

Lesson 11--The Church and Denominations

Lesson Text

Objective: using a drawing, the student can explain the concept of denominationalism and can contrast it with the view the Bible provides of the church.

Introduction:

One of the most vital issues and one of the most discussed topics today is the concept of denominations. Many, but not all, of the mainline denominations are losing membership. Many "community churches" are developing that have no denominational connection and who call themselves "non-denominational." Important questions arise: (1) What is a denomination? (2) How did denominations arise? (3) Is the denominational concept of the church the plan Christ wants us to follow? (4) Can one be a Christian and not be in a denomination? (5) Is it scriptural to be a member of a denomination? (6) Should those who consider themselves members of the church Jesus established seek to avoid being a denomination?

Questions like these are vitally important for all who would seek to follow Christ and those who would be personal workers must be ready to answer them with scriptural accuracy and love.

1. What does the word "denomination" mean?

Of course the word "denomination" is not a Bible word and so we must find its meaning from the way in which the word is currently used. Since "to denominate" means "to name," the word denomination is connected with naming things. When, for example, the government produces money, it makes bills of varying amounts and names them \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20, etc. Each of these types of bills is called "a denomination" of paper money. Thus, one type out of many similar types is called "a denomination." By definition, then, a denomination is something less than the whole because it is one among several that make up the whole.

2. What does the word "denomination" mean when applied to religion?

There are many major religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and others. These are not called denominations because they are not parts of the same whole. Within some of these, particularly Christianity, however, there are different groups which share the belief that Jesus is savior, but which differ on various points of doctrine and practice. These "churches" consider themselves as one among many "churches that are part of the large whole of Christianity. These are properly, then, called "denominations" because they are one type among many similar types.

This view is often expressed in sayings that have become familiar. "Join the church of your choice." "All churches are headed to the same place, they just take different roads



to get there." "All churches are equally good so just choose the one you like best."
"You can be a Christian and not be a member of any denomination."

So there are various "branches of Christianity," as they are sometimes called, and these constitute groups about which one must make a decision. Which of these should one join? Does one have to be in one of these to be a Christian? Is this view of Christ's church as He wanted it to be? It is questions like these that this lesson will seek to answer.

3. What passages are especially important in this study?

- A. Matthew 16:18--"I will build my church"--church not started yet.
- B. Mark 9:1--"Some of you shall not taste death until you see the kingdom come with power"--kingdom (church) not started yet. (See Lesson on the Thousand Year Reign for more about the church and kingdom.)
- C. Acts 1:6--"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"--kingdom (church) not started yet.
- D. Acts 2:47--"The Lord added to them daily such as were being saved"--a body of baptized believers is now in existence and people are being added to that body each day.
- E. Acts 8:12--Philip preached "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ." As he preaches Jesus he is also preaching the kingdom.
- F. Colossians 1:13--"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."--The Christians at Colossae were members of the kingdom (church), therefore it was in existence by this time.
- G. 1 Corinthians 1:1-2--"Paul . . . to the church of God in Corinth." Obviously the church is in existence because Paul writes to those who are in it.
- H. Romans 16:16--the churches of Christ salute you--Christ's church exists and the congregations together were referred to as churches of Christ.

4. What began between Acts 1:6 and Acts 2:47 something began of which saved people could be members?

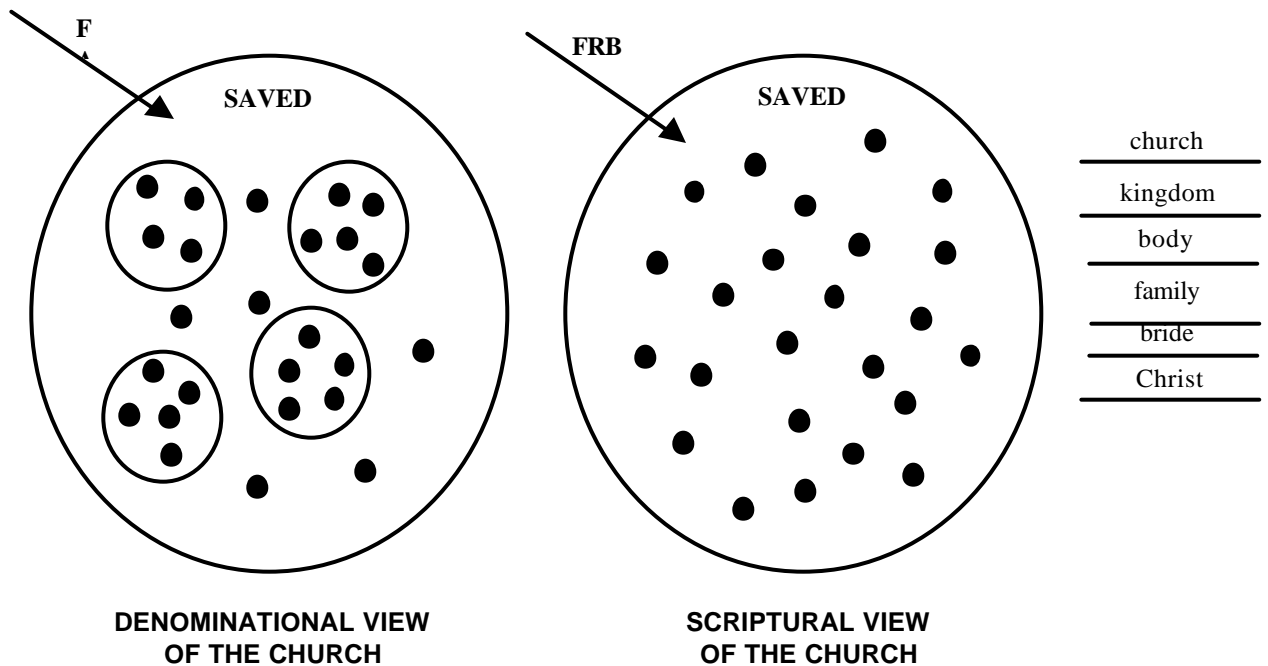
- A. Between those two scriptures we have, in Acts 2, the record of the day of Pentecost when Peter preached about Jesus and told those who believed to "repent and be baptized for remission of sins." The three thousand who obeyed him that day and others who followed later were "added" to the body of the saved which by then was in existence. Sometimes this body is called "the church," sometimes "the kingdom," and sometimes the "body." These are just different terms for the same people--those saved by the blood of Jesus. In the Bible, the church means the saved and the saved means the church.
- B. It is important to note from Acts 2:47 that the Lord did the adding to this body. He knows who is saved and, therefore, He alone can add to the saved, the church. While we can read in the Bible of His commands about how to be saved and we can observe whether one has outwardly followed such commands, a person has "inner thoughts" only God can see. Since salvation involves "inner" beliefs and



commitments, only God can know for certain whether one has followed such teachings properly.

- C. So, the church Jesus said He would build started on first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus (30 A.D.), and all those who were saved by His blood became members of it. In Colossians 1:18 Paul called this church "the body of Christ," and in Ephesians 4:4 he said there is "one body." When the church began, then, all those saved by Christ's blood were considered as "the church" or "the body."
- D. While different groups of this church met in different locations, they were one church, the same in doctrine and practice. An important lesson on this matter comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Division was creeping in and members were beginning to call themselves after the preacher who had baptized them. Some said, "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ." Paul rebuked them strongly and urged that they "all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). This was exactly in harmony with Jesus' prayer that His followers would all be "one" so the world would believe that God sent Him (John 17:21).]

5. How may we contrast the denominational view and the biblical view visually?



Notice the following concepts as you look at the two circles.

- A. Each dot in both circles represent a saved person.
- B. Both large circles represent all of the saved according to each view.



- C. In the "denominational" circle, the arrow with the "F" indicates that, according to this view, one enters the circle of the saved at the moment he/she believes--thus "salvation by faith only." This is expressed in various ways such as "receive the Lord Jesus" or "Just tell Him you believe "or "Just give your life to Jesus."
- D. Beginning from a point about an inch to the right of the right circle and even with In the circle to the right, representing the scriptural view, there is an arrow with FRB to stand for the words faith, repentance, and baptism. According to the scriptures, God adds to the saved those who have confessed their faith in Christ, repented of their sins and have been baptized for remission of their sins. Since they are now "saved" from sins, God adds them to the church. The Greek word we translate church is the word for "called out." Thus those in the church are the ones God has "called out" of the world by setting them apart.
- E. Thus, a major difference in these two views is what God commands us to do to have our sins forgiven and thus to be eligible for God to add us to the saved. Is it by "faith only" we are saved, or do the scriptures teach faith, repentance, and baptism are necessary prior to forgiveness?
- F. A second major difference in the two views lies in the relationships between those inside the circle. Now note the four or five smaller circles inside the circle on the left. These circles include most of the dots but some dots are left outside any smaller circle. This represents the denominational view that within the "church universal," the larger circle, there are denominations, each containing some of the saved. Those in each smaller circle consider those in each other smaller circle to be saved even though they have doctrines and practices that differ. Those with this view also believe that since one is saved at the moment of faith, there are those who have been saved that have not and may never join any denomination. So there are some dots (saved people) inside the big circle that are not inside one of the smaller circles. This concept is expressed by saying "join the church of your choice." Once you have been saved, it is good but not required that you enter one of the smaller circles. Being in a denomination, they think, is not required to be saved for you are already saved before you enter one. Each denomination, then, may set its own entrance requirements because being in that church is not linked with salvation. Also according to this view, it makes no difference which of the small circles you join. Since you are saved before joining any of them, membership in a denomination has no effect on salvation.
- G. In the circle on the right there are no small circles within this larger circle. The scriptural view say that since Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers condemned divisions and parties within the church (the saved), it is wrong to develop or promote such division. While those in this circle will be in different locations and thus in different congregations of the Lord's people, they should all be one with each other and one with the Lord. They all were added to this circle by the Lord when they obeyed Him in faith, repentance, and baptism.

These people may or may not be known to each other. That is, one might find in another part of the world a person who had read the Bible and obeyed its teachings about how to be saved whom the Lord would have added to His church independent of any connection with any other members of God's family. Anyone, anywhere, at any time who has followed the teachings of scripture by confessing faith in Jesus,



repenting of sins, and being baptized for remission of sins has the promise that God will add Him to the body of Christ. All so added are in fellowship within this body unless they have in some way departed from the essentials of faith and practice revealed in scripture. Even then, these are still in the family though they might be disinherited children and not accepted in fellowship because of their unscriptural practices and beliefs.

- H. Summary. The left circle shows the denominational concept of the saved. One enters this "church universal" by faith only and then has the option of selecting a denomination he/she prefers or remaining outside of any denomination. Joining a denomination, however, has no consequences about salvation because those in all groups or who join none of these groups are equally headed to heaven. The concept also suggests that it is acceptable to have different "varieties" of churches within the church universal, even with differing beliefs and practices.

By contrast, the other circle shows the concept of the church presented in scripture. The Lord adds those to His church, the body of Christ, the kingdom, the family when they have complied with His commands about how to receive His grace--confessing faith in Jesus, repenting of sins, and being baptized for remission of sins.

Conclusion:

If one has been saved and thus God has added him/her to the church of the New Testament, that person would not, by that process, have become a member of any denomination. Should such a person be asked, "What denomination are you a member of?" a proper response would be to say "I am not a member of any denomination. I am just a member of the Lord's body." That church is the same as the kingdom, the family, the bride. If such a person should be asked, "Do you believe only those in your church are going to heaven?" he/she cannot give just a simple "yes" or "no" answer. A little background will have to be given. First, he/she can say, "I believe the Lord adds all He saves to His church, the body of Christ. Since God adds all the saved to that church, and I believe I am in that church, I believe only those in this church are promised salvation. Since the church Jesus started on the day of Pentecost was not to be divided into factions or divisions, we should all work to make that the case in His church today."

The author has articles on this topic in the following locations:

www.oc.edu/faculty/stafford.north.

Jim Sheerer and Charles L. Williams (eds.) Directions for the Road Ahead, Chapter 15.

