

A Non-Denominational Church

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Lately, there have been many efforts by various groups to establish non-denominational churches. This, I think, reflects a growing awareness that denominationalism is wrong. Surely, to the fair minded Bible reader, it must be clear that it nowhere approves modern day denominationalism.

The term “denomination” refers to the name which certain people share with others of similar practices and doctrines. Since a name connects people who share certain doctrines, practices or leaders, it is not surprising that Luke records, “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (Acts 11:26). The word “disciple” means a learner, one who has learned and is continuing to learn about Christ. “Called” in this passage means a divine calling, a calling by divine oracle. In civic matters, the word meant to call officially. So the Lord’s disciples had a name by which they were identified with other worshipers of Christ. Peter’s use of the word “Christian” (1 Peter 4:16) leaves no doubt that he accepted and approved it. See also Acts 26:27-30. Here Paul accepts the name “Christian.” But, there were no “kinds” of Christians in the first century. Just Christians.

And local congregations had terms to identify them. 1 Corinthians 1:2 uses the expression “church of God.” Romans 16:16 refers to the “churches of Christ.” And, there were other scriptural expressions by which the early believers were identified.

But, the essence of modern denominationalism is not so much in its names as its organizational structure. A denomination is an organization by which those of similar beliefs are bound together into a functional entity. The form of that organization may vary from one group to another but it is always there. It is this distribution of authority, beginning at the local level and extending through the national and international levels, that really constitutes a denomination. More than a mere “naming”, it is an organized unit, with officers and administrators at every level.

The members of a denomination are not just a group of people whose beliefs are described by a name. They are participants in a structured federation of religious power and politics.

In increasing numbers, people are seeing that no such structure existed in apostolic times. It started with the Roman Catholic Church which by the beginning of the 7th century had extended its power from the local level (Rome) to the international level (catholic=universal).

It had become the world’s first denomination.

There is no such thing in the word of God. That is why we oppose it. There is no organization by

which faithful churches of Christ are bound together. There is no regional organization. Nor is there a state, national, or international organization. We have no delegates or conventions by which our beliefs are deliberated, adopted and rejected. Every local church is free and independent of every other. It has its own presbyters (also called elders, bishops, overseers, pastors, shepherds {1 Peter 5:1, 2} and Acts 20:17,28). It is answerable only to Christ, the Head. It is not a denomination.

The Bible speaks of the universal church which Christ promised to build (Matthew 16:18). That includes all those who have obeyed the gospel (Acts 2:36-47). But, it has no earthly officers through which to function universally. The local church, on the other hand, can and does function through prescribed officers. And, in between the local and universal levels of government, the Bible knows no organization of any kind.

It is understandable, I suppose, that people unacquainted with our beliefs should consider us just another denomination. We are usually identified by the name "church of Christ." But, this is not a sectarian name. We accept this designation because it is scriptural and it has traditionally identified those who advocate a restoration of New Testament Christianity. The name honors Christ, our Savior. It identifies us as His people. Other designations, if they be found in the Scriptures, would also be acceptable. The expression "church of God" for example is Scriptural and therefore acceptable. But, it is confusing because, it most commonly refers to those who teach the unscriptural doctrines of Pentecostalism.

The church of Christ is not a denomination. Local churches of Christ are the units of no super-organizational body whatever. Although some, who are careless or uninformed, may use the expression as a sectarian name, we find no justification in the Bible either for denominations or denominational names.