



UNDENOMINATIONAL CHRISTIANITY

BY
ROBERT G. DOCKERY
THOMAS W. DOCKERY

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Hans Kung, the well-known European theologian, published a book some years ago entitled, *The Church*, in which he lamented the fact that the established church has lost its way, has become bogged down with tradition, has failed to be what Christ intended it to be!

The only remedy, according to Dr. Kung, is to go back to the Scriptures to see what the church was in the beginning and then to recover in the 20th Century the essence of the original church!

Those of us who are members of churches of Christ are committed to the concept of restoring “undenominational” New Testament Christianity. We believe that it is possible to be members of the church of our Lord without holding membership in any denomination. To achieve this goal of restoring undenominational New Testament Christianity, the following things are necessary:

1. The unity of all believers on the basis of the Bible.
2. The rejection of all human creeds and the acceptance of the Bible as the only binding rule of faith and practice.
3. The recognition of Christ as the only Head of the Church.
4. The absolute autonomy and independence of every local congregation.
5. The use of only scriptural names in referring to the people of God.
6. The restoration of the government, worship, and terms of membership of the New Testament church.

Many do not understand this concept of undenominational Christianity. They resent what they regard as the superior and unbending attitude of members of the church of Christ. They see no real difference between the church of Christ and denominations. We need, therefore, to consider the question: "Is the church of Christ just another denomination?" Involved in an answer to that question are the questions: What is denominationalism? Is denominationalism pleasing to God? Can we really be undenominational in today's religious world? In answering these and all other religious questions, let us determine that God's Word will be our only standard and His Will our only concern.

WHAT IS DENOMINATIONALISM?

Webster's New World Dictionary (1968) gives the following definitions:

Denomination: First it is the "act of naming" but in reference to religion it is a "religious sect."

Denominationalism: In regard to religion it is a "division into denominations."

Basically, the word "denomination" is used in religion to mean there are many parts and that it is necessary to give special names in order to distinguish one from another.

WAS THE CHURCH OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DENOMINATIONAL?

Jesus promised to build only one church. In *Matthew 16.18* Jesus promised to build His church. In looking forward to the establishment of His church, He said "...they shall become one flock with one shepherd." (*John 10.16.*)

He prayed that His followers might be united. *“I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.”* (John 17.20,21.)

There was but one church in New Testament times. There was but one body. (Ephesians 4.4.) That body is the church. (Ephesians 1.22,23; 5.23.) Paul asserts that even though there is a multiplicity of members, there is but one body. (1 Corinthians 12.12.)

Division was severely condemned by New Testament writers. Paul strongly condemned divided sects in the church at Corinth. (1 Corinthians 1.10.)

“Sect” comes from the Greek word *haireisis* and is translated as sect, heresy, or faction. It is defined by Abbott-Smith’s Greek Lexicon as “a school, sect, party, faction.” Galatians 5.20 identifies it as a work of the flesh. 2 Peter 2.1 speaks of “sects of perdition.” (ASV.) Romans 16.17,18 urges that those who cause division should be marked and turned away from.

The church is referred to as God’s family. (1 Timothy 3.14,15.) Since God has only one family, and since that family is the church, it is clear that God approved of only one church. A house divided against itself cannot stand. (Mark 3.25.)

HOW DID DENOMINATIONALISM DEVELOP?

Even during New Testament times men were trying to divide the church. “Grievous wolves” would speak “perverse things.” (Acts 20.29,30.) There were those who by “slight of men, in craftiness” sought “wiles of error” (Ephesians 4.14.) “Some perverted the gospel.” (See Galatians 1.6-9.) False prophets brought in “damnable heresies.” (2 Peter 2.1.)

Gradually digression occurred from the New Testament pattern. It occurred in church government with the development of a bureaucratic church hierarchy. It occurred in doctrine as human tradition was exalted over the Word of God. It occurred in worship with the development of an involved liturgy to replace the simple and devout worship of the New Testament church. With the passing centuries the digression became so complete that New Testament Christianity was buried beneath an avalanche of apostasy, worldliness, and corruption.

In the 16th century, the attempt to reform these abuses during the Protestant Reformation led to full-scale denominationalism. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and many others advocated reformation of the Catholic Church and a return to New Testament simplicity. They did not intend to start new sects, but their followers rallied around them instead of Christ. From the 16th Century onward one denomination followed another in rapid succession and Christianity became even more fragmented. By the beginning of the 19th Century Christendom was divided into many different camps of warring sects, names, and creeds. The factionalism among those who claimed to be followers of Christ led many thoughtful people to turn away in disgust. It was out of these conditions that the Restoration Movement in America was born near the beginning of the 19th Century.

This movement had as its aim the restoration of New Testament Christianity in all its original purity and glory. It drew its leaders from many different religious backgrounds. Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Anglicans, and Baptist united in an effort to erase denominational differences in the restoration of New Testament Christianity. Thousands joined the movement toward Undenominational Christianity. They realized that

the answer was not another denomination but the rejection of denominationalism and the return the the church of the Bible.

Today, millions around the world have rejected denominationalism for Undenominational New Testament Christianity.

IS NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY POSSIBLE TODAY?

1. It is possible because the Lord's church was to be eternal. Daniel mentioned a kingdom that would stand forever. (*Daniel 2.44.*) Jesus pointed out that even hades could not prevail against it. (*Matthew 16.18.*) Since this undenominational church was to last forever, it must be possible to be an undenominational Christian *today*.
2. It is possible because we have the same seed which produced undenominational Christianity in the first century. The seed is the Word of God. (*Luke 8.11.*) We are born again by the Word of God. (*1 Peter 1.23.*) Seed always produces the same harvest no matter when or where it is planted.
3. It is possible because unity is commanded. Christ prayed for unity. (*John 17.20,21.*) Paul condemned division in *1 Corinthians 1.10-13*. *Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

4. It is possible when we turn from men and their doctrines, creeds, opinions, and pronouncements and turn to Christ and His Word. The Bible only will make Christians only. We can be in the 20th Century what Christians were in the 1st Century, if we are willing to believe what they believed, obey what they obeyed, and observe what they observed.

WHY IS DENOMINATIONALISM WRONG?

1. Because Jesus gave His life for the unity of God's people. He died to reconcile divided mankind in one body by the cross. (*Read Ephesians 2.13-16.*)
2. Because unity is commanded. God's people are all to speak the same things (*1 Corinthians 1.10*), and to be of one mind. (*1 Peter 3.8.*)
3. Because division causes unbelief. The price of a divided Christendom is an unbelieving world. ***“Religious division has done more to hide Christ from the view of mankind than all the infidelities that have ever been spoken.”***
4. Because division is wasteful. What a tragedy that the poor go unclothed, the hungry unfed, and the lost untaught because millions are spent to build redundant church buildings, to pay competing preachers, and to finance overlapping and unnecessary organizations. Think what might be accomplished — what power we would wield — what a glorious picture we would present to the world — if only we would unite!

CONCLUSION

The New Testament Church was not made up of many denominations. Denominations come into existence when people do more or less than God commands. To do exactly what He commands, no more, and no less, makes

undenominational churches of Christ. The 1st Century church existed without denominations. The work and worship of the church can be performed without them. They are a barrier to unity and a cause of unbelief.

The church is the body of Christ. (*Ephesians 1.22-23.*) There is only one body. (*Ephesians 4.4-6.*) Christ is the Savior of the body. (*Ephesians 5.23.*) We are baptized into Christ at the same time we are baptized into the one body, which is His church. (*Galatians 3.27.*)

WHY NOT BE JUST A CHRISTIAN...?..?



**W
B
S**

Enroll In A FREE Bible Course By Mail

Write: **WORLD BIBLE SCHOOL (GTI)**

P. O. Box 2169

Cedar Park, TX 78630, U.S.A.

CHURCH OF CHRIST

P.O. Box 6017, Accra, Ghana, West Africa

CHURCH OF CHRIST

P.O. Box 176, San Fernando, Trinidad, West Indies

CHURCH OF CHRIST

P. O. Box 614, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, West Africa

CHURCH OF CHRIST

P.O. Box 57, Kakinada A.P., Pin. 533 001, South India

Published by Gospel Tracts International

A Ministry of Baldwin Church of Christ