

WHAT DENOMINATION?

This, as you know, is a common question. When someone indicates that they are part of a church, inquiring minds want to know “what denomination?” The World Christian Encyclopedia by Barrett, Kurian, Johnson (Oxford Univ Press, 2nd edition, 2001) indicates that there are over 33,000 Christian Denominations in 238 total countries. “What denomination?” is therefore a logical question.

This question, however, would have made no sense during the Age of the Apostles. In those days there were no denominations.

- The church began about A. D. 30 with 120 who met in the upper room (Acts 1:15). That same year on the day of Pentecost 3,000 penitent believers were baptized and added to their number (Acts 2:41).
- Then the Lord added daily to their number (Acts 2:47).
- Shortly afterward the number of men who believed came to about 5,000 (Acts 4:4).
- Then more and more believers were added to their number (Acts 5:14).
- As the number of disciples increased a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).
- When persecution arose those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went (Acts 8:4). There were, of course, many congregations, but no denominations.
- Saul of Tarsus was baptized (Acts 9:18). Cornelius and his household were baptized (Acts 10:47 - 48). Lydia and her household were baptized (Acts 16:14 - 15). The Philippian jailer and his household were baptized (Acts 16:33). These penitent believers did not become a part of any denomination, they were baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27). Paul wrote by inspiration: **“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (1 Cor 12:13)**

The word “denomination” comes from “de” which means “off, or away from”, and “nominate” which means to name. Perhaps the seeds of denominationalism were sown in Corinth around A.D. 57. At this time some “separated” themselves, and “named” themselves after human leaders like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (1 Cor. 1:10 - 17) Paul therefore asked: **“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13)**. Obviously not! Christ is not divided! Disorder and confusion do not come from God (1 Cor. 14:33). It is the plan of God to end all division and confusion by bringing everyone under the headship of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10). Denominations are not the answer, they are the problem!

QUESTION

Is it possible for us to do today what they did then? Can we be Christians today without any denomination affiliation or loyalty? Can a church exist today without being a denomination? Can we just go by the Bible, or do we need denominational creeds and dogmas? In short, is Christianity supposed to be different now, from what it was 2,000 years ago?

It is my personal conviction that salvation and the church ought to be the same now as they were then. Salvation involves a direct and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian Eunuch, for example, was baptized into Christ in a deserted area between Jerusalem and Gaza (Acts 8:26 - 40). Certainly his name must have been added to the Lamb's Book of Life.

The churches of the First Century were not perfect. In fact, most of the Apostolic Letters were written to help them solve their problems. There were, however, no denominations. Though believers met in different cities and different locations there was still only “One Body” (Eph. 4:4).

Someone has observed that the Bible only makes Christians only. The Bible plus a denominational creed, and a denominational name are the stuff that denominations are made of. Those who determine to only take the name of Christ, and to only go by the Bible are certainly not the only Christians, but are hopefully endeavoring to be Christians only.