

## THE UNDENOMINATIONAL CHURCH

WHEN THE Jewish leaders in Rome met with the prisoner, Paul, they said they wanted to hear him “for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against” (Acts 28:22). They referred to the church as a “sect.” Sometimes the church of Christ even today is called a sect!

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There were various sects of the Jews’ religion, Pharisees, Sadducees, etc. These were denominations of the Jews, religious groups that had their particular doctrinal inventions and traditions. They had come to accept that some would be of one group (sect) and some of another. Thus, when they had heard about the church of Christ they assumed that this was just another sect of the Jews. In fact, non-members had named the church “the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). This was a prejudicial term probably because many of the Jewish people thought like Nathaniel, “can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1). The Jewish people in Rome in 62 a.d. looked upon the Jesus’ church as a “sect”, just one of the many Jewish denominations.

But Jesus’ apostle Paul did not accept this idea that the church was a sect. Instead he “expounded and testified concerning the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and the prophets, from morning till evening.” (Acts 28:23). Yes, there were Jewish sects like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but the church of Christ was something different. It is the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ is its King. That’s right! Members of the Christ’s church are citizens in His Kingdom. Being in Christ’s church has nothing to do with involvement in a denomination.

In our own times there are many sects. Many people still assume that the church of the Lord is just another denomination among the many. In fact, most people believe that they cannot be a member of the church without being a member of a denomination. But friends, you can be a member of the church of Christ without being a member of a denomination. That claim may sound egotistical, but it is what the Bible teaches. The New Testament only knows about one church, the

church that Jesus said He would build. (Matthew 16:18) That church is called the “body of Christ” over which Jesus is the head. (Col 1:18) It is also called the Kingdom of God, over which Jesus is the king. The church is also called the Bride of Christ, beside which He is the Groom. All of these images are found in the New Testament, but they all are referring to the one group of people who answered the call of the gospel of Christ and became Christians.

**The church of Christ is not a denomination** because it has no earthly denominational founder or originator. Jesus built his church and is continuing to build it one obedient person at a time. Jesus began building His church in the world after He was raised from the dead and after he had ascended to the right hand of God. In fact it was ten days after His ascension that the Lord Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to His apostles, as He had promised. Those apostles of Christ preached the good news of Jesus’ death on behalf of sinners...and they preached what they had seen with their own eyes, the resurrected Jesus. Jesus was raised from the dead on account of our justification. Our faith in Jesus as the Son of God is a justified faith, because we believe the eyewitness testimony of those 12 men, and above 500 more people who saw Jesus alive after his resurrection. The church that belongs to Christ is not a denomination.

Furthermore, the church of Christ is not a denomination because it has no human hierarchy or headquarters. Christ is the head of his church, says Colossians 1:18. Jesus himself said, “All authority has been given to me, in heaven and in earth.” (Matthew 28:20) The New Testament of Jesus Christ provides the instructions of Jesus. Jesus is the Great Shepherd of His people. According to His instructions under-shepherds are to be appointed in every local congregation. These men are called shepherds (pastors). And the early churches of Christ had more than one in every congregation. There is no authority in the New Testament for just ONE pastor. These men are also called elders. A third name for these men is bishop, which means overseer. These are the men who are charged with shepherding the flock of Christ. Each congregation has its own shepherds or elders or bishops. There is no example in the New Testament of one set of elders having authority over many churches. Since there is no authority for a denominational hierarchy in the Lord’s church...hierarchies are inventions of men. They do not come from the Lord, the head of the church. In the New Testament there is no superintendent, no state bishop, nor president, no legislative council, no pope. Although there is

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fellowship and cooperation among and between local churches of Christ, there is no authority over them (except the authority of Heaven, given through the New Testament of Jesus Christ). This is why we say like Isaiah, “To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light.” “ [Isa 8:20 ESV](#)”

The church of Christ is not a denomination because it is a kingdom, not a democracy or a republic. A democracy means government authority resides directly in the will of the people. Therefore, majority rules. A republic means government is by representatives of the people. Therefore, a majority of the representatives rule. The government of the church of Jesus Christ is under the sole authority of King Jesus, because the church is a kingdom. When Jesus announced to his disciples that he would build his church, he immediately spoke of it as the “kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 16:18, 19) Whereas we may rejoice that we have a say in the government of a nation, we must not confuse national politics with the teaching of King Jesus. We are under the rule of Jesus Christ, and we can find His teaching in New Testament of Jesus Christ. The church of Christ is not a denomination because there is no room for man-made regulations.

Furthermore, the church of Christ is not a denomination because it has no denominational creed. Man-made denominations are recognized by their creeds, their manuals of faith. Those books set out the doctrines and practices which are peculiar to the denomination. Churches of Christ study the scriptures in order to learn what to believe and practice. They do not go to a book written by a human being in order to live by its teaching. This does not mean that members of the church have never written books. They have written many. But human documents are only good if they help us understand all that the Bible has to say on a subject that is important to our souls. We may be like the Ethiopian Eunuch who needed someone to guide him in his Bible study. The final authority by which we judge human teaching is the Bible. The Bible is the “supreme court”, the “supreme arbiter” of questions before the church. Among denominations, depending upon their human rules, questions are decided by their creeds or church regulations. The church of Christ is not a denomination because it has no human rulebook.

Furthermore, the church of Christ is not a denomination because its faith and practice are not determined by denominational traditions. When Jesus was

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dealing with the Pharisee denomination of the Jewish people, he showed them the error of their traditions. Jesus said, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!" (Mark 7:9 ESV) The early church at Thessalonica was told to "stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter." (2Thess 2:15 ESV) You see, those Christians were supposed to hold to apostolic traditions, not some man's traditions that were imposed upon the church far later in history. The church of Christ goes all the way back to the first century in order to find the traditions that matter. Man-made traditions accumulated through the centuries should be discarded if they contradict apostolic traditions. Denominational traditions are such things as infant baptism, instrumental music in worship, choirs that keep the congregation entertained, sprinkling for baptism, quarterly communion, holy days and seasons, etc. Some of the traditions of men bind what God has not required, and some of them disregard what God does require. One very significant example is in the apostolic tradition of the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. A preacher of a certain denomination was asked why his church did not practice weekly communion with Christ. His answer was quite revealing: he said, "That is not our tradition." If another preacher was asked, "Why do you sprinkle babies," he would probably answer, "That is our tradition."

The church of Christ is not a denomination because its existence does not depend upon a historical succession. A church of Christ can spring up where it has never been before, simply because the "seed of the kingdom" is planted. When people hear the gospel, believe it, repents of sin, gladly confesses their faith, and is baptized into Christ, they put on Christ, and Christ adds them to His church. Acts 2:47.

You can become a member of the church of Jesus Christ this very day. The church may not meet in your community...you may be the first one there to believe and obey the good news of Jesus Christ. But it can happen because our King has proven it possible. Is the King leading you to obey Him?