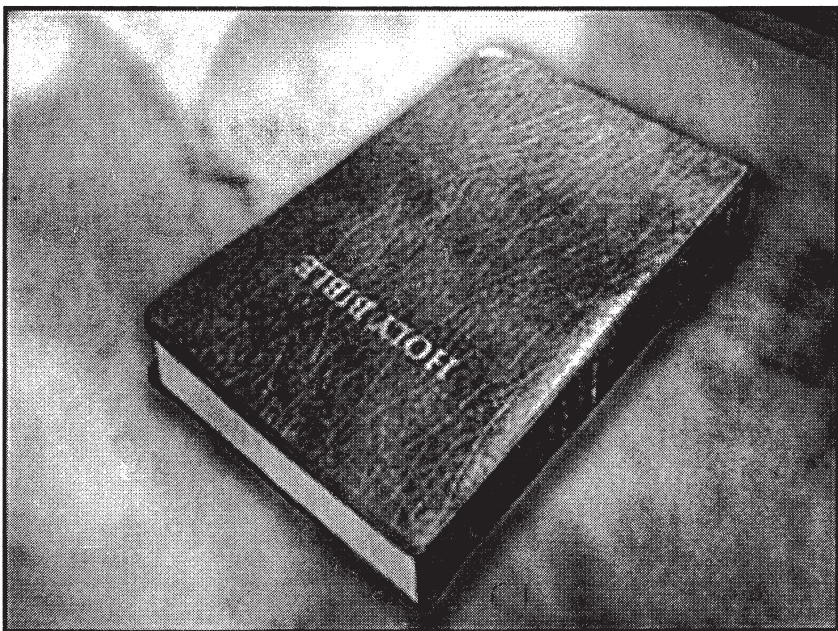


The Church



and Denominationalism



THIS ARTICLE deals with the subject of “The Church and Denominationalism.” As we approach this subject, perhaps it would be well for us to define what is meant by “church” and “denominationalism.”

The Church

The word “church” is the translation of the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*), which from its stems signifies “out of” and “to call.” It is used to identify an assembly of people who have been called together, the called out ones.

As we think of this word as found in the Scriptures in connection with Christianity, we find three different usages of the term. (1) It refers generically to the body of believers in the world in a collective way. The Lord said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Paul said, “I persecuted the church” (1 Corinthians 15:9). (2) Then the church exists in a local sense, the body of believers in one given locality, as “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:1-2). (3) And, finally, the word is used in its most basic meaning, that of believers coming together for worship and edification. This can be seen when the apostle Paul said, “Let your

women keep silence in the churches [assemblies]" (1 Corinthians 14:34), as they were not permitted to be public speakers in the general assembly of the church (1 Timothy 2:12-14). Also, notice a similar usage in Colossians 4:16. (A non-religious use of *ekklesia* also can be seen in Acts 19:32,39, and 41 where the term is translated "assembly," KJV).

From the overall perspective, Christ said, "I will build my church." And speaking of this coming church at that time, he said, "There shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16). The church is the body of Christ, spiritually speaking (Colossians 1:18). As the Lord Jesus came into the world through the virgin birth, and thereby taking the form of man and walking upon the earth, he had one body. Now the church, representative of Christ in the world, is one body. When we become a Christian, we are called into and baptized into one body (Colossians 3:15; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Ephesians 4:3-6 clearly makes plain the teaching that the church is one body and the oneness of everything in connection with it, according to God's plan.

Denominationalism

Now in sharp contrast with all of this, let us notice the meaning of "denominationalism." The first definition found in the English dictionary reads, "The tendency to separate into religious sects or denominations" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). This brings us to the word "denomination," which signifies division and "partyism." And with this word we back up to the word "denominate," meaning "to give a name to; designate." And thus from the purity of the undenominational Christian viewpoint, a religious sect or party separated from others, while wearing man-made names and embracing distinctive doctrines of men, constitutes a denomination. This situation is represented in the Scriptures (KJV) by the word translated "sect" and "heresy" (*haireisis*), having this twofold meaning (the religious party and the divisive beliefs that have brought them together as a party). (The Jews looked upon Christianity as such, when the words "sect" and "heresy" are used, Acts 24:5 and 24:14—the same Greek word, *haireisis*, is behind these words). To simplify it, when you see the word "sect" think of the word "section," and not the whole. That is what denominationalism is, a splinter group.

In view of what we have learned about there being one church taught in the New Testament, denominationalism is contrary to the Bible in every way. In that great high priestly prayer found in the 17th chapter of John, our Lord prayed for unity among his would-be followers (John 17:20-22). Religious division, as seen on

a local scale at Corinth, was condemned as sinful and a work of the flesh (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:3-5). In fact, Paul specifically calls such division a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. But in spite of all of this, we are told there are over 300 denominations in our land today as men unblushingly hold to their divisive denominational doctrines and traditions of men (or have little conviction at all).

I. WHEN WAS THE CHURCH ESTABLISHED?

Looking at Prophecy

When was the church we read about in the Scriptures established among men? Perhaps a good place to begin in answering this question would be to look at prophecies leading up to its establishment; then it finally coming into being. That way we will get a basic understanding in approaching this subject.

The “Forever” Promise to David

A good beginning place in this consideration would be 2 Samuel 7:12-16 (1 Chronicles 17:11-14). David had it upon his heart to build a temple for God as theretofore the tabernacle had only been used as a place of worship (1 Chronicles 17:5). God said “no” to David because he was a man of blood and war (1 Chronicles 22:7-8). But God told David that his son would build the house, and he would establish the seed of David forever upon his throne. This promise in 2 Samuel 7:12-16 seems somewhat like the one given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. It was multi-layered, two-pronged or two-fold. It had its temporal part and its eternal part as subsequent history bears out. The immediate temporal part involving the building of the temple and David’s posterity being on the throne forever, or indefinitely, was conditional (1 Chronicles 28:7,9), and in time this “forever” part was invalidated. But the second part, which we learn was about the coming of the Messiah, was irrevocable. Thus we read in Isaiah 9:6-7 these expressive words: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment **and** with justice from henceforth even for ever. ***The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this [meaning, it is irrevocably going to come to pass].***” In spite of God no longer recognizing the sinful seed of David and them being uprooted and carried into Babylonian Captivity, the Jews still looked forward to David (his seed) being established forever upon his throne.

The Anticipated King and Kingdom

There are numerous references to be found throughout the prophets, although clothed and expressed in the imagery of the Old Testament, that look forward with great anticipation to this event coming to pass. Here is a string of Scriptures to consider besides the ones already mentioned: Isaiah 11:1-10; 55:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:14-26; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14; Hosea 3:5; etc. (Also, notice Psalms 89:3-4). Each one is worthy to be looked into. Reference is made to King David, his seed, it being forever. From Babylonian Captivity Ezekiel writes, "And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them" (Ezekiel 37:24). There is continual reference to Gentiles in connection with this kingdom. Daniel expands it in language beyond the context of Israel. "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever" (Daniel 2:44).

The "Law" Would Go Out of Zion

Another interesting Scripture that points to the coming of the church is Isaiah 2:2-4. This really is a duplication of Micah 4:1-3. Isaiah and Micah were contemporary prophets. Isaiah reads, "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem..." The expression "in the last days" is commonly understood to refer to the New Testament era (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:1,2). In the "last days" the "word of the LORD" would go forth from Jerusalem and "all nations" would be involved in response to this.

The Angel's Declaration

When the fullness of time was come, all of these things began to happen (Galatians 4:4). A young virgin by the name of Mary, engaged and as yet unmarried, was found to be with child conceived by the Holy Spirit. Her lineage was of David (Luke 3:23-38), as likewise was the lineage of Joseph, her husband to be (Matthew 1:1-17). Before this happened the angel Gabriel appeared unto her, "And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy

womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:30-33).

The King and Kingdom in the Gospels

The gospel accounts are saturated with repeated references to the kingdom, its nature and its imminence. When Jesus was born, wise men came from the east asking, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2) Years later, John the Baptist upon beginning his ministry as the harbinger of Christ, began to preach, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). The Lord Jesus himself, upon entering his ministry, began to preach the same message: “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). During his ministry, he repeatedly gave parables about the nature of this kingdom, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is likened unto...” (Matthew chapter 13 and elsewhere). Almost surprisingly, in view of the seemingly literal language of the prophecies in the Old Testament, there was nothing earthly or political about this kingdom. Christ even said that unless a person was converted and became as a little child, he could not even enter this kingdom (Matthew 18:3-4). Nicodemus was told that a man had to be born of the water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom (John 3:1-5). Decidedly, the anticipated kingdom spoken of in prophecy was to be spiritual and not a political or physical one of this world. While the Lord was being interrogated by Pilate before his crucifixion, he said little, but he did say, “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...” (John 18:36). Pilate, seizing upon these words, asked him then if he was really a king. Jesus answered, “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world...” (John 18:37).

The Caesarea Philippi Declaration

As we “zero in” in more exactly understanding when the church was established, it is well for us to notice words exchanged between the Lord and his disciples a few months before the crucifixion. This took place in Caesarea Philippi, as he questioned them concerning their conclusion as to his identity, just who they really thought he was. In all that was said, many great truths emerge and converge. Peter made that great confession, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). (“Christ,” or “Messiah,” was the official title of the one who would sit upon the

throne of David, and the confession of deity corresponds well with Isaiah 9:6—notice John 15:9; Colossians 2:9) To this the Lord responded, “Upon this rock I will build my church...” (16:18). And in what he further says to Peter, the word “church” and the word “kingdom” are used interchangeably. Reference to building his church and using the keys of the kingdom were synonymous expressions. Earlier in his ministry excitement filled the air as it was preached that the kingdom was at hand. Now this decided and affirmative declaration is made in reference to it coming. It is imminent. Following this, we read, “And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1).

Pentecost: Christ Raised and Sitting on the Throne of David

Finally in the 2nd chapter of Acts, the first Jewish Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ, we see all of these great truths that we have touched upon coming to pass. God had promised David, the prophets repeatedly spoke of it, and the angel plainly declared to Mary that “JESUS” would be given “the throne of his father David.” But the Lord Jesus, the seed of David, had been raised from the dead and was ascended to heaven. When did this enthronement take place? Along with what was happening that day, Peter explains everything in reference to what David had said. “Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him [to David], that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, *he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne: He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ...*” (Acts 2:30-31). According to what Peter says here, Christ in being raised from the dead, going back to heaven and being seated on the right hand of God has fulfilled the promise made to David. He was thereby enthroned as King. He was responsible for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom had come with power, just like Jesus said (Mark 9:1). Thus Peter declares, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36). The kingdom was now a reality. In the book of Acts, preaching the gospel involved preaching the kingdom (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31). Thereafter we read such Scriptures as Colossians 1:13, “Who [God] hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” Believers were spoken of as being in the kingdom (Revelation 1:9).

The Church Now a Reality

All of the other references fall in line. The prophets had said that the “law” would go out of Zion and all nations would flow into the house of God. This definitely came to pass. In stating the Great Commission, the Lord had said “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Notice Acts 1:8. Before the book of Acts, the term “church” had only been used twice, and that was in anticipation (Matthew 16:18; 18:17). Christ said, “I will build my church.” In Acts 2, Peter had used the “keys of the kingdom” in this connection as it came about. Thereafter (after Pentecost) in the book of Acts the church is spoken of as something in existence and ongoing (Acts 5:11; 8:1,3; 11:22,26; 12:1; 13:1; 14:23,27; 15:3,4,22; 18:22; 20:17, 28). In the rest of the New Testament, “church” is a term that appears frequently. As one reads the book of Acts, called the history of the early church, Pentecost is looked back upon as a point of reference, the day of beginning. After going to the household of the Gentile Cornelius, in explaining what happened, Peter said, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost [Spirit] fell on them, as on us *at the beginning*” (Acts 11:15).

II. WHAT ABOUT THE RISE OF DENOMINATIONALISM?

God’s Eternal Purpose in Christ and the Church, the Kingdom

Salvation and the concept of the kingdom are synonymously interwoven in God’s scheme of redemption from sin. It involves being saved and the saved. The church, or the kingdom, is made up of the saved and in this context the saved have their being and their spiritual well-being. Interestingly, the angel said to Joseph, speaking of Mary, “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Then in the parallel appearance to Mary, the angel accordingly said, “And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS” (Luke 1:30-33). And what would be the outcome of this son as spoken of to Mary? What would he do? He would occupy the throne of David and reign forever upon it. The thoughts are parallel: *SALVATION and THE KINGDOM are inseparably interwoven*. The first was said to Joseph and the second to Mary. The kingdom is spiritual; it has to do with salvation. We are told that Christ purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Paul said, “Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25). So God’s eternal purpose in reference to himself and man is

tied up in Christ and the church (**Ephesians 1:4; 3:10,11**). Looking to the end of the world (**age**), as implied in the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:20**), the apostle Paul said, "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father..." (**1 Corinthians 15:24**). And, looking upon the full spectrum of the picture, he said, "Unto him [God] be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (**Ephesians 3:21**).

The Devil's Failure to Thwart God's Plan from Without

All of this being the case in reference to Christ and his church (or kingdom), we could hardly expect the devil to sit idly by while all of this was taking place. After all, he was the one responsible for the sin and death that had come upon mankind and necessitated God's plan of salvation. But he didn't thwart the plan of God in the establishment of the church. Christ had declared, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (**Matthew 16:18**). Jesus came forth victorious from the grave, and the church triumphantly came into being. However, from the very beginning the church was harassed by persecutions, being more localized in nature. But as time went by, we are told there were ten major persecutions of Christians carried out on a large scale by the Roman Empire, starting with Nero. As if waiting for relief and vengeance from God, the voice of the martyrs is heard crying out in the book of Revelation, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (**Revelation 6:10**). But, as it has well been said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The prayer of the saints was heard. In time Christianity triumphantly prevailed, paganism was debunked and dismantled, and the church was officially recognized and embraced by the Roman government. Like a mighty army moved the church of God.

The Devil's Efforts to Thwart God's Plan from Within

However, all was not well. Converging forces were at work. While the gospel was being carried to the remotest parts of the Roman Empire and beyond (**Romans 10:18**), the devil was coming from the other direction. Evidently he saw that persecution was not stopping the spread of Christianity, so another more subtle tactic came into play. If he could not stop Christianity by opposition from the outside, he would try working from the inside to make havoc and impede the progress of the church, if not bringing it to a grinding halt. He would pollute the fountainhead of its

source, its message. One of his first attempts along this line was Judaism, the corrupting of the gospel with the outdated Law of Moses that had been taken out of the way. First, the practice of circumcision would be imposed on the Gentile Christians (Acts 15) and then whole churches began to be swayed over to keeping the Law of Moses, as seen among the Galatians (Read the epistle). This would result in their condemnation, severing them from Christ (Galatians 1:8; 5:4). At times it seems that local practices and philosophies, along with a smattering of the Law, were mixed with the gospel (Colossians 2:8,18-23). Toward the end of the first century, a false teaching called Gnosticism was beginning to raise its ugly head, as implied in John's epistles.

"For the Mystery of Iniquity Doth Already Work"

All of this worked ill, but the undercurrents of a far greater and a far more reaching deception were early in the making. Paul's concern for the local situation at Corinth could well be used as a description of the wider and more sweeping apostasy that was to come. He said to them, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3). While here the Lord, speaking in general terms, had said, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Matthew 24:11-13). Paul personally had warned the Ephesian elders, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Peter, John and Jude ominously spoke of apostasy (2 Peter 2:1-3; I John 4:1-3; Jude). But the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 more specifically tells of a great apostasy that was to come upon the church on a universal scale. It was troubling and of much concern to him. Even in his day, Paul said, "For the mystery of iniquity doeth already work..." (2:7). It would be just a matter of time, involving days, years, and even centuries, for it to reach its apex.

The "Man of Sin," Celibacy and Asceticism

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 carefully and then 1 Timothy 4:1-6. At Thessalonica some were expecting an early second coming of Christ. Paul makes it plain that certain things would take place before this would come about. He wrote, "Let no man deceive you

by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.” In the New Testament sense, when talking about the “temple,” it is the church (Ephesians 2:20-22; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17). This would happen in the context of that which was supposed to be the church. One would flaunt himself flamboyantly as if he were God himself (called the “man of sin” by Paul). Then in 1 Timothy 4:1-6 Paul seems to be talking about the same apostasy. Interestingly, here two tenets of practice in this apostasy are mentioned, “Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats...” In other words, he is talking about the practice of celibacy and asceticism. Are these telling clues in identifying this apostasy?

“The Man of Sin” and the King James Version of the Bible

To make a long story short, let us leap frog the many years from Paul and to more modern times, to the year 1611. Europe was beginning to emerge from the Dark Ages with the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation being in full sway. In times past, the Bible had been kept from the people, even with death and burning at the stake being imposed upon those who would dare to translate it, i.e. to John Huss, 1415, and William Tyndale, 1535. In the century before, before 1611, Luther had made his initial impact upon the religious scene. Now in such a context, the King James Version of the Bible (known as the Authorized Version) makes its début. In the “Dedicatory” preface of this Bible, King James is commended for authorizing such a translation and the importance of the Scriptures is recognized, “which hath given such a blow unto that Man of Sin, as will not be healed.” (This is the exact quotation). To them the “man of sin” prophetically spoken of by the apostle Paul was the papacy of the Church of Rome, the pope having long arrogantly imposed himself upon the world, both politically and religiously, as if he were God.

Departure and Radical Changes

From the time of the apostle Paul, and the initial inception of the church into the world, radical changes had taken place. The professed church had gone from a simple, local autonomous entity to a monolithic structure with its imposing headquarters in Rome. Bishops (elders) had gone from being one of a plurality in a local church to one so-called bishop (the pope) at Rome claiming to be the head of the church and over all the churches in the world. The

unfounded claim was put forward that the apostle Peter was the first pope and all others were his successors. With the collapse of the Roman Empire, the pope filled the vacuum and it wasn't long until the so-called Holy Roman Empire came into being with the pope making and replacing kings. He even divided the world up into different geographic areas for different countries to occupy for purposes of colonization. Claims were made that final religious authority was in the so-called church, meaning the pope and bishops, and not in the Word of God alone. Doctrines and traditions of men at variance with New Testament teachings prevailed. Religion seemed to amount to prescribed human works. We know things had gotten so bad spiritually speaking with the sell of indulgences in the time of Martin Luther, that he nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. With the rebirth of learning and the Bible being discovered all over again, the Protestant Reformation Movement to reform the Catholic Church became full-blown.

The Multiplication of Denominations

Although accomplishing much good, the shortcoming of the Protestant Reformation was that it was a protest against certain glaring wrongs in the Catholic Church, and that being its primary focus, it fell short of a complete return to and restoration of the church in other areas. Different prongs of the Reformation Movement divided from others with their distinctive creeds and beliefs, the creeds being used to define and hold each group together. About all of them carried over certain beliefs and practices from Catholicism. We will not attempt to list all of them in this article, but such can be seen in the practice of infant baptism and sprinkling in the place of New Testament baptism (Acts 2:38; 8:38; Romans 6:1-4). Many copied and mimicked the organizational structure as seen in the Catholic Church. In many countries the separation of church and state was not distinct. Likewise, many reactionary beliefs and doctrines were incorporated into their denominational creeds. Reacting against human works so evident in Catholicism, Luther taught salvation by "faith only" (James 2:14-26). Finding God dethroned in the papal system, Calvin, evidently trying to establish again the sovereignty of God, taught predestination (his version), irresistible grace, and the impossibility of falling from grace. Then the masses in coming to America found freedom of religion like they had never experienced before in the Old World. This freedom, although great and wonderful, became the spawning grounds for more division and the further multiplication of denominations.

A Concluding Appeal to All

Our appeal in this article is that we would divest ourselves of any and everything that would make us a denomination and merge into that one church that was started in the first century on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ; just be Christians, not different kinds of Christians. (There is only one kind). We need to do this because denominationalism is wrong. And as we intimated in the first part of this study, denominationalism is wrong because of division and because of diverse man-made doctrines that cause this division (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-5; Romans 16:17-18). Let us heed, believe and practice the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:3-6, "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." According to the Scriptures, when we repent and are baptized into Christ for the remission of sins, the Lord himself adds us to his one church (Acts 2:38-41, 47; 1 Corinthians 12:13). We are called into one body (Colossians 3:15). That being the case, why join some denominational division, which is condemned in the Scriptures? And as the great apostasy came about in getting away from the simple, independent and autonomous local church, the oneness and unity that the Lord wants is to be reclaimed, realized and practiced within the bounds of that local church (not by being lined up with a denominational bloc of "churches"). It is a Scriptural and spiritual unity as we follow the Bible and that alone.—**James E. Gibbons** □



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