

# *What Do We Mean By* “UNDENOMINATIONAL” NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY?

—By James E. Gibbons

**MANY PEOPLE** are perplexed when we talk about “undenominational” New Testament Christianity. They ask, “What in the world are you talking about? What do you mean by this? You talk about being Christians only and about local, nondenominational, New Testament churches. What do you mean?” The answer is quite simple because “undenominational” New Testament Christianity is all that is found in the New Testament. Denominations, as we know them today, had not come into being yet.

## **Meaning of “Denomination”**

To understand what is meant when we speak of the “undenominational” New Testament church, it is good to know what the word “denomination” means. Denominationalism signifies division and the word “denomination” itself means those who have been denominated, or named, in this division. Religiously speaking, the dictionary says “denomination” means “a particular religious sect or body, with a specific name, organization, etc.” Denominations are characterized by distinctive names and doctrines that separate them from other denominations (and from the Biblical viewpoint, divergent names and doctrines from the New Testament). That’s what makes them denominations.

## **One Lord, One Body—One Church**

Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “I will build *my church*” (one, not many). In John 10:16 he said, “there shall be *one fold* and *one shepherd*.” Then further looking to the future, he prayed, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they *all may be one*; as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be *one* in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” John 17:20,21). Fittingly in the second chapter of Acts, the day the church was started, we read, “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with *one accord* in *one place*” (Acts 2:1). Those who repented and were baptized were “baptized into *one body*” (Acts 2:38-41; 1 Corinthians 12:13), having been “called in *one body*” (Colossians 3:15). There is “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*” (Read all of Ephesians 4:4-6). In this same epistle, Paul wrote that Christ had broken down the wall of partition that divided humanity, “that he might reconcile both [all] unto God in *one body* by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Ephesians 2:14-16; Galatians 3:28).

## **Denominationalism is Wrong**

Therefore, it is very apparent that denominationalism, which means division, is decidedly wrong. In fact, it is strongly condemned in the New Testament. "Heresies" (KJV), which involves the opinions of men and division, is listed as a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 and the 3rd chapter of 1 Corinthians. Sectarianism was raising its ugly head as the Corinthians were saying, "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ." Paul raked them over the coals and said, "For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?" Paul would even tell the Christians at Rome to "mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Romans 16:17). He also said, "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject" (Titus 3:10). Yes, in that Scripture in Ephesians (4:3-6) that emphasizes the oneness of God's plan, he starts out by saying that we should endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Even in the Old Testament, Psalms 133:1 asserts, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

## **Abiding by the Great Commission**

The Great Commission stands as the fountainhead of authority and charter behind all Christian endeavor. It reads, beginning with Matthew 28:18 and going through verse 20, "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (NKJV). The resurrected Christ spoke with all authority in giving this commission. Its details were to be carried out. They were to (1) "go," (2) "make disciples of all nations," (3) "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and (4) "teaching them to observe all things" that he had commanded. The promise of Christ being with them was conditional that they abide by the particulars of the commission. The commission went beyond the immediate disciples in its execution; it was to be carried out unto the end of the "world" (age). To accomplish what the Lord wants accomplished and to be acceptable with him, we must abide by its terms today. Otherwise we are not included in the promise of him being with us (and denominationalism is not in his scheme of things).

## **Called into One Body (No Authority for Denominations)**

As we brought out from the New Testament Scriptures, the Lord initially established one church. When the Great Commission is faithfully carried out, those who accept Christ in accordance with the Scriptures are

made a part of this one church. One doesn't join it like a denomination is joined. On the day the church was started, in Acts 2, those who repented and were baptized [immersed] for the remission of their sins were "added to the church" by the Lord (Acts 2:38-47). No one voted on them. No one joined. It was an act of the Lord that put them in the church. According to 1 Corinthians 12:13, we are "baptized into one body." Colossians 3:15 says that we are "called" into one body. If we are made a part of the "one body," which is the church (Colossians 1:18), and called into one body, why in the world join a denomination and be a part of division that is condemned in the Word of God? Anyone claiming to be working under the Great Commission has no authority to invite you to become a part of a denomination. There is no authority from Christ for even the existence of a denomination. His one church was begun in the first century. When we faithfully preach the gospel, and abide by the Great Commission, the Lord will add those who respond to this one church, the "undenominational" church of the New Testament. Thereby let us simply be a Christian, no more and no less. It is that simple.

### **The Local, Autonomous Church**

Paul admonished the Ephesians to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). He is not talking about a denominational unity, or union. It is a spiritual unity that comes about by being in union with Christ (and with every other person who has been united with him, Galatians 3:27,28). This union basically is to be recognized within the bounds of the local church and therein expressed. A careful study of the New Testament Scriptures will reveal that the early church was made up of local, autonomous congregations. The universal church was not organized. There was no organization of the church beyond the local church. Evangelists were sent out to win souls and thereby start other local, autonomous churches. We are admonished to "love the brotherhood" (1 Peter 2:17), not organize it. Any movement away from the local church, even in attaching national and regional names to gatherings, is in the wrong direction and is to be avoided. It is how denominations exercise and express themselves as denominations. The only headquarters we have is in heaven where our head is, the Lord Jesus Christ. Too many Protestant denominations seem to be headed back more and more to the mother of apostasy. Others seem comfortable in joining them.

### **The Word of God and That Alone**

The Lord prayed for unity for whom? They who believed on him through the word of the apostles (John 17:20). On the day of the church's inception into the world, the multitudes cried out "unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). We know what the answer was (Acts 2:38), and after they were baptized, "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine..." (Acts 2:42). They were "with one accord" together (Acts 2:46). This refrain reoccurs

throughout the book of Acts. In the context of them being in “one accord” we repeatedly read that “the word of God increased” (Acts 6:7), “the word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24), and “so mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (Acts 19:20). Their oneness, and their unity, was all brought about and interwoven with the Word of God. Paul tells us that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Paul also tells us that people will not endure sound doctrine, and, consequently, the injunction is given to “Preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

And so with denominationalism today, another ingredient is added that causes problems, that is the doctrines and traditions of men. (What the Lord thought about such can be seen in Mark 7:1-13). In the protest against Catholicism of yesteryear, reactionary doctrines came into being among Protestants (thus, “faith only”). At the same time, not being all that removed from this system of error, certain practices were brought over and incorporated into doctrines of the new denominations. Through the years other movements have come into being, many times emphasizing one doctrine out of proportion to another. So in time, to hold their adherents together, man-made creeds or creed books in one form or another were brought into being. Many times immature thinking was crystallized in these books to be imposed upon oncoming generations, rather than just following the Bible and that alone. Many today naively don’t even know that denominational creeds influence what denominational preachers preach.

**THEREFORE**, when we talk about simple, “undenominational” New Testament Christianity, we are talking about what we read in the New Testament uncluttered by denominational names and traditions. When we talk about being a part of the one church that was established in the first century, there is nothing self-righteous or arrogant about this. One church is all that the Lord started. As we have noticed, in becoming a Christian we are called into one body. If we choose to belong to a denomination, we have chosen division. We have gone against the Lord’s prayer. We have chosen the narrow, sectarian way of looking at things, limiting ourselves to a denominational outlook, instead of simply being Christians and that alone.

We challenge you to be a New Testament Christian. That is the only kind you find in the New Testament. Why be anything else?



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