

CHAPTER 8

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

8.1 SO WHAT?

If you have gotten this far in the book we can attribute it to one of three possible reasons: (1) you see and appreciate the gravity of the denominations continuing to foster myths and wish to do something about it, (2) you so adamantly disagree with most of what we have written that you have read in detail with the purpose of refuting it, or (3) you skipped over the details and are reading the last chapter without reading all that precedes it. This introductory section of this chapter will address the third of these reader types, since we feel that the other two types are highly motivated to take whatever actions they feel appropriate in any event.

Yes, we can conceive that some will still have a complacent attitude even when presented with the sound scriptural evidence which proves that the denominations are generally guilty of teaching myth rather than sound doctrine. We have tried throughout the chapters to demonstrate the downside of these myths. We should be concerned, as the apostle Paul was when he wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3-4: "As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: [so do].") Despite all of this, we still feel that some will have a "so what?" attitude at this point. So, before prescribing a scriptural remedy to this problem, let us take one more shot at changing this mindset.

The name of this book is *Seven Myths of Denominationalism*, not *The Seven Myths of Denominationalism*. The reason for the former rather than the latter title is our firm belief that the promulgation of myths is in no way restricted to these seven. We have no doubt that we could easily find seventy, or maybe even 700 myths. We attempted to select those which were most predominant, easy to explain and easy to demonstrate their inconsistency with scripture. Perhaps we chose wrong; but in no event do we wish to imply that these are the only problems within the denominations.

The major problem stems from the central theme that all denominations share, and which is their single unifying force: Myth 1. That is, the concept that, since we cannot understand the bible alike, why try? Further, Myth 1 implies that anyone who teaches that the bible *can and should* be understood is the enemy. This person is the divider, the bigot, the close-minded, and whatever other name might serve to discourage people from listening to such "heresy." As long as this is the predominating attitude within the denominations, there is absolutely no incentive to alter practice and doctrine. To do such would be an admission of error on the part of the leadership. This is not going to happen,

at least not on a very broad scale.

Does this mean to imply that *everything* taught within the denominations is wrong? (Please bear with us on our response here, since it cannot be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*.) In the sense that some of the teachings of the denominations are consistent with the teachings of Christ, we must answer in the negative. The Roman Catholic church teaches accurately on the subject of abortion, the Moslem religion teaches accurately on the subject of temperance, the Jewish religion teaches accurately that thou shalt not kill. Does the fact that *some* of the teachings of a given religion are consistent with the will of God justify any and all deviations from God's will? If so, then it would be hard to find any religion at all that should be opposed. Universalism would be correct, and we would do well to abandon our search for truth.

The bible is so definitively against this most liberal view of religion that we are hesitant to cite scriptures for fear of under-representing the view. We urge the reader to pick out three pages from the New Testament at random and read the condemnation of this view. We feel that, while it might be possible to find three which do not do this, the vast majority of them clearly do. Let us just cite two key scriptures which destroy this liberal viewpoint. The first is Matthew 28:20: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The second is Matthew 4:4: "But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." We cannot just pick and choose, and the fact that we are doing some things right does not justify those things which are amiss (James 2:10): "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one [point], he is guilty of all." We cannot trivialize any part of God's will for us.

This brings us back to our original question: *Does this mean to imply that everything taught within the denominations is wrong?* If those things which are being done right are being done because they are *commanded or authorized* by the word of God, then those things are right. We contend, however, that, even if they are consistent with the word of God, if they are being done because they are commanded or authorized by any authority other than the word of God, they are vain attempts at salvation by works. For, they are works of man, not works of God. Indeed, they might be the same as those commanded by God, but, in reality, they are being done in obedience to man and not to God.

Give this considerable thought. Let us illustrate with an example. The Roman Catholic stand against abortion is a brave and courageous stand for what is right. However, those Roman Catholics who obey this command do not do so because of biblical authority. If you do not believe this, just ask one of them to give the *biblical* reasons that they believe abortion to be wrong. They cannot answer. Their answer is that the church teaches (or the Pope) teaches them that abortion is wrong, and this is the reason that they do not engage in it. Is this obedience to God or to the Pope? True, it is consistent with biblical precepts, but unless they recognize where and why it is

commanded of God, it is faith in man and not God.

We use the Roman Catholic church as an example because we believe most of our readers can be objective in their application of these principles to that institution. Of course, that which applies to the Roman Catholic church applies equally well to the denominations, and vice versa. (Obviously, many myths of denominationalism are also myths of the Roman Catholic church.)

Again, we refocus on our question: *Does this mean to imply that everything taught within the denominations is wrong?* If it is taught and practiced as the doctrine or tradition of the church and not based on the will of God, then the answer is: yes. This concept is so fundamental that we need to break it out:

Any doctrine which has originated with man and is taught as a tradition or doctrine of a religious organization defies the authority of God despite that within itself it might be consistent with His will.

To determine if this is true, consider the following examples:

1. Matthew 3:7-9: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to [our] father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." Coming to be baptized of John was clearly according to God's will; however, they were doing it for the wrong reason and by the wrong authority.
2. Matthew 19:16-22 tells of a young man who came to Christ asking: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" When Jesus informed him to "keep the commandments," he responded that: "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go [and] sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come [and] follow me." When he heard this "he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." Question: Was he following the commands of God out of obedience to God or to man? If it was out of his faith to God, then would he not have followed Jesus? By what authority as he obeying God's commands -- those of God, or those of his society?
3. In Acts 5:1-11 there is a story of a man and his wife who made a very large financial contribution to the work of the church. This was certainly consistent with the will of God (see Acts 4:36-37). However, because they did it for their own benefit and not in subjection to the will of God, they were struck dead.

4. In Acts 16:16-18: "And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour." Who can deny that the testimony of the damsel was not the truth. Yet, coming from the authority of the spirit of divination, it gave the truth a bad name.

These are but a small sampling of literally dozens of such examples which could be gleaned from both the old and new testaments. These illustrate and prove the premise given above. Not only do our actions have to be consistent with God's will, they must also be motivated by our faith in His will for us, not just something that happens in some ways to be consistent with His will.

If you have drawn the conclusion that the motives of the people in the four examples was not right, this would be a valid conclusion. Are we questioning the motives of those in the denominations who apparently do many things consistently with God's will but because of the teachings of the denominations rather than the word of God? We cannot do this, because we do not know their motives. However, we can state this very emphatically: if they are doing what they are doing because of the teaching of man (whether right or wrong), this cannot be attributed to their faith in God.

Now consider the following question:

If a religious organization admittedly does some things without the authority of God (e.g., teach any myths at all), by what authority do they do the things that are consistent with God's will?

This is a very sobering question: If biblical authority is discarded in some areas, what compels the members of the organization to not discard it in all areas? Can that organization indeed state that they do X by the authority of God, when, in fact, it is known that they do Y without His authority. Can it not be reasoned that if Y is done without His authority, chances are that X is also being done by the same authority of Y even though X happens to be consistent with God's will. If this, in fact, is the case, then nothing that that organization does is by the authority of Christ, even though some of their teachings and practices might be consistent with biblical edicts.

Now let us qualify these statements. It is possible that some of these organizations are striving to do *all* things that the word of God teaches. There is an easy way to determine this. Study the seven myths publicly and, if the organization is teaching and practicing any one of them, move to conform with biblical teachings. It is our experience

that the *very study of these issues will not be allowed in most denominational organizations*. What does this tell us about the basic source of authority of that organization?

Question: is an organization which is based upon the authority of man rather the authority of God a *saving* institution or a *losing* institution? If your religious organization does not teach the biblical plan of salvation, is it *saving* souls or making sure that they *stay lost*? These are sobering questions that we all must address. It is not my job to go all over the countryside determining the authority by which various groups are doing things. However, as a member of *your* religious organization *you* can surely answer these questions. In the following sections we propose what to do if you come to a negative conclusion.

8.2 THE ALTERNATIVES

We will consider two alternatives to the status quo: (1) redirection and evolution, and (2) restoration. The second of these will be necessitated by a failure of the first. We will describe each of these alternatives in the next two sections.

8.2.1 REDIRECTION AND EVOLUTION

We pose this alternative not because we have ever seen it work, but because it is theoretically possible. It is interesting to explore this option from a theoretical point of view. We will describe the organizational dynamics and the problematic nature of reform. This will give us the background to initiate an evolution in a positive direction, if this is possible. If not, this will lead logically to the alternative described in the next section.

Let us begin with some observations from history. Virtually all organizations (religious or otherwise) start out relatively small with a highly motivated, tightly-knit group of individuals who are often complementary in their abilities. As these organizations begin to function they overcome obstacles by pure human ingenuity and a sense of destiny. Often there is a charismatic leader (in the secular sense), and there are few political or bureaucratic considerations. These young organizations will either die quickly and be forgotten or flourish. Those which prosper will grow, and their success will attract additional members.

Attracted by the success as opposed to the cause, the second generation of members is usually not as enthusiastic as the first, especially if they are induced by such things as nepotism and friendship as opposed to dedication. Thus, success brings its own seeds of destruction. It is soon recognized that if the organization is to survive, certain resources must be dedicated to its survival as opposed to satisfying its original goals.

Thus, a bureaucracy develops, and compromises in the original goals are made to assure that both the undedicated membership and the outside world continue to support it. This process can take several generations to evolve. Ultimately, it degenerates into a massive bureaucracy, where the bureaucrats have considerable difficulty recognizing any difference between their own self interests and those of the organization.

We see this process repeat itself in virtually all organizations which are composed of humans. One would be naive to think that it does not happen in religious organizations. The fact that it was going to happen in the Lord's church is clearly taught in the New Testament. Consider the following passages, which are but a small set of those which could be cited to prove this:

1. Acts 20:28-30: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. 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." Note that the predicted apostasy would come from *within* the leadership. This fits the common trend in human organizations to move in the direction of a self-serving bureaucracy.
2. It is clear that the church at Corinth was already beginning to self-destruct (1 Corinthians 1:10-17): "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and [that] there be no divisions among you; but [that] ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them [which are of the house] of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." Clearly they were beginning the denominating process of dividing themselves up and giving themselves names. As we read the rest of First Corinthians we can see both the moral and doctrinal decay that accompanied this departure from the truth.
3. Galatians 1:6-7: "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ." It is clear that a process of departure had already begun in the Galatian churches.

4. Paul indicated the motives of the false teachers to the Phillipian Christians (Phil. 3:17-19): "Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, [that they are] the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end [is] destruction, whose God [is their] belly, and [whose] glory [is] in their shame, who mind earthly things.)" Once a person has a vested financial interest in an enterprise, it is difficult for him to distinguish between his own personal interests and that of the organization. Unfortunately, when this happens in the Lord's church, the price that is paid for such selfishness is measured in lost souls.

5.2 Thessalonians 2:1-4: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and [by] our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 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, showing himself that he is God." You should have no problem identifying this as the Roman Catholic apostasy. It is not speaking of another religion. It is talking about a "falling away." Thus, this is an apostasy of the church, not a religion outside of that which was initiated on the day of Pentecost.

6. In case there is any doubt, Paul spoke of this same apostasy in 1 Timothy 4:1-3: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, [and commanding] to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." Note that this is also a prediction that some would "depart from the faith," not attack it from without. Could any more definitive description be given of the characteristics of the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic apostasy?

The examples could go on for pages; indeed an entire book could be written just on this aspect of the evolution of the Lord's church. It is clear, that we should not expect any religious organization to maintain its integrity over several generations. Indeed, if this did not happen in the first century in the presence of the inspired apostles, why should we think that things would be any different today?

This scenario appears to be futile. If human nature is such that even the most sound and dedicated of religious organizations are destined to self destruct, should we just throw up our hands and forget it. *Indeed, if your faith is in any organization of humans, you probably should, for they will let you down every time.* However, if your faith is in Jesus

Christ this will be seen as only a minor inconvenience.

Is it possible to transform an organization which is steeped in denominational tradition to one which is totally dedicated to doing everything by the authority of Christ? Jesus own words state that "nothing shall be impossible" (Mt. 17:20; 19:26). We have heard of some isolated instances where it has occurred, although this was not first-hand knowledge.

Any transformation must begin with a single individual within the organization. Recognize that when we use the word *organization* we are referring to the local church unit. Since no higher organization than this is authorized by the New Testament (see Section 8.3), it would be impossible for regional bishops to implement the transition without allowing their churches to operate on an independent basis. Obviously, the more that this individual's authority is recognized within the local organization, the greater the potential to lead a transition.

The first step is for this individual to fully conform his or her life to the precepts of the New Testament in every possible way. Further, this leader must have an excellent knowledge of biblical principles. Both are essential, for no matter how far a group might be from conforming to God's word, they will still identify deficiencies in this regard. The reasoning is summarized as follows: "Total conformity based only on the New Testament is impossible; after all, look at the fact that you are not consistent in the matter of X." Nothing will defeat the effort quicker than a lack of knowledge and dedication in this regard.

The second step is to influence as many as possible to initiate a thorough study of God's word with the one and only goal to change all doctrines and practices which are not totally in accord with it. The study for this reason is much different from that generally practiced in the denominations, since the New Testament is generally not considered to be the final authority for doctrine and practice. So, while it is studied, it is impossible to modify practice or doctrine based upon that study. It is recommended that these bible studies be set up independently of the formal church meetings unless a majority wish to engage in such serious studies.

The third step has to do with monitoring the progress. While setbacks should be expected, as long as there is significant progress from month to month, there is reason to continue. Progress can be measured by the following: (1) additional interest in bible studies as measured by additional faithfulness and continued discussions between formal study times, and (2) changes actually brought about by knowledge gained in the bible studies. On the other hand, if there is clearly no progress after several months of effort, another approach will be required (see Section 8.2.2).

Do not be discouraged if your zeal for the truth is not met with general acceptance.

In fact, the following realities argue strongly against this transition taking place:

1. The vested interests in the denominational leaders. Their financial and career interests are lodged in maintaining and strengthening the denomination.
2. A long tradition and mindset, especially on the part of the leadership. It is difficult for most religious leaders to separate their interests from those of the Lord. They cannot even fathom that they could be wrong. It is almost impossible for them to know that they are wrong because they have rationalized through their beliefs in great detail.
3. A challenge to the "ordained" order. Who are you to challenge a person with a degree in divinity who has been ordained by the denominational hierarchy?
4. Satisfaction on the part of the followers. The main problem in most religious organizations is not the leadership. If you think about it, the leaders only exist if there are people who will follow. Thus, Paul warned Timothy (4:3-4): "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away [their] ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."
5. When you seek book, chapter and verse for what is being practiced and taught, you will usually be seen as the enemy, the troublemaker. Recall that the basic premise that most denominations operate under is that this is *not* the basis for unity -- the basis for unity is to abandon the call for book, chapter and verse. Thus, expect to be labeled as evil (Isaiah 5:20): "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!"

For these reasons we urge those brave souls who attempt to initiate a transition within their organization and fail not to be discouraged. There is an alternative, and you are commanded to follow it (2 Corinthians 6:14-18):

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in [them]; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean [thing]; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

As we have demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, if the vast majority of a religious organization has no concern for the authority of Christ, they must be considered to be unbelievers, despite the fact that they might state emphatically that they are observing the authority of Christ. Stating it does not make it so. The proof is in the action, not the words (recall Matthew 7:21-23 once again):

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Thus, once we identify the fact that we are not having any success in moving our current organization in the direction toward God's word, we are duty bound and commanded by God to come out from them and separate ourselves for His service.

8.2.2 RESTORATION

Reformation has proved to be futile since Martin Luther attempted to reform the Roman Catholic church. Those who know the history of the Roman Catholic church recognize that it was not significantly altered by the reformation. Unfortunately, those denominations which were formed by the reformation were also attempts to reform the Roman Catholic church. They were not attempting to totally restore the church which Jesus created in the first century. As a consequence of this, they have all too many remnants of Roman Catholicism which are totally foreign to the New Testament.

The alternative is a restoration of the practices which led to the establishment of the churches which existed in the first century. [Note that we do not say a restoration of the first century church, since that church has not ceased to exist (see Hebrews 12:18-24)]. We will describe the procedure by which you can accomplish this in this section. In the following section we will describe in more detail the nature of the churches which existed in the first century in order to understand just what it is that we are attempting to restore.

The first step toward restoration is total and utter obedience to 2 Corinthians 6:17: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean [thing]; and I will receive you..." Once the determination is made that the organization is not going to respond to the truth, anything short of a complete separation from that organization will be identified as fellowship (sharing). This will be recognized by both God and man. This is the reason that God gave this command. As long as there is an inference that Christians support an apostate religious organization in any way,

there will be no way that they can influence members of that religious organization to disassociate themselves from it. It must be made clear, according to the principles which you can clearly state from the New Testament, that this organization is not *attempting* to teach the whole truth, therefore is not then under the authority of Christ, and therefore cannot be leading people to salvation. Any fellowship with such an organization by faithful Christians can only weaken their ability to lead individuals away from the clutches of this apostate organization.

The second step is a most difficult one for many to make: seek and find others to work and worship with who have the same respect for the authority of Jesus as you do. I anticipate the first question to be: what church is that? Name the organization and we will join it! Unfortunately, it is not as easy as that. For, while those who abide by the authority of Christ will call themselves by a designation which can be found in the New Testament, the fact that someone calls themselves by one of these designations does not within itself guarantee that they are respecting the authority of the Lord. (This gets into the non-denomination aspect of the church which many find difficult to understand, and which we will discuss in the next section.)

This step can take two possible turns: you either can find such a group with whom you can meet, or you cannot. For the sake of argument, let us assume that you believe that you have identified such a group. The next steps would be to visit with them, both their formal worship and with them as individuals. Learn everything that you can about them, especially with regard to their teachings and practice. If you are met with resistance or animosity in such an inquiry, then chances are you have not found a sound group. Those who are honestly endeavoring to practice what the bible teaches will be *overjoyed* to discuss the reasons for doing *everything* that they do. This is not just in an effort to convince you that they are right -- it is also an honest inquiry of themselves, so that if you bring about a better understanding of an issue, they will change as their knowledge of the truth increases. A sound congregation will collectively be willing to change as they learn about their errors. Conversely, those who are overly defensive about the status quo and resist your inquiry are clearly putting their current practice above their desire to attain a better knowledge of God's word.

It is essential that we interject a qualifier here. It is the attitude of this group toward the authority of Christ and the scriptures that is important. There are any number of religious and even non-religious organizations who are filled with really good, friendly people. Faithfulness to the word of God is not measured solely by friendliness. Indeed, love is essential to the integrity of the group; however, love can be emulated in a variety of ways. True love holds the concern for the salvation of the visitor's soul as the greatest objective. While straight, hard gospel preaching is often seen to be judgmental and narrow minded by the world, the worst form of contempt and hatred is displayed by those who have no greater concern for your soul than to gloss over those words essential to your salvation. Such is self-serving hypocrisy. While we are not advocating undue

offensiveness on the part of Christians, we are pleading for those who are evaluating various groups to "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

Once you are comfortable with the attitude of this group, it is essential that you become an integral part of them (Hebrews 10:25). Not only is this to obtain spiritual nourishment from them, but it is also your responsibility to provoke them to love and good works (Heb. 10:24). The final step is to assure that this group remains faithful, which we will discuss further in Section 8.4.

We have not dealt with the possibility that it might be extremely difficult, or even impossible, to find a faithful group of Christians to meet with in your geographic area. We invite you to contact us and enlist our assistance in this regard; however, due to the essential autonomous nature of local churches, there is no way to assure that any given congregation is maintaining its integrity and moving in the direction of greater maturity and faithfulness. This determination must be made by the reader, and the selection of the group that you associate with is your responsibility. Remember, you are the victim of your environment (1 Cor. 15:33: "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good morals.") However, the implication of this statement is that you have the ability to *change* your environment; thus, "come ye out from among them and be ye separate." These are individual responsibilities, and those who allow others to make these decisions for them are not looking out for their own souls.

But what do you do if there is no sound group of Christians that you can associate with? The answer is simple: a group has to start somewhere. Thus, if it does not exist, start it. Jesus recognized that the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven was such that it would often be difficult to find. Thus, He stated to them (Matthew 18:20): "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We learn of many Christians in the first century that had "churches in their houses" (see Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15, Philemon 2).

We recognize that this might seem quite uncomfortable and might be very difficult for those who have depended upon a denominational organization to facilitate their religious services from birth to death. It was also difficult for Abraham, when he was called out of his father's homeland and to go to a land that he knew not (Gen. 12:1-4). Indeed, God is not a respecter of persons. When we leave that which is familiar and do the will of God, we are exhibiting the same faith that Abraham had. Notice what the scriptures say in reference to this event (Romans 4:3): "For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." As with Abraham, nothing short of your complete faith in God will get you through this period.

But you will get through it! We suggest that you place the following ad in your local paper close to the religious section: "We are seeking others with total respect for the

authority of Jesus as given in the New Testament to establish a new work for the Lord. We are meeting on Sunday morning at ... *your address* ...; if interested, please call ... *your phone number*." This will not go unnoticed by faithful Christians who will seek you out; nor will it go without a response consistent with the providence of God.

One of the reasons that this is such a strange action to most individuals is because of the misunderstanding of the nature of the Lord's church as organized on this earth. We have summarized this concern in the next section after which we will talk more about the trends of religious organizations and then bring our discourse to a close.

8.3 THE NATURE OF LOCAL CHURCHES

The concept of the local church as described in the New Testament is diametrically opposed to what we see in the denominations. This produces a tremendous barrier to communication, since when we use the word *church* it produces an image in the mind of the hearer which is considerably different from that which is found in the New Testament.

We could write an entire book on this subject, looking at all of the uses of the word *church* throughout the New Testament, and comparing with all of the other words that are used to figuratively describe it: kingdom, bride of Christ, holy nation, elect, priesthood, etc., etc. To keep this section short, however, we are going to avoid this rigor and summarize. We hope after you have studied the scriptures from the other parts of this book (in their contexts) and gone on to your own private studies, that you will understand and appreciate the validity of the statements made in this section. Further, we would urge you to reread the entire New Testament, with special emphasis upon the book of Acts and the letters (Romans through Jude) to assure that the statements made here are valid.

The general concept of the Lord's church as held by most denominations is that it consists of an ongoing, sanctioned, ordained organization of God which is tangible, has corporate offices, etc. Most central offices of the denominations, and certainly the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church fulfill this expectation. Even those organizations which are outside of the denominational mainstream -- the huge radio and TV mega-churches -- fulfill this expectation for the vast majority of people. It gives them great comfort to be a part of something which is much larger than themselves.

The only problem with this concept of the church is that this is totally a creation of man. When Jesus was confronted with the issue of defining just where his kingdom was, he responded with something that would sound very confusing today (Luke 17:20-21): "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither

shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you."

The kingdom, which is the Lord's church, is not something that you join. There is no concept of "joining the church" in the New Testament. Read it through and verify this (as well as everything else being presented here) -- you will never find anyone joining the church. The reason is that the church, at least that part which we can see (i.e., the local church), does not pre-exist the conversion of Christians. We recognize that there is a universal church which consists of those saved throughout all time (Hebrews 12:18-24). However, this is never organized on this earth. There is never a gathering of the universal church, nor is there any attempt to organize churches above the local level. This can only be verified by reading through the New Testament -- we urge you to do just that!

So where does this leave us? If the local church does not pre-exist Christians, then how is a local church formed. Read through the book of Acts and you will see that it was the seed of the word of God (see also Mt. 13: 1-23) which was planted. When that word was believed, those who were baptized became Christians and Christians only. Seeing their common cause, and the fact that God had ordained the local church to both evangelize (Mt. 28:18-19) and to sustain their salvation (Heb. 10: 24-25), they organized themselves as given by the authority of Christ through the apostles (e.g., see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1).

The point is that there was no authority of man on this earth that ordained or sanctioned a given church. This is abundantly clear by a review of Galatians 1 and 2, in which the apostle Paul is trying to make this very point. Paul's authority did not stem from Jerusalem or Rome -- it came directly from Christ! Denominations compromise this great truth by placing their organizations between man and his God -- between a congregation and their Lord. It is completely foreign to the sacred word of God and can do nothing but create a deterrent to one's faithfulness.

Thus, a church must be formed bottom up -- it cannot be imposed top down. When a faithful group of Christians associate themselves together as God ordained in the New Testament, this is exactly what God expects. It occurs in obedience to His word, and *only* in obedience to His word. Absolutely no organization of man needs to be involved; in fact, if such an organization is required according to some church doctrine, it does not fit the pattern of scripture -- it violates God's word (2 Jn. 9).

The bottom-up nature of the local church fits the pattern exactly. Consider Hebrews 8: 7-13, which essentially says that the church of the lord will be composed of believers and only believers. This cannot be said of top-down denominationally organized religious organizations. We know that this organization fosters all kinds of corruption from within. On the other hand, when a local church is formed by the collaboration of those whose only intent is to restore the doctrine and practice as given in the New Testament, this church has to be sound. [Sound implies the *intent* to do

everything that the New Testament teaches and nothing else; it does not imply perfection in this regard.]

Now many will be mystified by such a loose organizational structure, and they will claim that it is impossible. Even when they see it in action, they will claim that there is some global organization. They cannot even accept it when they see it in reality.

The proof is in a direct observation of reality. There are groups like this organized independently without any centralized authority of man all over the world. We can find them in virtually any country and in many if not most cities of this country. They have no other commonality than that they have accepted the word of God as being the final authority in all things. Yet their practices as far as worship, work and teaching are in many cases as uniform as that of many denominations who impose consistency top down. This proves that it not only can work, but it is working!

If you ask me to tell you what religious organization this is, I can only say that it is the church that you read about in the New Testament. If I were to attempt to lump all of these together and give them a name, I would be as guilty of denominating as any of the denominations have been. The burden of proof falls upon you, the reader, to find that organization which is sound and doing God's will -- or else to form such yourself. While I might be able to point you in the right direction if I have some knowledge of your geographical location, it is not my job to verify the doctrine and practice of every local congregation. That job is your's. All that I am submitting to you is that it not only is possible, it is a reality in most cities of the United States and most countries throughout the world.

As a final proof that this process of individual effort toward determining the truth, consider the major reason that the Roman Catholic church and the denominations are able to take down such a large number of followers simultaneously. Is it not because they have linked all of their congregations under a common hierarchy? Thus, when the hierarchy goes bad, so does the entire denomination. And this fall is inevitably (1 Peter 2:1-3): "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not."

If you have read this far, we are convinced that you see that this applies to the leadership of the denominations today. Ignoring God's plan for the independent organization of the local churches, they have led their members to believe all kinds of myths, the seven given in this book being only the beginning. Indeed, they have their followers thinking of the Lord's church as being a monstrous abomination, with multiple

bodies, multiple heads, and God as the author of such confusion. Who can believe it?

The solution is so very simple -- it is as simple as casting off the traditions of man and going back to God's word for *all* teaching, *all* work, *all* practice, and *all* worship.

Most members of denominations have been taught by their family, friends, religious leaders and popular lure that this is impossible. Indeed, if this were impossible there would be no local congregations at all who have, in absolute reality, abandoned *all* denominational affiliations, *all* creeds, and *all* traditions of man and have dedicated themselves to only practicing and teaching exactly what the bible teaches for us today. But there are hundreds if not thousands of such groups throughout this country and the world. This proves that the *impossibility of unity* within God's word is a myth. The fact that this is possible, and the fact that such is commanded of us (1 Cor. 1:10, etc.) makes the restoration of the Lord's church a command to us today. Thus, any failure on our part to attempt to restore the Lord's church is sin.

As one further proof of the validity of this claim, consider the fact that these congregations (local churches) have no organization greater than their own individual elders and deacons. *That is, each one is autonomous and free to preach, teach and practice their religion as they see fit.* This is the essence of free will. Nothing binds an individual to any given congregation -- each is free to come and go as their conscience dictates. Further, and more importantly, *there is absolutely not common creed of doctrine other than the bible itself.* And yet, the practices, worship and teachings of these churches do not vary significantly from one congregation to the next. I can go half way around the world, find a congregation true to God's word, and I will be worshipping and having fellowship with them in every other way. This, despite the fact that we might not have any common acquaintances, and we have never read any other common literature except the bible itself.

This evidence flies in the face of those who teach and honestly believe that such is impossible. That people with nothing else in common but their common belief in Gods word would come to such unity of belief totally defies explanation if it were not ordained of God. This is the way that God wants His people to be organized. It is given that way in the New Testament. "How do I know; the bible tells me so."

8.4 REVERSING THE TREND

This is not to say that these local churches are perfect. They are not. They are made up of men and women, and they have all of the weaknesses of men and women. They make mistakes and often they go astray of God's word. However, as long as they hold the word of God to be the only basis of unity and authority, they will return to it

when their shortcomings are shown to them. Indeed, this is the major basis of determining fellowship (2 John 9): "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into [your] house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

There is a trend within these churches to drift away from the word of God. This is no surprise to students of the bible. Many, if not most of the churches addressed in the New Testament had this same problem. Read through the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. We have quoted the warnings with regard to false teachers over and over again. As long as churches are made up of people, they will have their problems.

Is this evidence that the word of God is not sufficient and that we must accept the denominational model? Absolutely not! Consider Romans 3:1-3, which discusses the fact that the Jews of Jesus' time had the advantage of the scriptures despite the fact that they did not observe them properly: "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit [is there] of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged." The point is that you cannot judge the truth by those who claim to have it, or even by those who faithfully endeavor to keep it. Man will let you down every time.

I will admit that the paragraphs above might sound contradictory. First we said that the uniformity of the churches who are dedicated to following only God's word is evidence that the bible pattern can be attained. Then we indicated that these same churches have a tendency to drift away from God's word. How can these two assertions be rectified? Quite simply, we must realize that churches, like people, are not uniform in their maturity. The fact that a person achieves a degree of righteousness proves that this degree of righteousness can be attained. The fact that that very same person falls into sin does not negate the first proof.

The spiritual maturity of a church, of course, depends totally upon the spiritual maturity of its members. No church ever stands still. Usually a church is first formed by a small, very dedicated group of individuals who are dissatisfied with their current religious organization. They may have tried for years to convince those in their previous organization of the truth. Finally, convinced themselves that their efforts are not bearing fruit, they obey the command to "... come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean [thing]; and I will receive you, ..." (1 Cor. 6:17).

These individuals seek and find others who share their desire to base their religion solely on God's word. As such, they are highly blessed in their efforts to keep the Lord's

great commission. The small church of two or three increased to ten or twenty. Over the course of a generation it might grow to number in the hundreds.

This is the tricky part, for here we have replicated either the church at Corinth, or else the church at Smyrna (see Revelation 2:8-11) -- one was headed toward destruction, the other holding the course and obviously growing in spirituality. Certainly the same conditions can exist in any church today. This is the reason that we cannot stake our salvation upon a name or a group. For, the very same group can be removed from grace by God himself. The responsibility to reverse the trend away from God's word falls upon each one of us, as indicated by the warning issued to the church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:5): "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

8.5 SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We need to conclude right where we began: with an appeal to the authority of the word of God. These things are irrelevant if you still feel that the bible cannot be understood, or that it cannot be understood alike, or that it is not the absolute and ultimate authority by which God has communicated with us. However, if you are convinced that God has given us His word to "thoroughly furnish us unto every good work," then you are compelled to leave the system of myths propagated by the denominations and find others who have the same faith that you have -- a faith that is sufficient to enable us to be like Abraham, "... when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Hebrews 11:8).

Indeed, the decision to leave the religious environment of one's lifetime is a leap which requires as much faith as Abraham had. God is not a respecter of persons; he expects us to reject sin, even if all of our friends and relatives are steeped in it. But before you start feeling sorry for yourself, listen to the words of Jesus (Mark 10:29-30):

And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

From this we can see that salvation is a matter of faith, not works. For, if we receive even on this earth a hundredfold more than we sacrifice, how can we think that it could possibly be earned. But the further implication of this verse is that, generally, we will

have to leave many of the things that we hold most dear if, in fact, they are not consistent with our following Jesus.

So, where does this leave us? Our relationship with God must come first. Absolutely nothing should get in the way of this service. This is the reason that Jesus said: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). If we want Jesus in our midst, let us do everything in His name, which means by His authority. If that means that we are only two or three, so be it. But recognize the following as well: "For where two or three thousand are gathered together in any other than my name, I will not be in their midst."