

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

38,000 Denominations? Want To Be Just A Christian?

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.” -- John 17:20-21

The above passage is Jesus’ prayer for unity just before He was arrested and crucified. He wanted those who believe in Him to be one, “that the world may believe.”

And yet today there are an estimated 38,000 different denominations with different names, doctrines, and practices! Is Jesus pleased with this? What’s so bad about denominationalism? Is there an alternative? Is it even possible to be simply a Christian without being a member of a denomination? Let’s start with...

I. WHAT IS A DENOMINATION?

A denomination is a group of churches with a common faith and name, organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy (American Heritage Dictionary).

A. When two or more churches submit to some governing body above the local congregation, they are “denominated” from all other congregations that do not submit to the same authority. This leads to “denominationalism.”

II. WHAT IS DENOMINATIONALISM?

A. American Heritage Dictionary defines it as:

1. “The tendency to separate into religious denominations”
2. “Advocacy of separation into religious denominations”
3. “Strict adherence to a denomination; sectarianism”

B. Webster’s Dictionary defines it as:

1. “Devotion to denominational principles or interests”
2. “Narrow emphasizing of denominational differences:
3. “SECTARIANISM”

C. I will be applying the term to any approval of denominational division which exists today. I know that many people in denominations are not all that devoted to their denominational principles or interests. But by membership in a denomination, by implication they advocate separation into religious denominations.

III. IS DENOMINATIONALISM WRONG?

A. Yes! It is un-scriptural.

B. That is, without any Scriptural support.

C. There is no Biblical basis for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies.

D. No denomination can go to the Bible and say, "See that passage? There is our church (**denomination**)!"

E. In the New Testament, local churches were independent, self-governing. Organization was limited within the local congregation, with elders (also known as pastors, bishops, overseers, presbyters) appointed to oversee only the congregation of which they were members (**Acts 20:17,28; 1 Peter 5:1-2**).

F. The only authority above the local church was Jesus Christ and His apostles. Once the church began the apostles were not replaced after they died. But through their writings (i.e., the New Testament) the authority of Christ and his apostles continue to this day.

G. Individuals, synods, councils, etc., that presume to usurp authority over a group of congregations today do so without scriptural authority!

H. Secondly, it is anti-scriptural! It is not only without scriptural support, religious division is contrary to what the Bible teaches:

1. It is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for unity among His believers (Jn 17:20-23).

2. It is condemned by Paul in his epistle to the church at Corinth (1Co 1:10-13; 3:1-4).

3. It opposes the efforts of Christ on the cross to make out of two (Jew & Gentile) one new man (Ep 2:14-16).

I. Third, it is harmful to the cause of Christ! He knew that unity among believers would help others believe (Jn 17:21). Many unbelievers today point to the divided condition of those professing to follow Jesus as reasons not to believe in God. It has also given rise to cults like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

J. Understanding the harm of denominationalism has led to interesting statements by others:

*"I ask that men make no reference to my name, and call themselves not Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? My doctrine, I am sure, is not mine, nor have I been crucified for anyone. St. Paul, in 1 Cor. 3, would not allow Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I, poor, foul carcass that I am, come to have men give to the children of Christ a name derived from my worthless name? No, no, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names, and call ourselves Christians after Him Whose doctrine we have." - **Martin Luther***

*"Would to God that all party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world, were forgot and that the very name [Methodist] might never be mentioned more, but be buried in eternal oblivion." - **John Wesley***

"I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living! I hope that the Baptist name will soon perish, but let Christ's name last forever." - **Charles Spurgeon**.

1. That day has not come, and denominationalism with its religious division seems stronger than ever. But all is not lost!
2. Throughout the world more and more people are throwing aside their denominational shackles. They are following Jesus Christ in the freedom of gospel liberty that comes by being simply a Christian.
3. What may surprise some, is that they are able to do *so "being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord of one mind" (Philippians 2:2)*.

Conclusion: How is this possible? It is actually quite simple:

1. Obey the gospel of Christ (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38-41,47; Matthew 16:18).
2. Abide in the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42; 1Corinthians 4:17; 14:37).
3. Simply be Christians (Acts 11:26; 1Peter 4:16).
4. Avoid denominational doctrines, names (2 John 9).
5. Find a local church of Christ (Romans 16:16).
6. Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3-6).
7. Have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1-5).

Friend, don't you want to be simply a Christian, a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? Will you heed the prayer of Jesus (John 17:20-23)?