SECTARIAN DENOMINATIONALISM

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SECTARIAN DENOMINATIONALISM

When you study through the following book, please keep in mind that the church, through the eyes of God, can never be a denomination according to the modern-day practice of denominationalism. Though we may behave denominationally because of our sectarian spirit, the church is never a denomination. This book is written to explain how we behave denominationally, not to affirm that the church is a denomination. Our understanding of the New Testament church is that God planned the church to be universal as members are added to the body of Christ throughout the world. The church can never be denominated in the eyes of God though we may gather into groups and separate ourselves from one another. This is not God’s plan. This is not what Jesus wants of His disciples. He prayed that His disciples accept one another, and thus all disciples of Jesus must seek to answer this prayer.

INTRODUCTION

These are exciting times. Great times for reaching out and touching others with Jesus. Many today who in some way hold Jesus Christ dear to their hearts are moving into a new paradigm. The baby boomer and buster generations, who have little concern for the way things were done in the past, have less loyalty for institutional and traditional religions. They seek to determine their own destiny in a personal relationship with God outside the confines of a professionally controlled institutional church. They want to be on local community levels with their personal ministries and relationships with one another and those they desire to come into a personal relationship with Jesus. We are thus being led out of the past at warp speed into a new and exciting generation that has inaugurated a new future in the world of Christendom. These are great times for the gospel.

The Protestant community is reinventing itself in order to address family needs, violence in society, identity of the sexes, how to value relationships over valued possessions, needs of teenagers in drug cultures, alcoholic addictions, recovering divorcees, character development, and a host of other social crises that have to a great extent gone unattended by the institutional church. In a world where democratic politics is becoming the political system of the new world order, the religious world is shifting from the pastoral leadership of the professionals in the local institutional church to personal and individual ministries wherein leadership is identified by loving service. Individual members are arising to discover their own gifts in order to initiate ground level ministries that
meet the needs of the communities in which they live. Individual members seek empowerment to facilitate home groups that cater to personal needs.

Some have affirmed that we are at the dawn of a new reformation. I would urge us beyond reformation. We are at the brink of a restorational paradigm shift, a shift from the liberal modern world to the conservative primitive values of Jesus, which values are being brought into the new forms and symbols of a new religious world view. It is an exciting era, a time when old religious behavioral patterns are tested as a new generation seeks to encapsulate the message of the gospel in the life-style of a generation of blue jeans and sweat shirts.

And herein is a tremendous evangelistic opportunity for God’s children. This new religious paradigm shift is seeking to discard the old wineskins of traditional religiosity. Many of the old institutional religions have now lost a whole generation to this new religious reformation. They have lost baby boomers and busters because this postmodern thinking did not consider the organizational order and structure of the institutional/corporate church an answer to present sociological needs. One of the primary religious institutional norms of the past that is being discarded is a Christianity that is dissected into an assortment of denominational groups. Division into sacred institutional camps that fought against one another in order to build favorite parties that were maintained by a dynamic pastor or traditional heritage no longer satisfies the needs of this new generation.

In this postdenominational environment wherein institutional religions have little appeal, a new generational church movement is emerging that seeks to determine its own destiny without the shackles of an institutional/corporate religion that has failed them.

If the church is to reach this generation, then we must do some real soul-searching of our own. It is a time to recognize our own denominational behavior. The new reformation looks with disgust and disdain at the traditional world of institutional/corporate religion. If we are to reach this generation, it is a time for the church to check its own schismatic behavior in order to reach a generation that is in a paradigm shift to nondenominationalism. It is a time, therefore, to reinvestigate what Jesus originally instituted in order to meet the needs of every generation of the world until He comes again.

I address this book, therefore, to two audiences. As the church, we must check our own behavior. We must admit to our denominational/institution/corporate behavior, and seek with humility a confession of our hypocritical approach to the religious world. Regardless of the undenominational plea the church would make in any part of the world, the fact remains that others view the church as just another denomination. And rightly so, since we behave as such in the midst of maintaining an ideal for undenominationality that is just not human. People group themselves into fellowships, which fellowships always have a tendency to exclude others. We cannot deny our humanity.
The second group to which I direct the following pages is the traditional/institutional world of Christendom. This is a plea of confession and reconciliation. I am not perfect in my conclusions. But one thing is clear, in a Satan-filled world we must come to the table of a God-given unity that will empower our efforts to populate heaven. Though we are our history, we must look again at our heritage in order to consider any possibility for a unified effort for the future. If both of us are willing to do this, then dialog can begin. And when we talk, great things will happen in our efforts to be one in Christ.

Prologue

Jesus is the True Vine (Jn 15:1). I am only a connected branch that extends from Him (Jn 15:5). My connection is individual. It is personal. Regardless of what you think, Jesus is my personal savior because He personally connected me with Him through my obedience to the gospel. If you are also connected to Jesus through obedience to the gospel, then you too are a fellow branch with me of the True Vine. Our common attachment to Jesus as branches individually connects us to one another. Our unity with one another is inherent in our common connection to Jesus.

I am a branch, not because I am connected to you. I am not a branch from you, but a branch from Jesus with you. Our fellowship with one another, therefore, is based on our common attachment to Jesus. Praise God!

Jesus said, “I am the vine. You are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). I want to stay connected to Jesus because my productivity and eternal survival depend on it. “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered. And they gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned” (Jn 15:6).

When we both abide in Jesus, we are productively in fellowship with one another, and thus headed for heaven together. We maintain our gift of fellowship because our source of spiritual nourishment is from the True Vine (1 Jn 3:1). Our fellowship, therefore, is founded on our common connection and sustenance from the True Vine, the Lord Jesus Christ. This makes us His one body, His church, the elect of God. I thus maintain my fellowship with you because of my fellowship with Jesus. For this reason, I seek to enjoy and nurture the gift of our fellowship by enjoying and nurturing my personal relationship with Jesus.

But we often seek to be free-flying branches from one another while presuming to remain connected as branches to Jesus. We build walls. We draw lines between ourselves. We behave as disfellowshipped branches extending from the True Vine. We lead ourselves to believe that our identity is deter-
minded by our relationship with one another, which relationship is often based on a list of rules and regulations we may have established for ourselves in order to determine which branches are bundled into our particular fellowship. Our identity then takes on the appearance of conformity to a box of rules and regulations, not to our common connection to Jesus through our obedience to the gospel. We make boxes of branches, therefore, bundled into fellowships that have no connection with one another. We become bundled branches who are not in common fellowship with one another because of our unique identities we have established for ourselves. We thus lose our common fellowship because we lose sight of our common salvation (Jd 3). We become denominational.

In this scenario of schisms we now view the True Vine standing with bound bunches of branches seeking to remain attached to the Vine. The bunches of branches have no fellowship with one another. They have gone from individual branches to bunches of bound branches who have lost sight of the unity that is God’s gift to those who come into a covenant relationship with Him through obedience to the gospel.

I believe it is a time to cut through the cords of bondage that bind us as individual parties who are separated from one another. Someone once said that we should dare to think “outside the box” we create for ourselves. I have always wondered who made the boxes in the first place? Why is it our religious nature to continually make boxes for ourselves outside which we must struggle to think? From the beginning of Christianity two thousand years ago, religious boxes have been continually made outside which men have had to arise and think in order to call us back to the simple Way.

Anyone who believes in our effort to be simple Christians as Jesus intended we be, must be paranoid about the theological box making business. It is for this reason that I think we need to take another look at the boxes we have made for ourselves. Maybe we should reconsider our religious beliefs and behavior in reference to the unchanging word of God. We must do this lest we build for ourselves traditional boxes outside which we struggle to think and live.

I do believe that if the concept of calling to remembrance the ancient paths is a biblical teaching, then we should be claustrophobic about being in any man-made box, for freedom did Jesus set us free. He liberated us from the bondage of institutional boxes in order to bring us into a covenant of freedom.

Jesus knew that His disciples would be human in their relationships with one another. And being human meant that they would often be cursed with a worldly spirit of being individualistic and competitive among themselves. Brought together into our behavior with one another, these two characteristics lend us to naturally separating ourselves into different parties as we treasure favorite traditions and opinions. As we cluster around our favorites, we create theological camps and make religious boxes for ourselves. We jump in and then sling theological
grenades and mortars outside in order to judge and condemn those outside our box. We lead ourselves to believe that our camps are preserved by how much destruction we can cause to the camp of our enemy. The intensity of the conflict, unfortunately, often digresses into ungodly guerilla warfare wherein suicide bombers seek to see how many innocent victims they can destroy in the camp of the opposition by slinging slanderous grenades here and there. In all this conflict, the world does not believe in the one Lord because it often does not see His oneness in us.

Jesus knew who we are. Because He knew we like making boxes, He warned that a spirit of sectarianism would come among some of His disciples as men would competitively arise to draw disciples after themselves. Some would even seek to lord over the flock of God as the world taught them to so behave in the business and political world in which they lived. For this reason, Jesus prayed that His disciples continually struggle to recognize the unity they must enjoy because of their common obedience to the gospel. Therefore, regardless of personality conflicts, exalted opinions and traditions, they were to strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. His plea was that boxes never be built which would separate His disciples from one another.

Today we live in the very religious world about which Jesus warned. Christendom is known as a religious world of denominational division. And in some areas, the church is not innocent of the practices of sectarian-denominational thinking and behavior. As in the first century, world religions, politics, and the business world continually affect our thinking today, and subsequently mold our religious behavior. Our world is not unlike the one that influenced the early disciples. In our world today, Christendom is also bombarded with influences that often dictate behavioral practices which are contrary to the spirit of New Testament Christianity. In fact, Christendom would be defined by many as a divided Protestantism of those who believe in Jesus, but at the same time function separately from one another in unique groups that are autonomous from one another. That definition would be correct, but from a biblical perspective, certainly erroneous.

In our present religiously divided environment of confrontation, we must again renew our vigor to restore simple Christianity. Because of the religiously divided nature of our present environment, this is a time to renew an intense investigation of the word of God. We must do this in order that we submit to the request of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:20,21, that we behave as the one body of Christ. For this reason alone, it is a time to burn boxes.

The religious world of Christendom is plagued with organized institutional religions that are patterned after the business and political world in which ad-
herents live. Religious synods, international religious organizations, church dioceses, and religious councils have regimented adherents into fine-tuned institutional corporations that have long forgotten the fundamental teaching of freedom in Christ. Institutionally structured religiosity has thus stifled the spirit to revive the universal body of Christ in an environment of liberty. Professionalism has intimidated the personal use of individual gifts of ministry. Freedom for individual study of the Scriptures has often been denied by our own desires to be accepted by our self-imposed religious hierarchies and governing organizations. The institutional church has often become an organizational structure that seems more like an international corporation than the spiritual body of Christ.

Added to the fact that Protestantism is so divided is the complacency of many who are perfectly content with the present situation. Many people are satisfied to remain in a divided Christianity and to maintain the status quo within denominated religious parties. This is especially true in those institutional groups where the financial support of people is dependent on the survival of the institutionalized church. It seems that the proclamation of Jeremiah is still true today. “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?” (Jr 5:31). Apostate people eventually threw Jeremiah into a pit for taking such a stand against false religiosity and the lukewarm spirituality of his day. I suppose they will do the same today since Jesus said they would (Mt 5:10-12; Lk 6:22,23). We like our boxes. If anyone would suggest that we live in one that is man constructed, then we start looking for pits into which our prophets can be cast.

A spirit of sectarianism has given birth to a schismatic Christendom that seems determined to turn continually on itself with competitive religiosity while non-Christian religions and secular humanism are on the increase. Churches often bite and devour one another in a confrontational culture wherein control by men is more important than submission to the unity pleas of Jesus. Christendom is thus cursed with a cancerous divisional disease. Our disease repels an unbelieving world that has witnessed our betrayal of Jesus through divisive practices and sectarian attitudes. While the non-Christian world mocks Christendom for its frivolous divisions, an unchurched generation is being won over by secular humanism. Packed shopping malls on Sunday morning are a testimony to our inability to reach our generation with the gospel of Christ.

We are often our own worst enemy. As human beings, we are habitual. We are traditional. We cherish our heritages. When dealing with the normal routines
of life, we crave regularity, commonality and predictability. Our “Christian” traditional behavior also becomes religiously traditional. As we traverse time, we pick up unnoticed behavioral practices that become the norms which identify our particular group of believers to be a unique group from others who do things in a different way. A divided Christendom is evidence of the fact that we cherish our religious heritages. And since we treasure our heritages, we become defensive when questioned about long-held behavioral patterns of a religion that we have created after our own desires.

A culture that focuses on control systems in a political/business world has in many ways dictated the style of our leadership. Instead of leadership by humble service, we have adopted and adapted the principle that there must be lords among us who dictate our beliefs and control our behavior, just as we do with ourselves in the western business world. As in the days of Jeremiah, we are often content with our “lords,” and thus carry on with a will that is given over to a professional clergy with whom we are perfectly comfortable to lead us. We have laid our Bibles aside and feel completely content with the pronouncements from our professional pulpistars.

Though the preceding scenario will prevail among many religious groups for years to come, there are some changes coming in the future. I see a refreshing wind of change toward a renewal of the individual priesthood of the believer. Personal ministries are being discovered as individuals seek to serve God according to their own gifts. Will this driving change introduced by the postmodern generation lead us back to a service-oriented faith?

In the past the church has suffered from the challenges of a sectarian attitude that brought us into denominating ourselves from one another under the umbrella of different controlling structures. We have allowed this to happen by developing our own institutional identity codes that make us unique from one another. Traditional interpretations of Scripture have further denominated us as we accepted treasured proof-text passages and favorite personalities. We authorized our interpretations and behavioral traditions by the quotation of some famous name, and subsequently we divided ourselves as the Corinthians by becoming either “of Paul,” or “of Cephas,” or “of Apollos.” The postmodern religious generation repudiates this scenario. They have thus walked away from the hypocrisy of such divisions in an effort to connect with one another on the foundation of Jesus alone.

Instead of conforming to a regimentation that was dictated by traditions and those who seek to maintain power and purse, this new generation is seeking to be dictated by personal relationships with Jesus and others.

The good news is also that many are waking up to the fact that churches that
originally sought to be undenominational have become traditional denominations themselves, and thus sought within themselves to keep groups of believers away from one another. In their efforts to teach against the sects, they have admitted that they developed a sectarian attitude that often resembles a sect with its own divisive names and traditions. As a result of this recognition, there is now a call for unity that is based on the simplicity of those salvational teachings that God requires of all men. This is a refreshing wind of change.

The word “paradigm” refers to the general example, pattern or model that is reflected in our behavior from our world view. When we talk of a paradigm shift we mean that the whole pattern of our behavior changes as a result of understanding things from a different point of view. Religious paradigm shifts often take place when cultures change. They take place when honest men and women rediscover the simplicity of old truths. In reference to cultural influences, new applications of biblical truths are enacted in the life of the new generation in a different manner than the applications of previous generations. The truths do not change. What changes is the pattern of behavior that is reflected in the change of a world view. And such is what is happening in the religious world today. For this reason, a religious paradigm shift is happening before our eyes, the extremes of which have not been witnessed for centuries. In this historical context, we have an opportunity to encourage a religious restorational paradigm shift from institutional religiosity to the unchanging principles of God that the Spirit revealed and would be applicable to every generation of the world.

Therefore, in order to initiate and encourage a restorational paradigm shift, we must recognize that we have been in the past scholars of religious cultural eisegesis. We have sought to read our religious culture and interpretations into the Scriptures. In some cases, we have allowed our heritages to dictate our paradigm. We interpreted the first century church from the paradigm of our present religious behavior, methods of function and opinions. We have defined (interpreted) the New Testament church through the glasses of the church today.

Culture does reflect our understanding of ancient truths. However, culture must always be subservient to biblical principle. This point is very important when dealing with our religious paradigm. In fact, in most cases, our religious heritage almost always leads us to interpret church according to what we have always done. Heritage becomes stronger than biblical principle, and thus often distorts a clear vision of the original road map we are to follow, the New Testament.

Exegesis is allowing the Scriptures to determine our beliefs and our religious behavior. It is allowing the New Testament to define the New Testament church. We must extract out of God’s word those principles that will dictate our cultural behavior, specifically our religious cultural behavior in our relationships with Jesus and one another. In the
In the denominated world of Christendom, the church has often maintained a sectarian spirit in her efforts to reach out to others with a pretense of unity. By harboring a sectarian spirit themselves, some Christians have promoted separation within the church. Our attitudes, our beliefs, and our behavior have betrayed the hypocrisy of our plea for unity in Christ. Some have evolved into sounding like those we have for so long considered apostates from the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. In seeking to be undenominational, we have become that from which we have fled. In fighting the sects, some have in many cases become a sect.

We must not be shocked by this admission. In our zeal to restore simple New Testament Christianity, we have fought diligently against those who would divide the body of Christ with a sectarian spirit that promotes an “us-and-them” attitude of division over quibbles of unprofitable issues. But in our efforts to be the unique body of Christ, we sometimes develop our own exclusive spirit that moves us to isolate ourselves from those with whom we should seek dialog. Some have thus made the church of God one of those denominations against whom we have labored so diligently to refute.

Praise God for refreshing times of self-evaluation. We must take a look at our beliefs and our behavior in order to determine if we have not become that which we have so feverishly condemned. Those who are sincere students of the word of God will have no fear in doing this. If we discover that we have developed beliefs or behavioral patterns that conflict with the spirit of Jesus, or teachings that conflict with His word, then the eager disciple will correct himself or herself in order to conform to the will of God. If we see ourselves as just another denomination, we will seek to become undenominational when we understand
the error of behaving in such a manner. This is the signal of a true disciple and a scholar of the word of God. If we are fearful of taking this journey with the word of God into the sanctuary of our present religious paradigm, then we are doomed. We are doomed to creating a god after our own misguided religiosity and a church that becomes lost in a maze of religious confusion.

If in my challenge of your present belief and behavior you discover that you may have gone wrong in becoming sectarian and denominational, you will possibly become agitated at what I say. But by becoming so, you may prove my case by the nature of your reaction. Since there is the spirit of idolatry in all of us—we seek to create a god who conforms to our desires—it is imperative that we take this journey. It is salvational to learn and obey those fundamental truths from which so many have strayed by manufacturing religions that conform to the whims of men who are determined to humanistically please their misguided religiosity. But we would not be that way. If we claim to be the children of God, then it is only natural to continually review ourselves in the mirror of God’s word. It is God who must direct our steps. It is by His word that our beliefs and behavior must be determined.

The world in which we live has in many places become more hostile to Christianity. It has become more hostile simply because non-Christian faiths like Islam are making a diligent effort to propagate themselves throughout the world. On the opposite end of the continuum of religiosity, secular humanism in the Western world has displaced God from the minds and lives of men in order to substitute man himself. As illustrated by the world before Noah, and the populations of Sodom and Gomorrah, humanity does not progress from paganism to great moral integrity. It digresses in the other direction. Secular humanism is rapidly throwing the world into a global society of antireligion.

In such an environment we cannot afford to fuss among ourselves. Our schismatic behavior has often nullified the effect of the church in a world of non-Christian religions. Our sectarian spirit and divided behavior have embarrassed the body of Christ before a denominational world that often says we are the same as they. And in many ways, they are right. Therefore, we must not be defensive about where we are. We must not arrogantly refuse to consider that we too are subject to tendencies to become as the religious nations around us. For this reason, we must continually take a serious look at ourselves in order to consider the possibility that in some ways we may have lost our undenominational plea in a world that seeks to conform the church to the nations among which she must dwell. In our plea to be Christians only, we may have arrogantly assumed to be the only Christians.
I seek to challenge the spirit of division that is manifested by any who would profess to be a disciple of Christ. The religions of man have made a mess out of the simplicity of Christianity. They have done so by the addition of religious traditions and twisted interpretations of the Scriptures to the simplicity of the word of God. Most have come to the point of rejecting the commandment of God in order to remain faithful to their heritages. In the discussions that follow, I will seriously challenge some of our erroneous beliefs and behavior that often characterize us as the church of God. I will challenge our sectarian spirit, our clergy orientation, and our isolation from one another that is promoted by a divisive interpretation of church independence. I do this in order to stimulate restorative thinking. Unless we continually remind ourselves that we can at any time in history join the nations around us, we will do such.

I find it interesting in these times that among some little is spoken or written about sectarianism and denominationalism. I believe few people truly understand what it means to take a nonsectarian or an undenominational stand in the midst of a religiously divided world. It may be that some churches have just thrown in the doctrinal towel and accepted the erroneous theology that God accepts denominationalism. Others may be seeking to avoid confrontation with their religious neighbors in order to be an acceptable church in the community. Whatever the reason for this haunting silence on teaching against sectarian denominationalism, the fact is that there are those among us who have no understanding or perception of the fact that we often have a sectarian spirit ourselves that moves us to continually bite and devour ourselves. Even fewer understand the plea for undenominational Christianity simply because they do not know what it means to be undenominational.

One fact is true. Many of the religious postmodern generation have little use for institutional churches that have been propped up by centuries of ceremonies and institutional organization. The decline of the institutional denomination and rise of the community church movement is evidence that this new generation has made a clear statement of complaint. Those institutional churches that have not listened to this complaint are destined for doom as gray-headed assemblies grow smaller and sanctuaries echo with absence.

This is thus a time for reevaluation. It is such a time because we must again look at ourselves as we look among the sects of the religious world. Have we lost sight of the fact that we seek to restore New Testament Christianity in a world that has in so many ways counterfeited the New Testament church? Have we lost contact with a postmodern generation that no longer listens to the institutional melodies of century old songs,
ceremonial assemblies, and hierarchical control from a professional clergy? If so, then this is a time for box burning.

In writing this book I realize that I will sometimes be misunderstood. I am writing from the position of a house-church existence of church function. Concepts as “local church,” “autonomous” and “independent” are generally not a part of the vocabulary or practice of those who are involved in networked house churches. The behavior of house church networking is inherent fellowship through freedom in Christ. The betrayal of this fellowship, as witnessed today in Christendom, was foreign to the vocabulary of the early church. Denominational structures were developing in the early church, but the early Christians’ dealing with the problem was different from how we deal with the problem today. It was different because of the difference between the division in Christendom today and that which was in the first century church.

The first century church was house-church oriented in its assemblies and function. It is for this reason that we do not see denominational vocabulary used in the New Testament to explain the existence and function of the church. Because of our denominational function today in many churches, we have invented our own words which carry with them into the Bible definitions that are often foreign to the New Testament. And herein we sometimes fail to communicate. Our invented words have a lot of baggage. For this reason we will struggle with our baggage in our investigation of this subject. Such is to be expected with the diversity of beliefs and behavior that characterize Christendom in these days.

We must be patient with one another as we seek to understand the paradigm from which we speak. If we miss one another in our communication, stop for a moment and consider the fact that the early church did not assemble in purpose-built church buildings as it does today. The early Christians, therefore, did not define a “local” church as an assembly that could exist in the same city without being in full fellowship with other assemblies of Christians in the same city. All Christians in cities were in fellowship with one another regardless of where they assembled on Sunday morning. Since I am writing from a house church paradigm of church function and assembly, please keep in mind that my focus is on fellowship among Christians, regardless of where they assemble. I am willing to risk any misunderstandings for the sake of dealing with a New Testament function of the early Christians among themselves, not as we see the divided behavior of the diverse religions that are scattered here and there throughout our communities today. I ask for your patience, therefore, as we work through some very direct and challenging material concerning a major challenge that I see in the church in particular, and Christendom in general.

I say this knowing that our human nature is to seek fellowship with others in a common group, and often develop
those with whom we fellowship as an exclusive group. We are, after all, human. It is only that we must recognize our tendency to be exclusive, and thus be as forbearing with others as possible in our efforts to evangelize the world to the glory of God.

Chapter 1

Initiating A Restorational Paradigm Shift

All religious groups are now in a world that is burdened with a history of sectarian attitudes that have given rise to and perpetuated a mass assortment of institutional denominations. Admittedly, some are content to remain as is in this arrangement in order to retain sacred religious heritages. Others are guarding positions and power, salaries and pensions. But anyone who is familiar with the fruit of sectarianism cannot seriously justify the resulting denominationalism that we see in the world today. The very nature of the fruit is contrary to the brotherhood of the universal church. It is a denial of the oneness of the body about which God has spoken to us through His word. It is a hindrance to world evangelism in a non-Christian world. It is a hypocritical proclamation of the one body while at the same time practicing many bodies with many heads. For this reason, there is throughout the world a choir of pleas going up to God that there be a renewed focus on a restoration to the simplicity of the first century church about which we read in the New Testament. These pleas are based on a common desire that we advance into the future more united than divided. There is a united cry for a restorational paradigm shift out of our present denominational situation in order that we be able to fight together against the worldwide attacks of Satan that are before us.

Taking a stand for a restorational paradigm shift involves great risks for those who would initiate such. Restoration involves great change and people do not like change. Nevertheless, in order to get to where we must be for the glory of God, we must risk the struggles that come with change. In the midst of change from the old to the new we must have standing before us those who are bold enough to say, “We must obey God rather than man.”

Change in and of itself does not necessarily assume that restoration is occurring. When sincere people come to a realization that they are not what God would have them be, then change occurs. They then determine that efforts must be made to renew commitment to the word of God. Because we perceive that we are not as we should be, we thus make small changes here and there in a revival effort to get
ourselves back to the prescribed behavior that God intended should be characteristic of His children. And because we make a few minor adjustments, we comfort ourselves in the fact that we have repented and restored the prescribed divine directives of God. However, the changes are often only cosmetic in the sense that they are simple religious cultural adjustments. They are not the radical paradigm shift that is often needed to get back on track with God.

The same efforts to change often occur when a new generation emerges. We make behavioral changes in church organization, assembly order, worship styles, or cultural encounters with one another in order to accommodate the new generation. When the changes are made, relief from some tension is often enjoyed. While sparing ourselves from delving into real issues that deal with the fundamental nature of the church, we feel that we are now set for another decade or two of “peace” in the ranks of the redeemed.

Making cultural adjustments is important and necessary. Making changes in a revival effort to restore our zeal for the Lord is also necessary. But what happens when those who claim Christ and profess to be His church are so far removed from the original intent of God that the “church” itself can no longer be identified as the original church from which it has strayed? Every generation of Christians must continually ask themselves this question. Since individual assemblies of the church are always one generation away from apostasy, we must deal directly and be specific about where we stand in relation to what God intended we should be as the New Testament church.

Not for one moment do I believe that the whole global church has ever gone into apostasy. The church has historically existed since the day the first believer came out of the waters of baptism on the day of Pentecost. Simply because recorded history does not mention the existence of the faithful throughout every century since then, does not mean that they did not exist. When times of Dark Ages occur in world history, the church will always exist underground as sincere men and women maintain the faith in the midst of persecution and doctrinal apostasy. Nevertheless, there are churches of cities who will lose their first love. Candlesticks will be removed and placed in other cities. If you feel that the candlestick of the church in your city is about to be removed, it is time for a restorative paradigm shift.

Since a paradigm is the very foundation upon which we function in every aspect of life, it is very difficult to make paradigm shifts. After being initiated, they are even more difficult to maintain since we have a longing for the good old days back in Egypt. The initiation of a religious paradigm shift is painful and its maintenance in the church promotes great struggle, and often an environment of chaos, depending on the extent of the shift. Paradigm shifts are difficult to generate simply because the group who must
carry them out in their behavior often do not recognize that they must be made in the first place—the majority is always content with the traditional. But when we recognize that a shift must be initiated in order to get back to that which is necessary, the traditional culture of the group that must make the change is so strong that the leading movers and shakers are often shouted into obscurity and often out of the group itself. And so, the group continues as usual, having cast its “Jeremias” into pits and stoned its “Pauls” in order that the group might remain at ease in Zion.

The challenge of initiating religious paradigm shifts—this is just a modern religious term for religious restoration—is that “chaos” (struggle) is an essential part of the program. When changes must be made, there is always a level of tension that is generated within the group. The fellowship that is going through the shift (restoration) usually does not like or understand the struggle that is caused by the change. The chaos, or struggle, is usually viewed in a negative sense, and thus those who are engaged in the struggle usually increase the tension by their efforts to resist the change.

The Holy Spirit warned the early Jewish Christians that they would experience the turmoil of the paradigm shift that would transpire in their lives as they moved Israel from Judaism to Jesus. Resistance to the shift put Jesus on the cross. To His disciples, Jesus said that persecution would come from religious people who would “insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you for My sake” (Mt 5:11). It was religious people who persecuted Paul from city to city. It was religious people who stirred up the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem to kill Paul (At 21:27,31). As a result of this effort, chaos resulted (At 21:34), the same chaos that prevailed in Ephesus when religious worshipers of Diana felt threatened by the religious paradigm shift that was taking place in the city (At 19:24-41). Religious paradigm shifts are difficult and come with great struggle. Nevertheless, when they are in the direction of truth, they must be made, regardless of the struggle that comes with the shift.

In order to resist the restorational paradigm shifts that occur in religious bodies, some leaders randomly throw around “dividing-the-church” statements in an effort to guard and maintain the old and traditional. Such statements are usually made in order to intimidate those who seek to restore what they see as necessary to get us back on track with God. Unless the change is in fundamental doctrine, such statements are only the frustrated efforts of those who either cannot deal with change itself or feel threatened by the new order that is struggling to be born out of the chaos of change. “Dividing-the-church” statements usually come from those who have long forgotten how to distinguish between fundamental law and the opinions and traditions of men. Because of their inability to allow freedom in matters of opinion and tradition, some simply view paradigm shifts as “dividing the church”.

All societies go through periods of
change and subsequently social chaos in times of struggle. These are times when the mores of society are being transformed. They are times of transition, a change from the old to the new and different; wineskins are being torn asunder as society spills forth something new. This is simply a process of life. It is not something good or bad within itself. It is simply a process of cultural and social change that continually happens within the social dynamics of people. Paul recognized this social phenomenon and applied it to the Corinthian church situation. “For there must also be factions among you so that those who are approved may be made known among you” (1 Co 11:19). And for this reason, there must be times when the church divides from traditions that have been bound as law. If no division comes, the church moves straight into the oblivion of man-made heresies.

If our hearts are sincere and our goal is to restore the simplicity of God’s will in our lives, then struggle refines our faith. We thus do not despise the struggle that comes with restoration. Out of factions (chaos) come forth the manifested new. The old is peeled away in order to reveal the approved. Unfortunately, we always view the time of faction (chaos) as something that is always wrong. But Paul knew that at times such must happen in any group in order for God to prune away that which hinders the growth of the group. Group discipline prunes, and thus we must not regret the chaos that comes with the change that group discipline produces (Hb 12:5,6). Because God loves us He will discipline us into being what we should be as His children. If we move into burdening ourselves with many traditional burdens that cannot be born, then He will generate a shaking of His church in order that we rid ourselves of nonessential baggage that holds the church back.

The same principle of social and religious chaos lies behind the parable of the tares. During the social and religious chaos that prevailed at the end of the Jewish State in the first century, Jesus said that “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43). The end of the Jewish State was in the providence of God. The end was a time when God was shaking national Israel in order to manifest those who were Israel by faith in the kingdom reign of a new King. God produced the social and religious chaos during this time in order to bring forth that which was new. This was the encouragement of Hebrews 12:28 which was written during this period of shaking. Throughout the forty-year period of shaking between the establishment of the church on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30 and the final destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the “approved” were “receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” During this time of shaking, the traditions of Judaism were being shaken out of Israel in order that the true Israel by faith be
revealed by her obedience to the truth. God’s shaking at that time was a religious paradigm shift.

**We must not sacrifice the task of restoration for the sake of avoiding the struggle that accompanies the very nature of the restoration process.** In the midst of the shaking that restoration to biblical authority generates, struggle is inevitable, and thus inherently necessary, regardless of whether it is appreciated. Struggle in restoration forces us to wonder about where we stand. Subsequently, the honest and sincere wander back to God’s word. If we are the “approved” of which Paul spoke, it forces us to reevaluate our teaching and our hearts. We are forced to look into the mirror of God’s word and reevaluate our own hearts and motives. Out of this self-evaluation, a new spirit emerges. A new generation of believers is established on a course back to the Bible in order to advance closer to the Father into the future.

When a group becomes legal in its doctrine and entrenched in its traditions and institutionalism, or blindly subservient to dominant personalities, it is often beyond repair. The leaders of such groups see restorational paradigm shifts only as “division in the church”. They are thus resistant to the struggle in the midst of the shift because either their own positions, control, financial support base, or legalistic doctrine is under attack. The attitudes of such leaders make it difficult for them to change. The churches for which they are presumed to be leaders are often against restoration simply because of their resistance to the traumatic change and struggle that comes with restorational paradigm shifts.

Are religious groups with centuries of established and embedded traditions beyond correction? As a whole, they probably are. If their leadership is driven by less than admirable motives, they are usually destined to oblivion in a sea of religions that are moved and perpetuated by a leadership that seeks to maintain dominant roles among innocent followers. I do not mean to be fatalistic, but the majority of institutional churches and their leaders usually do not seek to abandon their heritage for the sake of restoration. History books are not filled with examples of whole movements making change in order to restore simple New Testament Christianity. Restoration is a rare phenomenon in the history of Christendom.

Because of the subconscious nature of our habitual behavior, we are naturally resistant to change. This resistance makes us victims to the bondage of the majority. In this religious cultural bondage, individual thinking is sacrificed for collective harmony. Individual relationships with God are lost in the maze of conformity to the dictates of group heritage. Private conclusions to Bible studies are concealed in order that one not be judged by the group to be a revolution-
ary or simply controversial in attitude. The result of this natural phenomenon of religious resistance is that groups carry themselves away into a religion that is created after their own habitual beliefs and behavior. Affecting a paradigm shift to restore primitive Christianity in this environment becomes the exception to the rule. The further away from the original the present has strayed, the more painful and unlikely the shift back to the original.

This brings us to the threshold of whether one can stimulate a restoration or reformation in those religious institutions that are global and financially networked through dominant religious structures and church synods. If we initiate a restoration, or even a cosmetic reformation, we must understand where we are going and how we are going to get there. **Biblically blind paradigm shifts are useless and confusing when dealing with God’s business.** In the religious world, if they are not directed by the word of God, they are only organizational maneuvers that are orchestrated by the whims of fallible leaders and not the Spirit of God.

In order to make changes, some have taken the road of reformation. But reformation is only an effort to reform an existing structure. It is an effort to rework the old framework in order to come up with something that is only redesigned. Small or large changes are made here and there in an effort to correct injustices, to make the religious group more culturally accepted, or reorganized with a new leadership. The reformist seeks to cut off offending appendages of tradition, doctrine, behavior, and sometimes dominant leaders. With surgical precision, reformation efforts are very carefully carried out in order not to cause discomfort to the whole. In an effort to make the group more healthy, the reformist is content with surface reforms whereby the reformers and the reformed are reassured that they have satisfied the will of God to draw closer to Him. The reformist seeks to keep the group from as much pain as possible in order to make course corrections. The reformist is generally not a wave maker. Neither does he like to dispose of old wineskins.

And herein was the dilemma of Wesley, Luther, Calvin, Zwingly and a host of other reformers. The apostasy of the Christendom in which they lived and worked was strong. The “church” of their day was far removed from the original. It was so far removed that they could be only reformers, not true restorationists. Because of the tremendous dominance of the Catholic Church over the minds of the people in the religious and political world, it was difficult for them to think freely without the influencing baggage of an apostate church. The reformists, therefore, could thus initiate only reforms in the midst of great opposition, which opposition sent some of them to their deaths. A generation away from their initial and personal efforts, their followers simply canonized their leftover re-
forms for survival in the midst of tremendous opposition by the dominant Catholic Church that continued to launch persecution against them in the centuries that followed. Nevertheless, we must take our hats off to these brave reformists who took a stand against an apostasy that continues even to this day. Though they did not give a restoration heritage to their followers, they at least took a stand against the established apostate religion of their day.

In the decades and centuries that followed the reformation of the 1500s and 1600s, reformed churches drew up creeds and manuals in order to guarantee their survival and the allegiance of adherents to their particular denominations. We are thus left with a legacy of groups out of the Reformation who are denominated from one another. Their past and present inability to affect true restorative paradigm shifts has only set them on a road that has circled around to bring them back to the roots of their birth. They are now the opposition to restoration as was the Catholic Church to the Reformation. Nevertheless, some in this present environment are again standing up to write theses on church house doors in order to affect either reformation or restoration.

The union of the present denominational world is the new “Catholic Church” which now persecutes those who seek restoration of simple New Testament Christianity. Nothing ever changes for the true restorationist. There are always those of the status quo apostasy who desire no pain that comes with religious paradigm shifts. There are always those who seek to guarantee positions and power. Nothing has changed since the dominant religious leaders of Jesus’ day schemed and carried out a plot of murder against the Son of God.

In view of the consequences of apostasy, it is imperative that we seek a restorational paradigm shift, not the simple cosmetic efforts of a reformation effort. Restoration is an effort to go back to our original religious roots, back to the original divine directives that are not encumbered with the legacy of man-made doctrines, traditions and misguided heritages. Restorationists are interested in redefining the accepted paradigm in order to re-institute the original for the sake of the future. In fact, the restorationist is not willing to make a simple shift in order to seek the original. He is willing to readjust his foundational world view in order to set himself on a return to what God originally intended His church to be throughout the centuries until Jesus comes for His bride. And in view of our present religious environment, this is a paradigm shift from the existing sectarian denominational thinking and behavior of Christendom to a paradigm that is based on the principle of New Testament relational Christianity.

The intention of the restorationist is noble in reference to remaining outside the confusion of religious denominationalism in order to restore the original sim-
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plicity of relational Christianity. Every restorationist must at some time make a break with the status quo in order to get on with what God wants done. Unfortunately, the very nature of his plea lends him to being kicked out of many synagogues, stoned and left for dead. Nevertheless, unless we have among us those who continually challenge us to rethink our positions and policies in reference to the word of God, we are doomed to obscurity in a world of man-made religions.

It should always be our desire to search the Scriptures in order to discover and restore fundamental principles. Not to be restorationist in thinking would doom us to being just another man-made denomination. It would condemn us to the futility of man-made organizations and religious unions that are worked out by the manipulations of fallible men.

However, restorationists often make a common mistake when seeking to restore what they conclude is the original New Testament church. They use the fundamental thinking that established the present traditional paradigm in order to construct a new direction that is supposedly “patterned” after the original. In other words, if the church is presently legalistic, one will often use a legalistic formula in order to restore the 1st century church in the 21st century. Or if the church is presently denominational in thinking, denominational thinking will be used to initiate restoration. But what we end up with is just another legalistic checklist that is justified with proof texts and a fellowship that is just another denomination. It is only natural to do this since our tools for reconstruction and restoration are usually formed after the hermeneutics that got us into trouble in the first place.

It is for the preceding reason that it is difficult for those who believe that they have a copyright on restoration heritage to make restorational paradigm shifts. Their “restorational theology” and obsession with quotations from their restorational fathers often becomes distorted in the traditional heritage of their group. They claim that the result of their restorational theology is evidence of the fact that their thinking is correct. They thus do not perceive that their system may be flawed with a legalistic definition of that which they seek to restore. Their often arrogant claim to restoration heritage handicaps their ability to question the premise upon which they seek to restore New Testament Christianity. Those who are of such movements often carry on throughout history in their own theological cocoon in a denominated fellowship of churches wherein they have pacified themselves that they are the sole saved because they have engineered real restoration. But the denominating of their fellowship from within is evidence that there are flaws either in their hermeneu-
tics or the institutional baggage they have picked up from their religious neighbors on their journey.

We must understand the essential task of what we are doing in order to be true restorationists. A paradigm is the very foundation of our beliefs and behavior. It is our beliefs that will take us into the future, because upon them our behavior is based. In the task of restoration, we are dealing with our world view of religious behavior and how we establish what we feel is fundamental for belief. The maintenance of our world view depends on subconscious mental structures that give order to our conscious thinking, and subsequently, order to our lives. How we establish the foundation upon which we plan and direct our course is critical to the success of our journey. If our compass is in calibration, we will arrive on course.

In order to arrive at a correct destination, it is imperative that we focus our attention exclusively on Jesus and His word. We owe much to our reformation and restoration fathers. They have given us a heritage of reexamining ourselves at any one point of history. However, in our quest to look objectively into the word of God for direction to be simple Christians, we must be on guard not to be diverted by the tremendous influence of our heritage. Our desire, therefore, is not to burden ourselves with footnotes from those who have gone before. It is our task to focus on the One who is before all. Only when He becomes the sole directive of our purpose will we arrive at any satisfactory destination.

Chapter 2

The Origin Of Sectarianism

Denominationalism is generally caused when a sectarian attitude is carried out in the lives of those who seek to separate themselves religiously from others with whom they disagree on one or more points of difference. Sectarianism is an attitude that is manifested by the practice of denominating believers from one another because of either doctrinal creeds, institutional organizations, dominant personalities, or religious traditions. The sectarian uses one or more points of difference in order to gather a group of believers under his control, and then separate that group from other groups in order to maintain the identity of his specific group. Whether for negative or positive reasons, the sect develops its own identity, and thus becomes a denominated group commonly known in the religious world as a denomination.

A sect is first considered such by its original fellowship, who for some reason, has considered the sect not to be in conformity with either the beliefs or behavioral norms of the original fellowship. Christianity was first identified as a “sect of the Jews” by idolatrous people who knew little of its origins and teachings and some Jews who were distant from Judea (At 28:21,22). However, when the general populace of the Roman Empire
eventually understood more about the doctrinal orientation of Christianity, it was not identified as a sect of the Jews. It was identified as an indigenous belief that was based on Christians’ belief that Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God and Savior of the world.

Those Jews who were steeped in Judaism did not consider Christianity a sect of the Jews. They saw it as an apostasy from Judaism. When the early Christians denominated themselves from Judaism, they did not become a denomination after the nature of the denominations we see today in the Protestant world. It was divided from Judaism simply because most of the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Christians thus stood alone in a world of non-Christian religions because of their faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. This did not make the church a denomination since denominationalism is generally defined as division among those who do accept Jesus as the Messiah. In fact, what is prevalent today in the denominational world would be an embarrassment to the early church.

In our present-day situation, a religious group usually first develops as a sect from its original religion of birth. Once the new faith develops identifying characteristics, it is considered a denomination that stands alone because of its unique beliefs or behavior. This road to denominationalism is the one that has been taken by many present-day traditional denominations throughout the world. Many of these groups were initial efforts to reform the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. However, after their initial efforts of reformation, they denominated themselves both from the Catholic Church and from one another. They stand divided among themselves today as a testimony to the fact that the principles that gave birth to their origin were flawed.

Today, we must understand sectarianism in the context of a Christendom that is made up of a host of denominations that have centuries of heritage behind them. The birth of any denomination may first have its origin in a desire to get back to God and His authority in our lives through His word. But what often happens is that a sectarian spirit sets in among those who seek restoration. When this spirit sets in, the restorers denominate themselves from one another, and thus new denominations are formed within the restoration movement. In order to maintain this separateness, each group establishes both traditional beliefs and systems of control in order to guarantee that those who align themselves with each particular party remain identified and separated from other parties.

Once denominations are formed, a sectarian spirit works as the engine to maintain the continuation of the denomination. The truly sectarian person thus sees things from the viewpoint of “us and them.” He draws lines, establishes camps, and seeks to establish a vocabulary and list of teachings that would identify the uniqueness of his particular group.
in the midst of an assortment of other denominations who have done the same. The establishment of some system of control guarantees the allegiance of the members to the group, and thus they are led to compete with other established groups. When these factors are enacted and maintained by every denomination, a sectarian attitude has thus given birth to and maintenance of another denomination among churches.

The New Testament is not without examples of some disciples who manifested a sectarian spirit. In their spiritual formative years, some of the Jewish disciples sought to bring into the church the sectarian spirit that was common among the Jewish leadership of their day. From their initial behavior, some of the early disciples first viewed the ministry of Jesus as the development of just another sect of Judaism.

A. Within Judaism a sectarian spirit divided the Jews.

Though religiously divided into several minor schools of belief, the three major sects of the Jews were represented by the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the community of the Essenes. The Pharisees and Sadducees were dominant religious leaders who represented two distinct groups in the Jewish religious structure that were on many issues in conflict with one another. The Essenes were a sect to themselves and less confrontational than the groups represented by the leadership of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The uniqueness of the teachings of each party denominated Judaism. For example, in reference to the resurrection, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, whereas the Pharisees did (At 23:8). The Sadducees rejected the authority of the prophetic books, but the Essenes (the Qumran community) highly regarded them, establishing a community that worked specifically to make copies of these Old Testament books. The Pharisees simply regarded them as divinely inspired commentaries of the Torah (Pentateuch). There were other issues of controversy as marriage and divorce, the Sabbath and tithing. Over each belief great controversy often occurred in the religious community of Israel. Allegiance to a particular group or school of thought was very important. If one were zealous in his beliefs, he would be the disciple of a particular teacher by identifying himself with the teachings of that teacher and the sect he represented.

The disciples of Jesus thus grew up in a religious atmosphere where discussion, if not outright debate over theological issues, was the nature of Jewish religious training and behavior. They grew up in an environment wherein Jews aligned themselves with a particular teacher and his unique interpretation of the Torah and the Prophets. We would assume, therefore, that when they were discipled to Jesus, they would initially bring into their ranks a sectarian spirit by which they would
first see themselves as a part of the “Jesus sect,” as opposed to the other sects within Judaism.

Because the sect of the Pharisees was very legalistic in their interpretation of the law, they were considered the group with the strongest feelings and behavior of sectarianism. During the end of His ministry, Jesus strongly condemned their legalistic behavior. “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel sea and land to make one proselyte. And when he is made, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Mt 23:15). The Pharisees made Gentile proselytes “twice as much a son of hell” because the Gentiles were first dead in their paganistic beliefs before they were proselyted to the scribes and Pharisees. They were dead again when brought into the religion of the scribes and Pharisees, which religion was not true Old Testament faith, but a mixture of Jewish traditions and Old Testament (Mk 7:1-9; see At 26:5; Gl 1:11-14). At the time Jesus spoke this stern message, the Pharisees were keeping these Gentile proselytes from the truth by their systematic control of religious intimidation.

The Holy Spirit referred to the Sadducees as the “sect of the Sadducees” (At 5:17) and the Pharisees as the “sect of the Pharisees” (At 15:5). It is not difficult to understand, therefore, that after the church was established, the Jewish religious leaders and unbelieving Gentiles would view Christians as just another sect of Judaism. In fact, when Paul was on trial in Caesarea, Tertullus, who represented the Jewish religious establishment, said of Paul that he was “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (At 24:5). When Paul approached Jews in Rome who were distantly removed from happenings in Jerusalem, they initially said to Paul, “We desire to hear from you what you think, for as concerning this sect we know that it is spoken against everywhere” (At 28:22). Unbelievers were speaking everywhere about the “sect of the Nazarenes.” It was the nature of the religious environment of Israel to encourage people initially to view Christianity as just another divergent sect of Judaism.

The church was initially viewed as just another sect of Judaism, which accusation betrays the nature of Judaism, that it was very divided within by a sectarian spirit. This is what we would expect when men come to the point of rejecting the word of God in order to maintain their religious traditions (Mk 7:9). When religious traditions and personal dogma become the major player in determining our foundation for faith, then a sectarian spirit becomes the guiding rule to determine the camp in which we seek to dwell. When we exalt particular interpreters of the word above others, then we lend ourselves to being sectarian, and subsequently, partisan in our relationships with one another.

B. The disciples manifested a sectarian spirit during the ministry of Jesus.
Since James and John grew up in the religious establishment of Judaism, we would not be surprised to see that these sons of Zebedee would lead among the disciples with a Jewish sectarian spirit. After all, they were the sons of the influential Zebedee, and thus as children, though they grew up in Galilee far from Jerusalem, were personally known by the inner circle of Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem (Jn 18:16). They were known as the “sons of thunder” because of their zeal to maintain their beliefs in the midst of hostile religious debate (Mk 3:17). They grew up in the atmosphere of Pharisaical behavior, and thus manifested the sectarian spirit that prevailed among different sects within Judaism. When men grow up among the sects, they often bring such a spirit into the church when converted.

On one occasion during the ministry of Jesus, John came to Jesus and spoke as the representative of other disciples who found someone who was working in the name of Jesus, but not with them. John said, “Master, we saw one casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us” (Lk 9:49). It was not that the exorcist did not follow Jesus. John used the pronoun “us”. The exorcist was not doing his work as a part of what John viewed as Jesus’ party. He was not in their “sect” and a part of their fellowship. The problem was that John and others could not accept the fact that someone was out there working for Jesus, but not working in direct fellowship with their specific party.

John, who represented the disciples who were with Jesus, manifested a sectarian party spirit that would be contrary to the nature of the church that was yet in the near future. Jesus thus responded to John, “Do not forbid him, he who is not against you is for you” (Lk 9:50). When one has a sectarian spirit, individual loyalty to parties is more important than the righteous work others are doing in the name of Jesus. To the sectarian, loyalty to Jesus is confirmed by loyalty to a specific party.

The sectarian focuses on party loyalty when teaching and working in the name of Jesus. He seeks to maintain his sect by focusing on fellowship with a specific party of members. He feels that his loyalty to Jesus is dependent on his loyalty to his sect. It is for this reason that the one who displays a sectarian spirit develops a systematic theology that is a mixture of doctrines, traditions, methods and opinions by which he can identify those who are loyal to his party. He calls on those who would seek fellowship with him and his particular sect to express loyalty to the established doctrines, traditions and opinions of his sect. He often requires members to sign membership cards that bind the consignees to the rules and regulations of his particular religious club.

Sectarianism can also be manifested in those who place membership with one group to the exclusion of others. He is the one who will disfellowship an entire...
church that does not conform to his set of doctrines, traditions, methods and opinions that separate his group from others. He seeks to guard the purity of his church, which purity to him is based on compliance to a catechism of beliefs and methods. By demanding compliance, he thus maintains the separation of his group from others who would seek their loyalty.

Sectarianism is always manifested in the heart of the one who is obsessed with others “stealing his sheep” from his coveted group. As John in the context of Luke 9, he sees others as “not of us,” and thus views others as opposed to his party (church). Since the sectarian does not discern the universality of the body of Christ, his prayer for unity is actually a plea for union within his group or fellowship of churches. He seeks for a union of all those who will conform to his established code of conduct, methods and the traditional interpretations of Scripture that are characteristic with his particular party.

C. The Corinthians manifested a sectarian spirit.

I think there was some sarcasm in Paul’s statement to the Corinthians for the sectarianism they manifested in their allegiance to different individuals. Paul wrote, “Now I say this, that each one of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas’ and ‘I of Christ’” (1 Co 1:12). Sectarianism exists when different groups give allegiance to favorite personalities. In the Corinthian case, allegiance to particular preachers denominated the Corinthian church into different parties. Loyalty to a particular preacher became the identification of the party to which one showed loyalty.

We might assume from the above scenario that different house churches were established in Corinth through the ministry of Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter), all of whom worked in Corinth at one time or another. I believe Paul is being sarcastic when he throws in “I of Christ” in the list of the denominated parties who were calling themselves after different men. He does so in order to shame them concerning their divisive attitudes. He would be sarcastically asking, “Are there not any ‘of Christ’ among you?” The point is that when one is truly of Christ, he cannot be “of Paul,” “of Apollos,” or “of Cephas.”

Paul would write the same rebuke today to any community as he did to the Corinthians. Different “pastors” throughout communities today have established their particular groups, whose members give allegiance to these men and their churches. Because the local preacher is the center of reference to the entire program of the local church, a sectarian spirit is developed among the members in order to retain the commitment of the members to each particular group. Allegiance to the preacher becomes the manifestation of a sectarian spirit among
the members. Paul would also give to these churches the following plea he gave to the Corinthians: “Now I urge you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all 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 Co 1:10).

Chapter 3

The Identity Of Sectarianism

It is easy to become sectarian in our own spirit at the same time we are denouncing others for being sectarian. It is for this reason that it would be good here to list some points that identify what it means to have a sectarian attitude, belief and behavior.

Becoming sectarian in our attitudes is something about which I have found we often become very apathetic in checking our own thinking. The fact that we assert ourselves against some group we consider to be a sect often leads us to think that we cannot become the same. Because this often happens, it is necessary to identify a sectarian spirit in order that we guard ourselves from developing an exclusive spirit that keeps us away from one another.

A. Sectarian fellowships exalt church over Christ.

One is sectarian when he promotes allegiance to a particular body of believers as opposed to Christ and the universal church. His emphasis is on proselytizing people to his “local” church and less on converting people to Jesus. A sectarian person would promote party loyalty to a particular local congregation or preacher over another. He would assume that two local congregations within close distance of each other would be in competition with one another for converts and members. In this supposed competition between local churches, the sectarian individual would exalt the works or assets of his particular church over that of another. When this practice becomes common with a group of churches in the midst of a denominational world, the sectarian preacher seeks to emphasize the church instead of the Christ of the church. He seeks to build his church camp rather than bring people to Jesus.

With a belief that church is emphasized over Christ, the person with a sectarian spirit often accuses others of “steal-
ing sheep” if they infringed on the membership of his flock. Since the stolen sheep would leave his particular congregation of believers, the sectarian would pronounce his sheep as “stolen”. His party loyalty to a particular congregation would make him feel that his local flock of sheep has been invaded if one of the members of his group is “recruited” to attend another group. Those who are sectarian after this manner can always be identified by their use of terms as “sheep stealing,” “territory of our church,” and “place of membership.” This terminology betrays one’s party loyalty to a particular group to the exclusion of others.

B. Sectarian fellowships exalt the local over the universal.

The phrase “local church” is not specifically used in the Scriptures, though the concept is inferred when Paul addressed the “church of God at Corinth” or the church in someone’s house. However, it is terminology that often betrays the sectarian attitude of those who have lost sight of the universality of the body of Christ. It is a term that is often used in order to identify a specific group of believers in a community who seek to distinguish themselves from other groups in the same community. When there are two “local” churches in the same community who will not work together as one church, then the two are working denominationally from one another. How can Christians who happen to meet in two different assemblies in the same community not work together as members of the one global church?

The typical presence of many churches within a local community illustrates this point. In the denominated religious world, there are those of the same groups who believe that they have been called by God to work in the same community. What often occurs in the work is that the two groups and their preachers feel that they are in competition with one another. But has God really called denominated assemblies and their preachers into competition with one another in the same community? Or is it the case that the two groups seek party loyalty, and thus consider themselves as different “local” churches in competition with one another?

The New Testament emphasizes the global body of Christ. Even when speaking of problems in the church in a particular area, the inspired writers used pronouns as “we” and “us” to explain the universality of the church. When discussing the problems in the church of Corinth, and in the midst of explaining the function and necessity of all members, Paul answered the Corinthian problems with how all members in Corinth should behave as members of the universal church. “For by one Spirit we [the global membership] were all immersed into one [global] body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bondservants or free, and we [the universal church] were all made to drink of the one Spirit” (1 Co 12:13). He
said that “the [global] body is not one member, but many” (1 Co 12:14). In this context he explained the necessity of each member of the universal body, not just the members who happened to live in Corinth.

When writing to the Ephesians, Paul spoke of the church of the Christ. He spoke of the specific universal ministries of the apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd/teachers (Ep 4:11). However, he was not speaking exclusively of the gifts in the church of Ephesus. He was speaking universally. These ministries were set in the universal church “until we all [that’s every member everywhere] come to the unity of the faith .... Then we [that’s Corinth, Ephesus, New York, etc.] will no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching ...” (Ep 4:13,14). In the pronoun “we”, Paul included the whole church in the whole world. Simply because a New Testament letter was directed to members in a particular city, this did not establish a definition for a local church. The content of the New Testament letters themselves denies this conclusion. The letters were addressed to members in a particular location, but their application was to members throughout the world.

Those who are sectarian often lose their true identity with the body of Christ as a whole by focusing on a local group of Christians in particular. In their struggle to build big local churches and secure a strong financial base, they often lost sight of building the body of Christ throughout the world as the body works as an organism within each community of the world. In their empirical religion to “see” how many sheep they can get together at a particular location on Sunday morning, they have become “local” minded to the point of separating their efforts from other members of the body who are seeking to build the church universally. Their view of the local church encourages them to develop a sectarian spirit that is manifested in their spirit of competitiveness with other “local” churches. They thus claim sheep, register them on a membership roll, corral them together with a work program, and then make an attendance card in order that all sheep are accounted for on Sunday morning.

Those churches who are sectarian in spirit are often introverted in their behavior as a church. They are churches who focus on themselves. In their programs and behavior they have sworn allegiance to the local church and preacher, and thus they often have little or no mission outreach. They have no mission program outside the mission of recruiting members who are within driving or walking distance of their location of meeting. If they do convert someone outside driving distance to the local corral, then they know that the term local will not fit their theology. That convert will either have to become another “local” church, or forsaken. If you are a local church member, you know the rest of this story.

A local thinking church is often against the establishment of another group within its “territory”, since such is viewed as an effort to detract from the
numbers of the existing local churches. Since the term “local” assumes “territory,” then it is only natural that a sectarian-spirited local church would not want another group to set up another territory within their territory. They would proclaim such as “dividing the church.”

It is unfortunate that the stronger the feelings are to focus on the existence of the local church, the less the local church concentrates on the global mission of Christ. Such introverted churches cease to be the assembly of those who send evangelists to preach to other areas (Rm 10:15). Self-centered Christians often cease to behave after the character of their Founder whose commission was to send His disciples into all the world (Mt 28:19,20). In their sectarian introversion, localized churches often die as the cluster of members age and die. The fruit of sectarianism in a local church is that the candlestick is eventually removed as the local religious social club burns out.

Churches can determine if they have digressed into being local religious clubs by whether they work to carry out the global great commission of Jesus (See Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15,16). If a local church has no mission program, then its focus is eschew. How can a group of believers say they are the church of Christ if they are not functioning in carrying out the great commission of Christ? We cannot be the church without working to fulfill the commission of the One after whom we call ourselves. To say we are the church of Christ without carrying out the commission of Christ is to plagiarize the name of Christ. The point is that what we do identifies us as to who we are. If we belong to Christ, then we will be carrying out the will of Christ to reach the lost.

C. Sectarian fellowships draw territorial boundaries.

As discussed in the preceding point, the body of Christ is a global organism that spreads like leaven into the hearts of accountable people in every nation, country, city, suburb, city block, and house of every world citizen (Mt 13:38). Church exists wherever there is at least one baptized believer. The body functions as individual cells work to supply every need of the worldwide body of members (Ep 4:11-16). When we view the body of Christ from this perspective, the sectarian denominationalism of some local churches is quite evident. The more one understands the universality of the body, the more encouraged one is to remain a part of this body.

However, members of a sectarian local church often drive across town—if they have automobiles—and pass by fellow members who are going in the opposite direction to another assembly. In their thinking, they will have some imagined territory for their local church. This territory will mentally be drawn as abstract boundaries around the local place of assembly. Driving across town to a preferred assembly is not wrong. We naturally associate with those with whom
we have work and culture in common. However, we must guard ourselves against excluding others in order to make the drive.

The leadership of an exclusive local church feels that they as a group have a territory they must guard. Members of a sectarian local church will always question the motives of the evangelistic outreach of sister congregations who are evangelizing in what they claim as their “territory”. As if the church has less a territory than the world (see Mt 13:38), the sectarian local church always feels threatened by the local evangelistic outreach of other local churches in their area who work on a greater evangelistic outreach than the area in the vicinity of their place of assembly.

There are no such attitudes or practices in the New Testament. There were no political maneuverings going on among churches in the first century other than that practiced by false teachers who denied fundamental principles of Christianity. Such church politics were practiced by the judaizing teachers of Galatia who denied the truth of the gospel by the binding of matters that God had not bound (See At 15:1; Gl 4:17). This threat was discussed and settled through the Galatian letter and a meeting of the church in Jerusalem (At 15). However, there are no discussions in the New Testament concerning where members should assemble or what territory a particular group of brethren should claim. Competition implies that we are in some type of religious game, competing for prospects and members by staking claims to a specific territory. But I see no territorialization of the membership of the body of Christ in the word of God. When the Holy Spirit used the singular form of the word “church” in the New Testament in reference to the saints in a particular city, He never assigned any geographical boundaries that brethren should claim in order to exclude others from that area (See 1 Co 1:2; At 20:17).

Quite the opposite is true. The New Testament portrays a universal body of believers functioning throughout the first century world. It was a body of Christ that was thriving as one body in order to evangelize a lost world. The territory was the whole world (Mt 13:38). Church politics and dissension over territorial claim jumping was totally absent from any discussions in the New Testament concerning the evangelistic function of the church. Such thinking is just not a part of the New Testament church.

It is impossible to be territorial as Christians since the world is our field of work. To produce areas of labor that territorially exclude others is contrary to the spirit of working together which we enjoy in Christ. Those who would confine workers to geographical areas of evangelism are guilty of excluding others from their supposed territory and are generating contentions over matters that lead to sectarian behavior (See Ti 3:9-11). Their spirit of exclusion spirit is
manifested in their desire to exclude others from reaching the hearts of men regardless of where those hearts live.

In Acts 20:29,30 Paul warned the Ephesian elders about those with a sectarian spirit who would practice exclusive attitudes among Christians. “For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” When one is critical of others in order to keep sheep in his particular party, he is sectarian in spirit. When one is paranoid about others evangelizing in his party’s supposed territory, he is exclusive. When one feels that those who are under his care belong to him and not Jesus, he is excluding his group from others. When one feels competitive by comparing his group with other groups, then he is leading his group to be separate from others. When one is derogatory and judgmental of other groups and their work who are near to his supposed area of work, he is developing an attitude within his party that works to separate his group from others.

A sectarian draws groups of disciples away from other groups of disciples. The strength and size of his group is a supposed indication of his ability to maintain a large flock. Unfortunately, one’s desire to strengthen his own camp to the exclusion of others is an indication of a sectarian spirit.

D. Sectarian fellowships claim names for identification.

This point is admittedly a very sensitive subject. It is sensitive simply because we cherish our unique names in reference to our particular heritage. Nevertheless, since names for churches were never used to separate the saints in the New Testaments from one another, then we must be cautious about using such in a denominational manner today.

To begin this discussion, it is worthy to note that translators of the Scriptures would have done us a favor by translating the Greek word ekklesia with the word “assembly” or “congregation” instead of the word “church.” In doing this, we would not only have maintained the use of the word today as it was used in the first century in reference to God’s people, but we would also have placed less emphasis on glorifying local assemblies. Possibly, we would have been less aggressive in putting local assemblies of Christians in competition with one another in local communities. With such a translation, the members’ allegiance would have better remained with Jesus, and a worldwide body and not so much to the local assembly where each member supposedly had his or her “membership placed.”

The problem with using a name for a specific “local” congregation of people distracts from the universal nature of the church of Christ. When we claim a particular name, we locally differentiate ourselves from others. We make a “local” church a distinctive part of the whole. The fact is that a local assembly of Christians is not separated from the whole because a group of Christians as-
semble in a specific area or building. The one body is not composed of several minor bodies. Christians are the one universal congregation of Christ regardless of where they assemble.

One is sectarian when he claims a specific name in order to denominate his assembly from other assemblies. In order for the members of a sect to be identified as a specific group, a name is often chosen so that all members of the group might give allegiance to that particular group with its unique name. This is done in order to establish the group’s identity in a particular community. When several churches in the same community do this, names of churches become very important in order for different groups to maintain their unique identities. When a name is used to separate one group of believers from another, then the name often manifests the spirit of sectarianism that exists with those who have given allegiance to the specific names.

The preceding can also happen even if a descriptive phrase is taken from the New Testament and used as the “official” name of a group of Christians. Descriptive phrases as “church of God” and “church of Christ” were never used in the New Testament to separate groups of Christians from one another. References to Christians were never given as exclusive names to either identify exclusive assemblies of Christians or to separate assemblies of saints from one another. When Paul referred to the “church of God that is at Corinth,” he was not using the phrase “church of God” as a specific name to separate the members in Corinth from other members in other cities (1 Co 1:2). The church (ekklesia) of God in Corinth met in many different house assemblies. Since the church was meeting in several house assemblies in the city, then Paul’s use of the singular form of the word “church” indicates that the phrase “church of God” was never meant to separate assemblies of Christians from one another. A church is not identified by its assemblies, and thus a name for a specific assembly of Christians works to divide one group from another. Regardless of the multiplicity of assemblies that were being conducted in the city of Corinth, God’s people were still “the church of God.”

When Paul used the phrase “churches of Christ” in Romans 16:16, he was not differentiating between many “local” assemblies who were sending their greetings to a local assembly in Rome. He was simply saying that the assemblies of Christ throughout the world sent their greetings to the many Christians in Rome who were also a part of the global assembly of God’s people. Phrases as “church of God” or “church of Christ” that are used in reference to Christians in the New Testament were not meant to be names of assemblies. They were meant to identify the ownership of God’s...
community, regardless of where that community existed.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth and Rome, there were no religious denominations in either city. Therefore, he could not have been using the phrases “church of God” or “churches of Christ” in a denominational sense, or in a way by which he was identifying the church as a unique body from existing denominations. To use these phrases today in such a manner would manifest a denominational spirit, and subsequently be using the phrases out of the context in which Paul initially used them.

E. Sectarian fellowships promote allegiance to unique dogmas of traditional interpretations.

Churches that are sectarian in reference to traditional interpretations of Scripture wherein deductive reasoning is necessary in order to determine the interpretation, are usually engaged in constant struggles. They struggle to determine correct interpretations that should be accepted by the fellowship as a whole. Leaders of such churches often find it difficult to come to any agreement on opinions, and thus authorities within the fellowship are in constant turmoil in trying to establish what is to be considered authoritative interpretations for the sect in order to have unity.

The confrontations within such fellowships is inevitable because of an erroneous hermeneutic in determining what God has either bound or loosed. Interpreters naturally seek to promote their opinions as law. When several individuals do this, then the stage is set for confrontation. Sheep are lined up behind accepted authorities in the fellowship, years of struggle often ensue. The fellowship is often splintered into numerous subfellowships that are identified by the unique teachings of the one they consider the final interpretive authority for their group. This is why the wide spectrum of denominational churches originated from the Reformation Movement of the 1500s and 1600s. This is how any fellowship of churches will continually divide if the fellowship promotes a hermeneutic that is given to promoting division.

When the systematic interpretations of a particular authority are established throughout the years of confrontation, the interpretations become the dogma that define a group as unique. Those who either disagree with the accepted dogmas of interpretation, or who do not conform to such, are either labeled as liberal or disfellowshipped from the group. The man-derived interpretations thus become the foundation upon which a sect is founded.

The sectarian often denominates a church or group of churches on the basis of identifying those who are “faithful” to accepted traditional dogmas. Adherents’ faithfulness is determined by allegiance to a particular catechism of interpretation of the Scriptures. The judges
in these fellowships determine as faithful only those congregations who maintain a teaching that conforms to what they believe is the established traditional standard of identity of their party.

The problem with this aspect of the sectarian spirit is that “truth” is usually defined according to the beliefs of the accepted authorities within the fellowship of the “faithful” churches. Opinions or traditional interpretations of these authorities are the standard by which each leader is judged either faithful or unfaithful. The lawgivers and judges thus align churches according to the members’ allegiance to their standard of dogma. Unfortunately, in such situations self-appointed watchdogs are allowed to be dominant figures and are given the authority to make judgments concerning who is faithful within the fellowship.

Another problem in this scenario of sectarianism is that the watchdogs usually view the church as local denominated autonomous bodies of believers. This lends them to having a narrow view of the universality of the body of Christ and personal accountability for oneself before Christ. They are thus quick to disfellowship “local churches” who do not conform to their checklist of established dogma of interpretation. In their narrowness, they have failed to understand that the church is not denominated into congregations that have nothing to do with one another. It is universal. And being universal, the membership of each individual member is in heaven. Individual members, therefore, must be considered on the basis of what they personally believe, not on what a particular assembly of believers might be known for believing. In the New Testament, withdrawal of fellowship is from individuals, not entire assemblies of saints.

Nevertheless, the sectarian often fails to understand that in local assemblies of the church, individual members must give account for their own beliefs and behavior (2 Co 5:10). Seeking to wipe the slate clean by disfellowshipping an entire assembly manifests the hardened attitude of a sectarian who has little consideration for the individual’s personal responsibility and covenant relationship with God. It manifests a lack of concern for innocent victims within the congregation that are disfellowshipped as a whole.

We must always remember that covenant relationships with God are individual. Our relationship in Christ, therefore, is individual. Our covenant relationship with God does not depend on “membership” with an assembly of covenanted people. Our assembly is the serendipity of our common covenant we all have with God. We seek to be with one another, therefore, because we have a common covenant with God in Christ. Wherever there are covenanted people throughout the world, I will seek to be with them whenever I can. I will seek to be with them in order to celebrate our common covenant through the drinking of the blood of the covenant. The celebration is thus not over the assembly, but over our common covenant relationship which was made possible by the One who made the sacrificial offering. If I
seek to cast out of the covenant those Jesus has covenanted, then I place myself in the position of being a judge in reference to God’s covenant with man.

F. Sectarian fellowships promote unique traditions.

Sectarianism is manifested by grouping together a brotherhood of assemblies of believers who give allegiance to a particular establishment of human religious traditions or heritages. Jesus reflected on this practice in the context of Mark 7:1-9 (See also Mt 15:1-9). In reference to His statements in Mark 7, here are stages of digression into establishing a unique fellowship that is based on human religious tradition. In His rebuke of the Pharisees, Jesus said they first began their apostasy by “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mk 7:7). However, as time progressed, they were not satisfied with simply teaching their man-made doctrines and cloaking them as commandments from God. They continued their digression by setting aside the true commandments of God in order to keep their doctrines. “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men ...” (Mk 7:8). They went from teaching the traditions to laying aside the word of God. The next stage finalized their complete departure from the will of God. “All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own tradition” (Mk 7:9). Because they were at this point in their departure from God when Jesus came into the world, they contended with Him on many issues, which issues involved discussions over their religious traditions, not the commandments of God.

In the context of Mark 7, it was the issue of washing hands, pots and pans that caused the controversy. The disciples failed to conform to the religious leaders’ traditions, and thus they were judged “unfaithful” according to the standard of the traditions. The one who is sectarian in spirit, therefore, establishes his traditions as the standard by which others are considered either faithful or unfaithful. He freely argues over violation of tradition which has become the heritage of the group. When others do not conform to one’s religious tradition or heritage, the self-appointed judge feels uncomfortable and often behaves in a cantankerous manner in order to bring violators of the traditions back into conformity. Violators are usually intimidated by the dominant behavior of the traditionalists, and thus they conform to the wishes of the traditionalists in order to maintain peace. This happens over a period of years concerning many issues, and subsequently a denomination is born. There is usually no pain in a church becoming denominational in its existence because such takes place over a period of many years.

G. Sectarian fellowships promote lawgivers and judges.

The binding of either traditional interpretations or man-made traditions, as pointed out in the preceding two points,
will always lead to lawgivers and judges within a fellowship. Such guardians naturally develop simply because there are always those who seek to preserve the fellowship by the preservation of the unique traditions and heritages that define their uniqueness. But because the definitive characteristics are traditions, the defenders are naturally sectarian against others who have a different heritage of traditions.

I am not discussing here teaching in reference to fundamental doctrine. Essential teaching is not a matter of interpretation. It takes no hermeneutical skills to read that which is plainly stated and easy to understand in reference to what is required for salvation. God did not cloak those teachings that are necessary for salvation in language that could not be clearly understood by the common person. The problem comes when a clergy of supposed authorized interpreters establish themselves as the official voice of the church. In their efforts to claim for themselves disciples into their own camps, they assert that their interpretations in matters of opinion are to be accepted as the rule for establishing fellowship within the group or among groups. Those who do not conform to their accepted traditional interpretations and man-made religious traditions are excluded from their fellowship.

Some go so far as to change simple principles of interpretation in order to propagate some twisted imagination of the Scriptures. Fundamental teachings are easy to understand with the simple principles by which ordinary men understand literature. However, when one is driven by questionable motives or a hidden agenda, his understanding of simple New Testament principles can be quite distorted.

Those who seek to defend the uniqueness of their fellowship and heritage will make pronouncements from pulpits that there are some who do not conform to his particular creed or interpretation. Since he affirms that he “has the truth” on all matters, he often arrogantly assumes that anyone who would disagree with him on any particular issue must be incorrect. He thus seeks to maintain a following through slander and name-calling to intimidate those with whom he disagrees. He subsequently gathers terrified sheep around himself who are afraid to take a stand for themselves by personal study of the Scriptures. The timid sheep have handed their thinking over to him, and subsequently the sectarian spirit of a dominant person has created a new denomination.

This was certainly the behavior of Diotrephes (3 Jn 9,10). His sectarian spirit was manifested through six sins: (1) He loved to be first. (2) He did not receive the apostle John. (One would wonder why someone would not receive a Christ-sent apostle as John, the apostle...
(3) He slandered John and the other apostles with malicious words. (4) He refused to receive evangelists who were traveling about preaching the gospel. (5) He forbade anyone of “his church” to receive the traveling evangelists. (6) He cast out of the church those who did receive the evangelists. In doing this, he lorded over the believers by intimidation. Diotrephes knew well how to intimidate a local fellowship of believers in order to retain his control over them and to keep out opposition to his behavior.

When one establishes himself as a judge over others and a lawgiver by binding his opinions and agenda, he manifests the true spirit of sectarianism. This person has thus stolen the sheep of God. He is the person who is quick to slander the name of others whom he believes might steal his sheep or disrupt his kingdom. It is thus his church, his flock, and anyone who might come in among his flock is viewed with suspicion. He has inadvertently assumed the position of Christ as the sole head of the church and has stolen the lordship of the Chief Shepherd over the flock.

One of the characteristics that help identify this particular leader is the manner by which he approaches differences of opinion with others. The Diotrephetic leader is not satisfied with discussions over the issues themselves. He becomes personal and derogatory in his pronouncements. He slanders and maliciously debates those who disagree with his position. He distorts facts and attacks personalities in order to gain allegiance to his side of the issue. In the heat of debate, he rarely quotes his opponent correctly, and thus the discussion over an issue becomes a personality issue because he seeks a following instead of the truth. These are the false leaders about whom Paul wrote to both Timothy and Titus. To Timothy, Paul wrote in order to charge some “before the Lord that they do not strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers” (2 Tm 2:14). He warned Timothy to “avoid profane and empty babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness” (2 Tm 2:16).

To Titus, he said not even to show up at the discussion with this type of people.

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and contentions and strivings about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned (Ti 3:9-11).

If one persists in controversies over matters of opinion, he is to be avoided. If one persists in debating unprofitable and worthless matters, he is factious. He is perverted and sinning. Paul says that such a
person is self-condemned because his heart is revealed to be ungodly. I wonder how many church splits could have been avoided if leaders would have followed the preceding instructions of Paul? Some have sinned by conducting senseless meetings about such things that Paul said should be avoided. Nevertheless, the meetings were conducted and participants sinned with harsh words about things that should never have been discussed in a formal meeting. Meetings that do not lead to church edification should never be conducted.

If one claims to know all the truth, he often becomes sectarian in his relationship with others. One can know all the truth concerning essentials for salvation, but one cannot know all the truth. This fact should caution us about becoming arrogant concerning our knowledge of the Bible. Our opinions concerning particular interpretations of Scripture may be true, but we must not arrogantly assert that all our interpretations are correct, thus leaving no more need for study of the Scriptures, nor room for objective study with other Bible students.

When it comes to disagreement over a particular issue, it would be best to follow the actions of Michael when he had a dispute with the devil about the body of Moses. “But Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’” (Jd 9). Michael dared not bring a railing accusation even against the devil. But some brethren have no inhibitions about railing against their own brethren. Michael would not consign the devil to hell. But some brethren are quick to charge as “false teachers” those with whom they disagree in matters of opinion. One who has a true sectarian spirit is arrogant, self-righteous, and is quick to make eternal judgments concerning those with whom he disagrees in matters of opinion. But we must remember the words of James. “For judgment will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (Js 2:13). When it comes to disagreements over matters of opinion, the Holy Spirit’s mandate of Philippians 4:5 should be followed. “Let your forbearance be known to all men.” How have discussions over matters of opinion defined your reputation?

H. Sectarian fellowships universally bind local culture and tradition.

If a particular group binds on itself cultural or traditional practices that are not universal, and believes that such practices must characterize the culture and behavior of the universal church, then the party that binds the cultural practices or traditions is establishing itself as a sect that is identified by its unique customs and traditions. In such a way, some of the Christian Jews of Judea sought to bind their culture on the Gentile churches. They practiced circumcision, and subsequently sought to circumcise those Gentiles who came into the church.
Circumcision was a God-ordained religious rite under the Old Testament law. It was both a cultural practice and religious rite of the Jews long before the ministry of Jesus. However, when the Old Testament law was annulled, the divine authority for the practice of circumcision ceased. Nevertheless, its cultural importance has continued among the Jewish community until this day, though Jews still assume that it is a commandment of God.

In the first century, some Jewish Christians sternly enforced the rite of circumcision on the early church (At 15:1). They sought to take this practice into Gentile churches, and thus bind a matter of culture and opinion on the Gentile Christians (See Gl 2:1-16). However, Paul and others took a strong stand against doing this since being circumcised indicated that one obligated himself to the legalistic doctrine of perfect law-keeping in an effort to be justified before God (Gl 5:1-4).

To manifest his strong stand against this teaching that was indicated by one’s circumcision, Paul refused to allow Titus, a Gentile, to be circumcised when he took him into the Jewish culture and church of Jerusalem where circumcision was practiced (Gl 2:1-5). He refused to allow this matter of opinion and culture to be bound on Titus, or the church as a whole. He did this because some in the church in Judea had moved the culture and tradition of circumcision into the realm of law, and thus were binding where God had not bound.

However, when working outside the church in evangelistic outreach, Paul sought to become all things to all men. "To the Jews I became as a Jew", he later wrote to the Corinthians (1 Co 9:20). He did so in order that he “might gain those who are under law” (1 Co 9:20). He wrote, “I have become all things to all men, so that I might by all means save some” (1 Co 9:22). For this reason on his second missionary journey he took Timothy “and circumcised him because of the Jews” (At 16:3). The Jews in the context of this statement were not Jewish brethren. They were unconverted Jews meeting in the synagogues to which Paul was planning to go. In order to prevent Timothy’s uncircumcision from being an obstacle in his evangelistic outreach to these Jews, Paul brought Timothy into conformity with the Jewish culture of circumcision. For Paul and Timothy, there was no religious significance to Timothy’s circumcision. It was simply a cultural move in order to advance the preaching of the gospel to the Jews.

But among Judean churches, those Jewish Christians who had a sectarian spirit often shunned the uncircumcised Gentile Christians. Their sectarianism was manifested by their pulling away from those who did not conform to something that was a religious cultural practice, but not binding by the word of God. An example of this happened in Antioch when legalistic Jewish brethren came up from Jerusalem (Gl 2:11-13). When they...
came, Peter was intimidated to pull away from the Gentile Christians. Paul subsequently confronted him publicly for practicing a divisive spirit among the Gentiles by separating himself from Gentile brethren (Gl 2:11).

The church today is not without the efforts of some who have sought to bind cultural practices and traditions on the universal body of Christ. We often attach the baggage of the regional church to the universal church. For example, the binding of suits and ties in assembly in one culture is not the norm for the universal church. Church buildings and pews are not universal applications of the church for the assembly of the saints. Pews in Japan do not fit in a culture where people sit on the floor. Songbooks and Bible school literature would also fall into religious culture that is not universal. One should also be cautious about binding unique assembly logistics and worship behavior. Clapping and raising of hands may be accepted in one culture, but not in another. The role of women is certainly an area that should be seriously considered since the role of women is often in the area of subjective interpretation. Borrowing Old Testament practices that existed under the old covenant and bringing them into the new covenant can also be an occasion for controversy.

When the church in a particular area becomes culturally linked, it should be cautious about exporting its beliefs and behavior to other areas. If we do not separate our traditional practices and cultural cues from the fundamentals of Christianity, then we risk separating ourselves from those who do not clone their behavior after our opinions and unique manner of behavior. Our mission to the world is with the message of the simple gospel. Anything more is the propagation of a denominational sect.

In their formative years as disciples of Jesus, both James and John had some difficulty in overcoming their sectarian spirit. They both grew up in the influential environment of Zebedee, their father. In their boyhood, they were both known by the inner circle of priests in Jerusalem. One can only imagine, therefore, their attitudes that were developed as privileged young men who had accepted the sectarian spirit of the Jewish hierarchy.

In their initial months of following Jesus, James and John struggled to get over the sectarian attitudes of their youth. At one time, they enticed their mother to approach Jesus for special positions in what they believed was to be a physical kingdom reign of Jesus on earth (Mk 10:35-45). An example of their sectarian spirit was illustrated when John on another occasion came running to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we saw one casting out
demons in Your name, and he did not follow us. And we forbade him because he did not follow us” (Mk 9:38). What else would we expect from a sectarian. John’s problem was not in the fact that the unknown disciple was casting out demons. He struggled with his sectarian spirit in that the unknown disciple was not “with us.” And since he was not “with us,” he was to be forbidden in casting out demons. Jesus answered this sectarian spirit by saying, “Do not forbid him, for there is no one who will do a miracle in My name who can afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side” (Mk 9:39,40). Paul said the same in reference to some who were preaching Jesus, but doing so with a sectarian spirit, for they preached from an attitude of selfish ambition (Ph 1:15-17). Paul’s answer was, “Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached” (Ph 1:18).

True sectarians cannot accept the fact that others would cast out demons or preach Christ if they are not in one’s own camp or fellowship. If others are preaching Christ outside their camp, they are envious, and thus produce strife (Ph 1:15). What John should have said to Jesus was, “Jesus, we found someone else who is also casting out demons. Praise God!” As disciples of Jesus we must be very cautious about developing a party spirit that is formed around any individual on earth.

Chapter 4

The Nonsectarian

In any discussion concerning the spirit of sectarianism, it is necessary to define what it means not to be sectarian in spirit. In our struggle for the restoration of simple New Testament Christianity, as much as possible we seek not to be sectarian in our own beliefs and behavior. However, as stated previously, a tendency to become sectarian is often inevitable as we struggle to maintain the uniqueness of the church in a world of religious sects.

Though we must caution ourselves about making the community of God a sect of Christendom, we must take a strong biblical stance in reference to the unique nature of the church in the midst of a world that has every sort of religion that lays claim to Jesus in some way. Taking a strong stand for the truth does not mean that one is sectarian. However, in doing such others will always view those who take such a stand as just another sect. Nevertheless, in our efforts to be Christians only, but not the only Christians, we must remain vigilant in our plea to promote unity in a world of diversity. Doing such does not make one sectarian. The following are positions or attitudes that are not sectarian, but necessary positions for those who would maintain the faith in a world of religious confusion:

A. One is not sectarian by refusing to allow cultural distinctions to characterize the nature of the church.
This point reflects on the previous case of Titus’ remaining uncircumcised and Timothy’s circumcision. The Judean churches had a right to practice circumcision after a cultural manner, for almost all members of the church in Judea were Jews. However, they did not have a right to bind the cultural practice of circumcision on the Gentiles. It was for this reason that Paul refused to allow Titus to be circumcised when he took him to Judea. Paul’s refusal to allow Titus to be circumcised did not by example mean that he was teaching that circumcision as a cultural practice was wrong. His example simply meant that the legalistic position of the judaizing teachers on the matter of circumcision and salvation could not be bound on the church (See At 15:1,2).

One is not sectarian when conforming to local cultural practices that are part of a local community. The church is certainly not a culture that refuses to recognize local cultural practices. Paul became all things to all men in order to have an opportunity to reach more people (1 Co 9:22). But at the same time, he did not allow local cultural practices to be practiced as doctrine, and thus bound on the church in all areas where the church was located. It would be wrong, therefore, for the church in one region to bind its customs on the church in another region. We can have “Gentile” churches and “Jewish” churches who are in complete fellowship with one another. If “Gentile” churches start shunning “Jewish” churches, then a sectarian attitude is coming into practice, and denominationalism is being established.

B. One is not sectarian when taking a firm stand for the truth.

Taking a firm stand for biblical teaching is necessary in order to define who we are. We are to be taught in the word of God in order that we not be tossed to and fro in a world of religious error (Ep 4:14). We are to shun those who do not bring us the teaching of Christ (2 Jn 9,10). We are to preach the word of God (2 Tm 4:2) and stand fast in the teaching of His word. It is not being sectarian, therefore, to take a firm stand for the truth. In fact, to fail to do so would lead us away from our plea to restore undenominational Christianity in the midst of a religiously denominated world. We would also not be able to stand against those who have doctrinally denominated themselves from one another.

If we are to be the disciples of Jesus, then we must be loyal to His word. Jesus said, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples” (Jn 8:31). One cannot claim to be a disciple of Jesus if he or she does not continue in the word of Jesus (See 1 Jn 1:7-9). Therefore, taking a stand to affirm confidently the word of God is not sectarianism (Ti 3:8). One’s bold stand to preach truth in opposition to error does not label him as one with a divisive spirit.

This point must be understood in the
context of what often historically happens in the general movement of religious behavior among denominational groups in their relationships with one another. Under the umbrella of “Christendom”, religious groups will in doctrine and fellowship move a great distance from one another. Differing religious groups will refuse to talk to one another. They will feverishly debate one another, attack one another, and be very competitive with one another in growing their own camps. This struggle may continue for three to five decades. However, the pendulum swings and there is a great desire to “work together”. Several sociological factors ignite this desire. It often takes place after a great social struggle within a nation, sometimes a quest for freedom from dictatorial domination, or a war with neighboring countries. Whatever the sociological trigger, the religious environment is changed from conflict to conformity.

The nature of the movement to conformity has many interesting characteristics. When religious groups seek to conform by working together, this does not mean that they are uniting upon the authority of God’s word. It simply means that they agree to put up with one another in their doctrinal and traditional differences. As a result, union is established, not unity. In union, denominational groups agree to coexist with one another in a spirit of union. Great meetings are often conducted. Dialog is carried out. However, after the meetings the adherents of each group go back to their respective church houses to carry on as denominated groups. This is a historical phenomenon in Christendom that has periodically occurred throughout history. In the sociological history of different nations, this phenomenon will occur. The World Council of Churches was the product of such a swing of the pendulum.

But this swing of the pendulum to union fails to produce unity that is based on the word of God. In union, individual denominations continue to maintain their individual identities. No favorite traditions are forsaken. No twisted scriptures are untangled. Worshipers continue to meet with their particular group in order to maintain their identity with their chosen sectarian names. No restoration to New Testament Christianity is made. Such movements in history must not be confused with our call for a total eradication of sectarian denominationalism and the establishment of the church upon the foundation of God’s word. One is not sectarian in spirit if he takes a strong stand against union efforts by calling for unity that is based on the authority of the Scriptures.

We must also recognize that ecumenical movements eventually move back to that which existed before the union efforts. Schisms develop among member groups of the union movement and everyone is back to where they
started. They are back into institutional religious groups that have little or no contact with one another.

I would challenge us to think of this scenario on the basis of individuals instead of groups. There will always be those debatable issues between us. We will disagree, and often view some of the issues as truth over which fellowship is to be established. An entire group may accept a particular debatable issue as a matter of fellowship. Nevertheless, we cannot write off an individual because of the beliefs and practices of the group to which he or she belongs, and thus refuse to work with that individual because the group to which he or she belongs holds to or has enshrined a debatable issue. Debatable issues are debatable because there is no clear revelation on the issue in the Bible.

The debatable issue may become enshrined, and thus a denomination is formed around that unique issue. Nevertheless, we must not assume that every attendee at the unique assembly agrees with the enshrined issue. It is for this reason that our fellowship with one another as individuals must be considered on an individual basis as opposed to a congregational basis. There were some in the church of Pergamos who held the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Rv 2:14,15). However, notice what Jesus said to the entire church. “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth” (Rv 2:16). Jesus would deal individually with those who held to the erroneous doctrines. His fight was against them, not the entire church in Pergamos.

We might argue that we can never agree on all debatable issues. In the present theological environment of Christendom this is true, for we all have our favorite enshrined issues, and thus often determine fellowship on the basis of what we have enshrined. Too many debatable issues are embedded in tradition and will not be relinquished for the sake of unity. However, we are still reminded of the church of the first century. There were certainly debatable issues that were entering the fellowship of Christians, particularly through the medium of the Jewish culture. However, I would remind us that the real struggles in the first century church were not over the frivolous issues over which we often have too much scuffle. The “issues” they considered false doctrine were such things as the denial of the resurrection, the authority of a Christ-sent apostle, condoning of immoral behavior, idols and the legalistic binding of circumcision. These were not debatable issues. They were teachings and behavior that attacked the foundation of Christianity.

False teachers in the first century church were those who either denied or distorted these fundamental truths. To compare those struggles over fundamentals with the issues about which we so divide ourselves today is certainly a manifestation of our inability to distinguish between what is a frivolous issue
and a fundamental truth. To use passages of the New Testament that were made in the context of debate over a denial or distortion of fundamental truths in the first century context in a context today of such debatable issues as to where one should use one cup in the Lord’s Supper or a certain dress code for assembly, would be using the passages out of their original context. A false teacher in the context of John’s use of the term in his epistles was one who denied the incarnation. How can one use the same term today in reference to another who might disagree with him on whether one should clap hands when singing or stand as a stone?

Foundational fundamentals kept the early Christians together. It will keep Christians together today if we refuse to allow debatable issues to become issues of fellowship. It is our task today to discard unnecessary debate over frivolous issues in order to see the greater picture of unity that is based on essential salvational fundamentals. One of which is the unity of believers. This principle must be lived while we work out in a context of love those issues over which we disagree, and if debatable, may never agree. But at least, we will maintain the unity of the brotherhood. We will be going about seeking first those things about which we agree, before we get to the debatable issues. If we maintain a sectarian behavior with one another until debatable issues are agreed upon, then we will never enjoy our unity, for we will always have debatable issues among us.

C. **One is not sectarian by taking a stand against false teaching.**

False teaching is often the occasion for religious people to denominate into different sects. If one refuses to accept such false teachings, then he is not being denominational. It is not being sectarian and denominational to separate oneself from that which is contrary to the word of God.

Times of apostasy have always faced the church (1 Tm 4:1-3; Ti 1:10,11). For this reason, every shepherd of the flock of God must hold “fast the faithful word as he has been taught, so that he may be able by sound teaching both to exhort and refute those who contradict” (Ti 1:9). **It is not sectarian, therefore, to take a stand for the truth so as to cause division between those who speak the truth and those who speak error. One must not apologize for standing against error.** “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tm 4:2). If one does not take a strong stand against error, then he is aiding in the development of an atmosphere wherein error can have an occasion to produce division among brethren.

This point assumes that there should be some standard by which we can determine false teaching. Though we agree that the Bible is the standard for determining such, this does not solve the problem. Bible-believers have for centuries accused one another of being false teachers promoting false teaching. However, I do have one suggestion. If we see the
Bible condemning something specifically as a false teaching, then we can so condemn the same as such. If we do this, we will be spared of much of the nonsense debates over issues that are not mentioned in the Bible as false teaching.

D. One is not sectarian if he refuses to engage in debates over nonessential issues.

As previously mentioned, Paul specifically instructed both Timothy and Titus not to become involved in contentious meetings over matters of opinion (2 Tm 2:14; Ti 3:9-11). “But avoid foolish controversies ... for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Ti 3:9). There is nothing difficult about understanding this command. We are to avoid foolish controversies that produce division between brethren. The controversies are thus foolish because they produce contention between brethren.

The point must be made in this context that we are first to avoid the controversy. If the one who develops the controversy persists in making a nonessential issue a matter of contention, then he is to be rejected after the first and second admonition (Ti 3:10). Paul’s context of Titus 3 is in dealing with individuals, not whole groups. Nowhere in the New Testament is one encouraged to reject a whole group because of the factious practices of one man. If we did such, then certainly we would be avoiding one group after another simply because there are no perfect church groups in which everyone believes the same thing. Matters of disagreement over debatable issues, therefore, must first be dealt with on an individual basis, not on a group basis.

When one refuses to become entangled in a controversy over a matter of opinion, he is not being sectarian. Under the command of the Holy Spirit, he is withdrawing from discussions over those things wherein we have freedom of opinion or method of work that are directed by biblical principles. Those who would seek to be contentious in such areas are divisive by the very fact that they are seeking to argue someone into accepting their belief or behavior. But such a one is self-condemned because of his attitude of trying to bind where God has not bound (Ti 3:11). He is seeking to promote a forum for discussion that is “unprofitable and worthless”. Such forums are usually a pretense for one who is seeking to exercise control over others by giving his permission to others in the realm of freedom. Such people are to be avoided after the first and second admonition.

Paul’s command that we not engage in “foolish controversies” was for a specific reason. Anytime a discussion or debate is carried out over an issue of opinion or method of work that is within the area of freedom in Christian work, decisions are often made in order that the two
parties have peace. When such decisions are made, both parties are restricted by their decisions. In their restrictions, they have bound themselves. Paul’s argument is that one not engage others in discussions wherein binding decisions are made in areas of opinion.

The problem is also that the “decisions” that are made and agreed upon in order to maintain peace between groups become the creeds and catechisms by which two parties become known. They thus become the foundation upon which two new denominations are born.

Differences of opinion in the realm of freedom should never be an occasion for establishing creeds and catechisms. In other words, if both parties, or at least one party, recognize that the point of disagreement falls in the area of freedom in Christ, no meeting must occur. Each party simply allows the other the freedom to function. But if in ignorance of the fact that the controversy is in the realm of freedom, the two parties have the meeting in order to “work out” an agreement, the decisions that are made constitute the foundation upon schism occurs and the formation of a new denomination is begun.

When Christians make binding decisions for peace in areas where they should have been defending one another’s freedom, the roots of denominationalism are planted. The two parties who have made the binding decisions are moving in opposite directions because they have bound themselves with decisions in the realm of opinion and freedom. The point is that Christians should honor one another by guarding the freedom that we all have in Christ. Honoring the freedom of others means allowing others to work in areas of opinion without being critical or judgmental of their work. It means that each party refuses to restrict one another with judgments. Each party thus remains in fellowship, though they work or behave in different ways. In this way, unity is maintained without the “foolish controversies” that would move both parties away from one another.

Paul told Timothy and Titus not to show up for discussions over issues that are in the area of opinion. **If one party presses the issue and contends for the meeting in order to make decisions, or he feels that others must have his permission for doing what they have freedom to do, then he is sectarian in spirit and is seeking to lord over others by pressing his side of the issue.** Paul said that “such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned” (Ti 3:11). He is self-condemned because he is the one who is factious. He is the one who is causing the faction because in his refusal to allow freedom, he is seeking to bind on the church his position concerning the issue. He is seeking to make his beliefs a point of fellowship, and thus is self-con-
demned in his behavior because he is binding where God has not bound.

It is not sectarian, therefore, to refuse to allow someone to bind where God has not bound. In fact, the opposite is true. If we allow someone to bind a decision on us that is in the area of freedom in Christ, then we have allowed that person to practice his sectarian spirit and to lord over others in the area of freedom. By binding on a group that which God never intended should be bound, he separates the bound group from those who are free in Christ. This point is in the context of Paul’s argument to the Galatians. If they allowed the judaizing teachers to bind circumcision on them, then they allowed the judaizers the opportunity to practice their sectarian spirit (Gl 4:17).

However, if the Galatians refused to allow circumcision to be bound, they were not being sectarian. They were simply exercising their right to be free in Christ (Gl 5:1). But on the other hand, if the judaizing teachers withdrew from them because they exercised their right not to be circumcised, then it was the judaizing teachers who were being sectarian and denominational, not those who refuse to be bound.

Romans 16:17,18 is often twisted and used out of context to accuse someone of “dividing the church” over the introduction of something that is actually in the area of opinion. In the context of the book of Romans, those who were adding to the word of God were not adding what they believed to be a matter of opinion. Judaizing teachers were doctrinally and legally binding circumcision and other aspects of the Old Testament law where God had not bound. They were bringing brethren into the bondage of justification through perfect keeping of law, one law being that of circumcision. By promoting their belief that perfect law-keeping produced salvation, they were denying the grace of God. And in doing such, they were causing division with those who sought to be justified freely by faith and grace.

As the Magna Carta of the Christian faith, Paul wrote Galatians as a stern rebuke against those who would develop a heretical gospel by the enforcement of their religious practices and opinions on believers (Gl 1:6-9). Some in the Galatian churches were recruiting believers (Gl 4:17) in order to convince the recruits to practice circumcision as a necessary fundamental for salvation (At 15:1). In this environment of conflict, if a Gentile Christian practiced circumcision, it was a signal that he had succumbed to the legal system of the judaizing teachers. Being circumcised for such a reason brought him into the same condemnation (Gl 5:3,4). A Jewish Christian could be circumcised as a matter of custom and opinion, but not as an indication that he was conforming to a legal system of meritorious salvation. In Paul’s condemnation of justification by meritorious law-keeping, which was manifested through the binding of circumcision, he wrote to
the faithful, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gl 5:1).

It was not sectarian for the Gentile Christians to refuse to be circumcised. It was and is not sectarian, therefore, to stand for one’s freedom in Christ in order not to allow someone to bind on us those things that are in the area of freedom. It is not sectarian to refuse to meet with those who seek compromising decisions, for Paul commanded that we avoid meetings with those who seek to argue their case to bind where God has not bound. He commanded that we refuse to make decisions where agreement on decisions binds denominational behavior on the backs of the free. When it came to the legalistic circumcision issue of the Galatians, Paul was very specific in his desires. “I could wish that those who are troubling you would cut themselves off from you” (Gl 5:12). Sometimes division is necessary (See 1 Co 11:19). In this case, Paul desired that the legalistic judaizing teachers denominate themselves from the free.

E. One is not sectarian when taking a stand against the practice of denominating the church of God.

By taking a firm stand against sectarianism, and the denominationalism that it causes, one is not being sectarian in behavior. Christians must be intolerant of teachings that compromise the very foundation upon which their faith is built. If the foundation of fundamentals upon which our faith is based is destroyed, then we cease to exist as the church of Christ. It is for this reason that Christians must stand firm against the wiles of the devil that seek to denominate the church with the doctrine of demons (See Ep 6:10-18. More on this later.).

Being nondenominational is not enough. In other words, accepting everyone as they are does not solve the problem of sectarian denominationalism. Christians must call for a return to unity that is based on the authority of God’s word. Simply assuming that we are acceptable to God with any belief and behavior we so choose is not what God desires. It is not sectarian, therefore, to refuse to accept everyone regardless of what they believe or teach. If there is no concrete truth to which all of us can conform, then we are left adrift in a world of confused religions with every man theologically for himself. I am certain that God is not playing religious games with His creation. Knowing the truth that sets us free means that there is a truth we can know that sets us free. It means that concrete truth can be known. And it assumes that all those who love the truth can know
the truth, and thus be set free together. If they are not together, then surely we must question whether they know that truth which sets them free. Or at least we must assume that we have added to that essential truth, and thus disfellowshipped ourselves from one another and brought ourselves into bondage.

In the midst of so much false teaching that is prevalent throughout the world, we often become defensive about standing for truth as opposed to tradition. If we are accused of being a sect because we denominate ourselves from those who persist in teaching erroneous doctrines or binding religious traditions, then we are not the cause of the separation. We have been separated for taking a stand for truth. It is not our desire to be separated from the larger body of those seeking to be disciples of Jesus. However, if we are accused of being sectarian because we will not participate in the erroneous beliefs and behavior of man-made religions, though they would call themselves after Christ, then we must remain separate, though not sectarian in spirit. We must keep in mind who builds the fence that causes the separation. Men build fences. God seeks to tear them down by the truth of His word.

Nevertheless, in the quest to tear down divisive doctrines of men, the Christian must not develop a spirit that drives him away from those with whom he can agree on fundamentals. A sectarian spirit is destructive because it continues to push one into his own religious world. He develops an attitude of separateness, and thus isolates himself from those with whom he must be studying the word of God. In his isolation, he becomes religiously introverted, and thus a true sect after the definition of such.

Chapter 5

Denominationalism

The spirit of sectarianism is the cause of people isolating themselves into different religious groups or sects commonly referred to as denominationalism. A sectarian spirit and denominationalism are inseparable since the attitude leads to the practice. We naturally progress from one to the other since attitudes manifest themselves in practice. If one chooses to maintain an exclusive attitude with others on the basis of disagreement on matters of opinion and debatable issues, then he will often separate himself from the one with whom he disagrees.

In view of the historical fact that restoration or reformation movements seem to always circle around and become that from which restoration or reformation was first initiated, it is paramount that we continue to review our beliefs and behavior in reference to God’s word. If we do not, we may wake up one day and realize that we have divided the church of God after our unique peculiarities.

Being undenominational is probably an idealistic dream in the midst of ourselves who are often over zealous about our different heritages, traditions and fa-
vorite interpretations. At least in a world that has accepted the fact of a denominated Christendom, the church, though claiming undenominationality, will always be viewed as just another denomination. It is for this reason that Christians must be individually judged as such, and not collectively according to the group to which they have assigned themselves. It is easy to stereotype the individual through a sweeping judgment of the collective group. But when we consider individual Christians in their accountability before God, then we are tempted less to consign individuals to the beliefs of the group. The Bible still says that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that every one may receive the things done in the body ...” (2 Co 5:10). We will not be judged according to the group with which we assembled, but individually according to our own behavior.

Our problem both individually and collectively is that we have a natural tendency to religiously isolate ourselves from one another according to our heritages and traditions. Because of this tendency, we must continually examine ourselves as individual Christians. If we discover that we have behaved after a sectarian manner, then it is time for some serious reevaluation of our attitudes, beliefs, behavior and hermeneutic principles that we have used to justify our isolationist behavior.

When was the last time you heard a lesson on the practice of sectarianism or denominationalism? The fact that discussions on these subjects are infrequent among some is evidence that our guard is down and that we may have relinquished ourselves to being just another denomination. In the present religious environment, any church that does not discuss or consider whether it is a denomination leaves itself open to becoming such. Discussing the fact that we could be denominational keeps us aware of the danger. Any group that meets under the banner of a specific name and a specific leader in order to remain separate from others who are under different banners, is often sectarian and denominational.

Keep in mind that becoming a denomination is not painful. Apostasy is never noticed unless we recognize in ourselves a sectarian spirit that is moving us into having a distant fellowship with others. Depending on how far gone any particular group or individual is in isolation from others will determine the amount of pain that is necessary to get one back to where God intended he or she be in fellowship with others. For this reason, the level of pain in the process of restorative paradigm shifts is an indication of how denominational a particular church has become.

Being undenominational is an abstract concept. And by being abstract, it is often difficult to grasp in a religious...
world that is historically founded on the practice and acceptance of legalistically defined religious groups. Though somewhat difficult to understand, the causes of the effect are not difficult to determine. Denominationalism is an effort of Satan to lead groups into religious oblivion. It is Satan’s work to make men feel comfortable in religions that they have created after their own desires and traditions. It is thus an effect that works against the prayer of Jesus for unity among us (Jn 17:20,21). It is imperative, therefore, that we understand the nature of denominationalism and what it takes to solve this destructive practice that exists among those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

In order to accomplish the task of being undenominational in a divided religious world, it is necessary to determine if we personally behave contrary to Jesus’ spirit for unity. The preceding chapter laid the foundation for determining if we have become sectarian in our spirit. In the following discussion, we must determine if our sectarian spirit has brought forth its fruit in our lives by the separating of ourselves from one another.

A denomination is identified by one or more of the following points. Not every group would be practicing every point. But only one practiced point is enough to define a particular group as unique, and thus divided from others who would behave after a different manner. As you study through these points, one thing will be quite revealing in our lives. Almost all of us are individually denominational in some way. If we do not exclude others because of doctrine, we are exclusive in relation to heritages, traditions, cultures and a host of other things that naturally move us into unique groups.

Except for denominational doctrines that deny fundamental salvational truths, our challenge is not to form a collective group of those who agree on matters of opinion or heritages, and thus isolate ourselves as a group from others who may disagree with us on our particular point of agreement. As long as we keep challenging one another not to carry out in our behavior tendencies to isolate from others, then we can at least slow the process of forming full blown denominational groups that have nothing to do with one another. We must continually remind ourselves not to take ourselves “out of the world,” as Paul suggested that some would (1 Co 5:10), but to remain in communicative contact with all men in order that we have opportunity to preach the truth of the gospel.

A. Some denominations can be identified by a sectarian-spirited fellowship.

If one’s allegiance to a particular group is the sole motivation for maintaining the identity of the group within a community, then loyalty to the group tends to separate it and its adherents from others who maintain allegiance to other groups. When allegiance to a group or
specific leader, rather than Christ alone, is the foundation upon which one is identified as a member of a particular church, then a denomination is established in the community. Allegiance to either individual personalities or groups of personalities is the source for the development of a sectarian spirit, and subsequently a denomination of those who maintain their allegiance primarily to a unique fellowship.

A denomination emphasizes the social structure of the group above allegiance to Christ and biblical teachings. As a social structure, emphasis is usually on a specific personality of the group rather than Christ as the only head and foundation upon which the church is built. It is not wrong to be loyal to one’s familiar brothers and sisters in Christ. After all, we must be committed to one another as a brotherhood of believers (1 Pt 2:17). However, if this allegiance is to the exclusion of others who happen to meet at a different location, then an exclusive spirit gives birth to a denominational church. Allegiance to Christ alone is what brings members of the church into fellowship with one another. It is not our allegiance to one another that brings us into fellowship with Christ. As Christians we must be committed to one another. However, we must be committed to one another because we are first committed to Christ.

B. Some denominations can be identified when the members adhere to a unique creed, catechism or methodology.

A creed usually comes into a fellowship in the written form of a church discipline, church manual, confession of faith or catechism. Sometimes it is a simple letter that expresses the beliefs of the particular church that requires members to sign, or at least give allegiance to the doctrines defined in the letter. Such documents are the evidence of a group of people who are seeking to maintain the uniqueness of their particular group by maintaining the uniqueness of their beliefs. The spirit of exclusion of the group is manifested when the leaders ask members to sign the documents in order to remain a member of their group. If one does not adhere to the doctrines of the documents, or unique interpretations of Scripture or methods, then a denomination is formed around the statement of faith.

Allegiance to a particular group is also manifested when the members are required to give allegiance to a particular church program or the vision of a dominant leader. The written disciplines, manuals, confessions and catechisms are often declarations of official interpretations of the Scriptures or statements of the traditions and programs to which adherence must be maintained in order for one to be identified with a particular group. These documents become the evidence of an institutional denomination.
standard by which each particular group is identified. Conformity to these documents of faith and methodology must be maintained by all groups of a fellowship of churches in order that each group secure their link with the greater brotherhood of those who have accepted the guidelines of the documents.

A creed or statement of faith may be the pronouncements of a particular individual or the group as a whole. If allegiance to these pronouncements is necessary in order to maintain fellowship with a particular individual or fellowship that makes the pronouncements, then a network of denominations is formed. The documents become the means by which others are shunned, and thus considered to be out of fellowship with all those who have given their allegiance to the statements of the written documents and the creeds of faith and methodologies that are set forth as the standard of fellowship.

There is also the matter of “unwritten creeds.” These are the unique beliefs, behavior, and even vocabulary identification marks that are commonly used by a particular group or fellowship of groups. Unwritten creeds are often more binding or intimidating than written creeds. Traditional interpretations, behavioral patterns, or methods of work may become the established norm for a particular denomination. When loyalty to these accepted interpretations, behavioral patterns, and methods of work are necessary in order to verify one’s allegiance to a particular group, or brotherhood of groups, then each particular group and its leaders are behaving denominationally.

What is often characteristic with the membership of this system of denominationalism is that the average member is usually unaware of the fact that the unwritten creeds have separated their group from others. In such cases, the membership usually depends on the pastor, preacher or pope for official statements of belief or behavior for the particular denomination. Allegiance to the creed, therefore, is via the official pronouncements of the accepted authority who is usually the preacher.

In order for each denomination within a fellowship to guarantee allegiance to the written or unwritten interpretations, heritages and traditions of the brotherhood, the preachers of each group are usually sent to accepted schools for preacher training and graduated with diplomas that authorize them to maintain the unique practices of the unique brotherhood.

What is sometimes the case in such denominational fellowships is that the graduates from different schools within the fellowship often label one another either “liberal” or “conservative”, depending on the general theological position of the educational institution from which each preacher graduates. The result of this labeling is a manifestation of denomina-
nationalism from within a fellowship of churches. It is denominationalism that is promoted and sustained by the professional clergy of the fellowship of churches.

What often perpetuates this cause of denominationalism is a membership that has ceased studying the Bible. The members have ceased being Bible students either because they have become legalistic in their doctrinal beliefs, and thus feel no more need for study, or they have been intimidated into conformity to the accepted patterns of their unique group by a dominant leader or group of leaders. Whatever the case may be for the problem, repentance and restoration can occur only when the general membership as individuals determine to absorb themselves in the word of God. Leaders must turn people’s minds to the Bible for authority, and not themselves. Only when this is done will denominations as this come out of their separation from one another and be reunited with the universal church of God.

You will say that this is idealistic. It probably is. Groups usually do not reform as a whole. They intimidate the individual to conform to the accepted standards of the whole. However, individuals do reform, and through individuals groups can be reformed. Our misdirection in the matter is in trying to reform the individual by reforming the group. We forget that the group is composed of individuals. It is not our task to view groups as a whole. It is our challenge to reform individuals to exalt the word of God in their personal lives. In doing this, the group as a whole will be affected, but usually not reformed as a whole. This is what Jesus sought to do with the church of Laodicea. Jesus stood at the door of the church and knocked (Rv 3:20). “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him and will sup with him, and he with Me” (Rv 3:20).

Revival is always personal. Jesus seeks personal reform and revival in our lives as individuals. Therefore, when we talk of restoration, we must think individually. Through the network (fellowship) of revived and reformed individuals, groups change. In every denominated group, therefore, there are individuals as there were in the church of Sardis, to whom Jesus said, “Nevertheless, you have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments. And they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (Rv 3:4).

This brings us back to the problem of written or unwritten creedal denominationalism. Individual members must take a serious look at themselves. I must take a personal stand to study the word of God. I must look at my personal relationship with Jesus. I must learn to fear God again over my fear of the brethren. Any individual Christian who fears or is intimidated by the brotherhood more than his or her fear of God, is on his or her way to apostasy. We, individually, need a restoration of the fear of God in our hearts in order to generate a restorative paradigm shift.
C. Some denominations can be identified when the members believe that they have a copyright on all truth.

In order to prevent some misunderstanding on this point, I would clarify the fact that one can know all truth in the Bible that is necessary in order to be saved. We would certainly not believe that God would cloud with ambiguity those things that are necessary to be saved. Neither would we believe that essential teachings require the deductive reasoning of our biblical scholars in order to understand. Therefore, we must be confident that we can open the Bible and read those things that are necessary to believe and obey in order to be saved. Understanding these salvational truths clearly is what gives the Christian a mission to the misguided.

Nevertheless, we live in a world of great religious confusion, especially in reference to teachings concerning both salvational essentials and truth for Christian edification. Many realize that this confusion has led to a tremendous amount of division within Christendom. And thus, there is a desire among many to rid themselves of confusing doctrines in order to restore the simplicity of those teachings upon which all of us can be united.

The minimization of doctrine in the postmodern church is so strong that such is usually absent from conversation and fellowship. Postmodern members will often flee fellowships that debate doctrinal issues. Their primary focus is on relationships with others and personal involvement. Doctrine in these fellowships is often sacrificed for the sake of relationships (fellowship). The negative about such is that it takes more than relationships to bond believers. We may commonly work together, but there must also be some common belief that acts as the cement to keep us together in times when our working relationship is strained over disagreements. This is what happened in the case of Paul and Barnabas. Though they strongly disagree on a point of work and relationships, they carried out their doctrinal mandate to preach the gospel to the lost (See At 15:36-41).

But there is another side to this point. It is based on how we understand the purpose of doctrinal teaching. If we understand that the purpose of doctrine is to build the behavioral Christian life, then debates over doctrine differences are somewhat different. When Paul instructed Timothy, “These things command and teach,” I believe his focus was on teaching “these things” for the purpose of helping people to better their lives (1 Tm 4:11). At least this seems to be the context of the statement, for in the following verse Paul wrote, “But you be an example to the believers ...” (1 Tm 4:12). If we debate how we need to change our behavior in order to comply with “doctrine,” then we are on the right page with Paul.

Biblical teaching in reference to truth is important. This is particularly true in
reference to salvational teachings. Though we understand those things that are essential for salvation, we must keep in mind that the spirit of restoration is generated in the hearts and minds of those who are continually absorbed in the word of God in order to learn more “doctrine” in order to bring their lives into conformity to Jesus. There can be no restoration among the biblically ignorant for they create behavioral religiosity after their own desires.

However, those who believe that they have completed the restoration of New Testament Christianity, and thus have a corner on all “doctrine” truth, often become arrogant in their assumptions. Their arrogance reveals their belief that they have fully restored the church. They subsequently lay aside study of the Scriptures and assume that there is no more truth to be discovered. Believing that they have arrived at “all understanding” lends them to being exclusive of those who are not where they are in knowledge of the Bible. The footnotes of their literature comes from within their own brotherhood, or from the forefathers of their heritage. Their exclusiveness is thus perpetuated as they place more confidence in the fathers of their heritage than the authority of the word of God. They become overconfident in thinking that their brotherhood is the sole source of all truth in reference to salvational essentials, as well as all things they assume a Christian must believe. They would associate themselves with those they agree on salvational fundamentals, but dissociate themselves from those they disagree on a minor point of belief. They thus become guardians of “the truth” in believing that all other groups must now conform to the authority of their pattern of doctrine and behavior.

Their denominationality is betrayed by their assumption that knowledge of truth does not lie outside the realm of their fellowship or the library of their fathers. They separate themselves from others, therefore, because they have convinced themselves that there is no more truth to learn outside their fellowship and no one outside their fellowship can teach any truth.

This point does not assume that definite truth cannot be known. We can know the truth, especially those things that are necessary for salvation. But knowing the truth is no guarantee that one cannot be carried away by every wind of false doctrine. There is fundamental truth that distinguishes the true believer from the error of denominational beliefs. One can know this truth, which truth will set one free. But we must guard ourselves from adding our opinions to the truth, and thus be carried away into religious obscurity.

The problem is that some have simply accepted denominationalism by asserting that God accepts different “flavors” of Christianity. Some assume, therefore, that doctrinal issues are not important. Some even assert that we cannot know the truth that brings us together into one church. In their unwillingness to confront their sectarian attitudes that
hinder one from coming to a knowledge of the truth, they have become content with a divided Christendom they feel is acceptable to God. But God did not reveal His will in a way that would promote any form of denominationalism among believers.

We must not misunderstand this point. When we call for all religious groups to leave those things that separate us from one another, and come to the Bible as our only authority in order to be undenominational, we are not being arrogant about the truth. **Seeking to establish one’s belief and behavior on the word of God alone is not being denominational. It is essential in order to maintain our identity as Christians.** Affirming that belief and behavior be based on the word of God is not arrogance, but a restorational call for allegiance to the word of God. Commitment to the truth of God’s word will invariably exclude those who do not have a love of the truth (See 2 Th 2:10-12). It also means that restoring the New Testament church by relying on the word of God alone, not the pronouncements of either creeds or traditions, will lead to one’s denominating himself from error. We must be willing to sacrifice all creeds and traditions that would hinder us from coming to a knowledge of any truth and restoring the unity of the faith among those who have committed their lives to Jesus.

**D. Some denominations can be identified when their members’ adhere to unique teachings that are either false or contradict Bible teaching.**

Determining if a particular religious group is denominational according to a false teaching may involve some controversy as to the biblical soundness of what the group has always believed and taught. The problem comes when a particular group of people have canonized their teachings, believing that they are right on all points of teaching, and thus biblically correct as a church.

Most people realize that one cannot know all that the Bible teaches. However, there are fundamental truths on which the church must stand that cannot be twisted or denied. A group is not denominational when standing on the foundation of truths that are salvational. (More on this in chapter 13.)

The difficulty some have in establishing fundamental teaching is that religious groups are too eager to maintain traditional interpretations, religious ceremonies, heritages, or traditional methods of behavior that are necessary to identify them as a unique group.

But we must keep in mind that God did not reveal His word to us in a manner that would cause confusion among believers. Neither did He make it difficult for those who come to Him with an honest heart to remain united as the church.
The problem comes when we enforce on ourselves more than the Scriptures require for biblical soundness or subtract from the Scriptures what is necessary for salvation.

The denial of fundamental teaching or the enforcement of matters of opinion makes a church denominational. Combine this with the force of heritage and any unique religious group is encased as a separate fellowship. When a group establishes for itself a unique teaching that has no biblical foundation, its heritage will perpetuate its denominationality. When a group establishes teaching that is contradictory to the word of God, it becomes denominational. It is for this reason that churches must continually search the Scriptures in order to test their own beliefs. Paul certainly had this in mind when he wrote, “Examine yourselfs as to whether you are in the faith. Test your own selves” (2 Co 13:5).

Denominated churches must take a serious look at this matter. If the biblical teaching that the Bible must be our final authority in religious matters is not believed and practiced, then any religious group is in the process of apostasy. It is in a process of moving away from Jesus and His word, because their heritage as a unique group will have priority over truth. Such groups have placed themselves at the mercy of their preachers or leaders who assert the direction in which the group must go. Or, they have placed themselves at the mercy of their forefathers and heritage. I have found that many profess to be Bible based, but in reality they are cluttered with traditional baggage that makes them denominational in their relationship with other groups who are doing the same or have a different heritage. If the leaders of these groups are not bound by the direction of the Bible, then they will continue to lead the group into doctrinal and religious oblivion. Such groups have doomed themselves to be humanistic religions wherein the authority for the groups is based on the feelings and thoughts of man as opposed to the actual authority of God’s word.

In view of what I have just said, I would add that the unity of believers is based on the fact that Christ is the catalyst that produces unity. “For by one Spirit we were all immersed into one body...” (1 Co 12:13). “For as many of you as were immersed into Christ have put on Christ” (Gl 3:27). “Or do you not know that as many of us as were immersed into Christ Jesus were immersed into His death?” (Rm 6:3). It is into Christ that repentant disciples have been immersed. All who have been so immersed are united upon the foundation that they have put on Christ. Unity among believers, therefore, is based on their common obedience to the gospel. Our unity is based on our common baptism into the death of Jesus, not in whether we have a common religious heritage or tradition. Unless we can look past out heritages and traditions, we will never be able to look directly and objec-
tively at the New Testament in order to be the one body into which we were immersed.

After immersion into Christ, doctrinal beliefs play a strategic role in maintaining the unity that we enjoy in Christ. Those who deny that Jesus has come in the flesh, are not to be fellowshipped (2 Jn 9,10). Those who live immoral lives are to be put away from us (1 Co 5:4-10). The same holds true of any who would deny fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith (Ep 4:4-6).

One may have been immersed for the correct reasons, but his continued fellowship with those with whom he was first united in immersion can be severed if he ceases to believe the fundamental truths that brought him into Christ and to live a moral life directed by Christ. This was Paul’s argument to the Corinthians by his use of the word “if” in reference to the gospel and his revelation of the bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. “... by which [gospel] you are saved, if you hold fast to that word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain” (1 Co 15:2). If the Corinthians ceased believing the medium through which the gospel event was communicated to them (Paul’s word of preaching), they would cease possessing their salvation (See Hb 10:39; 2 Pt 2:20-22). Therefore, what one doctrinally believes after he is united with Christ and His body by immersion is important in order to maintain fellowship with Christ and His body (See 2 Jn 9,10).

E. Some denominations can be identified by use of a distinctive name that identifies their heritage and fellowship.

One interesting characteristic of religion is the significance that people place on names. Names of churches are so important to some that they fear they will lose their religious identity if they are not tagged by a certain name. Therefore, when discussing this subject in the context of denominational behavior, dealing with the names of churches is very controversial. Nevertheless, because any name inherently signals uniqueness or individuality, the subject must be discussed, especially in reference to how names of churches have a tendency to divide differently named churches from one another.

When it comes to determining names for particular religious groups, some people have exercised great imagination. Names of churches have usually come from one of two sources. First, there are those names that have no biblical origin. They have simply expressed the ingenuity of creative minds and were coined by followers in order to fancy a particular doctrine, heritage or method of work. I once heard of “The Ark Church.” Of course, the word “ark” is in the Bible, since Noah and his family boarded such in order to escape the flood. But I question whether this would be a good name for a church. But such is the nature of our obsession with names. A Sunday afternoon drive around any community will reveal that
men have been very inventive with names in order to identify their particular party of believers.

The second source from which we have derived names are descriptive phrases that are found in the New Testament in reference to Christians. “Church of God,” “Church of Christ” “Family of God” and “Church of the Firstborn” are only a few examples. These phrases are in the New Testament, but were never originally meant by the Holy Spirit to be official names of the church that would denominate believers from one another. One can use a “name” which has New Testament origin, but still use that name denominationally if it is used in a way that divides one group of believers from another. We must always keep in mind that denominationalism did not prevail in the first century, and thus the references that were made to Christians were never used with denominational connotations as they are used today.

The use of a New Testament name for a church does not make a church biblical. In fact, if a biblical “name” is used in a denominational manner, then the name itself is one factor that manifests a sectarian spirit within a fellowship. And as long as the particular religious group persists in maintaining its coined name, the members will maintain their party loyalty in reference to the name, and subsequently exclude themselves from other groups simply because of the name.

Within the use of any particular name is embedded a spirit of seclusion and exclusion. Sometimes the names express the attitude of adherents toward others who are not of their particular group. Names as the “Full Gospel Church,” “First Baptist Church” and “United Church of Christ” indicate that everyone else is substandard, “half-full,” “second” or “not united.” Names as “Lutheran” and “Wesleyan” promote denominationality over personalities. “Presbyterian,” “Congregational” and “Methodist” promote allegiance to particular doctrines or institutional structure. Regardless of the name that is used, therefore, denominationalism occurs between those who call themselves after the specific name they use to identify themselves from others. The problem is that inherent within the unique use of any name, whether biblical or not, there is a connotation of denominationalism.

Regardless of the name of a particular group, the specific name itself often becomes an obstacle to unity. Church names are not adopted for the purpose of determining a separation between the church and the world of unbelievers. They are adopted in order to separate one religious group from another within the world of Christendom. Not only do names separate us from one another, they often take people’s focus off Jesus and place it on loyalty to the particular “named” religious group of which one is a member. **Loyalty is to the particular party to which a name is given, not primarily to the Name after which we all must be called. In our overemphasis on a particular**
name, therefore, we inherently exclude ourselves from one another.

In the first century there was no need for a specific name of the church to distinguish the church from other groups who also claimed Jesus. Those who believed in Jesus were identified for what and who they were as the disciples of Jesus. As a group, they were first disciples of Christ who were of “the Way.” They later became known as Christians (At 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pt 4:16). There were no denominating names of the church as a whole in the first century since there were no fully organized denominations within the universal church who desired to separate themselves as a fellowship from the church as a whole. Is it possible today to live without a unique name of the church in order to be undenominational? Can we be Christians only in order to restore the unity of the faith in the bond of peace (Cl 3:14)? Is it possible to enjoy the unity of the Spirit that is based on agreement on fundamental teaching rather than allegiance to a particular party and its name?

One might argue that it is necessary to have a name lest the church lose its identity in a Christendom that is corrupted with so many denominations that teach erroneous doctrines. There is some validity to this argument. We must consider the fact that it would be difficult to identify the church in a community if the global church did not have a specific name. But in selecting a specific name, we must understand that the early church did not do this. There was no one specific name used by the first century church. Because no unique name of the church is found in the New Testament for the assembly of believers, we must confess that we are stepping outside the undenominational behavior of the early church when we adopt a unique name for ourselves. We are denominating ourselves from others who do not fall under our coined name. Thus to carry a unique name, and at the same time profess undenominationality, is somewhat inconsistent. We are theological ostriches who are hiding from the reality of being denominational.

In our efforts to initiate a restorational paradigm shift, the first action to take in order to be undenominational is to realize that unique names denominate ourselves from one another. In order to bring down the house of sectarianism in the midst of a denominated Christendom, therefore, the divisive names of churches must be relinquished for the sake of restoring New Testament Christianity. Can we not be Christians only and at the same time not arrogantly assume that we are the only Christians?

While confessing to the inconsistency of the use of names, some may argue that we need a particular name unto which we can call those who seek to be theoretically undenominational. There is some truth in doing this because the religious confusion that exists today did not exist in the early church. But in order to restore New Testament Christianity we must simply call ourselves after Christ.
We must be the universal assembly of those who have given allegiance to Christ. Christians, therefore, are the assembly (church) of Christ. They are the church of Christ simply because all Christians belong to Christ. Can all Christians simply be known for being a church (assembly) of believers who belong to Christ?

If we are to bring unity among those who agree on the fundamentals of the faith, at least unbiblical denominational names must go. Is it too difficult to ask for this in order to restore New Testament unity among those who seek to be Christians only? In all the argument that we might impose on ourselves concerning the use of a unique name, we must remember that the Christians of the first century never labelled themselves with a unique name. They had no desire to exclude or exclude themselves from one another. They were first identified as the disciples of Christ Jesus. After the church had been in existence for at least ten years, the disciples were called “Christians” (At 11:26). And even later, they were willing to suffer in this name only (1 Pt 4:16). Are we willing to be Christians only? I suppose if we were honest with ourselves, we would admit that the names by which we choose to identify ourselves are chosen for the purpose of maintaining some heritage or denominating ourselves from others.

One Suffers in the Name “Christian”, Not in the Name Of the Church.

It may be that we are afraid of the confusion that would possibly prevail if in a utopian dream if every denominational name were vanquished from Protestantism. And assuredly, there would certainly be some confusion. In order to sort out such confusion all of us would be driven to the word of God in order to determine what is truth and what is error. We would be driven to dialogue with one another concerning what each believed. We would not pigeonhole one another according to the belief baggage that comes with a particular name. Would this be so bad? If our identity as Christian, and our fellowship with others who claimed the same, depended on quoting a scripture to confirm our beliefs, would that not encourage searching of the Scriptures daily “to see whether these things were so” (At 17:11)? Am I being too idealistic?

F. Some denominations can be identified by their emphasis on heritage and tradition over the authority of God’s word.

The progression into digression from God about which Jesus spoke in Mark 7:1-9 is both clear and frightening. Since we are traditional beings and seek to go our own way, we progress from teaching our traditions to neglecting the word of God, and then to rejecting the word. We go from religious tradition to religious commandment, form a sectarian spirit and then go to a full blown denomination. After all, denominational groups did not wake up one day and decide to create a religion after their own desires. The
process was slow and without pain. But the end result is the same with every group who follow the road of traditional religiosity. Many religious groups have digressed to the point of rejecting fundamental biblical truths in order to maintain the uniqueness of the group in the midst of a host of other groups who traveled down the same road.

It is human nature to behave after a traditional manner. Since this is true, then we would assume that our traditional behavior would also become a part of our religious behavior. One of the primary pillars upon which denominationalism is built is traditionalism. A danger most people fail to recognize is that when our traditions become the identity of our heritage, they often become more important than the word of God. Paul spoke of this danger in Colossians 2:22,23. “All these concern things that perish with the using, after the commandments and doctrines of men. These things have indeed a show of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and neglect of the body, but not in any value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh.”

If we are “teaching as doctrine the commandments of men” (Mt 15:9), then we have created religion. The commandments of men are identified as those things we bind on ourselves in order to maintain a religious identity. Institutional structures, styles or ceremonies of worship, methods of evangelism, church names, and programs are all occasions for creating the uniqueness of our group if we bind where God has not bound. A self-made religion is constructed after the traditions we impose on ourselves as doctrine in order to be a distinct religious group. Paul’s command concerning such man-made religious traditions was “Do not touch. Do not taste. Do not handle” (Cl 2:21).

In those areas of belief and work that are required of God’s people, the Bible is often silent on how to accomplish work that must be done, for example, caring for orphans or world evangelistic outreach. We must be careful not to bind as commandment methodologies to carry out God’s work where the Bible is silent. What God intends is that we exercise our freedom when He gives no specifics to carry out that which He commands. We have freedom in methods of ministry to do what is necessary to get the job done according to the guiding principles of the Bible. But when a particular traditional way of doing something becomes the only way it can be done, then we have established the foundation upon which we separate ourselves after our unique way of doing something.

Keep in mind that Jesus did not condemn tradition in and of itself. It was only when traditions became the “commandment of men” that they fall into the category of being vain worship. Man-made orders or ceremonies
of worship are in the area of freedom if they do not conflict with a biblical principle. God allows great freedom when it comes to expressing our worship and carrying out our personal ministries in order to serve Him. However, when “worship styles” or “ceremonies” and “methods of work” become the only way things can be done, and thus bound on the believers, then they have become the commandments of men.

One’s mind is boggled when thinking of all the man-made religious traditions that denominate the behavior of the religious world today. One would wonder how we could ever restore the simplicity of being simple Christians in the midst of so much confusion. I am optimistic. We can. However, if we are not willing to forsake our traditions for the sake of unity, then we will always be denominated from one another. And in the midst of persistent religious division, there will be no hope of restoration among the vast majority in the world of Christendom.

In order to establish undenominational Christianity, we must be willing to take another look at our traditions and our personal heritages. If our traditions are taught in a manner that makes them religious law to which all adherents of our heritage must conform, then they are divisive. And when our traditions are divisive, they must be sacrificed for the sake of unity and the restoration of being Christians only. If we are not willing to do this, then we will claim to be Christians, but Christians with the added label of some unique tradition or heritage that sets us apart from those who do not adhere to our unique heritage or traditions.

I realize that when we challenge our religious heritage, we make people very uncomfortable. Our religious heritages are sacred, for they were usually given to us by our parents. If not our parents, then they were given to us by religious forefathers we deeply respect. Nevertheless, I would challenge you to look through your heritage directly at Jesus. If your heritage blurs your vision of what Jesus envisioned, then is heritage too big a price to pay for a better vision of Jesus? I think it is not. Though I respect my religious heritage, it is not the foundation for my relationship with Jesus. I will follow Paul insofar as He follows Christ (1 Co 11:1). But if Paul has stepped aside from Christ, I will follow Christ and still respect the fallibility of Peter in his fall in Antioch. Heritage can never be the foundation upon which we establish a relationship with God. That right is reserved only for Jesus Christ.

G. Some denominations can be identified by their universal institutional organization that is imposed on individual believers.

Christians have a right to organize themselves in order to accomplish great works. Outside the freedom each Christian has in serving the needs of those in his or her own community, there is no international institutional structure of the church other than the headship of Christ under which we individually work in service to one another and our communi-
ties. However, when an international organization becomes the means by which individuals are led to denominate from one another, then the international organization violates our freedom to serve where we are under the universal headship of Jesus.

Sometimes churches organize themselves after the structure of corporations, and thus demand allegiance to the universal corporate church over direct allegiance to the headship of Christ. These institutions demand that each church or individual associated with the universal church institution must conform either to the traditions, doctrines, or traditional function of the institution. Man-imposed religious institutions like these often enforce worship styles, organizational structures, systems of contribution, structures in appointing preachers, lessons that are preached, and a host of other regulations that are used to bring associated churches into conformity to the dictates of the institution. By establishing their regulations as authoritative in the lives of the members of the institution, those churches that conform to the regulations are denominated as a fellowship of churches from other churches that do not submit to the regulations of the institution.

Institutional churches of the denominational world are usually maintained by either a written code or the training and graduation (ordination) of the preachers who work for the associated churches. Through the official recognition of the preachers and the churches, the ecclesiastical institution maintains control over all associated preachers and churches. It is not the purpose of such institutional organizations to refer individual believers to the authority of the word of God. Emphasis is on the authority of the institution that exerts its direction through the ordained clergy. If the members of associated churches were encouraged to focus primarily on the word of God as their sole authority, then “apostasy” from the institution would be imminent. For this reason, religious groups that promote an authoritative institutional organization of their fellowship of churches usually do not encourage Bible study by local members.

H. Some denominations are identified by their local legislative institutional organization that is imposed on a particular group.

According to the definition of the word “institution,” the church could be identified as an institution universally. An institution in the broadest definition of the word simply indicates that there is a universal Head of the church with headquarters in heaven and members who function under the authority of the word of the Head. However, when a local group of believers seek to
autonomously function as an institution, they naturally denominate from other groups who would do the same. As local institutions, each group would be a denominated group according to the institutional structure under which each would fall or to which the members of each group would give allegiance. For this reason, we would do well to be cautious when using the word “institution” in reference to a particular assembly of Christians. The church is not an institution locally after the common use of the word “institution.”

Highly organized autonomous (independent) churches often fall into the institutional trap. In an effort to corporately organize in order to see that every need is fulfilled and every member involved, such program-oriented churches become fine-tuned corporate organizations. In being such, they make themselves distinct from others. They sometimes become proud of their organizational structure, and thus view other churches as disorganized or “less church” because they are not a fine-turned organization. Autonomous institutional church groups are often undeclared denominations who function separate from other groups.

Many Western churches are institutionally organized. They function with a single person (preacher) as the center of reference for organization and who functions as the single source for the dissemination of knowledge to the group. An “eldership” makes decisions as a corporate board of directors. The members have relinquished decision authority to a corporate elder board, and deacons serve as functionaries to carry out the decisions of the board of elders of the institution. In order to ensure vision and organization, names, responsibilities and direction are structured on a spreadsheet (outline), and thus a “well greased” institution functions after the precision of a successful corporation. Whether we would acknowledge such, this is institutional religion. It is organizationally patterned after the corporate Western business world, and thus satisfies the organizational obsession of the business executives who are members of this church, and often those who compose the “eldership.”

When groups of believers organize after such a manner they are an institutional church. They have institutionalized the behavior of those who are enlisted on the corporate membership roll. Now to say that each particular institutional group does not denominate itself from others who are organized in the same manner, is refusing to see reality. The very organizational structure of the institutional church denominates it from other groups who are organized in a different manner. When two groups are so organized, they behave denominationally in their relationship with one another.

When groups of people institutionally organize as corporate churches, they function as two different corporations. As such, they are unique from one another. They have different control mechanisms. They have different policies, different rules of function, different organized ministries, etc. They are two different groups functioning autono-
mously from one another. Their organizationalism is not wrong. Christians have freedom to organize, and then write their organizational structure on a piece of paper. But we must understand that the paper is the “creed for the year” as members work according to the structure that is inscribed on the organization’s written creed. Again, to do such is not biblically wrong. What is wrong is to deny the fact that two groups of believers who organize and work according to the mandates of two different institutional creeds are not denominational in their relationship with one another. Institutional churches that are corporately organized are inherently denominational.

I must say again that organizing members to work as a group is not biblically wrong. No one is saying this. But we must also recognize that the Scriptures are completely silent in reference to the organizational structure of the modern-day institutional church. Other than individuals making decisions to plan and work together, one would have to read between a great deal of “revelational lines” in order to come up with the organizational structure that is characteristic of many institutional churches that exist today.

In all this quagmire of organizational religion, I see a ray of hope for the future as the postmodern generation repudiates institutional religious structures. In an effort to restore a personal relationship with Jesus and a functional relationship with one another, those of the postmodern generation have discovered that the institutional/corporate church cannot accomplish their desires. They have been betrayed by the structured church, and thus are fleeing in groves to small groups wherein a personal relationship with Jesus is learned as one learns the skills of how to be together with others. A relationship paradigm is shifting from the formal, ceremonial function of the corporate church to the personal, warm environment of small groups meeting in houses that are directed by the laity. This is certainly a refreshing wind of change as individual believers seek a restoration of the “one another” relational Christianity that is portrayed in Scripture.

I. Some denominations can be identified by the members who follow a specific personality.

A denomination is often started by either a dominant or charismatic personality. Or, in the development of a church, a dominant or influential personality may affect many in the congregation to give loyalty to him as the principal leader. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that different individuals would arise who would “draw away the disciples after themselves” (At 20:30). Often, the seed for a new denomination arises out of an existing church that is faithful to a specific leader. This was certainly the problem about which Paul warned the Ephesian elders in the preceding verse. When demigods arise in the church, they form a denominated fellowship.
A similar situation happened in the church of Corinth when members started calling themselves after either Paul, Apollos or Cephas (1 Co 1:12). The problem in Corinth was not Paul, Apollos or Cephas calling away the disciples after themselves. They were innocent victims of a sectarian spirit. What is revealed in this case is the fact that people are as sheep without a shepherd. They seek to follow some personality on earth in conjunction with the true Shepherd in heaven. When a particular individual takes advantage of the desire of the people who seek to follow a noted personality, and that personality becomes a dominant or egotistical person with those who would follow him, then the group makes this individual the center of reference for the existence of the group. By doing this, a sectarian spirit is generated in the fellowship and a denomination is formed. The group denominates itself from those who do not accept the one after whom they call themselves. A preacher may be perfectly innocent in this matter as in the situation in Corinth with Paul, Apollos and Cephas. But the sectarian spirit in the mind of the members will often lead them to denominate themselves from others. The followers will separate themselves from others simply because of their great respect for their leader.

A similar scenario of division over a personality happened with the church to which John wrote the letter of 3 John. Diotrephes had in some way gained authoritarian control over the church. He took advantage of the sheep who sought a leader. He subsequently dominated the sheep to the point of intimidating the members by threatening to excommunicate from the fellowship of the church those who received John and the other evangelists (3 Jn 10). Diotrephes thus separated a group of Christians from other Christians in that he refused to receive perceived competition into the realm of his control (3 Jn 9,10). He led a denominated group of Christians who had obeyed the gospel, but were intimidated into being an exclusive group of believers.

When a group has a leader who refuses to receive those who are going about preaching the gospel, then that group has become a denomination. It is a denomination because it has shut the door to God’s evangelists.

Through slander and malicious words, dominant leaders of these denominated groups behave as Diotrephes did in order to keep out of their party those who would question their dominance over the churches they control. They thus separate their groups from others. Leaders who slander the “Johns” and evangelists in order to keep them away from members they have called after themselves, are seeking to isolate a group of Christians from other groups. They may preach the truth in reference to doctrine, but in their sectarian behavior they deny the doctrine of unity. The theology of the group may be correct, but their spirit is certainly sectarian.

J. Some denominations can be identified by the exaltation of a particu-
lar group of people or institution that exercises control over the group.

In conjunction with the previous point, some church organizations are set up with a system of designated leaders who are given dominant positions within a fellowship of churches. The members recognize these individuals or group of individuals as officials with universal authority over the church. Those who are not under the authority of these officials are not a part of their fellowship of churches. This is the institutional structure of the Catholic church with its hierarchy of a pope, bishops and priests who control the network of Catholic churches.

For the sake of clarity, we must be specific in reference to what is under discussion. The name of an organized institution does not necessarily identify the nature of the organization. In this context I am not discussing the name or the concept of organizing to accomplish specific ministries. In order to carry out tasks that God desires that His children do, any number of Christians can organize under any name or type of organization of work that does not contradict the Bible. Whatever the particular group calls itself is not relevant to this discussion or the problem I am addressing. Terms as “mission team” or “ministry team” are not wrong within themselves. What such teams may do is not wrong if it is to carry out the work of God. However, if a particular team becomes an authoritative governing body over the affairs of the church, then the team is an institutional authority other than the whole church at large. God never intended that any individual or group of individuals lord over His flock (See 1 Pt 5:1-4).

The problems are parachurch institutions or synods of leaders as the Catholic hierarchy that are made up of officially ordained individuals who are sanctioned to preach for a fellowship of churches that are controlled by a universal organization of ordained leaders. In such situations, those who do not receive the official sanction of the organization are not authorized to work for or represent the fellowship of churches over which the organization has control. With diplomas from the accepted educational institutions of the organization, this ordained clergy exercises the authority of the organization within local churches. A fellowship of churches that has signed allegiance to the organization thus separates itself from other churches by approving only those preachers (priests) who are officially ordained and recognized to preach for their fellowship of churches.

We must reaffirm that the authority for the church originates solely from Jesus through His word (Jn 12:48). As in Acts 15, the decisions that are made in areas of freedom where God expects the church to make decisions, rest with the church as a whole, not with any authoritative organization that functions separate from the church. For this reason, we must not assume that qualifications for positions in the church are mandates
for authority. In the New Testament there are no qualifications for doing the work of preaching the gospel to the lost. There were no official diplomas, or ordinations, or clergy who function separate from all the members of the church.

When men arise to claim some special authority over the church, they often become clergy in their behavior, and thus exercise dominance over the sheep of God. They assume some supposed authority outside the authority of the word of God by which they can dominate others. We must remember, however, that our only authority is Jesus through the power of His word. He is the only head (control) of the church (Cl 1:18). There is no other controlling head of the local believer. When we forsake this teaching, we open up ourselves to the dominance of certain personalities, as well as to organizations of official men who would reign over the sheep of God as ordained ministers of the church. (More on this in chapter 6.)

K. Some denominations can be identified by their requirement of a second membership of the members.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were individually members of the universal body of Christ (1 Co 12:12). They were members of the body of Christ (1 Co 6:15) and fellow citizens of the kingdom (Ep 2:19). The Christian’s membership, therefore, is individually in heaven. I can truly say, “My name is written there.” Since the body is universal, then the membership of the Christian is also universal. This means that every immersed believer is a member of every assembly of believers throughout the world. When one is baptized into the body of Christ, his or her membership is placed in the book of life in heaven and his or her fellowship is established with every other baptized believer throughout the world. Any theology that seeks to change this clear teaching of Scripture substitutes something local for the universal fellowship of the Christian with all Christians throughout the world.

There is no such thing in Scripture that talks about a dual membership, one that is in heaven and the other that is on earth with a local body of Christians. Concepts as “placing membership” and “changing membership” are strictly denominational terminologies that are not found in the Scriptures. Sometimes these phrases betray our perceptions of the church. If membership in the universal church is dependent on membership in a local denominated group, then the terminology of “placing membership” betrays our denominational thinking.

If we view membership of the body of Christ as something that is local and specific with one body, then we are focusing more on the local body of saints than the body as a whole. The concept of placing membership with a specific party often manifests a party spirit. The

The Christian’s Membership Is Never Moved From Heavenly Enrollment.
sectarianism of the teaching is revealed in the fact that two different Christians may live across the street from one another. One may have his membership “placed” with church A and the other with church B. If the one who has his membership with church A is in need of help, the members of church B often feel that they are not responsible to help. Sometimes, the shepherds of church B feel no obligation to spiritually care for a member of church A since his membership is “placed” with another party. The fact is that these feelings and practices fall short of our obligation to one another as Christians throughout the world.

The concept of “placing membership” is often used in reference to one making known to others his presence with a particular group of believers. Such is done to identify his presence among the saints. Making our presence known to others through an announcement, however, is sufficient to accomplish the purpose. “Placing membership” makes an entirely different statement. The denominational world uses this terminology after a sectarian manner. We would do well, therefore, to refrain from such a phrase lest we bring into our efforts to restore New Testament Christianity the sectarian baggage that comes with the phrase.

When one obeys the gospel, he or she establishes a direct relationship with God. Since this relationship is direct, it does not depend on the mediatorship of any one person or group structure. It depends on Christ alone. It is for this reason that an individual relationship with God is strongly emphasized in the New Testament. Membership in local assemblies is a foreign concept to the New Testament. Baptized believers have a common fellowship with one another because of their common membership in heaven. Christians, therefore, have a common fellowship with one another throughout the world, not with an exclusive group that would separate one’s fellowship from any other believer of the worldwide church.

When local fellowships become institutional, they often view membership in a sectarian manner. Either through structured organization or commitment to a specific church group, they suppress individual participation with all other church groups. When individuality is suppressed and freedom restricted, reform within such churches is highly improbable. Individuals are usually discouraged from thinking and acting independently from the norms of the particular group to which they have given their allegiance through placing membership.

However, we must not interpret individualism in our relationship with God as an excuse for forsaking our fellowship and responsibility to one another as Christians. Though our responsibility toward God is individual, our association with other Christians whenever possible is mandatory. This is the foundational principle upon which Hebrews 10:24, 25 was written. If one isolates himself from his or her responsibility to stir up love and good works in our fellowship with one another, then we are forsaking the community that God intended would
build us up unto the unity of the faith (Ep 4:11-16). For this reason, our individual membership in the universal church has placed us in common fellowship with one another. It is through our seeking and maintaining our common fellowship that we encourage one another to maintain the faith.

The practice of denominationalism distorts the nature of the body of Christ. The universality of the body is denied in order that focus be on a local party of believers. The denominationalist views the church as a patchwork effort of Jesus throughout the world, and thus denies the inherent unity of the worldwide body.

A group of believers can never de-nominate themselves from the universal church of Christ. They can only de-nominate themselves from other believers. In doing such, they have violated the oneness of the body which is inherent in the one head/one body that Jesus established.

Movements that are initiated by men are usually influenced by the thinking of the initial leaders of the movements. A true restoration of undenominational Christianity must be generated and directed by God. If we are to guard ourselves from denominating the church, then we must allow God to work in our lives. A restoration of relationships between Christians must occur. A focus on Jesus must be maintained lest we change our focus to men and the glorification of the movement itself.

Some may accuse us of becoming a denomination when we promote undenominational Christianity. I would challenge this accusation. Suppose a pioneering farmer moves to open range and decides, as in the early days of America, not to build fences to hedge in his cattle. He is happy to allow his cattle to roam freely on the range with the cattle of his neighbor. He knows his cattle and his cattle know him. As time goes by, however, his neighbor decides to build fences in order to separate his cattle from his neighbor and to claim a portion of the pasture as his own. He thus builds a fence around his farm that is east of the farmer who wants his cattle to freely graze in open range. A third farmer subsequently builds another fence north of the open-range farmer. A fourth builds a fence west and another farmer builds south of the open-range farmer. The open-range farmer is now fenced in. But who built the fences?

When we say that we will build no denominational fences, we must not be accused of building the fences when we are fenced in by those who have chosen to fence in their cattle with denominational dogma and traditional religious practices. The undenominational Christian did not separate himself from others. The one who builds the fences is the sectarian in spirit, and thus the denominationalist. The one who pulls himself away from another because of tradition, matters of opinion, or just a contentious spirit is the one who is divisive. The undenominational Christian does not teach anything that is not as universal and broad as the universal church of God. Forcing teaching, unique methods, or behavior on a local flock of God
that is less than that which is universal is denominational.

If others seek to build the fences, the open-range farmer has no choice. He must live in a realm wherein he is separated from those he would like to dialog in order to tear down fences. The fences are the problem.

Every baptized believer throughout the world has been added to the universal body of Christ. He or she must not, therefore, be thought of in denominational terms. For this reason, it is certainly presumptuous to think that the believer who has been baptized for the right reasons must then be baptized again if he or she did not have a complete knowledge of the church to which he or she was added by God. One is baptized and added to the church by God. He is not baptized and added to a church by man.

Since everyone who has obeyed the gospel is added to the church by God, then all baptized believers are one in Christ. No one can dissolve this unity we have as a gift from God as a result of our obedience to the gospel. God gives the unity, not man. Christians may reject one another or not receive one another, but they can never destroy that which is God’s work in viewing Christians as the single body of Christ. It is our responsibility to recognize this unity. We may ignore it, deny it, or say that it does not exist. But the oneness of the body is God’s work, not our work. It is our task as immersed believers to set aside our differences in order to enjoy that which comes to us as a gift from God. If we are willing to set aside our differences, then we will begin to understand the unity that we will eventually enjoy in reality in the heavenly environment that is yet to come. But until then, we must at least make ever effort to start practicing that which will be revealed in its appointed time. This simply means that we must start practicing unity be preparation for heaven.

Chapter 6

Types Of Denominationism

Recognizing denominational behavior in one’s own life is often difficult. If we do recognize it, it is more difficult to correct. Since we know that Jesus wants us to be one as He and the Father are one, it is difficult to acknowledge that we sometimes allow our sectarian human nature to be carried out in our religious behavior. And for this reason, we are usually in self denial about behaving denominationally in reference to others who also claim not to be behaving after the same manner. At least, we are quick to accuse others of sectarian behavior concerning how we define denominationism. Therefore, I have deemed it necessary to be more specific in this chapter in defining different expressions of denominationism.

Sincere People Have No Fear Of Re-examining Their Own Lives.
We have lived with denominationalism in Christendom for so many centuries that most people have led themselves to believe that “one church is as good as another.” Some believe that we are all headed for heaven, but down different roads. When the error of denominationalism is pointed out, some become very defensive. Others are just puzzled because they do not understand why there should be so much concern over something that is supposedly not a problem among so many.

And then there are those who simply do not want to be made uncomfortable in their present religious behavior. I have found that some become very disturbed when it is pointed out that their behavior is very denominational. In fact, when some are confronted with the possibility that they are denominational in behavior, I have discovered that they become quite defensive, especially those who believe that they have completed the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

I believe this chapter is necessary, therefore, in order that we delve into who we really are. Sincere believers who seek to be undenominational will have no fear in doing this, since it is always their goal to be simply Christians in a confused religious world.

I believe this investigation is imperative because separation from other Christians is something about which one must be greatly concerned. We must be concerned because such separation is based on concepts that contradict the very nature of our dwelling together in a common covenant relationship with God. There are some basic principles of Scripture that are either denied or twisted if our separation from one another is accepted as true. Once the causes of denominationalism are identified, then it is easy to determine that God never intended that the “church” should exist in a state of divided parties that have little to do with one another. Understanding the nature of specific causes of the problem also helps us to identify the unbiblical practices that must be maintained in order to prop up those churches that persist in maintaining a sectarian denominational nature.

There are two audiences to which I direct the thoughts of this chapter. The first is the church of the redeemed who have covenanted themselves with God through their obedience to the gospel. As the church, we are not guarded from becoming denominational in reference to unique parties maintaining a sectarian spirit. As we study through the New Testament, it is clear that some of the early Christians struggled with schismatic tendencies. We would be naive to believe, therefore, that we would not behave in a similar manner as we struggle to rid ourselves of the influences of the divided Christendom in which we live.

The second general group to which I direct the following discussion is the denominational groups of Christendom. It
seems that thousands of leaders have taken the name of Jesus, organized some group together after their command, and then called themselves an independent church. Each group thus has little to do with others. As independent churches, each group clones itself throughout communities, cities and the world. They then take their place among the institutional denominations that were born out of the Reformation Movement. And thus, we live in a world of institutional denominationalism, wherein we struggle to release ourselves of the bondage of misguided heritages and doctrines that have produced the division of Christendom.

Denominationalism as a whole is not caused by a single erroneous interpretation of Scripture or the behavior of some who carry out an exclusive spirit in their religious behavior. There are several beliefs and behavioral patterns that have given rise to the present division we see in the religious world. For this reason, there are many types of denominations. Because we have often stereotyped one another’s exclusiveness, we have failed to see the root cause of the problem. This failure to identify different causes has also led some to believe that they were not behaving as a sect because they were preaching the truth. The fact is, one can be preaching correct doctrine, but behaving denominationally toward others who also know the truth.

Sometimes the causes of the problem are either overlooked or ignored by those who do not want to be confronted with an erroneous sectarian spirit that has led them to be in constant conflict with their brethren. Others have simply resigned themselves to live in a divided religious world with walls between those who believe on Jesus. But we do not have the option of overlooking any cause that would lead us to separate ourselves from one another. We do not because we must make every effort to correct that which leads us apart from one another. If the cause is doctrinal error, then that error must be confronted. If it is binding tradition as law, then that tradition must be identified and taken out of the realm of law. If the problem is a lack of willingness to allow people to work in the area of freedom, then freedom must ring. If the problem is binding opinions, then one must be confronted about making his opinions law. The fact is that each denominating cause in some way contradicts the very nature of the church.

Some have believed that there was no denominationalism in the first century. But this is not true. It is true that the type or extent of institutional denominationalism we see today was not prevalent in the first century. However, the seeds that cause denominationalism today constantly attacked the early Christians in their efforts to remain one universal church. Understanding these causes for division in the first century will help us understand the reasons why men who forsake the guiding authority...
of the word of God will digress to the extent of the institutional religions we see today. Understanding how the early Christians dealt with the threat of division will give us tools with which to work in order to bring us together and keep us together in heart and spirit.

Conversely, an understanding of the causes for separating churches into different groups helps us to understand the sectarianism that affected the church in the first century. The following is a brief review of some of the first century efforts by some to develop unique groups in the early church. Such efforts have been successfully used throughout the centuries by different people in order to denominate the church into unique groups that are patterned after the unique teachings of some leader or leaders:

### A. Doctrinal Denominationalism:

This type of denominationalism is the most common in the religious world today. It is built on the fact that one or more fundamental teachings of the New Testament are either twisted, denied or misapplied. It also centers around teaching doctrines that have no biblical foundation. Unique doctrines thus become the foundation upon which a particular denomination is established or identified.

1. **First century doctrinal denominationalism:** Jesus identified some who taught as doctrine the commandments of men (Mk 7:7). Though directed specifically to the Jews, His statement was prophetically true in reference to the church. There were some in the early church who taught the doctrines of men (Cl 2:22). They taught doctrines of demons (1 Tm 4:1) and things that were contrary to sound doctrine (1 Tm 1:10). Paul warned that there would be those who would not endure sound teaching (2 Tm 4:3). Because they would not endure sound teaching, they would go beyond the doctrine of Christ (2 Jn 9,10). By the time John wrote the letter of Revelation, there were some who held to the teaching of Balaam (Rv 2:14), and subsequently caused some in the church to stumble. There were some in the church of Thyatira who held to the doctrine of Jezebel (Rv 2:18-24). Doctrinal denominationalism had already begun before the close of the New Testament canon of Scriptures.

Doctrinal error was the first apostasy in the church. It was so because there are always those who will pervert what God communicates to man through the Scriptures (2 Pt 3:15,16). Doctrinal error occurred in the first century when Christians with itching ears were willing to be carried about by every wind of doctrine (See Ep 4:11-14; 1 Tm 4:1-5; 2 Tm 4:3,4). It occurs today because itching ears still exist. When people go beyond the teaching of Christ, the church is to separate herself from such people. The faithful are not to give any greeting to those who deny salvational teaching (2 Jn 9,10).

2. **Present-day doctrinal denominationalism:** Churches that highlight specific erroneous doctrines today also separate themselves from those who do not
cherish their doctrines. Doctrinally denominational churches have capitalized on doctrines such as mariolatry, predestination, transubstantiation, infant baptism, original sin, sprinkling for baptism, denominational names, and a host of erroneous concepts in reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. Different doctrines have become the foundation upon which different religious groups have either rejected or accepted one another.

It is necessary that we know and teach the truth of God’s word (2 Th 2:9-11). We must be the advocates of sound teaching. We must understand, however, that teaching truth will cause others to separate themselves from the one who teaches the truth. If speaking the truth causes others to separate themselves from the one who speaks the truth, then the one who seeks to teach the fundamentals of the word of God as truth is not the one who is causing the division. The one who teaches “another gospel” is the actual person who is causing the division (See Gl 1:6-9). Paul was so bold as to say that those who teach another gospel should cut themselves off from those who continue to believe and teach the truth of the gospel (Gl 5:12). In the Galatian situation, I am sure that some followed his advice, and subsequently the denomination of “another gospel” was formed when judaizing teachers cut themselves off from the fellowship of the faithful.

I believe there is a great truth taught by the Galatian controversy that is relevant to our call that some must give up doctrines that either deny or contradict fundamental truth. The judaizing teachers of Galatia believed in the incarnation. They believed the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the “other gospel” they were teaching was binding law, specifically circumcision, as added conditions for salvation (See At 15:1). The theme of the Galatian letter was that one can believe the truth concerning fundamentals, but when other teachings are added as fundamental, they change the simple gospel to “another gospel.” Those who would do such today should cut themselves off (denominated) from those who do not accept their “other gospel.” This was what Paul said of the judaizing teachers in their relationship to the fellowship of the free. “I could wish that those who are troubling you would cut themselves off from you” (Gl 5:12).

B. Traditional Denominationalism:

Some would refer to this as “historical denominationalism”. This is denominationalism that is based on the canonizing of the traditions of the fathers or our unique heritage. It is the dividing of a fellowship of churches after the unique traditions that are accepted by everyone in the fellowship.

There are two general types of traditional denominationalists. There are those who are first patterned after the preceding point of doctrinal denominationalism. Some have traditional doctrinal points that are erroneous in ref-
ference to biblical teaching. Combined with erroneous doctrines, these denominations have added centuries of tradition that identify them as a unique religious group. Their traditions and doctrines are viewed as necessary points to identify themselves as a unique fellowship of churches. With the traditions and doctrines, these religious groups have claimed a distinctive name by which they can be identified.

Secondly, there are those who know the truth, but have knowingly or unknowingly throughout the years added many traditions to their own beliefs and behavior. Since we as humans are traditional, this would not be surprising. Individual church groups develop unique traditions. For example, there are an insurmountable number of traditions surrounding the Lord’s Supper alone that divide different groups from one another.

Traditions often become an identifying characteristic that make groups unique, and often denominational in their relationship with one another. Even large fellowships of independent churches who know the truth in doctrine have burdened themselves with unique traditions that divide the fellowship of the church from within. It seems that some in their sincerity to be as biblical as possible have infringed on the freedom we have in Christ by binding every sort of obscure Bible statement or example on the minds of sincere brethren. These obscure teachings have become unique with particular groups, and subsequently their unique teachings define them as a denomination.

Even the vocabulary of the fellowship of some groups becomes a matter of determining the identity of those within the fellowship. Generally accepted words or phrases that either unite and divide would be, “gospel meeting,” “campaign,” “workshop,” “lectureship,” and “providence.” Some examples of vocabulary words that are often questioned are words as “crusade,” “revival,” “conference,” “seminar,” “disciple,” “witness,” and “heal.” What is difficult in these fellowships is to convince them that in many ways they have become traditional in their language, and thus sectarian on the basis of their vocabulary alone. When one is somewhat arrogant about knowing the truth, it is difficult to convince such a person that he has added traditional practices, or a traditional vocabulary, to what he knows as the truth.

1. **First century traditional denominationalism:** In the first century, the traditions of men entered the church from outside. It was not that the church had established its own traditions. The church had not been in existence long enough to establish her own unique ways of doing things that would be considered traditional. However, this did not mean that the traditions of men did not plague the early church. The problem was that religious traditions were brought in with the baggage of new converts.

The early Jewish Christians had a difficult time with their Jewish baggage.
This was especially true of Jewish Christians who sought to bind circumcision on Gentile converts. In Antioch, Peter succumbed to the intimidation of those who came from Jerusalem with a suitcase full of circumcision knives. He withdrew himself from the Gentile Christians when these legalistic Jews arrived (Gl 2:11,12). Another example of traditional denominationalism is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. He warned the brethren in Colosse that no one take them captive “through philosophy and vain deceit according to the tradition of men” (Cl 2:8). The fact that he made this statement indicates that some were taking captive (denominating) some believers after their own philosophies and traditions. When men seek to bind the traditions of men with the commandments of God, they have been led into the bondage of traditional religion (Mk 7:1-9).

2. Present day traditional denominationalism: We now live in an era wherein traditional denominations have had many centuries to develop and crystallize their teaching and behavior. These unique groups now use words and phrases that identify the character of each particular group. All churches that would desire to remain in fellowship with a particular fellowship of traditional churches must agree to the accepted traditions that have been handed down through generations of church behavior. In order to maintain these unique fellowships, catechisms and manuals have often been written in order that everyone knows and adheres to the traditions of the fathers. Such books become the standard of judgment by which each congregation in the fellowship of a specific traditional heritage of churches is judged to be faithful to the traditions of the fathers.

If two congregations in the same community refuse to have fellowship with one another because both are of a different traditional heritage, then certainly this cannot be right. Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bondservant nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gl 3:28). Can a “Jewish cultured church” meet across the street from a Gentile church without being a denomination based on tradition and culture?

Traditions can never be allowed to separate those who are in fellowship with God through their obedience to the gospel. The reason traditional denominationalism is wrong is because it assumes that all men must submit to a common tradition or set of traditions in order to be in fellowship with one another. Tradition is thus elevated to the position of law. This brings the authority of man into the church as a standard by which judgments are made concerning bound traditions. When this happens, the sole authority of Jesus as the head of the church is challenged. It is for this reason that the traditions of men can never be allowed to determine fellowship among Christians.
If we must submit to common traditions in order to be in fellowship with one another, then we would have great difficulty in establishing fellowship. Determining whose traditions to which we all must submit would be very difficult. Since tradition is the invention of men who live by habitual behavior, then we must assume that God never intended that some human be the foundation upon which fellowship is to be established. It is for this reason that human religious traditions can never be the foundation upon which fellowship is established in the church. Neither should they be a hindrance to establishing fellowship. As long as we recognize that tradition can never be bound as law on the church, then tradition can never hinder the fellowship of the church.

It is paramount in initiating and sustaining a restorational paradigm shift that if traditions are to be sacrificed for fellowship, then they must be sacrificed. No religious tradition, regardless of how long it has been held by any religious group, must be used to determine the unity we are to enjoy as the people of God. Unique traditions can be maintained by different groups. But it must be understood that they fall into the realm of freedom, and thus are not factors in determining our fellowship with one another.

The problem comes, however, when we seek to determine what and whose traditions must be sacrificed. In answer to this I would state that no tradition necessarily must be sacrificed if the tradition does not contradict the Bible or take the place of biblical mandates. I have attended hundreds of assemblies throughout the world. In every assembly something traditional is carried out in the assembly. I have no problem with these traditional differences as long as they do not contradict or set aside biblical truth. But frankly, I cannot remember the last time I observed anything that would in my opinion be judged contradictory to biblical truth, or anything that took the place of what God requires. For example, just the serving of the bread of the Lord’s Supper is something that will boggle your mind concerning traditions. I have seen the bread covered with a cloth, served after the fruit of the vine, served from the back of the assembly, broken into small pieces before everyone is served, served in a single plate, served in several plates, served as a loaf of bread, served as a chip, served hard, served soft, the entire assembly going forward to partake, prayer before it is served, everyone taking of the bread, but eating at the same time, etc. All such things revolved around tradition. Now if someone stands up and says, “This is the only way it can be done”, then we have problems. When I say we must be willing to sacrifice any tradition in order to discover our God-given unity, I mean that no one should make this statement about their unique traditions that have no reasonable hermeneutical justification for being bound as law. We can
keep our traditions, but enjoy one another’s fellowship. Thank God for our uniqueness.

C. Issue-oriented Denominationalism:

As with traditional denominationalism, the issue-oriented denominationalist does one of two things. First, he would move that which is nonessential into the realm of binding doctrine, specifically fundamental doctrine. Second, he would consider as binding examples or statements in the Bible that are only incidental statements or events those that surround the occasion of a particular incident in the Bible. He would thus separate himself from those who do not maintain what he believes is essential teaching. By doing such he would bind his beliefs on the church as a whole. His debate over such things becomes an “issue,” which issue becomes a test of fellowship, and thus an occasion for dividing believers from one another.

1. First-century issue-oriented denominationalism: Any brief study of the first century church would reveal that the primary teaching that was introduced into the church as an issue was the matter of circumcision. There were those who believed that being circumcised was a matter of salvation (At 15:1,2). Circumcision was certainly an issue to many Jews who had practiced the rite for centuries. To let go of this heritage meant letting go of their Jewishness. When a particular church was dominated by Jews, we would assume that there was great pressure on the Gentiles in that church to be circumcised. This was at least the case when Paul took the Gentile, Titus, to Jerusalem. Paul later wrote concerning the trip, “Not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised” (Gl 2:3). The word “compelled” in this text is a forceful word in the Greek language. The Jewish brethren in Jerusalem argued with force that Titus be circumcised. But Paul “did not yield in subjection even for an hour” (Gl 2:5). Paul did not allow the majority to compel Titus to submit to the issue. Circumcision was a matter of opinion under the new covenant, and thus could never be bound as a matter of law.

There were other issues in the church in the first century that presented occasions for dispute. Titus was dealing with those who made an issue out of genealogies (Ti 3:9). Paul instructed that discussions over such issues were “unprofitable and worthless” (Ti 3:9). Any who promoted discussion and debate over such issues were factious (Ti 3:10). For this reason Paul instructed both Timothy and Titus to “avoid profane and empty babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness” (2 Tm 2:16; see 1 Tm 1:3-8; Ti 3:9-11). Those who persist in meaningless discussions over issues are to be avoided to the point that the faithful separate themselves from the one who “is obsessed with controversy and
disputes about words, from which come envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions ...” (1 Tm 6:4,5). Paul instructed, “from such withdraw yourself” (1 Tm 6:5). This, and similar cases in the New Testament church, are examples where denominationalism was developed on the foundation of certain people who cherished debate over issues in the church. Though the faithful enacted the withdrawal from the contentious person, it was the contentious person who made an issue out of something that was not worth discussion. He was the one who presented the occasion for the division, not the one who would not put up with his contentious issues.

2. Present-day issue-oriented denominationalism: It is not difficult to establish that which is fundamental teaching. No interpretation of Scripture is needed; only the reading of clear statements. However, there are some who have difficulty in rightly dividing the word of truth in order to establish simple fundamentals that are easily discerned. But because some have assumed that every incident or example in the Bible is binding, great confusion has existed in the religious world over issues that God never intended should be bound on the church. Debate over numerous issues has led to a great deal of denominating between brethren. In view of Paul’s exhortation to both Timothy and Titus, we should be embarrassed by our participation in such senseless debates with those who are obsessed with debate over non-essential issues. By being involved in such debates, we have proved what Paul said concerning such, that they lead further into ungodliness (1 Tm 6:3-6; Ti 3:9-11).

The problem is that the issue-oriented denominationalist restricts where God has allowed freedom. Different expressions of worship become an issue to the person who has difficulty in allowing others to have freedom of expression. Orders of worship or styles of worship where the Bible is silent often become an issue to some when something out of the customary way of conducting public worship is done. Specific things about which the Bible does not speak, but the issue-oriented denominationalist considers essential to Christian conduct or a violation of the “silence of the Scriptures,” have continually plagued efforts by brethren who seek to prevent meaningless disputes over nonessential matters.

The issue-oriented denominationalist will often use the argument that one does not have “biblical authority” for doing that about which the Bible says nothing. Unfortunately, he does not see his inconsistency in applying his argument to himself since he usually does several things in his own religious life for which he has no “biblical authority”. Examples of these things would be the use of church buildings, song books, lit-
erature, song leaders, tents, and loud speakers for revival or gospel meetings. The Bible says nothing about doing or using such things, and thus there is no “biblical authority” for doing or using them. But this does not mean that it is wrong to incorporate these things into a religious context. It simply means that God has given us freedom in areas where He has been silent. And since Christians have freedom in the realm of silence, then the argument for “biblical authority” is qualified. “Biblical authority” thus refers to those things that are authorized, not to those things wherein liberty is given. In other words, we have freedom to work in those areas where the Bible says nothing, as long as that which is done does not contradict clear statements of biblical teaching.

Because of a misunderstanding of how we should interpret and apply what God intended we should apply, the issue-oriented denominationalist struggles to determine what is fundamental, and thus essential salvational doctrine. He finds it difficult to separate the fundamental from that which is a matter of freedom. Those who are not separating the fundamental from that which is a matter of freedom are endlessly dividing within their fellowship of churches over whatever favorite teaching is cherished by individual teachers. This is particularly true in churches that are dominated by an accepted preacher who favors a particular teaching that he binds on the group for which he preaches. Issue-oriented denominationalism is perpetuated by preachers who endlessly contend for their favorite issues that they bind on the consciences of those who give allegiance to their leadership.

**D. Autocratic Denominationalism:**

Autocratic denominationalism is based on control. The control is either exercised by an individual or group of people in an institutional church structure. If a leader is autocratic, the very nature of his leadership style will separate those over whom he exerts control from other groups who may also have autocratic leaders. If the control is with a parachurch religious institution, then churches are often divided within a fellowship of churches by those who do or do not conform to the definition of the parachurch institution.

The autocratic denominationalist often promotes and gives allegiance to a local or international controlling group that supersedes the authority of the headship of Christ over the individual believer. He believes that unless one is a part of a controlling structure, that person is out of fellowship with all those who have sworn allegiance to the institutional structure of the organization. Membership in the controlling institution thus becomes a test of fellowship and a factor upon which fellowship is determined.
1. **First-century autocratic denominationalism**: In the first century church, individual autocratic denominationalism was manifested in the dominating control that was exerted by such men as Diotrephes who sought to separate those over whom he had control from John and traveling evangelists (3 Jn 9,10). Paul warned that some elders would separate disciples after themselves (At 20:30). Peter revealed the controlling practices of some elders who sought to lord over the flock of God (1 Pt 5:1-4). Even in the case of Simon the sorcerer, autocratic control was desired by Simon who offered to purchase the gift of laying on hands from Peter and John. The reason he sought the gift was that it would give him the opportunity to regain the influence he once had in the city of Samaria as a well-known sorcerer (See At 8:9,10,18,21-23).

   **Money Should Never Determine Fellowship.**

   The problem with autocratic denominationalism is that an individual or organization of authority is established that competes with the sole headship of Christ over the sole believer in Christ. When allegiance to a man or an earthly organization competes with the authority of Christ, then the adherents must have a double allegiance, one to Christ and the other to an institution on earth. What usually happens in such cases is that the visible, earthly institution or individual begins to dominate the fellowship of the believers. This happens when the institutional structure on earth takes control by supplanting the individual’s personal allegiance to Christ. Such human organizations often become international with the spread of the churches who have affiliated themselves with the institutional organization. Reports of numbers of conversions, raised funds, or work progress are internationally fed back to the head office of such organizations in order that allegiance to the organization is maintained.

2. **Present-day autocratic denominationalism**: When men seek to rule over their fellow brethren, different religious schisms will develop where dominant leaders seek to exercise rule. This is usually accomplished in a church by setting up and giving authority of rule to a corporate structure in order to carry out the work of the members. There is nothing wrong with organizing for success. However, when the organization becomes a controlling institutional structure with an authoritative head at the top, the organization itself denominates one church group from other church groups who are controlled in a similar institutional manner. In the case of some elders and Diotrephes, the church relinquished control to specific individuals who sought to control the group as a whole. When a group gives over its responsibility to govern itself to an individual or group of individuals, those to whom the control is given will autocratically run the affairs of the group.

   **House Churches Brought The Rich And The Poor Into A Close Relationship.**

   *Money Should Never Determine Fellowship.*
When the financial support of those who are working with the organization is added to this international system, the individual is then locked in and a pay-check takes control of the behavior and beliefs of the individual. The individual is thus subjected to give allegiance to the organization in behavior and belief lest he lose his support from the organization. What often happens next is that the supported individual must give allegiance to the organization over his personal allegiance to Christ and the church. The international organization thus separates the individual from the fellowship of local Christians. The supported individual is muzzled from speaking anything that might be contrary to the beliefs of the organization, lest he lose his support.

E. Financial Denominationalism:

Closely associated with autocratic denominationalism is the division of church groups according to economics. Since the poor will always be with us, there will always be tension in some churches between the rich and poor. It is imperative, therefore, that churches be on guard against any tendency that would promote the marginalization of the poor.

1. First century financial denominationalism: Discrimination between the rich and poor entered the church by the time James wrote the epistle of James. He identified the problem which evidently flourished among Jewish churches of the Diaspora. He first encouraged “the brother of humble circumstances” (the poor brother) to rejoice in his circumstances (Js 1:9). He then reminded the rich Sadducean Jewish brethren that they would eventually “pass away”, probably indicating the passing of their riches in the imminent destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Js 1:10; see 5:7,8). In fact, he wrote to the rich, “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you” (Js 5:1; see 5:1-6). At the time he wrote, the “miseries” of the Roman legions were marching to Jerusalem.

One would have to agree that there was financial discrimination among those Christians to whom James wrote. Paul indicated that such also existed among those with whom Timothy was working, for he encouraged the rich not to be high-minded concerning their riches (1 Tm 6:17).

In contrast to the financial denominating that some practiced in the first century church, there is also the example of some great brethren as Philemon, in whose house the church met (Pl 1,2). Onesimus was a runaway slave of Philemon who went to Rome, but subsequently was immersed by Paul and sent back to Philemon. What is pertinent about this situation in this context is that a slave owner and his slave met in the same house church. If such financial and cultural obstacles can be overcome as this when Christianity is truly practiced,
then certainly there is no room for financial denominationalism in the church today.

One of the evidences that the true church existed in the first century was in the fact that “pure religion” was practiced (See Js 1:27). Orphans and widows were serviced (At 6:1-6). The poor were cared for in any house church where they met. Since the assembly structure of the early church was house meetings, then no rich person could hide in a large assembly from those who were truly in need. House assemblies brought the need and the help together into a context of love. When Christians live distant lives from one another, the poor often suffer.

2. **Present-day financial denominationalism:** I once heard of some members who found it difficult to assemble with those brethren who continually asked for their money when they showed up at the assembly. The rich brethren subsequently separated themselves from the poorer brethren, and started their own group. I suppose such cases are not unique, but each illustrates that financial denominationalism is a reality, and one with which we must deal. I have found that both the poor brethren and rich brethren must be taught specific principles in how to cohabit with one another in the fellowship of the church. Both must learn to be content with what they have (Ph 4:11). But no brother is to be left without the basic needs of life. I have discovered that the matter of poverty will always be unanswered. Jesus said the poor will always be present in the global community. We will never eradicate poverty. What we must determine is a correct definition of poverty. This is not easy. The Western world that is very possession oriented (materialistic) has a different definition for poverty in the sense that the Westerner judges that the poor are such because they do not have a great number of possessions. However, the Third World defines true poverty as having no food or clothing. Such was Paul’s definition (See 1 Tm 6:8). For this reason no Christian should be allowed to go without food and clothing.

In an imperfect world there will always be the rich and poor. We will never eradicate poverty. That is not reality. And thus, the global church must always seek to “have things in common.” No brother or sister should be left destitute. Every effort, therefore, must be made to help the poor. They are the occasion to manifest true Christianity in the hearts of those who can give.

F. **Cultural Denominationalism:**

God recognizes the differences between races, which differences have developed throughout the populations of the world (See At 17:26). In the first century, there was a great cultural difference between the two major cultures of the Jews specifically and the Gentiles in general. In the Judean context, Jews were not even allowed to enter the homes of Gentiles (See At 11:2,3). In recognition of this vast cultural difference, the early evangelists made choices as to
whether they would concentrate on either a Jewish or Gentile culture (See Gl 2:7). Such was in the area of cultural freedom. However, when one passes from being an evangelized unbeliever to a saved believer, culture must be set aside for the sake of fellowship (Gl 3:28,29). It is not that we lose our culture when we become Christians. It is that culture must never be an obstacle to fellowship. If it is, then it is racism, and practiced racism is sin.

1. First-century cultural denominationalism: Galatians 4:4 speaks of the time being right for the coming of the Reconciler between man and God, and between man and man (Gl 4:4). One reason the time was right was because of the tremendous racism that existed between the Jews and Gentiles in general. God wanted a cultural situation wherein Christianity would manifest the breaking down of the “middle wall of partition” between races (Ep 2:14-18). He wanted to show the world that in Christ all men are made equal (Gl 3:28,29; Cl 3:25). If Christianity could break down racial barriers between the Jews and Gentiles, then it would be shown that it could permeate any cultural difference that might exist in all history after the first century.

Unfortunately, in some cases the tremendous cultural differences between the Jews and Gentiles in the first century were brought into the church in areas where there was a high concentration of Jewish converts. Some Jewish Christians separated themselves from the Gentiles because of the practice of circumcision. Even Peter at one time was carried away in sin by this act of discrimination (Gl 2:11-13). By doing such he stood condemned (Gl 2:11).

Another example of cultural denominationalism was when the Hebraic Jews in Jerusalem manifested a sectarian spirit toward the Grecian Jews. In this case, the Grecian Jewish widows were racially neglected in the daily distribution of food to widows (At 6:1,2). This was a case where a racial sectarian spirit was carried out by neglecting a particular racial group. The Hebraic widows were not neglected while sitting in the presence of Jewish widows. The case was that they probably met as a group in a different house church, and subsequently were ignored by those Jews who administered the contribution for widows. It was a case that manifested the insidious nature of racism which is contrary to the core nature of Christianity.

The Holy Spirit had said that pure religion is taking care of widows (Js 1:27). But when racism enters the fellowship of the saints, even this most fundamental teaching of the word of God is often denied.

2. Present-day cultural denominationalism: Cultural ethnocentrism is the cause of our racial separation from one another. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s culture or race is superior to others. The cultural ethnocentric, therefore, looks down on others who are not of his
native culture. When cultural ethnocentrism is brought into the behavior of the church, churches often segregate themselves from one another on the basis of race. When it comes to the subject of race, we are too quick to forget that there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ (Gl 3:28,29).

It is not wrong for those of a common culture to fellowship as one group. But when one cultural fellowship intentionally separates itself from another on the basis of culture or race, then cultural isolationism has occurred. A spirit of racial sectarianism perpetuates the cultural division, and thus others are either knowingly or unknowingly excluded from the ethnocentric church. Any church that intentionally practices racial separateness on the basis of cultural discrimination is in sin.

Racial discrimination is against the very nature of true Christianity simply because it destroys the universality of the fellowship of the church. It has always been an enigma of theological reasoning for one to believe that he or she will eternally dwell in fellowship with thousands of previously differentiated cultural groups in a heavenly dwelling while having practiced racial segregation in the church on earth.

G. Leader-oriented Denominationalism:

This is the dividing of the church into different fellowships that are led by either dominant or charismatic personalities who call disciples after themselves. Though such division may be unintentional, it is still denominating the church of God when members give allegiance to a particular personality to the exclusion of others. This is often a practice that takes place in large urban centers. Churches sometimes hire a popular personality as the preacher in order to attract members to their particular church. Subsequently, fickle members float from one church to another in their quest to follow the favorite personality.

1. First-century leader-oriented denominationalism: In their formative years with Jesus during His ministry, the twelve disciples struggled with asserting themselves individually among themselves. At one time, James and John put themselves forth for special positions (Mk 10:25-37). Even during the occasion of the final supper of Jesus with the disciples, “there was also a dispute among them as to which one of them should be considered the greatest” (Lk 22:24). If these feelings would have been carried on in their ministry after the establishment of the church in Acts 2, they would have denominated the early church after themselves. This does not mean, however, that some did not try to divide the church after the personality of leading brethren in the early church. One of the initial cases of personality denominationalism was in the church of Corinth.

There Will Be No Races In Heaven.

In this situation, some called themselves after the personalities of either Paul, Cephas or Apollos (1 Co 1:12). The personalities in this case were completely innocent of causing the problem. However, because of a party spirit that prevailed among the Corinthians, they denominated themselves over these three personalities.

A particularly dominant person is often the cause of personality denominationalism when he assumes control of a church. This would be the case of Diotrephes who sought to separate the church or churches over which he had control from John and other evangelists (3 Jn 9,10). Paul prophesied to the Ephesian elders that there would be dominant personalities who would rise up among the elders and call disciples after themselves (At 20:30). These personalities would have little consideration for the unity of the flock. They would think only of themselves by calling others after themselves. They would sacrifice the unity of the flock for the sake of being considered the leader of a particular party of the flock.

2. Present-day personality denominationalism: Those who are filled with selfish ambition often use the church as an occasion to develop a following after themselves. It is for this reason that Christians must be cautious about those who use smooth and fair speech in order to beguile the hearts of the innocent (Rm 16:18). The use of such speech by an individual is often evidence that he is seeking a following. By clever speech he seeks to attract others to himself, and thus denominate those who are attracted to his own party.

Personality denominationalism is manifested when allegiance is given to an accepted religious leader as the center of reference in a church. In the religious world this leader often proclaims himself to be a “prophet” or “apostle” in order to captivate the admiration of his followers. At the same time, another group will accept another as a “prophet” or “apostle.” When this occurs, the adherents of both parties separate themselves from one another.

In the Pentecostal/charismatic world, this is particularly a problem when certain so-called “prophets” and “apostles” become leading figures unto whom adherents give their loyalty. The supposed “prophet” or “apostle” often believes and teaches that which is false. However, because of the charismatic prominence and presence of the individual, adherents willingly forsake Bible teaching in order to give allegiance to this favored personality. Those who contend that the prophet is a false teacher are subsequently disfellowshipped as people who have no faith in a “prophet of God.”

Leader-oriented denominationalism is a particular problem in those religious groups where it is believed that the Holy Spirit directly communicates truth and direction through dreams and visions. The irony of this scenario of belief and behavior is manifested in the inconsis-
tency of the supposed “prophets” of different religious groups who stand up on Sunday morning and proclaim that “God spoke to them.” However, each “prophet” speaks different doctrines, which doctrines are often contradictory to one another. Nevertheless, with closed Bibles the adherents give allegiance to their favorite personality, and subsequently carry on as usual with devotion to the “prophet”. The two groups remain denominated from one another and never consider the fact that personal study of God’s word is an answer to sorting out their differences or for determining what they should be preaching and behaving. They usually never consider the biblical mandate that true prophets are to be tested by the word of God (Dt 13:1-5; 18:20-22; Jr 28:9).

We must not underestimate the dividing factor among religions because of different personalities. This is such a strong factor in the religious world that a particular personality can promote any teaching, and yet be followed for his supposed working of some “miracle” or “God-spoke-to-me” dream or vision. The loyal followers simply proclaim the leader as “the great power of God” and carry on in their ignorance (See At 8:10). Regardless of what the particular personality may teach, the adherents are wooed into following him because of his supposed personal experiences with God, regardless of what the Bible teaches.

The problem with leader-oriented denominationalism is that allegiance is given to a man on earth over Christ in heaven and His word. Popes are born and matured in this manner. When the personality becomes dominant in a particular religious movement or fellowship of churches, then his word is often considered authoritative. A denomination of adherents is thus established when an unquestionable allegiance is given to the word of a favorite personality.

Those who have separated themselves after different personalities forget that there are no Spirit-inspired men today as were the Spirit-inspired apostles of Christ. The Holy Spirit is not giving inspired interpretations to men on earth today since all truth has been revealed and recorded (See 2 Tm 3:16,17; Jd 3). One of the very roots of personality denominationalism is that some give great credit to those they think the Spirit is directly inspiring to deliver more truth or to interpret truth that has already been revealed in written form. This belief denies the biblical truth that all truth has been revealed (Jd 3; Rv 22:18,19). It is also erroneous because such a belief moves the adherents to make a subjective decision as to whom the Spirit is supposedly either revealing new truth or inspiring new interpretation. In either case, the followers are subjected to the most convincing personality who asserts that his supposed interpretations or revelations are
true, and those of other supposed apostles and prophets are false.

Concerning inspired interpretation, not even the apostle Peter would give himself credit for inspired interpretations of some difficult things that Paul wrote (See 2 Pt 3:15,16). When men claim to possess inspired interpretations of Scripture, they are setting themselves up as special sources who can dominate and divide innocent Bible students from one another by calling them after the authority of their supposed inspired interpretations. When two such men reside and work in the same community, the foundation is established for the creation of two different denominations that are built on two different personalities who invariably offer to their adherents contradictory interpretations of the Bible.

If the Spirit were inspiring interpretation of the Bible, then we would assume that there would never be a contradiction between preachers in the matter of biblical interpretation. But there are. I think that the greatest argument against the doctrine of inspired interpretation is the existence of a denominated Christendom that cannot seem to agree on anything. In this confused theological environment, either the Spirit cannot get His act together in inspiring men to interpret the Scriptures, or men are confused in thinking that He is directly inspiring them to understand the word. I think the latter is the case. Confused religious leaders are submitting to the wrong spirit.

A word of exhortation to those who would divide churches over personalities comes from the example of men as Peter, John and Paul. All three personalities were personally called into apostleship by Jesus. On one occasion idolatrous men exalted Paul and Barnabas to be some type of gods, and thus sought to offer sacrifices to them. But realizing the seriousness of accepting worship that should only go to God, both Paul and Barnabas ran among the crowds crying out, “We also are men with the same nature as you ...” (At 14:15). When Peter came to the house of Cornelius, Cornelius fell down at his feet and worshiped him (At 10:25). “But Peter took him up, saying, ‘Stand up. I myself also am a man’” (At 10:26). When an angel appeared before John, John “fell at his feet to worship him” (Rv 19:10). But the angel said, “Do not do that. I am your fellow servant ...” (Rv 19:10).

Those who would seek to be somewhat among the churches would do well to heed the exhortation of these examples. Leader-oriented denominationalism not only leads to the fall of the personality who calls disciples after himself, but it also leads to the fall of those about whom Paul warned Timothy. “For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires. And they will turn away
their ears from the truth and will be turned to fables” (2 Tm 4:3,4).

H. Social Denominationalism:

Schisms that are caused after any of the preceding points would manifest itself in the context of where adherents to each particular party would assemble. On an individual assembly level, this would certainly be true. It would only be natural that those who are of a common belief, culture, tradition, organization, economic status, or doctrine would seek to be together, and subsequently carry out the assembly of themselves to the exclusion of others. Once the exclusive group has carried on for several years, the members naturally form a denominated social bond that works to the exclusion of others. Their familiarity to their traditional way of doing things as a group hinders them from behaving differently outside their social cocoon. I would call this social denominationalism because the group develops a unique social structure that separates it from other groups. It is a learned “church culture” that visitors find hard to penetrate when they show up during one of the meetings of the socially isolated church.

A church can determine if it is socially denominated when visitors come to the assembly. When visitors go away without the slightest welcome to someone’s home after the assembly, then you can be sure that the church they visited has set up its own social structure in a way that excludes outsiders.

Social isolationists become cliques, and as social cliques they function to the exclusion of others. Not only do they exclude others, they usually have no desire to associate with others. Social denominationalists usually build for themselves a church building in order to identify their credibility and presence in a community. Assembly in the building becomes a subliminal social identity of the group in the community, and thus allegiance to the assembly in the building identifies one’s membership to the group. The fellowship becomes cocooned within itself when members place membership with the group, and thus social membership in the religious club is maintained by “faithful” attendance at “club” meetings on Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night.

Without realizing it, the members of the group have over the years slowly slipped into a traditional behavior of ceremonial assemblies that are often void of relationships. The members reach a spiritual plateau, a traditional “church culture” is established, and then they defend themselves against any changes to the church cocoon.

The problem with social denominationalism is not the church building, nor the assemblies in a building, nor even the commitment one has to a particular group
of believers. The problem is that members of the group often forget the universal nature and mission of the church. The social denominationalist often views the universal church to be made up of several local assemblies of Christians who are to a great extent denominated from one another. Though they may recognize other local groups as brethren, they will function in their work to the exclusion of others.

Social denominationalists believe that Christians are members of the universal church because of their membership in a local church. Membership is first viewed in reference to the local assembly, and then in reference to the universal church. For the social denominations, local church membership precedes universal church membership.

Identifying oneself as a social denominationalist takes a great deal of honesty. Most people will not admit that they are living in exclusion from other fellowships of the church in other areas because of their sole allegiance to a particular group that meets at the West & Main church building. They have been meeting with the same crowd for so long that they have forgotten that the church is global and that they are members of a global community of God.

We cannot find socially denominating churches in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit referred to the church in Corinth, Jerusalem or Ephesus. Multiple assemblies in houses took place in each of these cities, but there was one church per city. Though geographically separated by city location, all members had placed their membership in the one global church of God.

Our problem is that we project our present assembly behavior into the Scriptures, and thus assume that there was only one “assembly” of the church in either Corinth, Jerusalem or Ephesus. We read our present cocooned church behavior into the Scriptures to the point that we assume each “local” church in the first century regularly met together at the same place on Sunday morning in order to be referred to as a local church. But this interpretation is erroneous in view of the fact that the early church met in houses, not in church buildings. It is also erroneous in the fact that we assume that a local church is identified by the ability of all the members to meet together at the same place. It is for this reason that there is no hint in the New Testament of individuals giving allegiance to a particular assembly of Christians. Allegiance was solely Christ, regardless of where individual Christians lived and assembled with other members. The church simply existed wherever there was an immersed disciple. Assemblies and buildings had nothing to do with the existence of the church. They had nothing to do with the identity of the church, since the church did not cease to exist when it was oppressed by governments who denied assembly. Assemblies exist because the church (people) exist. We do not exist as the church because
we assemble. The church would still exist even if tyrannical governments destroyed church buildings and banned assemblies.

Though we might not confess up to the fact, there is a certain feeling of denominationalism among those who have given their allegiance to a particular assembly of Christians. The truth of this fact is clearly manifested in the situation where two families might live across the street from one another, and yet go to two separate assemblies on Sunday because of their allegiance to their favorite group. If one of the families happens to visit the church of his neighbor, those of his “home” church will question him as to why such was done. They will remind him that his “membership” is with them and that he must “leave his contribution” with the group to which he has given membership allegiance. This is the spirit of social sectarian denominationalism within the church.

It would be safe to say that believers develop many reasons over which they can separate themselves from one another. This tendency should be clearly recognized in ourselves in order that we not become victims of promoting an exclusive spirit among Christians. The sin of denominationalism paralyzes the church. It diverts the thinking of believers to think only of their own party. It is a bad advertisement to the unbelieving world. It defeats the power that is released through the spirit and practice of unity. It divides mission outreach and promotes partyism throughout the world.

We must continually remind ourselves of the unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17:20,21. The fact that Jesus made the prayer that we all be one indicates that Jesus Himself knew that we would seek reasons for denominating ourselves from one another. He knew that we would work on earth to the exclusion of one another. He knew the curse of an egocentric nature that was not controlled by love.

Since it seems natural for each of us to seek exclusion from others by forming our own social parties, then we would conclude that Christians must focus specifically on maintaining the unity of the spirit in an atmosphere of peace. In view of the present sectarian attitudes that have divided believers from one another, we can understand why the Holy Spirit inscribed numerous exhortations that Christians manifest a spirit of unity (See 1 Co 1:10; Cl 3:12-14; Ph 1:27). In view of the eternal fellowship that is to come in a heavenly environment, we must work to alleviate the spirit of sectarian denominationalism that always seeks to creep into the fellowship of believers throughout the world. If one plans on dwelling together with others in eternity, then certainly he must plan on being together with others on earth. We will certainly not be able to separate ourselves from one another in heaven. The fact that there will not be such divisions in heaven argues the case that every Chris-
tian—if he or she claims to be such—should be working to answer the prayer of Jesus for unity among all those who are disciples of Jesus.

Chapter 7

Professional Leadership

After the newly discovered Book of the Law was read in the ears of King Josiah, the King had no question about how far Israel had strayed from belief and behavior in reference to the will of God. His response to what he heard was that he tore his clothes in repentance (2 Kg 22:11). When sincere leadership understands that they have drifted far from what God originally instituted they should be, they understand that it is a time for tearing clothes.

Josiah initiated a restorational paradigm shift in Israel. In order to accomplish the shift, he not only cleaned up the religious behavior of the people, he also sorted out those who led in the apostasy. He went straight for those unrighteous religious leaders who perpetuated the apostasy because of their love for power and positions. “He removed the idola
trous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense on the high places ...” (2 Kg 23:5). “He executed all the priests of the high places ...” (2 Kg 23:20). Josiah recognized the seriousness of unrighteous religious leaders who would lead God’s flock astray. He was willing to sacrifice the leaders for the sake of the flock. Such extreme measures on the part of Josiah should frighten us concerning our responsibility as leaders of God’s flock.

When Jesus walked on the face of the earth, it was the religious leadership of Judaism that moved against Him with envy and jealousy. It was this leadership that eventually nailed Him to the cross. Throughout history, nothing has changed. Movements are not started by the people. They are started and perpetuated by leaders. For righteous or unrighteous reasons, leaders assume the task of leading God’s people. If their motives are unrighteous, they will lead in the direction of their own desires. For this reason, James warned concerning leaders, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers [leaders], knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (Js 3:1). You can ask Josiah about his interpretation of the phrase, “Stricter judgment.”

When discussing the apostasy of sectarian denominationalism, leadership lies at the center of the problem. In order to initiate any restoration to simple Christianity, we must consider the motives and actions of those who lead, specifically those who would lead the flock of God in the wrong direction. We must look into the psychology of those who would use the flock of God for unrighteous reasons in order to perpetuate a system that
functions contrary to the nature of the church of God. When the apostle John set out to correct the problem in the church where Gaius lived, he did not deal with the church who had been subjugated to unrighteous leadership. He went straight to the problem. And the problem was unrighteous leadership on the part of Diotrephes (3 Jn 9,10). When James and John approached Jesus for special leadership positions in the kingdom, they approached Jesus through their mother (See Mt 20:20,21). However, Jesus did not deal with the mother. The record of this event that was written by Mark does not even mention the mother (Mk 10:35-37). Jesus knew the source of the request. And thus Mark wants us to understand that Jesus went straight to the source of the carnal request.

During the early years of apostasy in the fourth century, Constantine sought to institutionalize the church through the leadership of professionals. He built purpose-built church buildings for Christians, and after the practice of pagan temples, he brought into and put on government salary a professional “clergy” that would lead the churches. And thus was born in church history the professional clergy.

The word “clergy” originally referred to a pagan priest in the pagan temples of Constantine’s era. It has today become a term that refers to the professional “preaching class” as opposed to the “laity,” the laity being a term that is generally used in religious circles to refer to the “common church” people to whom the clergy ministers. For lack of a better term, I will use the word “clergy” to refer to this group of professional religious leaders who set themselves apart from the people because of position, power and purse. In the first century, the clergy would be defined by the behavior of the Pharisees. Therefore, when discussing unrighteous professional leadership in the church, the behavior of the Pharisees determines the definition for unrighteous leadership.

The system of professional leadership became the norm for Christendom after the days of Constantine. Christian leadership went from the practical application of biblical principles through the behavior of leaders among the people, to pulpiteers who produced homiletically fine-tuned orations from highly positioned pulpits. Leaders no longer administered the word on occasions which spontaneously called for a message from the word that applied to real-life situations. The delivery of the message went from highways and hedges to polished three-point outlines that were delivered from polished ornate platforms. Pulpit science became a course of study in preacher schools and universities in order that eloquent orators be graduated, who, with finely tuned and canned sermons, could stand before hundreds of spectators and woo them with fine-tuned deliveries. Platform rhetoric became the standard by which one was judged a good or bad preacher.

What is interesting about all the pomp and professionalism that centers around the present concept of the modern-day preacher, is that the New Testa-
ment gives no description of such. If Jesus were to visit one of our assemblies today, can we visualize Him taking the platform position of the local preacher in the modern-day pulpit? Would the apostle Paul last over two Sundays in one of our cherished sanctuaries? What is interesting about archaeological discoveries from the period between A.D. 100 and A.D. 300 is that there is no mention in the church of special clergymen, priests, ministers or preachers in the function of an assembled church. This phenomenon is prevalent only after the days of Constantine when he initiated such in a Christendom that had been taken over by a government.

This does not mean that such is wrong. It is simply a system of delivering teaching to the church. But it is a system that has often been abused. It has been abused in the sense that the preacher/priest has become the center of reference, the one-man band of the local church. Individual ministries have been stymied in the presence of so many professionals. We forget that the early church was expanded throughout the world by “the laity”.

Most preachers understand the dilemma of their situation. Unfortunately, they are locked into a system that provides financial security and a means by which they can work “full-time” in service to the Lord. On the other hand, there are some unfortunate negatives associated with some leaders who covet their positions and guard their purses. It is this pharisaical leadership that perpetuates the apostasy of sectarian denominationalism.

In the following points we must not forget that there are “weak” and “strong” brothers among us (Rm 14). There are “novice” brothers and those who are “teachers” (Ep 4:11,12; Js 3:1). There are those who must be respected because they watch out on behalf of our souls (Hb 13:17) and those who have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints (1 Co 16:15,16). I am not comparing these ministries with the denominationally defined clergy of the Protestant world.

We have great respect for evangelists and shepherd/teachers who have for many years given themselves to the ministry of the word. We must keep in mind that in the early church there was a plurality of shepherd/teachers in the church of every city (At 14:23) and evangelists who were on the move among the lost. Preachers were among the lost, and a plurality of shepherd/teachers were among the saved. Though it is not wrong for a teacher to be fully supported in order to teach among the saints in a city, we must keep in mind that such teachers did not become the center of reference for any particular church.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day behaved after the manner of the professional clergy today in the Protestant religious environment who would covet their positions in order to justify their existence. What is in existence today in many situations is not unlike the system of Jewish leadership into which Jesus and the early disciples came in the first century. Be-
cause of Jesus’ pronounced judgment of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, His condemnation of their character and behavior are the guidelines to use in order to look out for and guard ourselves against the same type of character and behavior in our own lives. Here are some of those characteristics of pharisaical leadership in the first century, which characteristics we must guard ourselves against becoming.

A. Pharisaical leaders love preeminence.

The professional clergy, as the Pharisees, “love the best places at feasts and the chief seats in the synagogue” (Mt 23:6). They do so because they love to be first (See 3 Jn 9). The professional loves to be considered first, allowed first in line, seated at the front of the assembly, and called upon to preside over meetings. The Pharisees manifested their preeminent thinking and behavior by wearing special clothing that would identify them in public (Mt 23:5-8). By wearing such clothing, the general public would know who they were, and thus place them in places of preeminence. When clothing is used to identify one’s “position”, then one knows that he is professional.

When professionals behave preeminently, the individual priesthood of the believers is suppressed. In the midst of professionally operated corporate churches, the responsibility of members is subjugated to the responsibilities of the professionals. An unfortunate result of the professional clergy is that practice minimizes the responsibilities of every member of the church.

B. Pharisaical leaders seek to be the center of reference.

The professional religious leader is often egotistical, and thus egocentric. Like the Pharisees, his ego is manifested in his desire to call disciples after himself (At 20:30). He calls disciples after himself because he has his own interest at heart. When preachers feel that they must be at every meeting, called upon to deal with every problem of the local church, be called upon for special interpretations of Scripture, they often become egocentric. One can know that he is a professional clergyman if he feels left out when decisions are made and activities are carried out by the church. If he feels uncomfortable when others disagree with him on points of biblical interpretation in matters of opinion, then he is developing the heart of a pharisaical leader. When such a heart is developed, one considers himself a one-man point of reference around whom the church evolves.

Because pharisaical leaders seek to be the center of reference for the activities and function of the church, they feel that without their presence, the church will disintegrate. When the attendance is up, they feel good. When it is down, they feel hurt, and thus...
blame themselves for not performing well enough to keep people attending. The pharisaical leader thus places on himself a great deal of pressure to perform well with great oratories from the pulpit in order to reaffirm his value to the church.

Ironically, the pharisaical professional often feels complemented when the attendance goes down when he travels or leaves one particular church to preach for another. Since he markets himself on the size of the assembly for which he preaches, or the number of baptisms he has, the professional clergyman places great emphasis on the performance of the church for which he preaches. Counting the numbers of Israel to reaffirm strength is very important to professional clergymen.

C. Pharisaical leaders are autocratic.

An autocratic leadership style is born out of one’s egocentric desire to control what is believed to be one’s position or power over a particular group (See 3 Jn 9,10). Autocratic leadership in church leaders is manifested in those who feel that they must be consulted for permission before any member can do that which he feels is necessary to please God.

The autocratic leader is obsessed with control. His obsession lends him to being a micro manager over the affairs of the church. He is thus threatened when others take an initiative to do things about which he does not know or over which he has no control. The self initiative of the individual who seeks to allow Jesus to individually work in his or her life will always put one in conflict with an autocratic leader. It is easy, therefore, for an autocratic leader to be sectarian in attitude, and specifically denominational in behavior with those over whom he exercises control.

The autocratic clergyman’s obsession with control moves him to intimidate others into getting his permission. He will complain that others do not consult him before they act. He feels slighted when others do not show up at his meetings to discuss what should be planned and accomplished according to his directions. His call for endless meetings about the work of the Lord is a cover for his obsession to give permission of work to those over whom he has assumed control. When meetings do not happen he feels that nothing is being done. He feels that if he does not have a handle on the activity of each member, then nothing is being done by members.

The autocratic leader has denominational tendencies because he must have a specific realm over which he can exercise his control. If the territory of this realm is abstract, he is frustrated. A specific assembly of members at a specific location offers the ideal environment
wherein the autocratic leader can function. Attendance numbers can be counted, faces can be seen, and attendance graphs can be placed on bulletin boards of church house foyers. All such things give the autocratic leader a sense of security and control over “his church”. By doing such he can separate those of his church from other churches. He thus isolates the church over which he exercises control from other groups that are outside his control. Autocratic leaders, therefore, are inherently denominational. They have a difficult time enjoying the universal fellowship of Christians since their focus is directed primarily to those over whom they exercise their oversight.

Because of the autocratic leader’s paranoia about control, he will work against small groups of Christians meeting in houses in order to have a closer relationship with one another. Such meetings threaten his control mechanism since he views the assembly of all his sheep at the same place as a mechanism to exercise control. He will thus have a limited view of the universality of the church, even within the city in which he lives and works for a “local” church. Since he cannot be at all the assemblies of a multiple-assembly church, he feels that he cannot control the behavior and direction of those with whom he cannot assemble on a regular basis. He thus views individual group meetings of a church as “division in the church” simply because he cannot exercise visual control over every member of the church and pronounce them “faithful” by their attendance at the prescribed assemblies.

It is for this reason that autocratic leaders firmly believe in the concept of church autonomy and single assemblies of the “local” church. In practicing the doctrine of church autonomy, the autocratic leader separates himself from those he cannot control, referring to them as other autonomous churches. It is for this reason that autocratic leadership promotes denominationalism of the church under the disguise of a sectarian interpretation of church autonomy.

D. Pharisaical leaders are jealous and envious of others.

When one is autocratic in leadership, he inevitably becomes jealous of those groups or individuals from whom he has separated himself. He does so because he feels that he is in competition with others. The unbelieving Pilate knew that the religious leadership of Israel worked against Jesus because of their jealousy and envy of Jesus. At the trials of Jesus, Matthew recorded, “For he [Pilate] knew that because of envy they [the religious leaders] had delivered Him” (Mt 27:18). Religious jealousy was generated in the hearts of the Pharisees because Jesus had captivated the hearts of the multitudes. Great multitudes, therefore, turned their allegiance from the Pharisees to Jesus.

Simon, the sorcerer, would be another case. When he lost the allegiance of the city of Samaria by the obedience of the people to the gospel, he became bitter (At 8:21-23). He then sought a means by which he could regain his fame and position by purchasing the gift of God (At 8:18,19).
When the position of autocratic leaders is endangered, they often become jealous, envious, and subsequently competitively scheme to bring about the downfall of those they envy. When one becomes too popular, it is always the scheme of the autocratic leader to方案, and thus bring down those with whom he feels he is in competition for popularity.

The autocratic clergyman can always be identified by attitudes of jealousy and envy. He has such attitudes because of his craving for recognition and position among the people. The ego of some religious leaders lends them to being competitive in their work, and thus envious of the work of others. In their envy, they are quick to criticize another leader and to make judgmental statements concerning the work of others. Because they have separated themselves from others, their jealousy moves them to be highly critical of those from whom they have separated themselves. When the performance of their group falls short of the performance of a neighboring group, envious leaders are quick to criticize the works of others.

E. Pharisaical leaders are slanderous of others.

Jealousy and envy usually manifest a lack of self esteem or confidence. It is the nature of those who have low self esteem, or lack a great deal of confidence, to be critical of others. If one has low self esteem and lacks confidence, but is autocratic in reference to leadership, then he is often explosive in his criticism of others. In fact, the criticism usually progresses to outright slander. Envious leadership resorts to speaking lies about others in order to exalt their own position or to protect their territory of influence.

Envious leaders are often slanderous (See 3 Jn 9,10). Bar-jesus was a slanderous man who would “not cease perverting the right ways of the Lord” (At 13:10). The Pharisees had mastered the art of slander. They slanderously accused Jesus (Mt 27:12). They even made efforts to bring false witnesses before the Jewish council in order to have Jesus condemned during His trials (Mt 26:59,60). Pilate knew that they did such because of envy (Mt 27:18). The apostle Paul was slandered by arrogant leaders in the Roman church (Rm 3:8). John, the apostle of love, was slandered (3 Jn 9,10). And it is because of envy that many righteous men of God have been falsely accused by those who were driven by envy.

Slander is one of the most vile means by which jealous and envious leaders deal with one another. Through it, characters are defamed and men’s reputations are often ruined. Pharisaical leadership is often identified by those who seek to defame competition in an effort to maintain position and financial security. It would be good for such leaders to fearfully read Proverbs 10:18 (See Ps 15:3; 101:5):
Whoever hides hatred has lying lips, 
And whoever spreads slander is a fool.

Pharisaical preachers often play conformity games in order to keep everyone regimented to their checklist of rules. They thus ask among themselves derogatory questions and make insinuating statements. “Are you teaching what has been accepted?” “You are holding a controversial position.” “What is your relationship with the church?” “Have you checked that thought with others?” “Who gave you the authority to ...?”

When I was a young preacher, an older preacher made a statement to me concerning another preacher who was challenging the traditional thinking on a point that was accepted at the time. He said of the other preacher, “He is an old man living off by himself.” I did not first understand the derogatory sentiment of the statement or the Pharisaical game the critic was trying to play with my mind. He thought that if I believed the person was a theological hermit, then I would not listen to the “old man”.

Young preachers are often the victims of these pharisaical preacher games. I would urge young preachers to listen to the word of God. Receive no criticism about the beliefs of another unless you have personally talked to that person or objectively studied his writings. Sometimes “old men off by themselves” have some incredible wisdom to be discovered. At least they are unintimidated by the status quo, and thus think for themselves.

F. Pharisaical leaders use smooth and fair speech.

The context in which Paul used the phrase “smooth and fair speech” (some translations read: “appealing words and flattering speech”), was a context wherein he condemned those who would divide Christians from one another by binding where God had not bound (Rm 16:17,18). In the Colossian letter he also referred to the deceptive speaking of those who would seek to lead the disciples away. “And this I say so that no one should deceive you with persuasive words” (Cl 2:4).

Religious leaders who have ulterior motives that are outside the truth of God, will often use smooth and fair speech to accomplish their goals. It is for this reason that Christians must always be cautious about those who would seek to persuade others with “smooth and fair speech”. Such speech can be the disguise of a heart that seeks to draw away disciples after one’s self. Such speech can be the cloak for questionable motives by one who seeks to destroy another. Leaders must always be on guard when voicing opinions about the character and work of others.
G. Pharisaical leaders are arrogant.

Because of their competitive arrogance, some in the church of Rome slandered, and thus twisted the words of Paul concerning his teaching on grace (Rm 3:8). They affirmed that Paul said, “Let us do evil that good may come” (Rm 3:8). And in such a manner will arrogant leaders behave. They will twist the teaching of others in order to exalt themselves. Peter taught that such people are untaught and unstable (2 Pt 3:15,16). And because of their own ignorance and unstable emotional character, they will distort the teachings of others. They will even twist the inspired truth that was revealed through an apostle of Christ.

From the character of those who slanderously spoke against Paul in Corinth, we would conclude that there was a spirit of arrogance in the hearts of some in the Corinthian church. Their argument against the validity of Paul’s apostleship manifested their arrogance. Their arrogance was quite strong since it was manifested even though the signs of an apostle had been worked among them (2 Co 12:12).

When ungodly men covet positions and purse, they will be relentless against those who would endanger what they presume to be and have. Unlike Michael the archangel, who would not speak arrogantly against even the devil (Jd 9), arrogant leaders have no inhibitions about twisting the statements of others. They have no conscience about quoting others out of context. They will read another’s writings between the lines and assume the author is saying something he never intended to say. They will arrogantly assume that they are bastions of the truth because of their studies about the truth (See 1 Tm 1:5-7). Unfortunately, they never come to a knowledge of the truth because their arrogance blocks them from understanding that which is essential for correct biblical interpretation. And that which is essential for understanding truth is a humble and loving heart.

But in their love of being first, arrogant leaders psychologically project their unrighteous motives and personalities on others whom they believe are manipulating the “laity” for their position. Arrogance is ego run wild, and thus a pompous preacher is a reference point for destruction among God’s people. Arrogant leaders always produce denominations since they draw people unto themselves. And once they have drawn the disciples unto themselves, they credit their behavior by the size of their congregation.

H. Pharisaical leaders elevate tradition above Scripture.

We must not underestimate the power of tradition and the willingness of men to perpetuate the same as authority in religion. When traditional interpretations of the Scriptures come into the picture,
the Pharisaical leader would rather continue the propagation of twisted scriptures than restore objective Bible study in order to correct past mistakes. For this reason, “prophets” and “apostles” will continue to arise who will distort the word of God. As noted in a previous point, the untaught and unstable will twist the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Pt 3:15,16).

I have always been amazed at what sources of authority preachers, who have ceased study of the Bible, come up with in order to justify their messages. By ignoring diligent study of the Bible, they will often make “God-told-me” statements and reveal “dreams” and “visions” they have supposedly had in order to strike awe in the hearts of those they seek to impress. In order to have some source of authority other than the word of God, they will look to their own inventions in order to convince others that they are representing the voice of God.

This is not unlike the situation into which Jesus came in the first century. If the Pharisees would have objectively understood the Old Testament prophecies in reference to Jesus, they would have had to accept Him as the Messiah. But they refused to see Jesus in prophecy because of their distorted views of the Messiah. Jesus said of them, “You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life. It is these that testify of Me” (Jn 5:39). The Pharisees could not objectively understand the Scriptures because they had a wrong understanding of the Messiah and the prophesied kingdom of God. Their traditional interpretations, therefore, caused them to distort prophecy to conform to their materialistic hopes for a restored glory of Israel. Their canonized interpretations hindered objective Bible study and individual searching of the Scriptures.

One of the greatest denominating factors of the church in Africa is tradition. This is a continual struggle among those who seek to rid themselves of what they believe is a bondage of the past. As educated leaders arise, young leaders see the inconsistency of some traditions and the bondage it continually brings into their lives as they seek to adapt to a new and changing world. Because of this historical foundation that is built on honored traditions, Africa will remain very traditional for many years to come. Until leaders start reasoning for themselves and allowing freedom in areas of opinion, churches will continue to struggle over traditional practices and traditional interpretations of the word of God. This struggle will continue until the next generation of postmodern Africa has established its own traditions over which the generation that follows them will also struggle. This is the nature of Africa.

But Africa also has a historical religious past to overcome. Because of Africa’s traditional nature, religious be-
behavioral traditions and interpretations of Scripture that were imported by missionaries decades ago from Europe and America have a firm hold on the minds of Africans. From America, a legalistic approach to righteousness was brought over to Africa as missionaries came out of a church that was struggling itself with patterns of religious behavior that came from Europe. Since the African is very traditional, it is difficult to generate original African thinking in matters of opinion and original interpretation and application of Scripture that is truly African. It has been difficult for the African to revise American interpretations and applications of Scripture in those areas of freedom where God intended that culture be allowed to play a part in making His word come alive in our lives. But I see a time when a new leadership in Africa will lead the way. There is enlightenment at the end of the theological tunnel of tradition.

I. Pharisaical leaders are often legalistic.

Of all the problems that promote denominationalism, legalism is at the top of the list. Legalistic thinking uses tradition as an instrument to create unique parties that are separate from one another. Legalism is an attitude that moves a leader to make judgment calls in reference to other people on the basis of whether others conform to the established code of conduct that the legalists believes is essential in order to maintain righteousness, and thus fellowship with others. The legalist will always be on guard in his inspection of others in order to promote conformity to what he believes is essential for salvation. His attitude will always lead him to question those who do not conform to his established code of belief and conduct. The legalist is inherently suspicious of others.

The legalist resorts to a checklist of law that makes him feel confident that the performance of the checklist will produce his justification before God. Add to this checklist of law numerous traditions of men, and we have the religious scenario of the legalistic scribes and Pharisees in the first century. Of them Jesus said, “For they bind up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders” (Mt 23:4).

The clergy is often legalistic as the scribes and Pharisees simply because a legal checklist is a means by which one can judge the performance and conformity of others. And in being a judge of others, one’s position as an authoritative interpreter is required in order that adherents are taught the traditions and that the same are obedient to the letter of the law. The people, therefore, expect the clergy to know the legal checklist. This expectation is so great that several years of training in the “law” (checklist) is often necessary in or-
der to qualify one for a pastoral position among many denominational churches.

I was once meeting with a group of denominational preachers. During the meeting one particular preacher was combing through the rule book of his particular denomination in search of a particular point of “law.” I noticed in the book that it had numerous highlights and underlined sentences on every page and in almost every paragraph. I asked the preacher, “What are you doing?” He replied, “This is the book for my existence as a preacher.”

In the legal system of Judaism, it was the duty of the scribes to know and interpret the law and tradition. The Pharisees implemented the scribes’ interpretation of the law in the lives of the people. For this reason the scribes and Pharisees are presented together in the inspired records in their encounters with Jesus. The lesson is that in a legal system of religion, “doctors of the law” become necessary since the “law” becomes so complicated with tradition that only professional interpreters can understand it. Add to this fact the lack of willingness on the part of the people to study their Bibles, and we come up with the perfect environment for professionals to preside over the minds of the people with the authority of their interpretations of the law. In such scenarios, churches often make sure that preachers who are candidates for hiring—sounds like corporate talk—have degrees that qualify them as “doctors of the law.” There is a neo-Judaism still with us today. The laws are different, but the religious system is the same.

Once the “doctors of the law” were established in the system of Judaism, unity was promoted by intimidating everyone into conformity to the accepted traditions and interpretations of the doctrinal lawyers. If one did not conform to the established codes, debate ensued (See Mk 7:1-9).

Nothing has changed since the days of the Pharisees. Neopharisees promote unity, but their concept of unity is deceiving. Their understanding of unity is based on conformity to established and excepted methods and opinions. Their lectures on unity are actually a disguise of their efforts to clone disciples into a union that is regulated by a legal compliance to the creeds and traditions of men. For this reason, disciples must be on guard to clearly understand what one actually means when he trumpets the theme of unity without promoting freedom in Christ. Sermons on unity that make no mention of freedom are usually the proclamations of pharisaical clone-makers.

When churches become institutionally legalistic in their attitude and behavior, they present a very challenging obstacle to their preachers. The preachers are pressured into conformity for the sake of a salary or the urge to be accepted. They must believe and behave as the established leaders of the church. In order for the church to guarantee their conformity, lengthy study in schools that are approved by the church are required. When
these preachers write or preach, their research must be from the accepted authorities of the church. Their papers must be footnoted with a host of accepted authorities from the institution for which they preach.

These requirements place a tremendous burden on Bible students and sincere young preachers. Such a religious atmosphere crushes objective Bible research. It intimidates Bible students into conforming to the accepted theologies and methodologies of the institution from which one draws his salary. All such intimidation locks a church into a time warp that is programmed for extinction as just another denomination.

Since denominationalism is based on the foundation of a strict acceptance and compliance to the particular identity marks of each unique religious group, the preachers of such groups are inherently legalistic in their obedience to their checklist of religious codes. They must be in order to promote the existence of their unique party and means of support. In order to qualify for a “job” as a preacher, the preacher is under pressure to know every article of the checklist of tradition that identifies his potential employer. Once employed, he must zealously promote the group’s checklist of laws in order to guarantee his job. In the promotion of each unique checklist, each preacher becomes legalistic in behavior, and subsequently denominational in his relationship with other churches and leaders.

Does all this sound confusing? It does. It does because the desire of men to manufacture denominations is totally contrary to the spirit of freedom for which Jesus set us free. When men promote and perpetuate systems of religiosity in order to provide a means of livelihood, and a position as an authoritative interpreter of the “law,” then the sin of true denominationalism is manifested in the hearts of the leaders. It is for this reason that Paul wrote to Titus in order to explain that the factious man who functions as a scribe or Pharisee toward others “is perverted and is sinning, being self condemned” (Ti 3:11).

When the preceding religious system is a part of the missionary system that represents a particular church, the church has a mechanism by which to propagate itself to other areas throughout the world. Because the financial lifeline of the missionary is connected to the traditions of the supporting church or organization, he is obligated to promote the traditions of those who sign his paycheck. It is for this reason that it is difficult for restorationists to rise out of the ranks of the missionary force throughout the world. They are far away from home. They have families who live in often hostile environments. When they return home to raise funds, they are intimidated into compromising their beliefs for the sake of raising money for their work. They are often placed in the position of Balaam to
compromise their beliefs and behavior for the sake of their support. As a result, the denominationalism of the supporting churches is perpetuated throughout the world through the one they intimidate into towing the line of legal purity. My hat goes off to those world evangelists who have not up with this put.

Because of the financial trap of church support, Paul chose to support himself as a tentmaker. He would not allow himself to be brought into the bondage of those who would control him by signing his paychecks. He thus declared his freedom from the bondage of being supported by the Corinthians (1 Co 9:15). He boasted to them that he preached to them free of the strings of their checkbooks. He said, “It would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void” (1 Co 9:15). Because he supported himself, he could thus declare his freedom from the support of all men (1 Co 9:19).

Young preachers should listen closely to what Paul said. Each preacher must declare his freedom before those who support him. If you do not, then the supporters will always hold a paycheck over your head in order to control your mind and ministry. If you sell your mind and ministry for a price, you are no better off than Balaam who ran greedily after money (2 Pt 2:15). Preachers who sell their ministry have lost their calling. They are preaching for the sake of gain.

**J. Pharisical leaders are obsessed with money.**

Of all the points that identify one to be of the professional clergy, this is probably one of the most telling, but least admitted by the professional himself. As mentioned before, Peter identified this mark of unrighteous leadership in the character of Balaam, and those who would follow his example. “They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor; who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Pt 2:15). Such men “run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward” (Jd 11). The Holy Spirit slipped in an explanatory note in the book of Luke when He explained in the midst of the controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees that the Pharisees were lovers of money (Lk 16:14). We cannot but think that worry over money was behind much of the antagonism of the Pharisees against Jesus. The sin of the Pharisees and Balaam was that they allowed money to determine their beliefs and ministry. In some cases, it developed in their thinking a spirit of competition among themselves and those they opposed.

The Pharisees were so obsessed with money that they sinned against the law of God in order that their financial support be guaranteed. Under the Old Testament law, the children were to financially provide for their parents in their old age (Mk 7:9:10). But the Pharisees
rejected the commandment of God concerning this responsibility (Mk 7:9). Jesus said, “But you say, ‘If a man will say to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you is Corban”’ (that is to say, given to God), then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother ...” (Mk 7:11,12). In other words, the money that was to go to the support of the aged mothers and fathers was claimed by the religious leaders in order that it go to them. I would suggest that we never underestimate the influence money has over the thinking of those who run greedily after the error of Balaam.

The Holy Spirit called the practice of determining one’s message or ministry for the sake of money as an abomination. It is an abomination to God simply because the hireling will twist his message or attack others for the sake of maintaining his financial security. As a result of Paul’s work in Ephesus, the religious business of idol-making was greatly affected. It was affected to the extent of endangering the financial security of those who were in the idol-making business. A prominent leader among the idol makers, Demetrius, subsequently took the initiative to stir up his fellow idol-makers in order to turn the people against Paul (At 19:24-26). His accusation against Paul to his followers was that their source of support was endangered (At 19:27). And if endangered, their place of religious assemblies was also endangered (At 19:27). When the truth affects one’s personal finances and the traditional place of religious assembly, look out.

The result of the preceding uprising in Ephesus was that those who were financially endangered were filled with wrath (At 19:28). In their wrath, they motivated the worshipers to reaffirm their error (At 19:28). And then they moved with malice against those who represented and preached the truth (At 19:29). When the purse of the clergy is threatened, expect nothing short of the reaction that is similar to the reaction of the worshipers of the temple of Diana in Ephesus. Religious workers who see their financial security endangered by the preaching of the truth will often manifest that they have been running in the way of Balaam for hire.

Titus was dealing with similar religious leaders. In Paul’s encouragement of Titus, he identified these leaders as “rebellious and idle talkers and deceivers” (Ti 1:10). He informed Titus that their mouths must be stopped because they were subverting whole households (Ti 1:11). The reason their mouths had to be stopped was because they were teaching false things for the purpose of receiving dishonest gain (Ti 1:11). Paul exhorted Titus, “Rebuke them sharply so that they may be sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and com-
mandments of men who turn from the truth” (Ti 1:13,14). Paul identified the religious leaders as “defiled and unbelieving” (Ti 1:15). “Even their mind and conscience are defiled” (Ti 1:15). He concluded his condemnation of such religious leaders by saying, “They profess that they know God. But in works they deny Him, being abominable and disobedient and worthless for any good work” (Ti 1:16). Such are very harsh words for brethren who would run greedily after the error of Balaam to preach for money or distort the truth of God because of financial support. It is for this reason that the financially denominated preacher will often lash out against any who would endanger the signing of his paycheck. Money changes a man’s focus.

When men take advantage of the sincerity of others for the sake of gain, then they are guilty of using sincere believers for their own selfish means. One becomes a denominational clergyman when he believes “that godliness is a means to gain” (1 Tm 6:5). When a church is established by one who seeks to use the members of the church as a “means to gain”, then he is professional and denominational in his behavior. He is denominational because he will guard his group from supposed “sheep stealers” lest he lose his means of support. Paul told Timothy, “From such withdraw yourself” (1 Tm 6:5). He told Timothy to do this because the one who has “run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward” (Jd 11) has judged himself to be using the church as a means of financial security.

The greedy preacher, therefore, denounces his group from others in order to protect his means of support. He will even stop God’s method of evangelism. When some of the members of “his church” want to go out and start another assembly, the one who is using the church for the sake of gain will often seek to stop such efforts in order that contributions not leave the church coffers. Paul instructed the faithful to withdraw themselves from such preachers because their minds are on money and not kingdom business. They have lost sight of the mission of Jesus because of money. They stop evangelism in order that their local budgets be maintained. Such was the “error of Balaam”. These practices are an abomination to God because the lost are sacrificed for salaries.

In Christendom as a whole throughout the world, there is a tidal wave of people moving to small assemblies in homes. They have discovered the failure of the corporate institutional church and the dynamics of small groups of Christians meeting together for the purpose of community outreach. In order to restore relational Christianity, those who are seeking to know one another better have discovered that only in small group meetings this can be accomplished. To move the church from house to house into all the world, they have discovered that they must move away from the confines of stationary places of meeting in order to take their Christian behavior back to
their homes and into their immediate communities.

But with this restoration of New Testament house assemblies, there has been an onslaught of criticism from the established and institutional churches. The criticism is across the board with all religious groups. Institutional churches are usually posting their opposition for two reasons: control and money. In their opposition, some institutional church leaders have admitted that the financial foundation of their struggling churches is being eroded by those who seek to meet in homes. Unfortunately, such leaders have led themselves to believe that unless all members of a particular church meet together as a financially denominated group of contributors, they have no financial power to work or control contributed funds. Such arguments for single-assemblies of the church are carnal, an abomination to the Lord. If you are wondering how house assemblies can evangelistically reach a world for Christ, then determine how the church in Jerusalem, Antioch or Ephesus collected and supported evangelists while meeting in houses throughout those cities. If you find no directions on how they did such, then conclude two things: First, it was accomplished in the first century, and second, since there are no directions on how such was accomplished, you have freedom to work out how you will do it today.

The point is that the church must never be viewed with a corporate church mentality. It is the church, not some corporation that executive financiers manipulate in order to produce a product for sale. God’s work is not dependent on money. If it is, then why does the church grow faster among the poor than among the rich? Maybe God is trying to preach a sermon to the financial denominationalist and the professional clergy who think that God’s mission to the world is regulated by money.

K. Pharisaical leaders are professionals.

The church is under commandment to support those who preach the gospel to the lost. “Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel” (1 Co 9:14). Since the gospel – the good news about the cross and resurrection – is preached to the lost, not the believer, for the believer already has heard and obeyed the gospel, then it is imperative that the church support evangelists to preach to the lost. John reinforced this principle by deduction in 3 John. He argued that since the evangelists “went forth for the sake of the Name, taking nothing from the Gentiles ... we ought to show hospitality [support] to such men so that we might be fellow workers for the truth” (3 Jn 7,8). The
evangelists went forth to preach the Name of Jesus to the lost. We, therefore, should support them. They did not take up a contribution from the Gentiles to whom they preached. We, therefore, should support them. If we would be fellow workers with preachers who are preaching to the lost, then we must support them. When a preacher “goes forth” to preach the gospel to the lost, then he deserves to be supported by those who stay home.

But what about those who have made it their profession to be teachers for the saved? According to the instructions of Paul, shepherd/teachers are to be supported with double salary (1 Tm 5:17). One salary is for living and the other is for helping the needy. Though Paul supported himself during most of his ministry among the Corinthians, he had a right to receive their support (1 Co 9:3-7). It is right for those who are taught in the word to support those who teach all good things (Gl 6:6). Those who do minister the word of God to the sheep of God have a right to be supported in some way.

The problem with the term “full-time” is that it has come to refer to one whose profession it is to do religious work. Such a one is known for being a “man of the cloth.” He often has “his church” from which he draws his means of financial security. Some churches require this person to have a diploma or degree from some accepted religious college or university. A title such as “reverend,” “pastor” or “doctor” is placed before the “Doctor of Theology,” and thus we have a full blown professional clergy that is set apart from the laity, the people. Such concepts are nowhere found in Holy Scripture, neither in the historical records of the church for three centuries after the establishment of the church.

In the denominated religious world, once the professional clergy is established, there is tremendous intimidation within the clergy that every “pastor” conform to the accepted code of the religious institution that signs his paycheck. Nicodemus felt this pressure when he came to Jesus at night in order not to be discovered by his peers (Jn 3:1,2). Many of the priests of Judaism waited several years after the establishment of the church before they obeyed the gospel (At 6:7). They waited because of the intimidation of the Pharisees. Clergymen play on the feelings of young preachers to be accepted by the established hierarchy of clergymen. They play political church games in order that all fall in line with the norms of those they believe are the noted preachers in the brotherhood.

Professionalism is always identified by a spirit of competition. Since the clergyman is a professional, it is easy for a preacher to develop a competitive spirit in reference to other preachers. When preachers compete for positions with large churches, they are in competition with one another. When preachers establish programs with feelings of doing better than someone else, they are professional, using the work of the church.
as a playing field to carry out their competitive feelings with their fellow preachers. The problem with a competitive spirit is that one is often driven to the position of criticizing another’s work in order to exalt his own. Bring this competitive spirit into the realm of fundraising from churches, and some ungodly speech invariably comes out of the mouth of the professional who is competing for support. He will often criticize the work of another in order to recruit support for his own program. There is an old English word for this practice. It is the word “gainsaying.” A gainsayer will speak evil of another’s work in order to gain support for his own work (See Rm 10:21; Jd 11).

Once the clergy is established within a religious group, it is difficult for one of that clergy to initiate a restorational paradigm shift. Fellow clergymen are quick to bring “radicals” and “controversialists” into line through intimidation and defamation of character. The clergy will, as Diotrephes, speak malicious words against their fellow preachers. Pulpits and lectureship platforms will be used as instruments of intimidation to bring back into line those who walk contrary to either tradition or established power structures. Restorationists who may arise in such fellowships are usually kicked out of the “synagogues” (church buildings), stoned with tongues, and slandered in order to generate suspicion in the minds of the church concerning their person and teaching. Professional clergymen rarely deal honorably with those who do not march according to their beat. It is for this reason that few restorationists arise from the ranks of the professional clergy. The security of their livelihood dominates their courage.

As previously mentioned, the past three decades have seen a tremendous surge of interest in and movement to house (cell) churches throughout the world. This phenomenon has grown out of a desire of believers to establish a more relational behavior among themselves and an evangelistic outreach in communities. Small groups of believers have gone to their homes in order to escape the cold ceremonial traditionalism and indifferent relationships that are characteristic with assembly-oriented institutional churches. As would be expected, the professional preaching fraternity, or those who feel that they must maintain control over the hearts and minds of individual believers, has often risen in opposition to this worldwide restoration of relational Christianity.

In view of the definition of the professional preacher, it is easy to understand why this opposition has arisen. The clergy seeks to maintain control. But the house church member seeks the personal headship of Jesus alone. The clergy seeks to secure his financial base. But the house church member, though often sending his contributions to collective church coffers, is seeking to meet the direct
needs of those he or she encounters in a living room environment. The clergy seeks to be the center of reference to all that happens in the church. The house church members seek to have Jesus only as their center of reference. The clergy wants “his church”, and thus the house church appears to disinvest the ownership of the church by the clergy. The establishment of house churches threatens many practices of the established clergy. And rightly so. Multiple-assembly churches naturally weaken the dominant control the clergy has over the members of the church.

Unfortunately, when one develops the spirit of a professional, his position and validity is assured by the number of people he can gather before him. The larger the assembly, the more secure the supported professional is. Once one’s ego has been satisfied by great numbers, professional pulpiteers judge their skills by the rise or fall of the attendance. Some elders use attendance and contribution records as standards of judgment by which to determine the success of their preacher. Everyone knows this, though nothing is usually said. As a result, insecure preachers thumb through attendance cards on Sunday afternoon in order to determine how long they will stay at a particular church. When it comes to attendance and support, there is a certain unspoken paranoia among professionals that often warps their view of their success as a preacher.

When something happens that threatens support, the professional will sometimes do and say things he later regrets. But such is the spirit of professionalism that has so many good preachers in the bondage of those who sign their paychecks. Preachers are usually innocent of professionalism, but the churches for which they preach have often forced them into being professionals. I like what Paul said to the Corinthians on this matter in reference to the financial support of the church. “I am free from all men!” (1 Co 9:19).

Another manifestation of professionalism among preachers is the attempt of some to legally copyright the truth. Plagiarism is the word-for-word copying of another author’s writings, and then claiming that those words are his own. It includes the manner by which one presents his material. Such is dishonest, and in the literary legal world, against the law. Even the theme or plot of a book can be copyrighted in order that another not steal one’s original story.

The professional clergy often confuses the original ideas of man and the revelation of God’s word. The professional often assumes that his study and writing of biblical truth can be copyrighted. It is plagiarism to copy another’s material word-for-word and claim such as one’s own words. But biblical truth cannot be copyrighted. It is the presumption of a professional clergy that biblical truth can be claimed as one’s own thoughts. If I through my studies discover truth in the word of God, and then write such in a book, you have free access to
that truth. I can stake no claim to the truth by seeking to copyright God’s revelation. I have no claim to originality of biblical truth, and thus have no claim to assume that biblical truth originated with me. If you read my book, learn biblical truth through my studies, then the truth is yours as a gift of God. You have no obligation to give me credit for truth you have discovered in God’s word through the reading of my book. It would only be arrogant capitalism on my part to think that you should give me credit for truth you learned that originated with God Himself.

I was once sitting in an audience when a brother stood up and announced to others a Bible course that he had written and was about to publish. In reference to the part of the course that dealt with obedience to the gospel, he wanted to make it clear that his idea of obedience to the gospel by immersion originated with me. I felt very uncomfortable about this announcement and told him so. For me to assume originality to the biblical truth that immersion was in obedience to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus would endanger my soul. Because the brother lived in a very capitalistic society, he felt obligated to give credit to me for a biblical truth he read in one of my books. The pressure of being accused of plagiarism moved him to do something that was contrary to God’s free revelation of the truth to all men, regardless of the medium by which he learned that truth.

In the capitalistic professionalism of some societies I have seen some writers who think they have a copyright on the truth of God’s word. Such is a sign of materialistic capitalism and a manifestation of some who would use the truths of God’s word as a means for gain. In the world of the professional clergy, some men have exalted themselves through their efforts to copyright the truth for the sake of profit.

L. Pharisical leaders focus on academics and position.

The professional positions of the pharisical leader is identified by an emphasis on institutional education, which education is often used as a theological wall that separates the clergy from the laity. In the religious society of Judaism, the scribes and Pharisees dominated the theological arena. In comparison to their education, they viewed the leaders of Jesus’ disciples as simply “uneducated and ordinary men” (At 4:13). The apostles were judged uneducated because they had no formal education from the accepted theological institutions within the educational system of Judaism. They were ordinary in comparison to the pomp that was characteristic of those who were accepted in the religious society of Jerusalem because of their education.

Many churches have long since moved into an era where resumes (CVs) without degrees are placed at the bottom of the pile. One traditional religious group in South Africa requires that their
preachers have eight years of theological studies before they can be ordained as preachers in the churches of their fellowship. The theological schools of church fellowships have for many years moved into the age where theological schools take pride in accreditation, which accreditation often takes their policy making outside the leadership of the church and places it under the authority of a civil state or organization of denominational theological schools outside their fellowship. These churches have now relinquished the right to train their own evangelists. Their responsibility and right to train their own evangelists have been relinquished to institutions outside the equipping responsibilities of the church. They have submitted the education of their evangelists to parachurch educational institutions that function apart from the church. This is the world of pastoral professionalism. It is a world of competition where preacher applications are valued by the level and number of degrees tagged behind the applicant’s name. It is a world where one’s knowledge of the Bible and work in the vineyard takes second place to professional education in the institutions of “higher” theological education.

As the director of a church-sponsored school that is focused on equipping those who have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints and evangelism of the world, I often receive requests from students to offer some degree. The pressure from the denominational world has developed a competitive environment wherein our men feel that they must compete with the degrees of the professionally trained clergy. Everyone else is “degreed”, and thus we have led ourselves to believe that to have some sort of credibility in this arena of competition, we must also have a few letters behind our names.

Denominationalism is identified by a clergy that is professional. The clergy is officially ordained after years of professional education. It is certainly not wrong to seek education in the word of God from every source possible, for you are reading this book in order to be a better evangelist. In fact, it would be negligent on the part of God’s people to refuse to continually educate themselves in the word (See 2 Tm 2:15). However, to do so in order to gain advantage over another or to be considered spiritually superior to a fellow brother, is competitive in spirit. Some have become no different than those who hang framed degrees on office walls in order to impress and exalt themselves above those who enter. While carrying on a theological discussion with someone before their office desk, they glance occasionally at their educational trophy in order to remind the humble opponent in the discussion that they have the upper educational hand. Professionalism in the clergy separates the clergy from the people, and thus assumes that the clergy is of another class of spirituality than the people.

Some religious groups are locked into a religious time warp by a clergy who fears for their positions and a salary that would provide for their families. One
would ask, therefore, How are those who are in such situations able to initiate a restoration to simple New Testament Christianity? This is not an easy question to answer simply because of the tremendous religious machinery in which many preachers are caught. It will take great courage on the part of those preachers who are caught in such systems to come out. They are usually cast out before they voluntarily come out. But praise and honor must go to those men who have taken the initiative throughout the centuries to courageously stand up and say to their denomination and peers, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard” (At 4:19,20).

Chapter 8

Wondering Where You Are?

Because we often do not recognize that we are behaving in a sectarian manner, we must move into the feelings and emotions that cause denominational division. We must seek to identify our own thinking and emotions concerning a sectarian spirit that continually plagues the harmony of the church at any time in history.

There is a psychology about sectarianism that is often difficult to identify in our own lives. On the other hand, it may be easy to identify, but difficult to confess. We accuse others of being infected with the virus, but fail to look at our own beliefs and behavior. So unless we dig deep into our own thinking, we will never discover the root cause of a behavior that is contrary to the unity that is inherent among those who have obeyed the gospel.

Every person who claims to be a Christian must eventually question whether he or she is manifesting a spirit of exclusion in reference to other baptized believers. If one does not do some real soul-searching in this matter, then certainly he or she will eventually separate himself from others in both spirit and behavior. If one discovers in his soul-searching that he is sectarian and denominational in belief and behavior, then there are some serious New Testament teachings with which one must deal. A sectarian disposition and behavior is contrary to the very nature of the universal oneness of the body of Christ. It is a practice that attacks the very heart of the fellowship of the church.

I have discovered that it is difficult for most people to acknowledge the fact that they might have a sectarian spirit about other people who profess to be Christian. When we believe that we have a special

Self-examination Is An Essential Spiritual Responsibility.
claim on restoration theology and truth, and thus think we have fully restored the New Testament church, our thinking often blocks our self-examination. Some are often so sure of themselves in their restoration heritage that they think it inconceivable that they could be denominational in their own relationships with others. To even suggest that the church could become or is denominational in some areas of the world is often rejected because we have assumed that such could never happen. But in some cases it has.

There are those, however, who have just acknowledged and accepted the fact that they are just another denomination. Some of these have unfortunately resigned themselves to the heretical thought that God accepts denominational behavior. However, there are those of us who firmly believe that this is certainly not what God would have among His children. Since there is no happy outcome at the end of the road to apostasy away from the truth, we should be greatly concerned about venturing onto that road. It is a road about which Paul said is filled with the potholes of “all deception of wickedness among those who perish” because those on this road do not receive the love of the truth. It is a road that ends in condemnation because men “did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (See 2 Th 2:9-12). Don’t go down that road.

The Protestant world is filled with an assortment of churches that have claimed to have reformed “to” the church of the New Testament. But because they had no real theology of restoration, tradition and humanistic theologies have diverted them from reaching their desired goals. There are also those who have claimed a final restoration of the New Testament church. It is often those of this heritage who have a difficult time understanding the fact that both reformation and restoration movements circle around and become denominational within themselves. When they do circle around, it is very difficult for them to admit that they have become sectarian and denominational in their belief and behavior.

And then there are those who have claimed to have restored the “Pentecostal” church of the New Testament. Their vibrant assemblies and emotional outbursts which are ascribed to the Holy Spirit are a supposed proof that the church that was established in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost has been restored. This movement is based on little biblical knowledge. “Pastors” rely on “God-told-me” statements in order to reassure adherents that they are speaking for God. Unfortunately, the “pastor” in the church on the next block is also saying “God told me.” However, he speaks a different message, adding to the confusion that prevails throughout the Pentecost/charismatic movement. Emotions have supplanted the word of God, and thus churches are

The answer To The Problem Is Not To Forsake The Solution.

Subjective Experiences Are No Replacement For The Word Of God.
carried to and fro after the latest subjective “prophecy” or “vision” of those who depend more on man than the word of God.

Regardless of where each one of us is in reference to our thinking, we must continually seek out the word of God and read. Anyone who does not feel that he must be reminded of where he should be is on his way away from God. It is for this reason that any true restoration effort is identified by those who are diligently searching the Scriptures in order to discover the will of God (See At 17:11).

Whatever your specific case may be, I would like to challenge you with the following thoughts that might help to determine if you harbor a sectarian attitude that has given birth in your life to the practice of denominationalism. I write this review of the preceding chapters in order to clearly identify the problem and to stimulate some serious self-evaluation concerning our possible exclusiveness that is carried out in denominational behavior. This is necessary because most people do not believe that they are sectarian in their attitudes and denominational in their behavior. They usually resent being approached with the possibility that they are. They know that denominationalism is wrong among God’s people, but they have never considered the fact that they may be that which they condemn. This is a very discomforting thought, and thus most religious leaders simply ignore the subject. But as God’s people, we do not have the option of turning our thinking away from this subject.

A. Sectarian denominational concerns:

Admittedly, the following points are my subjective judgments. You have the right to ignore or revise them. You even have the right to disagree. Nevertheless, they are set forth for the purpose of identifying denominational practices that result from a sectarian spirit. Whether you agree or disagree with my definition, you must admit that the content of each point sets forth something that is contrary to the spirit of New Testament Christianity. It is for this reason that we must challenge ourselves continually to rethink our attitudes and behavior in reference to sectarian-denominationalism.

1. Obsession with control: The sectarian-denominational person feels that his control over the affairs of the local church where he preaches or is a leader is threatened when challenged with the work and leadership of others inside or outside his group. He is thus very protective of his position and his group. His protectionism lends him to being suspicious about what he considers competitive leadership, innovative programs of work, or personalities that may have more influence over his group than he has. He continually feels threatened by other leaders, feeling that he must guard his position from those who might take control. In order to guard his leadership, he separates his group.
from others, often launching slanderous attacks against other leaders in order to keep his adherents away from influences outside his group.

2. **Obsession with territory:** The sectarian-denominational person feels that there is a territory within which his local group meets that cannot be invaded by those who live outside this territory and are not “members of his church”. His claim to a territory is often a cover for a spirit of control over those members who are within his territory. When other churches are working within his territory, he feels threatened in the sense that he might lose members to the invading churches, and subsequently lose his financial base.

Territorial protectionism is sometimes the result of the denominated church feeling embarrassed about not being evangelistic in its own community. When others “come close” in their evangelistic outreach, the lukewarm or stagnant church is embarrassed, and thus territorially defensive.

The sectarian-denominational person often seeks discussions with the threatening invaders of his territory in order to work out territorial boundaries. When the boundaries are established, then the sectarian denominationalist withdraws himself within his boundaries and keeps others out. By doing such, his isolationist spirit is manifested and his denominational behavior confirmed.

3. **Obsession with competition:** As the leader of a particular church, the sectarian leader believes that he must be consulted before supposed competition enters his realm of work or self-designated area of responsibility. He has voted himself into the office of territorial guard over his domain. Those who are not a member of his party must receive his permission before making any invasions into his claimed territory of ministry. He feels hurt if permission is not first granted. But he is confused. His hurt feelings are the result of viewing other Christians in a competitive role. He thus psychologically projects his competitive feelings on others, thinking they are in competition with him for territory and converts.

4. **Obsession with decisions:** The sectarian denominational person seeks official decisions in reference to catechism and creed concerning methodology or biblical interpretation. His assumption is that church decisions must be made in areas of opinion in order to establish unity in the church. Since he believes that “division” is caused when others do not conform to the established methodologies and interpretations of his group, he assumes that others are guilty of “dividing the church” because they do not conform to accepted traditions. The sectarian denominationalist’s answer to division is to establish a “synod” wherein decisions can be made to “establish unity in the church” on the foundation of agreed upon teachings, work, territory or interpretations.

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5. **Obsession with names:** The sectarian denominational person feels that the unique name of his church is sacred, whether derived from the New Testament or the mental gymnastics of an imaginative religious leader. The name of his church is sacred because it identifies those of his party. The name thus maintains his party’s separation from other groups who do not conform to his traditions in methodology, interpretation, or simply submit to his control. He believes that names are so important in labeling those of his party that if such names were deleted, his party would lose its identity.

6. **Obsession with conformity:** The sectarian denominationalist feels that his “catechism” of teaching is without question, and must be conformed to by all who would be of the truth and in fellowship with his party. He believes that respecting the traditional way of doing things and traditional interpretations are necessary in order to promote peace and unity. If conformity to the established traditions is violated, he feels deeply discomforted. Because of this discomfort, he seeks to bind conformity on the succeeding generation of the church in order to perpetuate that which he received from his fathers.

7. **Obsession with methods and opinions:** The sectarian denominational person is offended when others point out the fact that he has moved matters of methodology or opinion in interpretation into the realm of fundamental or salutational teaching. Since he has long forgotten that there is freedom in matters of opinion, he judges others as liberal or false if they do not conform to his “systematic theology” that is actually encumbered with tradition and opinion. In order to guard his position and guarantee the existence of his party, he freely labels those with whom he disagrees as either liberal or false teachers.

8. **Obsession with making judgments:** The sectarian denominationalist will feel threatened by the literature or speeches of those who are not of his party. He will write off those with whom he may disagree on only one point. He will stop reading the book when he comes to a point with which he disagrees with the author. Since he has convinced himself that he has already established the truth, then he feels that no one outside his own party can know or discover any point of truth. Therefore, he will usually not read or listen to someone outside his own party. He thus separates himself from everyone outside his own circle of friends in order to maintain his unique party. He will shun any preacher with whom he disagrees on a particular point. He will ban from “his pulpit” those he has labeled either liberal or legal.

9. **Obsession with bondage:** The sectarian denominational person is often fearful, if not paranoid, about the bibli-
cal teaching of freedom in Christ. His sense of control and dependence on traditional methods and interpretations move him to fear any possible change from the past. Such would disrupt his denomination and bring into question his religious system of behavior.

One of the greatest threats against the truth of the gospel that brings freedom is legalistic religiosity. This was the first threat against the early church, which threat prompted what is believed the writing of the first scriptures of the New Testament, the letter to the Galatians. The threat has continued throughout the centuries as religious people seek to bring themselves under the bondage of religious traditions that are added to the behavior of believers and a legal application of New Testament principles. Leaders see themselves as defenders of their heritage, confusing the traditions of their heritage with the word of God. In their obsession with their traditional heritage, they alienate themselves from one another into unique groups, which groups now make up the Protestant world.

B. Judging our reaction to sectarian-denominationalism:

Paul wrote, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test your own selves ...” (2 Co 13:5). I do not think that we would be stretching this passage to include the examination of ourselves in reference to a possible spirit of sectarianism that we may harbor in reference to others who differ with us in matters of tradition and opinion. The spirit of restoration tells us to continually look at ourselves in order to determine if we are exclusive in attitude and divisive in behavior. Since being undenominational is abstract, we may have difficulty in determining if we are sectarian and denominational in behavior.

When presented with the fact that we might be sectarian in attitude and denominational in practice, how do we react to such a possibility?

One of those penetrating passages of Scripture that should be at the forefront of our thinking in reference to this subject is Colossians 2:8. “Beware lest anyone take you captive through philosophy and vain deceit according to the traditions of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” Sectarian-denominationalism is a philosophy. It is vain deceit according to the traditions of men. It is a religiosity that takes one’s mind off Christ and places it primarily on the traditions of men. If one believes such vain philosophies and is deceived by the supposed authority of the traditions of men, then he has been taken into captivity.

In order to exemplify the authority of Christ over the authority that is imposed by the philosophies and traditions of men, Paul continued the thought of Colossians 2:8 in verse 9. “For in Him
[Christ] *all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.* When a person reacts with hostility to attacks on his denominational traditions and philosophies, then he does not understand the absolute authority of Christ. Paul would remind those who react defensively to the fact that they honor their denomination over Christ with the following words: “*And you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power*” (Cl 2:10). It is Christ first, church second. We are complete in Christ.

The church exists because of the fact that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God (Mt 16:16-18). Christ does not exist because of the existence of the church. In his defense of his party, the sectarian denominationalist loses his focus on the One to whom all glory and allegiance must go. His defense is first to his party, and then to Christ. But we must not forget that we are subjects to the One in whom the fullness of Deity dwells. We are who we are because of who He was. We must never reverse this order lest we seek our own glory.

**Chapter 9**

**Freedom Without Isolation**

Generally speaking, in the environment of a religiously complex and divided Christendom, we must continue to walk down the long and narrow road of restoration to the behavior of simple New Testament relational Christianity that seeks to do the work of God. But in order to continue this walk, there is some traditional baggage we have picked up along the way that must be sacrificed. The baggage is cumbersome and sometimes very Western. In many cases, it has diverted us from our course. It has often brought us into bondage, and thus once again has made us slaves to the regulations of man. Nevertheless, we must sacrifice anything that destroys our freedom in Christ. If these sacrifices are not made, we will never arrive at our destination or accomplish the work of God. We will simply take our seat among the host of denominational churches of Christendom and content ourselves that this is the way it must be.

The road to restoration is not a comfortable journey. It is not because along the way we must make some very uncomfortable discoveries and decisions. We may discover that some of our cherished religious beliefs and traditions must be sacrificed for the sake of restoring the work of God in our lives. If we take the road of restoration, any “theological” dogma or tradition that has been invented in order to promote and maintain sectarian-denominationalism, must be thoroughly examined. If neces-
sary, such must be sacrificed for the sake of being what God intended we should be as the functioning organism of the body that is to be the salt of the world. Doing this will involve the possibility that we have made traditional some favorite beliefs and systems of function that hinder the impact of Christians on the world. We will possibly discover some doctrines that have no biblical foundation whatsoever. If any belief we may examine does not stand the test of Scripture, then without question our quest to follow God’s instructions must have priority over traditional beliefs. True restorationists know that they must take the risk of sacrificing cherished traditions and dogma that do not stand the test of scriptural scrutiny. They are willing to change their practical function as Christians in order to carry out God’s desires in their lives.

This brings us to a long held theology that was born out of an era of religious conflict and Western individualism. Religious movements are often born out of times of conflict. Reactionary theologies are often invented when men come into conflict with one another. Individuals take positions. Lines are drawn. In order for each party to guard its theological territory, doctrines are often put together in order to keep the enemy out of one’s camp. Such, I believe, was the environment that gave rise to a Western view of church autonomy. As a result, the teaching of autonomy has in many situations become another definition of denominational behavior.

In the religious world of denominationalism, new denominational groups continue to rise out of an environment of power, dominance, and a need for financial security. A preacher (“pastor”) stands up and calls people unto himself. A group is formed. A sectarian attitude is developed in order to solidify the group against outside influences. The leader proclaims the group’s independence (autonomy), and thus a new denomination is formed. The financial foundation of the leader is secured and the group carries on in a religious world of similar independent churches, all professing their uniqueness and autonomy (independence) from one another. Each one is guarding the uniqueness of its enclave of doctrine and behavior in order to function autonomously from one another.

When one understands the universality of the body of Christ, it is difficult to understand why divisive camps are developed and maintained in the church under the umbrella of a teaching that promotes exclusion. I do not believe the New Testament teaches that God gave a right to individuals to separate themselves from the universal church or one another under the disguise of church autonomy. Regardless of Christians meeting in different assemblies on Sunday morning, individual Christians are not autonomous from one another, but universally interdependent on one another.

The very nature of the church is universality. The very nature of the authority of Christ is universal. The
nature of the great commission is “all the world”. The headship of our King extends over the global community of His church. How “local” assemblies throughout the world could somehow lead themselves into dividing into different parties is an enigma of restoration theology and history. There is a core nature about the Western definition of autonomy that is contrary to the universal fellowship of the church.

Part of the problem in defining autonomy is that the common definition of the word is loaded with Western culture. In the formative years of American history, individualism built America. Young pioneers left their fathers, mothers and relatives and struck out on their own for the West. The American would not be dictated to by a European power. Individualism led to political independence. It led to an individual rebellion against religious synods and popes in order to “speak where the Bible speaks.” Individualism was the engine that brought a nation into existence, and since has sustained it in a world wherein it is willing to stand alone in wars to help others gain freedom. Unilateral political and military function is a Western culture that was built on a strong history of individualism.

To think that this individualism would not determine the Western church’s definition of church autonomy, would certainly be ignoring the very process of how words are defined. Our history defines the words of our dictionary. Therefore, Western theological dictionaries, and thus Western religious books, are loaded with Western individualism in their definition of “church autonomy”. Those books, and their individualism in reference to church autonomy, have been circulated throughout the world. For over a century, the rest of the world has struggled with the doctrine of church autonomy because the teaching has been exported to them with the definitions of a foreign dictionary.

When several individualistic Westerners assemble together in a common assembly, declare themselves as an “established church”, their understanding of church autonomy is different than when the same is done in most other cultures of the world. As a group (church), the Westerners are declaring their independence, their right to separate control over their own affairs, and thus isolation from others. They do such in order to stand for themselves without the influence of other groups who have taken the same stand. In their institutional development, they form an indigenous group that is able to stand alone and function separately from others. This is Western culture. Now to say they as churches are not functioning in a denominational manner in reference to one another is to ignore the very definition of the word “denomination”. But this is not necessarily the way the rest of the world of Christians want to function in their relationship with one another, regardless of where they assemble on Sunday. And, I would add that I do not see this system of function in the New Testament as Christians throughout the world then sought to function as one universal church.
I was once discussing the subject of autonomy over a kitchen table with a beloved African preacher. He made the statement, “The doctrine of church autonomy is so unAfrican.” And such it is, if we use a Western definition. African culture is built on the foundation of ancient tribalism and extended families. The tribe extended over vast territories. But it was still one tribe. Extended families often made up the entire village. I have come to the understanding that the independence of groups of Christians who are isolated from one another is a western theology that was carved out of the independent individualism of the American West.

People of the West may cherish being independent from one another and individual in order to do their own thing. But this is not the African way. My preacher friend taught me, “In Africa we are interdependent on one another, not independent of one another.” What a beautiful statement to apply to the nature of Christian fellowship. The West could learn a lot from Africa in reference to fellowship.

The teaching of church autonomy in a Western dictionary, therefore, is defined as denominationalism within the fellowship of those who have a common doctrine. We must keep in mind that denominationalism is not caused solely by doctrinal heresy. It is caused by excluding believers from one another, regardless of doctrine, though often because of doctrine. To believe that denominationalism is caused solely by doctrinal error would allow ourselves to be led into the complacency of behavioral hypocrisy in the midst of a religiously divided world. While condemning the “denominations” for their denial of the universal church by denominating the church over doctrines, we often hypocritically make our accusations from the position of a divided fellowship within the church. Declaring independence on the grounds of autonomy can never be used as a disguise for denominationalism.

In dictionaries the definition of autonomy has various meanings. Any dictionary will give definitions as, “independent in government”, “having the right of self-government”, and “functioning independently of other parts.” These are Western definitions of the word. When we bring these definitions into the use of the word in a biblical context, there are some problems, depending on the culture from which you are coming in applying any particular aspect of definition. This is especially true if one understands autonomy from the viewpoint of Western individualism. If you are coming from a Protestant religious world view, there are also some complicated problems in using this word in reference to the fellowship of the universal church.
Self-governing and independent denominations see themselves as separate from one another. In fact, in a religious context, the denominational relationship of independent Protestant churches would be the natural and practical manner by which the word “autonomy” would be defined. And in many situations, this is how the Western church has come to define and practice church autonomy.

We define a word by our behavior. When two groups of Christians across the street from one another refuse to have anything to do with one another, and thus claim autonomy as a justification for their behavior, then they have defined autonomy to mean “functioning independently of other parts.” This is a denominational definition. I challenge this functional definition of how Christians should behave in their relationship with one another in view of the behavior of Christians in the first century.

When one views the existence of the church to be determined by the existence of common autonomous assemblies (churches), then the Western definition of autonomy has a tendency to isolate these assemblies (“parts”) from one another. Individual Christians as members of the “independent” assemblies, therefore, are isolated from one another because their membership is placed with one of these “parts.” When we add to our definition our allegiance to one of these “parts”, then we are functionally denominational in practice.

I have come to the conclusion that church autonomy has been interpreted and applied in congregational behavior according to a Western interpretation. I find little harmony between the Western definition and practice of autonomy and the extended Hebrew tribal culture in both the times of the Old Testament in the era of Jesus’ ministry and the behavior of Christians in the first century. The church is a universally extended family. It is a worldwide nation of God’s people. I would challenge the Western definition of church groups behaving denominationally with one another while at the same time claiming to be undenominational. I believe we need to focus on the doctrine of freedom in Christ in view of the divisive implications that come with the Western definition of church autonomy as it has been historically taught and practiced by Western churches.

Those readers who are Western in culture will surely not understand some of the points that I will make in the following chapters because of the paradigm from which I am writing. I am writing from an African paradigm of communal relationships. Since I am writing from an African cultural perspective, I do not expect Westerners to understand since they are defining autonomy from a Western individualistic culture, whereas in Africa we would be understanding Christian Fellowship to be interdependent on one another. It is my opinion that the African is closer in cultural reference to the first century fellowship of the church than individualistic thinking Western Christians. For this reason, I make no apologies for a lack of Western understanding of some of my conclusions because they have not grown up in a tribal,
extended family culture.

I am also writing from a house church paradigm of church relationships and function throughout urban areas. If you are not in a house church function, please be patient with my challenges of your definition of individualistic autonomy. We may be saying the same thing in some cases, but from a different perspective. I am coming from an African house church understanding. I will declare freedom. You will declare autonomy. However, from our point of view in house church function, your definition of autonomy is somewhat different. We are saying that we will set you free, but at the same time we will interactively work with one another in all things. We seek to be one in work, not individualistic in “parts”, though we have to be at a geographical distance from one another. Our assembly locations and schedules do not separate our brotherhood from one another. We are one church and our inability to assemble with one another at the same place on Sunday morning has nothing to do with our brotherhood. Where we assemble does not define our relationship as the one church in Christ. Neither does it set boundaries on our work together. We are not “self-governing” as independent fellowships, but universally governed by the headship of Jesus through His word in our individual lives. This keeps us working together as one church, and wherever possible, interdependent in making decisions in order to help one another.

We often hide ourselves behind a supposed theology of church autonomy in order to justify our spirit of independence from one another. We say we have the right to be autonomous (independent) when actually we are saying that we reserve the right to separate ourselves from one another as individual “parts” in order to maintain our individuality. In view of the fact that many churches with restoration heritage are separated into independent fellowships, I would certainly question our consistency in condemning others for being denominational when we are often functioning after the true definition of the word “denomination” in reference to autonomous assemblies.

What leads many of us in Africa to question the doctrine of church autonomy is a simple fact. **There is not one New Testament scripture that clearly teaches the Western definition of local church autonomy.** Neither is there any historical passage in Scripture that defines the church functioning in such a manner. The doctrine has been developed out of a humanly deducted conglomeration of concepts that have been brought together to promote an often hidden agenda of cultural individualism. The fact that there is no specific scripture that declares the independent, autonomous nature of local assemblies of God’s people from one another should alert serious Bible students to question the Western definition of autonomy.

Unfortunately, some deducted interpretations become so traditional within
the heritage of a movement that they are simply assumed to be correct, and thus are held without question. However, in the context of this book, this teaching, which in many ways challenges the New Testament teaching of the universality of the church, must be brought under close scrutiny. It must because its very nature seems to contradict the fundamental teaching that the body of Christ is one, though members of the body live throughout the world.

Chapter 10

Declaring Our Independence

If we understand that autonomy means freedom in Christ, then we are on the same page. However, I fear this is not all that is hidden in the definition as some would have us understand the teaching. Freedom in Christ refers to **individuals** maintaining their freedom from the bondage of legal justification by works of law (Gl 5:1). Autonomy is usually understood from a **group** perspective. At least, I have never heard an individual say, “I’m autonomous.” On the other hand, I have heard individual Christians say, and rightly so, that they are “free in Christ.”

Groups of believers, however, have assembled under the banner of a particular name or person, and then declared their independence (autonomy) from other groups who have done the same. In the present “church culture” of Christendom, therefore, autonomy refers to groups denominating themselves from one another in order to guarantee their own function and existence as a unique party of believers. I do not see this concept of autonomy in the New Testament.

Church groups have defined themselves as autonomous from one another because of various historical reasons. In both reformation and restoration movements away from institutional religion, groups of believers have often stated their autonomy as a **declaration of independence from someone else**. Their very declaration, therefore, identifies them as a unique group that is to be identified as different from other groups. In order to maintain the exclusiveness of their particular party of believers, some have used autonomy as a teaching to keep even independent groups from one another in order not to return to any international religious institutional network (synod) of churches.

The following points give some of the reasons why some church groups have a high regard for their denominational definition of autonomy. Since a denominational interpretation of autonomy is not found in the New Testament, we must question the practices of some who autonomously function as a group to the exclusion of others.
A. Desire to avoid another Catholic heresy:

When Constantine hijacked the church at the beginning of the fourth century, he sought to organize the church around the structure of the Roman government. As a result, the church was institutionalized after the structure of civil government. We live with this apostasy today in the form of the Catholic Church. Because of the dominance of this institutional church, reformation and restoration movements have sprung up throughout the centuries. The reformationists and restorationists saw the evils of the Catholic heresy in its worldwide dominance as a corporate religious organization. In order not to return their movements to a similar institutional organization, church autonomy was taught. The teaching was practiced in a manner that would supposedly guarantee that either reformation or restoration churches not return to the heresy out of which they were born. Therefore, our fear of becoming an international organization as the Catholic Church has caused some to run through Jerusalem concerning group autonomy.

Unfortunately, the side effect of the teaching was the denominating of churches who were fleeing Catholic institutional organization. Our fear of becoming Catholic planted seeds of sectarian denominationalism within our own understanding of being in Christ. We naturally separate ourselves as groups from one another because we believe that we are independent from one another as groups. By running from the universal organization of the institutional Catholic Church, we divided ourselves into many institutional groups to the point that we would not work together as one universal church. We have thus parceled out the church into “local churches” throughout the world, and then produced records of how many “churches” of our fellowship are here and there. We should have been thinking that there is only one church that meets in assemblies here and there. But our understanding of autonomy isolated groups from one another to the point that “local” assemblies of Christians denominationally functioned in their relationships with one another.

We should think as Paul when he addressed the many assemblies of Christians in houses in Ephesus. He wrote, “... to the saints who are at Ephesus ...” (Ep 1:1). To the Philippians he wrote, “... to all the saints ...” (Ph 1:1). His address was to all the saints in Ephesus and Philippi, regardless of where they met. When the word “church” is used, we must not lose sight of individual Christians. And it is...
individuals who are free, not autonomous from one another, but interdependent on one another.

To the Galatians Paul focused on churches in many cities when he addressed “the churches of Galatia” (Gl 1:2), and specifically to the church of one city when he wrote, “the church in Corinth” (1 Co 1:2). Though he addressed the church as a whole, his message had an individual application. I seriously do not believe that Paul taught that any group of Christians must be autonomous from another group of Christians. On the other hand, he firmly taught the fundamental teaching that each one of us is free in Christ (Gl 5:1).

It is not that there are so many autonomous churches (assemblies) in this city or country. The fact is that there is only one church and so many Christians (members) in that city or this country. The fact that we count “churches” is evidence of our denominational thinking in reference to the teaching of autonomy. I believe we need to stop counting assemblies and focus more on individual members. Is this not what Jesus did in Revelation 2 & 3? He addressed the church that existed in seven different cities. But He was not addressing particular assemblies of these churches, for the church in the cities was meeting in different homes throughout the cities. Once the church in a particular city was addressed, He focused on “some” members who were engaged in sin. His focus was on what individuals were doing, not what a particular assembly was doing.

B. Desire to avoid doctrinal apostasy:

Man-made doctrines become universal because of the denominational structure by which they are often propagated. Through the accepted seminaries and universities of a particular denominational fellowship of churches, theologies are propagated throughout the fellowship by the graduated and ordained clergy. Since many religious groups have long since given up the Bible as the sole authority in religious matters, the invention and propagation of man-made theologies permeates the religious world. Each unique fellowship maintains its own unique doctrine, which doctrine is faithfully propagated by the officially ordained and professional clergy.

Restorationists have learned the above lesson very well. Restorations are usually born out of a religious environment wherein error is globally propagated through educational institutions and denominational churches that are networked by the control of synods and associations. In order not to repeat the spread from one group to another of the erroneous doctrines of the past, some resort to the teaching of autonomy in order to refuse into their pulpits those with whom they may disagree on some point of teaching. If
an error is promoted in one church, the autonomous nature of each local church is supposedly a guard against the spreading of the error to other churches. Unfortunately, we never thought for a moment that developing such a practice would actually promote that which we sought to avoid, that is, being exclusive in our relationship with one another as groups of believers.

It seems that in some of our efforts to remain free from the influences of error, we have developed an atmosphere of exclusion and suspicion. In this scenario, we have locked out of our assemblies the “Johns” and “Pauls” who could come and help us biblically sort out any disputes that a particular group may have within itself. What has happened is that demigods have arisen within local groups who slander the “Johns” and “Pauls” in order to keep them away from a group that a particular preacher may covet. Once those who can help are locked out of the local autonomous church, that group becomes uniquely identified by its teaching and custodian. It is sectarian in that it seeks to be separate from any who would speak contrary to the “ordained” teachings of the leader or leaders. In every sense of the term, therefore, this group has become a denomination.

C. Desire to avoid parachurch organizations:

This particular point delves into some real and present dangers in the religious world of modern Christendom. There are some points of this discussion that are sometimes ambiguous because of how we define our terms and practices of organized church behavior. For this reason, there is room for a great deal of opinion in this realm of discussion. So bear with me as I express some opinions in relation to parachurch institutional organizations that have often become “churches” within themselves.

As a reminder, the word “parachurch” refers to an organizational structure that operates beside (para) the traditional view of what we call institutionally organized church groups, which groups we affirm to be autonomous from one another because each has declared their independence. The parachurch organization is established by an individual, or group of individuals, in order to carry out a specific ministry. In the legal structure of such organizations, they are often set up as nonprofit organizations. They are nondenominational and operate with the contributions that come from individual contributors who belong to many denominations. Because they draw funds from individual contributors, they are able to
maintain high budget operations. These religious organizations are corporately organized in order to accomplish religious work, whatever the religion may be that they propagate. They have a name, a leader or counsel of leaders, and a defined program of work. It is difficult, therefore, not to view them as institutional churches, since they are organized after the same manner as institutional churches.

Parachurch organizations are a recent phenomenon in church history. The nineteenth century saw the development of a few such organizations in the western church environment. But primarily in the last fifty years of the twentieth century there has been an explosion of such organizations in the western religious world. It is not my purpose to go into the reasons as to why this phenomenon has happened in the history of Christendom. The fact is that these organizations are now a part of Christendom, and will be so for many years to come.

When such organizations were conceived and brought into existence in the nineteenth century, they were attacked by many “local” institutional churches because they were viewed as a threat to local control mechanism, and as well as a threat to local church budgets. If individual members were enticed to contribute peripherally to these institutional religious organizations, then their loyalty to the local church was questioned. The irony of the arguments against such organizations that developed during these years of struggle was in the fact that institutional churches were arguing against religious institution organizations, not thinking for a moment that the institutional churches themselves were organized and behaving as the religious institutional organizations against whom they spoke.

It is my firm belief that every individual Christian is responsible to preach the gospel to the world and edify the saints, regardless of what a church group may do as a whole. If several Christians as a group function globally in order to accomplish this mission, then there is no need to develop any institutions that are commissioned to do what Christians as a whole must be doing. When the global church functions globally, then there is no need for institutions to arise to do the work of the church. If they do arise, then something is wrong within the church.

It may be that the phenomenon of the rise of parachurch religious institutions in the last century was the result of the failure of the institutional church to carry out the work of God to evangelize the world. After all, it is the purpose of almost every parachurch organization to carry out in some way the great commission of Jesus. Could it be that the church became so institutionalized and introverted that frustrated individuals had to work parallel to the institutional church with an organization by which they could carry out the work of preaching the gospel to the world?

In an effort to release themselves...
from the shackles of institutionally denominated churches, some in the religious world have sought to escape the confines of church hierarchies. In their efforts to work free of institutional religions, they have established parachurch organizations to get on with the work of God. They have done this in order to get on with the work of teaching the Bible to the world without all the encumbering framework of the institutional church. Unfortunately, these organizations often become “churches” within themselves in order to operate interdenominationally. It is unfortunate that such organizations have had to “dechurch” in order to carry on with their work.

If the church becomes introverted with institutional hierarchical control and politics, then there will be those who will seek to operate separate from such restrictive structures in order to get the job of evangelism accomplished. When this happens, it is time for us to reinvestigate the means by which we organize the work of the church in order to carry out the mission of Jesus. If our organizational structure strangles those who seek to do God’s work in their lives, then it is a time for a restorational change. It is time to investigate the possibility that in our desire to be so corporately organized that we have lost our mission.

History, however, is not without examples of numerous organizations that have sought to take the place of Christians who seek to carry out the work of God in their lives. As stated previously, what often happens with parachurch organizations is that they demand loyalty to the organization. And in doing such, they become that which they fled, that is, institutional control. The party attitude of these organizations, and their demand for financial loyalty, has often made us paranoid about their existence. And rightly so. When a particular religious organization steals away the freedom of the individual believer to evangelize the world after his own choice and according to his own gifts, then the organization becomes a governing body, an institution, that seeks to exercise authority over the individual believer. What is the difference between such an organization and an institutionalized local church?

Organizations that seek loyalty in order to come between the individual believer and Christ, are seeking to assume the headship of Christ over the individual believer. Such organizations are seeking to minimize the church by being an organization that takes the place of the church at work.

It is not that we do not seek leadership in what to do in working together to accomplish great international projects. It is that we must be cautious about any organization that becomes a controlling head of the individual believer. When such organizations call for our allegiance through signature and commitment to prescribed doctrines or methodologies, then the organization has supplanted the individual’s allegiance to Christ alone.

We Must Not Become Institutional When In Our Flight From Institutionalism.
Corporate religious organizations should never replace the church at work through individual members.

We live in an era of international religious organizations. Many of these organizations are doing great works as Christians with unique talents have had to organize in order to carry out their ministries. These organizations are usually operated under a board of Christian directors and hold “nonprofit” status with local governments. I see no scriptural reason why these organizations would be operating contrary to God’s word. Individual believers have a right and freedom to unite together to accomplish great things for Christ. In many cases, civil government imposes laws in reference to organizational structures and finances in such institutions. In many countries, even churches are required to legally register as an organized entity and give an accounting of contributions. Churches are required to do such for auditing purposes.

The problem is not whether international religious organizations are wrong. We have freedom in Christ to do everything in the name of Christ (Cl 3:17). However, if the organized structure of such organizations seeks to dominate the individual believer, then they have become authorities over the individual believer. They have essentially become another denomination since they structure themselves after the same order as institutional churches. The institutional structure, therefore, becomes a denominating factor between those who give allegiance and support to the organization and those who do not.

As long as the local believer maintains his or her freedom to either work with or contribute to legal organizations, no harm has been done. But if the organization seeks to infringe on the freedom we enjoy in Christ by assuming authority over the local believer, then we are being brought again into bondage by the authority of another religious institution (See Gl 5:1,2).

One reason for the emphasis on church autonomy was to guard the church from religious organizations that would seek to separate groups of believers into institutional organizations that become “churches” within themselves. Because of the nature of “denominational” organizations in the past, autonomy kept the associates of such organizations out of church treasuries. Instead of giving a right for the existence of such organizations, and the freedom for Christians to work together for a common cause, the autonomous institutional church sought to separate its membership from the work of those who had brought their ministries together to accomplish specific works.

D. Desire to keep hands out of the “church treasury”:

In an effort to keep institutional organizations out of the church bank account, some have developed the theology of the “church treasury,” which treasury is distinct from the church across
the street who also has a treasury. What has subsequently happened is that a great number of members who were discouraged from using “church treasury” money to contribute to various organizations in order to carry out their desired work, have since decided to contribute peripherally to the collection plate to nonprofit organizations and religious educational institutions. They believe this keeps the church treasury autonomous from such organizations. This may be true, but at the same time the organization to which the contributions are made is made up of members of the same church.

Institutionally organized churches naturally view their financial departments after a corporate manner. This certainly does not argue against strict financial policies in reference to contributed funds. But the fact is true that much argument over the concept of the “church treasury” comes from those who have a corporate view of the church.

I suppose most of the problems surrounding the church treasury originates from a dichotomous view of our Christian life. In other words, we seek to live in two different worlds as Christians. One world we personally control, and the other is our “church world” wherein we seek to follow Jesus. And thus, we make a difference between our possessions in both worlds. That which is in “my” world I own. That which is in my corporate church world “belongs to the Lord,” or “belongs to the church.”

But in reality as a Christian, the only difference between the money of the “church treasury” and the money in my pocket is that the church group has been given group decision power over the contributed money while I still have individual power over the money in my pocket. Once I contribute the funds, the church assumes control of deciding where it is to go. As I see it, that is the only difference between the money in my pocket and the money in the church’s collection tray. I do not live a dichotomous Christian life, transitioning back and forth from Sunday to the other days of the week.

If the group as a whole desires to do something with the collected funds that is outside the purpose for which an individual has contributed, then that individual has the freedom not to contribute to that specific project. Because he or she chooses not to contribute does not say that such a person is rebellious and insubmissive. Individuals have the power over the money they earn and offer. Free-will offering is just that. Individual members have the freedom to give cheerfully to special needs they want to fulfill as they live daily as Christians.

We must always keep in mind that the Christian’s money is still the Lord’s, whether it is in my pocket or in the church coffer. This must be true if I died with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me (Gl 2:20). If this
is true—and it is—then I believe we can dispel with much of the nonsense that goes on about “church money”. The money does not belong to the church people. It belonged to the Lord while it was in my pocket before it was contributed. It still belongs to the Lord in the church bank account. It was given to the Lord when I was crucified with Him. It became His money the first moment when I came out of the waters of baptism. When I sing, “I am mine no more”, I mean just that (Rm 12:1,2). Therefore, while it is in my Christian pocket I have the freedom as an individual to choose whether to give it to the group of members in my local assembly (church), or to a group of members of the universal church who are working internationally to accomplish the work of the church, but are not necessarily a part of my local assembly. Wherever I give it, therefore, I am giving it “to the church” in order that the church may make a group decision as to how it will be used.

When it comes to contributing to international needs, members have a right to give the “Lord’s money” (“my money”) to whatever work they so desire. If an individual considers a particular project to be in agreement with his or her desire to preach the gospel to the world, then he or she is free to contribute to that project. If a group of members (a “local church”) decides together to run their contribution through a “church bank account”, nothing has changed from the individual deciding to do the same. Whether an individual decision or a group (church) decision, there is still freedom to give to whatever the individual or group decides to do.

We must not view the church as a corporate business organization. Neither is it like the Red Cross organization. If we view the “church treasury” as we view the funds of a corporate organization, then the church as a whole has relinquished its desires to a few people who can do with the contributions as they so desire. But when the church as a whole maintains decision power over the contributed money, the desires of the church are fulfilled when the contribution is used. Everyone in the body participates in the distribution of the funds. In this way the church works together as one in order to accomplish the mission of the church.

E. Desire for local control:

Some leaders have patterned themselves after those about whom the Holy Spirit warned the Ephesian elders. The Spirit warned that some would draw away disciples after themselves (At 20:29,30). In other situations, some would seek to lord over the flock (1 Pt 5:1-4). And some would simply be as Diotrephes and take control (3 Jn 9,10). Whatever the scenario, there will always be those in the church who will seek to carry out in their lives their desire to “have a church” by claiming the sheep of God for themselves.

This can be a particular problem in the establishment of house churches. Leaders who start house churches with existing members of the church must se-
riously evaluate their motives. If the motive is to “draw away disciples” after oneself, then the motive is carnal. Such a motive will only establish another denominational group, but on a smaller basis.

When a group structure has been established, some have erroneously hidden behind the teaching of church autonomy in order to justify the practice of keeping other leaders out of their realm of control. It was for this reason that Diotrephes did not want the apostle John, or the traveling evangelists, in the presence of those over whom he had assumed control. The doctrine of church autonomy, therefore, has been denominationally interpreted as a doctrinal shield to guard against outside intervention. The one who uses autonomy in this way is seeking to thwart the efforts of the “Johns” and “Pauls” by making them feel that they are violating a supposed biblical doctrine of autonomy in their efforts to help believers come to the table for discussions.

Those who seek to exercise great control over a local church are usually those who are strong believers in a denominational interpretation of local church autonomy. Those preachers who consider themselves the center of reference for the local church are great advocates of church autonomy. Those who seek to steal the sheep from God always build fences around those sheep they have stolen. Would we not conclude that Diotrephes was teaching a sectarian interpretation of church autonomy when he blocked the coming of evangelists into his realm of control of the local church? Was he practicing church autonomy when John wrote of his actions, “He himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who would, and casts them out of the church” (3 Jn 10)? It is interesting that John says nothing about local church autonomy when dealing with this problem. He simply assumes that he and other traveling evangelists have a right to see Gaius and the other brethren when they travel through their area.

A group of Christians are autonomous (free) only because each individual in the group is free. But when the free are subject to the bondage of a dominant leadership that has brought the group under lordship control, then they are no longer individually free. They have been led into the captivity of one or more who seek to lord over them. And herein is the problem with the concept of corporate church autonomy. A group of Christians who assemble together are autonomous (free). They are individually free in Christ to freely determine as a group their ministry for Christ. However, when the autonomous church turns into an institutional corporate organization, the autonomy of the group becomes denominational by the group’s exclusion of other...
groups who are not under the control systems of the local leadership. When members (contributors) are coveted for the existence of the institution (budget), then the group is functioning as an autonomous denomination. It is in this scenario that the members have been drawn away into a corporate religious organization that functions autonomously from other similar organizations.

When the preceding occurs over a period of time, individuality of the members in the corporate church is often lost. Control systems are set in place in order to maintain the identity of the group and to guarantee the existence of the structure. Church groups who have moved into this scenario of existence are often fearful about “losing members.” “Losing members” means losing contributions to the institutional structure. The leaders are also paranoid about small groups of members meeting in homes because they see such to be a threat to their control systems of the group. Instead of encouraging individual relationships in such groups, they are worried about who will control the individuals. Such worries are evidence of the fact that the simple group of those who were initially free in Christ have moved into being truly institutionally organized as a corporate religious body. This is the definition of a denominated body of individuals.

**F. Desire to do our own program:**

Every individual believer has a right to carry out in his or her life what he or she feels must be done to the glory of God. When Paul said, “*whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus*”, he was speaking individually, not congregationally (Cl 3:17). What individual members do, therefore, they should do in the name of Jesus Christ. Every individual member has the responsibility to bear his own burden of work (Gl 6:5). Each will give account of his or her own work before the Lord (2 Co 5:10). In other words, every individual member is a “church program.”

A group of believers also has the freedom to organize together in order to carry out specific projects in the name of Jesus. The members of the organized group do not have to be members of the same local assembly of the saints. They can be from several assemblies since assembly does not define who is a member of the church. Because of their common desire to work in a specific ministry, all Christians have the freedom to organize their gifts together in order to accomplish a common ministry.

Organizing together as a group is certainly in the realm of freedom in Christ. However, if an organization of members seeks to dominate the decisions and infringe on the freedom of individual believers, then there is a problem. The problem is the dominance the organization may seek to exert over the individual believer in order to demand allegiance to the organization’s cause.

What has developed out of our con-
frontation with dominant organizations that seek to infringe on the freedom of the local believer is the fortress of autonomous or independent churches. Local believers have sheltered themselves in defense of such organizations by building a defense that has inadvertently led to the denominating of themselves from one another. We have developed the concept of the “local church”, then the local controlling eldership or “pastor”. We then set ourselves apart from others on the foundation of being an independent local church that is separate from other independent local churches. Is this not sectarianism manifesting itself as an independent denomination? Our goal to protect ourselves from institutional organizations was noble. But our defense developed into a theological mechanism that separated ourselves from one another. We theologically shot ourselves in the foot.

Developing theologies to guard ourselves from the control of organizational structures is not the answer to attacks on the freedom we have in Christ. The answer is in understanding the sole headship of Christ over the sole member. We have a right to carry out our personal ministry in our lives without the encroachment of someone or some organization that would seek to steal away the headship of Christ from the individual believer. At the same time, the individual believer has a right to organize together with other believers in order to carry out a common ministry of shared gifts.

We must keep in mind that “church” is people. We are a people who have been set free to obey. We are free to accomplish the mission of Jesus in those areas where the Scriptures both speak and are silent. Simply because some have abused their freedom in Christ does not mean that we should be paranoid in those areas in which we have freedom to serve according to our individual ministries. I am writing this book, not because I have a direct biblical command to write. There is no “biblical authority” to write religious books. Therefore, I am writing in the area of biblical silence in order to accomplish my ministry. I have the freedom to do so, as well as all those authors who seek to accomplish the mission of Jesus through the ministry of writing. We even have the freedom to establish a religious publishing organization for the books we write. We can ask for your contributions. But we cannot demand such in order to judge you faithful. We have the freedom to organize. You have the freedom to give.

G. Desire to promote party loyalty:

The sectarian/denominational interpretation of church autonomy is used to promote loyalty to a particular party of believers to the exclusion of others. The denominational spirit of the autonomous fellowship is first formed among the group. In order to guard the group from the influence of other groups, church autonomy is defined in a way to keep oth-
ers away who are not a part of the particular fellowship. A co-cocooned fellowship (denomination) is thus maintained as the local group shields itself from outside influences.

Within this cocooned fellowship, a leadership structure is formed. In the religious world, a preacher often claims a group of members, proclaims his church as independent (autonomous), and then seeks to protect his flock against the outside influence of others. There is certainly a duty of leaders to guard the flock from the invasion of false teachings (2 Jn 9,10). However, when confronting false teachers, the subject of church autonomy is usually not brought up in the discussions. It is brought up when the local autonomous fellowship seeks to bar competitive leadership from the affairs of the local group. When the control system of a “local” church is threatened, it is in this context that autonomy is usually discussed.

H. Desire to maintain corporate budgets:

The urban church lives in a corporate world. It has often been the nature of urban churches to form their budgets after the accounting procedures of corporate businesses, and thus encourage the members to maintain the budget with their contributions. When members travel, they are encouraged to send their contributions home to the local budget (“church treasury”).

There is nothing wrong with maintaining good financial policies with the finances of the church. But financial policies are not what is under consideration in this context. What is under consideration is the fact that church budgets are often run like corporately controlled financial departments to which membership commitment is demanded. If the individual member seeks to contribute to another budget or cause, his loyalty to the local church and its budget is often questioned. It is certainly not wrong to encourage loyalty to agreed upon projects at home. But individual members have the freedom to contribute to what they so desire. Budgets should never be used to discourage the contributions of individual members to works they encounter in their daily living. If they are used in such a way, individual members will be discouraged from spontaneous giving to urgent needs.

In an effort to maintain the local budget, some churches have reached back into the Old Testament tithe system in order to obligate members to contribute ten percent to the local needs (budget). As long as one is on the “membership roll”, he is obligated to tithe his contribution to the local budget. Since it is believed that a local church is autonomous, loyalty is demanded to the local budget. In this situation, the leadership usually frowns on contributions that are made by members
to works that are not included in the local budget. Peripheral contributions to works or individual budget needs other than the local church budget are discouraged in order that the local budget be met.

As stated before, the practice of contributing only to the local budget has a tendency of focusing the thinking of the individual member exclusively to the needs of his immediate area. He is led to believe that the work of the church is only local, not universal. His loyalty to the local budget must have priority over any other needs. I have found that this particular teaching has moved the church in the last fifty years to focus on local needs to the exclusion of the church’s responsibility to evangelize the world. Multi-staffed churches have introverted in their efforts to stimulate growth in a western culture that seems to be giving up on God.

I. Desire to disfellowship a sister assembly:

It is true that the Bible can be used to teach almost anything. When scriptures are studied out of context, unscriptural conclusions are always developed. When men develop deductive teachings that have questionable conclusions, the teachings often give rise to subsidiary teachings that are likewise questionable. Such is the case with any teaching that would justify one church disfellowshipping another entire group of Christians. Since a distorted view of autonomy has often promoted a party spirit between local churches, the resulting practice of the distortion has often been manifested in one church disfellowshipping another group of Christians because of a disagreement on some point of teaching.

There is nothing in the New Testament that gives any support whatsoever to the practice of one local group of Christians disfellowshipping another entire group of Christians. Since God views individual Christians to be accountable for their own individual behavior, He does not stereotype entire churches because of the sins of one or a few within any one assembly of Christians. Within the assemblies of Christians that John mentions in Revelation 2 & 3 were individual members who were practicing some insidious sins (See Rv 2:14,20). Jesus, who addressed these Christians, had the right to remove the candlestick of the members’ influence from the cities in which they lived. In His exhortations, however, He did not encourage any church to withdraw fellowship from another church in another city, or within any of the cities that were mentioned. The fact that the practice of “whole church disfellowship” is not mentioned in this situation, or any other similar situation in the New Testa-
ment, should alert us to the fact that those who have practiced such have gone beyond the word of God.

The denominational interpretations of the “local autonomous church” sets the foundation for erroneous doctrines as congregational disfellowship. Not only does the teaching of congregational disfellowship assume that every member of the disfellowshipped congregation is in sin, it assumes a practice that has no scriptural foundation. However, when churches believe that they are separated from one another because of autonomy, then they feel that they have a right to disfellowship entire congregations of Christians when a sin arises with some within the congregation.

Whole group disfellowships deny the universal nature of the body of Christ and individual membership of that body. Those who promote this doctrine often view the church as clumps of believers scattered here and there throughout the world, which clumps are subject to their judgments. Those who congregationally disfellowship other churches fail to see within a particular group the individual believer who is struggling to remain faithful, though sometimes subjected to the erroneous behavior of an erring leader or leaders within the group. Since the Holy Spirit gave us no command or example for writing off whole assemblies because of the sins of a few, then certainly we should question such a practice.

One of the unfortunate side effects of a denominational interpretation of the doctrine of local church autonomy is that it establishes a foundation for some preachers to be highly judgmental of one another. The teaching pontificates local preachers who often make slanderous and judgmental statements about other local assemblies of Christians and their preachers. When one is led to believe that he controls the doctrinal destiny of a local flock of God, he feels that he must represent that flock as a judge and lawgiver over the other autonomous flocks that are not under his control. However, if a “local” preacher knew that he could not launch mortar attacks from a distance against those from whom he could shield himself with church autonomy, then possibly he would be more cautious about his accusations of others.

When Peter wrote 1 Peter, he was in Babylon (1 Pt 5:13). He wrote to brethren in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Pt 1:1). But he wrote as a “fellow elder” (1 Pt 5:1). If gainsayers in Pontus knew that they could be approached by elders in Babylon, then the mouth of the gainsayer would be stopped (Ti 1:9-11). One could not “change membership” and run away from his sin.

The church is not an international synod. However, it is a universal organism, and being universal every member is subject to one another and the teaching by shepherd/teachers of the word of God. Local church autonomy does not shield one from teachers of the word of
Chapter 11

Born Free

Several years ago the preacher of a particular denomination I knew came to the conclusion that he must lead his family in obedience to the gospel. He realized that if he did such, he would lose his financial security. He would lose his house, retirement and the work which he loved to do. Nevertheless, he was thoroughly convinced that obedience to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus by immersion in water for the remission of sins was necessary for his own salvation. What will always be a testimony to his faith and honesty was the fact that he did at the time what he believed the Scriptures taught. When he came up out of the waters of baptism, he threw up his hands and cried, “I’m free! I’m free!”

For freedom did Christ set us free. Throughout the decades of teaching on the denominational autonomy of church groups, we should have been focusing on the freedom of individual members in order to bring the masses out of religious bondage into the freedom that is in Christ. Unfortunately, when men are in the heat of battle to rid themselves from the confines of doctrinal and institutional bondage that is produced by our desires to corporately organize religious behavior, they focus on building walls instead of maintaining open fields for continued discussion. The sectarian interpretation and practice of local group autonomy is a wall. Individual Christian freedom is an open plain. Autonomy makes boxes. Freedom burns boxes. Denominational autonomy is a fence that confines the sheep of God with the dictates of autocratic leadership. Individual freedom offers no barriers to keep the sheep away from one another. Autonomy is often a disguise for the denominating of the church by barricading small clusters of Christians into individual parties behind defensive walls. These are walls behind which men have sought control. Freedom, on the other hand, encourages us to be forbearing with one another (Ph 4:5). Freedom allows unity in a brotherhood of individual Christians who often with one another differ on matters of opinion.

We must not allow ourselves to miss this point. The sectarian’s abuse of autonomy has developed a doctrine that is based on control. In order to seal off their arena of control and protection, they seek to keep others out of their business. It is for this reason that the doctrine of autonomy has become inherently denominational to those who have a sectarian spirit. The teaching of autonomy...
was born out of decades of struggle to protect denominated groups from the control of others. But in developing a defensive theology that was based on control and protection, we became sectarian, and subsequently made ourselves denominational in reference to one another.

Freedom breaks down walls and fences between those who seek to restore personal Bible study, personal relationships and individual ministry. For this reason, freedom in Christ is a biblical teaching that is often avoided during times of conflict over control and a reaffirmation of hierarchy. We seek to shield ourselves from one another instead of giving one another a break for the sake of freedom. When we are sectarian in spirit, it is only natural that we seek to exclude others while we retreat within our own party. Group autonomy cannot be an excuse for individually separating ourselves from those with whom we disagree on matters of opinion or methods.

If we are theologically insecure, we will always be on the defensive, and thus seek to establish walls by which we can establish our own identity. We thus lead ourselves into legal theologies that bring bondage, not freedom. We do so because it is always easier to identify ourselves by checks on an outline of ceremonial and legal laws. But freedom demands faith. It demands that we trust in the grace of God and not our own performance of a self-imposed checklist. Unfortunately, we often believe that freedom leaves us somewhat theologically abstract in reference to being acceptable before God. But when we understand that our obedience is never perfect before God, we are driven to grace.

Legalism makes our obedience concrete, or so we think. But concrete obedience leaves no room for faith in depending on the grace of God. If I assure myself of salvation through the completion of a checklist, then no faith is required. When I question my salvation, I simply look at the checks I have made on my list. Once I see all the boxes checked, then I feel secure. Checklists leave no room for grace.

Unfortunately, in a legal system of institutional religion, no freedom is required; no grace is sought. We are always brought into the bondage of someone’s checklist. The interpretation and practice of denominational autonomy was born out of an era when checklists abounded. They were produced after the unique interpretations of individuals who often struggled with rightly dividing the word of truth. A theological checklist was constructed in order to bring some doctrinal security and group identity to those who had for centuries been tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. But when these checklists were compared by individual groups, conflicts were discovered and debates ensued. Party lines were drawn when different groups would not give up favorite traditions. Denominationalism occurred. A denominational practice of group autonomy kept groups with conflicting
checklists separate from one another. We thus became that for which the checklist was originally made to keep us away from. We became denominational.

It is in the context of discussions over the doctrine of group autonomy that we must discuss the doctrine of individual freedom in Christ. When some leaders were trying to denominate the Galatian church over an issue they had put on a legal checklist, Paul wrote to them, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gl 5:1). Paul’s doctrine of freedom in Christ must not be taken lightly. It is fundamental to the heart of unity among Christians everywhere. Without a clear understanding of individual freedom in Christ, Christians can never be united. They can never be truly free. There will always be efforts to bring autonomous (denominated) groups into union. However, there will never be a true sense of unity that we have as a gift of God that we receive because of our common obedience to the faith (Jd 3). All believers are initially united with one another upon their obedience to the gospel. They simply need to recognize and preserve their unity through belief and behavior of fundamental New Testament teachings. Through our continued study of the Scriptures, we will come to different conclusions on matters of opinion. Therefore, we must continually remind ourselves of our initial unity that was produced by our common obedience to the gospel. At that time, we were diverse in our beliefs, but united in our diversity because of our obedience to the gospel. Unified believers always understand that we are unified as the body of Christ regardless of our diversity in matters of opinion. Growing as a Christian means learning how to be forbearing with one another in matters of opinion.

Unity that is maintained upon fundamental teaching can be easily recognized from clear statements in Scripture (1 Co 1:10). However, maintaining unity can be a challenge, especially if we continue to think denominationally by promoting our favorite checklist of traditional teachings. In fact, I would say that we will never enjoy the unity that is a gift of God if we do not repent of our sectarian denominational mentality that was generated out of an era of conflicts over checklists.

As long as we are exclusive in attitude and divided in behavior, we will seek to write uniform checklists that result
when everyone comes away from the bargaining table with decisions of what they will or will not believe and do. Such union decisions are humanly orchestrated. They are founded upon the genius of those we promote as our leaders. They are engineered by conflict artists who are able to bring parties together for agreement on checklists of beliefs and behavior. Would it not be easier to simply allow others to have individual freedom in areas of opinion and tradition?

We must remember that unity is something that we have as a gift from the one true and living God. It is something that we must preserve in the spirit of love and forbearance with one another as individual Christians. Unless there is a clear understanding of our freedom in Christ, we will forever be seeking union meetings between denominated clusters of believers in order to produce some sort of “united denominationalism.”

In the first century there were those who were intentionally going about binding on the church as a matter of salvation that which God never intended should be bound (Gl 2:4,12). Legal checklists were being drawn up even before the ink dried on the last inspired New Testament document. One might say that those of the “International Circumcision Church” (ICC) were going from one church to another in order to bind the practice of circumcision, the trademark of their organization and a salvational point on their checklist. To them circumcision was a matter of salvation, and thus it was imperative for them to take this message to all the world where they knew churches had been established (At 15:1). What they considered salvational became their call to missions, and thus they recruited churches to their belief (Gl 4:17). In doing this, they violated the doctrine of freedom in Christ. Paul said that they “sneaked in to spy out our liberty that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (Gl 2:4). If the letter to the Galatians teaches anything, it teaches that those who bring the gospel with an added list of legal points to which believers must also submit, are teaching another gospel (Gl 1:6-9).

It is imperative, therefore, that one have a clear understanding of the liberty about which Paul says we enjoy in Christ. We must maintain such clear thinking or we will fall victim to the oppression of the pet doctrines of those who would seek to add and bind where God has done neither. The judaizing teachers of the “ICC” were destroying the liberty that the early believers had. Uncircumcised Christians were considered unsaved, and thus they recruited candidates for circumcision. With a Bible in one hand and a knife in the other, these self-appointed evangelists set out on a mission to save the saved by preaching Christ and cutting.

So where does our questioning of autonomy fit into this discussion? Precisely in the fact that in all the early debate over the imposition of circumcision in the first century church, there is no recourse
made to local church autonomy in order to keep the knives of circumcision out of different assemblies. One would think that if we are denominationally autonomous from one another, then certainly Paul, who dealt directly with the judaizing teachers in Antioch, a Gentile church, would have used the autonomy argument against the judaizers who sought to bind a Jewish law and custom on Gentile believers. Though the judaizing teachers took advantage of the universal nature of the church by going from one group to another, and thus invited themselves into the church of Antioch and other cities, Paul never resorted to group autonomy in order to keep them out. In fact, one can comb through the entire New Testament in reference to false teachers going about from one church group to another and there is no teaching on denominational autonomy in order to keep them away. Emphasis was on “equipping the saints” (Ep 4:11-16), “instructing the brethren” (2 Tm 3:16,17), and “preaching the word” in order that we not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine (2 Tm 4:2). Emphasis was on guarding our freedom in Christ lest we be brought under the bondage of a legal religion (Gl 5:1).

We must keep in mind that it is false doctrine that must be confronted, not the withdrawal of one church group from another. The universality of the church must be protected in the midst of debate over false teachings. Denominating ourselves from one another to combat false doctrine is against the fundamental teaching of the one body. In fact, denominating ourselves from one another only weakens our stand for the truth. A united brotherhood for the truth is a testimony to the fact that we are the church.

If throughout the era of debate over matters of opinion—though some would consider circumcision a matter of doctrine—we would have focused on individual freedom in Christ rather than church group autonomy, we might have come to a different conclusion in reference to our fellowship with one another as individual Christians. Instead of denominated groups within the brotherhood of believers of the universal church, we would have given one another individual freedom in areas of opinion. Our sectarian definition of group autonomy, however, has brought many to denominationalism instead of unity. But if we focus on freedom from checklists, the brotherhood of the universal church is maintained and individual leaders who show up with a Bible in one hand and a knife in the other can be shown the back door. The church must stand as one against those individuals who would bind in the realm of freedom, for when freedom is denied, denominationalism thrives.

The Church Must Stand United Against Denials Of Fundamentals.

Institutional Christians Do Not Understand Freedom In Christ.
Chapter 12

Focus On Freedom

Some often manifest their insecurity that results from a lack of biblical knowledge by imposing on themselves strictures of religious belief and behavior that they invent for themselves. The imposition of such religiosity gives them some sense of security because of their vague understanding of the grace of God. The religion of many, therefore, is built on the performance of man-made ordinances that give some sense of spiritual satisfaction that one has “done his duty”. It is for this reason that religious groups are always divided. Different groups always have different ordinances that must be performed in order to be counted worthy before God.

On the other hand, Christianity brings unity that is based on the word of God. When sincere students of God come to the direction of His word instead of man’s religious ordinances, freedom from the bondage of religion is discovered through a knowledge of and obedience to the truth of God’s word. We must, therefore, focus on freedom, freedom from institutional religion in order to focus on God and His word.

We must always keep in mind that we have this irresistible urge to bind where God has not spoken. In our spiritual insecurity we want our own approval. Because of the insecurity we feel in our relationship with God, we seek the bondage of our ordinances instead of freedom. We lead ourselves to believe that if we add precept upon precept we will somehow generate an obedience that God must accept. When we have a moment of theological insecurity, we simply check our “theology chart” and our “works chart,” and then soothe ourselves that we have performed well. If this does not bring complete satisfaction, then we do as Paul said of some of the Corinthians. “But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (2 Co 10:12). If we judge ourselves to have outperformed another, then we are at peace. But such is carnal behavior.

In order to maintain our need for security, opinion is often exalted to law. Confused interpreters then exalt themselves to be lawgivers and judges in reference to the restrictions we place on ourselves. The more dominant our interpreters are with their rules and regulations, the more secure we feel. We thus seek those who are “doctors of the law” in order to comfort us that we are correctly checking off every point on our self-im-
posed checklist. When we accept such people as our leaders, we are brought under the bondage of those who profess their unique opinions as law. When this happens, opinion moves into the realm of law. A wedge is thus driven between the individual believer and his sole allegiance to Jesus and His word. Unique religious groups are born as followers give heed to the unique teachings of their favorite “doctor of the law.”

We do this to ourselves because we are obsessed with the pronouncements from our leaders and their unique codes of law. We are obsessed to the point that we forget the Spirit of the law. We divide ourselves from one another according to the unique opinions of each leader or group, and thus set ourselves up as judges of one another’s opinions. We burn our sacrifices on the altar and at the same time we unmercifully attack one another over how much wood should go on the fire.

One cannot enjoy freedom in Christ if he or she is brought under the bondage of men. The greater the bondage of men over the individual believer, the less freedom one has in Christ. We must always remember that when one is in bondage, all that he thinks about is how to be set free. He is not enjoying freedom while in bondage. Freedom is only a hope that keeps him alive in bondage. What Jesus did at the cross was deliver us out of the captivity of bondage, and by grace, deliver us into a realm of freedom (Gl 5:1).

We are not under law, but under grace (Rm 6:14).

Jesus delivered us from the bondage of two things, both of which are interlinked with one another. He first set us free from the law of sin and death (Rm 8:2). None of us can live perfectly under law (Rm 3:23). And thus, since we all sin against law, all are condemned under law. If any tried to be justified by law, they were “severed from Christ” and “fallen from grace” (Gl 5:4). For this reason, Jesus set us free from the confines of having to be justified by perfect keeping of law (Rm 6:18; 8:2). So Paul wrote, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law” (Gl 5:18).

Since Jesus freed us from the bondage of law, He freed us from any ordinances of tradition we might impose on ourselves as law. For this reason, we “touch not, taste not and handle not” those ordinances that give a pretense of godliness, but are simply the self-imposed restrictions of men (See Cl 2:20-23). We are free from the bondage of traditions that religious fellowships might impose on us. For the purpose of freedom did Jesus set us free (Gl 5:1).

In view of being set free, Paul questioned why some of the Galatians wanted to go back into bondage. “But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elements to which you desire again to be in bondage?” (Gl 4:9).
But what often happens is that we cluster around a set of man-made rules and regulations in order to retain our identity as a unique church in the community. We declare our independence (autonomy) from others, and thus establish ourselves as unique and different.

With the doctrine of local group independence we seek to bring all the members of our unique fellowship into the bondage of the code or control of our particular fellowship. We thus focus on either established traditional interpretations, traditions, personalities or heritages in order to maintain the identity of each group. In order for each group to exist, there must be a strong control factor within each group that seeks to maintain the identity of the groups from the influence or control of others. We say we are autonomous as groups by establishing unique regulations by which individual groups seek to do their own thing separate from the influence or control of other groups and their regulations.

The New Testament teaching on freedom in Christ releases the individual believer from the bondage of human laws and traditions in order that our focus remain solely on Jesus and obedience to His directions. When a group is obsessed with autonomy, they are thinking collectively, not individually. They are thinking locally, not universally. The leader or leaders of the group are seeking the allegiance of each member to the autonomous group in order to maintain the identity of the group. But if the leaders are thinking freedom, then they are more likely focusing the church on Jesus rather than the maintenance of a unique group. They are focusing on the universal church which is autonomous from the world. Good leaders should lead us into the realm of freedom unto which Jesus delivered us in order that individuals not be focused on the authority of a group of members, but on the authority of Jesus.

When dealing with salvational matters, our relationship is always individually determined (See 2 Co 5:10; Gl 6:5). No individual or synod has the right to determine the salvation of any one individual. Nor does any group as a whole have a right to dictate the behavioral relationship the individual believer must have with Christ. We will be saved in the end, not because we conformed to the legal code of any specific group, but because we are a part of the redeemed body of Christ. Baptized believers are a part of this redeemed body wherever they are in the world.

When we start thinking collectively as a specific group, the members of the group often start turning their attention from...
Jesus to the group itself. Because we want to be accepted by others, our loyalty is often directed first to a specific fellowship (local church), and then to Jesus. Our desire to be accepted by others is usually stronger than our conscious will to be accepted by God. It is for this reason that many churches lose sight of Jesus in their collective enthusiasm. They want to “go to church” to see friends and family, not specifically to renew their worship of God. Assembly often becomes a meeting primarily for social and entertainment purposes with a little Bible teaching on the side.

Our friends are immediate. They speak with concrete voices and give tangible hugs that we enjoy. However, in the interactivity of our empirical world, God often becomes an abstract thought from whom we become very detached. We cannot hear His voice. There are no concrete hugs. As a result, we turn to cherishing the acceptance of our group over an abstract relationship with God. In focusing on being accepted by our group, we seek to solidify our unique fellowship. We will go to great lengths to guarantee its identity and survival. We even go to the extreme of keeping it separate from other groups who have also solidified their boundaries. We are thus autonomous from one another, denominated into different social clubs.

It is true that our close fellowship with one another helps us understand the love of God. However, we must always keep in mind that it is our fellowship with God that gives us meaning for our fellowship with one another. Our covenant we made with God at the time we were immersed is the reason why we have fellowship as heirs of the promise (1 Jn 1:3). We love one another because He first loved us.

When a group of autonomous people are encouraged to “give glory to the church”, what is usually meant is to give glory to their particular church group. But in the New Testament, our loyalty as servants to the Master is not directed to a specific local group of members. Our obedient loyalty is to Jesus as the sole head and authority of the one universal church. It is for this reason that Paul said, “He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church” (Cl 1:18). Since there is only one Lord (Ep 4:5), then the one Lord can have no competition in loyalty on earth. We love our brothers and sisters in Christ. But our loyalty is first to our King. All glory goes to God, not to any one assembly of believers on earth.

When we focus on King Jesus, then we guard ourselves from exalting individual personalities or local assemblies of believers above what they should be. Christians give honor to whom honor is due, however, they give glory only to the King.

When the denominational interpretation and practice of church autonomy is brought to the forefront during disagreements and loyalties between church groups, invariably there is a conflict between personalities within the separate groups. The debate is not over funda-
mental doctrine, but over personalities in opposing groups who have disagreed with one another. When a particular local church is brought under the supposed authority and control of an individual or controlling group who seeks to lord over the flock, then denominational autonomy becomes a precious doctrine to guard both beliefs, behavior and control from outside influences.

If you do not believe what I have just said in the preceding statements, suppose your church group was about to conduct a business meeting of the affairs of your local group of members. Before the meeting started, suppose some members from another “local church” came to the meeting just to sit and listen. How would you view their presence? Would they be intruding? Would they be considered unwelcome? Would they be imposing themselves on your meeting? Would they be presumptuous to suppose that they could come to your party? Now how would you judge your own feelings in view of the fact that we are all members of the same body of Christ? Are these feelings not a denial of the universal solidarity that we have in Christ? Think about this.

Chapter 13

God’s Global Community

If we are denominational in our thinking and behavior, we will assume that the one universal church is made up of exclusive groups of members who meet at different locations throughout any particular city. We will think that these groups can declare their independence from one another. However, there are two concepts with this view that must always be questioned. First, a clear teaching of the New Testament is the universal nature of the body of Christ that has one head and one King. Because of this, the church must always be viewed globally, not locally. Second, the concept of numerous independent church groups meeting in the same community is nowhere defined in the New Testament. The New Testament pictures one global community of God which is referred to in the New Testament as the church.

It is here that we must remember that when Jesus introduced our connection to Him as the True Vine, He referred to us individually as branches (Jn 15:1-4). He did not refer to collective bundles of branches abiding in Him. We are personally and individually connected to the True Vine. Our relationship with Jesus is not via a local assembly of branches. It is personal and individual, and thus a direct connection. We are individually members of His universal body. Our relationship with Him exists regardless of where we assemble. And since our relationship with Him is individual, then we are all members of the same body.
are fellow heirs, and thus one community of God wherever we are in the world.

However, our assembly-oriented concept of the church has driven us to focus on independent assemblies as the defining factor for the existence of any particular church group. The problem with this theology is that when one is baptized he is added to the universal body of Christ by God (At 2:47). But what we often think is that when one is baptized, he is added to a particular local assembly of the one church. The truth is that when one is added to the church, he is not added to a local assembly, but to all local assemblies of the global church. A baptized believer is added to the universal church, and thus is a part of any local fellowship throughout the world. Membership in the universal church brings fellowship to any local assembly of Christians throughout the world. To think differently is to think denominationally.

Therefore, the church exists in any part of the world because of baptized believers. The church began on Pentecost in Acts 2 because about three thousand people were baptized in the location of that city. It did not exist in the world when there were no members. It came into existence throughout the world when men and women first responded to the first official announcement in Jerusalem that Jesus was reigning as King of all things (At 2:36-41,47). Therefore, the worldwide church came into existence in the world in Jerusalem, though there were baptized members only in Jerusalem at the time it came into existence on the day of Pentecost.

The church does not exist because of the assemblies of those who have been baptized. It exists because of baptized believers. Our emphasis on the erroneous belief that the church exists because of assembly has moved us to focus too much on the evidence of assembly for the identity and existence of the church in any particular community. We must simply keep in mind that the personal witness of the members of the body in any community is the identity of the church in that community. Jesus still says, “By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). This is the witness of the existence of the church.

A. The universal community of God included Corinth.

The church is universally one in function and goal, but witnessed in every world community by the godly life of individual members. The church functions throughout the world as each member serves according to individual tasks and abilities on a local basis (Gl 6:5). When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 12:12, he was not speaking of a “local” church meeting at the same place on some street corner in the city of Corinth. He was speaking universally when he said, “For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the one body, though they are many, are one body, so also is
Christ.” As Christ is one, there is only one global body of Christ. The body of Christ is not broken into bits and pieces of denominated groups that are autonomously meeting here and there throughout the world. “For the body is not one member, but many” (1 Co 12:14). And these many members are scattered throughout the world, and thus make up the one universal church of Christ.

Consider the context of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 in a universal, not local sense, as some would view the church today. Paul says that because the church is one, a foot of the body in Corinth cannot say to a hand of the body in Antioch, “Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body” (1 Co 12:15). Though the problem of exclusion manifested itself locally in Corinth, Paul’s answer was in reference to the whole body throughout the world. Every functioning member of the body of Christ is needed throughout the world. “God has set the members, each one of them in the body, just as He has desired” (1 Co 12:18). In the context of the one universal body, “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. Or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Co 12:26).

For example, when a famine occurred in Judea in the first century, all the members of the global church suffered with the members of the church in Judea. Paul said of the Macedonian members that they were “begging us with much urgency that we should receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints” (2 Co 8:4). The Macedonian members thus “abounded in the riches of their liberality” in order to fellowship with suffering members in Judea who were hundreds of kilometers away, yet still members of the same church that met in Macedonia (2 Co 8:2). In fact, the members of the church in Philippi felt so at one with members who lived in Judea that they went beyond their ability to send aid to fellow members of the church in Judea (2 Co 8:3). They viewed the saints of Judea as members of the global body of Christ, and thus sought to remain in fellowship with them through their contributions to their suffering as a result of the famine. This is the nature and function of the universal membership of the church. This does not sound like assemblies functioning separate from one another in order that members remain independent from one another’s needs.

B. The universal community of God included Philippi.

It is interesting how Paul addressed the church in Philippi. He wrote, “... to all the saints ... who are in Philippi ...” (Ph 1:1). Though the saints in Philippi were meeting in different homes through-
out the city, he did not address them as different independent congregations. His address was to all the saints, not to collective assemblies of the saints. Even when he mentioned the overseers and menservants (deacons), he did not break them down into overseers of specific groups.

If we bring into the Philippian and Corinthian situation any teaching that says churches cannot cooperate with one another, then we attack the universal fellowship of the church. We have a denominational view of the church. In doing this we conjure up all sorts of arguments as to how one church should supposedly guard its independence from other churches when people are starving because of the famine. A denominational understanding of autonomy sets individual assemblies of members apart from one another, and in some cases against one another. I have seen some argue over church autonomy concerning contributions to famine victims while those who were to receive the contributions were starving to death.

Does not the preceding scenario contradict the very instructions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12? In such situations is not the foot saying to the hand, “I have no need of you”? And is not the eye saying to the foot, “I have no need of you”? When any teaching causes us to make these statements to one another, then it is the foundation upon which denominationalism is built. It is for this reason that a sectarian view of local assembly autonomy is inherently denominational.

The doctrine of anti-cooperation among churches was born out of the doctrine that churches are so independent from one another that they cannot cooperate with one another. It is affirmed that autonomous assemblies do not have a right to cooperate in work and decision making with one another on specific projects. But this belief would have denied the Macedonians the right to work with the Judean churches during the famine that took place during Paul’s ministry. Since the Judean churches were supposedly autonomous, the Macedonian churches would have had to give their contributions directly to the individual Christians who were in need during the famine. They supposedly could not have given it directly to another autonomous church, and then work with that church in making decisions concerning work and distribution with their contribution. Those who promote anti-cooperation would argue that since the supposedly autonomous Macedonian churches had no control over other autonomous churches, they could not work with the Judean churches in making decisions concerning how the contribution was to be distributed. The practice of anti-cooperation is strictly denominational thinking and a denial of the universal fellowship of all Christians. It is the nature of the body that it must cooperate in function.

C. The universal community of God included Jerusalem.

I challenge you to take another look at the context of Acts 11 & 12. But view the context of what historically took place
in reference to the famine during the reign of Claudius. Consider the fact that Luke views the church as one body that functions universally, not autonomously as independent assemblies of Christians. In this case where the church worked universally, there were members of the church in all the Roman Empire, but specific mention is made of the members in Antioch, Jerusalem and the region of Judea. Regardless of where they lived, all Christians functioned as one church in order to carry out the task of taking care of the famine victims in Judea.

Acts 11:19 begins this historical case for the universal church by stating that members “were scattered abroad after the persecution.” They were scattered from Jerusalem and Judea. Some went to Antioch, another geographical location north of Jerusalem (At 11:20). As a result, many were converted in Antioch. The news of conversions in Antioch came to the ears of “the church” in Jerusalem (At 11:22). Barnabas was subsequently sent from Jerusalem to Antioch in order to encourage the new converts (At 11:22,23). Many people were thus “added to the Lord”, not to a single autonomous assembly of the church in Antioch (At 11:24). When one is baptized, he is “added to the Lord.” He is added by the Lord to the one universal church (At 2:47). When believers were baptized in Antioch, they were added to the same church as those in Jerusalem.

In this case study, Barnabas went to Tarsus and found Saul (Paul) in order to bring him to Antioch (At 11:25). For a whole year they taught the new members of the universal church who lived specifically in Antioch (At 11:26). During this time, “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (At 11:26). Though “the disciples” who were first called Christians lived in Antioch, Luke uses the phrase “the disciples” in a universal sense. His reference is to “the disciples” throughout the world who were represented by “the disciples” who lived in Antioch. The Antioch disciples represented the disciples throughout the world. Therefore, any reference to the church locally is a reference to the church universally. And in the case of the instruction of the church locally throughout the New Testament letters, the instruction is to the church universally.

This was illustrated in Acts 11:27 when prophets came down from Jerusalem. The prophets lived in Jerusalem, but they were not prophets of a local assembly in Jerusalem. They were prophets of the universal church whose work was not geographically or autonomously confined to one local assembly of Christians. They were prophets of the whole church, not just the Jerusalem church.

The prophet Agabus foretold a coming famine that took place in the days of Caesar Claudius (At 11:28). Acts 11:29
again refers to the universal discipleship of the church. “The disciples” everywhere determined to send famine relief to “the brethren” who lived in Judea. The universal discipleship worked as one church to aid disciples in one particular geographical area. They subsequently made the contribution and “sent it to the elders” (At 11:30). The question is, What elders? The answer must be in the context of the preceding verse. These were the elders in Judea (At 11:29). They were not just the elders of the Jerusalem city church. That understanding is not what Luke wants us to derive from this historical record. He wants us to understand that there were elders of the disciples (brethren) in all Judea who would handle the distribution of the contribution. This may seem strange to those who believe in the concept of elders “over” local autonomous assemblies, which in the Judean context would be many assemblies throughout Judea. This would be true even in Jerusalem, for the church at the time met in the homes of members. Nevertheless, the elders of the brethren in Judea functioned together in reference to the use of the famine contribution.

My argument for the functionality of the church as one can be witnessed again in Acts 12. Herod launched a persecution against “the church.” If you are thinking “local denominational (independent) assemblies,” then you will struggle to identify this local assembly against which Herod launched his persecution. In Acts 12:2, Luke identifies “the church” against which Herod launched his persecution. During this persecution, James, the apostle, is killed by Herod. James was not an apostle to a specific local assembly of believers. He was a Christ-sent apostle of the universal church. Herod’s persecution, therefore, was not against a specific assembly of “the church”. Luke wants us to understand that the persecution was against the worldwide church, though the persecution took place specifically in a local setting.

After James’ death, Herod arrested Peter. While Peter was kept in prison by Herod, “the church” made constant prayers for him. I am sure Luke wants us to understand that these prayers did not come only from a single “local church” in Jerusalem. I believe he wants us to understand that the prayers came from brethren throughout Jerusalem and Judea and other places where brethren received news of Peter’s imprisonment. It was the universal church that prayed for Peter’s release.

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke described to Theophilus the nature of the community of God at work in the world by the power of the Spirit. It is my belief that both Luke and Acts were written as defense documents of Christianity on behalf of Paul who was in prison in Rome at the time Luke wrote both documents. In Luke’s defense of Paul, he wrote with universal meaning concerning the ministry of Jesus (Luke) and the worldwide...
effect of that ministry as the Spirit worked through the church (Acts). Luke thus portrayed to Theophilus a worldwide church of Christ that functioned as a united body because of the global headship of Christ and His reign over all things. He did not present the picture that several local denominationally independent churches throughout the Roman Empire had somehow worked out an ecclesiastical order to work together as independent bodies.

If Luke was trying to portray a union of ecclesiastical autonomous bodies, his defense argument to Theophilus would have fallen flat, for we would assume that the ecclesiastical union would depend on the skill of church negotiators to keep the union together. Luke’s argument is that Jesus was who He said He was, and the church was His universal Spirit-driven body, because the one Spirit was working universally wherever Christians lived. The power of the church was not in the ability to organize individual autonomous assemblies into one force, but in the Spirit of God who worked individually and universally through each free believer. This was the power of Luke’s argument to Theophilus. The Christ and His church of Spirit-filled believers were the work of God and not man. This was so because the work of the Spirit could be witnessed in the lives of individuals, not in the ability of men to corporately work together as institutional groups.

We must admit that the heart of the doctrine of denominational autonomy is money and control. When a particular work is discussed among local independent groups as a possible cooperative effort, control is on the minds of those who participate in the discussions. When money is involved, it is control over money. Both focuses, however, are often thought of carnally in reference to who will control the money. Control becomes carnal when men focus on how much control they can maintain through the vehicle of money. The use of money as leverage to exercise control is a manifestation of one’s carnal motives.

When a famine occurred in Judea, members throughout the ancient world contributed to victims of the famine who lived in Judea. There was some procrastination on the part of some in making their promised contributions, but at the end of the day, the money was given and the suffering brethren of Judea were relieved. Throughout every mention of this historical event in the New Testament, there is not one word mentioned as to who would control the money. Not one word is mentioned in the New Testament about how “local church autonomy” is to be guarded in the contributing and use of the money. Should this haunting silence not cause us to question the theology that independent assemblies of Christians have a right to denominationally function separate from one another?

Paul suggested that the Corinthians send some local brethren with him when he took their contribution to Judea (2 Co
8:19). The suggestion was based on security and the questioning minds of some accusers of Paul in Corinth. Paul did not want to be put in a position where accusations could be made against him concerning the money. There were also some security reasons behind his suggestion since Paul would be making a long trip to Jerusalem with a lot of money. But nowhere in this historical case is there any discussion concerning control and autonomy.

Now the question is, When these brethren who went with Paul arrived in Jerusalem, did they “hand over the money” to the Jerusalem church because it was the money of an autonomous church (Corinth) going to another autonomous church (Jerusalem)? We must consider this scenario in view of the teaching that membership is supposedly placed with local autonomous corporate assemblies, and that members from one such assembly (church) have no right to function in fellowship with another corporate assembly (church) with rights of work and decision as to how the administration of the funds are to be used. Some believe that independent corporate churches cannot work together in making decisions and ministry. But if this is true, then the Corinthian brethren who were with Paul had to hand over the money and catch the first flight home. I think there is something unrealistic about this thinking, if not just plain nonsense.

Though the Scriptures say nothing about what historically happened upon the Corinthians’ arrival in Jerusalem, my assumption is that the Corinthian brethren stayed on and worked as members of the global community of God. They worked in fellowship with Christians in Judea in the administration of the funds to famine victims, as well as in making decisions with the Judean Christians as to how all collected funds from other Christians were to be used. Every Christian who was in Judea, or who had come to Judea with funds, worked together in decision making and administration of the collected funds. They worked as one global community of God.

I personally do not think the Corinthian brethren were concerned about control of the contribution, though this is high priority with some people. They simply joined in to see that the job of feeding the famine victims was dealt with. When contributed money is used to manipulate oneself into a position of authority and control, then there is a problem and a time for concern. It is like holding onto a preacher’s paycheck in order to keep him in line. There have been a few church treasurers who have viewed themselves in positions of control simply because the church had asked them to deposit contributions and write checks for the church. Put a group of such people together in an effort to carry out a cooperative effort among Christians, and the feelings of control emerge and autonomy becomes an issue with the carnally minded.

In all the preceding points of church function in the New Testament, one thing is very clear. The New Testament Christians functioned as one global body. Regardless of where any individual mem-
ber lived throughout the world, he or she considered himself or herself a member of the global community of God. When each member considers himself or her-
self as such, then the church functions as a universal organism that touches the lives of millions. And in so functioning, it honors the universal Head, Jesus.

Chapter 14

Free To Receive

Let’s suppose that a particular assembly of Christians decide that members of their group must be vegetarian. Since the members may live in an area where eating meats is associated with pagan practices (See 1 Co 8; Rm 14), they come to the conclusion that everyone should abstain from the eating of all meats. They thus make a decision as a group to abstain from the eating of meats. Churches in other areas, however, believe that eating meats is simply a matter of opinion. Regardless of whether living in any social environment, they believe that Christians have a right to eat meats. Nevertheless, the “vegetarian church” feels that meats compromise their status in the community, and thus they agree as a group that eating of meat should be banned because of what those outside the church might say.

Now suppose the vegetarian church decides to make the eating of meats a matter of fellowship among all churches. They first bind on themselves the doctrine of vegetarianism as a matter of law, and not opinion. When they do this, other brethren immediately see the error of such. However, because of their belief that they are an independent group of Christians and can do what they want, the vegetarian church says that no other Christians have the right to intervene in their affairs. The vegetarian church subsequently denominates itself from the “meat-eating groups.”

The next stage of this progression into denominationalism naturally follows. Since the vegetarian group has made vegetarianism a matter of fellowship, they feel that it is their mission to convert others to their doctrine. They subsequently send out missionaries to save the saved by recruiting churches to their position on vegetarianism. Since they have denominated themselves from the brotherhood of meat-eating churches, they view meat-eating churches as a mission field. And so, a worldwide confrontation prevails because the vegetarian churches cannot give freedom to the meat-eating churches. And in some churches, the meat-eating churches will not give freedom to the vegetarian churches to eat vegetables only because of their cultural environment.

Consider the preceding scenario from the viewpoint of freedom. Suppose that at the beginning of the situation the broth-
erhood of individual members viewed themselves as part of the universal church with freedom to function in areas of opinion, as well as in areas of cultural differences. If this would have been the case at the beginning of controversy, I wonder if the preceding scenario would have been different? If an individual member sought to bind vegetarianism on others, he would not be dealing with a local assembly of members over which he may be a dominant leader, but with a worldwide brotherhood. He would not be dealing with a few over whom he possibly exercised scholastic dominance, but with “Johns” and “Pauls” who had the right to “preach the word” and “convict the gainsayers.” If at the very beginning of the situation the individuals who initiated the vegetarian doctrine had to deal with peers who could openly challenge their reasoning, then possibly unity would have prevailed instead of division over the matter of vegetarianism. In fact, vegetarianism would not have been instituted as a doctrine if at first challenged by others outside the local brethren. For conscience sake, freedom could have been given to the vegetarians to eat their vegetables. But freedom could also have been given to the worldwide brotherhood to eat meat. Freedom would have promoted unity upon the foundation of Paul’s mandate of Romans 14 that we receive one another (Rm 14:1).

Scholastically unchallenged individual Bible students who lose sight of fundamental doctrine develop unique teachings that they often bind on the consciences of their students. It is for this reason that Bible students must always allow themselves to be challenged by others. Unfortunately, when some Bible students hide behind the teaching of church independence, they leave themselves unchallenged by others outside their cocoon of seclusion, and thus develop unique denominations with those they have convinced concerning their conclusions.

Since Jesus has been exalted above all powers, He rules over all (Hb 1:3). God has “highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name” (Ph 2:9), that He might be the head over all things (Ep 1:22). It is necessary to remember this since we live in a world where principalities and powers inside and outside the church seek to bring the believer into bondage. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places” (Ep 6:12). Paul nowhere said that such principalities and powers in high places existed exclusively outside the fellowship of believers. Sometimes these forces are generated from within the church. In the context of 2 Corinthians 10, the “pulling down of strongholds, casting down
imaginations and every high thing” had specific reference to those in the Corinthian church who had set themselves against the authority of a Christ-sent apostle (2 Co 10:1-6). The individual believer, therefore, must guard himself from being brought into bondage by organizations and individuals who would seek to enslave the people of God.

Group autonomy is not the answer to guarding a group from the influence of those who would seek to bring us into bondage. It is the responsibility of each individual Christian to guard himself against the bondage of men. In the end, each Christian will give account of himself before the Lord Jesus (At 17:30,31; 2 Co 5:10). Our account before Christ in judgment will not be congregationally, but individually. For this reason, our relationship with the Judge must be based on our personal relationship with the Judge through the decrees He has set forth in His word (Jn 12:48). If the individual believer allows another judge to step in between himself and the final Judge, then principalities and powers have taken control of his life. It is for this reason that Christians must stand firm in the liberty by which they have been set free (Gl 5:1). They individually must not allow anyone to bring them into the bondage of man-made traditional religion.

The beauty of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is in the fact that one personally has direct access to and contact with God in prayer. We have the Holy Spirit working in our lives in order that all things work together for good (Rm 8:28) and that our dreams be fulfilled exceedingly abundantly beyond our initial plans (Ep 3:20,21). We “individually together” as the church will stand before God as the body of Christ. It is not that we have access to Jesus through a local institution. This old Catholic doctrine is erroneous. The church is God’s people, not some international corporate institution that calls itself a church. Since the church is people, then when we say that the church has direct access to the Head of the body, we mean that each member of the church is in direct communication with the Head through prayer. The Head is in communication with the body through His written word (Jn 15:7,14).

A group of people should never come between the individual believer and his Head. The individual member is responsible for himself or herself when considering one’s relationship and communication with the Head of the body. Therefore, regardless of the beliefs and behavior of the group, the individual still remains individually accountable for himself or herself before Jesus. Each one of us will give account of ourselves before Jesus, regardless of any other person or group of people (2 Co 5:10).

We must in our relationships focus on one another. Our focus on one an-
other brings us together as individual Christians. Wherever there is another Christian, if possible, I want to be with that Christian. I do not want two individual Christians to form a group in order to withdraw as a group from any other Christian because they declare independence from others. We are free in Christ as individuals, but we will never declare our autonomy from one another as individuals. It is on the foundation of our freedom that we allow one another the space to believe and work according to our personal ministry for God. If we seek to infringe on that freedom, we will move away from one another. It is our mutual understanding of freedom that keeps us together.

Though groups of Christians may declare themselves to be autonomous from other groups, as an individual I will never declare myself autonomous from you. If I did, I would be denying the global fellowship of the body of Christ. If it would be wrong for me as an individual to declare autonomy from you, then how can a group of individual Christians make such a declaration? If they do, are they not acting denominationally?

We are traditional beings, creatures of habit. When one of us seeks to behave in a different manner than the traditional way the group does things, then the group becomes quite uncomfortable. Because of our discomfort, we resist. In our resistance, we as a group will make every effort to bring the “revolutionary” or “controversialist” back into the norm of the group. Therefore, unless the one who seeks to change is trying to change more than minor points of his world view, he will be brought back into conformity or discarded from the group.

In order to affect a paradigm shift in our behavior, we must make major changes in how we come to conclusions. The mechanisms for arriving at conclusions in our world view must be changed before long-lasting restoration can be attempted. If we are to initiate and maintain a religious restorative paradigm shift, our mechanism for doing such is critical in order to have the desired outcome.

In the realm of theology, we must seriously take a look at our hermeneutical tools by which we draw doctrinal conclusions, and subsequently initiate restoration. If we judge ourselves at this time to be just another denomination, then our hermeneutics are suspect. After all, the manner by which we interpret and apply the Scriptures is what got us to where we are. If we feel that we are theologically denominated, then we must
honestly reconsider how we theologically denominated ourselves from one another.

It is imperative that we first understand that God did not give His word to us in a manner that would theologically separate us from one another. In the midst of a divided Christendom, therefore, we must first see man as the problem, not God’s Road Map. To blame denominationalism on the word of God is to blame God for a supposed inability to deliver His message to sincere believers in a way that would produce unity.

It is religion that causes division, not our spiritual connection with God through His word. Religion is the invention of those who seek to quench the thirst of their own spirit. When men seek to engineer their own theologies, they construct religions. The problem is that each of us produces different conclusions, which conclusions continually keep us divided from one another.

A religious restorational paradigm shift must focus on our sometimes questionable motives of how to connect with God. To make the shift, it is necessary to question our means and methods by which we satisfy our spiritual longings. Our first step in making a shift, therefore, must be to go to the word of God alone. We must then examine how we interpret the Scriptures and apply what we interpret.

If one claims to have instituted a restoration without changing the hermeneutics by which he comes to conclusions, then he is actually only a reformist. He is only reforming an existing structure into being a supposedly better institution or more adapted to the culture in which he lives. But at the end of the day, he is not a true restorationist. He only reforms. The result of his efforts is only a reformed denomination because he has not allowed the Scriptures to be the sole authority in his quest for restoration of the original.

This is not to say that the restorationist is willing to throw out the baby with the bath water. It only means that one must be willing to make all necessary sacrifices to affect a restoration to God’s word and work among men. One must be willing to do all that is necessary in order to go to the Scriptures with an open and honest heart and mind in order to discover the purity of God’s will. Reformationists are rarely willing to do this. Tradition bears down on them too forcefully. The burden of tradition distorts their efforts to be true restorationists. The result of the reformist, therefore, is only the renovation of a denominational institution in order to come up with different rules and regulations, but still just another brand and breed of the institution that has been reworked.

It is for this reason that we must ask ourselves, Have we as restorationists become only reformists? Are we establishing another denomination by seeking only reform? We must not fear in asking and answering these questions. True
restorationists do not fear to ask such questions for they seek to be God’s children in belief and behavior at all costs. They are willing to make all necessary belief and behavioral sacrifices and changes in order to be directed by the will of God. Since there is no fear in love (1 Jn 4:18), and John’s love was the keeping of God’s commandments (1 Jn 5:2,3), then restoring God’s commandments to our lives brings peace, not fear. Fear is produced in the struggle for restoration only when those in the midst of the paradigm shift are ignorant of God’s word or are unwilling to sacrifice traditions or positions for the sake of restoration. True sectarian denominationalists always fear restoration.

So we are challenged with the task of becoming undenominational in our efforts to restore that which was born out of a time when there were no denominations as they exist today. We are challenged with a possible change in our hermeneutics in order to be objective in our quest for simple Christianity. Is our effort to do this only an elusive dream, a theological phantom of speculation? Can we really understand the Bible in a way that produces unity?

I have heard many who are trapped in the world of divided Christendom fatalistically resign themselves to the fact that restorational paradigm shifts cannot happen. And since they have concluded that the dream is impossible to bring into reality, they have relinquished any efforts of giving up where they are in order to make the tough journey home. I would not so resign myself. But at the same time, I would also not ignore the awesome task that is before us.

I once heard a preacher give an illustration to identify the restored 21st century church as undenominational. He said that a deck of fifty-two cards are all individual cards because each card has different symbols that classify them as different from one another. The eight of diamonds is different from the six of hearts because of the different symbols on the two cards. The Jack is identified as a different card than the Queen. Each card is denominated from the others by specific characteristics of identification. His application was that denominational churches were separated from one another because each unique group could be identified by separate and individual doctrines and church organizations. Their differences made them individual denominations from one another.

The preacher then drew on the board a card that had no numbers and symbols. He called this card the “no name card”. It represented the “no name church.” Since this card (church) did not want to denominate itself from the other cards (churches), it decided not to use a name that would separate it from the others. So it remained the “no name church.”

However, the weakness of the illustration in explaining the undenominational nature of the church is that the card
that had no symbols was the “no name card.” From the perspective of all the “named cards,” the “no name card” was still denominated from the rest. It was named the “no name” denomination.

Restorationists often counter this accusation by using a “scriptural” name in order to identify the “no name church”. They add a “scriptural pattern” of organization by which separation can be maintained from other churches. From the point of view of restoration, we thus assume that we have restored an undenominational church. However, if we were a member of a “named church”, we would still view the “no name church” as a denomination. Though the “no name church” might refuse to dialogue or fellowship with the rest of the “named churches,” the “named churches” would still consider them as part of the “one-church-is-as-good-as-another” fellowship.

If our name is legalistically established, though originated from Scripture, and our organization viewed as a legal structure of acceptance before God, have we not established a legal denomination? Did God originally establish the church as a legal institution in order that it be identified as separate from the denominations that would eventually come in religious history? If so, then a legalistically defined church is just as denominational as the man-made denominations that surround it.

I find it difficult to believe that God legalistically identified the church in the first century in a way to distinguish it from the nature of the denominationalism that exists today since the denominationalism we witness today did not exist in the first century. But if we identify the church today in a manner to distinguish it from the denominationalism that exists today, then I fear lest we have used a legal hermeneutic to do so. And in doing such, we make the church as denominational in identification as those denominations from which we seek to make it separate.

The problem with a “scripturally” legalistic denomination is that it builds within itself a mechanism for self-destruction. From within, different leaders invariably arrive at different legal conclusions and applications of Scripture. The honest leaders in this scenario eventually wake up one day to find themselves fractured (denominated) from one another. While accusing the man-made religions of the world as schisms of men, the legalistic denomination is thus hypocritical in its accusation. It is hypocritical because the lines of fellowship that are drawn from within the legal denomination are just as bold as those that are drawn to separate itself from all other man-made religions.

The preacher who gave the card illustration pointed out our denominationality simply because of our definition of the church in the exact same manner as those churches who claim to be denominational. He defined the church by its name. So did the others. He de-
defined the church by an organizational structure. So did the others. The problem was in the system of trying to define the church of the New Testament after a legalistic institution by which many denominational churches also define themselves.

The restorationist has a more difficult task before him than the reformist. How can he define New Testament Christianity without being accused of just starting another denomination? How can he simply be Christian in the midst of the religions of men who view the group he seeks to restore as just another denominated sect of Christendom? I do not believe that one who is steeped in man-made Christianity will understand the quest of Christians who simply seek to be Christians only. Unless one is on the same quest to be undenominational, he will desire no understanding of the subject. He will not allow his thinking to be challenged for fear of discovering that he is that which he condemns.

However, I would make a suggestion in order to begin and continue a restorational paradigm shift. We should first ask ourselves, Is church defined by a scriptural name and organization of a group of believers? Or, is it defined by the behavior of individual believers? If our focus is first on being scriptural in name and organization, then we leave ourselves open for a direct onslaught from those who focus first on the spirit of the law and not the letter. Their accusation is backed by the fact that Jesus said that His disciples would be identified by their love of Him (Jn 14:15; 15:14) and their love for one another (Jn 13:34,35). When it came to identity, therefore, Jesus’ focus was on individual behavior, not institutional name and organization. Can we change the primary focus that Jesus initiated—that we be identified first by our love—and at the same time end up with what Jesus intended to establish? I think not.

Do not misunderstand this point. Godliness cannot be claimed without Scripture. But Scripture can be asserted without godliness. The Pharisees maintained righteousness in reference to law. They were not ignorant of their Bibles. But their godliness had a lot to be desired, so much so that Jesus condemned them as hypocrites. They kept law without love.

Jesus ministered in the midst of “whited tomb” leaders who had for centuries digressed to focusing on sacrifice rather than mercy. His was a world of religious hypocrisy. Leadership was identified by legal obedience to denominational structures within Judaism. In the midst of such religious confusion, Jesus did not come to reform. He came to radically restore and innovate. He was a restorationist in the truest sense of the word. We would do well, therefore, to follow closely how He instigated a restorational paradigm shift from the corrupted religious institutions of His day to the original plan of God for His people.
I do not believe His plan was to focus first on a new outline of strictures and structures. His focus was on godly behavior that was generated out of a heart of love and thanksgiving. The impetus of what He initiated was grace (Ti 2:11). The foundation upon which it continues is thanksgiving in the hearts of those who have been saved by grace (1 Co 15:10).

So here we are today. We are seated in a similar religious environment as our Savior in the first century. We are surrounded with a host of legalistically structured religious groups who claim to believe in biblical authority for their beliefs and organizations. If we use their system by which they identify themselves as distinct and different from one another, then they will assume that the church is just another denomination as they are denominated from one another. They will be right. If we establish ourselves with the same rules that have led to denominationalism today, then will we not become the same?

Relational Christianity is not a regimentation to rules that clone us into religious robots. Jesus would not have His flock defined simply by an outline on a piece of paper. He would focus us on our behavior, a behavior that would signal to the world that we are His disciples by our love for one another. Church, therefore, would be identified first by the behavior of the redeemed. **The loving sacrifice of a loving God would forever be the identity of a loving and thankful fellowship that is called in our English translations, “church.”**

Members of the church are in a common fellowship because they are in a common covenant with God. Must we therefore produce books on systematic theology in order to identify those who are in this covenant? Must a legal outline be drawn up to make sure that everyone has conformed to the system? If so, then is the church simply a mechanistic legal system of Christian clones who go about doing their legal duties to make sure that every check on the outline is made? There is something chilling about this thought. There is something empty, dead ... twice dead.

The answers to the preceding questions are that there is a “systematic theology” before all of us. Not for one moment will the true restorationist sacrifice fundamental biblical teaching in order to be directed in his efforts to restore the community of God. The Holy Spirit knew that we needed teaching that would keep us from straying from our intended goals. Therefore, **to scrap the Bible for a humanistic religiosity that is based exclusively on a loving fellowship is to leave ourselves adrift in a religious world that has gone astray.** The problem in the religious world is that doctrine has been sacrificed for fellowship, and thus judgment has come from their ranks that restorationists are legal, works oriented, overemphasizing doctrine and commandments. However, the restorationist understands that God has directed that we be “doers of the word”. If we love Him, we will keep His commandments. And there is nothing legalistic about loving to do what our Father directs us to do.
Some would also accuse that the biblical restorationist has quenched the Holy Spirit. I would certainly question the theology behind this accusation. It is true that the Holy Spirit works in the life of the believer in order to carry out His benefit for the believer. **He will do this work regardless of the believer’s understanding of His work.** But the Spirit has been conjured up in the religious world to supposedly have accomplished everything that might come to the mind of hysterically misguided and biblically ill-informed religionists. Men have sought to walk their own way in religious matters, while assigning their biblically blind walk to the workings of the Spirit. But in restorational paradigm shifts, we cannot trust the whims of biblically illiterate religionists who assert all sorts of fanatical claims that are supposedly accomplished by the Spirit. The road map to restoration is concrete, not abstract. And God’s word is concrete, though we must depend on the abstract work of the Spirit to lead us through this word.

In order to work together in restoration, we must first come to the table with the concrete statements of Scripture. We cannot use one another’s experience in reference to the work of the Spirit in our lives as concrete judgments for determining fellowship. **The Spirit never intended that His work in the life of the Christian be used as the standard by which fellowship is deter-mined.** The problem with using an “experience of the Spirit” as a rule by which to initiate unity and promote restoration is that we leave ourselves open to the subjective judgments of men who can easily be led astray by their own feelings. We will never be united in our subjective interpretations of how the Spirit has worked in each of our lives. The Scriptures teach that we must make objective decisions that are based on “sound doctrine”, not the sensations of the Spirit.

In order to initiate a restorational paradigm shift, we must first resort to the Spirit’s first work for the direction of obedient believers. The Scriptures were given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tm 3:16). We must agree that we can trust the direction of the Scriptures without the subjective nudges that are asserted workings of the Spirit. We must assume that we can read and objectively understand together the Spirit’s instructions concerning essential teaching (Ep 3:3-5). **Any honest and openhearted Bible student can be an obedient believer because he can read or hear what the Bible says he must do to be obedient.**

In the task of restoration, we must never be side tracked from this proposition. We must never be detoured by subjective experiences lest we again end up with an “experiential” religion that is based on the emotional whims of men.

If we are to affect a restorational paradigm shift in the midst of the present religious world, then we must reconsider our emphasis. In their zeal to restore correct teaching, restorationists have often been guilty of sacrificing love for
scriptural correctness. The result of such has often been loveless institutions that are based on correct outlines, but void of real heart relationships. Others have sacrificed objective study of the Bible for a “God-told-me” urge they supposedly received in a dream in the night. Still others have become “if-it-feels-right-it-must-be-right” denominations that are based on the emotional meanderings of excited religionists. Such theologies are only humanly driven solely by either intellect or emotion, and being such, they are driven into obscurity in the forest of religiously misguided religions that are directed by man, not God.

If we are to affect a restorational paradigm shift from denominational religiosity, then we must restore how this will be done. True restoration is more than drawing up declarations to which everyone signs allegiance. It is more than topical sermons and proof texts. If we are to discover who we are to be in the eyes of God, then it will take a restoration of hermeneutical tools by which we interpret God’s communication to us. Such tools must focus on Jesus’ means by which He brought the flock of God out of an apostate Israel. We must use tools that focus us on the dynamic fellowship that was initiated and maintained by those first disciples. In an atmosphere of love, therefore, we must work ourselves through the Original Outline of the Holy Spirit in order to keep ourselves directed by God in a world of religious chaos. It is for this reason that we must be zealous students of the word of God since this is our only concrete source by which the Holy Spirit seeks to give objective instructions on what we should be and believe. The word of God is the map home.

Chapter 16

The Way Home

A pilot friend and I were once in an airplane crash at night in the middle of a forest. My friend, the pilot, broke both legs, and thus was completely incapacitated. He needed help. I needed to find my way out of the forest to find help.

When you are in a forest at night, everything looks the same. Trees have no addresses. There are no roads, no signs, no directions as to where you should go. Nevertheless, I needed to find a way that would lead us out of a desperate situation.

In the midst of a denominated Christendom, there is confusion everywhere. Some have just thrown up their hands and settled for what presently is a religious quagmire. The only way out is to look up.
exists. I do not believe we can do that. If we can do such, then we have the right to create religion after our own desires. And I sincerely believe that God is not pleased with our religious inventions. If it is every man for himself in a religiously confused world, then we will hopelessly wander among countless religious groups that will continually spring up to satisfy the desire of men. Is there a way out of this confusion? Did God leave us to our own wits in order to dream up something on which we expect Him to give His stamp of approval? If we believe this, then God is playing games. He is seeing who will exercise the greatest imagination and come up with the greatest religious invention.

When I was without direction in the darkness of the night in the midst of a forest after that airplane crash, I had only one option. I had to look up. There was no direction on earth. There was no direction amidst the countless trees that were cloaked in darkness. But there was direction from above. The arrangement of the stars never changes. I thus resorted to an unchanging standard, the standard of the stars. If I followed the stars I would not become lost. I would be able to find my way out of the forest and back again to where my friend lay injured.

And I did. I eventually found a road. The first vehicle that came down that road in the middle of the night was a brother in Christ. My pilot friend and I were saved.

Only God can give us direction out of the quagmire of religious confusion. He has given us an inspired road map from heaven. We need to look up in prayer and ask for wisdom to be delivered from the mess into which we have crash landed. We must trust in His guidance through His word in order to be delivered. We must be willing to be led by the Spirit in order to discover the spirit of simple Christianity.

We must start with the essential fundamentals of what He would require of us to find a road out of our own religious inventions. This road map of fundamentals is clear. No interpretation is needed. God did not cloud what was necessary for salvation with mysterious metaphors that needed the deductive reasoning of the fallible recipients to which He gave us His word. If we believe that the Bible has caused the confusion that now exists in the religious world, then we are accusing the Holy Spirit of not being able to communicate. We are accusing Him of not being able to communicate to man in a clear and distinct manner those essential commands for salvation that honest men should understand and obey. Not for one minute can we believe that the Bible is the cause for the present religious confusion. The fault must always lie at the doorstep of the recipients.

What puzzles many people concerning the road map to God is that it is so simple. Those basic fundamentals that are necessary in order to be Christian are not difficult to understand. Though a repentant life is necessary to maintain be-
behavioral directions, we must not confuse the simplicity of what God requires with the religious confusion that has been the invention of imaginative men. There are simple beliefs in the Bible that are necessary and there are simple behavioral standards that must be kept in order to be a disciple of Jesus. If we believe the concepts and behave according to the simple principles of Christian conduct, then we will restore that which in some religious groups has been lost for centuries. It has been lost in the assortment of catechism and creeds that have been so confusing to everyone.

In order to initiate restoration, it takes little hermeneutics to understand clear statements as Mark 16:16. “He who believes and is immersed [baptized] will be saved. But he who does not believe will be condemned.” What deductive reasoning is necessary in order to understand this simple statement of Jesus? I once opened my Bible to this passage and simply read it to a pastor of a particular religious group. After reading the passage, he retorted, “That is your interpretation.” But I had given no interpretation. I had simply read the passage. If Jesus said it, it must be true. And if I love Jesus, I will love and obey His commandments that pertain to my salvation. Is there something difficult about this? The point is that we must allow the Bible to speak for itself without our preconceived doctrinal orientation. When we do this, the Book of God comes alive. When I free myself from the bondage of defending my religious heritage, I begin anew every day with truth from God via His word. This is the only way we will be able to restore that which God intended us to be.

A. Restoring fundamental beliefs:

After one obeys the gospel, he or she is set for a walk in newness of life (Rm 6:3-6). Fundamental beliefs that are essential to be a Christian in this new life are explained by Paul in Ephesians 4:4-6. Though I do not believe that Paul wrote Ephesians 4:4-6 to be a creed to identify the church in the midst of numerous denominations—they did not exist when he wrote—he did write such to separate Christians from the idolatrous world in which the Ephesians lived. In this sense, therefore, this is an inspired creed for Christianity. These fundamental beliefs are necessary in order to be a son of God. In other words, how can one claim to be a Christian if he does not believe in all the points Paul mentions in Ephesians 4:4-6?

There is one body and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one immersion, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

“One” is the key word that permeates these seven essential beliefs. When the Holy Spirit guided the hand of Paul
to write these words, He wanted us to clearly understand that there can be no division among those who believe these seven fundamentals simply because there is no division within the fundamentals themselves. Unity permeates the very nature of what God has established for us to believe. In order to initiate and maintain a restorational paradigm shift back to what God would have us be, therefore, it is absolutely necessary that we adhere to the following fundamentals:

1. **One Body:** Since the body is the church (Cl 1:18), then there is only one church (ekklesia) because there is only one body of Christ. And since the church is the global ekklesia (assembly) of God’s people, then the church exists wherever there is a member of the body. The body exists, not because of the assemblies of the members, but because of the covenant each individual member has with the head of the body who is the Lord Jesus (Ep 5:23). When one obeys the gospel through immersion for remissions of sins (At 2:38; 1 Co 12:13), God adds that person to the church of Christ which exists throughout the world (At 2:47). Regardless of where an immersed believer worships, whether in his home, in a church house, a school, or under a tree, he is a God-added member to the one body of Christ. His assembly with other Christians does not determine whether he is a God-added member of the body of Christ.

The one universal body cannot be denominated. Men may denominate from one another on earth, but God always views the church as one body. Any promotion or condoning of a divided church, therefore, works contrary to the unified nature of the one body of members who are to speak the same thing (1 Co 1:10; see Cl 3:12-15).

The one universal body of Christ is directed and controlled by her only head, the Lord Jesus Christ (Ep 5:23). This universal body is as leaven that spreads throughout the world (Mt 13:33). Each member of the body gives allegiance to the Head who is in heaven at the right hand of God (Hb 8:1). Jesus purchased the church of His people with His own blood (Ep 1:7). His people, therefore, are the bride of Christ (Rv 18:23; 21:2,9; 22:17). Anyone who would be a part of those who will be redeemed out of this world when Jesus comes again must be a member of His body, for He will save only His bride, the church (1 Th 4:13-18).

2. **One Spirit:** There is only one Holy Spirit who seeks to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and not Himself (Jn 16:14). The one Spirit has spoken one message of truth from God to man only through the inspiration of truth that was recorded by Spirit-inspired biblical writers (Jn 14:26; 16:13; 1 Tm 3:16,17). Through inspiration, the revelation of divine truth has come to man in a manner
that can be understood (Ep 3:3-5). The Spirit now indwells those who have obeyed the gospel (1 Co 3:16,17). The Spirit seeks to work for the obedient believer according to His own will (1 Co 12:11). Regardless of the believer’s understanding of His work (Rm 8:28; Ep 3:20,21), the Spirit does not work in a contradictory manner in the lives of the members of the body (1 Co 12:4). He does not lead men to work against themselves. In order to be a Christian, one must believe that only through the Holy Spirit was all truth delivered that is necessary for salvation (1 Co 2:10-13), and that it is only the Spirit who works in the life of the obedient to work all things together for good (Rm 8:28).

3. **One Hope:**
The Christian lives in hope of eternal life for which God originally created man (Ti 1:2). It is a destiny that we have not seen, and thus look forward to with faith (Rm 8:24,25). When Jesus comes again, the reality of our prepared heavenly dwelling (Jn 14:1-3) will be realized to be incorruptible and undefiled (1 Pt 1:3,4). It is in this dwelling that Christians will forever be in the presence of God (Ph 1:23; 1 Th 4:17). They will be embodied as Jesus is, and thus dwell within the eternal presence of God (1 Co 15:35-54; 1 Jn 3:2). One cannot be Christian in faith if he or she does not have this hope.

4. **One Lord:** Since one cannot be totally committed to more than one lord (Mt 6:24), then it is imperative that the Christian submit only to the Lord Jesus Christ (Ph 2:5-11). No man on earth is to be given the lordship which Jesus is to have in His reign over all men (1 Pt 5:3). Jesus is the Lord of lords (1 Tm 6:15), and thus reigns over all things for the sake of the church (Ep 1:20-22; 1 Pt 3:22). There is nothing, except the Father (1 Co 15:24-28), that is not now under the reigning power of the Lord Jesus Christ (Hb 2:8). Christians must believe in the authority that Jesus now has over all things (Mt 28:18). They must believe that He upholds all things by the word of His power (Hb 1:3). Jesus was and is the Son of God who now has power and authority over all that is in existence. One cannot be a Christian if he or she does not believe this about the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. **One Faith:** When Paul wrote these words to the Ephesians, there were many faiths (religions) scattered throughout the world. We understand what he means by the one faith in the context of Ephesians 4 from the interpretation of “the faith” about which Jude wrote in Jude 3. This was the one faith that was once and for all time delivered to mankind. It is more than a revelation of words. It was first revealed through the Word (Jesus, the Son of God) who became flesh (Jn 1:14). This incarnate message has since gone into all the world through the inspired words of the Bible that are the medium through which God now communicates to man the good news.
of our common salvation (1 Co 2:10-13; see 15:1-4). Through the revealed and written word of revelation we can now understand the scheme of God’s salvation (Ep 3:3-5).

The one faith is final, being completely revealed through the written word of God (2 Tm 3:16,17). No more schemes of either revelation or salvation have been or will be revealed (Gl 1:6-9; Rv 22:18,19). The sufficiency of the cross of Christ negates any other scheme by which men can be saved (Hb 9:12; see At 4:12). Our faith, therefore, is in the surety of the one faith wherein Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tm 2:5; Hb 8:6). One cannot be a Christian, therefore, unless he or she is of the one faith, which faith is revealed exclusively through the Bible.

6. One Immersion: Included in the midst of essential beliefs concerning one body, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, and one God is the essential immersion (baptism) for remission of the sins for those who commit their lives to Jesus (At 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pt 3:21). In placing baptism in the midst of such fundamental teachings, the Holy Spirit surely knew that men would eventually deny that which is most important for one to do in order to be saved and brought into a covenant relationship with God.

Baptism is the obedient response of anyone who recognizes that there is only one body into which all must be immersed (1 Co 12:13; Gl 3:26,27). In consequence to one’s crucifying himself with Jesus on his personal cross of repentance, he is immersed with Jesus in the likeness of His death (Rm 6:3-6). As Jesus was physically raised from the tomb, so buried believers will not only physically come out of a grave of water in baptism, but they will eventually come out of their tombs of death when Jesus comes again (Jn 5:28,29; 1 Th 4:13-18). When one comes out of the tomb of water, he or she is added to the universal body of Christ. Being an added member of the body, he or she should be joined to any assembly of fellow Christians in his or her community. No compromise, therefore, can ever be made of the one baptism by which one comes into a covenant relationship with God in the universal body of Christ. One cannot claim to be a Christian, therefore, unless he or she has submitted himself or herself to obedience of the gospel by being immersed with Jesus into His death and raised with Him as He was raised (2 Th 1:7-9; 1 Pt 4:17).

7. One God: Contrary to the polytheism that is prevalent among the faiths of men, the Christian gives worshipful allegiance to only one God. This is the only living and true God (1 Th 1:9) in whose omnipresence we all live (At 17:28). He is not as the gods that have...
been invented by the imagination of men who presume they can comprehend God with their feeble minds. He is the God who is beyond the definition of the words of our dictionary. Since He is one, all who honestly and earnestly seek Him are brought into one brotherhood on earth through their obedience to His word (Hb 5:9). The one God has revealed His existence through the things that He has created (Ps 19:1,2; Rm 1:20). Through the revelation of His word He expects us to form our understanding of Him. Though limited in our understanding of God, one cannot be a Christian without believing in the biblically defined God that is revealed to all men through the Bible.

These fundamental beliefs are essential to the definition of one’s Christianity. There can be no compromise, no avoidance, no minimizing or denial in any form of these propositions of Christianity. A Christian is such because his or her faith is founded upon these essential truths.

Christians believe the preceding because they affect the behavior of one’s life. They are the principle beliefs upon which the Christian’s world view is established. There are other doctrinal teachings throughout the word of God. Christians understand that all doctrinal teachings were given by God in order to enhance one’s life in order that they enjoy the abundant life (Jn 10:10). Doctrine was given by God, therefore, not simply to believe that which was is right, but also to do that which is godly. The teaching of God’s word was delivered to us for the purpose of establishing the foundation upon which we behave.

B. Restoring fundamental behavior:

An essential behavioral principle of Christianity is that faith without works is dead, for it is by our works that we manifest our faith (Js 2:14-26). It is paramount to being a Christian, therefore, that one’s belief in the preceding fundamental truths results in an appropriate response (See Mk 16:16). This obedient response that comes from our faith is founded upon our love of God with all our heart, soul and mind (Mt 22:37). Such a response to the being of God initiates our loving relationship with our neighbor (Mt 22:39; Gl 5:14,22,23). And herein God has established fundamental relational practices that must be maintained in order to be Christian. The behavioral practices manifest our faith. They identify the love which is to be the signal of our discipleship (Jn 13:34,35).

1. Thou shalt nots: The following is a summary list of behavioral practices from Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:8 and Revelation 21:8 that one cannot do if he or she claims to be a Christian:

Commit fornication, be morally unclean, be lewd, be an idolater, practice sorcery, harbor hatred, strive with others, live in jealousy of others, harbor uncontrollable anger, be selfishly ambitious, cause dis-
2. **Thou shalt**: Since the foundation of Christianity is built on the principle of love, one’s love is manifested in a variety of ways. It is for this reason that the New Testament does not give a legal list of those things that would manifest love. Love cannot be legally controlled. It must be spontaneous, meeting the needs of others as those needs are presented to the believer in his or her everyday life. However, there are some specifics that are given in the New Testament concerning essential things a Christian must do in order to be Christian. The following is a summary list from Romans 12, Galatians 5:22,23 and James 1:27 of those things that manifest one’s obedient faith, and thus must be characteristic of those who would be Jesus’ disciples through love:

- Put others before oneself, think soberly, use one’s gifts to minister to others, love without hypocrisy, cling to good, love the brotherhood, give honor to one another, rejoice, persevere in trials, pray, give, be considerate of the poor, do not seek revenge, be honest, live peaceably with others, overcome evil with good, take care of orphans and widows

Upon the basis of the preceding the Christian seeks his autonomy from the world. He thus denominates himself from those who would practice the “thou shalt nots”. The disciple is separate from the world, not in the sense of living outside the world, but by not practicing or condoning evil in any way. In this way, Christians are the unique people of God (1 Pt 2:5). They are the holy nation of God who have been separated from the world (1 Pt 2:9).

Those who believe and behave in a godly manner are naturally drawn together into a common fellowship. It is impossible for denominationalism to exist among those who have subscribed to the preceding fundamental beliefs and behavioral practices. It is for this reason that sectarian-denominationalism is wrong. The practice of such is against the very nature of the fundamentals of Christianity.

3. **“Do this in remembrance of Me.”**

When Jesus was with His disciples during the final hours of His earthly ministry, He instituted what is commonly referred to as the Lord’s Supper. During the celebration of the Passover feast with His disciples He “took bread and blessed it. And He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat. This is My body.’ And he took the cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘All of you drink of it. For this is My blood of the covenant that is shed for many for the remission of sins.’” (Mt 26:26-28). In Luke’s account of this event, he records that Jesus concluded the institution of the bread and cup by saying, “*Do this in remembrance of Me*” (Lk 22:19).
Any restoration of simple New Testament Christianity could never leave out the regular observance of the Lord’s Supper. It is necessary, therefore, that disciples regularly observe the Supper in order to remember Jesus. Paul recorded, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Co 11:26). And it seems that the disciples in Troas partook of the Supper every first day of the week (At 20:7).

Restoration means restoring Jesus as the center of our lives. Jesus knew that we would have difficulty maintaining our focus on Him. The reason is that we seek to create our own religions, and thus, lose sight of Jesus. When disciples regularly partake of the Supper, however, they keep their focus on Jesus. And when we have restored our focus on Jesus, we are on our way to restoring discipleship that is centered around Him and not any man.

Epilogue
The Dawn Of A Restored Future

In order to initiate any restorational paradigm shift in our behavior, we must cease speaking the language of denominationalism and behaving as such. When Israel was contaminated by her friendship with the idolatrous nations around her, she began to speak the language of those nations. When Nehemiah initiated a restoration in Israel after the Babylonian captivity, he stated,

In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people (Ne 13:23,24).

When we speak the language of denominational Ashdod, we have exposed our sectarian spirit and denominational behavior. We have through our language revealed our ignorance of the fact that we are divided, and thus have joined the religious nations around us.

We live among the powerful influences of a divided Christendom. It will take great courage to stand against that which has divided those who believe in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Paul exhorted, “... be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rm 12:2).

The religious world is saturated with the created religions of men. It will take bold men and women to stand up to this onslaught against Christianity. There must be those who will stand for our freedom in Christ; those who will refuse to be brought again into the bondage of men (Gl 5:1). We must heed the exhortation that Paul gave to Timothy at the conclusion of 1 Timothy.
O Timothy, guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings and opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge, which some professing have erred concerning the faith” (1 Tm 6:20,21).

Our plea to all Christians to enjoy our united fellowship in Christ is based on our responsibility to evangelistically reach out to an unbelieving world. Jesus prayed in reference to His disciples, “that they all may be one; even as You, Father; are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me” (Jn 17:21). In our efforts to win an unbelieving world to Jesus, we must forsake our party spirits. This is precisely what Paul urged the Philippians to do. “Only let your behavior be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Ph 1:27). When believers become so involved in debates over traditions, opinions, methods and interpretations, they lose their evangelistic focus and outreach. Their energy is consumed by their devouring of one another (Gl 5:15). One of the best ways to get over a sectarian spirit is to keep oneself totally consumed with preaching the gospel to the lost.

I have discovered that when churches become introverted by the loss of their evangelistic outreach, the members often turn on one another. Leaders among these groups become confused concerning what must be done to stop the self-destruction. They confuse union with unity, and thus seek to bring everyone into conformity to traditional norms. Their misunderstanding of unity is based on their own departure from the freedom we have in Christ. Union movements have lost sight of Christ. Those in such movements seek to bring everyone into the bondage of robotic religiosity. However, unity exalts freedom. There can be unity only when leaders understand that we have been delivered from being religious clones. We are free to be united in our diversity.

It is true that some local churches have become so institutional that they often choke the individual’s freedom in his or her relationship with God. However, leaving such a group and exchanging it for another, only substitutes one institution for another. What we must keep in mind is that the church is universal. Christ died for individuals, not groups. The church is made up of saved individuals throughout the world. I am not saved because I am a part of a local assembly, but because I am a member of the redeemed body of Christ. Local assemblies should not stifle one’s personal relationship with God. They should encourage it. Therefore, regardless of the behavior of those with whom I may assemble, I will nurture my personal relationship with God. The one who leaves an assembly because he says it is full of hypocrites, is trying to base his relationship with God on the conduct of others.
The one body is a universal organism, and thus cannot be divided for it has only one head. Those who are members of the universal body may reject one another, but the point remains that all members are one body in Christ. Disciples may separate themselves into denominated assemblies, but they are still members of the one body. Our task is not to incorporate members into exclusive assemblies, but to cease rejecting one another as members of the one body. When we start accepting everyone who is in a covenant relationship with Christ, we will begin accepting one another regardless of where we show up on Sunday morning.