

Understanding the Undenominational Church of Christ

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Introduction:

Matthew 16:18 - *"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."* (NKJ)

Jesus promises to build His church. The word he uses here is the familiar word *ekklesia* in the Greek. It is defined as an assembly, and in a more precise connotation it indicates an assembly called out from one location or relationship to another.

I. The *Ekklesia* of the N.T. Jesus' *ekklesia* are His people who have been called out of the world into a relationship with Christ. But the word church conveys two different concepts in the New Testament.

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary states: *"The Greek word for church is ekklesia. This word is used 115 times in the New Testament, mostly in the Book of Acts and the writings of the apostle Paul and the general epistles. At least 92 times this word refers to a local congregation. The other references are to the church general, or all believers everywhere for all ages."*

A. It is used to reference all the saved people of all time, both living and dead, from all over the world. This is sometimes referred to as **the universal church**; although that terminology is not found in the N.T., the concept is – i.e. **Matthew 16:18**:

Matthew 16:18 *"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it."*

B. It is also used to reference smaller groups of Christians in different localities, sometimes called "**local churches**". We see local churches in Revelation 2-3 with the 7 churches of Asia, the churches of Galatia, and the church at Corinth, etc. These concepts are important to our understanding of the undenominational nature of Christ's church.

II. The Church of Christ is Not a Denomination – We often make this statement in our written materials or in Bible discussions with others. Can we properly explain why this is true? Can we defend our claim of undenominationalism in a denominational world?

A. **What is a Denomination?** A very basic definition is some smaller unit that is composed of a large unit. We understand the word denomination best by example. A quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny are all denominations of a dollar. They are smaller units that make up the whole. But what is a denomination in the religious world?

1. Donald G. Tinder from the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says, "***Denominations are associations of congregations—though sometimes it might be said that congregations are localized subdivisions of denominations—that have a common heritage.***"
2. Tinder defines denominations as an association of congregations, but even a little more than that. They are *localized subdivisions* of the greater whole.

B. **A Church of Many Religious Groups?** It is a

common view of the Lord's church that it is comprised of all the religious groups that believe in Christ. Therefore the church is made up of the Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Catholics, Episcopal, and so on.

1. The proof text which is generally used for this teaching is found in **John 15:1-6**:

John 15:1-6 1 *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. 3 "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."*

Here we are told that each branch of the vine is a denomination. But is this what Jesus taught? Does Jesus say that I am the vine and denominations are the branches? Does Jesus say that I am the vine and the churches are the branches? Not at all. Jesus is talking about people. *He* that abides in me and I in *him* bears much fruit. **Individuals** are the branches in Christ.

- C. **A Church of Many Congregations?** Another common false teaching is that the universal church, the Lord's body, is made up of local churches. It is not all the religious groups out there, but the church

is made up of all the churches of Christ. So we have the church in North Ft. Myers, Cape Coral, Ft. Pierce, Okeechobee, and so on.

1. Alexander Campbell in the Millennial Harbinger of July 1834 said, *"The church...is not one congregation or assembly, but the congregation of Christ, composed of all the individual congregations on earth."* Twenty years later in the Millennial Harbinger of June 1853 said, *"Every individual church on earth stands to the whole church of Christ as one individual man to one particular church."*

He had been so surrounded by denominations that he had accepted the same concept of the Lord's body. But the scriptures do not teach either of these concepts about the universal church.

- D. **The Lord's Church is a Church of Individual Christians.** In **1 Corinthians 12:12-13** we see that Christ is the body and there are many members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 12 "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Now look at **1 Corinthians 12:27**:

1 Corinthians 12:27 *"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually."*

The body of Christ, the universal group of the saved is not made up of churches or religious groups, but

individual Christians.

Turn to **Hebrews 12:22-24**:

Hebrews 12:22-24 *22 "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel."*

Verse 23 says, "to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect."

This passage gives us a great definition of the Lord's body. What consists of the general assembly and church of the firstborn? Is it congregations? No, it consists of *"the spirits of righteous men made perfect."*

1. **Start with a single chain link.** The plural is many chain links, not interconnected, lying next to each other. If we connect the links together, then we have a chain. It is the same for the Christian.

Matthew 18:15-18 *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear*

the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

In this passage we find a single Christian, a plurality of Christians, and then a collectivity of Christians called a church.

2. In **1 Corinthians 1:2** we have "*the church of God at Corinth.*" Here we are talking about one local church.

1 Corinthians 1:2 "*...to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours...*"

We read of a plurality of churches, each acting independently, in **Galatians 1:2**, "*the churches of Galatia.*"

Galatians 1:2 "*And all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia...*"

This is also seen in **Revelation 1:11**, "***send it to the seven churches which are in Asia.***"

Revelation 1:11 "*...saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."*"

3. **Now What passage can we turn to where we will find churches (congregations) in a collectivity? None.** That would indicate a denomination by definition, **an association of**

churches.

- But the universal church of Christ has **no collective action.**
- There is **no collective action greater than our own local church.** Nearly all religious bodies today consider themselves a collection of churches.

III. Christ Did Not Die and Resurrect to Build a Collection of Denominations. He died & rose again to purchase the One Church that belongs to Him Alone:

Ephesians 1:19-23 *"...and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to **the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.***

Later in **Ephesians 4:4-6** He tells us that there is only one body, or church:

Ephesians 4:4-6 *4 "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."*

- A. Those who are redeemed by Christ are not added to a denomination, but they are added to the church as in **Acts 2** – the beginning of the Lord's church:

Acts 2:47 "...praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

- B. To be a part of a denomination you must join or accept the teaching of the denominated body, in addition to what God says in the Bible. Obedience to Christ alone makes one a Christian alone – a member in the undenominational church of Christ.

- C. After you obey Christ through repentance and baptism and subsequently the Lord adds you to His church you can join yourself to a local church of committed individuals and work together for Christ (as Saul of Tarsus joined himself to the saints at Jerusalem after his conversion). But your relationship to Christ is not sustained through the church, but through the blood of Christ, and your continued obedience to His will alone.

Conclusion: Are in Christ? Have you been added to the Lord's Church?

Invitation

We never close a service without providing an opportunity for those who have come to an understanding of God's word to submit to his will. If you have heard the gospel, believe it, are willing to repent of your sins and confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, you are ready to be baptized, and we can help you do that now.

In addition, we provide this opportunity for any Christians who have fallen away to make it known that they wish come back to God through repentance and prayer. This time is also set aside for those who have any other need or request they wish to share with the congregation.

If you have learned what you must do to make yourself right with God and have made a decision, we encourage you to take action now. If there is anything we can do to assist you, please come forward to the front row as together we stand and sing the song that has been selected.