

Lesson 3: *Undenominational Nature of the Church of Christ*

In the first century, not a single denomination existed among Christians anywhere. There existed only the church that Jesus built, with her individual members assembled in local congregations. Denominationalism began to rise during the Protestant Reformation and today there are hundreds of major sects. Because this division is not authorized in the New Testament, it is not a proper state for Christ's church. The church of Christ today endeavors to foster unity under no creed but the Bible and no name but Christ's. The church of Christ does not have a denominational hierarchy and structure; it is not a denomination.

Some of the sectarian persuasion will point to John 15:1-8 to provide prophecy of the division of the church Jesus was building. The Lord refers to himself as the vine and his apostles as the branches who bear him fruit. The sectarian interprets this to mean that the vine is the universal church and the branches are all the denominations. Of course, that does not fit the context in any possible way. To contend that this passage authorizes sectarianism, one must accept the following premises as well:

- ◊ First, since Christ was speaking to the apostles, you have to believe that the twelve would leave Jesus and begin teaching different doctrines as modern denominations do (Gal. 2:6-10).
- ◊ Second, you must believe that Christ was kidding when he said that abiding in him was a condition of faithfulness, for one denomination today will contend that the doctrines of all others contain at least some unscriptural element (John 15:9-11).
- ◊ Third, you must accept the proposition that the bitter divisions that exist between many denominations actually glorify God.
- ◊ Finally, you must accept that Christ's prayer for unity (John 17:17-21) was wishing the impossible.

If denominationalism were authorized and accepted by God, the apostle Paul would have had the perfect opportunity to inaugurate it when the Corinthian church began fracturing. He began his first letter to them instead by upbraiding them for dividing under the banners of various unwilling preachers. Here was the opportunity to sanction the Pauline convention, the Petrine convention and the Apollonian convention. They were dividing as believers divide today into the Baptist convention, the Lutheran denomination or the Presbyterian society. Paul told them this attitude was carnal and that they should "all speak the same thing, and that there should be no divisions among you" (1:10).

Obviously there were no denominations in the first century. If those folks could be saved without a denomination, then why cannot people today? If someone is baptized and makes up his mind to join no denomination but to be joined only to the body of Christ, is this possible? Of course.

In the Bible, the church is known as the church of Christ or the church of God and a few other variants of this same ideal of ownership. Modern denominations are named after doctrines (Presbyterian, Methodism), men (Baptist, Lutheran) and nations (Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox). Believers should be able to agree on the phrase "church of Christ" since God uttered the words first (Rom. 16:16). They will always be divided when some insist on unbiblical names like the others.

In the Bible, the disciples of Christ are only properly known as "Christians" (Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16). There are no Presbyterians or Methodists in the Bible. The name "Christian" glorifies Christ whereas these other names subjugate his name to that of a man or doctrine. Believers can agree on "Christian" but will always be divided when some insist on unscriptural names like the others.

1. In what era did denominationalism take hold? Was it before or after the advent of the Roman Catholic church? Should members of the church of Christ be considered as part of a denomination?

2. Whom does Jesus identify as the vine in John 15:1-8? Whom does he identify as the branches?

3. Give four reasons why this passage does not authorize or predict the division of Christ's church.

4. The seeds of denominationalism were present in first century Corinth and the apostle Paul did what he could to dig them up (1 Cor. 1:10-13). On what basis were they dividing? What does Paul advise instead of sectarianism?

5. Is it possible to be saved from your sins without benefit of a denomination or eventual membership in one? If not, how could the early saints have been saved then? If so, why do we need denominations at all?

6. Martin Luther begged his followers not to call their discipline after him and yet they are known even today as Lutherans. Charles Spurgeon openly wished for a day when there was not a Baptist on the face of the Earth, but only Christians. What is the effect of wearing denominational brands like these?

7. What would be thought of a woman who opted not to be called after her husband but his best man instead? Is this not the case with the Baptist church, since the church is to be the bride of Christ (John 3:25-30)?

8. How does the Holy Spirit refer to the church in these Scriptures?
 - a. 1 Corinthians 1:2:
 - b. Romans 16:16:
 - c. Ephesians 1:22-23:
 - d. 1 Timothy 3:15-16:

9. Give the designation and its meaning by which Christ's followers were called in these scriptures.
 - a. Acts 11:26:
 - b. Acts 26:28:
 - c. Philippians 4:21:
 - d. Acts 16:1:
 - e. Colossians 1:2:
 - f. 1 Peter 4:16: