

Is Non-Denominational Christianity Possible?

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"That they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me." (**John 17:21**, NASB). In a world where religious division is common and where thousands upon thousands of "Christian" denominations exist, the idea of "Non-denominational Christianity" as Jesus prayed may seem to some people like a "fairy tale," a "pipe dream," or too idealistic. Yet, that doesn't stop people from trying. Many are desperate to escape the problem of denominationalism and work to free them from it. So when a religious group or church claims to be non-denom. (non-denominational) or is working toward that goal, it can be quite appealing in a world of religious confusion.

In America, there is an ever growing popularity of "non-denom." churches. Many "mega-churches" claim to be non-denom. Even many churches that belong to a denomination claim to be non-denom. to sound more attractive to church seekers. Why the trend to be "non-denom."? Certainly the interest by some comes from a sincere desire to be "Christians only." Yet, unfortunately, most people who want to be non-denom. do not understand what that actually means. Many believe that anything different and new is non-denom. which is a huge mistake (**1 Tim. 6:20-21**). Many wrongly suppose that to be non-denom. *all* traditions must be set aside, including the "traditions" or instructions handed down by the apostles of Christ (**2 Thes. 2:15**). Others merely seek to escape the need for authority, doctrine, leadership, and organization, even though the Bible clearly teaches the necessity of all of these (**Col. 1:18; 3:17; Acts 2:42; 1 Pet 5:1-4; Phil 1:1b; Tit 1:5; etc.**). Therefore, the *mere* claim of a church to be non-denom. doesn't make it so.

What is a Denomination?

To understand what it means to be *non*-denominational we need to first understand what it means to be denominational. The word denomination cannot be found in the Scriptures; therefore we look to definitions provided by English dictionaries: "1. A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy. 2. One of a series of kinds, values, or sizes, as in a system of currency or weights: Cash registers have compartments for bills of different denominations...3. A name or designation, especially for a class or group (American Heritage Dictionary); "4. a religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices" (Merriam-Webster Online). From these definitions we learn the following:

A denomination is a group of churches that has chosen a specific name to identify (or designate) themselves to separate themselves from other religious groups. There is nothing wrong with this, *provided the name is a name given by God in the Scriptures (e.g., Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Tim. 3:15)*. Denominations commonly choose non-biblical names (e.g., Lutheran, Academy, Baptist, Community). Of course, a Scriptural name used for the church does not necessarily mean it is a group of **God's** people.

A denomination is a united group of churches (two or more) that follow a *specific* tradition, teaching, and practice. Certainly if there is agreement among churches who walk by the same rule (**Phil. 3:16**), this can be a great encouragement and blessing *if* the standard is the word of God. *Yet, denominations are not based upon the Bible alone.* Man-made creeds, philosophies, opinions, and the like are also included in the shaky foundation of denominationalism (cf. **Mat. 7:26-27**).

A denomination is commonly under the authority of an administrative body in which one church and/or her leaders oversees the work of others. Commonly, a denom. or a group of churches unite to accomplish a work that was meant to be fulfilled only by the local church or individual Christians such as the work of teaching the lost (e.g., **Phil. 4:15-18; Acts 8:4**). As a result, an organization larger than the church is formed, an organization which is not authorized by the New Testament.

Where did all of the Denominations Come from?

One study (e.g., “Center for the Study of Global Christianity”) asserts that there are over 39,000 denominations in the world. Where did they all come from? Not being content with the teachings of Scripture, men went beyond Scripture (**1 Cor. 4:6; 2 John 9**) and they added to and took away from God’s word (**Rev. 22:18-19**). They followed the words of men, instead of the word of God only. No matter how well-intentioned people may be, whenever the wrong “seed” is used, another denomination will be formed. *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.”* (**Gal. 6:7-8**). Only by sowing the right kind of “seed”, the word of God, will Christians be the result (**Lk 8:11; Rom. 1:16**).

Denominations did not come from God. Denominationalism is the world’s concept of Christianity. The world thinks of the church not as Christians only, but as consisting of many denominational churches or “Christian” subgroups. Whenever a denom. is formed, the world views it as an addition to the worldwide church of Christ. All people of every denomination are considered to be “Christians” by the world.

What’s wrong with Denominationalism?

“Denominational Christianity” is foreign and contrary to the New Testament: The practice of forming “Christian denominations” has no approval or authority in the Scriptures. *No where* in the New Testament can you find the existence of a Christian denomination, certainly not with God’s approval! Denominations are sinful, simply by the fact that there is no authority by Christ in His Word for them to exist.

Denominations Promote Division: Denominationalism, by its very nature, leads to division which is clearly condemned in Scripture (**1 Cor. 1:10; Gal. 5:20**). Jesus prayed that His disciples be as one and that such unity be based on the truth or God’s word (**John 17:17, 20-21**). Thus, denominationalism goes *against* the desire of Jesus. Instead

of bringing people together for Bible study and discussion, there is the further advancement of separation and isolation from one another.

Denominations Lead to the Establishment of Man-made Creeds: A creed, sometimes called “a confession” or “rule of faith”, is an authoritative statement in a precise written or oral form that formally and publicly declares the beliefs and doctrines of a religious group. Whenever a denomination is formed, men feel the need to establish an official consensus or agreement in what is believed by their members and thus has turned to creeds. Creeds have been seen as a way to keep people loyal to “the truth”, as a standard to measure “correct doctrine.” This way, it is believed, the world will know exactly what they stand for and will set them apart from other churches.

The problems with creeds are abundant! They are not inspired and thus are imperfect and grossly insufficient, always needing to be revised (**2 Tim. 3:16-17**). Creeds cannot build genuine saving faith, only God’s word can (**Rom. 10:17**). Creeds often add man’s wisdom, traditions, and philosophies (**Col. 2:8**) and also take away from God’s word (**Rev. 22:18-19**). Instead of helping people be God’s special people, man-made creeds have been used as *divisive* instruments, teaching people how others are wrong and how they are right discouraging Bible study with those who differ.

Denominations create followers of men, not Disciples of Christ: The first example of “denominationalism” took place at Corinth. *“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?”* (**1 Cor 1:11-13**). People today often make the same mistake. Commonly, people will say: “I am a Lutheran” or “I am a Baptist” or “I am an Adventist” for example. Whenever loyalty that should belong to Christ is transferred to a man and his teachings, that person has become a follower of man! Denominations promote this type of thinking in which people take their focus off of Christ and onto a man-made creed and organization.

Destroys the Autonomy and Independence of Local Churches: A local church that belongs to a denomination often forfeits her independence and autonomy (the right to self-govern). This is contrary to the New Testament that teaches that each local church must be independent and autonomous from one another. This is not to say they cannot help each other when in need (e.g., Benevolence – **Acts 11:27-30; 2 Cor. 8**). But, there must be an independent rule of the leadership of each congregation. Overseers (i.e., bishops, pastors, elders) are commanded to shepherd *only* the members of a church of which they themselves belong. *“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.”* (**1 Pet. 5:1-3; cf. Acts 20:28**).

Denominations go beyond this limitation, unlawfully extending their rule over many congregations. For example, "Methodists have bishops elected by the Jurisdictional Conference which *oversee work in a broad geographic area.*" (Church History by John D. Cox). This goes beyond the oversight of a single congregation. Not even the apostles ruled in this way! Though the apostles' doctrine is the foundation of the church (**Eph. 2:20**), the apostles understood the importance of church autonomy. "*Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.*" (**2 Cor. 1:24**). Sadly, denominational churches often sacrifice their independence and free will to think and stand on their own for the Lord. They allow one law-making body to "lord it over" their faith! For instance, even many Baptist churches that claim to be independent and autonomous are allowing themselves to be dictated to by the Southern Baptist Convention.

God in His wisdom instructed churches to be autonomous to safeguard each one against widespread corruption. When a local church departs from the faith, this does not have to affect other churches. For example, the church in Thyatira tolerated a false teacher and her doctrine (**Rev. 2:18-29**), yet this particular problem did not advance to the other churches in Asia (**Rev. 2-3**). On the other hand, when the headquarters of a denomination starts to teach error, false doctrine has the potential to "*spread like cancer*" (**2 Tim. 2:17-18**) to every church associated with it.

The One Church of Christ is comprised of Christians, not Churches.

There is Only One Body or Church: Contrary to the Scriptures, denominationalism teaches that there are many bodies or churches that comprise the worldwide church of Christ citing John 15 as proof. Yet, the figure Jesus uses, "the branches," clearly refer to individual disciples, not denominations or churches: "*I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.*" (**John 15:5**).

Christ is the Head over **just one** body / church: "*And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all... There is one body*" (**Eph 1:22-23, 4:4a; cf. Eph 2:16; 3:6; 5:23; Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 20**). There is only "one flock" or "one fold" of God's people along with the "one shepherd" Jesus Christ (**John 10:16; cf. 1 Pet. 2:25**). Jesus promised: "*I will build My church*" - singular, not plural - "churches" (**Mat. 16:18**). There was just one church purposed (**Eph. 3:10-11**), prophesied (**Dan. 2:44-45; Heb. 12:23, 28**), and promised by God (**Mat. 16:18**).

Every Person who is Saved (Becomes a Christian) is Added to His Church (**Acts 2:38, 41**). Not added to a denomination, but added to the Church by the Lord: "*And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*" (**Acts 2:47b**, NKJV). Those who are baptized into Christ, are baptized into His one body, the church (**1 Cor. 12:13; cf. Col. 1:18**). Therefore, those who are baptized into Christ's body belong to the saved people of God (**Heb. 12:23**). Therefore, the worldwide church of Christ is made up of **Christians**, not local churches or denominations.

Local Churches: Individual Christians, who *already* belong to the church, then have a duty to work and worship with other Christians, establishing local churches of Christ. Christians are authorized by God’s word to organize themselves into local “churches of Christ” to collectively worship God and carry out the work of the church. “...*All the churches of Christ greet you* (Rom. 16:16b, NASB e.g. 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2; 1 Thes 1:1).

How Can I Be a Non-Denominational Christian?

Maintain a Non-Denominational Mindset: When a person has responded to the gospel to become a Christian (John 3:16; Rom. 10:9-10; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21), it is very important that he/ she not think of himself as belonging to a denomination nor speak in ways that convey this. Do *you* speak as being member of the Lord’s church or just a member of a local church that happens to have the name “Church of Christ” on the door? God’s people are simply Christians that belong to His church: “*But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God*” (1 Peter 4:16). Refuse to speak in denominational ways of your faith. Avoid labels, partyism, or any hint of a denominational affiliation (1 Cor. 1:10-15).

Lead People to Christ, not to a Local Church: Again, what is your mindset? Do you lead people to Christ or merely to the “local church of *your* choice”? Certainly, there is great value to bringing visitors to worship assemblies or Bible classes so they may hear God’s word taught. But again, what is our number one goal? Christ, not the Body (Church) is the Savior (Eph. 5:23); we are first and foremost leading the lost to Jesus Christ, not to any particular local church. Therefore, even if a person we teach the gospel becomes a Christian and has to attend a different congregation (e.g., in another city), we still rejoice, for a soul for Christ has been saved!

Do not Condone the Error of Denominationalism: In our society, it can be awfully tempting to regard all people of every denomination as Christians in order to “get along.” Yet, we do our neighbor a disservice when we act as if denominational differences do not matter. “*And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them*” (Eph. 5:11). Denominationalism goes against God’s word and thus is a “deed of darkness.” We must not submit to the “age of toleration” and condone error, but instead be helping people out of their error and teaching them the truth.

Don’t Confuse being Non-denominational with Being Interdenominational: Some people believe they can fellowship or be members of many different denominations and show respect of all doctrines, and be non-denominational at the *same* time. Yet, this is not the unity that Jesus prayed for. Instead, this is **interdenominationalism**. Interdenominational churches attempt to unite people of different denominational backgrounds. This is achieved by getting people to make compromises on doctrinal issues that are, in their view, “secondary” to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Unity certainly starts with our belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ which is the foundation of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Yet, the gospel also stands for the truth, which is God’s word (Eph. 1:13; John 17:17). Unity or fellowship with one

another requires that we abide in the teaching of Christ (**2 John 9**), “the law of Christ” (**1 Cor. 9:21**), the truth of God’s word (**Jn 17**). Any compromise of so called “secondary” issues is to belittle the New Covenant that Jesus gave His life for (**Mat. 26:28**).

How Can I tell if a Local Church is truly Non-Denominational?

Look Beyond Autonomy: Just because a church makes the claim to be independent and autonomous from other churches, doesn’t mean that they are *truly* non-denominational. While autonomy is important, this is not the only characteristic to look for in a church. Many religious cults are autonomous, but this does not make them the Lord’s people!

Respects Christ as Their Head: “*And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all*” (**Eph 1:22-23**; cf. **Mat. 28:18**). A church is non-denom. when she respects Jesus as the One with all authority. This means that the church is committed to making sure that every belief and practice they have is authorized by Christ (**Col. 3:17**). Law is not determined by church leaders, but by the word of God. The Lord is our only lawgiver and judge (**James 4:12**). Jesus has the final say on everything (**John 12:48**).

What Does This Local Church Stand for? Being non-denominational does not mean that a church has to compromise the truth. Some seem to think that taking a position on any doctrinal issue automatically makes a church a denomination. Not so! A non-denominational church should and must stand for the truth of God’s word and not settle for anything less! “*But in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, **the pillar and support of the truth***” (**1 Tim 3:15**). Any local church worth consideration should have the courage or “backbone” to proclaim their beliefs as taught by God’s word.

“The Faith” is Taught, not Something “Different”: Beware of churches that boast of being “fun, new, different, and exciting.” Being non-denom. is not merely about being new and different. God’s people will certainly be different or set apart from the world (**2 Cor. 6:14-18**). Yet, what should set a church apart from most all other churches is that the original faith, “the faith” is taught: “*Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for **the faith** which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (**Jude 3**). Does this church preach the *same* message of the first century? (**1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 16:1**).

They Practice New Testament Christianity: “*And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” (**Acts 2:42**) Has the world changed so much that we cannot be New Testament Christians but instead something close but not the same? God’s word “*lives and abides forever*” and applies to us today! (**1 Pet. 1:23-25**). A church that does this will appear strange to the world, yet that is what sets it apart as a **non**-denominational church!

Christians can be non-denominational when they are committed to being *only* Christians who belong to the church which Jesus Christ paid for with His own blood (**Acts 20:28**).