

# **Landon - Sharp Debate on The Church**

**David N. Landon**  
**Reformed Presbyterian Church**

and

**Keith Sharp**  
**Church of Christ**

## **Propositions**

Justified believers are found in various sects and denominations.

Affirmed: \_\_\_\_\_ (David N. Landon)

Denied: \_\_\_\_\_ (Keith Sharp)

It is a sin to belong to a sect or denomination.

Affirmed: \_\_\_\_\_ (Keith Sharp)

Denied: \_\_\_\_\_ (David N. Landon)

**Affirmative**  
**David N. Landon**

Proposition: Justified believers are found in various sects and denominations.

It is the purpose of this debate to identify the true church, and to determine who, and who is not, a member of it. The importance of this discussion is underscored by the fact that most Christians acknowledge the role of the church in their salvation. Our own confession states that outside of the church there is “no ordinary possibility of salvation,” WCF, 25:2. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* notes that there are as many as 28,000 distinct Christian denominations in the world. That their creeds are often contradictory proves they cannot all be true.

For the purpose of this debate a *justified believer* is a person who has obtained salvation through Christ. A sect or denomination is a society of persons who share a common creed. It is our position that while some sects have so far fallen from those truths that are consistent with salvation that they cannot be counted as part of the true church, there are yet many others in which genuine believers may be found.

The church of Christ is **one, holy, catholic and apostolic**. I am sure Keith would agree. The church is:

Apostolic. Certainly no community of professing believers can lay claim to the name “church” whose creed does not line up with Scripture. The chief purpose of the apostles was to lay the foundation of the church, 1Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11,12.

Catholic. The church of Christ is *universal* in extent. In its visible aspect it is no longer confined to one nation, but consists of all who profess the true religion, WCF 25:2. In its invisible aspect it is comprised of all the elect from Adam to the consummation of all things.

Holy. Those who belong to Christ are characterized by sanctity or holiness without which, no man will see the Lord, Song Of Solomon 4:7; Ephesians 1 :4, 2:21; Hebrews 12:14.

One. Jesus said, “I will build my church.” There is only one church, not several. Paul makes it clear in his epistle to the Ephesians that as there is but *one* God, so also there is but *one* body, and *one* faith, 4:4-6. I do not believe there is anything under these four headings that Keith would not consent to, with the possible exception of the church considered as both visible and invisible. The following distinctions will examine the doctrine of the unity of the church, for it is our position that the oneness, or unity of the church, is multiform, and not uniform. It is both:

Visible and invisible. The invisible church is clearly taught in such passages as Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 5:27. Ephesians 4:11,12 speaks of the visible. Other verses that teach that the church is essentially invisible include Romans 2:28 where Paul shows that the reality of conversion was always inward, and spiritual, rather than outward and visible. Luke writes that the kingdom of God (a phrase synonymous with the church) comes without observation, 17:20. According to Turretin this distinction inescapably follows from the twofold call to men. The visible church is the gathering of all those who have answered the outward call of the gospel given in the preaching of the word. The invisible church is made up of those who have heard not with the ear merely, but also with the heart. The visible is made up of both wheat and tares; the invisible has no tares. “Profession,” wrote Chillingworth, “constitutes the visible church, belief and obedience the invisible.” This distinction is not a new invention. The church historian Neander wrote that this was the teaching of the earliest church until Cyprian, in the middle of the 3rd century brought in confusion in this point, which confusion, said Neander, resulted in the

idea that salvation was to be found only in some one visible and outward church.

True and false. “Some churches,” according to the Westminster Confession of Faith, “have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan,” 25:5. But, says the same section, “there shall be always a church on earth.” It is impossible to talk of the *unity of the faith* without recognizing the distinction that the apostle Paul makes between the foundation, and that which is built thereon. In 1 Corinthians 3:11 Paul calls the principles of Christ the foundation or essential matter of the Christian’s faith; other doctrines make up the superstructure of the building, and these may consist of a mixture of truth and error, 3:12. The principles and doctrines of Christ are those things that constitute the very *being* of a true church. Other doctrines built upon this foundation contribute only to the *well-being* of a church. As a Presbyterian I believe that there is abundant Scriptural evidence for a Presbyterian form of church government, and that this model of government will advance the *well-being* of that particular church. But the lack of such a form of government does not cause the Lord to disown that body of believers. A church then, may be considered a true church if she retains, and preaches, the truth concerning Christ. The clear teaching of John 20:31 is that life comes from faith in Christ.

Pure and impure. Those visible churches that have a true foundation, and faithfully teach those doctrines that are essential to salvation, are yet subject to varying degrees of purity in the areas of teaching, administration of ordinances, and public worship, WCF 25:4. Some churches, like the church of Sardis, barely have a name that they live, yet even in her there were found some that had not defiled their garments, Rev. 3. The desire on the part of some churchmen to see abuses in a particular church corrected, or to attain to a greater degree of purity in doctrine or practice, is what has often led to the formation of a new denomination. Such divisions are sinful when done for a trivial, or light matter, but certainly not so when the cause concerns an essential doctrine of the faith, or when done in order to achieve a greater degree of conformity to the Scripture in doctrine or practice, and in obedience to the command of Christ.

Our proposition that justified believers may be found in various denominations follows inescapably from the above material. There is only one true, pure, and universal church of Christ. This is the universal invisible church, and is also called in Scripture the Body of Christ, and the Kingdom of God. There are found in this church the elect from all ages, and from all groups of professing Christians. There is next the universal visible church made up of all those on earth at any given time in history who call on the name of the Lord, preach the gospel, and rightly administer the sacraments. In addition to the universal visible church, there will always be found a visible church, also known as a local or particular church. Such visible churches will be more or less pure. They will also be more or less visible, and some (as the church in Elijah’s day that was hidden in a cave, and unknown even to Elijah) hardly visible at all.

The universal invisible church is called the Catholic Church, or the Church of Christ, and has been so designated by all the Protestant churches as witnessed in their confessions. The visible church, and particularly visible local churches have often taken to themselves additional names to identify either their place of worship, or some reform in their teaching, worship, or government that they have accomplished in obedience to the command of Christ to build on the foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, 1 Cor. 3:12. True enough, the members of some churches have left a true local church, and have founded another for the purpose of building with wood, hay, and stubble. They who have done so are guilty of the sin of schism. They have sinned in causing a rent in the church. But still some individuals among them may be justified for they continue to have the root of the matter in them; they are joined to Christ, and

live by His grace. Often however, a rent occurs in a visible church that is not sinful, for not every rent is sinful, only those that are causeless. Certainly there was a division in the visible church when Luther left the papal church, but who would suggest that Luther was wrong, or sinful, in leaving?

Questions for Keith. 1) What are the marks of the true church, and how might an unlearned person know them? 2) Does not your own church exhibit all the signs of being a denomination? 3) Can a person remaining in a denomination until death be saved?

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### Negative Keith Sharp

My friend commits three fundamental errors in his affirmative that make it confusing throughout and lead to his false conclusion that the Lord permits Christians to be members of sects and denominations.

First, he is not precise in his definitions (I notice he cited no authority for them). “A sect or denomination” is more than just “a society of persons who share a common creed.” A “creed” is “A formal statement of religious belief; a confession of faith” (**American Heritage**). All Christians, i.e., the body of Christ, share a common creed, the Bible, and a common confession, “Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (1 John 4:15). Thus, according to the affirmative definition, the body of Christ is a sect or denomination. This is the same accusation Tertullus, the lying orator whom the Jews hired to convict Paul before Felix, made (Acts 24:5) and which Paul implicitly denied (Acts 24:14).

A “sect” is “a division or group based upon different doctrinal opinions and/or loyalties” (Louw & Nida. 11.50). A “denomination” is a “large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy” (**American Heritage**). The New Testament specifically condemns sectarianism (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; Galatians 5:19-21), and denominations are unknown to the New Testament.

Further, the Affirmative commits the fallacy of ambiguity, an unintentional shift of meaning (Black, 234). My friend defines the word “church” in three ways: “the invisible church,” “the universal visible church,” and the “local or particular church.” Yet he uses the word “church” to mean “denomination.” (“e.g., The desire on the part of some churchmen to see abuses in a particular church corrected ... is what has often led to the formation of a new denomination.”)

The term “church” is used in the New Testament to denote the whole body of the saved, whether visible or invisible (Ephesians 1:22-23; Hebrews 12:22-24), the local body of believers who worship and work together (1 Corinthians 1:2), and the public assembly of that local body of believers (1 Corinthians 11:19). The word is never used in the Bible to denote a sect or denomination.

This fallacy of ambiguity leads to my friend’s third mistake, the fallacy of begging the question. This is the mistake of assuming as true what one needs to prove (Black, 236). Since Dave shifts the meaning of “church” to “denomination or sect,” what he finds in the Scriptures about a local church he applies to sects and denominations. But he has simply assumed without proof the Scriptures approve the very existence of these sinful bodies.

It is amazing how much my friend has written about the church to which I can say an hearty “Amen”! Yes, the contradictory creeds of the various denominations do indeed prove they cannot all be true. Yes, “The church of Christ is **one, holy, catholic and apostolic.**” I find it more than interesting that, when my learned friend speaks of the one true church of the New Testament, he calls it by the same name I generally use.

We differ greatly on what we mean by “apostolic.” Dave thinks their “creed” must “line up with the Scriptures.” By “apostolic” I mean they follow only the “apostles doctrine” (Acts 2:42) and nothing else (1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:13). If we all just believed, taught, and practiced only what the Scriptures teach, there would be no sects or denominations, and we would have no creeds written by uninspired men. And that is precisely what I am pleading for all to do.

Some of the Affirmative’s statements about the universal church are based on his Calvinistic beliefs in individual predestination and miraculous regeneration and are false. However, since they are irrelevant to the issue of sects and denominations, I will ignore them.

My friend totally twists 1 Corinthians 3:11-12 in a vain attempt to justify the doctrinal divisions of denominations. The Christians in Corinth, not the teaching of Paul and Barnabas, comprised the building they built (1 Corinthians 3:9). Thus, “wood, hay,” and “straw” represent converts who fall away, whereas “gold, silver,” and “precious stones” symbolize those who persevere. The passage contains no justification for doctrinal differences. Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to “all speak the same thing” and to “be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

John 20:31 does not teach life comes from faith alone; obedience is essential to life in Christ (James 2:24; Matthew 7:21; Hebrews 5:8-9).

It takes more than teaching “the truth concerning Christ” to make a congregation belong to Christ. “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9). Contextually, “the doctrine of Christ” includes both the teaching about Christ (verse 7) as well as the truth that comes from Christ (verse 4). The phrase “doctrine of” is commonly used in the

Scriptures to mean the teaching that comes from a person (e.g., Revelation 2:14). We must mark and avoid false teachers, including those who deny the truth about Christ, those who teach things that cause sin, and those who divide the church over their opinions (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10-11; 2 Peter 2:1-3).

Fellowship and salvation are coextensive (1 John 1:3,7). Thus, we should only refuse to extend the right hand of fellowship to those who teach and/or practice things that will cause people to be lost. The “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-6) is too precious before an unbelieving world (John 17:20-21) to be sacrificed for anything that doesn’t affect the salvation of the soul. We must never break fellowship over matters that are indifferent to eternal life (Romans 14:1-3,14). “Factions, divisions,” and “parties” (Galatians 5:20, **American Standard Version**) are works of the flesh that will prevent one from inheriting the kingdom of God (verse 21).

No congregation should wear a name unauthorized by the Scriptures, because it is evidence of sectarian loyalty and is sinful (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; Colossians 3:17). Congregations are authorized to designate themselves by their location (1 Corinthians 1:2).

The church at Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6) was a local church, not a sect or denomination. Yes, local churches exist in varying states of purity, but that in no way justifies sects or denominations.

### **Answers to Questions**

(1) If by “true church,” you mean a sect or denomination, one cannot find it, for all sects and denominations are sinful. If you mean the universal body of the saved, there is no need to look for it, for in the process of saving the obedient believer, the Lord adds him to that body (Acts 2:47). If you mean a local church or congregation, he should look for a body of immersed believers who are not a part of any denomination or sect but who follow the apostles’ doctrine alone as their creed and whose only required confession is faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38-42; 1 John 4:15).

(2) I am a member of the universal body of the saved (Ephesians 1:22-23) and a local church, the Tri-County Church of Christ. This congregation has a scriptural name, identified by the location of its members and the one to Whom it owes its loyalty (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 16:16). It is a matter of indifference to me which of the scriptural names is attached to this church, whether church of Christ (Romans 16:16), “the church” (Acts 8:3), “the Way” (Acts 9:1-2), “the church of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2), or “the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:14-15). We wear no sectarian name, such as Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Baptist (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). We had to adopt some name as a congregation to incorporate so as to have insurance and property, but we do not contend for “church of Christ” as the exclusive name of the church. We accept no statement of beliefs other than the apostles’ doctrine found in Scripture and require no confession other than one’s faith in Christ. We have no organic ties to any larger body on this earth, such as a synod, conference, or association. No, I do not belong to a denomination.

If my friend can prove that I am inconsistent and am practicing sectarianism, that would not prove his position to be true. It would only demonstrate I need to repent. If he can point out to me any sectarianism in my teaching or practice, I will repent and consider him a dear friend for having delivered me from death (James 5:19-20).

(3) No. Religious “parties” are a work of the flesh, and those “who practise such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21, **American Standard Version**).

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### **Response**

**David N. Landon**

The focus of this debate has been on the identity of the church, and how one may become a member of that community. Concerning the identity of the church, Keith suggests that certain errors in my affirmative have made my position confusing. I can only say that my position is that of millions of professing Christians, who recognize that the church can be seen as both visible and invisible, and, further, that Scripture allows that a number of particular churches, in order to ensure that affairs are managed decently, and in order, may form a denomination; yet we do not say that this denomination is the church, but only a part of it. Millions, I say, understand these things perfectly well, and without confusion. But even if there were confusion on the part of some as to the identity of the church, it would not preclude the possibility of their gaining admission into that blessed assembly. I have never said that a perfect understanding of these things is necessary for salvation. Faith in the one necessary confession of the church, that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God,” is all that is essential for church membership. Genuine heart belief of this proposition places one into the invisible church, and confession with the mouth secures fellowship in the visible body of believers, Romans 10:9-13. Is Keith willing to say that such a confession is impossible for a Baptist to make; or a Presbyterian, or a Methodist? When Paul was accused of being a sectarian (Acts 24:5,) notice that he did not respond with negatives; with a list of beliefs, or practices that he avoided. His apologetic was positive; “I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets,” vs.24. Again, why couldn’t a Presbyterian make this same confession?

The true church of Christ has always had but one mark, or one confession, and that is that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Keith, in his negative, admits this at least twice. “We,” he writes, “require no confession other than one’s faith in Christ.” Why then does Keith introduce confusion here? For, not content with this simple requirement for church membership, he brings in his negatives; one cannot be in a denomination, cannot have a creed, cannot be baptized by sprinkling or pouring. What has happened to his claim that the church has but one confession?

How does an unlearned person find the church according to Keith? We say that a confession of faith in Christ places one in the body of Christ. With Keith's position, the unlearned man can only hope that someone will lend him dictionaries and lexicons that he may find his way.

There may be true Christian unity even where there are doctrinal differences. The Jews in Christ's day insisted that their understanding of the *unity* in the Godhead was the only acceptable interpretation. They were wrong. Similarly, Keith believes that his understanding of what constitutes Christian *unity* should trump all other interpretations. Like the frog in the fable that thought that the ditch he lived in to be all the world, Keith thinks his church to be all the church. Centuries ago Richard Hooker wrote that the confession of Christ is what separated the church from infidels and from Jews. To add anything else to this "is the error of all Popish definitions that hitherto have been brought. They define not the church by that which the church essentially is, but by that wherein they imagine their own more perfect than the rest are."

That there be no divisions, and that we all speak the same thing, is certainly the ideal, and that for which we ought to strive. That it will happen this side of heaven, in a sinful world, and with so many different understandings of Scripture is doubtful. For instance, Keith accuses me of twisting 1 Corinthians 3:11-12 although I dare say that the majority of commentaries favor my position on that text.

Is Keith a sectarian? He invites me to prove it. I know that he disavows any historic connection with Alexander Campbell. In our debate on the mode of baptism Keith protested "I am a Christian, not a Campbellite." Yet his views on baptism, the church, and Christian unity are identical with Campbell's **Christian System**. If then, it can be demonstrated that Campbell was divisive, it would follow that Keith also is divisive. Campbell's system, and Keith's, are identical in three things: in the stated objective, in the means employed to achieve that objective, and in the unintended result. The objective was to effect a return to apostolic Christianity, based upon the Scripture alone, without creeds, or denominations. The means employed included a denunciation of all sects, and creeds, and an insistence in immersion as the only valid baptism. These means cannot succeed because professing Christians are going to disagree one with another. And, as Dabney shows, a creed "is the only possible expedient, in the absence of an inspired living umpire ... by which fidelity to truth can be reconciled with cooperation." The result in Campbell's case, writes Dabney, was that "The body he has formed possesses every sectarian feature in its most exasperated form. The campbellite is usually known as an ecclesiastical Ishmaelite. Their leader was more divisive, more denunciatory, more exclusive, than any of the sects he reviled. He excluded more Christians from Christ's church than are excluded by all the avowed creed-holding churches in America, Christians who according to their professions were already upon his platform of faith, baptism, and obedience. And the societies founded by him, while independent in church government, hardened at once into a religious denomination of rigid bigotry."

The Reformed churches are not divisive. They require no more than what all Christians require. Having made the same profession of faith in Christ, they are all joined by one spirit to the Lord.

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**Affirmative**  
**Keith Sharp**

This is the thirteenth debate between my Presbyterian friend David N. Landon and me. This debate pertains to the nature of the church. I affirm **It is a sin to belong to a sect or denomination.**

**Definitions**

“Sin” is a violation of the law of God (1 John 3:4).

The word translated “sect” in the New Testament primarily means *a choosing, choice...; then, that which is chosen, and hence, an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects....* (Vine. 2:217).

Everyone has opinions, things he thinks are true but cannot prove by the Bible. If he treats his opinions as if they were divine revelation, by teaching them as divine truth and/or insisting that others follow them, he becomes an “heretic” (Titus 3:10-11, **King James Version**) or “divisive man” (**New King James Version**), and must be rejected (Ibid). The Greek term rendered “sect” is also translated “factions” (1 Corinthians 11:19) and “heresies” (Galatians 5:20; 2 Peter 2:1). A “sect” is “a division or group based upon different doctrinal opinions and/or loyalties” (Louw & Nida. 11.50).

The term “denomination” is not found in the Bible. A “denomination” is a “large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy” (**American Heritage**). Thus, the three characteristics common to religious denominations are an uninspired creed, a sectarian name, and an organization above the level of the local church tying congregations together.

**One Church as Good as Another?**

In our “I’m OK, you’re OK” society, most people accept the opinion, “One church is as good as another.” This statement demonstrates ignorance of the church as revealed in the New Testament.

The term “church” is used in the New Testament of the universal body of the saved (Matthew 16:18; Hebrews 12:22-24), of a local group of Christians (1 Corinthians 1:2), and of the public worship assembly of a local group of believers (1 Corinthians 11:18). It is never used in the New Testament of a group larger than the local church and smaller than the universal body of the saved. There is absolutely no scriptural authority to divide the body of Christ into denominations.

Jesus built His church (Matthew 16:18). The church Jesus built is simply **the assembly of people called out of the world into fellowship with God.** The church is the spiritual assembly

of God's people (Hebrews 12:22-24), composed of those who have responded to the gospel call (2 Thessalonians 2:14), have forsaken the fellowship of the world and its sin (2 Corinthians 6:17-18), and have been brought into fellowship with God (1 John 1:3,7).

To say that any denomination begun by men is as good as the church Jesus built is to put a human institution on par with the divine relationship. No denomination is as good as the church begun by the Lord if for no other reason than the fact they are human and it is divine.

### **Body of Christ**

The church in its relationship to Christ is "His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22-23). The church is the spiritual body of Christ, and Christ is the spiritual Head of His church. Just as Christ is the Christian's fullness, the One who supplies all our spiritual needs (Colossians 1:19; 2:8-10), even so the church is the fullness of Christ. Anyone in Christ is in His church, and anyone in His church is in Christ. Any blessing in Christ, and in Him are all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3), is in His church. One can no more be in Christ and not be in His church than he could be in a bathtub full of water and not be in the water.

Paul affirms, "There is one body" (Ephesians 4:4). If there is one body, and the body is the church, how many churches does Jesus have?

Since the church is the fullness of Christ, and salvation is in Him (2 Timothy 2:10), all saved people are members of this church. This doesn't mean the church saves us. Christ is the only Savior (John 14:6), and He saves his church (Ephesians 5:23). The church is the saved, not the savior.

One cannot join the church Jesus built. Rather, the Lord adds the saved to the church (Acts 2:47).

Denominations have man made membership requirements, and men determine who may join. But the church Jesus built is composed of all who have accepted Christ by the obedience of faith and have been saved by the gospel (Romans 1:5,16-17). No man or group of men determine its membership. There is no official roll of members on earth. The Lord adds people to His church, the body of the saved, as He saves them, and their names are enrolled in heaven (Luke 10:20; Revelation 20:15).

### **Sin to Belong to a Sect**

The sects of the Jews believed and taught doctrines at variance with each other and wore party names as an indication of sectarian loyalty (Acts 23:6-8). The Jews even considered Christians to be a sect of Judaism (Acts 24:5; 28:22) and derisively called them "Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). Paul implied Christians were not a sect (Acts 24:14).

The brethren at Corinth were dividing into factions (1 Corinthians 1:11). This was a reflection of carnality (1 Corinthians 3:1-3), which will cause one to be lost (Romans 8:5-8).

They had sectarian loyalties demonstrated by their sectarian names (1 Corinthians 1:12). The apostle rebuked their sectarianism in a series of rhetorical questions (1 Corinthians 1:13). He urged them:

*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 Corinthians 1:10).*

All who claim to follow Christ must speak the same thing, have no divisions, and have the same mind and judgment.

Furthermore, we must not be guilty of sectarian loyalty as reflected by party names (1 Corinthians 1:12). As individuals, we may be called “believers” (Acts 5:14), “disciples” (Acts 9:1), “saints” (Acts 9:13), “Christians” (Acts 11:25-26) or “members” (1 Corinthians 11:27). As a group, whether local or universal, we may be called “the church” (Acts 8:3), “the Way” (Acts 9:1-2), the church of Christ (Romans 16:16), “the church of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2), “the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:14-15), or “the general assembly and church of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:22-24, plural, indicating membership). All these names are used to include all scripturally baptized believers in their relationship to Christ and God.

### **Sin to Belong to a Denomination**

The church the Lord built has no earthly head or headquarters and no organization other than independent, local churches (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 5:1-2). Christ is its only Head (Colossians 1:18). Since He is in heaven, His church has neither head nor headquarters on this earth. It is not a denomination.

Every metaphor used in the New Testament of the church demonstrates it is composed of individual Christians rather than denominations. As to its government, the church is the kingdom of Christ (Matthew 16:18-19), and it is composed of citizens (Ephesians 2:19). It is the fold of God made up of sheep (John 10:16). Christ is the vine, and disciples are the branches (John 15:5-6). The church is the body of Christ, and Christians are its members (1 Corinthians 12:27). It is the temple of God (Ephesians 2:21), and disciples of Christ are the stones of which it is built (1 Peter 2:5). The church is the family of God (Ephesians 3:14-15), and the saved are His children (Galatians 3:26).

In fact, denominations are forbidden in principle. The closest biblical entity to denominations is a Jewish sect, and sectarianism is a sin (Galatians 5:19-21; Titus 3:10-11). The church of the Lord is not composed of denominations.

God wants believers in His Son to be one. Jesus prayed for the unity of those who believe in Him (John 17:20-21). Paul revealed to us a practical plan whereby we may “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-6). Central to this unity is oneness of faith (1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:4,11-16; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11; Jude 3). Sectarianism and denominationalism are the antitheses of the unity of the Spirit.

## Conclusion

I plead with people to avoid all sects and denominations. I simply implore all people to believe and obey the gospel, that the Lord might add them to His church, the body of the saved. **It is a sin to belong to a sect or denomination.**

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## Negative

**David N. Landon**

As with many of our debates thus far, there is much in this debate that I can agree on with Keith. At the very least we agree that there is but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one church. We *are* in disagreement concerning the nature or content of these articles of faith. I believe that all true Christians will acknowledge that there is but one Lord, and that this Lord has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Keith, I am sure, would agree. But what do we mean next, when we come to speak of *one* faith, of *one* baptism, *and of* one church? Certainly when we say that all true Christians share together in a common faith we need to make a distinction between what is absolutely essential to the faith, and what is non essential. The one is necessary to our very *being* a Christian, the other only to our *well being*. This is not to say that there are things in the Bible that are not important, or necessary for faith and life, for all of Scripture was given for that purpose. But this we say, - that some truths are revealed because necessary, and that others are necessary because revealed. Truths that are revealed because necessary are essential (ordinarily) for salvation. Truths that are necessary because revealed are not essential for salvation, nor are they essential for membership in Christ's church.

Christians also share *one* baptism. But what is essential, and what is non essential, about the sacrament of baptism? Christians have always agreed that water baptism is, in ordinary cases, essential for salvation. But only a very small minority have ever held the position that baptism is absolutely necessary, or that it is essential for it to be performed by one mode only.

There is only *one* church then. But where is it? The Protestant claim that we too are part of the true church is dismissed by Roman Catholic theologians who point out that the many contradictions in doctrine found in our various denominations prove that we cannot be one body. Rome's advantage is that she has not only a rule of faith, the Bible, but a living interpreter of that rule in the pope. Keith's position is not unlike that of the Roman Catholic. Like Rome, Keith believes that the church is essentially visible, that it must be called by a certain name, and that any who are found outside this church, as defined by him, cannot be saved. "Sectarianism," Keith once wrote in an essay entitled *Four Views Of The Church*, "is a sin which will cost one his soul." The following answer to his affirmative will show this to be an untenable position.

I have no argument with Keith's remarks under the heading *Definitions*, other than to suggest that his definition of a divisive man may not be adequate. Keith and I use the same rule of faith. In previous debates we have often quoted the same verses in defense of a position. (In our debate on the purpose of baptism I showed how nine out of eleven of Keith's proof texts were quoted by our confession in support of the Presbyterian position.) What is the answer to the problem? Rome continues to hold Protestantism up to ridicule on just this point. One answer is to insist that our view alone is the correct one, and so become a divisive man according to Keith's definition. The other is to recognize that all protestants, and indeed all Christians agree in one thing; we believe implicitly in all that scripture contains. Although there are divisions, any comparison of the various Protestant confessions will show that there is unity in things essential. We might also say, that while all factions are divisions, not all divisions are factions. Scripture shows that in some cases divisions are necessary, 1 Corinthians 11: 19.

No Presbyterian would ever say that one church is as good as another. There are varying degrees of purity among churches. In this sense it may be a sin to be in a particular denomination that has become corrupt, and refuses to be reformed. The word church can refer to a group larger than one particular congregation as Acts 8:1 shows. The word church there is singular, and yet refers to a number of congregations, (11 :22 also).

The church is the body of Christ, and Jesus has only one body. But only Roman Catholics (and Keith) would say that that body is defined by a visible church only. The church has never been without a tradition that has held that the body of Christ is essentially spiritual, and invisible. And no one believes more strongly than a Calvinist that it is Christ indeed who places the believer into the body.

I am glad that Keith admits that it is possible to be mistaken in charging a body of believers of being a sect. He should also note that among the sectarians at Corinth was a group who said "we are of Christ," 1 Corinthians 1: 12. These, like Keith, believed having the correct name to be one of the marks of the church. Having a biblical name means nothing if the gospel is absent. The early church fathers realized that heretics were also using the name Catholic. Cyprian wrote that "The Devil has invented a new fraud, that under a false title of the Christian name he may deceive the unwary," (quoted in Turretin). Keith adds to the necessity of a correct name, the further necessity of being "scripturally baptized." As if determining the identity of the true church was not difficult enough, Keith adds the further difficulty of determining what constitutes valid baptism, and excludes from the church all who have not been immersed; by far the greatest number of professing Christians.

Keith concludes his remarks with a plea to all people to "believe and obey the gospel." Which gospel? The gospel of free will, or of free grace? I would find myself between the horns of a dilemma if I should heed Keith's counsel to leave my denomination, for when I enter *church of Christ* on the internet I see that I have only two choices. All the entries are either denominations, or are groups that trace their roots back to Thomas and Alexander Campbell. If then, I am in a denomination, I sin according to Keith. If I become a Campbellite, I sin against my conscience, confessing a free will gospel I cannot believe.

Keith is not the first to say that the church is comprised of all who believe in the Lord, and are scripturally baptized. I say the same, howbeit in a different, and, I trust, biblical sense. But even Rome no longer holds what Keith maintains, that those in denominations are lost. At one time they did, and it is interesting to read some of the exchange between Protestants and Romanists during that period. Dean Sherlock wrote the following on the distinction between

unity and uniformity, "Schism and separation is a breach of the external and visible communion of the Church, not of the essential unity of it; the Church is one Church still, whatever breaches and schisms there are in its external communion; for the unity of the Catholic Church consists in the union of the whole to Christ, which makes them one body in him; not in the external union of the several parts of it to each other. And therefore it is not a separation from one another, but only a separation from Christ, which is a separation from the Catholic Church," (quoted in Goode's *Rule of Faith*). This has always been the Protestant answer to Rome, that the true unity of the church lies not in the union of individual Christians to each other (although this is important) but in the union of all the members to Christ.

William Goode concludes his section on church unity with these words, "There may be one Lord, one faith, one baptism, to those who are not in external communion with one another. There may be, therefore, a spiritual relationship, where, through the infirmity of the flesh, that relationship is not recognized, and does not issue in communion; just as men may be members of one family, who do not live together in friendly communion as of one family." Each man says Goode, "must act according to the light which he possesses. And though a man may err in his decision, and thereby even disturb the peace of the Church, and bring much evil upon himself and others, and perhaps expose himself to punishment, I should be loath to maintain, that if he has acted with sincerity, and holds the fundamentals of the faith, and regulates his life correspondently, he is not a member of Christ's visible Church; and one, moreover, who is upon the whole in a state of salvation."

We conclude that there are justified Christians in many different denominations

### **Work Cited**

Goode, William, **The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice.**

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### **Response Keith Sharp**

The statement, "some truths are revealed because necessary, and that others are necessary because revealed," is double talk. Are they necessary or unnecessary? How do you know? The apostle Peter warned about "false teachers... who will secretly bring in destructive heresies" (2 Peter 2:1-3). Anyone who divides the church over his opinions (Titus 3:9-11; 1 Peter 4:11) or by false doctrine (Romans 16:17-18), teaches false doctrine which leads to sin (2 Peter 2:18), or teaches false doctrine which causes people to deny the faith (2 Timothy 2:16-18) is a false teacher (2 Peter 2:1). The faithful must "note... and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

How can we "share *one* baptism" when we disagree as to its subject, mode, and purpose? Furthermore, the Romish concept of sacraments is unscriptural and anti-scriptural. How can my friend agree baptism "is, in ordinary cases, essential to salvation," when he denied in debate its purpose is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38)?

The claim that my position on the church is like Catholicism is absurd. I do not believe the church is essentially visible or that it must have one specific name. It must have a scriptural, nonsectarian name (Colossians 3:17; Galatians 5:19-21). We agree that the church of the New Testament is the universal body of the saved (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23). I simply deny that

denominations and sects are any part of it.

In every generation only a small minority are saved (Matthew 7:13-14).

“Factions, divisions,” and “parties” (Galatians 5:20, **American Standard Version**) are works of the flesh that will prevent one from inheriting the kingdom of God (verse 21). That is the essence of sectarianism and denominationalism. In fact, the word “heresies” (Galatians 5:20, **KJV, NKJV**) is the same word translated “sect” in other passages (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5,14; 26:5; 28:22).

We do not “use the same rule of faith.” The web site of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church states:

*Our church holds to the historic Christian faith, expressed in the Early Church in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and, following the Protestant Reformation, in the Westminster Confession of Faith & Catechisms.*

The local church of which I am a member accepts but one official statement of faith, the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 4:11; 2 John verse 9).

If we both “believe implicitly in all that scripture contains,” why does my friend identify himself as a Presbyterian, and why is the church of which he is a member called “The Reformed Presbyterian Church”? Where can I find the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the Bible? Where does the Bible tell one how to become a member of that denomination? The Bible only and only the Bible makes Christians only, and it only makes Christians (Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16). The Word of God is the seed which produces Christians (Luke 8:11). You can’t become a member of a denomination without mixing human creed with the divine seed.

My friend says the Protestants have “unity in things essential.” What about the “one hope” (Ephesians 4:4)? Reformed Presbyterians and I agree it is heaven (1 Peter 1:3-5), but most Baptists and Pentecostals have a second, vain hope, a thousand year, material kingdom on this earth. I have already demonstrated we don’t agree on the “one faith” (Ephesians 4:5), and Presbyterians and Baptists certainly don’t agree on the “one baptism” (Ibid). The answer is not a pope to lord it over us. The answer is to put aside all human creeds and in simple, child like faith just follow the plain teaching of Scripture. If it is not plainly taught in scripture, don’t teach it (1 Peter 4:11).

Divisions are necessary to show who is approved and who is disapproved (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Dave assumes without proof there was more than one congregation in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:22). Even if there were, they were not divided into sects or denominations. The Scriptures never use the word “church” to mean a sect or denomination.

If I insisted “church of Christ” is the only scriptural name, I would be like the factionists in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12), but I don’t do so. However, “church of Christ” is a scriptural, nonsectarian name for a local body of believers (Romans 16:16), whereas “Reformed Presbyterian Church” is both unscriptural and sectarian.

I have demonstrated in an earlier debate that free will and free grace are compatible.

If I were a “Campbellite,” a pejorative term used against Christians in America, I would be a member of the Christian Church. Alexander Campbell was the first president of the American Christian Missionary Society, which became the organizational basis for the Christian Church. My dear friend is so steeped in denominationalism he denies the very possibility of just being a Christian as were first century disciples.

The union of all the members to Christ (1 John 1:3) will result in the union of all the

members to one another (1 John 1:7). There must be unity upon “the faith” (Ephesians 4:13), the one body of doctrine “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude verse 3). One cannot accept Christ without accepting His Word (John 12:48).

I’m not very interested in whom Goode judged to be a Christian, and I will let Christ judge who will be saved eternally (James 4:12), but sectarianism is a damnable sin (Galatians 5:19-21), and sects and denominations are its products.

When King Agrippa, perhaps sneeringly, replied to Paul the prisoner, “You almost persuade me to be a Christian,” the beloved apostle answered, “I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:28-29). My friend, “I would to God that not only you, but also all who” read this debate “might become both almost and altogether such as I am,” simply a Christian and nothing else.

**It is a sin to belong to a sect or denomination.**

#### **Work Cited**

[http://www.syracuserpc.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26](http://www.syracuserpc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26).