**Is the New Testament Church a Denomination?**

(by Carl McMurray)

I spoke with a brother awhile back who had developed his own definition for the terms “liberal” and “conservative.” The definitions were based on neither word studies nor fact; they were just his developed opinions. He held these opinions so dear, however, that if he were sitting in an audience and heard a speaker use these terms not in accord with his own belief system, he would actually become offended. I spoke with him about the fact that words have meaning, and we simply cannot make up our own definitions and apply them. I don’t believe I convinced him, but I still believe that principle of communication is a good one. Words have meaning.

The American College Dictionary defines the noun “denomination” as a religious sect. The word “denominationalism” is defined as… a sectarian spirit of policy; the tendency to divide into denominations or sects. This is one of those words that people often use incorrectly. Even Christians do it. And especially is this true when it is applied to the New Testament church. Was the New Testament church a denomination? Is it one today?

***What’s Going on Today?*** Denominationalism, by definition, is division. Just as the math term “denominator” refers to the lower part of a fraction (beneath the line) which shows into how many parts the unit is divided, the term denominationalism speaks of religion which is likewise divided. Denominations can be recognized by their headquarters, conferences, synods, or otherwise named man-made centers of unity. They need these organizations as their basis for unity within their separate divisions, along with their own particular creed books, manuals, or catechisms. Denominations can be recognized by their attitude, i.e., their willingness to quote the Scriptures that support their traditions and deny the validity of those that don’t. Another attitude often seen is their attitude of accepting one another, even over the violation of God’s word which they have claimed as their own. Often their confusion over religious practices in the Law of Moses versus the new covenant gives them away as being counterfeits and not actually the New Testament church.

***What of the Early Church?*** The church of the first century had none of the above. They had no earthly headquarters, no creed books, no confusion over which covenant they followed (when Judaizing teachers tried to bring aspects of the Old Law into New Testament practice they were soundly rejected), and no confusion over fellowshipping so-called brethren who went beyond the teaching of Christ, **2 John 9-11**. It seems clear that the Lord’s church in the first century was ***not*** a denomination, a division, or a faction.

In the Corinthian church when division started up and parties began to arise, it was not tolerated and praised as a good thing to be able to pick their own church, as it is today. The apostle instead rebuked their actions in **1 Corinthians 1:10-13** and demanded that there should be ***no*** divisions! He asked them, ***“Has Christ been divided?”*** It was a rhetorical question. The plain answer was and is, *“NO, Christ has NOT been divided, and neither should His body be.”*

In **Acts 24:14**, the Jews attacking Paul tried to label the Way as a “sect.” You see, like many today, the Jews were used to sectarianism and factious parties. They had many of them in their religion. One could be a member of any of these “parties” and still be a Jew.

If we allow it, we face much the same division today as the Jewish religion accepted. Here is a question worthy of some consideration, however. If the diagram above of the Jewish religion were looked at as a map, where would you find Jesus? Which “party” was He identified with and where would you go to find Him? The answer is plain. Jesus was a Jew without being part of ANY of these parties.

Now ask yourself where you should go to find Him today? The answer should be just as clear. You can find Christ today and become a Christian without being part of any religious party or faction.

In **Acts 24:14**, the apostle did not accept their labeling of the Lord’s church in this fashion. He knew what we pointed out earlier, i.e., words have meaning. The first century church was NOT a sect, a denomination, a party, or a faction. In fact, this type of division was rejected and rebuked as sinful. Paul was having none of it, and New Testament Christians today will feel the same way.

The Lord’s church is non-denominational. It always has been. Some “Community Churches” and new start-up groups are making that claim, but what they really mean is that they are “all-denominational.” They accept folks from, and fellowship with, all the religious parties that call themselves “Christian.” The first century church was not “all-denominational,” i.e., accepting all these divisions, but “non-denominational.” The early church stood opposed to division and stood against the false doctrine of acceptance, **2 John 9-11**.

There is a group today without any central headquarters on earth. They have no church manual except the Bible. They are committed to following the new covenant, ratified with the blood of their Lord. They are trying to be the first century church in today’s world and you can be a Christian, with them, without being a part of any man-made religious party. They are simply churches of Christ and we encourage you to seek them out. They are not a denomination, but then again, Jesus was never part of one either, was He?