

UNDENOMINATIONAL CHRISTIANITY

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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 New Testament Church Denominational?

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

He prayed that His followers might be united. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (*John 17.20, 21*)

There was only one church in New Testament times. There was only one body. (*Ephesians 4.4*). That body is the church. (*Ephesians 1.22, 23; 5.23*) Paul asserts that even though there are many members, there is only one body. (*I Corinthians 12.12*)

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

"Sect" comes from the Greek word *hairesis* 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 "destructive heresies." (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. (*I 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. "*Savage wolves*" would "*distort the truth.*" (*Acts 20.29-30*) There were those who by "*cunning and craftiness*" sought "*deceitful scheming*" (*Ephesians 4.14*) "*Some perverted the gospel.*" (*See Galatians 1.6-9*) False prophets brought in "*destructive heresies.*" (*2 Peter 2.1*)

Gradually departure 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 elevated over the Word of God. It occurred in worship with the development of an involved ritual to replace the simple and devout worship of the New Testament church. With the passing centuries the departure 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 the Christian world 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 Baptists 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 to 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. (*I 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 *I 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 reunite 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 (*I Corinthians 1.10*), and to be of one mind. (*I Peter 3.8*)
3. Because division causes unbelief. The price of a divided Christian world is an unbelieving world. In the words of George MacDonald, the famed 19th century Scottish author, "*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?

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