

Denominationalism and Division: What Did God Want?

Franklin Church of Christ
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AM Worship

Introduction:

You do not have to drive around Franklin very long to find all different kinds of churches. Many of these different churches find their beginnings in the Protestant Reformation. Once Martin Luther broke from the Catholic Church and formed his own church, an avalanche of splits and divisions occurred. As the different churches grew, people in different locations were attracted into the distinct religious movements. Desiring some kind of organization among these different local bodies, a new entity was formed—the Denomination. Since then, denominational Christianity has been the norm. Each of us has grown up surrounded by, if not in, denominationalism. It is so engrained in our society that to even harp upon its divisive nature or to question the validity of denominationalism is looked upon as ridiculous. However, we must not be governed by the traditions of men. We must test every thought, every tradition, every teaching by the word of God. So we must ask, “Is denominationalism in the Bible?”

Discussion:

- I. In the Bible, we find the universal church and local churches.
 - A. In the Bible, we read about Christ’s universal church.
 1. Jesus claimed He was going to establish and build His one church in **Matthew 16:18**. According to **Ephesians 3:8-11**, God had eternally purposed to bring about this church in Christ. Further, we find that its head is Jesus Himself (**Ephesians 1:22-23**). Therefore its headquarters is in heaven at the right hand of God, the Father (**Acts 2:29-33**).
 2. This universal church, headed by Christ alone, is the spiritual assembly in Christ of all who are enrolled in heaven—all the saved, of every place, in every time (**Hebrews 12:22-24**). According to **Acts 2:47**, the Lord adds those who are saved to this church. Thus we conclude that the universal church is a collectivity of individuals, not of churches.
 - B. In the Bible, we read about local churches of Christ.
 1. In **I Corinthians 1:2**, Paul addressed his letter to “the church of God which is at Corinth.” We are certain this cannot refer to the universal church because in **I Corinthians 14:23**, Paul mentioned the whole church coming together in one place. That cannot happen with the universal church—all the saved, everywhere, of every time. He is referring to a localized group of Christians, assembling together with a common purpose, under common leadership, using a common treasury.
 2. More than one of these local groups exist. When Paul wrote the letter to the Galatian Christians he began, “To the churches of Galatia” (**Galatians 1:2**). Galatia was not a city but a large region. If Paul were writing today, he might well write “to the churches of Tennessee.” Within that large region there were multiple churches, to all of which this letter was addressed. Finally, Paul demonstrates the multiplicity of local churches in **Romans 16:16**, saying, “The churches of Christ greet you.”
 3. Finally, note that while the Lord adds members to the universal church when they become saved, Christians become members of local congregations by mutual agreement. In **Acts 9:26-28**, Saul wanted to join himself to the disciples in Jerusalem, but at first they would not agree. Once the matter of his conversion was cleared up, the church in Jerusalem welcomed Saul into their local fellowship.
- II. In the Bible, we do not find denominations.
 - A. First, we must define our terms.
 1. Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary: p. 386, 1989
 - a. **Denomination**: ...3. a religious group, usually including many local churches, often larger than a sect.
 - b. **Denominationalism**: denominational or sectarian spirit or policy; the tendency to divide into denominations or sects.
 2. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 310, 1984, Donald G. Tinder: “Denominations are associations of congregations ... that have a common heritage. Moreover, a true denomination does not claim to be the only legitimate expression of the church.”

3. The Dictionary of Religious Terms, p. 147, 1967, Donald T. Kaufman: "Denominationalism— A term for the continuation of the organizations and emphasis on the divisions and distinctions of Protestantism."

- B. Denominationalism means far more than naming a church. Considering the definitions above, we learn that ...
1. ... a denomination is an organized collectivity of churches.
 2. ... denominations are distinct and divided from one another.
 3. ... a denomination is supposed to be an organized part of the church.
 4. ... a denomination is bigger than a local church, but smaller than the universal church.
- C. We can read the Bible from cover to cover. Not once will we find a mention of any such kind of organization. Never once do we read of congregations banding together to form some midlevel institution for any reason. Further, we never even find any kind of equipping for how to set up such an organization if we wanted one.
- D. The only equipping for organization that we find is on the local congregation level. In **Acts 14:23**, we read of Paul appointing elders in every church. Additionally, in **I Peter 5:1-2**, we see that the role of elder does not extend beyond the flock among which they have been made overseers—the local congregation. In scripture, not once do we see any office established that oversees groups of churches. The closest thing we might find to that is the office of apostles. However, the apostles have died and left God's word behind to govern us. The denomination, an organized group of local churches, is unscriptural. With no equipping to form such organizations, we learn from **II Timothy 3:16-17**, that the denomination is not a good work.

III. In the Bible, we see division condemned.

- A. In **John 17:20-21**, Jesus prayed that everyone who believed on Him through the word of the apostles would be one. In **Ephesians 4:4**, we see that Jesus established only one body and authorized only one faith. In **I Corinthians 1:10-13**, Paul declared that God wanted no divisions within His church. But rather, He wants us all to be one.
- B. While there will be multiple local congregations, God wants unity even between them in the sense that the same thing should be taught in every congregation (**I Corinthians 4:17**).
- C. All congregations should be totally unified within and standing for the same teaching as every other congregation in every other place. However, having said that, God knew it would not be that way. In **I Corinthians 11:18-19**, Paul wrote that he believed there were factions in Corinth, because he knew that they must come to show who was approved. Not everyone who entered Christ would want to do things His way, eventually those who were not approved by God would move out and become separate demonstrating who was approved. For example, note **I John 2:19**, where John described the group we have come to know as the Gnostics leaving the churches to which he wrote. These people left because they were not really of God. They formed their own fellowships because they were not really in fellowship with Christ's church. This same pattern has continued over 2000 years. Just as with the Gnostic teachings, new teachings have continued to arise and new churches have continued to be established. Despite what some say today, this division is not healthy. It is not helpful. Jesus said in **John 17:20-21** that unity is what would be the greatest testimony to the world that Jesus came from God. Denominational division is not simply unauthorized, it is condemned.

IV. What should we do to be what God wants?

- A. If the present state of Christianity continues, there will be numerous who face the dark words of Jesus in **Matthew 7:23**, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." What needs to occur to get things back to the way God wants them?
- B. We must first get rid of the creed books written by men that divide us. Jesus proclaimed, quoting the prophet Isaiah, "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (**Matthew 15:9**). In place of man written creeds, every church should simply use the Bible to direct its affairs and govern its teaching (**II Timothy 3:16-17**).
- C. Secondly, we must get rid of the unscriptural organizations, offices and hierarchies. Instead of having archbishops, cardinals, presidents, judiciary committees, councils and conventions, we must follow the pattern of God, allowing each congregational to be autonomously governed by

its own shepherds submitting to the Chief Shepherd (**I Peter 5:1-4**) and using the Word of God as its by-laws, constitution and creed.

- D. Finally, if the religious world as a whole is unwilling to take these steps, then at least we must be willing to do so, banding together only as a local congregation without organizational ties to any other congregation. We should be able to say that we are a local congregation that is submitting to Christ, self-governed by His organization and teaching as delineated in His word. Neither this congregation nor we individual Christians should have any kind of organizational fellowship with any other congregation. The only other fellowship we enjoy is as individual Christians in fellowship with every other faithful Christian who walks in the light through the blood of Jesus Christ (**I John 1:7**). But notice, that is not a fellowship among churches, but among Christians.
- E. If you are our guest at the Franklin Church of Christ, allow me to assure you that what I have just described is exactly what we already have here. While you may have seen numerous churches with the name “Church of Christ” on the door, we are not denominationally affiliated with any of them. Despite how the phone book may list us, we are non-denominational, in fact, more than that, we are anti-denominational. We are self-governed by our own elders in accord with God’s Word. But each of us as individual Christians views ourselves as in fellowship with every other Christian in the world. We invite you to be a part of this non-denominational Christianity as God intended.

Conclusion:

To cap this off, notice what even Billy Graham admitted about denominationalism in his book, Facing Death and the Life After, in a section entitled “What will not be in heaven.” “In heaven there will be no sectarian worship, no denominational differences, no church creeds.” “God did not invent denominations, man did” (p. 230). According to **Matthew 6:10**, God’s kingdom and obedience within it are to be the same on earth as they are in heaven. Further, according to **Matthew 15:8-9**, when we are submitting to man made teachings, our worship is vain. While Graham makes these statements to get us to overlook denominationalism, in fact, they should cause us rebuke denominationalism. They should cause us to turn away from it in all its forms and simply be what God has asked us to be—Christians, members of His universal body, joining ourselves to a local group of disciples to accomplish His work. We should be nothing more and nothing less than that. So then, our final question is what brings us into fellowship with God and all the saints through the blood of Jesus Christ? **Romans 6:1-4** explains clearly. We enter the death and blood of Christ by being baptized into Christ. As Peter proclaimed in **Acts 2:38** we are to repent and be baptized for the remission of our sins. That is, based on our faith and confession of that faith (**Romans 10:9-10**), we must determine to turn away from our sins and then be immersed in water for the remission of our sins. We are not to be sprinkled or poured. We are not to be immersed as an outward sign of inward grace. We are not to say the sinner’s prayer, pray through to salvation or simply have a moment of faith. Instead, we must be baptized into Christ and into His death. Then and only then will anyone enter into the fellowship of Christ’s church, because at that point God will add you to His church (**Acts 2:47**).