

“Ready to Give a Defense”

Answering Our Friends’ Religious Questions

Lesson Four - Denominationalism

Introduction. Human beings like making choices based upon our individual preferences. Each of us decides what foods to eat, clothes to wear, car to drive or career to pursue based upon what we think and feel. Many people like to apply this same thinking to religious matters. They conclude that if a religious institution appeals to their likes and preferences that it is the “church for them.” In modern times many religious groups have grown into huge congregations as a result of surveys and market research indicating what people in the community “want in a church.” In this lesson we will consider some issues regarding this approach to religious service.

I. How Many Churches Did Jesus Build?

- A. Jesus built only one church (Matthew 16:13-18). He did not establish different churches teaching and practicing different things. The practices of modern times are the invention of man.
 - 1. It was part of the eternal purpose of God (Ephesians 3:8-11). The church was important enough to God that He planned its institution from eternity past. Mankind should be obliged to respect God’s wisdom in planning the church and not seek to alter it or shape it to our own wishes.
- B. The church Jesus built is His body (Colossians 1:18, 24). The church is described with the figure of Jesus’ body. This further illustrates its importance in the mind of God. It is the body of Christ that was sacrificed for the sin of the world.
 - 1. There is only one body (Ephesians 4:1-6). Jesus did not have multiple bodies. His church, therefore is not made up of multiple bodies of doctrine and practice.
 - 2. Paul taught the same thing in every church (I Corinthians 4:17). The church of the New Testament was to be united in doctrine and practice.
 - 3. The New Testament is the guide for how the church should conduct itself (I Timothy 3:14-15). The standard for how the church conducts itself is not found in human creeds, councils, surveys or opinion polls but in the revealed will of God contained in the New Testament.

II. What Does the Bible Say About Religious Division?

- A. Jesus prayed that His disciples should be one (John 17:20-23). This makes it clear that Jesus’ desire and intention was for believers to be unified in doctrine and practice.
 - 1. Religious division was condemned (I Corinthians 1:10-13). While there was already some religious division in the early church it was condemned and rebuked. How can we imagine it would be acceptable to God today?
 - 2. To be divided was considered “carnal” and not spiritual (I Corinthians 3:3-4). While the flesh is not sinful in-and-of itself, there are sins of the flesh. As Paul uses the term “carnal” to the Corinthians he is addressing sinful works of the flesh and classes religious division among them.
- B. Following human traditions rather than the word of God was condemned (Matt. 15:7-9). The pharisees are never rebuked for following God’s word, but they were rebuked for following human traditions to the violation or neglect of God’s word.
 - 1. To change what had been revealed was condemned (Galatians 1:8-9). Paul rebukes the Galatians for accepting a “different gospel.” We must avoid the same mistake today.

Lesson Four - Denominationalism

2. New Testament Christians were told to follow what the Apostles revealed (II Thessalonians 2:13-15). The doctrine and practice of Christ's church was not to be ever-changing with each new generation but followed in accordance with the Apostolic example in successive generations..

III. Whose Preferences Should Govern Religious Matters?

- A. God is seeking those who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:21-24). God wants mankind to worship Him "in truth." These very words show us that it is possible to worship in error. In so doing we would be doing what God does not want.
 1. Christians should seek to be "well-pleasing" to God (II Corinthians 5:7-9). The purpose of faith is not to please ourselves but God.
 2. Even Jesus did not seek His own will, but yielded to the desires of God the Father (Luke 22:42). If even God the Son was willing to forgo His own desires to do the will of God the Father shouldn't we do the same thing?
- A. The Holy Spirit promised a time when men would follow their own desires in religion (II Timothy 4:3-4). This shows us that God is not pleased when men follow simply their own desires as the standard in religious affairs.
 1. Christians must "turn away" from religion led by those who are "lovers of themselves" (II Timothy 3:1-5).

Conclusion. We live in an age in which there are as many different types of churches as their personalities and desires among human beings. This is not the way the Lord intended it to be and we must never imagine that this is pleasing to Him. We should look to the pattern of God's word as a guide so that believers might be united in doctrine and practice.