

Open letter
to churches and groups which are not in a denomination,
in particular to 'Baptistic' congregations

Dear sisters and brothers,

It strikes me how many 'independent' Christian churches there are all over the world. I call on these churches no longer to stand alone, but to join a denomination. If there is no church family in which you feel at home, you can start such a denomination together. The least I am asking you is that you join the national Evangelical Alliance and the local Council of Churches. Both in principle and practically it is not good for a congregation to stand alone. For this thesis I have the following arguments:

1. In the entire Bible it is clear that individual believers belong to, and are to serve within, the larger entity of those who know God. The New Testament calls this entity, among other things, 'the body of Christ'. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul makes clear that eye, nose and feet are not alone but only exist within a wider context. The same is true for churches: by their very nature they too belong together. Just as it is inconceivable that a local church would have declared themselves independent of Paul and the other apostles in the first century, so today no congregation can exist in independence from the others.
2. The Lord Jesus prayed that his followers would be one as he and his Father are one. Jesus is concerned about visible unity, so visible that 'the world' can see it and be impressed by it (John 17:11, 21-23). It is our responsibility to do all that is in our power to let the will of the Lord happen on earth. The complete unity of all Christians is not (yet) possible, but that is no excuse to stay apart from those with whom we have much in common.
3. Together we can better (read: more credibly) make our voices heard to the government (local and national), at the United Nations and to the governments of other countries. Together we can stand up for persecuted believers more effectively – and unfortunately, that is desperately needed. It is not good to leave such action (only) to parachurch organisations. Potentially, we may at some point need to stand up to our own government for our freedom of religion; again, we will be able to pull more weight when we do this together.
4. Your independent status has possibly also unintentionally become a cover for indifference. But are we not the guardians of our brethren (cf. Genesis 4:9)? In the past there may have been a valid reason why you came to stand alone, but do not let that past hinder you in the present to look to the future. If necessary, start a process of reconciliation.
5. A healthy denomination is not a straitjacket, but a blessed opportunity to learn from each other, to strengthen and encourage one another. Paul has much to say on this subject in Ephesians 2.
6. Cooperation is not merely about the profit it brings me, but rather about helping one another. We are called to be a blessing to each other and to encourage each other. 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others' (Philippians

2:4). Denominations can help their member churches to preserve or to restore a healthy spiritual life, and in this way the testimony of Christ is not broken or obscured.

7. In the era of Modernity, we concentrated on principles, purity in doctrine and our own explanation of our favourite text. Now that we have all to some degree become postmodern, the emphasis has shifted. Would it not be easier to recognise the good aspects of others, even when we do not 100% agree with each other?
8. In practical matters, it is good to have the support of a larger group. Such matters include the possibility of mediation in a labour dispute (or do you prefer to go to court?) and suspicions of (financial) malpractice, sexual abuses and the like.
9. Abuse of power by leaders can be prevented because sisters and brothers from outside watch you; if necessary, they can ask critical questions.
10. Many communities understandably treasure their freedom. Some Baptist churches call themselves an 'Independent' or 'Free' Baptist Church, as if churches within a union or federation of Baptist churches were not free. In every Baptist denomination, as in most other denominations, the local churches have a high degree of autonomy. To repeat, a denomination is not a straitjacket, but a place where things are agreed together.

You might say that this open letter contains more practical than theological arguments. That is correct, but arguments must be weighed, not counted. Jesus' explicit desire for the unity of his followers alone should be enough to spur us into action, or Paul's explanation of the fundamental unity of all believers in Christ in Ephesians.

If you are an 'ordinary member' of an independent Christian congregation, speak to your leaders about this matter. It is both in principle and in practice not good for a congregation to stand alone.

Yours in the Lord Jesus Christ,

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