



“Un” -vs- “Non”

A Scriptural examination of
Denominationalism within the Church

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Perhaps you have had a conversation similar to many that I have had over the years...

When asked “*What **kind** of Christian are you?*”, I always respond “*I am Christian **only**.*” This creates a sense of confusion in the mind of the one posing the question, so, they inevitably rephrase their question to something like “*No, I mean what **denomination** does your Church belong to?*” My response often further confuses them, “*Our congregation does not belong to a denomination. We are **undenominational**.*” Most of the time, this answer will cause a spark in their eye, and a response of “*Don’t you mean you are **nondenominational**?*” My final response of “*Nope, we’re **undenominational**.*” always provides opportunity to answer their final question: “***What’s the difference?***”

It is with the goal of answering the question, “*What is the difference between undenominational and nondenominational?*” that I am writing this article.

First, let’s have a little Church history refresher course to discover where denominationalism came from and whether or not it is Biblical.

Scripture records that the Church began **at Pentecost**, on or around AD 30 following the ascension of Jesus (10 days earlier) and the receipt of the promised Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. This 1st century Church existed under the overall headship of Jesus, and His authority, expressed through the ministry & oversight of the Apostles. Jesus recognized that the Church would continue beyond the Apostolic age of the 1st Century, so, He established a model for all ages to follow with regard to the structure of His Church. This model is the only one expressed in the New Testament, and is still in effect today.

Jesus has eternally been placed as Head of the Church by God the Father. He has not been selected (or elected) to this position by men, and He will never be removed or replaced in this position. Under Jesus, are the Apostles who labored under the expressed, direct authority & commission of Jesus. The Apostles, through the direction of the Holy Spirit, established an ongoing order of leadership within the Church, maintaining the headship of Christ. This leadership is shown to be the Elders, who are to be selected from the local body of believers, and are directly responsible for oversight, direction, discipline, shepherding and spiritual equipping in the local congregation of Christians. The elder (also called a bishop, overseer, pastor and shepherd in Scripture) bears authority only within the congregation with which he serves, never exerting authority over another congregation. This ensures that each congregation maintains autonomy, which prevents the imbalance created by a bishop holding authority over a number of congregations.

Unfortunately, early in Church history, following the death of the Apostles, the leaders within the Church overstepped their bounds for sake of convenience. Men were established as Bishops who would oversee small groups of congregations known as Diocese. This necessitated a hierarchy of overseers called Cardinals and required a “head” overseer who has come to be

known as the Pope. The Church was (is) in error by embracing such a model, because they have usurped the known teaching of the apostle Paul regarding a plurality of elders in each congregation. This error has overturned the cart, so to speak, by placing the Church in authority over the Word, rather than maintaining the authority of the Word over the Church, as Christ & His apostles had established.

Following the death of King Henry III in 1056, the College of Cardinals was born (1059) which created the establishment of the Pope around 20 years later. Priests would serve within the individual congregations under the direction of the order of Bishops, Cardinals and the Pope. However, corruption inevitably, and immediately, created an environment of exploitation based upon political agendas and greed. By 1517, dissatisfaction within the Church had reached the point that certain clergy & members were pushing for a change, prompting Martin Luther to nail his famous '95 Theses' to the door of the Wittenberg Church. Thus began what is historically referred to as the "Protestant Reformation".

Effectively, and unknowingly, Luther precipitated the beginning of modern denominationalism in this act. Denominations began springing up in the years which followed. Lutheran (1530), Presbyterian (1536), Mennonite (1537), Baptist (1611), Amish (1700), Methodist (1739) and many others formed under what was called *Protestant faith*, separate from Catholicism. However, with each new 'split' of denominations came a further distancing from the model of the united body found in the New Testament. Why? Because each group formed their own structure of 'government' with an earthly, denominational headquarters and placed a man as head over the entire structure. They were sinfully following the same model as the Church of Rome, rather than the model of Jesus & His apostles.

Jesus prayed for a unity among His followers as recorded in John's Gospel:

²⁰ ***"I do not ask on behalf of these alone,
but for those also who believe in Me through their word;
²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You,
that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.
John 17:20-21, NASB'95***

Jesus also identified why such unity is significant "... so that the world may believe that You sent Me." Since Jesus identified His words as "from the Father" (John 14:10) and that His words are eternal (Matthew 24:35) and that judgment falls upon those who ignore His words. (Mark 8:38) Therefore, one can only conclude that anything less than full compliance to Jesus' model is sinful.

Scripture has established these truths for followers of Christ:

- They are to be called Christians, honoring Christ, not man. (Acts 11:26)
- There is one body, the Church, united under Christ. (Ephesians 4:4)
- As established by God, the only head of the Church is Jesus, the Christ. (Ephesians 1:22)
- Christians are responsible to keep this unity in the body; e.g. no denominations. (Ephesians 4:3)

With this basic history review & Biblical background established, we are left to address the question of the difference between *undenominational* and *nondenominational*. Our answer lies, in part, within the terms themselves. Consider the following:

According to dictionary.com the prefix "un-" expresses the meaning "not," freely used as an

English formative, ***giving negative or opposite force*** in adjectives and their derivative adverbs and nouns (unfair; unfairly; unfairness; unfelt; unseen; unfitting; unformed; unheard-of; un-get-at-able), and less freely used in certain other nouns (unrest; unemployment).

Dictionary.com provides the following definition for “non-”: a prefix meaning “not,” freely used as an English formative, usually with a simple negative force as implying ***mere negation or absence of something*** (rather than the opposite or reverse of it, as often expressed by un-): nonadherence; noninterference; nonpayment; nonprofessional.

Denominationalism develops and promotes the use of creeds, earthly headquarters, and establishes men as an elected (selected) head of the Church. Denominationalism promotes the separation and disunity of the body of Christ. Since Christ has identified the Word of God as the source of unity, it only stands to reason that unity cannot come apart from being in agreement with the Word.

The term non-denominational expresses a false unity, established by seeking ‘likeness’ in certain areas or common goals, yet is not established upon the Word. The ‘Ecumenical Movement’ is an example of such non-denominationalism in action. To be open in participation, fellowship and even partnership in some cases with groups who do not share a ‘like faith’ based upon the Word, simply because they claim faith in Christ is irresponsible and demeaning to the true unity intended by Christ.

Some have stated that they find commonality in *‘agreeing to disagree’*, and uniting in like areas of faith. There is no such pattern or compromise expressed anywhere in the New Testament. It has also been suggested that to hold to such teaching is liken to spiritual snobbery or elitism. Actually, a nondenominational view fits that statement for it sets above the Scripture the idea that man should maintain differences in faith, rather than comply with God’s expressed plan for unity. Many have expressed that it is impossible for men to agree in such ways, to wit we can only reply that what is impossible with men is possible with God. Ours is to be obedient and follow His expressed plan for the Church, after all, He is the author & perfecter of faith, and the Head over His Church.

Undenominationalism does not participate in the ecumenical movement so commonly popular, nor with the false idea that by participating in such that we promote unity. The converse is true... unity is forgotten for a ‘lowest common denominator’ mentality of faith. Undenominational Christians plead for believers to leave denominations and restore New Testament faith and practices, nothing less. We do not claim to be the ‘only Christians’, but we plead for believers to embrace being ‘Christian only’.