

WHAT BRAND OF CHRISTIAN SHOULD WE BE?

I hear religious folks speaking all the time about their religious faith. When I hear the terminology used by those claiming to be Christians to describe their “brand,” I always do a double-take. It seems very strange to hear all of the adjectives placed in front of the word Christian to modify it and classify it. This practice has given us such hyphenations as Baptist-Christian, Methodist-Christian, charismatic-Christian, and hundreds of other dazzling combinations. Often, these hyphenations are shortened simply to Baptist, Methodist, and charismatic, as though the Christian part of it is optional.

What I am wondering is what ever happened to a plain old Christian Christian? In the days of the New Testament writers the designation Christian was descriptive enough. Modern denominationalism, though, since it isn’t patterned after the New Testament, has invented its own vocabulary to classify Christians, and it says, in effect, that simply being a Christian isn’t enough or that it’s not even possible. Is that true? Please study with me.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

We “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23) and have been separated from God by that sin (See also Isaiah 59:1-2; and Ephesians 2:1). The consequence of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The only way God has provided to remove that sin and restore fellowship with Him is through a relationship with His son, Jesus Christ. How can I say this kindly? God didn’t provide for sin’s solution through Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, or any human preacher or teacher - only through Jesus. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (JOHN 14:6).

In the New Testament, when sinners recognized their sinfulness they came to the Father through Jesus. They started living for Him, doing what He asked, and trying to be like Him. In other words, they became Jesus’ disciples. Because Jesus’ blood washed away their sins and restored them to a good relationship with God, the disciples were described as “sanctified”, “redeemed”, “saved”, “forgiven” and “washed”. When the first interracial church was established we read that these “disciples were called

Christians first at Antioch” (Acts 11:22). What were they called? No hyphenations here. No denominations back then. They were simply called Christians. Why call them Christians? Because they wear the name of Christ and He is the One they glorify, magnify, and live for. Paul argued that Christ was crucified for them and they had been baptized in the name of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:13).

CAN WE BE SIMPLY CHRISTIANS TODAY?

Some people speak as if the existence of denominations is a necessary evil. They say that if you want to join a church, there is no alternative - denominations are unavoidable. In other words, all churches are denominations. Is that true?

The churches of the New Testament were not institutions. They were independent local congregations that were not tied to any earthly headquarters or creed books. In fact, the word used in the original language for “church” is not a religious word at all, but a collective noun like “herd”, “covey” or “flock”. When people became Christians they were added to God’s people by the Lord Himself (Acts 2:47). Evidence is conclusive that Christians banded together to form local churches, but those churches were congregational in nature and they were undenominational.

Now, back to the question. If I am saved today like they were in the first century (Acts 2:38, 41), then what will the Lord do? He will add me to His people, those who are saved. Will He add me to a denomination? No. The Bible never speaks of one. So is it possible to be just a Christian and to find a church that is neither a denomination nor a part of one? Since that is the very thing practiced in the days of the apostles, we must try. It is our only hope for unity. Jesus wanted His followers to be united, not divided. He prayed,

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (JOHN 17:20-21).

We can unite on Him and His word when our loyalty is to Him. When God saves me, I am just a Christian.

WHAT DOES AN UNDENOMINATION LOOK LIKE?

A New Testament church . . .

. . . wears Bible descriptions.

Since a church is people, we will have to look at the people and what they are doing together to determine what an undenomination looks like. A New Testament church will refuse man-made names. God’s people in the first century did not refer to the churches by one exclusive description. Churches in the first century were known as “church (or assembly) of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2), “churches (or assemblies) of Christ” (Romans 16:16), and many other descriptions. Please notice these are descriptions, not formal names. An undenomination today will describe itself to the world instead of denominating itself with an exclusive name. The people in the church will focus on their relationship to God through Biblical phrases instead of aligning with some denominational group through exclusive names. The people who compose the church will call themselves Christians and the church will describe itself scripturally as God’s people.

There were no denominations in the first century. And when disciples started leaving the path of Christ in order to divide into factions, they were sternly rebuked and corrected by the apostles.

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren . . . that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-13).

I realize that to question denominationalism as unbiblical is to incur the wrath of some people who don’t want to examine their terminology or, more significantly, the belief system that undergirds that terminology. But the Bible doesn’t speak of differing brands of Christianity. I must not only question denominationalism, I must oppose it as unscriptural and wrong. The Christianity of the New Testament is non-sectarian and undenominational. Like 7-Up is

not a Cola, God's church is not a denomination. God's word provides for people to become Christians only - nothing more and nothing less.

A New Testament church . . .

... stands only on the Bible.

Being an undenomination involves much more than names or signs. Another factor is a church's source of teaching. What is its standard of authority? An undenomination will have no creed but the Bible. History demonstrates that written creed-books have been a focal point for religious division. As soon as one "brand" of church wants to set itself apart, it generally writes its own creed or aligns itself with one already in existence. Its members are then asked to follow not just the Bible, but the Bible with a creed-book sandwiched in the middle of its pages. The problem with any creed book is that it is written by fallible men, while the Bible was written through the inspiration of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). A church today that is undenominational will refuse to utilize human creed-books, and will take its stand on the Bible alone. The study of the Scriptures will occupy a prominent place in the activities of this kind of local church.

A New Testament church . . .

... honors God's will.

A church must deal with many topics: the organization of the local church, acceptable congregational worship, the proper work of the church, the edification and discipline of the disciples composing the local church, etc. Whatever the topic may be, a New Testament church will honor God's will and not some man's will. The apostle Paul wrote God's will on many of these topics to the church in Corinth and praised those disciples when they put God's will into practice over their own desires (2 Corinthians 7:8-14). While this relates to having no creed but the Bible, it also has to do with being honest, diligent students of the Bible. Christians love each other and strive to practice together only those things that all can conscientiously practice (Romans 14). That means I will not try to introduce some practice to the local church which I cannot scripturally defend. To push some view that is not grounded in Scripture is to foster the very kind of division that New Testament churches are to avoid.

A New Testament church . . .

... reaches out to sinners.

The churches of the first century were evangelistic in nature. That means they spent much time and effort spreading the message of the cross to the world. Christians in the first century were concerned about all aspects of their friends' well-being. But their primary emphasis was on their friends' spiritual well-being. When the persecution arose in Jerusalem "those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). The Christians composing the churches were personally committed to sharing the gospel message with others. Quite frankly, many churches today seem more committed to ending world hunger or housing all the homeless than saving souls. A New Testament church will be benevolent to the saved and will be merciful and loving toward the lost. But if a church today is geared primarily toward making this life better and not toward helping people go to heaven, then it is not a New Testament church. According to Romans 1:16, the gospel, not social programs, is what the lost world needs: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."*

THERE IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH NEAR YOU

Many congregations across the world are interested in simple New Testament Christianity. They are simply groups of Christians who work and worship together in harmony and love. They are not part of any denominational group or any organic alignment of churches. Just like the churches of the Bible were, they are independent and undenominational. They submit to the authority of Christ and His apostles through the Scriptures. They believe the local church was designed by God to bring glory to Him and to provide support and encouragement for Christians.

If the idea of simply being only a Christian appeals to you, please seek out a group like that in your area. (On MyPreachingPen.com, go to Links, and click on the "Church Finder" site.)

As Bible students we don't claim to have all the answers, but we believe that all the answers are available. If we can assist you in any way in your quest to "come to the Father" through Jesus Christ, please contact us.

Biblical Christianity: — God's Undenomination

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