

WHEN YOUR PREACHER LEAVES: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

Newsletter, February, 2007, #8

The following article is a chapter from John Parker's book *Bound and Loosed: Fundamentals of the Christian Faith*. For information on the book, please see John's website at www.interimcofc.com. For information on purchasing a copy of the book, please e-mail John at johnparker22@aol.com.

The Name of the Church; Is the Church a Denomination?

The tendency of men who form organizations is to give them a name: the United Nations, the Flat Earth Society, the National Football League, the Boy Scouts of America, the Baker Street Irregulars, the Better Business Bureau, the Republican Party, etc. Religious organizations have also given themselves names: Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, and many others.

In contrast to this practice, Jesus did not name the church itself; rather he simply designated it by the term "my church" (Mt. 16:18). The apostles referred to it simply as "the church" (the term most often used in the New Testament) or by several other descriptive terms and phrases.

Instead of giving the church its own separate name, Jesus associated it with his own name and that of his Father. Christ referred to it as "my church," and the apostles spoke of its congregations as "the churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16) and of the whole church as "the church of God" (1 Cor. 1:2). Besides these terms, the church is referred to in the New Testament by such phrases as "kingdom of God," "kingdom of heaven," "body of Christ," "church of the Lord," and a few others.

Grammatically, Jesus' phrase "my church" is the equivalent of the phrase "churches of Christ" in Rom. 16:16. The singular form "church of Christ" is the phrase which is probably the one used most often today in referring to Jesus' church. The preposition "of" in the phrase "church of Christ" shows possession. For example, a house belonging to a man named Smith might be called "Smith's house" or "the house of Smith." Similarly, the church belonging to Christ may be called "Christ's church" or "the church of Christ." The phrase "church of Christ," then, is not a denominational name, but a way of referring to Christ's church.

Christ's church, then, is not given a separate name in the New Testament. When men attempt to give the church a name when Christ did not give it one, there are at least two major problems created.

First, as we will see in Lesson 15, God forbids men to practice in religion what he has not authorized. He has not authorized them to give the church a name, and certainly not the hundreds of different church names which we see in today's religious world.

Second, different religious names reflect and even create religious division, and Christ does not want his people divided. The night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane:

JOH 17:20 NKJV "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I

in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

Unfortunately, after the time of the first century, men who claimed to follow Christ began violating his desire that his followers be unified. Now, two thousand years later, the result is the mass confusion of religious divisions and sects seen in Catholicism and in Protestant denominationalism. How all of this situation came about is a subject too vast for us to consider in detail here. But in brief the divisions came about as follows.

Within two or three centuries after Jesus established the church, some of its members began to disobey his commandments for it and to introduce and practice their own doctrines. For example, they began to place groups of men and ultimately one man in authority over all the church. Ultimately this movement evolved into Catholicism and the papacy. Catholicism eventually split into two major segments, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, along with several other fragments.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, religious leaders in Europe began to differ with the teachings and authority of the Roman Catholic Church. These conflicts resulted in the Protestant Reformation, which ultimately led to the formation of several different churches called “denominations,” a word signifying separations or divisions (cf. the “denominator” in a fraction, the number which divides the numerator). In other words, denominations are the various religious divisions or sects that came out of the Reformation.

Each of these major denominational groups taught and practiced doctrines which differed from those of all of the other denominations. In order to distinguish themselves from each other, therefore, they adopted special names, each denomination having its own separate name. Among the major denominations are the Lutheran church, the Episcopal church, the Methodist church, the Presbyterian church, and the Baptist church, although there are hundreds of others.

We need to remember again here that such religious division is in violation of the will of Christ as revealed in his prayer in Gethsemane. There he prayed that his disciples be one. When a group is divided, it ceases to be one. It has to become two, or three, or four, or more, because that is what division means and requires. This is precisely what Jesus did not want to happen to his people.

When the apostle Paul found out that the church in Corinth was being split into parties, he wrote to them that he did not want any such divisions.

1 CO 1:10 NKJV Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Immediately we can recognize that the one church which Jesus built and died for--which he called “my church” and which the apostles referred to by such phrases as “churches of Christ” and “church of God”--is not and cannot be a denomination. A denomination is a division, and the church of Christ, or Jesus’ church, is not a division.

It is true that people may try to refer to the church of Christ as a denomination, but their calling it a denomination does not make it one. A denomination is a division, and in being a division (and perhaps in its other practices and teachings as well) a denomination is not following the teachings of Christ. As long as the church of Christ is not divided and is following his teachings, therefore, it is not a denomination.

It is true, further, that a congregation which was once a true church of the Lord may begin to adopt the practices of a denomination and ultimately to become one, but once it does it ceases to be the church belonging to Christ (cf. Rev. 2:5). A church simply cannot be a

denomination and at the same time be the church of Christ, since the two terms by their definitions are contradictory and mutually exclusive.

Someone might ask at this point, "How can a person know which church is the one church which belongs to Christ and which, therefore, is not a denomination?" The answer to this good question is found in Lesson 10, where we discussed the identity of the church. Any group of people in any age who have been saved from their sins by Christ and who are continuing to do his will as that will is revealed by him through his apostles and prophets in the New Testament is Christ's church, or the church of Christ.

Hundreds of congregations of these people may be found in the world today, following the will of Christ just as the church did in the first century. These are people who do not belong to the Catholic church or to any denomination, but who are simply people who have been saved from their sins by obeying the gospel of Christ and who are continuing to follow his teachings. Of course they make mistakes, commit sins, and often fall short of perfection, but when they do their attitude is to repent and strive to be the church that Christ wants them to be.

The Divisive Effect of Religious Names

Names, by their very nature, divide and separate people. In Romeo and Juliet, Juliet recognizes that she and Romeo are kept apart by their respective family names of Capulet and Montague, and she naively thinks that this problem can be solved by Romeo's giving up his name or by Juliet's giving up hers:

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore [why] art thou Romeo?
[i.e., "Why do you have to wear that name?"]

Deny thy father and refuse thy name!

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

* * * * *

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy:

Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

* * * * *

O, be some other name!

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet;

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'ed,

Retain that dear perfection which he owes

Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,

And for thy name, which is no part of thee,

Take all myself.

Romeo and Juliet II. ii. 33-36, 38-39, 42-49.

Romeo agrees, but neither of the young people realizes that the division between their families symbolized by their different names cannot be so easily healed.

Names symbolize divisions and sometimes cause divisions. The name "Republican Party," for example, separates its members from the Democratic Party and other political parties.

While this may be desirable with human organizations, Christ, as we have seen, does not want such division in his people.

The only name which the church is to associated with is the name of its founder and king: Christ. Peter said of that name:

ACT 4:12 NKJV “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

As we have seen, the church is Christ’s church, and it is associated with no name but his.

A few years after the church of Christ was established on Pentecost, its members, the followers of Christ, became known as “Christians,” a term meaning one who belongs to Christ, just as “American” refers to a person belonging to America, or “Tennessean” refers to one belonging to or affiliated with Tennessee. Luke said of the church at Antioch:

ACT 11:26 NKJV And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

The church, then, is associated with no name other than that of its owner and founder. Rather it is described in the New Testament as being the church belonging to Christ, or the church of Christ. And the members of the church, since they are what the church consists of, are described only as “Christians,” a term simply meaning one who belongs to Christ. This definition is the one, and the only one, that is in harmony with Christ’s will for his body, the church, and its individual members.

(In this discussion of religious names I am indebted to J.W. McGarvey, Commentary on Acts, 144-51.)

SHAKESPEARE QUOTATIONS FOR MINISTERS:

by John Parker

So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.
Guilty people confess their guilt in trying to hide it.
HAMLET 4.5

When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions.

Sorrows do not come in single numbers, but in large groups.
HAMLET 4.5

We put on a compell'd valor.

We were courageous because we had no choice.
HAMLET 4.6

Lay her i' th' earth,
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring!

A eulogy for a virtuous young woman.
HAMLET 5.1

Smile of the Month

Here, in its entirety, is the text of a post card received by the parents of an eight-year-old camper:
Dear folks, I knew all along that something awful was going to happen. Well, last night it did. Love, Jimmy (*Reader's Digest*, August 1983, page 118).

Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books, Jerrie Barber

Get a Life: You Don't Need a Million to Retire Well, by Ralph Warner, published by Nolo, Berkeley, California, © 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004.

I have been reading some books on retirement. Here are some quotes I found interesting in this one:

“People who are involved in a wide variety of activities—both mental and physical—are likely to do well. This probably doesn't surprise you. But what you may never have considered—and something that could even make you rethink how you spend time today—is that if you wait until retirement to start looking for interests that will happily occupy you, it may be too late. Put more bluntly, unless you develop habits of the mind, body, and heart in midlife that will allow you to lead a healthy, interesting, and socially connected retirement, you risk becoming one of those bored and boring old (people) you walk around the flock to avoid” (page 8).

“Or as Fred Astaire remarked, “Old age is like everything else. To make a success of it, you've got to start young” (page 12).

“Even the habit of reading for pleasure will be extremely valuable in later life. To paraphrase the novelist Walker Percy, there is a huge difference between an alienated older person sitting in a recliner and an older person sitting in a recliner reading a novel about an alienated older person” (page 151).

Barber Clippings

My time is coming to a close at Berry's Chapel. I have been giving away books — about 90% of them. I offered them first to my family: children and grandchildren, second to our preachers at Berry's Chapel: Will Baxter and Alejandro Sanchez, then to the congregation. This has been a good time to share, reminisce, and talk about our transition.

Wes Gallagher started work with us February 1. He is an associate who will be coordinating leading the education ministry, supervising the office, and preaching when Andy Baker is away. I am enjoying getting to know him and his family: Stephanie, his wife, and his children: Cassie and Brayden.

We look forward to beginning our first interim work with the Eddyville, Kentucky, congregation the first Sunday in May. Gail and I visited there recently to see the house where we will be living and to talk more with the elders about how we will begin the work there.
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I am currently in an interim ministry for the South Harpeth church in Nashville, the third oldest church in Tennessee. I am also working on my book on great British hymns along with my colleague Dr. Paul Seawright of Great Britain. I am writing the copy while Paul, an international photographer, is taking the photographs of scenes where the hymns were composed.

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