

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

1. Introduction

A question that comes up when discussing the Gospel and the Lord's church is, "what denomination are you?" When I respond that the Lord's church isn't a denomination that often creates some confusion. In most peoples minds there are two divisions in what is recognized as "Christian" churches. Catholicism and Protestant denominations or denominationalism. Organizations that refer to themselves as non-denominational are frequently viewed with distrust. The idea of a denomination infers a structure and organization that's been well known and long established in Western culture. Independent groups are met with skepticism and may be seen as cult-like or a front for taking advantage of people. Unfortunately that does happen in the world but the idea of being non-denominational isn't always a cover for more questionable ideas and activities.

To understand why the Lord's church isn't a denomination we'll define what a denomination is and review the history of the Christian church to identify their origins. Finally we'll compare the Lord's church with existing denominations to answer this question.

2. What is a denomination (definition)

Webster's 9th Collegiate Dictionary defines a denomination as a "*religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body*. **The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition** adds another element to this definition stating that a denomination is "*united under a common faith and name usually organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy*". To further define these organizations we also see that they are non-Catholic churches. Denominations individually have differences between the various bodies but there are a number of similarities they all share including some form of centralized governing body that determines doctrinal positions, requirements for membership and the practices of the denomination. Their core beliefs are generally based on the Bible and scriptural principles but their individual "faith" reflects the convictions and interpretations of scripture of their founders. Among these organizations we also see varying degrees of **liberalism** or **conservatism**. More liberal groups are characterized as more progressive and willing to adopt changes to their doctrine and practice more readily in response to social issues and trends. Conservative attitudes in these groups are more resistant to change and seek to hold to more traditional beliefs. The traditions in this case many times refers to the preservation of ideas that have prevailed in the group since their founding.

3. Where did Denominations come from

In order to understand the origins of the denominations we'll briefly review the history of the church. Christ stated he would build his church in **Matthew 16.18** and we see that taking place on the day of Pentecost fifty days after Jesus crucifixion in the first century. On the day of Pentecost the remission of sins in the name of Christ was preached for the first time in **Acts 2**.

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

The church experienced a golden period at the beginning but in **Acts 7 & 8** we see opposition and persecution rising. Christians left Jerusalem during this time in **Acts 8.5** spreading the Gospel and establishing congregations of the Lord's people in other areas. Samaria is the first of these recorded in **Acts 8**. **Acts 13-28** records the spread of the Gospel and establishment of a number of congregations in the gentile world largely as a result of the work of the apostle Paul.

Later in the first century we see error being taught and spreading through the church. Paul mentions forged letters claiming to come from him (**2 Thess 2.2**). Paul, refuting false teachings about the second coming of Christ, told the Thessalonians that the Lord would not return until there was a "*falling away*" (**2 Thess 2.3**). In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul details this apostasy and its characteristics.

In the second and third century a number of errors were being accepted as doctrine. During this time the structure of the church was undergoing a change as well. Individual congregations were to be autonomous and overseen by a plurality of bishops, or elders. One of the first changes reduced the number of elders, or bishops in each congregation, and later appointed a single bishop to oversee congregations in a geographical region, establishing the framework for what later became known as a diocese.

In **325 A.D. Constantine**, seeking to harness the relative stability of the Christian church to strengthen the Roman empire, called for the bishops to convene a meeting at Nicea to resolve their internal differences. The result of that meeting was the Nicene Creed, the first extrabiblical statement of belief or doctrine. Although the content of the Nicene Creed isn't necessarily unscriptural it set a precedent for church leaders to meet and issue opinions as doctrine that were adopted for the church. Eventually in **606 A.D. Boniface III** was accepted as the universal bishop over the church, a position we recognize today as that of the Pope.

The church leaders were intertwined with the Roman government being declared as the official religion of the Roman Empire. After the collapse of the Roman empire proper, the Holy Roman empire, around **800 A.D**, consisting of a number of allied states in Europe, continued to control society giving precedence to the Roman church and the office and authority of the Pope.

Unscriptural practices and modifications of doctrine were prevalent in the church as it transformed into the apostate body Paul had spoken of. In **1517**, following representatives of the Pope's arrival in Germany to promote the sale of indulgences, or licenses to sin, for the repair of Saint Peter's Basilica, **Martin Luther**, a German priest, published a list of items he believed should be debated and reformed as being unscriptural. In **1520 Pope Leo X** responded to these and declared that Luther was teaching heretical ideas. In 1521 the Edict of Worms was issued that condemned Luther, who had been excommunicated earlier that same year, and also condemned anyone that supported him calling for such things as the forfeiture of their property.

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

In **1529**, in Spire, Germany, a meeting was convened to discuss the issues presented in the Edict of Worms. During that gathering a number of individuals met secretly and wrote a letter to the gathered council protesting the attitudes toward Luther and those influenced by him. Pope Leo X opposed the idea of open debate in the church with the statement that people should not think for themselves in matters of religion. The letter was publicized and the term Protestor or Protestant was adopted to describe what was happening. Luther hadn't wanted to abandon the teachings of the church. He only called on church leaders to engage in open debate for the sake of reforming the church. As time went on his followers became identified as Reformers and the existence of the formal protest was added to the term so they became known as the ***Protestant Reformers***.

Although Luther hadn't planned on breaking away from the church, and instructed his followers not to call themselves by his name, his excommunication and subsequent actions by the church made this inevitable. In the end the Lutheran church was established and in **1530** published the ***Augsburg Confession*** which detailed 28 articles defining their beliefs.

These events opened the door for others to step forward and promote their views and ideas on Christianity. Over the next 150 years a number of churches were established and while not being directly linked to Luther, or the original protestors, were included under the title of the Protestant Reformation movement. Today these bodies are well known in the world of what is regarded as Christian faith and practice. Their history however is one of conflict between the groups marked by persecution and bloodshed. Most of these conflicts were over interpretations of scripture and conflicting ideas of theologians.

Amidst this religious turmoil in the late **1700's** and early **1800's** individuals in the United States and other countries began to call for unity by abandoning ideas of men that couldn't be supported by scripture. It was proposed that the only source of authority is the New Testament and the work, worship and structure of the church should follow the pattern found in the scriptures. This movement became known as the **Restoration Movement** which unlike Luther's idea of reforming the existing church, was to restore adherence to New Testament doctrine.

4. The Lord's church compared to denomination

The Protestant denominations can be traced to a specific theologian or group and represents their opposition to teachings they disagreed with. The Lord's church on the other hand, and the intent of those involved in the Restoration Movement was to reproduce the church found in the New Testament as it was established by Christ through the apostles on the day of Pentecost. While denominational bodies may have some degree of pride in their history and heritage, the Lord's church seeks to promote the scriptures first and foremost. Differences between what the scriptures teach and what took place in the Protestant Reformation are clear when we consult the Bible.

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

Isaiah and Micah both spoke of the establishment of the “*mountain of the Lord’s house in the top of the mountains*” (**Isa 2.2, Mic 4.1**). The establishment of this new kingdom would begin in Jerusalem (**Isa 2.3**) and be characterized by a new law (**Jer 31.31-33**). Before his departure from the world, Jesus told his disciples to tarry in Jerusalem until they received power from on high (**Lk 24.49, Acts 1.4**).

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after his crucifixion, the apostles received the power of the Holy Spirit and Peter preached the first Gospel sermon. Remission of sins in the name of Christ was preached for the first time as the church has 3000 added on that day (**Acts 2.41**). Persecution arose in **Acts 7-8** forcing disciples to leave Jerusalem. We see a congregation established in city of Samaria as Philip carries the Gospel there preaching Jesus. **Acts 13-28** detail the growth of the church and the preaching in the gentile world primarily by the apostle Paul. Reading the book of Acts and epistles we see that each of these congregations functioned independently as they all taught the same message and practiced the same things.

The scriptures state that Christ is the head of the church (**Col 1.18**). The church teaches and follows the word that was revealed in the first century as we find warnings throughout the New Testament not to deviate from the doctrine that was delivered (**Jude 3**) and other passages. Local congregations were to be organized with elders, or bishops, who are charged with overseeing the flock spiritually. Other roles defined in the New Testament include preachers or evangelists, teachers, deacons and members (**Eph 4.11, Heb 13.7, 1 Pet 5.1-3**). The doctrine and teaching was to follow the same pattern everywhere as Paul states that there is one faith (**Eph 4.4-5**). Warnings also exist in the scriptures not to change the word of God which prohibits doctrinal statements or alterations by humans (**Prov 30.6, Rev 22.18-19**). We’re reminded that all scripture is inspired by God (**2 Tim 3.16**) and as such is not subject to editorial modifications that church leaders may think are necessary. Leaders of the **Protestant Reformation** argued in favor of their opinions about the scriptures while Restoration Movement teachers and preachers realized that God’s word is the only standard for all things in the church and we need to conform to scriptural teaching.

5. Didn’t the apostles and leaders of the church meet to determine doctrine?

Someone might say, “the church leaders met to decide doctrine in the early church” and may point to events recorded in the book of Acts. These can be understood when we take a look at the development of the early church and how things were being revealed.

Christ told his disciples there were more things that he wanted to tell them but they weren’t able to bear them at that time (**John 16.12**). Christ told them that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth (**John 16.13**). The writer of Hebrews reveals that the spread of the Gospel and fading of the Law of Moses took place slowly (**Heb 8.13**). We find that during the growth of the church things were being revealed to the apostles first and then passed on to others. As these events took place there was a need to meet and discuss them to understand what

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

was bring revealed.

Peter was sent to the house of Cornelius to preach the Gospel (**Acts 10**). Prior to leaving for the centurion's house he received a vision and told to rise kill and eat a number of unclean animals. After refusing to do this three times he was told that what God had cleansed should not be considered unclean. At Cornelius house the Holy Spirit fell on the Roman and his household demonstrating that the Gospel was for all nations not just the Jews.

On his return to Jerusalem Peter was called on the carpet so to speak for going to the house of a Gentile (**Acts 11.1-4**). Afer recounting the episode and the appearance of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 11.5-17**) the brethren were satisfied that God had offered salvation to the Gentiles as well (**Acts 11.18**). In this instance the meeting resulted in understanding what God was revealing - not to determine doctrine.

Later as the Gospel spread to more Gentiles there were Jewish converts, Pharisees, who insisted that the Gentiles had to observe certain elements of the Law in order to be acceptable (**Acts 15.1,5**). One of the main points of contention was that of circumcision. A meeting was convened in Jerusalem with the apostles and elders to discuss this (**Acts 15.4-6**). As the conversation developed Peter recounted how he had taken the Gospel to the Gentiles and there was now no difference between them and the Jews explaining what had been revealed through the event (**Acts 15.7-11**). James, referring to the prophecy of Amos (**Amos 9.11**) declared that the gentiles were acceptable and not required to observe the Law of Moses (**Acts 15.13-20**). Letters with this conclusion were then sent to Antioch (**Acts 15.23-31**). This letter didn't represent a doctrinal determination made by the consensus of the group at Jerusalem. It was a declaration of understanding of what was being revealed by God through these events.

In the same manner today we meet to study the scriptures, not to make changes to doctrine but to understand what has been revealed. No human has the ability to change the message of the scriptures. There are warnings about doing this in places such as **Proverbs 30.6** and **Revelation 22.18-19**. The falling away of the church and growth of denominationalism are examples of what happens when humans take it upon themselves to determine what we believe and practice rather than accepting what's been revealed.

6. How can there be consistency without central governing body

A criticism of this type of thinking is that there can't be any consistency between congregations without the oversight of a governing body regulating what's taught and practiced. From a human perspective that makes sense. Disconnected groups scattered around the world will wind up doing things differently without strict guidance and monitoring. That would be true if two things didn't exist. The first is the revealed word of God that in spite of numerous criticisms about translations, teaches a singular doctrine that describes what is to be taught, by whom and how things are to be done. The second thing is that when we become a Christian we

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

express our faith by confessing the name of Christ. That confession is a statement of belief but it's also an endorsement of our acceptance of his authority. Christ's authority lies in the scriptures that were revealed to the writers by the Holy Spirit. The word was given to the Holy Spirit by Christ, and Christ received it from God (**John 17.8**).

An act of faith is to accept the word of God as it stands realizing that we have a need to come to an understanding of what it teaches, not edit the word to fit what we think needs to be done or taught. Christ stated, "*If ye love me, keep my commandments*". (**John 14.15**). He told his disciples "*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...*" (**Matt 28.19-20**). As we read the New Testament we find there are examples of how the church did things and what they taught. When a number of individuals gather to form a local congregation, have accepted the New Testament in faith, and are committed to following this as closely as they can, what takes form is a reproduction of the church of the New Testament.

I have an example that I like to use to illustrate this point. The Nestlé Toll House Chocolate Chip Cookie recipe is I believe the most popular and famous in the world. I used to make those cookies so much that I had the recipe memorized. Now, consider that we issue a challenge where we give say 100 people that recipe and we tell them to make cookies without any deviation from the actual recipe. So they have to use the same ingredients and bake the cookies in the same way. No matter where these folks are when we get them all together and compare the results, we'll find that the cookies are going to be identical. Over the years this is exactly what has taken place at pot-luck dinners, parties and bake sales in a variety of locations. We can also tell when someone didn't stick to the recipe and began to alter the ingredients because the cookies will have a different look, texture or appearance.

We can understand that, but when it comes to the church and being consistent with the instruction manual, or recipe as found in the New Testament some find it hard to believe that different groups can achieve the same results on their own. But, we have a precedent that exists in the scriptures that's used as an example. Moses, was given instructions for making the Tabernacle and all the items used in worship with a strict directive to follow the pattern that was revealed (**Ex 25.40**). The writer of Hebrews brings this out in the comparison between the worship under the Law and the new law given in the New Testament. "*Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.*" (**Heb 8.5**).

When the scriptural pattern is followed what we see is a reproduction of the New Testament church as it was in the first century. Between groups we'll see a similarity in worship, a sameness in doctrine and a consistency in application of scripture guiding the work of the local body. What we'll find is that it's not impossible to do this as all it takes is a commitment to the word of God and a determination to follow the pattern that exists. When that

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

attitude prevails there's harmony between local groups as they all work under the headship of Christ led by the scriptures and oversight of spiritually mature elders, preachers and teachers who are dedicated to preserving the pattern in the scriptures.

7. Summary

To summarize our discussion we can see big differences between the denominational world and the Lord's church.

a. Denominations rose out of opposition to errors in the church. Arguments were made favoring the interpretations of those who advocated for them. Since their starting point was one of error, and they focused on their own personal convictions - error remained and was compounded over time.

b. Failure to return to scriptural authority perpetuated error. The opinions of theologians over the centuries didn't bring believers together and the **Protestant Reformation** is an exploration of how diverse attitudes without a consistent standard doesn't unite people. On the other hand when we commit ourselves to the doctrine of the New Testament, respect Christ as the head of the church and refuse to compromise the pattern found in the scriptures we can achieve unity and preserve fellowship among believers.

c. When the pattern in the N.T. is followed it reproduces only the church described in the New Testament. Deviations made by anyone are therefore noticeable and recognizable as not rooted in scripture. When believers follow the pattern found in the New Testament it doesn't matter where they are - the result is the same.

d. The legacy of the apostate church and later the **Protestant Reformation** is the concept that without an earthly centralized control of some sort we won't be unified. In recent years many differences have been masked by the concept of agreeing to disagree promoting the idea that as long as one believes, we'll be accepted by God. The idea that we can follow the scriptural pattern, be united in doctrine, practice and fellowship is thought to be impossible and foreign. Christ didn't seem to have that idea since he prayed for those who would believe on him through the teachings of the apostles and the word that was revealed. "*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).

e. The doctrine of each denomination varies from what the New Testament teaches in some way. It might be in the structure and organization of the body but generally there are significant doctrinal points that deviate from what the New Testament teaches. The result of that thinking has been that the scriptures aren't the pure inspired word and

Is The Church Of Christ A Denomination?

represent principles to guide believers rather than mandates that need to be followed. The Lord's church on the other hand believes that the providence of God has preserved the inspired word and that alone is the source of authority in everything we say or do.

f. There are many good people in denominations who believe in God, respect the Bible, do wonderful things for their fellow man and promote godly principles and morality. This is the same situation that Paul spoke of in his comments about the Jews in the first century. ***“Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.” (Heb 10.1-3)***. Faith in God through Christ demands that we follow the revealed word. That's not an impossible task if we reject the ideas of humans and adopt only what God has to say.

Looking at these differences and the attitudes of those who accept the doctrine of the New Testament, the headship of Christ and have a devotion to following the scriptural pattern we can conclude that the church Christ built is vastly different from the religions that humans have created. In the end, the only thing that God will recognize, and save, are those who have followed him according to what he has given us. Following that pattern results in a local body under the headship of Christ through his word and is not part of a denominational hierarchy that deviates from the New Testament.