

ARE DENOMINATIONS
NECESSARY?

PRESENTED

by

011 JOEL NEOERHOOD

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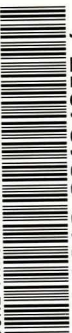
*The
Back to God
Hour*

THE DENOMINATION AD CAS OF

THE REFORMED CHURCHES

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ARE DENOMINATIONS NECESSARY?

It is certainly true that church assembly and the whole matter of the denominations is a very confusing spectacle, and if you are outside looking in, I can understand why you perhaps want nothing to do with something that looks as mixed up as the church scene does today. But one of the reasons we have denominations and they in turn have synods and other assemblies because the church is not really a simple thing, but it is very complex and extremely fascinating. Consequently, the church of Jesus Christ is expressed in several denominations, each of which has its own inner dynamics.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not one large corporation, but it is infinitely more diverse and interesting than a corporation would be. In a large multi-national corporation the goal of the enterprise is that of making a profit by providing necessary goods and services. The success of a corporation is measured by the usefulness of the products it provides, and especially by the profits it generates. In spite of the fact that a large corporation may employ thousands of people, be found in many countries and have billions of dollars in sales, it is still a very simple enterprise compared to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ spans all the ages of human history from the dawn of creation until the very end of time. And those who are its members may not be so arrogant as to disregard the testimony of those who have been members of the church in ages past. The church has arisen because of the most marvelous and gracious event that has ever occurred. God has come to seek and

to save condemned sinners through the blood of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. At the center of the church's life, the testimony of the Bible lives and dominates. And the Bible is not a simple book. It has been written by the Holy Spirit, and its truth displays an astonishing force for the citizens of every century. In addition, the church is made up of people of a variety of backgrounds. And its members are at different stages of spiritual development.

All these factors contribute to the complexity of the church and help explain why Christians tend to separate themselves into groups of various kinds. This doesn't mean that they are not all united under the Lord Jesus Christ, but it does mean that there is variety within the church which is sometimes expressed along organizational lines. This is why we have denominations. That's what the Christian Reformed Church is. It's a denomination which exists because of certain historical events and because of certain distinctive ways of responding to the Word of God. And those of us who are in it believe that this denomination is a context in which we can meaningfully express our membership in the one holy catholic church. And this is why we eagerly invite people to join us within our denomination if they wish to, or to find a similar context in which they can experience the reality of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in the same way that we experience this reality within our church.

The church then is a very complex and beautiful entity within our world, and denominations which express the dynamics of the true church can be beautiful, too, in spite of the flaws that mar them. And because the church is so much more beautiful than a giant corporation and differs from it so much, it cannot conduct

business by having an annual meeting of its stockholders at which Yes and No votes are given in response to proposals of the board of directors. No, the church needs synods, high assemblies at which the issues before the church are dealt with in a church-like way.

So it should be no surprise that in the Bible itself there is a record of what was virtually a synodical gathering of the early church. In the 15th chapter of the book of Acts we can find a record of that first synodical gathering. Let us look at the issue that made that synod necessary, at the way it was handled, and at the outcome.

The issue that arose way back here in the New Testament era was one that occurred because the church was alive and expanding. You see, the apostle Paul and his companion, Barnabas, had returned to Jerusalem to tell the people there about the amazing way new converts to Christianity were forming churches in many parts of Asia and Europe. These churches were formed because Paul had been preaching, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." His gospel was simple. And those who believed were baptized, confessing their sins.

But apparently a group of other teachers followed the apostle Paul and contradicted his simple gospel. They said, "No, it is not enough to believe in Jesus and be baptized. It is also necessary to be circumcised before a person will be a complete Christian." Circumcision, as you may know, was an Old Testament sign of the covenant agreement between God and the Jewish people. And the Jewish Christians wanted Gentiles to submit to this rite, too.

This is the way the Bible records these circumstances:

"But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. They came to Jerusalem, and they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.'" (Acts 15: J-5)

That was the issue, then: is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."

"Absolutely no," said the apostle Paul.

"Absolutely yes," said the party of the Pharisees.

The very central teaching of the gospel was at stake. Are men to be saved by the blood of Jesus, or by their own works? Is salvation by grace alone, or is salvation by the grace of God plus the work of man?

This was the issue at the Synod of Jerusalem and this is the kind of issue that makes synods necessary. Now, when a synod meets, it must take care of many housekeeping chores, nuts and bolts matters that arise out of the running of a church. But when you look at the issues that are before it, you always discover that many of them are crucial and vital and the

must be faced and they must be resolved. Else the church will be destroyed. Synods deal with issues that are that important.

Well, how was this issue handled at the first synod? Was there a big discussion in which everyone participated so that everyone would have a chance to give his opinion, after which a vote was taken and they all submitted to the will of the majority? No. It didn't go that way at all. The question was submitted to the authority of the apostles and the elders. They looked at the issue. They talked about it, yes. But most of all they asked the Scriptures said about this matter and they remembered the teaching of Jesus on this subject. The apostles were important at that Synod because they had been with Jesus and they remembered what He had taught. Acts 15 records what happened in detail. Listen:

"The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that they shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'" (vv. 6-11)

Acts 15 goes on and Jesus Christ's review of the Old Testament Scriptures pointed forward to the day when Gentiles would receive

the gospel and believe. And of it all there came a letter which was sent by the hand of three of the elders to the new Gentile converts. Their letter concluded with the significant words: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" This is the result of the decision that was taken. It was not a decision that was distilled from the interchange of human judgment alone, but it reflected the teaching of the Scriptures on the matter and the judgment of Spirit-filled men, who lived in obedience to the Word of God.

This is a season of the year in which the larger assemblies of many churches are meeting. What a disgrace it is when the business of such assemblies consists of issues which are not worthy of the church conducted in isolation from the witness of the Word of God, in isolation from the apostolic authority which we still have with us in the written record of the apostolic witness. What a mockery of what the church should really be when a large church gathering degenerates into an expression of human sentiments exclusively, when the ambitions of small men dominate, and the perpetuation of human power becomes the primary objective.

Ideally every synodical decision should be able to enjoy the preface, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. And where the Word of God is taken seriously, and where brethren in the Lord submit themselves to its

authority, the decisions that are taken are in deed the product of the Spirit of the Living God as He works in the hearts of the people of God through the testimony of the Scriptures. Thus, we must recognize that synods are necessary and useful. e, etoday. And those of us who are serious about our faith will have to take them very seriously indeed.

I wanted to talk with you about all of this because I know that many whom this program reaches cannot understand how the church conducts its affairs, and they cannot understand the many denominations around them. Are denominations necessary at all? So long as we do not conclude that any one denomination is the true church of Christ, the exclusion of all others, denominations can fulfill a useful function. They can be used in times like these to help the people of God find their way. They can respond to the rulership of Jesus Christ in their larger assemblies in ways that an individual Christian; or an individual church for that matter, cannot respond.

A synod is a very remarkable gathering of people. This is true of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. And as we looked back across the centuries to that first synod that met there in Jerusalem we saw what a synod can be and what it can do. It is our prayer now that the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church will be like the Synod of Jerusalem and that it will be able to conclude its meetings with the profound declaration: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us "

What about you? Do you live in the fellowship of a church like this yourself? Have you been so confused by the strange scene that confronts you whenever you look at the church that you have just stayed outside? I hope that

today has helped you see something of the beauty of what the church can be.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and become a member of a church that belongs to Him.

Prepared for broadcast by Dr. Joel Nederhood,
Radio Minister, Christian Reformed Church.

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