

The Multiplicity of Denominations An Evil

By James B. Gambrell, D.D.

“They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace” — (Jer. 6:14).

Taking these words as suggestive, I shall proceed directly to the discussion of

a matter which has long appeared to my mind to be of grave concern to all Christian people. It requires no argument to convince Bible-readers that the first churches had a common faith, as they had also a common Lord and a common baptism.

At the beginning there was unity in belief and practice. This is clear upon the face of the inspired

records, and it is equally clear that it was the will of our Lord that this happy state of things should continue. A caution was given against those who caused divisions contrary to the doctrines of Christ. Our Savior prayed for the unity of His disciples.

The whole tenor of the New Testament scriptures strongly indicates unity. But in the course of time changes came. Instead of visible bodies known as the churches of Christ, all holding the same doctrines and practicing the same things, there are hundreds of schismatic bodies, each with its special doctrines and peculiar forms of worship.

The heresy of schism is not only acquiesced in by great multitudes of professing Christians, but it has been elevated into a doctrine and boldly proclaimed from many a pulpit. The present state of things is extolled as tending mightily to the conversion of the world. This is the popular view, and I am aware that to take a strong stand against it will bring upon me the charge of bigotry, narrowness, etc. Nevertheless I have strong convictions upon the subject, and taking all risks I shall write on the question as the Lord helps me. *“The Multiplicity of Denominations An Evil”* is what I shall attempt to show. Taking the text as a guide I shall notice—

J. B. Gambrell was a graduate of the University of Mississippi, editor of the Mississippi Baptist Record, and served as president of Mercer University of Macon, Georgia. He later became editor of the *Texas Baptist Standard* and a member of the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary of Ft. Worth, Texas. In 1917 he was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention and served four terms as president.

I. The injury inflicted upon the cause of Christ by the multiplicity of denominations. II. The pleas for divisions, insufficient, unreasonable and unscriptural. III. The impossibility of a settled peace under existing circumstances.

I. The injury inflicted upon the cause of Christ by the multiplicity of denominations.

Under this head let us in the first place look at the mangled form of truth. The Scriptures present a perfect body of divinity, grand but simple. It was constructed and rounded out under the master hand of Deity. It is perfect. And more, it is exactly suited to the wants of our race. It needs no emendations nor reconstructions. And to realize the most perfect unity it is only necessary that all men humbly accept the simple system of truth revealed in the Scriptures. This has not been done. From very early times down through all the ages a process of adding to and taking from has been going on. Hence the various denominations of today. This is historically true, beyond dispute.

The Romish hierarchy is the slow growth of centuries, mainly the work of *men's* hands. Other sects around us have a kindred history, as might be shown did time and occasion allow. They all have some truth. Let us thank God for that! Yes and I will thank God that even in the Romish system there is truth, saving truth. The foundation rock is there in the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus which Catholics hold. It is fearfully overlaid by tradition and superstition, but it is there, and again I thank God! I will add that it is my hope and belief that in Rome even and all her Protestant branches, there are many of God's own elect people. But while all these sects hold truth, they do not hold all the truth, and they maintain much that is not truth. Thus the Divine system of truth has been mangled. Will any one say there is no harm in all

this. He would be a daring man who would so do.

A traveler, writing from Rome, laments that the petty nobility of that city irreverently tear down the magnificent old temples and take the stones to mix with other material in the construction of their private residences. And just so have men done with God's grand temple of truth. This can not be right. Such a procedure is attended by the most serious consequences and deserves the gravest censure. It is a work in which we will have no part and to which we will give no sanction.

But let us pass to notice that these divisions obstruct the course of truth. I accord to ministers of other denominations — many of them — the sincerest desire to forward the cause of our common Savior. This is done with the utmost pleasure, and it detracts nothing from what I am about to say. These good men are hindered by the errors of their own systems. There have been Christ-loving, soul-loving preachers in the Romish church, who sought earnestly to bring the truth savingly near the hearts of the people. But their congregations were wrapped about with the grave-clothes of ritualism. They fought bravely, but the sword of truth was encased in a lifeless formalism, and could not cut its way to the heart. All error is a hindrance, as all truth is a help. It is painful to see good men struggling with their own errors.

Take the English church: it has much precious truth in its creed, but this is neutralized in large measure by much error. It is so everywhere. Even our Presbyterian brethren, with a doctrinal base all of pure granite, are embarrassed by their views of infant baptism and other kindred doctrines. A man who is bound to maintain that baptism is the seal of the covenant can not so powerfully

enforce the doctrine of salvation wholly by the sovereign grace of God.

And more: whatever tends to hinder the free preaching of all truth in due proportion, must be an evil. The multiplicity of denominations has this tendency. In many places it is very unpopular to preach upon certain doctrines concerning which the sects are not agreed. Although clearly in the Bible, they are put under ban by a misguided public sentiment, lest the preaching of them should give offense. Many a man, too weak to stand against the prevalent sentiment, yields. The temptation to be silent is great, and the voice of truth is smothered. Men, who have been set for the defense of the gospel, speak with bated breath, because there are those before them who would take it as a personal unkindness, and an attack on their denomination, if the whole truth should be spoken plainly. Many a man who sees clearly that salvation must be entirely by grace, will not tell dying sinners so in unmistakable terms, because of the Arminian element in his congregation. There is a nervousness in pew and pulpit which is not favorable to the advance of scriptural views. Why, in many places certain denominations have pre-empted the ground, and it is held improper to go there and preach as the Scriptures most clearly teach.

Again, downright opposition to the truth is another evil growing out of the multiplicity of denominations. Truth is exclusive. It will form no alliance with error; nor will it agree to a truce with heresy. From this inherent disposition of truth it follows that often it must be crushed to make room for that which is not the truth. It is no part of my plan to discuss baptism in this article, but I will allude to the baptismal controversy for an illustration of the truth of the statement just made.

It is no more than just to say, that if ever *any* question ought to be regarded as settled beyond doubt, it is that which now so much disturbs the world. By every proof, immersion is the act which Christ and His Apostles both taught and practiced. Yet in how many ways is this divine institution attacked? Every theory is invented which tends to subvert it. Ridicule and even the charge of indecency are employed to destroy this institution of the gospel and make room for innovations.

Other truths have fared no better. How much the cause of Christ has been impeded by such opposition to His truth no one can know. I do not mean to say that men have wantonly opposed the truth, but only that they have been under the influence of a strong denominational bias, and so have done what they otherwise would not have done. The evil effects, however, are the same.

I have said that the existence of conflicting sects

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M. L. Moser, Editor

**Pastor Emeritus
CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH
15601 Taylor Loop Rd.
Little Rock, AR 72223
Email: mlmoser1@juno.com**

prevents the free preaching of the truth. Look at the other side of the question. The multiplicity of denominations greatly promotes the preaching of heresy. Men will propagate the creed of their church, and that, too, without taking any great pains as a rule, to find out whether the creed has the sanction of the Scripture. Now, no one can fail to know that where there are so many differences there is no little heresy. Things differing from each other can not be equal to the same thing. All are not right; all can not be right. There are, beyond dispute, grave heresies abroad, and these heresies are the like of the sects. Take from Rome her "infallibility dogma," her "Baptismal Regeneration," etc., and she would be Rome no more. And so, if what is unscriptural were taken from *all*, there would be a great deal accomplished toward unity. but with what energy do preachers uphold the inventions of men. How earnestly, even bitterly, do men contend for denominational peculiarities unknown to Apostolic times, and how blind are many to all reason. I suppose, if I say that a full half of all the preaching done in the world is in support of denominational dogmas for which there is no scriptural warrant, you would hardly doubt it.

Let us reflect for a few moments upon the difficulties thrown in the way of the ungodly by the multiplicity of denominations, each with its peculiar teachings. Many a time I have gone to an ungodly man to urge him to seek Christ, and have been met with something like this. "I hear so many different things, that I don't know which is right. Sometimes I think they are all wrong, and that my chance is about as good as any." The world is confused, and no wonder it is.

Not long ago I was assisting in a protracted meeting. There was a young man attending the meeting, who seemed to be under deep concern for his soul. We tried to point him directly to Christ for salvation. Others advised him to join their church, telling him that he would be more likely to be converted in that way. Others still urged him to be baptized right away, assuring him that in this act of obedience his sins would be washed away. There were still others who told him of the power of the church to do what was needful for him. The poor man, confused, went back to the world, and is now utterly hardened. This is only one case of thousands.

Now, just for a little time think how the path of obedience is blocked up before the feet of young converts by denominational influences. A person gives his heart to Jesus, and wishes at once to obey his dear Lord and Savior. In the Scriptures the path of duty is very plain, but he is not sent to the Bible to learn his duty. He is told to go with his family, or to consult his convenience, or he

is urged by one to do *this*, and by another to do *that*. Confusion is spread around him. Maybe he goes to his Bible and reads the simple law of Jesus touching baptism, the first public Christian act. He sees his duty; but he is not let alone to perform it. If he cannot be argued out of the conception of the meaning of the command, he may be persuaded that he need not obey it, seeing that it is not essential. If he is a minor, or if the subject is a daughter or a wife, sterner measures may be employed. This is no fancy picture.

I must just mention here that, under the influence of sectarian zeal, the Word of God is trampled under foot of men, and the authority of the Highest set at naught. In proof of this, I need only refer to the hundreds who readily confess that they believe immersion to be of divine origin, but who, nevertheless, refuse to leave their denomination to obey Christ. Are there not some such among my readers?

I must call your attention to another point which, to my mind, is important. By the injection of error into the religious world, we are called upon to repel it. There are some men among us who seem greatly to enjoy this business. They are properly called "heresy hunters," and, so far as appearances go, they would be extremely miserable if the whole world were to come suddenly right. As for preaching Christ simply, they seem not to have been called to do that. The denominational wars have given us a race of theological pugilists from whom we may well pray in the language of the prayerbook. "Good Lord, deliver us." But, after all, error must be met! Straightforward, peaceloving men are often compelled to leave a work they love better, to repel the attacks of error upon the citadel of truth. The necessity is thrust upon us, and often we must leave off building the walls to repel the enemy. Thus time and effort are lost, and, what is still more serious, often an unholy spirit is fostered. I verily believe the low state of religion in many places is to be attributed to denominational wars, which have been warmer and longer, perhaps, than was necessary.

In the next place, I must briefly call your attention to the untold waste caused by the multiplicity of denominations. Take almost any village of a thousand inhabitants, and you will see from five to six churches. These have generally, with much inconvenience, built houses of worship, and are maintaining a sickly existence. As many ministers, as churches, address handfuls of people, for which they receive a mere pittance. The strength of these bodies, in many cases, is wasted in strife among themselves, instead of being directed unitedly upon *the ungodly* in the community.

Now, I ask, in all reason, what is the use of this waste? Let us suppose that instead of all these churches, there was one, with one house and one minister, preaching the truth, all the truth, and nothing but the truth, and that all the people of God were united in every good word and work. How much better it would be for that community. And then, think of those other men going out to preach the same truth to the destitute. On this plan, how quickly could the gospel be sent to every community on the face of the earth!

This is an intensely practical point. It is a matter that ought to lie with ponderous weight upon the conscience of the Christian public. The present state of things is wrong, radically wrong.

The last point that I will mention under this head is **the promotion of infidelity by the multiplicity of denominations.** Our Savior prayed that His disciples might be one, even as He and His Father are one, that the world might believe that His Father had sent Him. There is a powerful force in unity to strengthen faith; there is a powerful force in division to weaken faith. The prayer of Christ teaches this truth, and reason and observation confirm it. Not all the avowed infidels in the world can inflict so deadly a wound upon the faith of the age as Christians and professed Christians are doing by their open divisions. Their diverse teachings, open strife, petty jealousies, palpable denials of the doctrines of Christ, and the changes which they take to themselves the liberty of making in the divine order of things, act disastrously upon the highest interests of the world.

We have but glanced at the evils growing out of a multiplicity of denominations. Time would fail us to enumerate all of them, or to adequately discuss them. But let us pass on to notice that: —

II. The pleas for division are insufficient, unreasonable and unscriptural.

There are many such pleas. Only a few of the more prominent can be mentioned here.

“There is variety in all the works of God, and it is reasonable that there should be variety in religion.” This is very specious. If God had not prescribed a religion, I would agree that endless variety might be right. As it is, there is no serious objection to variety in the mere circumstances of worship. If my Episcopal friend wishes to preach in a gown and surplice, I will not deny him the pleasure, though it is not at all to my taste. That is a circumstantial matter, and differences concerning it amount to nothing important. But when my friend teaches “baptismal regeneration,” etc., then we

must part, for the point is vital. yet we cannot hold different views on that question without sin on one side or the other. If baptismal regeneration be the truth of God, clearly we all ought to accept and teach it. If, as I believe with all my heart, there is no such thing taught in the Scriptures, then my friend in the surplice is very wrong to palm off such a notion upon the world. There is no room for variety, if we all keep to the truth on the question.

Now, this reasoning applies to every doctrine of the Bible. If God had meant that there should be different churches, with different creeds, He would have made different revelations to suit. As He has revealed but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one system of doctrine throughout, it is clear that He meant there should be unity in all these matters.

“People cannot all believe alike, and therefore we must not expect them to do so.” Is there any natural difficulty in the way of any one’s believing what God has revealed for our acceptance? Let those who are willing to risk it tell the Judge in the last day that they could not believe what He taught them. There is no valid excuse for not accepting the truth, and God will have none. We may be sure of that.

“It is wise to have different denominations, so that all may be suited.” This plea proceeds upon the notion that people are to be pleased in religion. The idea is radically wrong. It reverses things. It is *our* duty to please God by an humble and willing obedience to the truth. The Almighty has not undertaken to suit the world. Besides, if this plea be well founded, we have need of still other denominations, for there are many people yet unsuited. Such excuses will not heal the hurt inflicted upon the cause of Christ.

“All the denominations are branches of the church, and right, each in its own way.” Is this true is the first important inquiry. We have all heard much of the branches of the church. Where is the proof that the church has branches differing one from the other? Looking into the New Testament, we find many churches, but they were of the same faith and order. In vain do we search the sacred records for a trace of these divergent and antagonistic branches. Has the church really branched? Whence come the denominations of the present time? History informs us. If I say that they are branches of the Romish apostasy, I speak only an historical truth. Let no one say that I am uncharitable. I must speak the truth. That may humble, but should not offend. Is it not known to every one that John Calvin led out the Presbyterian branch, Martin Luther the Lutheran branch, and Henry VIII the Anglican branch? Methodism is a

branch of the last named.

Is Rome the true church of Christ? No Baptists and but few Protestants think so. Rather, she is the scarlet-robed persecutor of Christ's church. If Rome be not the real church, then are not these denominations branches of the false church; for they are the offshoots of that body, and, as the celebrated Methodist minister, Dr. Bond, aptly said, "The hues of Romanism are inlaid throughout all Protestantism." So much in vindication of the truth, as touching the branch theory which satisfies and misleads the consciences of many.

Upon the last part of this plea, I wish to say that *no* one exactly believes it. It sounds broad and charitable to hear men say, "all are right, each in his own way." but people frequently say more than they mean. In this case, they say more than they can mean. The mind of a sane man is not constructed to believe that "yes" and "no," with reference to the same thing, can both be true. We cannot believe both sides of a contradiction. When my brother, down the street, preaches up infant baptism and I preach it down, every one knows that somebody is wrong. It is idle to say that each one is right in his own way. There is but one right way, and that is the Scriptural way. If he affirms that the Scriptures teach such a doctrine, and I deny it, one of us has the misfortune to be wrong. When our Calvinistic brethren preach up the doctrines of grace, and our Arminian brethren preach them down, somebody is point-blank wrong. And just so it is with every point of disagreement.

With all the charity which characterizes our brethren of other persuasions, I have always noticed that they do not think as much of our doctrines as they do of their own. This is very natural, I will admit; but, at least, if we are all right, each in his way, they should not inveigh against what we hold to be the truth. I have a decided impression that if any or all of them could succeed equal to their wishes, the Baptist branch would soon be no more; we would be converted to other views. As for myself — and I am persuaded I speak the honest sentiments of my brethren — I would be glad to see the whole world converted to Baptist views. I cannot say that a man is right, and straightway seek to change him. The *all-right* theory is clearly all-wrong.

I must come now to the last division of the subject, and speedily to a close.

III. The impossibility of a settled peace under existing circumstances.

We hear the cry, "Peace, peace! when there is no peace," and there can be none till truth is triumphant.

Error is a disturbing element, and those who have foisted innovations upon the Christian system are responsible for disturbing the peace of Israel. Those who maintain these errors are also responsible. The responsibility lies altogether with those who have forsaken the old paths. To earnestly defend the faith once delivered to the saints, is a high Christian duty. As matters now stand, there can be no peace; we will not hold our peace; we dare not do it. Sprung directly from Christ and His holy Apostles, and descended through a long line of martyrs, Baptists have a duty to perform in vindicating the old faith, which they must not shirk. Our obligations to Christ and a proper regard for the highest interest of the race alike urge us to stand fast by the old landmarks of gospel faith. *We have no terms of compromise to offer, and there are none we can accept.* Our orders have been received from the Captain of our salvation; it only remains for us to obey them, and insist, to the last, that others do the same. Just as long as men preach baptismal regeneration, we will preach against it. If men will insist on an unregenerate church-membership, we are bound to oppose them. We will not even agree to the substitution of sprinkling or pouring for gospel baptism. Nor will we take infants instead of believers as proper subjects for baptism. And just as sternly will we oppose the inversion of the ordinances, putting communion before baptism, though this would please many people whom, in other matters, we would gladly accommodate.

I trust that we know well the difference between servants and Master, and that, being servants, we will make it our chief concern to obey. We will have no personal feelings in our advocacy of the truth, but in love we will speak the truth fully, plainly, constantly, till, under God, it prevails over the world.

It is related that there was great commotion and anxiety in the Romish Council which passed the Infallibility dogma. Many of the more prudent bishops feared the rupture of the church by such a bold measure. After the famous dogma was passed, surrounded by an excited crowd of prelates, Archbishop (now Cardinal) Manning, of England, holding the paper aloft in his hand, said, "Let all the world go to bits, and we will reconstruct it on this paper." The religious world is going to bits. Gradually, but surely, Protestantism is growing out of its Romish wrappings. Infant baptism is not now believed in as it once was. Right views of both the design and act of baptism prevail more and more. Even Rome cannot now hold the masses in her grasp as she has done in the past. The age is one of unrest. The means of communicating knowledge are constantly multiplying. Men are everywhere coming into a large inheritance of personal

liberty and responsibility. Truly, the old world of thought and faith is going to bits, and, under God, Baptists are called upon to reconstruct it, not around an infallible(?) man, but upon the infallible Word of God, which endureth forever. The very times admonish us to stand fast in the old ways, and to give to the simple truth of Jesus, which makes men free indeed, a consistent, earnest, and life-long advocacy.

And may the God of all grace, the God of peace, give us evermore the help of His Spirit, and, through the truth, hasten the day when all lovers of Jesus shall see eye to eye and speak the same things.



