

What Denomination are We?

Franklin Church of Christ
Edwin Crozier
May 7, 2006
AM Worship

Introduction:

Recently, we held a Gospel Meeting. When I would tell others about this event, one of the first questions many would ask is, "What denomination is your church?" Has anyone ever asked you that? How did you respond? Did you say, "Church of Christ"? Common statements I am hearing among Christians are, "I'm Church of Christ" or "He's/she's Church of Christ" or "Church of Christ preacher." It almost hurts my ears when someone will mention being a member of a local church of Christ and someone else will say, "No kidding, I'm Church of Christ too." All of this brings us back around to that original question, "What denomination are we?" How should we answer that question when it is posed?

Discussion:

- I. What is a denomination?
 - A. Before learning what denomination we are, we must first learn what a denomination is.
 1. "Denominations are associations of congregations—Though sometimes it might be said that congregations are localized subdivisions of denominations—that have a common heritage. Moreover, a true denomination does not claim to be the only legitimate expression of the church" (Donald G. Tinder, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, p. 310).
 2. "Denominationalism – A term for the continuation of the organizations and emphasis on the divisions and distinctions of Protestantism" (Donald T. Kauffman, *The Dictionary of Religious Terms*, 1967, p 147).
 - B. Note what a denomination is. A denomination is a collectivity of local churches. It is bigger than a local church. It is smaller than the universal church. Further, a denomination, by its very nature, is an emphasis of division.
- II. What are the earmarks of a denomination?
 - A. Consider one more definition, quoted from *The American Heritage Dictionary, 4th Edition* on Dictionary.com. "A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy."
 - B. Creedal or faith statement in addition to the Bible.
 1. **I Timothy 3:15** says Paul wrote to explain how work ought to be conducted within the church. In **I Corinthians 4:17**, Paul indicated he taught the same thing in every local congregation. The conclusion of this is if every congregation were strictly following just the intent of the Bible, then for the most part we would all look the same. We would worship the same ways. We would work the same ways. We would teach the same message. Yet, look around, there is no unity, there is division. How are the divisions maintained?
 2. It began back in the 4th century when Constantine called the Nicene Council. When they wrote the Nicene Creed to define exactly how Jesus' divinity worked, they took a step away from the Bible. From that point on, it was not enough to agree with inspired scripture. One also had to agree with an approved creedal statement. For many, a creedal statement, determined, written and voted upon by uninspired and ungifted men, holds as much weight as does inspired scripture.
 3. To be a part of the denominational organization, it is not enough to be a Christian. It is not enough to believe and obey the Bible, one must believe the Bible in accord with the denomination's agreed and voted upon doctrine. This leads directly to the next earmark.
 - C. Organization and official hierarchy beyond the local congregation
 1. Most denominations began as a single congregation. That is, a teacher in a certain location began to rebel against a church or denomination and gathered followers. They worked hard. They increased converts to their cause. Then they took their cause to other cities. They developed more followers. There were new local congregations started. This sounds a lot like what happened in **Acts** with the Lord's church, established in Jerusalem and spread throughout Judea, Samaria and even the ends of the earth (cf. **Acts 1:8**).
 2. The denomination is formed when the new congregations look to the first as a mother church. That mother church is either the model for how the satellites work or even a source of the teaching allowed. As more congregations are established under the mother congrega-

tion, an official hierarchy is developed. There will be officers within a local congregation to make sure the members of the church follow the creedal statement. Then there will be officers established over multiple congregations to make sure the congregations stay in check. As the denomination grows, more and more layers will be added. Usually, there is finally established one person or small group of people at the top who govern the entire denomination by their votes and decisions. I would suggest this is the heart of what it means to be a denomination.

D. Name to distinguish from other denominations

1. One of the side points of denominationalism is the naming. In fact, the etymology of “Denomination” is not about hierarchy or faith statements, but about naming. To denominate is to give a name to. Denominations develop a name in order to distinguish themselves from the other denominations. These names are, by nature, divisive. They highlight division. If you think I am mistaken, call a Lutheran a Baptist. Call a Pentecostal a Methodist.
2. Having said that, a relatively recent phenomenon is that of denominational churches not using their denomination’s name. While there are more independent congregations cropping up, many times you will learn churches who use no denominational name are actually members of a denomination and are still being run by the denominational statement of faith. These often go under the name of “Bible Church” or “Community Church.” Some who use this kind of name may well be unaffiliated with a denomination, but many are still part of one denomination or another but think the denominational name hinders their impact. Be careful with this form of deception.

III. What do we find in the Bible?

- A. In the Bible, we do not find any of the issues discussed in the above definitions or earmarks.
- B. We find the universal church, the collection of all Christians, of all locales, of all times. Jesus spoke of this in **Matthew 16:18**. We find local congregations, groups of Christians within a given geographical locale who assemble together regularly under a common oversight—see **Romans 16:16; Galatians 1:2**. Both groups are a collection of individuals. However, we never see an intermediate organization. We can read our New Testaments from cover to cover and not once see an organization of local congregations. Further, we never once see congregations banding together to form any such organization and we never once see any individual Christians as members of some intermediate organization.
- C. In the New Testament, we see no creedal statements besides the scriptures. We have read **II Timothy 3:16-17**. Creedal statements used to govern churches run into one of several possible problems. They either add to the word of God or take away from it (cf. **Deuteronomy 4:2**). Perhaps they are simply the same as the word of God. But if they are, then the creedal statements are unnecessary. Yet some would suggest it takes the word of God and makes it understandable. Are we suggesting God has written his word in such a way that it cannot communicate to the people He loves? We need no creed except God’s revealed word.
- D. In the New Testament, we see no organization beyond the local congregation except Jesus Himself as the head. In **Acts 14:23**, Paul appointed elders in every congregation he had established. In **I Peter 5:1-4**, we learn elders are to shepherd the flock among them. There is not once single indication of any office or official role over more than one congregation. There is never once an indication that overarching councils, judicial procedures, presidents or popes were ever established in the New Testament. Each congregation was autonomously governed. I am not saying the congregations never had anything to do with each other. It simply demonstrates elders in one congregation did not govern in another. There were no arch-bishops, cardinals, delegates, emissaries or presidents. There were no church councils voting on doctrine or work of the churches. It just didn’t happen in the New Testament.
- E. Here is the kicker. Do you know what name we see given to the universal church and/or local congregations in the New Testament? Absolutely none. Never once is the universal church or are local churches named in the New Testament. They are merely described.
 1. In **Romans 16:16**, Paul referred to multiple local congregations as “the churches of Christ.” Why? Not because that was their name, but because that is what they were. They were assemblies of people who belonged to Jesus Christ.

2. In **I Corinthians 1:2** and **II Corinthians 1:1**, Paul called the local congregation to which he was writing, “the church of God which is at Corinth.” Why? Not because that was its name, but because that is what it was; the assembly of people who belonged to God in Corinth.
 3. In **Galatians 1:2**, Paul spoke of “the churches of Galatia.” Why? Because that is what they were, assemblies meeting in various locations in Galatia.
 4. In **I Thessalonians 1:1** and **II Thessalonians 1:1**, Paul wrote “to the church of the Thessalonians.” Why? Because that is what they were, the assembling of Thessalonians.
 5. In **I Thessalonians 2:14**, Paul called the churches of Judea, “the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.” Why? Because that is what they were.
 6. In **I Timothy 3:15**, Paul called it “the church of the living God.”
 7. Interestingly, when Paul wrote to Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae, he wrote “to the saints who are at Ephesus” (**Ephesians 1:1**); “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (**Philippians 1:1**); and “to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae” (**Colossians 1:2**).
 8. In **Acts 24:14**, Paul referred to the church as “the Way.” Luke also used that terminology when he said Felix had “a more exact knowledge about the Way” in **Acts 24:22**. Why? Because that is what the church of our Lord is. It is the Way. That is, it is the group of people who follow, the Way, the truth and the life to the Father who is in heaven (cf. **John 14:6**). It is the group of people who walk on the straight and narrow Way of Jesus Christ (cf. **Matthew 7:13-14**).
 9. Just prior to Paul calling the church “the Way.” Tertullus had referred to the church as “the sect of the Nazarenes” (**Acts 24:5**). Paul commented on use of the term “sect” but didn’t correct the “Nazarene” terminology. Why would they be called “Nazarenes?” The terminology came about the same way “Christian” did. We are called Christians because we follow Christ. They were called “Nazarenes” because Christ was a Nazarene.
 10. Look at the descriptions in **Hebrews 12:22-24**. We come to “the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” In that text, the same church is referred to as “Mt. Zion,” “the city of the living God,” and “the heavenly Jerusalem.”
 11. Most often, it is just referred to as “the church”—e.g. **Acts 11:26**; **I Timothy 3:15**; **Philemon 1:2**, *et al.*
- F. Having said all of this, what do we find in the New Testament? What denominations do we read about? None. After **Acts 2:41**, when about 3000 souls were added to the initial 120 disciples, if you asked them of what denomination they were part, what would they say? They would look at you like you are nuts. They would say they were merely the saved. They were merely part of Christ’s church or kingdom. They were God’s assembly. After **Acts 11:26**, they would have said they were simply Christians. They were not a part of any denomination because no denominations had been developed yet. They were part of local congregations and they were part of the universal body of believers. They were not a part of any intermediate organization. They believed what they were taught by the inspiration of the apostles and accepted no other creeds or teachings (**Galatians 1:6-9**; **II John 9**).

IV. What about us?

- A. I must address two groups as we answer our initial question. What denomination are we?
- B. To our guests: We are no denomination. Not only are we non-denominational, but not finding the authority for such an organization, we are anti-denominational. Though we recognize all other believers who have submitted to Jesus Christ in baptism for the remission of their sins are Christians and though we recognize all other congregations who merely use the Scripture for their authority are legitimate churches, we are not affiliated in any official or hierarchal capacity with any other congregation. We have no outside board, council, conference, president or pope governing us. We have elders within our congregation who shepherd. We have deacons who serve and we have evangelists who preach. But we have no offices or officers beyond our own local fellowship. We are nothing more than a group of Christians from middle Tennessee who have agreed to assemble, worship and work together under the oversight of a common leadership. We have the words “Franklin Church of Christ” on our sign, not because we are the Franklin branch of some organization known as the “Church of Christ,” but because we want you to

know that is what we are: “a group of people belonging to Christ in Franklin.” Our sign could just as easily read “The Franklin Church of God,” “The Way in Franklin,” “The Church on Franklin Road,” “The Saints at Franklin,” “The Lord’s Church,” etc. The fact that other congregations have the words “Church of Christ” on their sign does not say they are like us or in affiliation with us. The fact that they don’t have those words on their sign does not mean they are not like us.

- C. To our members: We must not forget this. We are not a part of “The Church of Christ” Denomination. There are denominations with these kinds of names. There is “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints” denomination and we are not part of that. There is “The United Church of Christ” denomination and we are not part of that. There is the “Church of Christ (Holiness) U.S.A” denomination and we are not part of that. There is the “Church of Christ, Scientist” denomination and we are not part of that. There is the “Church of God” denomination and we are not part of that. There is the “Church of Jesus Christ” denomination and we are not part of that. On I could go. If there is a denomination that calls itself merely “Church of Christ,” we are not part of that either. We are a local body of Christ. Our faithful members are individually a part of the universal church of God. Individually, we are not “Church of Christ,” we are Christians, saints, disciples of Christ. We do not follow “Church of Christ” doctrine. We strive to teach Christ’s doctrine and gospel, using the Bible alone as our source of authority and teaching. We do not enlist the teaching of “Church of Christ” preachers. We seek only those who are preachers of Christ’s gospel using only the Bible as their source book for teaching. Just because someone attends a church with the words “Church of Christ” on the sign does not make them a Christian or in a right relationship with God. It does not make them “one of us.” Just because they attend a church with something different on the sign does not mean they are not “one of us.” We are part of no denomination and are utterly opposed to denominations under any name, creed or conference.
- D. When someone asks us what denomination we are, we should tell them we are part of no denomination. “Oh,” someone will protest, “but Edwin, we know what they mean and they won’t understand. It is just so much easier to say we are ‘Church of Christ.’ They’ll get the idea.” No, they will get the wrong idea. It is true that teaching and furthering error has always been easier than explaining the truth. Instead of abandoning the teachable moments and furthering the widespread misunderstanding among others and even ourselves, let us stand up and speak the truth. Let us forever ban from our vocabulary the phrases, “I’m/he’s/she’s Church of Christ,” “He’s a Church of Christ preacher,” “There were Baptists, Methodists and Church of Christ’s present,” “the other denominations” (a subtle statement that we are one denomination and the rest are the others). These kinds of statements further misunderstanding and error.
- E. Allow me to conclude with a story that saddened my heart. I was talking with a sister in Christ about a local congregation that was abandoning the faith. The congregation was embracing all manner of false teaching, was unifying with churches that do not teach the gospel of Christ as found in the Bible. But what upset this sister most of all was that she happened to look in the phone book and saw that the congregation had their name listed not under the “Church of Christ” heading, but under the “Non-denominational” heading. It is sad that an erring church might teach us something about the nature of local congregations. Further, it is sad that Bible-believing Christians think there is something wrong when a local congregation proclaims it is nondenominational. That is what we are. If it is not what we are, it is what we had better become because that is what we find in the Bible—non-denominational Christianity.

Conclusion:

What is the answer then? What denomination are we? No denomination. We are simply Christians who make up a local church that belongs to Christ. We are simply Christians who have been added to the universal body of the saved. We want to be nothing more and nothing less than just generic, Bible Christians. Would you like to be that? Would you like to be just a Christian, nothing more and nothing less? Leave denominational Christianity behind, simply be part of Christ’s church. Obey Christ’s gospel and God will add you to His church (**Acts 2:47**).