

WHY NOT BE JUST A CHRISTIAN???

By Bobby Dockery

"And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Acts 11.26B

INTRODUCTION

After sixteen years of research, J. Gordon Melton discovered there are more than 1,200 religious sects in America - from major, well-established denominations to bizarre cults specializing in all sorts of strange, outrageous beliefs. In other parts of the world, many hundreds more varieties of religious faith can be identified.

Confronted by so many conflicting religious doctrines, many don't know what to believe. "Which church is right?" they wonder. "Is one just as good as another?" Hearing so many conflicting voices claiming to speak for God, many are turned off Christianity altogether. The power of Christianity and its influence for good in the world have been tragically diminished by the divisions which exist.

The cost of religious division is staggeringly high: It is paid in the duplication of facilities and overlapping of effort; It is paid in the jealousy, suspicion, and competition between rival groups; It is paid in the unbelief of those driven away from Christianity by the scandal of denominational division. This prompts a question which many have probably never seriously considered: *"Why not be just a Christian?"* That is, why not simply be followers of Christ without bogging down in the narrow confines of denominational loyalty? Why not, instead of being hyphenated Christians, be just plain Christians - Christians only?

I believe the time has come to take a long searching look at the division which exists in the religious world and ask, "Why are we so badly divided? Is this really what God wants? Is there any way for all followers of Christ to be united?" I believe the answer is *Undenominational Christianity* - the commitment to be and do, in the 21st Century, just what Christians were and did in the 1st Century! I am convinced that we have come to the point where we can only go forward by going back - back to New Testament Christianity! Thy **not** be just Christians...? ...?

IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES THERE WAS ONLY ONE CHURCH

In describing the New Testament church, Paul wrote, *"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all and in you all." (Ephesians 4.4-6)*. The church was one body! (*Ephesians 1.22-23*). Members of that one body were simply called "Christians" in New Testament times! (*Acts 11.26*). Jesus wanted His people to be united. When He spoke of building His church, He promised only one. (*Matthew 16.18*). He prayed fervently for the unity of His followers: *"That they may be one; even as thou, Father, are in me, and I in thee..." (John 17.21)*. *Ephesians 2.13-16* notes that Christ reconciles men unto God through the one body which is the church! The inspired writers of the New Testament condemned division in the strongest possible terms! Paul said in *I Corinthians 1.10*, *"I beseech you brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."* The Word of God condemns division as a work of the flesh in *Galatians 5.20*, and speaks of the *"sects of perdition"* in *2 Peter 2.1*.

This New Testament concept of the oneness of the church has far-reaching implications:

1. If there is only one church, modern denominationalism stands condemned!
2. If there is only one church, then it is most emphatically NOT true that "one church is as good as another."
3. If there is only one church, then those who had advised that everyone should attend the "church of his choice" are either terribly misguided or deliberately defying the will of God.
4. If there is only one church, then any other religious body is merely a counterfeit of that one true church.
5. If there is only one church, then it is essential for men and women to be members of it!

Without malice or bitterness, and in a spirit of love and concern, we need to stress the Biblical picture of the church as an undenominational, Christ-centered body of men and women fully committed to doing the will of God!

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DENOMINATIONALISM

Present day religious division is rooted in a period in history known as the Great Apostasy or *"falling away."* Even during New Testament times, some were trying to divide the church. The apostles and other inspired writers warned that there were some who would seek to *"pervert the Gospel"* and would bring *"damnable heresies into the church."* (*Galatians 1.6-9; 2 Peter 2.1*). In *2 Thessalonians 2.3*, the apostle Paul warned that after the days of the apostles there would come a departure from New Testament Christianity as men drifted from the truths which they had received. He calls this departure the *"falling away."* The Greek word *apostasia* means a "decline, apostasy." Paul warned the Elders of the church at Ephesus, *"I know that after my departing grievous*

wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them." (Acts 20.20-30).

This period of decline and digression resulted in a gradual loss of the emphasis of the New Testament over a period of two centuries from about 100 A.D. to approximately 300 A.D. During this period, in one area after another, changes were made from the New Testament pattern.

1. Changes occurred in church government as the independent congregations of New Testament times were gradually replaced by a centralized religious hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, and from the 7th century onward, the papacy.
2. Changes occurred in doctrine as human traditions were exalted over the Word of God.
3. Changes took place in worship when the simple and devout services of New Testament times gave way to Involved Liturgy, Mass in Latin, the veneration of Images, and instrumental music.
4. Changes also took place in the terms of membership in the church with the introduction of infant baptism and the adoption of sprinkling and pouring for baptism.

The steps of apostasy can be seen in a series of significant dates:

1. **150 AD:** The rise of the Monarchal Bishop.
2. **251 AD:** The first substitution of pouring for immersion.
3. **405 AD:** The introduction of Images to worship.
4. **607 AD:** The first real pope.
5. **666 AD:** The first instance of instrumental music in the church.
6. **800 AD:** The unification of church and state by Charlemagne.
7. **1054 AD:** The division of the Greek and Roman churches.

With the passing centuries, departure became so complete and the pattern of digression so fixed, that Christianity was buried under a virtual avalanche of apostasy, worldliness, and corruption. In the 16th century, the attempt to correct these abuses led to the Reformation! Men like John Wycliffe, John Huss, and Jerome Savanorola paved the way for this attempt to get back to the New Testament ideal. They gave their lives in order to say, "The church is corrupt." It is truly inspiring to think of these men standing almost alone against the religious and political powers of their day to say, "We've drifted far from the original pattern." In later generations came Martin Luther, who insisted on the right of every individual to read and study the scriptures for himself without going through any ecclesiastical authority. Others like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox followed in his wake and carried on the work of digging the church out from under the centuries of digression and innovation which had swept over it. Still later, John Wesley attempted to breathe the life which characterized New Testament Christianity into the lifeless forms and rituals which men were observing.

These were great men; we owe them a great debt; they set a light shining which helped to dispel a great deal of the darkness of apostasy. But the tragedy is that they did not go far enough! In the end they set loose the seeds of denominationalism. None of them started with the intention of starting new churches. It was **never** their intention to contribute to religious division. Unfortunately, their followers rallied around them instead of focusing on Christ. From their time until now, one denomination has followed another and Christianity has become ever more fragmented. The teachings of Luther were crystallized into the Lutheran Church; the writings of Calvin became the basis for Baptist beliefs; John Knox established the Presbyterian Church; the work of John Wesley led to the formation of the Methodist Church; the Reformation in England produced the Episcopal or Anglican Church. As the years passed, these denominations divided and subdivided until more than 1,200 different churches are to be found in America! The Reformation failed because it stopped too soon!

THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

Near the beginning of the last century, a great movement began to gain momentum in the United States. It was born out of the sense of disillusion and disappointment which had been created by denominationalism with its legacy of factionalism, strife, and bitterness. It sprung from the recognition that the answer was not the creation of another denomination, but *the rejection of denominationalism altogether* in favor of a return to New Testament Christianity! It had, as its aim, the complete restoration of the 1st century church in all its original glory and purity. The movement spread like a prairie fire in the frontier American states of Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

The movement drew its leaders from many different religious backgrounds. Men, who had been Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopalian, united in an attempt to erase denominational differences in the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

One of the first leaders in the movement was James O'Kelly, a Methodist minister in North Carolina who withdrew from the Methodist Church in 1793 to work for New Testament Christianity. Over 5,000 others united with him in pleading for the use of "Christian" as the only name for believers, and the Bible as the only creed for the church.

Up in New England, two Baptist preachers, Elias Smith and Abner Jones, became disturbed over "sectarian names and creeds" and left them to begin working for New Testament Christianity beginning about 1801.

In Kentucky, a Presbyterian preacher, Barton W. Stone, withdrew from the Springfield Presbytery with six other preachers in order to take the Bible as their only creed and to wear the name of Christian only. They published a famous document: *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* in which they said, "We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling...We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better into life having one book, than having many be cast into hell." Soon Barton Stone had influenced thousands to renounce denominational ties to become Christians only.

Two of the most influential leaders in the Restoration Movement were Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son, who migrated to America from Ireland in 1807 and 1809 respectively. The Elder Campbell, a Presbyterian minister, delivered the "Declaration and Address" in 1809 which ended with the famous words: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent." He and his son Alexander withdrew from the Presbyterian Church, first to work within the Baptist Church, and later, after further study, to plead for New Testament Christianity. Alexander Campbell achieved world-wide fame through his writing and debating, and through his influence, tens of thousands joined the movement to become Christians only.

Beginning about the year 1832, these various movements which had arisen without knowledge of one another and were led by men of widely different religious backgrounds, joined forces in preaching for the same great principles which have become known as "The Restoration Plea."

1. They urged the unity of all believers in Christ on the basis of the Bible alone. (*I Peter 4.11*).
2. They urge the rejection of all man-made creeds. Because of the divisive influence of creeds, they determined to take the Bible only as their authority in religion.
3. They urged the use of only scriptural names in referring to God's people. They refused to call themselves hyphenated Christians. They were Christians only, determined to honor only Christ in their name.
4. They urged the recognition of the independence and autonomy of each local congregation of the church.
5. They urged a return to the worship and terms of membership practiced by the New Testament Church. Believing the church of the New Testament provided a continuing pattern for the church, they called for a careful replication of all the particulars of New Testament Christianity. *They were convinced that the only way to go forward was to go backward by restoring the church as it was in the beginning!*

Now this "*Restoration*" movement has gone around the world. In Africa, India, the Philippines, Central and South America, Europe, the Far East and elsewhere, thousands have taken up the cry, "Why not be just Christians...?"

CONCLUSION

Today we continue to cherish the hope that we may be Christians only. In humility, we continue to plead for the unity of a divided religious world on the basis of the Bible alone. In pursuit of that objective, we urge with all the power we possess that men and women of all religious persuasions re-examine their beliefs and practices with the sincere intention of "Speaking where the Bible speaks and remaining silent where the Bible is silent!"

We do not ask that you go back to Alexander Campbell or Barton Stone, or John Wesley, or Martin Luther, or John Calvin, or any other man. We plead instead for all men to go back to Christ! Back to the Bible! Back to the church of the New Testament! It is our prayer that we may be undenominational in our faith and in our practices.

This is the only real hope for unity in our religious world; it has worked before, it can work again! Our only hope is for all believers in Christ to walk faithfully in the Old Paths, following in the steps of the Lord. We can be in the 20th century just what Christians were in the 1st century if we will believe what they believed, obey what they obeyed, and observe what they observed! We must go back in order to go forward! Why not be just a Christian!!!