

Church Distinction

Imagine walking down the canned goods aisle in the grocery store looking for a can of corn or green beans. Shelf after shelf lines the aisle, each loaded with cans of all shapes and sizes. You look closely at the cans and notice that the labels, while colorful and eye catching, are all strangely similar: SELECT VEGETABLES, CHOICE VEGETABLES, QUALITY VEGETABLES, etc. They all sound good but what's in the can?

I mean, if you want to buy a can of corn or beans, how do you know which can to pick? You know there are vegetables in each can but there are a lot of different vegetables that wind up in cans. Maybe the fine print on the label will help: QUALITY VEGETABLES contains green beans. Or, if not, you can always take along a can opener and see what's inside that can of SELECT VEGETABLES.

Thankfully the labels in the store generally identify what is in the can. Labels such as QUALITY GREEN BEANS and SELECT CORN make our trip to the grocery store less frustrating and we don't upset the grocer with our can opener. That is the purpose of a label, to clearly identify what's inside.

The same could, and should, be said of churches. The name on the sign on the outside of the building should identify what is taught and practiced inside the church. For instance, if the sign read St. Somebody Catholic Church then you would expect to hear Roman Catholic doctrine taught and Roman Catholic traditions practiced. Likewise if the sign read Eastern Orthodox, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, or Presbyterian.

Unfortunately, churches are eliminating or obscuring their distinctive names and replacing them with generic names like, Grace Church, Faith Community Church, New Life Fellowship, and The Father's House. They all sound good but what's in the can?

Of course, those that favor doing away with labels such as Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Apostolic, Nazarene, Episcopal, Brethren, Congregational, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, etc., claim that labels cause too much division in the Body of Christ. They say we should present a unified front to the world and quit quibbling over trivial doctrinal differences. That's why we have the Bible church and Non-Denomination church movements, the dropping of denominational names from existing churches today, and the planting of denominational churches with generic, non-denominational names.

Now, obviously, in the beginning of Christianity we had no distinctive church or denominational names. There was no need because there was only one church. It was started by the Lord Jesus Christ and consisted of Him and His disciples. It was not until other churches came into being that different names began to be used to distinguish the churches from each other.

The church that Jesus Christ started was distinguished from the Jewish synagogues that its first members came out of. They were distinctive in that they believed that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16) and that He has "the words of eternal life (John 6:68)." They believed that they "found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ (John 1:41)."

The next churches planted held the same beliefs in common with the first church in Jerusalem. However, they were distinct from that first church. Hence the first church names began to appear; the church that was at Antioch (Acts 13:1), the church which is at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1), the church of God at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2), the churches of Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19), the churches of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1), the churches of Galatia (Galatians 1:2), the churches of Judaea (Galatians 1:22), the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1), church that is at Babylon (1 Peter 5:13), the church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:1), the church in Smyrna (Revelation 2:1), the church in Pergamos (Revelation 2:12), the church in Thyatira (Revelation 2:18), the church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1), the church in Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7), and the church of the Laodiceans (Revelation 3:14).

Although these early churches held essentially to a common set of practices and belief when first established, the devil was quick to sow tares among the wheat. False doctrine began creeping in and it was necessary for God to correct and reassure the early churches through the inspired writings that make up the New Testament. Unfortunately, not all the churches were willing to correct their errors. This marked the beginning of what we could call "denominationalism."

One of the first doctrines to suffer was that of church independence. All of the early churches were local, independent bodies. However, as churches began to multiply some, like Diotrophes in 3 John 1:9, loved "to have the preeminence among them." As they began claiming authority over other, smaller churches they departed from the scriptural precedent of giving advice (Acts 15:1-35, 21:25) to the unscriptural practice of giving orders. Along with that came the whole denominational hierarchy and the demise of the New Testament pattern of independent local churches in the second and third centuries.

In addition to altering the leadership and independence of the church, the membership of the church began to change from the scriptural standard. Though we see that "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" in the first century, by the third century man was adding to the kingdom such as should be baptized. The meaning of baptism was changed from a public testimony of the new believer's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ prior to joining a church to a requirement for regeneration or salvation itself. The new, unscriptural doctrine of being baptized in order to be saved, or baptismal regeneration, began to replace the old Bible doctrine of being baptized because you are saved.

The natural consequence of baptismal regeneration was a change from believer's baptism to baby baptism. Although we only find in the Bible the baptism of those who, like the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:36-37 gave evidence of salvation prior to salvation, churches began

baptizing infants in order to secure their salvation during the third and fourth centuries. The practice of infant baptism was eventually held to be a necessary rite by the Milevitan Council in 418 A.D. and was eventually established by law in the sixth century.

Baptismal regeneration also gave rise to the rejection of immersion for sprinkling or pouring instead. Although immersion was universally practiced and the word itself, both in English and in Greek, means to immerse, sprinkling was more convenient. The rejection of immersion by the Western or Roman Catholic Church contributed to the separation of the Eastern or Greek Orthodox Church in 869 A.D.

Many more examples of changing and corrupting Bible doctrines could be cited over the following centuries. Suffice to say, Paul was correct when he said, "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 (Acts 20:29-30)."

As a consequence, by the middle of the second century churches holding to the original doctrines and practices were separating from those that did not. They became known as regular or nonconforming churches because refused to conform with the changes embraced by the other churches. These churches and their successors down through the centuries were often known by the names of their early eaders; Vaudois, Montanists, Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Waldensians, Albigenses, to name a few.

They were also known as Anabaptists, or re-baptizers, due to their practice of re-baptizing new believers who had previously been sprinkled rather than immersed, baptized as babies, baptized for salvation, or baptized by any church or individual that did not share their doctrine and practices. The "ana-" prefix was dropped by the 1500's and they were simply called Baptists.

The Protestant Reformation of the 1600's also produced a variety of new church denominations and names. Some, like the Lutherans,

took the name of their early leaders. Others, such as the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, became known by their church polity. The Anglicans, or Church of England, took the name of their country of origin. Collectively, however, they were known as Protestant Churches because they protested against many of the false teachings and errors of the Roman Catholic Church which they came out of. Unfortunately they did not protest against everything and retained many unscriptural doctrines and practices and such as infant baptism, sprinkling rather than immersion, baptismal regeneration, and the union of church and state.

Other churches and denominations arose from time to time from the Baptists, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. Like the above examples their names reflected their early leaders, Amish and Mennonite, their particular doctrines and practices, as in the Seventh Day Adventists, or, like the Dutch Reformed, their place of origin.

You see, like the cans of vegetables at the beginning of this article, churches acquired labels to reflect their distinctive doctrines and practices. If you want a can of peas or carrots you look for a can with the appropriate label. Likewise, if you want a church that holds to certain doctrines and practices you should look for the appropriate label. Therefore, if you want a church that holds to the distinctive doctrines and practices of the first churches look for one that bears the name most closely associated with them today: Baptist.

After all, labels and names mean something. Or at least they should.

[—Pastor Davis](#)