

## **Are Denominations Sinful?** by Dr. Bryan Litfin

Many times today we hear the idea that the church has been split apart by denominations. “The body of Christ is supposed to be one,” we say, “yet look what denominations have done to divide us.” The Lutherans can’t have fellowship with the Methodists, the Presbyterians can’t have fellowship with the Episcopalians, and nobody can have fellowship with the Southern Baptists! It would seem that the church today is in a state of division and fracture. Let’s take a moment and consider whether this is true – and if so, what can we do about it?

Perhaps our first order of business is to understand where denominations came from. If we take things back to ancient times, we see that the first believers thought it very important to be what they called “catholic.” This didn’t mean “the Roman Catholic Church” but instead referred to the universal body of Christ. The word “catholic” with a little-c simply means “universal.” Unity was very important to the first believers, and they used the word “catholic” to describe it.

However, over time, different groups emerged. In the Middle Ages there was a split between what we now know as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. This situation continued for another 500 years until the Protestant Reformation more or less introduced what we know as denominations. The four main wings of the Reformation are the Lutheran; the Reformed or Calvinist; the Anglican; and the Free Church or Anabaptist tradition. Today there are many different Lutheran denominations such as the Missouri Synod Lutherans; there are Reformed denominations such as the Presbyterian Church in America; there are Anglican communions such as the Episcopalians; and there are Free Churches, such as the Baptists or the Evangelical Free. And of course, there are many non-denominational Bible churches that probably align most closely with the Free Church wing of the Reformation -- not to mention all the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox who are still around as well. What are we to think as we look at this bewildering array of diversity? Is the Church of Jesus Christ hopelessly split? Is the seamless garment of the Lord rent asunder, never to be sewn together again?

Certainly, God is not pleased by disunity within the body of Christ. Unity was one of Jesus’ main concerns. We see this in his High Priestly Prayer in John 17. Jesus prays that the church “may be one, even as we are one.” It’s amazing to think that God wants Christians to be unified in the way that the Trinity is unified! Likewise, the Apostle Paul severely criticizes the factions that plagued the early church. In 1 Corinthians 1:10 he writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you *agree*, and that there be no *divisions* among you, but that you be *united* in the same mind and the same judgment.” Clearly, divisive factions that separate Christians from one another are out of place within the Body of Christ.

However, I’m not sure that all *denominationalism* necessarily equates to *factionalism*. The Bible cares about whether individual believers are fighting and backbiting, but it says nothing about the organizations that we call denominations. In fact, the Apostle Paul even celebrates diversity in 1 Corinthians 12, where he says that the body needs its hands, its ears, its eyes, and so forth. I’m not saying I support everything that any given denomination might say or do; far from it! I am only saying that denominationalism might not be evil *per se*. I myself belong to a non-denominational church, but I’m grateful for the things that some Presbyterians bring, and some Anglicans, and yes, even those feisty Southern Baptists. As long as the bond of love and unity is present, the existence of global denominational structures doesn’t have to be a disaster for the church. I’d rather see us reaching across denominational lines than trying to

destroy the guys from the church across the street. That's the view from here. For Prime Time America, I'm Bryan Litfin. For Moody Radio, I'm Bryan Litfin.