

Viewpoint: JAV362

## WHAT DENOMINATION SHOULD I JOIN?

by John M. Frame

This article first appeared in the Viewpoint column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 36, number 02 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

---

People often ask what denomination is best, or what denomination they should join. Of course the prior, and far more important, question is: What should be our relation to Jesus Christ? The answer to that question is that we should believe in Christ as the Bible presents Him, and receive Him as our own Lord and Savior. *Lord* means that He rules our lives; *Savior* means that He, and only He, through His work on the cross, brings us divine forgiveness and salvation from sin.

After we have resolved that question, there is room to discuss many other questions. An important one is how we relate to the church; for Jesus did not die for us just to establish a one-on-one relationship. Rather, He baptizes us into one body including people of all backgrounds: Jews, Greeks, slaves, free (1 Cor. 12:13) and gives to each of us gifts of the Spirit intended to build up that body.

So new believers naturally want and need to know what church they should be part of. As we look around us, what strikes us are all the denominational names: Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian. We therefore tend to ask the question of church membership in terms of denomination—hence the title of this article.

**The Birth of Denominations.** But if you look in the Bible, you won't find anything about denominations. Look up "denomination" in a Bible concordance. It isn't there. Denominations, as we call them today, play no role in the New Testament, and they have no part in New Testament church government; yet they are so very prominent in our contemporary church life. One recent study estimates that there are approximately forty-one thousand denominations in the world today.

How did this happen? According to the New Testament, Jesus founded one true church (Matt. 16). After His resurrection, the church was administered by apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (Eph. 4:11). There were, from time to time, controversies and disputes among the believers. Jesus indicated what should be done when a believer accused another of sin (Matt. 18:15–20), and the apostles directed the churches to exercise discipline in moral (1 Cor. 5:1–13) and theological (2 Tim. 4:1–5; Tit. 1:13) matters. But the New Testament never suggests that when someone is unsatisfied with the church's judgment, he should leave the body and start a rival

church, a denomination. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 and 3:1–23 Paul warns against the kind of rivalry that later produced denominations.

Despite such warnings, in time some church members failed to accept the provisions of the one, true church and left to form other “churches.” There were the Novatianists, the Donatists, and various groups of Monophysite and Nestorian bodies. Then there was the great schism between eastern and western churches in AD 1054, the sixteenth-century Protestant/Catholic split in the West, and the general inability of Protestants to achieve visible unity, leading in time to forty-one thousand denominations.

Some of these differ only by name and/or nationality. But many have, or think they have, substantial differences of doctrine or practice, so that they cannot worship together and/or operate under a common church government.

**What Is Wrong with Denominationalism?** Now I think we should be clear on this fact: denominationalism is sin. It is a refusal to resolve disputes in biblical ways and a rejection of the one, true church founded by Jesus. I am not saying that everybody involved in a “walkout” has committed sin. Sometimes, the sin is on the part of those who leave, and sometimes on the part of people who wrongly forced them to leave. More often, there is plenty of guilt on both sides.

This is not the unforgivable sin. The grace of Jesus covers such people (in church history they have been called “schismatics”) when they repent and trust in His sacrifice. But Christian believers should be at least a little bit sad about these divisions, these wounds in the body of Christ. Unfortunately, what many of us do is to celebrate the founding of our denominations. We praise the great wisdom and spiritual courage of our founders, the sacrifices they made, and so on. And we pledge that we will maintain their position in the continuing strife and in analogous battles taking place today. But I can’t believe that such denominational chauvinism pleases our Lord.

There are battles to be fought today, but the chief battles are against spiritual beings: angels and demons (Eph. 6:10–20), not other believers, definitely not other denominations. Certainly, we are to fight for righteousness, holiness, and truth (2 Tim. 4:1–5); but according to the New Testament, these battles take place within our own church bodies and in the unbelieving world.

**Deciding on a Denomination.** But the question persists, what denomination should I join? Let’s put the question in more biblical terms: what *church* should I join? Although there are no denominations in the New Testament, certainly there are churches. The church that Jesus founded is a universal church—a church embracing all nations. But there are also city churches, like the Church of Thessalonica, and house churches, like the one mentioned in Romans 16:5. I have the impression that the city church embraced many house churches, and all the city churches were part of the universal church.

Part of the problem today is that, because of denominationalism, there is no overarching fellowship in a city or throughout the world. The Christians in our cities are split up by denominational differences. If you join the Lutheran church, you will

have limited fellowship with Baptists or Episcopalians. So when you make a choice to join one church, you will cut yourself off—not entirely, but somewhat—from fellowship with other believers.

Unfortunately, in the present time, a believer cannot join a church without joining a denomination. Even “nondenominational” churches are actually denominations of one.

Jesus wants us to be part of the church, and to do that we must (with some sadness, I hope) also become parts of denominations. Here are some important considerations in making this choice:

1. Does the church uphold the basic teachings of Christianity (as in the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds)?
2. Is the church committed to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture?
3. Does the preaching of the church fairly represent the teachings of Scripture (as you understand them, of course!) and apply them to the lives of its people?
4. Does it administer the sacraments in a biblical way?
5. Does the worship glorify God? Does it edify the worshipers?
6. Does the church encourage and provide good opportunities for fellowship among the people? Does that fellowship convey the love of Christ?
7. Does it meet the particular challenges of ministering to specific groups in the church: children, young people, old people, the sick and disabled, men, women, people of different races, income groups, and educational levels?
8. Does the church reach out to bring the good news of Christ to the unchurched people of the area?
9. Does the church display the love of Christ to the poor and needy of the area?
10. Does the church encourage the ministry of the gospel around the world?
11. Does the church stand for righteousness and against wickedness within its membership and throughout society?

You may notice that none of these criteria uses the word “denomination.” One can often make a wise decision about church membership without even inquiring as to what denomination the church belongs. But generally it is wise to take a church’s denominational membership into consideration.

Some denominations are better than others, in that they encourage churches to be more like the eleven descriptions above. You may sometimes find an excellent church within a weak denomination, or vice versa. But knowing the denominations and their histories can sometimes bring important facts to your attention and save heartaches later on.

For example, some denominations are very preoccupied with their histories and the controversies that led to their formation. That’s usually a negative indication, for the time spent celebrating these histories is usually better spent doing other things. Some denominations are historically Swedish, or English, or Scottish, or Dutch, or African-American, or some other background. That is fine, as long as the church welcomes

people from other ethnicities; but often they do not. Sometimes denominations insist on particular emphases of doctrine or practice, which limit the flexibility of a congregation to minister in its present situation. Some denominations are more authoritarian than others in the degree to which they govern each congregation's use of property, curriculum, missions support, colleges, and seminaries. In some cases that may be a good thing, but prospective members must choose how much authority they think the church should grant to a denomination.

Some denominations claim to be the one, true church, founded by Jesus and the apostles. Then they devote a large amount of effort and resources to persuading people of this claim and disparaging churches and people who belong to other bodies. As I have developed the argument of this article, I think such claims are all false. No denomination is equivalent to that one, true church. The one, true church today is the fellowship of all believers in Christ throughout history and throughout the world, with Jesus at the head. When a denomination claims to be the one, true church, that should be a danger signal to those who think about joining it.

Denominations are not the true church; indeed, denominations are not churches at all. We should get out of the habit of referring to denominations as "churches," like "the Evangelical Lutheran Church" or "the Presbyterian Church in America." What are they, then? They are makeshifts. The one, true church still exists, but it has lost much of its earthly unity because of human sin.

Denominations (and for that matter, also the often-criticized "para-church organizations") are like duct tape or Elmer's Glue—human attempts to restore something like, but not identical to, the unity of the original church. So one important mark of a good denomination is humility.<sup>1</sup> —*John M. Frame*

**John M. Frame** is professor of systematic theology and philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

---

## NOTES

- 1 For more analysis of this question, see <http://www.evangelicalreunion.org/>.