

Tags Come Second

Neil Girard

There is a story about a group of people who formed themselves into a fishermen's club. They met regularly to discuss fishing, to display the latest tackle and gear they had purchased and to hang on their walls the stuffed and mounted trophies that someone else had caught. But they themselves never went to the streams, rivers, ponds and lakes to actually do any fishing. These people were extremely knowledgeable about every nuance of fishing but they never did any fishing themselves. In this way, calling themselves a fishermen's club became a lie because they were not fishermen any more than is the person who never touches hook, line, rod or reel but instead "catches" all his fish in the grocery store freezer! Yet this group, because they were the "experts" on fishing, continued to lure people into their meetings to talk about fishing and laid down bylaws that forbade people to go fishing without having first been "properly" trained. And anyone who actually did any real fishing, especially without such training (training which usually cured them of the desire to actually fish anyway), was labeled a radical and chased off as a competitor. As time went by, various factions arose as a result of arguments over which fish was the best to catch, which bait worked best, which streams were the best to fish in, etc. Each faction was sure it was the best-informed, smartest, wisest group of fishermen to have ever hit the planet. This *is* the story of the "church" with only a few shining exceptions.

Labels

Jesus prayed,

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 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. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." (Jn. 17:20-23)

Throughout church history, there have been efforts to walk in this oneness that Jesus speaks of here, efforts that brought into existence labels that ultimately worked against the very unity being sought. The first label to be applied to all believers was "catholic" which means "universal" and it was held to be the label that differentiated one from sectarians ("heretics" or schismatics). More recently there has been what has been called the "ecumenical" movement. This is another term which, in its basic definition, simply means "general" or "universal." The first word, catholic, was taken over by the first large-scale sect (the Roman Catholic "church") and the second, ecumenical, was used to superficially congeal together a federation of carnal sects (denominations) without dealing in any way with the divisive nature of denominationalism! No fundamental, long-term solutions here!

The problem now is that the English language only has so many words that represent the concept of "one category that includes all." Many people, even those who believe in only "one holy people, body and bride of Christ," reject being called catholic because of the instantaneous Romish connotations associated with it. And many of these same people don't want to be instantly associated with the world-wide ecumenical movement because it embraces so many

things that can only be called sinful. What options remain? Before we address this question and merely as an aside, we should seriously consider discarding the word “church” just as we have discarded the words “catholic” and “ecumenical”! All these words are now rendered useless, obsolete and even antagonistic to the Message they were once used to convey because, over time and with usage, the word has accumulated additional baggage that completely changes how the word is commonly perceived. This is all the more true as the end of the age approaches and we need to distinguish between the genuine ekklesia (Greek [1577]) of Christ and the false, counterfeit, apostate “church” built on the spiritually numbing traditions of men and the lethally deceptive schemes and doctrines of demons. We will return to the differences between these two later in this article.

But as we look ahead, imagining and questing for what the genuine bride of Christ might look like if she were free of all the deceptive “church” encrustations, we come to the question of what we would look and be like if we could simply let go of our human desire and “need” for labels. What label can truly cover all that we are in Christ anyway? We are kingdomists, Monarchists, saints, family, templists, homists, priests and kings all at once! Any label we take upon ourselves will cause us to have already set our sights lower than the heights from which our predecessors have fallen, the first love of simply walking closely and quietly with our Master wherever He leads. (Rev. 2:4-5) This *is* the overarching “thing” to which we are joined when we receive, experience and obey the new birth from above. Perhaps it is simply best to call this transcendent “thing” “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 4:11, etc.) Just don’t try to make a label out of it! Let us simply recognize that as a Biblical, spiritual mystery, we require divine revelation from God to even rightly understand it. This is quite consistent with the Scriptures and it will tend to preserve us from the error of thinking that because we have a word or label for it, we understand it to the full. The kingdom of God is indeed a vast expanse that cannot be fully known here in this land where we see only dimly and in part.

The Second Part

There are some people who want to believe that, so long as “denominational tags” (affiliations, credentials, titles, degrees, etc.) come “second,” these “tags” are permissible and harmless and even irrelevant. “Second” here means after “submission” to Christ as the nominal and titled “Head of the body” – but whether this submission to Christ as Head is merely in word or in truth is very debatable. One is also tempted to completely short-circuit this discussion by pointing out that if these “tags” are so unimportant and irrelevant, why does one even need or bother to have them at all – but since so many people deem them desirable or are attached to them in one way or another, let us press on to discuss the poisonous and even lethal deceptions concealed within these “tags.” What truly occurs is that one aligns oneself with one branch of the religious fishermen’s club that competes against the real way of fishing.

There is not much point in addressing those who use this idea that secondary “tags” don’t matter as an obvious excuse for fleshly religiosity – their fruit speaks loudly enough in its own right. But those who put forward this proposal in its best light tell us that what really matters is that we serve the Lord wherever we’re at (both physically and in terms of progress in spiritual maturity), that we love one another and that we continue to seek further light from God (primarily through individually and corporately studying the Bible) – then, these assure us, we are on the right track and Biblically sound.

As good as all this sounds – and there is indeed much truth contained in these ideas – there are several key words and ideas found in the New Testament that are overlooked, words

and ideas that call into severe question most, if not all, our modern practices of denominational churchianity. This proposal – built upon the idea that denominational “tags” *can be* kept second to our obedience to Christ and God and are, therefore, unimportant and even irrelevant – is first of all virtually unattainable because the very context of modern churchianity works to prevent any spiritual unity in the Spirit of Christ. Even bringing forth and untwisting the truths this proposal touches and builds upon requires no small effort. Equally true is that even the effort to bring this proposal out into a better light will largely fall upon deaf ears and prove to be a useless gesture when it is placed before those who are already firmly convinced of the soundness of this deceptive proposal. Just as the “fishermen” of the story above came to believe themselves to be true fishermen and would not be dissuaded even when presented with blatant facts, what is perhaps most overlooked is that in order for any scheme of the devil to be effective against us, it must incorporate large portions of truth and only small degrees of subtle error. The devil recognized long ago that people who love truth and obey the Spirit and King of truth (Jn. 16:13, 18:37, etc.) will simply walk away from any ideas of his that contain too much error or too many obvious deceptions. It is not the bald-faced lies we readily fall for – it is the ones that seem right and good and desirable in our own eyes (Gen. 3:6) because we follow our own “knowledge” or “wisdom” apart from the leading of the Spirit of truth and these, in turn, lead us away from the narrow path that leads to life. (Mt. 7:14)

Let us consider the words and ideas that are overlooked in this proposal.

- “God composed the body...that there should be no schism (division, Greek *schisma* [4978]) in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.” (1 Cor. 12:24-25) Since the “church” is composed of many multiple schisms that each supposes itself to be superior to the rest, from this statement alone we must conclude that the “church” is *not* the body of Christ! This blatant fact will be lost on many “fishermen” but, since the body is the ekklesia (Eph. 1:22-23), those who have eyes to see and ears to hear must acknowledge that the “church” is a counterfeit that usurps and replaces the role and function of the body, bride and ekklesia of Christ.

Further, Paul opened his letter to the Corinthians with an impassioned plea in the name of the Lord “that there be *no* schisms (divisions) among you...” (1 Cor. 1:10) This plea is almost entirely ignored and dismissed as unrealistic in modern churchianity. But the indictment stands – those who divide and align themselves behind a man, *any* man no matter how fruitful his words and deeds may seem to be, are carnal (1 Cor. 3:3) and the men who so lead others are drawing the disciples away from the truth and after themselves. (see Acts 20:30) Carnality is a state Paul elsewhere describes as enmity against God (Rom. 8:7) and the divisions only demonstrate who has the approval of men (1 Cor. 11:19) but do not begin to show who genuinely has God’s approval. (2 Tim. 2:15)

- Paul lists the works of the flesh that prevent followers of Christ from attaining to or inheriting the kingdom of God. (see Gal. 5:19-21) Among this list are four sins which the “church” is literally and almost entirely built upon. These primary sins of the “church” are **heresies** (in the original sense found in the New Testament, “parties formed upon an idea or upon the leading of some man,” Greek *hairesis* [139]), **contentions and selfish ambitions** (in essence, rivalry for

preeminence, Greek *eris* [2054] and *eritheia* [2052], also see 3 Jn. 9) and **dissensions** (especially between the differing denominations and their “faithful” adherents, Greek *dichostasia* [1370], the “double standard” of “believe as I do or leave.”) As the root of these sins, we must name the sin of **lawlessness** (Greek *anomia* [458], best recognized as the secular philosophy of relativism and summed up as “doing what is right in one’s own eyes” – see Jdgs. 21:25) as each individual decides which brand, flavor and kind of “ministry” or “theology” he prefers most and then attends the “church” he or she likes best. Paul wrote that lawlessness (what is right in one’s own eyes) has absolutely no fellowship (share, partnership, commonality) with righteousness (what is right in God’s eyes. – 2 Cor. 6:14) Those who practice religious lawlessness may well find themselves eternally dismissed by the King, Christ Jesus. (Mt. 7:21-23)

- Paul wrote, “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it.” (2 Cor. 11:3-4) Many “churches” do still adhere to the written words of the Bible and strive to follow, as best they can, the major doctrines and themes found therein – note well, however, the growing number of “churches” that have abandoned even this foundational notion! Those “churches” that follow carefully what is clearly written in the New Testament usually have no trouble recognizing teachings that promote a false “Jesus” or a false “gospel.” Yet such “churches” are often run by slanderous, back-stabbing, power-mongers (the “pastor” and those who keep him in power) who will not hesitate to drive off anyone who dares to question or challenge the status quo. This only demonstrates that no one in attendance there has any ability to discern by which spirit the “work of God” is being done at this “church”!

- Paul wrote, “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.” (1 Cor. 1:10) It has been the error of the people of Christ throughout church history to align themselves, not to Christ, but to some man who purportedly and allegedly followed Christ. Thus churchianity is all about requiring its attendees to agree with its leaders about everything and see things only and exactly as those leaders see things. God forbid that we believe this is how it should be! Whenever any of us has an interpretation of the Bible that differs from that of another, our responsibility is to re-examine the roots and causes of our interpretation and submit all our views to the Head Christ Jesus. While the Lord will allow us our perspectives for a time, He will never allow us to permanently retain any belief that is not grounded in Him – not while we remain His, at any rate. Misbeliefs (lies and errors) are the work and domain of the devil and the demonic. (Jn. 8:44, 1 Jn. 4:6) Jesus came to destroy all their

works (1 Jn. 3:8) and, if we cling to their works, we will be destroyed right along with them. (Mt. 25:41)

We are not free to pick and choose which portions of teachings we like or agree with by heaping up teachers to scratch our ears (2 Tim. 4:3-4) and listening to our favorite “evangelist,” “apostle,” “prophet” or “pastor.” God says, “I am against the prophets who steal My words every one from his neighbor.” (Jer. 23:30) God also tells us not to even listen to the false prophets – those who misrepresent God or His message – because they will destroy us. (Jer. 23:16) And *anyone* who concocts his own private interpretation of a Scripture (apart from the revelatory and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit –2 Pet. 1:20) and then says, “This is the word of God,” is a false prophet. Make no mistake – these kind of private interpretations abound and are the basic building blocks of the dissensions and heresies (Gal. 5:20) men most often call denominations (even the so-called “non-denominational” denominations).

Coming together in unity is not the blind tolerance of “agreeing to disagree agreeably.” No! “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3) Nor is it a mere question of agreeing with one another. It is the way of the flesh to contest or spar or manipulate until the other one submits and agrees with *my* opinions and agendas. The question is much deeper. No one can walk with *Christ* until that one agrees with and enters into obedience to the mind of Christ. (Lk. 14:33) And only those who have submitted their all to Christ are then in a position to *preserve* (note well it does not say “build” or “make”) “the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) In the bond of peace, we can walk through the process of submitting our different views to the Headship and unity of Christ, experiencing the unanimity of the Spirit (oneness, one accord – Acts 2:46, etc.) until we do arrive at the unanimity of the faith. (Eph. 4:13)

- The primary deceptive scheme of the devil that incorporates many nuggets of truth (and which is used by God to draw men to himself in spite of the devil’s best efforts) is the one called “church.” This deception can perhaps be best seen by simply looking at the meaning of the word “church” as found in any worthwhile dictionary:

- 1) a specialized building;
- 2) the clergy;
- 3) the “Christian” religion; and
- 4) the people who follow Christ.

The word “church” is used to translate the Greek word *ekklesia* [1577], a word which refers *only* to people, specifically those people called out of the darkness of this world in order to attend to Christ’s kingdom of light. The contrast between “church” and *ekklesia* is presented very well in this – three parts deception with one part truth.

Those who can't see how this works must recognize:

1) God does not live in buildings made by human hands (Acts 7:48, 17:24) but the "church" spends more time and resources on its buildings than it does in reaching lost peoples with Christ's gospel (which they don't exactly preach that either but that's a different deception.)

2) An exalted clergy class that rules over the laity is a sin God hates (Nicolaitanism [3531], "conquering over the people" – Rev. 2:6, 15) and the whole notion of the existence of a clergy class is a complete distortion of what Peter said about *not* being lords over the flock! (see *kleros* [2819], the Greek word from which *clergy* is derived! – 1 Pet. 5:3)

3) Religion is best defined as man's attempts to please God. The word is used only five times in the New Testament and can hardly be considered as a central theme of the true way of following Christ and God. (see Acts 26:5, Col. 2:18, Jas. 1:26-27) The real way of following Christ is a *spiritual* life lived by taking up one's cross and following Him along the path of truth, righteousness and holiness that leads to eternal life, (Lk. 9:23, Mt. 7:14, 1 Cor. 3:1, etc.), not a list of religious codes, rules and bylaws whereby one earns God's favor.

4) Being Christ's ekklesia is all about following the sixty-plus *commands* of how we are to love and interact with one another. (Jn. 13:34, etc.) It is not a religious climbing of some pseudo-spiritual mountain so that we might experience God for ourselves and to hell with everyone else!

Time to Choose

Since churchianity is so intrinsically and diametrically opposed to the spiritual life in Christ, it is simply not realistic to suppose that one can attach the denominational "tags" to one's name and life and not be affected in any way. Those who purpose to keep their denominational "tags" in the background and keep them "second" in their Christian life do experience less of their influence than do those who believe their denomination is the right and only way to follow Christ. Put into the picture we began with, there is a certain amount of legitimacy in learning to fish from the fishermen's club – so long as we move on from learning from them and actually go out and fish for ourselves! That is, if we learn from men to turn our ears toward the Lord and hear Him and be led by His Spirit, we have done well. But if we learn from men to listen only to men, we have missed the main point of the New Testament!

The truly dangerous part of denominational "tags" and labels is that they represent a way that differs from the way of following Christ. They offer a different Jesus, a different gospel and a different spirit by which we do the things Christ spoke of. It remains true that apart from Him, we can do nothing that is of eternal value. (Jn. 15:5)

Paul wrote that "Christ also loved the ekklesia and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious ekklesia, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27) Those who have a link to a denomination are not without spot or wrinkle – the denominational "tag" *is* the spot and wrinkle, if not a full-fledged stain, on the

robe of the person so “tagged.” In the realms of animal management, it is common practice to “tag” a fish, sheep or cow – but this results only in a marred and deformed fish, sheep or cow! It is only human beings who are certain that a tagged animal experiences no difficulties in the wild because of that tag, assuming the animal survives being tagged! And the only reason to tag a sheep or cow is to demonstrate whom the animal belongs to in its course to becoming someone’s food! (see 1 Pet. 5:8, Jn. 10:10) Nothing of this world – and the “church” is only a kingdom of this world wrapped up in religious trappings so as to appear spiritual to men who think they are fishermen because they *talk* about fishing (see 1 Cor. 4:20) – will remain in the kingdom of God. *Everything* that can be shaken will be shaken and only Christ’s unshakeable kingdom will remain. (Heb. 12:27-28)

Paul also wrote, “Therefore, having these promises [of divine sonship], beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Cor. 7:1) *Everyone*, John wrote, who has the hope of being resurrected into the likeness of Jesus, purifies himself. (1 Jn. 3:2-3) It is from among those who do not purify themselves of the filthiness of flesh and spirit that we are to “Come out from among them.” (2 Cor. 6:17, 1 Cor. 5:10-11) This command to separate from those who only profess to follow Christ and God (see also 1 Tim. 3:5) surely applies to one’s interactions with any and every “church” that does not truly serve the kingdom of God but instead builds up only yet one more faction of the “fishermen’s club.”

If by the Spirit of truth we have become able to discern and acknowledge that the “church” is a counterfeit that usurps and replaces the role and function of the body, bride and ekklesia of Christ, then Paul’s question to the Corinthians takes on new significance: “Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!” (1 Cor. 6:15) We will never become the purified, spotless, blameless bride of Christ if we continue to wear the “tags” and labels that come from the prostitute “church” system. When the time comes that we must choose between following Christ and following our favorite denomination – and such times will surely come because God is both faithful and jealous over His people! – then these denominational “tags” take on a huge significance. The proposal that we are examining in this article could be better stated that denominational “tags” don’t matter in our relations with one another *until* we are faced with the choice of being loyal to our denomination or being loyal to Christ. Then those “tags” matter greatly!

The Kingdom of God

No discussion of “church” vs. ekklesia is truly complete without at least a recognition of the importance of the kingdom of God because it truly brings into view the answer to the question of what should a local assembly look like, be and do. Yet we must not think that God has merely given us a description or a pattern and then expects us to emulate that pattern in whatever way suits our own personalities and agendas. That is, Jesus said that the kingdom of God among men is 410411“the *mystery* of the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 4:11) We cannot know a New Testament mystery rightly unless it has been revealed to us by the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of Christ and God. The kingdom of God, as can be found in any worthwhile dictionary, is a realm ruled by a king. (also see Mt. 6:10, Heb. 5:9, etc.) If we do not have Christ as our true and literal King, we simply are not in His kingdom but in the kingdom, realm or fiefdom of some man.

The mystery of the kingdom of God as it pertains to being ekklesia might be best stated as:

“A local ekklesia is the mystery of the kingdom of God manifested in a particular locality.”

We will see how this can be so when we recall that God gave [Christ] to be Head [Master, King, Lord, Absolute Ruler] over *all* things to the ekklesia...” (Eph. 1:22) If the assembly we participate in does not truly serve Christ and His kingdom, we are in some counterfeit “church” that is, at best, contaminated or, at worst, dominated by the traditions of men (Mt. 15:3, 6) and the doctrines (teachings) of demons. (1 Tim. 4:1) Any connection we make with these latter things will inevitably have some detrimental effect on our lives and will be an impurity that we must purge from our lives. If we refuse to do this when the Master places this choice squarely before us, we have little reason to believe that He will allow us to remain in His kingdom since only those who actually *do* His will will be allowed to enter. (Mt. 7:21) This is one of the parts of Christ’s gospel that is usually left unsaid in “church” circles but remains an integral part of the truth nonetheless.

Let he who has ears hear.

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