



ISSUE

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Kevin Wise

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

It's a Different World

By Kyle Pope

When I first began preaching in the late 1980s, I picked up a book at a used bookstore entitled *Handbook of Denominations*, by Frank Mead. It was a helpful book that listed the major religious bodies in the United States at the time of its publication, with brief descriptions of their beliefs and history. While I didn't like that the book counted churches of Christ within its listing of "denominations," I appreciated that it explained under its entry, "They do not think of themselves as being denominational but 'rather desire to be as the church of the first century.'"¹ By my count the book listed 223 distinct groups among those who claimed a belief in Jesus.

What I didn't realize at the time was that the book, written in 1951 (and based on statistics going back as far as 1936), was describing conditions decades out of date by the time I purchased it. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Criswell Theological Seminary by 1970 worldwide there were 18,800 denominations, and by the year 2000 that number had risen to 34,200.² While the book I purchased was only looking at groups in the United States, and the statistics from Gordon-Criswell reflect global numbers, the fact is that the religious picture of the world around us has become more and more divided and confused. According to more recent estimates from that same study the number has now grown to 45,000!

The chaos of an apostate world does not change the singular nature of the Lord's church. When the Lord's church was first established there was **"one body"** (Eph. 4:4), and those who abide in the word of Christ continue as disciples of Christ (John 8:31) and members of that **"one body in Christ, and individually members of one another"** (Rom. 12:5). It is important, however, for Christians in the twenty-first century to understand the changes that have affected the religious world around us in order to effectively call people out of error and confusion.

What Has Changed?

Increasingly among those who consider themselves "Christians," more and more of these groups reject beliefs as fundamental as a belief in the inspiration of Scripture, the

reality of hell as a punishment for sin, or even Christ as the sole author of salvation. In 1980 Mike Willis wrote an article in *Truth Magazine* entitled “Changes in Denominationalism.” Willis observed at that time a growing ecumenical attitude that taught sincerity as the sole criterion for salvation and a willingness to condemn few doctrines or practices as sinful.³ In the years since Willis wrote, the religious world has not only advanced many of those same attitudes, but it has expanded to adopt practices and teachings far different from the traditional denominational views of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Notable among these changes are some of the following developments.

Changing Definitions of Denominationalism

Membership in many major denominations has declined in recent years. According to the US Census Bureau, from 1990-2008 membership in Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches all declined (61).⁴ In many cases “non-denominational” denominations have arisen from those who have left their former denominational allegiance. Ironically these “non-denominational” churches do not oppose denominational teachings or practices, but simply seek organizational independence. Some of these have become “mini-denominations,” training their own preachers, founding their own institutions, and establishing satellite churches following their own model. These changes blur and confuse what is even meant by using the term *denomination* in reference to religious

sects. Paul’s command to be “**perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment**” (1 Cor. 1:10) is increasingly ignored as an ideal that is unattainable.

These changing definitions have even affected churches of Christ. Congregations that once opposed denominationalism, now embrace identification of themselves as members of the “Church of Christ” denomination. In 1962, religious historian David Edwin Harrell, Jr., who passed away this week, warned, “The time may not be far distant when considerable numbers of Churches of Christ will be proud of their denominational status” (27).⁵ Sadly, that time has now come! Large congregations often participate in co-operative projects with denominations without reservation. Paul’s call to “**note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them**” (Rom. 16:17), is now seen as *old-fashioned* and *narrow-minded* thinking.

Finally, dissatisfaction with the current state of the religious world has led to rising numbers of people who have rejected organized religion altogether. These people, whom some have called “nones” (from the fact that they claim no affiliation) or “dones” (in that they have rejected former affiliations), adopt concepts of spirituality that are individual in nature or composed of loose associations with those of similar thought. Author Thom Schultz explains that they have tired of the “plop, pray, and pay” routine, and now are simply “done.”⁶ All of these changes affect where we can even begin in seeking to bring those outside of Christ into sound faith. This is especially true when we encounter...

Changing Standards of Right and Wrong

There was a time when (in spite of our differences with denominationalists over doctrines of salvation and the work and worship of the church) we shared many things in common with regard to what was considered right and wrong. Sadly, that is no longer the case. We now face dramatic differences regarding...

Attitudes toward the Bible. Sound teaching has long forced us to oppose the Catholic and Orthodox positions that Scripture and “Sacred Tradition” hold equal value in establishing authority for doctrine and practice. We have shared in common with Protestants an affirmation that the “Scriptures alone” (*sola scriptura*) are the standard of authority. Jesus taught that His disciples must reject religious tradition that is contrary to God’s word (Matt. 15:3-9). Paul taught that Scripture can make one “**complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work**” (2 Tim. 2:16-17). Yet, as the nineteenth century introduced critical scholarly theories that imagined evolutionary concepts of the man-made formation of Scripture, those who once trusted in the authority of the Bible began to place their trust in the wisdom and learning of man rather than the revelation of God. On the other extreme, the rise of charismatic movements within traditional denominations alongside Pentecostal denominations claiming to possess miraculous spiritual gifts has led to a different type of rejection of biblical authority. If people believe that the Holy Spirit is personally directing them, they will feel little need to study Scripture. So like the Catholics, they actually trust in a second standard of authority: the Bible and their own personal feelings (which they attribute to the Holy Spirit). Paul taught that any type of perceived additional revelation that runs contrary

to Scripture must be rejected (cf. Gal. 1:8-9). With this confused view of the Bible it is little wonder that many pulpits now use Scripture as mere “filler” between emotional stories and humorous anecdotes.

Attitudes toward Gender Roles. Changes within a culture inevitably bring changes in religious thinking. As women’s roles have expanded in the workplace and the political arena much of the religious world now rejects biblical restrictions on women’s roles within the church. The popularity of denominational teachers such as Beth Moore and others has led many who once followed biblical patterns to ignore what the Bible teaches on women’s roles. Clearly, the Bible teaches women to teach other women (Titus 2:3-4), children (2 Tim. 1:5), and in situations outside of the church assembly they may discuss spiritual matters with men (cf. Acts 18:26). Yet, even in these situations a Christian woman is to maintain a quiet and submissive disposition (1 Tim. 2:12-14). It is clear, however, with the exception of confession of Christ and singing, that in the assembly of the church a woman is to be silent (1 Cor. 14:34-35). Now, in spite of this, even within sound congregations we are beginning to see struggles to uphold biblical teaching in the face of a culture highly resistant to any gender restrictions.

Attitudes toward Morality. Increasingly people who claim religious convictions accept moral values that dramatically conflict with biblical teaching. A February 2015 PBS story reported that there are presently over 130 churches in the US that meet in bars, with beer served while services are conducted.⁷ Preacher Bryan Berghoef has authored a book entitled *Pub Theology* advocating religious discussions over shared alcoholic drinks as a legitimate venue for religious investigation.⁸ Didn’t Paul rebuke the Corinthians for bringing social meals into the church assembly (1 Cor. 11:22)? Didn’t Peter teach that “**drink-ing parties**” were something one leaves behind when becoming a Christian (1 Pet. 4:3)? How can we imagine these things are acceptable before God?

This is also true in matters of sexual morality. Retired Anglican Priest, Robert Brow argues, “The Bible does not forbid premarital sex. There is no passage of the Bible that references premarital sex as a sin against God.”⁹ Does Scripture not speak of it as “**a disgraceful thing**” and something “**which ought not be done**” (Gen. 34:7)? Unfortunately, this is not a new tendency. Long ago denominationalists embraced unscriptural attitudes toward modesty, sex outside of marriage, divorce, and they are increasingly tolerant of homosexuality. None of these changing views of human beings change anything within the word of God! The Holy Spirit teaches, “**Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,**” will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9).

Made to Order Religion

Perhaps one of the greatest changes in attitude is seen in a different view of the very purpose of faith. There is little talk in the modern world about *pleasing God*. It is assumed that if something pleases us, it *must* please

God. Israel was warned in the Law not to do as they ended up doing during the time of the Judges—doing whatever each thought was “**right in his own eyes**” (Deut. 12:8; Judg. 17:6; 21:25). In our world churches will actually survey communities to learn what people are looking for in the churches that are within their neighborhoods.¹⁰

This “as you like it” religion has had a profound impact on the religious world. Churches have become market-driven supercenters offering everything modern man imagines. This might include anything from knitting classes and exercise rooms, to financial counseling, daycare, and retreats to exotic locations. This thinking has changed expectations of the nature of religion. It is no longer a matter of worship aimed at pleasing God. The focus is now on what a church can do for us.

History has revealed the dangerous consequences of this kind of approach. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation the Roman Catholic Church was criticized for assimilating pagan concepts into religious practice in order to win converts. John Calvin criticized the Catholic Church for merging myths associated with pagan gods into legends about “saints.” In his work *A Treatise on Relics* he accused them of “substituting the agency of the Christian saint, the hero of their tale, for that of the Pagan deity, to whom it had originally been ascribed” (8). As the Bible teaches it there are no special and isolated Christians whom the church is authorized to canonize as “saints.” As the Bible teaches it, all Christians are “**saints**” i.e. *those set apart* unto God (1 Cor. 1:2). Even so, this practice of venerating “saints” and relics (which is drawn out of pagan religion) has contin-

ued throughout history. William Madsen in his book *The Virgin's Children: Life in an Aztec Village Today* address this as it was seen in Mexico following the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. He explains:

Catholic saints gradually assumed most of the functions of Aztec gods. Before the Conquest each Aztec village had an idol of a patron god who protected the pueblo. Indians adorned the village idol with robes and jewels and gave it offerings. After the Conquest each town adopted a patron saint, who received clothing and offerings from the villagers in return for providing them with the necessities of life (Chapter 2: Conquest and Conversion).¹¹

Jesus taught that acts of worship not authorized by the word of God are **“vain”** or useless (Matt. 15:9). Modern market-driven churches may not venerate relics and images, but they are doing exactly the same thing. They unashamedly focus on what potential converts want and shape their practice after these desires. This thinking has subtly worked its way into our own mindset, as we place less and less emphasis on what God wants and more on our own feelings and desires. May it be in us, as the Hebrew writer prayed, that God might make us, **“complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight”** (Heb. 13:21).

Opportunities in the Midst of Chaos

We should not end such a study without recognizing that in the midst of the increasing turmoil and confusion of the world around us, there are also important opportunities that such changes present. The growing ecumenical attitude of our world, and potential convergence of factions once separated by competing doctrines reflects a desire (on some level) to achieve our Lord's prayer that all who believe in Him **“may be one”** (John 17:11, 21). Our task must be to help such souls see that true unity is not accomplished by superficially coming together and accommodating everything man might imagine to be **“right in his own eyes”** (Deut. 12:8). It is accomplished by standing together on the sound teachings of God's word! Every time that a soul grows disillusioned with the false hope of denominationalism an opportunity arises to help that soul understand **“the way of God more accurately”** (Acts 18:26). In spite of the negative attitudes and improper thinking that exists, there are, nevertheless, people in error with good attitudes just waiting to learn the truth. These are souls **“not far from the kingdom of God”** (Mark 12:34). May God help us to seek them, find them, and share with them the glorious riches of the truth of God's word!

- ¹ Mead, Frank S. *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. New York, Abingdon Press, 1951, 60.
- ² Johnson, Todd M., Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing. “Christianity 2015: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39.1 (Jan. 2015): 28-29.
- ³ Willis, Mike. “Changes In Denominationalism.” *Truth Magazine* 24.49 (Dec. 11, 1980): 787-789.
- ⁴ “Table 75. Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990, 2001, and 2008.” *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012*. Ed. U.S. Census Bureau. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012.
- ⁵ Harrell, David Edwin, Jr. *The Emergence of the Church of Christ Denomination*. Athens, AL: CEI Pub. Co., 1972.
- ⁶ Schultz, Thom. “The Rise of the Dones.” *Holysoup.com* [online] <http://holysoup.com/2014/11/12/the-rise-of-the-dones/>.
- ⁷ Severson, Lucky. “Churches in Pubs.” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly: PBS.org* (Feb. 20, 2015) [online] <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2015/02/20/february-20-2015-churches-pubs/25265/>
- ⁸ Berghoef, Bryan. *Pub Theology: Beer, Conversation, and God*. Eugene, OR: Wipt and Stock Pub., 2012.
- ⁹ Brow, Robert. “Premarital Sex is Not a Sin Against God.” *123HelpMe.com*. [online] <http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=163282>.
- ¹⁰ Cimino, Richard and Don Lattin. “Choosing My Religion.” *American Demographics* (April 1999): 60-65.
- ¹¹ Madsen, William. *The Virgin's Children: Life in an Aztec Village Today*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960.

