

“According to the Way which they call a sect” (Acts 24:14)

[Or, *Is my church a “denomination”?*]

Defining our terms. A “church” is a group of people who are called together for religious purposes. The Bible refers to individuals whose purpose is to *follow Jesus* using several terms, for example, “the disciples” and “Christians” (Acts 11:26). These individuals the world over all form the **one church of Christ** – “there is one body” (Ephesians 4:4). The church is also called “His body” (Ephesians 1:22-23), “the church of God” (Galatians 1:13), and the “church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23). **Local congregations** are known as “the churches of God” in a particular area (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 2:14), or the “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16).

One church with local congregations
1. Entrance requirements
2. Governance
3. Creed
The problem: division
Traditions
Church choice

The church’s identity hinges on the body’s members following what Jesus taught. Those teachings are known collectively as “the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42) and include certain **key beliefs** (e.g., Ephesians 4:1-6). For the sake of brevity, let’s focus on **three key areas: entrance requirements, governance, and creed.**

- 1. The church’s entrance requirements.** The church of Christ is formed when believers repent and are baptized, confessing their belief in Jesus as God’s anointed, thus becoming His followers and being forgiven of their sins (Acts 2:38; Matthew 28:19; Romans 6:3-4; 10:9-10). Membership in the body is determined only by the Lord: *He adds us* to His church (Acts 2:47). (In Bibles that don’t use the word “church” in that verse, follow the description of that “number” of believers from Acts 2:44 and 47 to Acts 4:4 and 32, then to Acts 5:11.) However, membership in a *local congregation* depends on a mutual agreement of the members. (See Acts 9:26-28; 2 Corinthians 3:1.)
- 2. The church’s governance.** The church’s structure has Christ as the Head with local men (who meet certain qualifications) serving as elders and deacons within a local group (Ephesians 1:22-23; Philippians 1:1; Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). There is no earthly organization beyond this, though people will serve in various roles such as evangelists and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). In the Bible, there is no hierarchy for the church – no pope, no bishop overseeing more than one church, and no rules of conventions for local churches to follow.
- 3. The church’s creed.** The church’s creed is only the New Testament (Matthew 28:20; Acts 2:42; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 4:11).

A **denomination** exists when people adopt *different* entrance requirements, governance, and/or creed. (See warnings such as Acts 20:28-31, with the solution found in verses 27 and 32, and Galatians 1:6-9, with the solution found in verses 10-12.) Sometimes the differences are *highlighted* by the use of a man-made *name* which neither honors the Head nor describes the members.

- 1. A denomination’s entrance requirements.** Denominations disagree about who is lost and about how to be saved. They often add requirements for membership which either *fall*

short of Jesus' word (as in Mark 16:16) or add to it (such as an indoctrination period culminating in a test, extra confessions, etc.). These differences by their very nature divide people, varying from group to group and directly determining who are in *one group* (as spiritual "brothers and sisters") and who are in *another*.

2. A denomination's governance. While false teachings such as Judaism and Gnosticism were a problem from the start, the earliest major division of Jesus' followers involved corrupting the *organization* of the church. People elevated some of the elders (also known as bishops or pastors) over others. Each of those men ("the bishop" in each prominent congregation) left his God-given sphere (see Acts 20:28). They worked together in an unscriptural arrangement and began to extend their oversight beyond their local groups. Mirroring the organization of the secular government of the Roman Empire, they eventually formed the Roman Catholic Church. (The term "denomination" is defined by The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition as a "group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name, organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy." While that definition fits the Roman Catholic church, the term "denomination" is usually reserved for "protestant" churches which started long after the Catholic church. They often followed the same path in creating a hierarchy and organization of congregations made responsible to human authorities.)

3. A denomination's creed. Denominations have their own statements of faith and even creed *books* separate from the Bible detailing their key beliefs, describing their organization, and prescribing how to worship God and how to work as a church. The fact that these writings become central to their identity and indispensable to their practices shows that they do not believe in the sufficiency of the Bible and creates divisions among groups.

The nature of the problem. Denominations **fail to unite** on the fundamentals, and their **human teachings divide** people. The divisions can *only be maintained* by using those man-made creeds and/or names. Someone who studies only the New Testament can never find his or her way into one of the denominations because Jesus didn't start them; they don't follow the apostles' teachings. The Bible pleads with us to be united and warns against dividing ourselves up (John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Denominations are not equally *good*; they are equally *bad* in God's sight! (See Jesus' comments in Matthew 15:13-14 where He speaks about the Jewish sect, the Pharisees, as a group.)

A word about traditions. Any group practicing the same thing repeatedly over time will develop a certain style and certain customs in the process. Traditions can serve a useful purpose in terms of expectations, orderliness, and familiarity, but the Scriptures never encourage us to follow "tradition for tradition's sake." However, some ways of carrying out religious practices *must be followed*. The apostle Paul commanded the church in Thessalonica, "Stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15; also 3:6). The teachings and practices handed down from the apostles constitute divinely authorized traditions.

The challenge is to identify the *origins* of our practices and recognize that *human* traditions are *optional*. Jesus rebuked the ancient Jewish leaders for giving priority to their human traditions over God's word and for binding them on others, "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7). He said, "You reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition ... making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down" (Mark 7:9, 13). Jesus condemned them as hypocrites who were worshipping in vain (Mark 9:6-7).

When examining any given practice, we can ask, "Is this practice 'an instruction that was given over' (Thayer's definition of the word for "tradition") *by God*, or by people?" Man-made traditions can be recognized if their only justification sounds something like, "We've always done it this way," or "Because our elders say so." Traditions coming from God, given over by the apostles, will come with a Bible "book, chapter, and verse" in their support.

Church choice. As noted above, when we put on Jesus Christ in baptism (Galatians 3:26-27), He adds us to His church, the church of Christ. We become members of His body, and, because other people have also become members of the same body, "we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (Romans 12:5). This carries with it a relationship not only with Jesus, but with other believers. So, as carefully as we chose to follow Jesus, we should seek out a group to worship and work with that is trying to follow Him. (See the apostle Paul's example in Acts 9:26-30.) When we find one that follows the New Testament in its entrance requirements, governance, and creed, we have found the church of Christ, and we can enjoy all the privileges and responsibilities that go with those new relationships.