

Faith Pulpit

What's In a Name?

As new local churches are begun, there is a growing tendency to name them without a prominent denominational label, even when there may be some actual tie to a denominational fellowship or the church may be structured according to a certain denominational pattern. Even well established churches have adopted name changes in which a denominational designation has been exchanged for a more non-denominational label such as “Bible church” or “community church.”

Is there any value in keeping the denominational designation in a church's name where it has a place of prominence? Here are some things to consider before excluding it.

1. The Purpose of a Label

A label is intended for purposes of identification. It ideally describes what is inside. The more precise the label, the more one knows about the convictions, priorities, and practices for which the group stands.

This concept can be readily understood by anyone who goes grocery shopping. The various packages and cans on the store shelves each bear an identifying label. The more descriptive the label is, the more one knows about its contents. What chaos there would be if all a label in the grocery store said was “substance” or “food.” Even that might have some value (although greatly limited) but not nearly as much as if it said “corn”—or, better yet, “buttered corn kernels.” Have you ever had your children play near the food storage area only to discover that they have peeled off all of the labels on the cans? Perhaps you have pulled off certain soup can labels to save and done so before you remembered to mark each can. The result is obvious. So it is with church labels.

Someone may say, “but there are liberal churches also with some of the same denominational labels.” This is true enough, and one must exercise discernment and care to find the right kind. Because you

find a can of spoiled food or overly ripe fruit occasionally doesn't mean you stop grocery shopping. It means you learn to be careful in your selection.

2. Loyalty to What a Label Represents

To what extent is there a genuine commitment to what the label represents? Some convictions may not have a high level of commitment to the distinctive convictions of the label, and for that reason, the use or non-use of the label isn't all that significant. For others, the label represents specific truths taught in the Scriptures regarding local church practices which need to be followed today. If the identified: convictions of the label are viewed as expendable, so should be the label. But if what the label represents is of great importance, then one should think twice before abandoning the label.

3. A Label's Magnetic Effect

Like a magnet, a label attracts and repels. It has been suggested that a denominational label artificially repels some people. This may be true in a few cases, but even in these situations there are ways of overcoming this. It may also be true that denominational labels are not important to others, but the use of such a label doesn't necessarily hinder the seeker from attending a church service or function. Just how far should we be willing to go in removing any such supposed barrier? If a person is turned off by religion, would we be willing to drop the word "church" or any words which connote religious ideas—words such as "grace, faith, calvary, Savior, Redeemer?" Someone might suggest substituting less descriptive and less offensive terms such as "salt and light company," and yet our Lord doesn't hesitate to speak of His church. Nor should there be any hesitation on our part to accurately label who we are and the truths which we represent.

The attracting and repelling feature of a label is viewed by this writer as of great value. It is increasingly difficult these days for our churches—even when they carry proper descriptive labels—to bring together people who understand and are completely committed to these great truths represented by the label. Often well-meaning but uninformed people work their way into places of leadership within our churches. Doing away with the label only complicates and compounds this problem. The label, when properly used and understood, will attract those of like precious faith and practice and will direct those who disagree to other places where they can feel more comfortable.

Let us not neglect, disavow, or be ashamed of our great heritage—those who with courage of conviction have stood for Bible principles and practices—even though it meant personal sacrifice and loss. To broaden our label sends the wrong signal and makes consistent New Testament church practice more difficult.

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