

## 721 *Is the church of Christ a Denomination?*

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### *God's Answers to Life's Questions*

Not long ago I heard a news report on television that suggested that the "church of Christ" is denomination. Well, what is a denomination? Is the church of Christ a denomination? Occasionally I hear people speak of the church as if it were. Sometimes people speak about me as a "church-of-Christ" preacher or say that's a "church-of-Christ" building. One man, a member of the church of Christ, recently said, "Open any Yellow Pages, for example, and you will quickly find that we have voluntarily joined the denominational ranks. Along with many other Christian denominations, there we are—for all the world to see—clumped under the heading of "Church of Christ." Well, it's important that we explore the question, "what is a denomination? and are churches of Christ a denomination?"

The church Jesus purchased with his own blood was established on the day of Pentecost shortly after his death in the year 30 AD. When people confessed their faith, repented of their sins, and were baptized, the Lord saved them and added them to His church. The Lord adds every saved person to His church. Now in the beginning, the church had no denominational name. It would be absurd to speak of denominations in the apostolic age, because there simply were none. There was only the church, and the church did not have a title. It was simply, "the church." The word "church" is used in three different ways in the New Testament. It is most often used to refer to the world-wide body or kingdom of Christ, comprised of all who have obeyed the gospel and were added by the Lord to the number of the saved in His body. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Used in this universal sense, the word "church" is always used in the singular. In fact, the Scriptures insist there is only "one body" or one church (Eph. 4:4). Paul said in Ephesians 1:22-23, "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." It would be freakish to have a person with one head and several bodies. No, we understand that a person has one head and one body. So it is with the church—one head, Christ, and one body, the church.

A second use of the term "church" refers to the local congregation, so that the Scripture refers to the "church of God in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2), "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2), or the "seven churches in the province of Asia" (Rev. 1:4). If the Scriptures ever speak of "churches," you can be sure they are not speaking of different denominations but rather different congregations of the universal church. Reading the word "churches," one should not assume that these are different classes or kinds of churches, which have different names, creeds and practices. *The New Testament knows nothing of the denominational concept.* The New Testament knows of only one universal church identifiable in local congregations, so that Paul speaks of the "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16). These local churches were organized with elders, deacons, ministers and members. They all had the same Lord, the same faith, and the same gospel. They were merely in different locations.

A third use of the term "church" refers to the assembly of the local congregation. In 1 Cor. 11:18, Paul spoke about "when you come together as a church." In the New Testament the word "church" never refers to a physical building, though it is commonly used for that today. The church is made up of people. In Acts 8:3, Luke wrote, "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." Paul wasn't tearing down buildings; he was persecuting people. It is the people that make a church. The Bible uses other terms to speak of the "church." The Bible calls the church a temple, a vineyard, a kingdom, a body, and the household or family of God. These word pictures help us to understand the nature of the church. It is holy like a temple.

It is productive like a vineyard. It is subject to its king Jesus. It is the body of Christ today. And it is God's family, filled with love.

Sometimes I hear people speak of "Church of Christ" as if it were an adjective, but this is a very misleading thing to do. To say "Church-of-Christ" buildings, busses, or preachers is to use the phrase wrongly. Members of the church are Christians who attend a church of Christ. We are not "church-of-Christers" or "Church of Christ" Christians. We are simply Christians who are members of the church that belongs to Christ. Some people think that Alexander Campbell started the church of Christ denomination. Some of them called everyone in the church of Christ a "Campbellite." But those of us who are in the church of Christ have no allegiance to Alexander Campbell. We give our souls to Jesus Christ and belong to him and him alone. Alexander Campbell said back in 1826, "I have no idea of adding to the catalogue of new sects. This game has been played too long. I labor to see sectarianism abolished, and all Christians of every name united upon the one foundation on which the apostolic church was founded." Well, in 2007 I don't see any need for starting a new sect either. If the church of Christ ever becomes a denomination, I don't want to be in it. I want to be in the church Jesus built and purchased with his own blood.

The Word of God is the seed of the kingdom, the church (Luke 8:11). The Scriptures tell us what Jesus desires for His people. Nearly two thousand years have passed since the beginning of the church, but we still have the same seed, God's Word. When we plant the same seed they did, we will see the Lord produce the same thing—the church. It will be the same church, unchanged in faith, in doctrine, or organization, or in practice. When churches get away from the New Testament Scriptures and are more concerned with following what is popular in today's world, they are actually deserting the Lord's will. If the church belongs to Jesus (and it does), it cannot belong to us. We have no right to decide its teachings; only the Lord can do that. We have no desire to use any human creed, because we want to stay with the pure seed—God's Word. Jesus warned in Matthew 15:13, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up." I don't want to be part of a religious group that will be uprooted. I want to follow the Lord and His teaching without any compromises. I don't want to add to the Word or take away from the Word. I want to be a Christian, carrying His cross and loving His way.

From a Biblical point of view, however, there are significant differences between the church presented in the New Testament and many popular religious groups today. There are many things you hear about today but cannot read about in the New Testament. Men added these things in later centuries. They are innovations and changes. There simply is no authority for them in the New Testament. Where can you read about a church having a "headquarters" or a "creed book"? Where can you read about a church being a denomination? Where can you read about a church having a "president" or voting on matters of doctrine? These kinds of things are so entrenched in the thinking of today that most people have never asked whether God instructed us in Scripture to have them. For so many years people have understood churches to be denominations that it is difficult for them to understand any other way. The church as God wills it, however, is un-denominational; and the church you find in the New Testament is pre-denominational. The whole concept of denominationalism is foreign to the Scriptures.

It is always helpful to define the words one uses. According to *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, a denomination is defined as: "The organized grouping of congregations with similar names, creeds, beliefs, structures and practices." The word "denomination" refers to "a class, kind or sort designated by a specific name:

ecclesiastically a body or sect holding particular distinctives." That means one distinguishes one denomination from another by its name, its beliefs, and its practices. A denomination by its nature is one of many, a class of things amidst a bigger group. Denominationalism suggests that each denomination is a part or a division of the whole, that all of the denominations put together actually make up the universal church. The assumption is that denominations can be divided by their beliefs and yet still be united. This concept is wholly foreign to the New Testament, since Jesus only built one church. Jesus prayed that His church would remain united; to divide the church up actually violates God's will. "Division" is actually a work of the flesh and condemned in Scripture according to Galatians 5:19-21.

Denominationalism is steeped in the idea of religious pluralism. Pluralism is the belief that there can be differing groups with contradictory names, creeds, organizations, and practices and that these denominations can co-exist with the approval of God. For many people today, it doesn't matter what you believe or practice. But just because it is popular to believe everyone is okay doesn't mean that God approves of every belief or practice. In fact, the Scriptures teach just the opposite. The Lord expects people to believe and practice what He teaches and not be caught up in human traditions. He even distinguishes true disciples from those who think they are disciples. In John 8:31-32 Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." When people get away from God's Word, they lose the blessing of God. Paul spoke very straight to the churches of Galatia, who were getting away from the gospel. He said in Galatians 1:6-9, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." Anyone who changes and distorts the teaching of God endangers his soul.

The obvious consequence of division and pluralism is that people think there is no such thing as heresy or false doctrine. This may be the popular view, but it is not Biblical teaching. Jesus warned us of false teachers in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." They are false prophets because they teach false doctrines that lead people astray. When people depart from the word of God and bring into the church unscriptural practices, they corrupt the church. Paul urged in 2 Timothy 4:2-4, "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." I fear that many today have done just that. They have quit listening to God and begun listening to myths.

Our purpose is not to judge others. God is the One and only judge. It is not "who is right" that matters in this discussion but "what

is right." What does God wish for us to believe and practice so that we might please Him? Well, the answer is in going back to the seed of the kingdom, the Word of God. If we plant the same seed today that the apostles planted, we will have the same church they had. We will have a New Testament church and not be a member of any denomination. We will simply be Christians, loving the Lord and following his teaching. We plead for undenominational Christianity, committed to the teachings of Jesus in the Word of God. Our plea is to go back to the Bible—to do Bible things in Bible ways and to call Bible things by Bible names. My friend, wouldn't you like to be just "a Christian"? Wouldn't you like to serve Him only? Well, you can. There are thousands and thousands of others who want to do the same thing. They attend the church that belongs to Christ. We'd love for you to be part of that blood-bought, New Testament church.

**Are "churches of Christ" a denomination?** No. They seek something quite different. They seek simply to be God's people within the various local congregations. They embrace undenominational Christianity as God's people did in the first century. For expediency sake they identify themselves as "churches of Christ," so that they will know each other from place to place. In a world of multiple Christian groups, brethren must somehow identify each other. Once denominations came into this world, true Christians had to find a way to distinguish themselves from those denominations. Further, in order for any group to own property or to do business, it must have a legal name. It should not seem strange, then, for brethren to use a common name found in the Bible (Rom. 16:16). In every age from the first century to the present, churches have realized they belong to Christ (Matt. 16:18). The phrase, "church of Christ" is a description of who we are and whose we are rather than a denominational title. We are churches who devote ourselves to Christ and follow Christ. Our desire is that all men should understand this and want to be a member of the church for which Jesus died.

While churches of Christ have a common name, common beliefs, common organization, and common practices, we do not regard ourselves as a class or a kind. We cannot associate with or support those who teach or practice false religion, lest we become guilty of their evil deeds. We simply regard ourselves as Christians and our congregations as identifiable representatives of the family of God. One can be a Christian as the New Testament teaches and not be a member of any denomination. One does not have to tolerate the teachings and practices of men. One can simply be child of God in an identifiable, local congregation. Most today wear the name "church of Christ," so that they can honor the Lord with His name and so that they can identify their brethren. We invite you to follow Jesus. The Lord said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). One comes to Jesus by faith. You must believe that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Repent of your sins and turn away from them. Then, be baptized in water so that your sins will be forgiven. When you are baptized the Lord himself will save you and add you to His church. Today is the best day for you to become a Christian.

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