moved quickly into an organized structure, others move slowly, but they've all done it. All churches tend toward denominations; we are foolish if we think we don't and aren't.

C. Therefore, allow me to recommend five safeguards to help us remain pre-denominational:

1. *Love God's approval not man's:*

a) In **John 12:42-43**, we learn many of the Jewish authorities believed in Jesus. However, they did not confess Him because they loved the honor, glory, and approval that came from men above the honor, glory, and approval that comes from God. Please, recognize this is the heart of the evolution from church to denomination. Listen to the assessment of Liston Pope dean of the Yale Divinity School from 1949-1962 in his book Millhands and Preachers. He was noting the evolution of churches in much the same way we are noting today.

A [church], as it gains adherents and the promise of success, begins to reach out toward greater influence in society, whatever the roots of its ambition may be—evangelistic fervor, denominational rivalry, ministerial desire for greater income and influence, the cultural vindication of its peculiar faith, or what not. In the process it accommodates gradually to the culture it is attempting to conquer, and thereby loses influence over those relatively estranged from that culture. It counts this loss a gain as its own standards shift and as it attracts an increasing number of persons who enjoy the cultural and economic privileges of the society.²

b) At the heart of this evolution from church to denomination is the noble desire to convert the culture and the society surrounding the church. However, those who already have influence in the culture and society find it hard to give that up. Therefore, to attract the socially influential the church gradually accommodates them. Here is what happens. Churches usually start out not caring what the world or what other churches think of it, full of members who are excited to be saved by God and serving God no matter what their neighbors believe of them. Then because they desperately want their friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, employers to be a part, they start to ask their preachers to smooth out the rough and culturally offensive edges of the church's teaching. Maybe the doctrinal distinctions and moral standards that initially attracted so many don't have to be taught first thing. After all, that will turn people off. Maybe we can just preach those on Sunday night when guests aren't coming. Or we can just teach those in Bible classes after people have already joined up. Eventually, they just get tucked away and forgotten because we don't want to lose the socially influential people we attracted by hiding those distinctive teachings and in fact some of those people are now leading the church. Isn't it amazing? A desire to convert the culture to the church slowly ends up converting the church to the culture. And once it has happened, the church actually believes it has made progress. If we will avoid this, we must love God's approval more than man's. By the way, I put this one first because it is at the heart of all the other safeguards.

2. *Seek THE Way not A Way:*

a) In **Acts 24:5**, Paul's accusers called him a ringleader of "the sect of the Nazarenes." When he addressed Felix, he wanted to make something clear. They called it a sect, a party, a division, but Paul did not. He wasn't part of a sect, he worshiped according to The Way (**Acts 24:14**). He was not walking on one possible way among multiple possible ways. He was walking on The Way.

b) In **Matthew 7:13-14**, Jesus encouraged us to enter by the narrow gate and walk narrow way. The way to destruction is wide and easy. Many enter by it. Only few find the narrow gate and difficult way. We must seek for The Narrow way. If we seek, we will find (**Matthew 7:7-11**). Denominationalists say we are all going to the same place, but taking different ways. Jesus, said there is only one way. We must seek it. Our culture and society cries out against this. It is too limiting, too restrictive, too

² Liston Pope, Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1942, p. 119. Because Pope is writing as a sociologist and historian, he defines his terms based on how they are used in those fields and differently than their biblical definitions. In the original quote, where I have supplied "church" he used the word "sect." Though he defines terms differently, he is describing the same process and shift I am addressing in this lesson.

exclusive. Therefore, churches tend toward denominations because our society is more approving of a church that says, "This is just our way. You can go your own way and that is just as legitimate."

- c) Please, let me be clear. I chose my wording carefully. Our safeguard is not "Claim we are the way, not a way," but "Seek the Way, not a way." We are seeking the Way. Seeking the Way takes a humility that recognizes we might be wrong. We are not claiming we have found the Way, we have set it in stone, now follow us or go to hell. Rather, we are inviting everyone to seek the Way. Certainly, we believe we are walking on Christ's one way or we would change what we are doing. Denominationalism claims Christ's way is divided. It claims there are many ways. In fact, it ceases to seek the Way by claiming all divisions are equally legitimate. It is one thing to humbly accept we might be wrong and therefore respect, love, and pursue peace with those who walk a different way as we continue to discuss and challenge one another to seek the Way. It is completely different to arrogantly assume every division is okay and therefore quit seeking the Way.
- 3. *Follow God's scripture not man's statements:*
 - a) In the definitions of denomination, one of the earmarks was a "common faith." That is an odd distinctive marker in a system of division when we are told in **Ephesians 4:5** there is only one faith. However, in the system of denominationalism, there are different faiths within Christianity. We find these systems of faith in books called creeds, manuals, catechisms, articles of religion, and so forth.
 - b) In **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, Paul explains All Scripture is all we need. God's Scripture is all we need in order to teach, to reprove, to correct, and to train in righteousness. God's Scripture is all we need to complete us, mature us, and equip us for every good work. While it is certainly true that when we study and learn, we may give the sense and provide explanations. However, we don't need men to codify their explanations in manuals, creed books, confessions, articles of religion, catechisms. The only creed book we need is the Bible itself.
 - c) That being said, we must not assume because we haven't written an official creed book we are completely off the hook. Remember, all churches tend toward denominations. If we are not careful, that tendency will corrupt us even as we proclaim our pre-denominationalism. This happens when we develop catchy ways to systemize God's pattern as seen in the New Testament and end up lazily treating them the same as God's Word, answering Bible questions based on our summations and summaries instead of strictly from the Scripture.
 - d) Please, carefully consider what I'm about to say without giving way to knee-jerk reactions. What passage can you go to in order to tell me the 10 Commandments God gave Israel? That's easy, isn't it? **Exodus 20** or **Deuteronomy 5**. What passage can you go to in order to tell me what are the two greatest commandments? That's also easy. **Matthew 22:34-37; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:27-28**. Try this one. What passage can you go to in order to tell me the four things Scripture is profitable for? Another easy one. **II Timothy 3:16-17**. Okay. Try these. What passage can you go to in order to tell me the 5 steps of salvation? What passage can you go to in order to tell me what are the 3 works of the church? What about the 5 acts of worship? I'll even ask this, what passage can you go to in order to tell me the 5 safeguards against denominationalism? You can't. Now please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying those constructs are unscriptural. They are good and biblical as far as they rest on Scripture. But we need to recognize them for what they are. They are man's attempt at collecting, organizing, and summarizing some Biblical teaching on various issues. Practically speaking, they were developed by some man who wrote sermons or articles on those topics, and someone else liked them so he preached them too, and someone else liked them and he repeated them, and so on until they became quite common in churches with a similar heritage to ours. It is one thing to treat these sermons as Scriptural, as pointers to the Scripture. It is another to treat them like Scripture. We must not allow these sermons to become the "officially unofficial" creed of the congregation. We especially must not allow them to become the "officially unofficial" way we expect every congregation or every preacher we will call faithful to talk about these subjects. When we do this, we actually end up in danger of comparing our practices not to the Scripture, but to man's summation of the Scripture. When we do this, we are in danger of believing something is authorized because it fits neatly into a preacher's sermon structure rather than because it can really be supported by the Bible or of assuming it isn't scriptural because it doesn't fit neatly into the preacher's sermon jargon without actually checking the Scripture. When we do this, though we may protest all day long that we don't have an official creed, we will be committing the same error as those who do have one. Again, I'm not saying

those sermons and summations are unscriptural; I am saying they are not Scripture, and we must be careful to make that distinction.

4. *Submit to Jesus not the brotherhood:*

- a) Another earmark of the denomination is multiple congregations submitting to a common organizational and governing hierarchy. In the New Testament, we simply do not see that kind of government or hierarchy over congregations. Why would there be? In **I Peter 5:1-4** each congregation is to have shepherds. The Chief Shepherd, however, is not some higher ranking official with a grander title who exercise oversight over multiple congregations. It is not some elected body with representatives from multiple churches. The Chief Shepherd is Jesus who is the one who will appear (see also **1 Peter 2:24-25**). Therefore, we must avoid these kinds of organizations and hierarchies.
- b) To this point, we have avoided denominational organization. Yet, remember, all churches tend toward denominations. If we are not careful, this tendency will corrupt us even as we proclaim our pre-denominationalism. I'm glad there are other congregations following this same pre-denominational plea. However, while we will clearly interact with them, we must refuse to band together in an official denominational structure. But we are not off the hook for steering clear of official organization. We must also refuse to unofficially let the "brotherhood" govern us. If we make decisions based on what other Christians or other churches do or say about us rather than based on what is Scripturally authorized and best for our congregation, we are being poisoned by a denominational mindset.
- c) Further, if we assume a congregation is wrong or sinning because of how they compare to us instead of based on how they compare to Scripture, we have fallen prey to a denominational mindset.

5. *Remember the church is described not named:*

- a) Another earmark of the denomination was identifying under a common name. Let's be clear about this point. Some people completely misunderstand what a denomination is. They think the only marker is name. That is not true. The main defining marker of a denomination is the governing organizational structure the congregation submits to. Usually, churches in a denomination will identify with that denomination by carrying the name of the denomination. However, there are many churches today that are hiding their denominational affiliation by hiding their denominational name.
- b) All this being said, I invite you to read the entire New Testament from cover to cover. I would do it now, but nobody wants that. So I invite you to. Read it from cover to cover and tell me the name Christ gave to His church or to any one of His churches? The fact is the closest the New Testament gets to naming the church is **Acts 9:2**, when Luke calls it The Way (this is also found in **Acts 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22**). However, even that is not a name. Like every other identifying marker in the New Testament, it is a description. The word "church" itself is not a name, it is a description. It merely means an assembly, a gathering, or refers to a group of people who assemble and gather. There are many descriptions given for this people throughout the New Testament:
 - (1) Most often it is just described as "the church": **Matthew 16:18; Acts 5:11; 8:3; 11:26; 14:27; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 6:4; Philemon 1:2, et al.** This is fascinating because the word "church" is not a uniquely religious word. For this word to be used without further description is as if to say this group of people is so supreme, so weighty, so magnificent, it is not simply a group of people, it is "THE group of people." This is akin to calling our record of Scriptures "The Bible" which literally means "The Book." It isn't a book, it is THE Book.
 - (2) **Romans 16:16:** Described as "churches of Christ," that is groups of people belonging to Christ.
 - (3) **1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1:** Described as "the church of God that is in Corinth."
 - (4) **1 Corinthians 10:32:** Described as "the church of God."
 - (5) **1 Corinthians 11:16:** Described as "the churches of God."
 - (6) **1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1:** Described as "the church of the Thessalonians."
 - (7) **1 Thessalonians 2:14:** Described as "the churches of God in Christ Jesus."
 - (8) **1 Timothy 3:15:** Described as "the church of the living God."
 - (9) **Hebrews 12:22-24:** It is described as "the assembly (church) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." In that text, it is also metaphorically called "Mt. Zion," "the city of the living God," and "the heavenly Jerusalem."
 - (10) Sometimes the word "church" isn't even used. When Paul wrote to Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae, he wrote "to the saints who are in Ephesus" (**Ephesians 1:1**); "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (**Philippians 1:1**); and "to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae" (**Colossians 1:2**).

- c) If Jesus Himself didn't name His church, we should take great care in thinking we are making things easier and better by naming it. I admit, much to the chagrin of those who are marketing and branding minded among us, I am very pleased that of all the congregations I've ever been part of, this one most tries to avoid settling on a name. It is true that for banking purposes we have a legal description of "Livingston Avenue Church of Christ." However, our signs simply say "This church belongs to Christ" and "Christians meet here." Most of our materials describe us as a group of Christians who meet on Livingston Avenue. This is because we realize all these descriptions apply to us. Further, we realize we don't need a distinguishing name, rather we need to be a distinct people.
- d) However, never forget, all churches tend toward denominations. If we are not careful, this tendency toward denominationalizing will corrupt us even as we proclaim we are pre-denominational. The fact is this aspect of denominationalism is so deeply engrained into our minds, many of us would rather cave to simplicity and the path of least resistance than proclaim the truth on this. No matter what is on our sign or our letterhead, how many of us when people ask what denomination we are, rather than claiming we are no denomination will just say, "Oh, we're Church of Christ"? Do you speak of "Church of Christ preachers" and "Church of Christ colleges" and "Church of Christ churches"? When trying to distinguish between people who claim Christianity but follow men's creeds instead of the Bible and people who are truly following Biblical Christianity do you cut to the chase by asking, "Are they Church of Christ?" All of these "shortcuts" are the tendency of denominationalism.
- e) Would we be aghast if someone ever called us the Livingston Avenue Church of God? "Oh, but Edwin," someone will say, "We're not a church of God?" Are we not? Then there is something wrong with us. No, we are not part of the denomination that calls itself the Church of God, but we are a church of God. We are a church of God in Christ. And yes, we are a church of Christ. But we aren't part of any denomination or association of congregations using these as names. We are simply an independent group that knows every one of these descriptions applies to us. And to use the phrase "church of Christ" as if it identifies us with a set of beliefs, teachings, and practices more than a phrase like "church of God" would is a tendency toward denominationalism.
- f) "But Edwin," someone will protest, "we know what they mean, and they won't understand. It is just so much easier to say we are 'Church of Christ.' They'll get the idea." No, they will get the wrong idea. And I fear this seems appealing to us because some of us still have the wrong idea. It is true that teaching and furthering error has always been easier than explaining the truth. Instead of abandoning the teachable moments and furthering the widespread misunderstanding among others and even ourselves, let us stand up and speak the truth. The "Church of Christ" is not the only right denomination. Properly understood it is no denomination whatsoever. We are not part of the right denomination. If we are part of any denomination, we are wrong. Let us forever ban from our vocabulary the phrases, "I'm/he's/she's Church of Christ," "He's a Church of Christ preacher," "There were Baptists, Methodists and Church of Christers present," "the other denominations" (a subtle statement that we are one denomination and the rest are the others). These kinds of statements further misunderstanding and error not only "out there" but even "in here." Imagine what opportunities to share the gospel and the truth about Christ's blood-bought church we might have if we quit taking the denominational and easy way out but instead insist we are simply Christians rather than giving the notion that we are some denominational division of Christianity.

Conclusion:

Beware, all churches tend toward denominations. But Jesus didn't establish a denomination. He established His church. He established His local congregations. I want to worship according to the Way, not according to some division. May we always strive to be what those denominations were before men invented denominations. May we always be pre-denominational.