

You know, the answer to this question seems rather obvious, does it not? In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "... I will build My church ..." (singular, possessive). The church is called the "body" over which Christ is the "head" (Ephesians 1:22-23). Paul stated rather pointedly that there is only "one body" (Ephesians 4:4). If there is only one body over which Christ is the head, and that body is the church, then there is only one church. Jesus built only one church and is head over only one church. In the first century, there were many "congregations" of that church which met in many different places. For instance, Paul wrote letters to "the church of God which is at Corinth" (I Corinthians 1:2), to "the churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1:2), and to "the church of the Thessalonians" (I Thessalonians 1:1). Nevertheless, Christians in each of these locations were all members of only one body (I Corinthians 10:17)

They were united in doctrine. In I Corinthians 4:17, Paul said that his ways were the ways of Christ and that he taught the same things "everywhere in every church." In Acts 15, Paul met with the other apostles to verify the unity of their doctrine. In other words, all the apostles taught the same things everywhere in every church. Although there were many congregations in many places throughout the world, they were all "the churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16). They wore the same name. They practiced the same plan of salvation. They were organized and worshipped according to the same pattern. They shared the same hope of eternal reward.

In the first century, Jesus built one church -- and that church was unified in faith and practice. They were taught not to go beyond what is written (I Corinthians 4:6). They were taught not to go beyond the teachings of Christ (II John 9). They were taught to speak only the words of God (I Peter 4:11). They were taught to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). They were taught to "stand firm" and to "hold to the traditions" which they had been taught (II Thessalonians 2:15). These principles were given by God for the very purpose of maintaining a united church under the authority of Christ.

In fact, Jesus prayed that His disciples would all be ONE, just as He and the Father were ONE (John 17:21). Paul encouraged his readers to "agree" with each other, and to have "no divisions" among themselves; but to be "made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (I Corinthians 1:10). But who can say that this environment exists today?

Members of various denominations wear divisive names which segregate them from other groups. This practice was ridiculed by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 1:10-13. Modern religious leaders are addressed by titles which are foreign to and even condemned by the Lord in Matthew 23:8-10. Unscriptural, yet elaborate organizational structures widen the gap even farther between sectarian boundaries. Denominational churches hold to human creeds and traditions which evolved many years after inspired New Testament writings. Different churches teach different plans of salvation, despite the warning of Paul. He said, "... there are some who ... want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:7-9).

Today's ecumenical movement is a desperate, yet futile attempt at unity. It promotes a pseudo-fellowship and encourages united social service without resolving differences of fundamental faith. It merely sets aside doctrinal differences and encourages denominational believers to simply "agree to disagree."

How did we come to such a state of disarray? What ever happened to the beautiful church which God had purposed from the beginning of time? Why are there so many denominations? And what should individual believers do about this situation? These are good questions. We shall address them in Bible Talk # 408.

1. How does Matthew 16:18 help us know how many churches Christ has?

How does Ephesians 1:22-23 and 4:4 help us know how many churches Christ has?

2. From I Corinthians 4:17 and Acts 15, how did the apostles promote unity in the church?

3. What significance do you see in the expression “churches of Christ” in Romans 16:16?

4. Do you think unity would be promoted if every disciple wore only the name “Christian”?

5. Beside each of these passages, explain how compliance would promote church unity:

Galatians 1:7-9 _____

II Thes 2:15 _____

I Peter 1:3-4 _____

6. What principles were first century Christians taught which maintained a united church?

I Corinthians 4:6 _____

II John 9 _____

I Peter 4:11 _____

Jude 3 _____

7. Define “Denominationalism”.

Is Denominationalism pleasing to God? (John 17:21; I Corinthians 1:10)

List some denominational names which people of various churches wear.

What did Paul say about sectarian names? (I Corinthians 1:10-13)

List some titles worn by religious leaders in various churches.

What did Jesus teach about titles worn by religious leaders? (Matthew 23:8-10)

What will happen to someone who teaches the gospel incorrectly? (Galatians 1:7-9)

What do you think about the modern “ecumenical” movement?