

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism



Serving Christ Free Of Religious Division

MARK A. COPELAND

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

Table Of Contents

Why Is Denominationalism Wrong?	3
The Way Out Of Religious Division	7
Accepting The Call Of The Gospel	11
Is Baptism A Necessary Part Of The Gospel?	16
Determining Our Standard Of Authority	21
What Many Accept As Authority In Religion	25
Further Thoughts Related To Authority In Religion	29
Maintaining Unity In The Local Congregation	34
How To Find A New Testament Church	38

This material is from **ExecutableOutlines.com**, a web site containing sermon outlines and Bible studies by Mark A. Copeland. Visit the web site to browse or download additional material for church or personal use.

The outlines were developed in the course of my ministry as a preacher of the gospel. Feel free to use them as they are, or adapt them to suit your own personal style. To God be the glory!

Executable Outlines, Copyright © Mark A. Copeland, 2001
MarkCopeland@aol.com

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

Why Is Denominationalism Wrong?

INTRODUCTION

1. While many people are attracted to the good news of the grace of God offered through His Son Jesus Christ, certain questions often linger in their minds...
 - a. Why are there so many different denominations?
 - b. Can't the followers of Jesus Christ learn to get along?
 - c. What can be done about the religious division that exists today?
 - d. Is it possible for me to be simply a Christian, following Jesus without being a member of any denomination?

2. In reply to these questions, some make an effort to discount the significance of religious division, suggesting...
 - a. That the differences are not all that great
 - b. Or that religious division is good, for it enables people to find a church that suits them personally-- But there are several reasons why I believe these answers are wrong and do a disservice to the cause of Christ

3. In this series of lessons, I have several objectives in mind...
 - a. To explain why Denominationalism is wrong
 - b. To illustrate how one can simply be a Christian, serving Jesus without being a member of any denomination
 - c. To suggest how followers of Christ might be able *"to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* - cf. **Ep 4:3**

4. In this particular lesson, I wish to explain...
 - a. Why Denominationalism is wrong
 - b. Why anyone who truly follows Christ will do all they can to avoid participating in it

[First, perhaps a definition of terms is in order...]

I. DEFINING DENOMINATION AND DENOMINATIONALISM

A. WHAT IS A "DENOMINATION"?

1. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: **"A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy."**
2. From Webster's: **"A religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body a number of local congregations."**
3. In simple laymen terms, a denomination is a group of congregations that are joined

- together under some governing body
- a. The number of congregations can be as few as two or more
 - b. But by their tie to a governing body above the local congregation, by definition they are "denominated" from all congregations that do not submit to the same authority
4. Some examples:
- a. **The Roman Catholic Church** is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the pope in Rome
 - b. **The Eastern Orthodox Church** is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the patriarch of Constantinople
 - c. **The Anglican Church of England** is a denomination made up of those churches that submit to the archbishop of Canterbury
 - d. **The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod)** is made up of those churches that submit to the synod in Missouri
 - e. **The International Church of Christ** is made up of those churches that submit to the Boston Church of Christ
- These are just a few of the thousands of different denominations that now exist!

B. WHAT IS "DENOMINATIONALISM"?

1. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, it is:
 - a. **"The tendency to separate into religious denominations"**
 - b. **"Advocacy of separation into religious denominations"**
 - c. **"Strict adherence to a denomination; sectarianism"**
2. Again, Webster's dictionary defines it as:
 - a. **"Devotion to denominational principles or interests"**
 - b. **"Narrow emphasizing of denominational differences: SECTARIANISM"**
3. For the purpose in this series, I will be applying the term to any approval of the denominational division which exists today
 - a. I concede that many people in denominations today are not all that devoted to their denominational principles or interests
 - b. But by membership in a denomination they are by implication advocating separation into religious denominations

[But is Denominationalism really all that bad? Am I suggesting that one cannot serve Christ faithfully while participating in religious division? The answer to both questions is "Yes!" To understand the reason for saying this, let's examine...]

II. WHY DENOMINATIONALISM IS WRONG

A. IT IS UN-SCRIPTURAL...

1. That is, it is without Scriptural support
 - a. There is no basis in the Bible for local churches being divided up into various denominational bodies
 - b. There is no denomination that can go to the Bible and say, "See that passage? There is our church (denomination)!"
2. In the New Testament...

- a. Local congregations were independent, self-governing
- b. Church organization was limited to within the local congregation, with elders (also known as pastors, bishops, overseers, presbyters) appointed to oversee only the congregation of which they were members - cf. **Ac 20:17,28; 1 Pe 5:1-2**
3. The only authority above the local church in the New Testament was Christ and His apostles...
 - a. Once the church began, apostles were not replaced after they died
 - b. But through the Word of God, the authority of Christ and His apostles continues
4. Individuals, synods, conferences, etc., that presume to usurp authority over local congregations today do so without Scriptural authority

B. IT IS ANTI-SCRIPTURAL...

1. I.e., not only is it without scriptural support, it is contrary to what the Bible teaches
2. It is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for unity among His believers - **Jn 17:20-23**
3. It is condemned by Paul in his epistle to the church at Corinth
 - a. There are to be no divisions among believers - **1 Co 1:10-13**
 - b. Sectarianism is a sign of carnality - **1 Co 3:3-4**
4. It opposes the efforts of Christ on the cross! - **Ep 2:14-16**
 - a. Jesus died to break down the wall of division
 - b. Jesus died to reconcile man to God in ONE body-- Just as sinning works against the efforts of Christ on the cross (for He also died to put away sin), so it is with denominational division!

C. IT IS HARMFUL TO THE CAUSE OF CHRIST...

1. Jesus knew that unity among His disciples would be "the final apologetic"
 - a. Cf. "that the world may believe" - **Jn 17:21**
 - b. In view of Jesus' words, we should not be surprised when unbelievers are slow to accept the gospel coming from a divided church
2. Many people point to the divided condition of those professing to follow Christ...
 - a. Atheists and agnostics often use religious division as an excuse not to believe in God
 - b. Adherents to non-Christian religions (such as Islam, Judaism, etc.) will often use denominationalism as a reason not to believe in Christ
3. Denominationalism has also given support and encouragement to the cults
 - a. Mormonism started in reaction to the denominationalism of Joseph Smith's day
 - b. Those who call themselves "Jehovah's Witnesses" use religious division to encourage people to follow their strictly-controlled organization

D. OTHERS WHO VIEWED DENOMINATIONALISM AS WRONG...

1. **Martin Luther**, the leader of the Reformation Movement:

"I ask that men make no reference to my name, and call themselves not Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? My doctrine, I am sure, is not mine, nor have I been crucified for any one. St. Paul, in 1 Cor. 3, would not allow Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I, poor, foul carcass that I am, come to have men give to the children of

Christ a name derived from my worthless name? No, no, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names, and call ourselves Christians after Him Whose doctrine we have."

- Hugh Thomason Kerr, A Compend of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943, p. 135)

2. **John Wesley**, another great reformation leader, among whose followers are Methodists, Wesleyans, etc.:

"Would to God that all party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world, were forgot and that the very name [Methodist] might never be mentioned more, but be buried in eternal oblivion."

- John Wesley, Universal Knowledge, A Dictionary and Encyclopedia of Arts, Science, History, Biography, Law, Literature, Religions, Nations, Races, Customs, and Institutions, Vol. 9, Edward A. Pace, Editor (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1927, p. 540)

3. **Charles Spurgeon**, one of the greatest Baptist preachers who ever lived:

"I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living! I hope that the Baptist name will soon perish, but let Christ's name last forever."

- Spurgeon Memorial Library, Vol. I., p. 168

CONCLUSION

1. Well, that day has not yet come, and denominationalism with its religious division seems to be as strong as ever!
2. But all is not lost...
 - a. For throughout the world, more and more people are throwing aside their denominational shackles
 - b. They are following Jesus Christ in the freedom of gospel liberty that comes from being simply Christians!
 - c. And what may be a surprise to some, they are able to do so **"being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind"** - cf. **Ph 2:2**
3. How is this possible?
 - a. That is what I hope to demonstrate starting with the next lesson
 - b. But it begins with two things:
 - 1) A strong desire to follow Jesus Christ and His prayer for unity - cf. **Jn 17:20-23**
 - 2) An understanding of the carnal nature of division, and why denominationalism is wrong - cf. **1 Co 3:3-4**

Dear friend, don't you want to be simply a Christian, a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ...?

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

The Way Out Of Religious Division

INTRODUCTION

1. In our previous lesson, I began this series by defining the terms denomination and denominationalism...
 - a. **"denomination"** - a group of congregations that are joined together under some governing body, that effectively serves to distinguish and divide them from other congregations
 - b. **"denominationalism"** - advocacy of separation into religious denominations
2. I also suggested three reasons why "denominationalism" is wrong...
 - a. It is un-scriptural (i.e., without scriptural support)
 - b. It is anti-scriptural (e.g., **Jn 17:20-23; 1 Co 1:10-13; 3:3-4**)
 - c. It is harmful to the cause of Christ (by discouraging people from believing in Christ - **Jn 17:21**)
3. But is it possible for people today to simply be Christians, without being a member of any man-made denomination?
 - a. The answer is "Yes!"
 - b. Indeed, by following the example of Jesus Himself, we can be members of His body, the Lord's church, just as we read about in the scriptures!

[To see how, let's start by noticing Jesus' own example in the religious climate of His day...]

I. THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

A. THE RELIGIOUS CLIMATE OF HIS DAY...

1. When Jesus came to this earth, the Israelites were living under the Law of God as given by Moses
2. In that law, God had not made any provision for the division of His people into religious sects or parties
3. Yet, by the time of Jesus, the Jews had formed several distinct religious parties:
 - a. Pharisees (somewhat conservative)
 - b. Sadducees (very liberal, the "modernists" of their day)
 - c. Essenes (radical isolationists)
 - d. Herodians, Zealots (political religionists)
4. It was assumed that all who were serious about religion would be associated with one of these groups

B. WHAT JESUS DID THEN...

1. To which of these groups did Jesus belong? He belonged to NONE of these groups!

2. Instead, He maintained a "nonsectarian" relationship with God to the very end
 - a. As an Israelite, living at a time when the Law of Moses was still in effect, He was simply an "Israelite"
 - b. In addition, He encouraged all to live by the Law while it was still in effect - cf. **Mt 5:17-20**
 - c. In other words, He encouraged all to simply be what the Law of Moses intended them to be (i.e., "Israelites")

C. WHAT WOULD JESUS BE TODAY?

1. Would He be a Baptist, or Catholic, or Presbyterian, or Methodist, etc.?
2. If He was simply an Israelite then, would He not simply be a "Christian" today?
3. That was certainly what His disciples came to be called - cf. **Ac 11:26**

[The example Jesus has set for us is clear: just be what God originally intended under the Law which is in effect. Since in the New Testament (the "law of Christ" cf. **1 Co 9:21**) the disciples of Christ were called "Christians", so we should be!

Not only should we be content with being "called" Christians, we should also be concerned with "just being Christians". **Nothing more, nothing less!** But how can we be sure that we are simply Christians, members of the church we read about in the New Testament? It helps to see what the Bible tells us about ...]

II. THE LORD'S CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY

A. PROMISED BY JESUS...

1. Jesus promised to build HIS church - cf. **Mt 16:18**
2. The word "church" comes from the Greek word **ekklesia**, which means "a called-out group, an assembly, a congregation"
3. Therefore, Jesus was promising to create His own group of people who have been "called"

B. ESTABLISHED THROUGH PREACHING THE GOSPEL...

1. How does this "calling" take place?
2. According to the apostle Paul, we are "called" by the gospel of Christ - **2 Th 2:14**
3. On the first Pentecost after the ascension of Christ, we see by preaching the gospel Peter "called out" those who were willing to express their faith in Jesus - **Ac 2:38-41**
4. Notice that those who gladly responded in faith, repentance and baptism were "added"
 - a. To what and by whom were they "added"?
 - b. We find the answer in verse **47**: *"And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."*
5. The day of Pentecost was the beginning of the Lord's church (His "ekklesia")
6. This "called-out" assembly or group was created when the gospel was proclaimed and people responded to it

C. EXPANDED THROUGH PREACHING THE GOSPEL...

1. At first, the church existed only in Jerusalem

2. As the gospel spread, and people responded to it, groups of these saved people in various cities met together
3. Each group became known as a church in a **local** sense (in contrast to the church **universal** which is made up of all those saved throughout the world)
4. For example, during Paul's first missionary journey, many such churches were established - **Ac 14:21-23**
5. By simply teaching the gospel of Christ, a local church was formed when those who obeyed the gospel joined together in their work and worship

D. EDIFIED THROUGH THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE...

1. Though united in Christ, these local churches were independent of any human association or federation of churches
2. Christ directed them through His inspired apostles, as they taught them how to worship and work together - cf. **Ac 2:42**
3. Sometimes this teaching by the apostles was done directly, other times by appointed emissaries - e.g., **1 Co 4:17**
4. Just as often, the teaching was done through the epistles or letters written by the apostles - cf. **1 Co 14:37; 1 Ti 3:14-15; 2 Th 2:14-15; 3:14**

[When we read what the Bible says us about the Lord's church, we learn that by responding to the gospel and paying close heed to the "apostles' doctrine" (cf. **Ac 2:42**), people in the first century were able to be Christians only, without all the confusion prevalent today. Is it possible for us to do this today? Yes! Here is...]

III. THE WAY OUT OF RELIGIOUS DIVISION

A. ACCEPT THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL...

1. Remember, Christ calls us into His ekklesia (church) through the gospel
 2. Therefore, we can begin by obeying the same instructions that Peter gave on the Day of Pentecost - **Ac 2:38**
 3. Repenting of our sins, and being baptized for the remission of our sins, we then receive the same blessings as did the 3000 on that day: **salvation!**
 4. By being saved in this manner, we **know** that the Lord truly adds us to **His** church just as He added them - cf. **Ac 2:47**
- What then...?

B. FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS...

1. The early Christians continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine - **Ac 2:42**
 - a. They joined no other religious organization, and neither should we!
 - b. In Christ, we are automatically united with all others who are in Him!
2. As members of the Lord's church, we should study carefully the New Testament description of the church that continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine
 - a. This description is found in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles which follow it
 - b. It is here that we will find instruction from the Lord's apostles on HOW:
 - 1) To worship the Lord acceptably
 - 2) To be scripturally organized as local congregations

- 3) To live and work together as Christians, spreading the gospel of Christ through word and example
3. Since the apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit, we may be sure their instructions were exactly what Jesus wanted them to be!
 - a. If we duplicate the early churches by following the apostles' instructions, we will simply be "Christians", and we can be certain the Lord is pleased with us
 - b. As Jesus said to His apostles about those who would receive or reject their instructions: ***"He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me."*** - Lk 10:16

CONCLUSION

1. Simply being a Christian, and duplicating a New Testament congregation is not as difficult as one might think..
 - a. There are literally thousands of such congregations throughout the world
 - b. **There is likely one in your area right now!** (Feel free to contact me if you would like to try and locate the nearest one.)
 - c. There is also the option of starting a congregation in your own home
2. By following the example and teachings of Jesus, as revealed by His apostles, we can be led out of the religious confusion that dominates the religious world today!
3. Do you want to be simply a Christian, a member of the Lord's church we read about in the New Testament?
 - a. If so, then I plead with you to first render obedience to the gospel of Christ as proclaimed by Peter and all the apostles - cf. **Ac 2:36-38**
 - b. You have the assurance of God's Word that you will then be added by the Lord Himself to His church - cf. **Ac 2:47**
 - c. Then, you have the responsibility to learn and follow the apostles' doctrine as you serve the Lord Jesus in your life - cf. **Ac 2:42**

If you have not yet responded to the commands of the gospel as put forth by Peter in **Ac 2:38**, why not let the reaction of those who did on the Day of Pentecost describe your actions today:

"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." - Ac 2:41

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

Accepting The Call Of The Gospel

INTRODUCTION

1. In the last lesson I proposed the following as the way out of religious division...
 - a. First, follow the example of Jesus and maintain a "non-sectarian" relationship with God
 - 1) Living under the Old Covenant, He was simply an Israelite, as the Law intended
 - 2) Living under the New Covenant, His disciples were simply called "Christians", and so should we! - cf. **Ac 11:26; 1 Pe 4:16**
 - b. Second, to ensure that we are truly members of Christ's body, the church (i.e., His "called-out" ones)...
 - 1) Let us be sure that we have answered the call of the gospel, by which He adds us to His Church (and not some denomination begun by man) - **2 Th 2:14; Ac 2:41,47**
 - 2) Let us follow the example of the early church, who "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" - **Ac 2:42**
2. An important key, then, is that we properly answer the call of the gospel...
 - a. For through the gospel Christ is calling us into His church
 - b. When we accept the gospel call, by God's grace we receive salvation and the Lord adds us to His church
3. Unfortunately, there have always been those who have "perverted" certain elements of the gospel...
 - a. In the first century, Paul wrote of those who had perverted the gospel by trying to add elements of the Old Law to it - **Ga 1:8-9**; cf. **Ac 15:1,6**
 - b. Later, others attempted to change the basis of salvation by teaching a salvation of works, rather than by grace through faith
 - c. Even today, many pervert the gospel by the manner they call upon people to respond to the gospel, leaving out the proper response as taught by Christ and His apostles
 - For this reason, it is important that we understand the gospel of Christ, and how to properly accept the call of the gospel!
4. There are several good ways to summarize the gospel that makes it easy to remember, and one was that suggested by Walter Scott...
 - a. Not Sir Walter Scott, the British author who wrote "Ivanhoe"
 - b. But a kinsman born in Scotland (1796), who came to America and proclaimed the gospel throughout Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Kentucky
 - c. In his study of the gospel, Walter Scott summarized it as containing...
 - 1) Facts to be believed
 - 2) Commands to be obeyed
 - 3) Promises to be received
 - d. Indeed, accepting the call of the gospel involves a person accepting the "facts,"

"commands," and "promises" contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ

[To elaborate, let's consider first of all that to accept the call of the gospel one must...]

I. BELIEVE THE "FACTS" OF THE GOSPEL

A. JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED FOR OUR SINS...

1. The death of Jesus for our sins is a fundamental part of the gospel - **1 Co 15:1-3**
2. It was foretold by Isaiah - **Isa 53:4-6**
3. It's necessity is seen in that all are sinners, and the wages of sin is death - **Ro 3:23; 6:23**
4. But in love, God sent His son to be a propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins - **1 Jn 4:9-10**

B. JESUS WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD...

1. Together with His death and burial, the resurrection of Christ is fundamental to the gospel - **1 Co 15:4**
2. In the first gospel sermon recorded, Peter centered his message around proving that God raised Jesus from the dead - **Ac 2:22-32**
3. Without the resurrection of Christ, the gospel is meaningless - cf. **1 Co 15:14-19**

C. JESUS IS EXALTED AS KING AND SAVIOR...

1. So Peter proclaimed at the climax of his first gospel sermon - cf. **Ac 2:33-36**
2. All have been put under His feet, and made subject to Him - **Ep 1:20-22; 1 Pe 3:22**
3. Therefore He is truly "the ruler over the kings of the earth"! - **Re 1:5**

D. JESUS IS COMING AGAIN...

1. As prophesied in the Book of Revelation - **Re 1:7**
2. As proclaimed by the "two men in white apparel" when Jesus ascended to heaven - **Ac 1:9-11**
3. The purpose of His coming? To execute judgment and be glorified! - **2 Th 1:7-10**

[Certainly there are other elements of the gospel necessary for us to believe (such as the virgin birth of Christ, His deity, etc.), but in the preaching of the gospel as recording in the book of Acts, the facts which I have described were emphasized time and again.

Do you believe the "facts" of the gospel? If so, that is wonderful, for when you have such faith you will be prompted to accept the call of the gospel to...]

II. OBEY THE "COMMANDS" OF THE GOSPEL

A. BELIEVE THE GOSPEL CONCERNING JESUS CHRIST...

1. Yes, this sounds redundant, but it is important to stress two things:
 - a. That there are indeed "commands" one must obey to be saved
 - b. And that the first command is to "believe"!
2. Unless one believes the gospel, there is no hope - **Mk 16:15-16**

3. The gospel is God's power unto salvation, but only to those who believe - **Ro 1:16**
4. Faith (along with confession) is a necessary step leading to salvation - **Ro 10:9-10**
 - a. Without faith it is impossible to please God - **He 11:6**
 - b. Without faith, one will not act upon the other conditions of the gospel (such as confession, repentance, etc.)
5. Do you lack faith? Then I direct you to the four gospels (Matt, Mark, Luke, John)
 - a. For they were written to produce faith - cf. **Jn 20:30-31**
 - b. For faith comes from hearing the Word of God - **Ro 10:17**

B. CONFESS YOUR FAITH IN JESUS AS LORD...

1. In addition to the command to believe, there is the command to confess Jesus as Lord - cf. **Ro 10:9-10**
2. This means to acknowledge that you believe Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, who is "King of kings, and Lord of lords"
3. An example of such a confession is found in **Ac 8:37**
4. Without confessing Jesus before men, we have no hope that He will confess us before His Father in heaven - cf. **Mt 10:32-33**
5. Are you willing to confess that you believe Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God?

C. REPENT OF YOUR SINS...

1. To "repent" means to have "a change of mind", in which case you make the decision to turn from your sins and turn toward living for God
 - a. It is brought about by a "godly sorrow" for your sins - **2 Co 7:10**
 - b. And it will produce a visible change in one's life - **2 Co 7:11**
2. Jesus said that "repentance" should be preached in His name among the nations - **Lk 24:46-47**
3. Indeed, the apostles Peter and Paul both stressed repentance in their gospel preaching - cf. **Ac 2:37-38; 3:19; 17:30-31**
4. Dear friend, has faith in what Christ did for you on the cross and sorrow over your sins moved you to the point that you have made the decision to change?
5. If so, then you are ready for the culminating act of faith and obedience to the gospel of Christ...

D. BE BAPTIZED FOR THE REMISSION OF YOUR SINS...

1. Baptism is clearly a part of the gospel message that Jesus wanted His disciples to proclaim - **Mk 16:15-16; Mt 28:18-20**
2. Peter proclaimed baptism for the remission of sins in his first sermon - **Ac 2:38**
3. Paul related that he was commanded to be baptized "to wash away sins" - **Ac 22:16**
4. Not that there is anything in the act of immersion (the meaning of "baptizo") that merits or earns forgiveness, but it is simply the point of time in which God by His grace unites us with Christ in His death, and by His working in conjunction with our faith raises us to walk in newness of life!
 - a. **Ro 6:3-6** describes baptism as the point in time we are united into the death of Christ at which point we die to sin and thereby raised to newness of life
 - b. **Co 2:11-13** reveals that in baptism we are buried with Christ and then raised through faith in God's working who makes us alive in Christ by forgiving us of our

sins!

5. Dear friend, have you been baptized for the remission of your sins? If not, are you willing to let God cleanse you through the blood of His Son and raise you to a new life?

E. BE FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH...

1. Those who gladly received the preaching of the apostles were baptized, and the Lord added them to His church - **Ac 2:41,47**
2. So while in one sense the "commands" of the gospel end with the command to be baptized, there is also the command of our Lord for faithfulness
 - a. Jesus wanted His disciples to teach others *"to observe all things that I have commanded you"* - **Mt 28:19-20**
 - b. Jesus exhorted His church in Ephesus: *"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."* - **Re 2:10**
3. The need for continued faithfulness is paramount:
 - a. For believers can develop an evil heart of unbelief in falling away from God - **He 3:12**
 - b. For believers can become hardened through the deceitfulness of sin - **He 3:13**
 - c. And believers become partakers of Christ only *"IF we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end"* - **He 3:14**
4. Therefore the need for such exhortations as the one given by Paul: *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."* - **1 Co 15:58**

[Finally, to fully accept the call of the gospel, we need to...]

III. RECEIVE THE "PROMISES" OF THE GOSPEL

A. THE REMISSION OF SINS...

1. As stated by Jesus, remission of sins was to be proclaimed among all nations - **Lk 24:47**
2. Faithful to the Lord's charge, the early Christians offered this wonderful promise to those who would heed the commands of the gospel - cf. **Ac 2:38; 3:19; 22:16**
3. In their epistles, the writers would often refer to this wonderful blessing - e.g., **Ep 1:7**
 -- Don't you want the assurance that your sins have been forgiven, washed away by the blood of Christ? Then heed the commands of the gospel! - **Ac 2:38**

B. THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT...

1. Jesus had spoken of those who believe in Him receiving the Spirit in a special way - cf. **Jn 7:37-39**
2. Thus Peter offers the gift of the Spirit to those who will obey God - **Ac 2:38-39; 5:32**
3. The blessing of having the Spirit in our lives is related to His indwelling...
 - a. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit - **1 Co 6:19**
 - b. With the aid of the Spirit, we are able to put to death the deeds of the flesh - **Ro 8:9,11-13**
 - c. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is an instrumental agent by which the Father imparts

strength to the Christian - **Ep 3:16,20-21**

- Dear friend, God does not expect you to live the Christian life solely by your own strength; don't you wish to receive all of the aids (the Holy Spirit is only one such aid) that God affords His children? Then heed the commands of the gospel! - **Ac 2:38**

C. THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE...

1. The expression "eternal life" is an interesting one, evidently used in two different ways in the scriptures
 - a. It is used to describe the reward of the faithful, received on the day of judgment
 - 1) Jesus used it this way in **Mt 25:46**
 - 2) Paul, likewise, describing it as gift from God through Jesus Christ - **Ro 6:23** (cf. **6:22**; also **2:5-8**)
 - b. It is also used to describe the spiritual life we now enjoy by virtue of our knowledge of (or fellowship with) the Father and the Son
 - 1) Jesus describes it as such in **Jn 17:2-3**
 - 2) As well as His beloved disciple, John, in **1 Jn 5:11-13**
2. Thus the gift of eternal life is one that has "promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (to borrow a phrase from Paul)

-- Aren't you tired of the shallow life this world has to offer? Don't you wish to receive that "abundant life" that Jesus came to give (cf. **Jn 10:10**)? Then heed the commands of the gospel! - **Mk 16:16**

CONCLUSION

1. These wonderful promises (and there are many more) can be received by anyone who is willing to heed and accept the call of the gospel of Christ
 - a. Those who do, will not only receive these blessings
 - b. But they will also be added by the Lord to His church, that great assembly of "called-out" ones who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb
2. Have you accepted the "call" of the gospel? Have you...
 - a. Believed the "facts" of the gospel?
 - b. Obeyed the "commands" of the gospel?
 - c. Thereby received the "promises" of the gospel?
3. It is possible that you have only obeyed some of the "commands" of the gospel...
 - a. Many have believed, repented, confessed, but were never baptized
 - b. Because you rarely hear preachers stressing that aspect of the gospel in their preaching
4. Sadly, I fear that many...
 - a. Have reacted to one "perversion" of the gospel (adding meritorious works)
 - b. By going to the other extreme where they commit another "perversion" of the gospel (taking away a command of God)

I plan to discuss the subject of "baptism" more closely in the next lesson, but if you are convinced that you need to obey Christ in this regard, why not do so today?

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism Is Baptism A Necessary Part Of The Gospel?

INTRODUCTION

1. Following Jesus without denominationalism begins by heeding the call of the gospel...
 - a. For the Lord "calls" us through His gospel - **2 Th 2:14**
 - b. As we respond to the call, the Lord Himself adds us to His church (His "called-out" group of people), not some man-made denomination - **Ac 2:41,47**

2. In the previous lesson, I presented the gospel of Christ as containing...
 - a. **"Facts" to believe:**
 - 1) Jesus was crucified for our sins
 - 2) Jesus was raised from the dead
 - 3) Jesus is exalted as king and savior
 - 4) Jesus is coming again
 - b. **"Commands" to obey:**
 - 1) Believe the gospel concerning Jesus Christ
 - 2) Confess your faith in Jesus as Lord
 - 3) Repent of your sins
 - 4) Be baptized for the remission of your sins
 - 5) Be faithful unto death
 - c. **"Promises" to receive:**
 - 1) The remission of sins
 - 2) The gift of the Holy Spirit
 - 3) The gift of eternal life

-- In most cases, I have found that there is very little exception taken to the above, save for one thing: the suggestion that baptism is a necessary part of the gospel of Christ

3. Many people have a problem with the idea that baptism is for the remission of sins; they believe...
 - a. Baptism has nothing to do with God's plan of salvation
 - b. To suggest baptism is necessary is to deny we are justified by grace through faith
 - c. To teach baptism is for the remission of sins is to teach a salvation by works, not by grace

4. This raises the question, **"Is Baptism A Necessary Part Of The Gospel?"** In other words...
 - a. Is baptism really for the remission of sins?
 - b. If so, then how can we say that we are justified by grace through faith, and not of works?

[I believe it is helpful to answer these questions by first observing a few quotations by certain individuals none would ever question of denying that we are saved by grace through faith...]

I. THE WORDS OF AUGUSTINE, AQUINAS AND LUTHER

A. AUGUSTINE (A.D. 354-430)

1. Referring to the efficacy of baptism, he wrote that **"the salvation of man is effected in baptism"**; also, that a person **"is baptized for the express purpose of being with Christ."** (as quoted by Jack W. Cottrell in *Baptism And The Remission of Sins*, College Press, 1990, p. 30)
2. In regards to the necessity of baptism, he refers to the **"apostolic tradition, by which the Churches of Christ maintain it to be an inherent principle, that without baptism...it is impossible for any man to attain to salvation and everlasting life."** (ibid., p. 30)

B. THOMAS AQUINAS (A.D. 1225-1274)

1. **"...Men are bound to that without which they cannot obtain salvation. Now it is manifest that no one can obtain salvation but through Christ..."**
2. **"But for this end is baptism conferred on a man, that being regenerated thereby, he may be incorporated in Christ."**
3. **"Consequently it is manifest that all are bound to be baptized: and that without baptism there is no salvation for men."** (ibid., p. 31)

C. MARTIN LUTHER...

1. In answer to the question, "What gifts or benefits does Baptism bestow?", Luther replied in his Small Catechism, **"It effects forgiveness of sins."**
2. He also wrote concerning the sinner: **"Through Baptism he is bathed in the blood of Christ and is cleansed from sins."**
3. Again, he wrote: **"To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save."** (ibid., p. 32-34)
4. In his commentary on **Ro 6:3**, he wrote: **"Baptism has been instituted that it should lead us to the blessings (of this death) and through such death to eternal life. Therefore IT IS NECESSARY that we should be baptized into Jesus Christ and His death."** (Commentary On Romans, Kregel Publications, p. 101)
5. In his commentary on **Ga 3:27**, he wrote: **"This is diligently to be noted, because of the fond and fantastical spirits, who go about to deface the majesty of baptism, and speak wickedly of it. Paul, contrariwise, commendeth it, and setteth it forth with honourable titles, calling it, 'the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost'. And here also he saith, that 'all ye that are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.' Wherefore baptism is a thing of great force and efficacy."** (Commentary On Galatians, Kregel Publications, p.222)

[I trust that we all know that these individuals believed strongly in justification by grace through faith, and not of works (cf. **Ep 2:8-9**). How then could they say such things about baptism? The key is to understand "who" is at work in baptism. Is it man, or is it God?]

II. THE SAVING POWER INVOLVED IN BAPTISM

A. BAPTISM DOES NOT SAVE BECAUSE IT MERITS SALVATION...

1. Nearly everyone I talk to who takes issue with baptism being necessary, or having any part of the gospel plan of salvation, initially misunderstands this point

- a. They assume that if baptism is necessary, one is saved by meritorious works
 - b. They assume that if one is baptized for the remission of sins, one has earned their salvation
2. But they need to listen carefully to Martin Luther...
- a. In response to those who would call this a kind of works-salvation, he said **"Yes, it is true that our works are of no use for salvation. Baptism, however, is not our work but God's."** (ibid., p. 32-34)
 - b. Again, **"Luther correctly describes the working of baptism thus: 'How can water do such great things? It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God which is in and with the water (God's giving hand), and faith which trusts such word of God in the water (man's receiving hand).'"** (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, page 398-399).

B. BAPTISM SAVES BECAUSE "GOD" IS AT WORK!

1. Note that Peter clearly says that **"baptism doth also now save us"** (KJV) - **1 Pe 3:21**
2. But as observed by Luther, it is God who saves us in baptism:
 - a. He is the one at work in baptism - **Co 2:11-13** (cf. **"the working of God"**)
 - b. Other than possessing faith in Christ and God, MAN IS PASSIVE in baptism
 - 1) Like a patient submitting to the skill of a physician to remove cancer
 - 2) So we, seeking the removal of the cancer of sin, submit to the Great Physician to cut away our sins by the blood of Christ, which He does in baptism
 - c. It is God who makes us alive together with Christ, having forgiven all trespasses - **Co 2:13**
3. As stated in ISBE: **"Baptism does not produce salutary effects ~ex~opere~operato~, i.e. by the mere external performance of the baptismal action. No instrument with which Divine grace works does. Even the preaching of the gospel is void of saving results if not 'mixed with faith' (Heb 4.2, AV)."**
 - a. It is not the "act" of immersion that saves, though salvation occurs at that time
 - b. It is GOD who saves in baptism, by virtue of grace, when one believes in Christ!
 - c. But because God commands baptism, and saves us in baptism, it is proper to say...
 - 1) With Peter: **"baptism doth also now save us"** - **1 Pe 3:21**
 - 2) With Jesus: **"He who believes and is baptized shall be saved..."** - **Mk 16:16**

[When we properly understand that it is God doing the work of salvation in baptism, then we can better understand why the command to be baptized is such an integral part of the gospel. Allow me to expand on this point...]

III. BAPTISM AS INTEGRAL TO THE GOSPEL

A. I AM ENCOURAGED TO SEE OTHERS RETURN TO THIS EMPHASIS...

1. I am excited to see that many people are beginning to carefully restudy the biblical evidence concerning baptism, and returning to what was taught for nearly 1500 years
2. For example, G.R. Beasley-Murray, Principal of Spurgeon's College in London, later Senior Professor at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY, wrote a modern classic, Baptism In The New Testament. He gives chapters which thoroughly discuss baptism in the Gospels, in Acts, in Paul's writings, and in other apostolic writings

3. In his introduction, Beasley-Murray said:
 - a. **"This book is intended to offer a Baptist contribution to the discussions on baptism that are taking place throughout the Christian world."**
 - b. **"But the indefinite article should be observed; the impression must not be given that my interpretations are characteristic of Baptist thought generally. At most it can be claimed that they represent a trend gaining momentum among Baptists in Europe."**
 - c. **"I have striven to interpret the evidence of the New Testament as a Christian scholar, rather than as a member of a particular Christian Confession."**

-- G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism In The New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962, pp. v-vi.
4. From his chapter on baptism in Acts, Beasley-Murray said:
 - a. **"Consequently, baptism is regarded in Acts as the occasion and means of receiving the blessings conferred by the Lord of the Kingdom. Admittedly, this way of reading the evidence is not characteristic of our thinking, but the intention of the author is tolerably clear." (Ibid., p. 102)**
 - b. **"Whatever the relationship between baptism and the gift of the Spirit elsewhere in Acts, there appears to be no doubt as to the intention of Acts 2:38; the penitent believer baptized in the name of Jesus Christ may expect to receive at once the Holy Spirit, even as he is assured of the immediate forgiveness of his sins." (Ibid., p. 108)**
5. Some concluding statements were:
 - a. **"In light of the foregoing exposition of the New Testament representations of baptism, the idea that baptism is a purely symbolic rite must be pronounced not alone unsatisfactory but out of harmony with the New Testament itself. Admittedly, such a judgment runs counter to the popular tradition of the Denomination to which the writer belongs..."**
 - b. **"The extent and nature of the grace which the New Testament writers declare to be present in baptism is astonishing for any who come to the study freshly with an open mind."**
 - c. **"...the 'grace' available to man in baptism is said by the New Testament writers to include the following elements:**
 - 1) **forgiveness of sin, Ac 2.38 and cleansing from sins, Ac 22.16, 2 Co 6.11;**
 - 2) **union with Christ, Ga 3.27, and particularly union with Him in his death and resurrection, Ro. 6.3ff, Co 2.11f, with all that implies of release from sin's power, as well as guilt, and the sharing of the risen life of the Redeemer, Ro 6.1-11;**
 - 3) **participation in Christ's sonship, Ga 3.26f;**
 - 4) **consecration to God, 1 Co 6.11, hence membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, 1 Co 12.13, Ga 3.27-29;**
 - 5) **possession of the Spirit, Ac 2.38, 1 Co 6.11, 12.13, and therefore the new life in the Spirit, i.e., regeneration, Ti 3.5, Jn 3.5;**
 - 6) **grace to live according to the will of God, Ro 6.1ff, Co 3.1ff;**
 - 7) **deliverance from the evil powers that rule this world, Co 1.13;**
 - 8) **the inheritance of the Kingdom of God, Jn 3.5, and the pledge of the resurrection of the body, Ep 1.3f, 4.30.**

-- Ibid., pp. 263-264

B. ONE CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT PREACH THE GOSPEL WITHOUT MENTIONING THE COMMAND TO BE BAPTIZED...

1. Peter proclaimed the command to be baptized in the first gospel sermon - **Ac 2:36-38**
 2. Philip, when he preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch, must have proclaimed baptism in his message about Jesus, in view of the question raised: *"See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"* - **Ac 8:35-36**
 3. Indeed, Beasley-Murray stated the following conclusion in a chapter entitled "Baptismal Reform and Church Relationships":
 - a. **"First, there ought to be a greater endeavor to make baptism integral to the gospel."**
 - b. **"It is taken as axiomatic amongst us [Baptists] that the proclamation of the Gospel consists of making the redemptive acts of God in Christ known and calling for faith in Christ as the due response; baptism is then a proper subject for exposition in the enquirers' class, along with instruction as to the nature of the Church, of worship, of Christian obligation in the Church and to the world, etc."**
 - c. **"Peter's response, however, to the cry of his conscience stricken hearers on the Day of Pentecost was not "Repent and believe", but "Repent and BE BAPTIZED"! (Ac 2.38).**
 - d. **"Naturally faith was presumed in repentance, but Peter's answer told the Jews how to become Christians: faith and repentance are to be expressed in baptism, and SO they are to come to the Lord."**
 - e. **"Baptism is here a part of the proclamation of Christ. In an Apostolic sermon it comes as its logical conclusion."**
 - f. **"An effort ought to be made to restore this note in our [Baptist] preaching."**
- Ibid., p. 393

CONCLUSION

1. I could not say it better myself, other than to add that an effort ought to be made to restore this note in EVERYONE'S preaching!
2. Let's be sure to follow the example of apostolic preaching (cf. **Ac 2:36-38**)...
 - a. Calling upon people not only to believe in Jesus and repent of their sins
 - b. But to climax their response to the gospel by submitting to the Lord's command to be baptized for the remission of their sins
3. For then we can be assured that we will receive all those blessings the Bible ascribes to the act of baptism (see Beasley-Murray's summary above), by virtue of God's gracious working!

Dear friend, have you responded to the saving call of our Lord's wonderful gospel?

"And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." - Ac 22:16

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

Determining Our Standard Of Authority

INTRODUCTION

1. As dealt with in previous lessons, following Jesus without denominationalism begins by heeding the call of the gospel...
 - a. For the Lord "calls" us through His gospel - **2 Th 2:14**
 - b. As we respond to the call, the Lord Himself adds us to His church (His "called-out" group of people), not a man-made denomination - **Ac 2:41,47**
2. But I also suggested that if we are to be simply Christians, members of the Lord's church as we read about in the New Testament, then we must follow the example of the early church who *"continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine..."* - cf. **Ac 2:42**
3. The importance of this relates very closely to the subject of **authority in religion...**
 - a. It is impossible to maintain unity unless we can agree upon a "standard" of authority
 - b. This is true in all areas of life
 - 1) Imagine the confusion if we did not have a standard of authority relating to weights and measures
 - 2) We could not even agree on the length of a line, the volume of a tank of gasoline, etc.
 - 3) Confusion would reign supreme in the market place if we did not all agree on one standard of authority in regards to weights and measures
 - c. An essential key to having unity on any subject is this: **We must accept and submit to the same standard of authority!**
4. This is especially true in matters of religion...
 - a. If people can agree on the standard of authority in religious matters, unity is possible when we submit to that same standard
 - b. There are other elements necessary to have unity (which I will discuss in a later lesson), but without a standard of authority upon which we all agree, unity is impossible!

[What should be the standard of authority for Christ's church? Let's begin with a point with which I am sure all those professing to be Christians can agree...]

I. JESUS CHRIST HAS BEEN GIVEN ALL AUTHORITY

A. SO HE CLAIMED...

1. He claimed all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him - **Mt 28:18**
2. He therefore expects us to observe all things He has commanded - **Mt 28:19-20**

B. SO HIS APOSTLES TAUGHT...

1. He is HEAD of the BODY (the church) - **Ep 1:22-23**

2. As such, we are to submit to Him in everything - **Ep 5:23-24**

[If Jesus were on earth today, we could solve all religious questions by simply asking Him. But since He is not on earth, what then? This leads to our next point...]

II. JESUS HAS DELEGATED AUTHORITY TO HIS APOSTLES

A. TO RECEIVE CHRIST, WE MUST RECEIVE HIS APOSTLES...

1. As Jesus taught in **Jn 13:20**
 - a. Please note that the word "apostle" means "one sent"
 - b. So as Jesus speaks of "whomever I send", He has particular reference to His apostles
2. The apostles were sent as "ambassadors" for Christ - cf. **2 Co 5:20**
3. Therefore the early church "*continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine*" - **Ac 2:42**

B. TO ENSURE RELIABILITY, JESUS PROMISED THE HOLY SPIRIT...

1. The Spirit would teach the apostles all things, reminding them of what Jesus spoke to them - **Jn 14:26**
2. The Spirit would guide the apostles into ALL truth - **Jn 16:12-13**

C. THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDED THEM INTO "ALL" THE TRUTH...

1. Paul said he taught "*the WHOLE counsel of God*" - cf. **Ac 20:27**
2. Peter wrote God "*has given to us ALL THINGS that pertain to life and godliness*" - **2 Pe 1:3**

[So the apostles were given ALL the truth God (and Christ) wanted us to know. If the apostles were on earth today, we could simply ask them to settle religious differences. But again, they are not on earth. What then?]

III. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE APOSTLES HAVE WRITTEN WHAT CHRIST WANTS US TO KNOW!

A. IN THE N.T., WE HAVE WHAT THE APOSTLES WERE GIVEN BY THE SPIRIT...

1. As Paul explained in **Ep 3:1-5**
2. He wrote, so that when we read his writings we can have his same understanding
3. Peter wrote his epistles that we might always be reminded - **2 Pe 1:12-15; 3:1-2**

B. IN THE N.T., WE HAVE THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE LORD HIMSELF...

1. As Paul made clear in **1 Co 14:37**
2. As Peter confirmed, such writings as Paul's were considered Scripture - **2 Pe 3:15-16**
3. Therefore, when we have questions about what the Lord would have us to do...
 - a. We don't have to ascend to heaven for an answer
 - b. We don't have to ask Jesus personally, nor His apostles
...we simply need to turn to the apostles' writing (i.e., the New Testament)!

[In the New Testament, the repository of the "apostles' doctrine", is where we can turn to learn the will of Jesus, given through His selected and inspired ambassadors, the apostles. But this raises another question: Is the New Testament a complete guide for us today? Is it sufficient?]

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT IS A COMPLETE, ALL-SUFFICIENT GUIDE

A. IT MUST BE COMPLETE, FOR "THE FAITH" HAS BEEN REVEALED "ONCE FOR ALL" - Ju 3

1. "Once for all" literally means "one time for all time"
2. We cannot expect further revelation in the future
3. The writings of the apostles as collected in the New Testament are all we have
4. Our task, is not to look for further revelation, but to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints"!

B. ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLES THEMSELVES, THESE WRITINGS (SCRIPTURES) ARE INDEED SUFFICIENT!

1. Sufficient to make one complete, furnished unto every good work - **2 Ti 3:16-17**
2. They provide all we need to enjoy life and godliness - **2 Pe 1:3**
3. By heeding the writings of the apostles...
 - a. We will have the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ - cf. **2 Pe 1:8-9**
 - b. An abundant entrance will be supplied into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - cf. **2 Pe 1:10-11**

C. WE ARE LEFT WITH GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND HIS WORD...

1. As Paul prepared the elders of the church at Ephesus for his departure, he commended them to God and the word of His grace - **Ac 20:32**
2. He did not instruct them to appoint apostles to take his place
3. He did not instruct them to seek further revelation (for Paul had already proclaimed "the whole counsel of God" to them - **Ac 20:27**)
4. He simply directed them to two things:
 - a. To God Himself (i.e., His Divine Providence)
 - b. The word of His grace (that word which had been revealed by Paul himself)
5. These two blessings, Paul was confident, were able to do two things:
 - a. Build them up
 - b. Give them an inheritance among all those who are sanctified

CONCLUSION

1. **"The New Testament"**, then, is how...
 - a. Christ speaks to us today
 - b. He leads us to life everlasting!
2. It is through the writing of the apostles, *"the apostles' doctrine"*, that the Lord speaks and directs His Church!
 - a. It is "the apostles' doctrine" that is the standard of authority in matters of religion

b. It is "the apostles' doctrine" in which we must "continue steadfastly"! - cf. **Ac 2:42**

3. There is more to be said about **authority in religion**, which we will cover in the next lesson

But I hope that our attitude is such that what was said about the Thessalonians can also be said of us:

"For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe." - 1 Th 2:13

Is that your attitude toward *"the apostles' doctrine"*?

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

What Many Accept As Authority In Religion

INTRODUCTION

1. In our previous study, I endeavored to show...
 - a. That it is through the writing of the apostles, "*the apostles' doctrine*", that the Lord speaks to and directs His Church
 - b. That the **New Testament** is how Christ speaks to us today and leads us to life everlasting
 - c. That it is "the apostles' doctrine"...
 - 1) Which ought to be our standard of authority in matters of religion
 - 2) In which we must "*continue steadfastly*"! - cf. **Ac 2:42**
2. Many people say that they accept "the apostles' doctrine" as their authority in religion
 - a. But when faced with an issue in which a cherished position or view is being challenged...
 - b. ...they often appeal to a source for their authority that is quite different
3. This is easy to do, and perhaps the best way to avoid this is to be aware of other sources of authority in religion...
 - a. Some are **objective** standards of authority - sources outside of ourselves that we look to direct us
 - b. Others are **subjective** standards of authority - where we look within ourselves for the answers we want

[In this study we shall briefly touch upon various **standards** that people commonly turn to when faced with questions about what they believe and why they practice the things they do in religion. Let's start with...]

I. "OBJECTIVE" STANDARDS OF AUTHORITY

A. THE OLD TESTAMENT...

1. It is common for people to resort to the O. T. to provide authority for some practice
 - a. When they can't find authority for it in the teachings of Christ and/or His apostles
 - b. For example, a clergy-laity system, burning of incense and use of instrumental music in worship, keeping the Sabbath, etc.
2. But the O.T. was designed to be temporary, to fulfill a specific purpose and as a covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant (i.e., the New Testament)
 - a. It was given because of transgressions, till Christ should come - **Ga 3:19**
 - b. For those under the Law (Israel), it was a tutor
 - 1) A tutor designed to lead them to Christ - **Ga 3:24**
 - 2) A tutor that has been taken away - **Ga 3:25**
 - c. When those who were under the Law came to Christ...
 - 1) They became dead to the Law - **Ro 7:4**

- 2) They were delivered from the Law - **Ro 7:6**
- d. As prophesied by Jeremiah, God has made a "new covenant" to replace the "first covenant" which is now obsolete - **He 8:7-13**
- 3. In their handling of the issue of circumcision, the apostles demonstrated that one cannot use the O.T. to teach something which the apostles themselves did not command
 - a. Some sought to enforce circumcision and the Law upon Gentile believers - **Ac 15:1,6**
 - b. But the apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were able to defuse the problem by simply stating they themselves "*gave no such commandment*" - **Ac 15:22-29**
- 4. This is not to say the O.T. is not of value to Christians...
 - a. It was written for our learning, to provide patience, comfort, and hope - **Ro 15:4**
 - b. It was written for our admonition, that we not make similar mistakes - **1 Co 10:6,11**

...we just can't use it to enjoin religious practices upon others which the apostles themselves did not teach!

B. MAJORITY RULE...

- 1. Many people accept whatever the majority thinks about something
- 2. But consider the words of Jesus, in describing the end of the majority - **Mt 7:13-14**
- 3. If you followed the majority...
 - a. In Noah's day, you would have perished in the flood
 - b. In Joshua's day, you would have perished in the wilderness
- 4. Rather than simply follow the majority, let our attitude be like that of Joshua: "*as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*" - cf. **Jos 24:14-15**

C. PARENTS...

- 1. Some think "If it was good enough for Mom and Dad, it is good enough for me."
- 2. Yet as much as we may love and respect our parents, Christ must come first - **Mt 10:37**
- 3. If every generation had simply followed their parents, then we who are Gentiles would likely still be idol-worshippers and polytheistic!

D. PREACHERS...

- 1. It is common for people to place their trust in their "preacher," "priest," or "pastor"
- 2. They reason in their hearts that surely these "men of God" could not be wrong or lead them astray
 - a. Yet Paul warned of how we can easily be misled - cf. **2 Co 11:13-15**
 - b. And Jesus warned about the "blind leading the blind" - **Mt 15:12-14**
- 3. Our attitude needs to be like that of the Bereans, who carefully examined Paul's teachings in light of the Scriptures - **Ac 17:11**

E. CREEDS AND TRADITIONS OF MEN...

- 1. This is where the denominations really get most of their authority
- 2. Indeed, adherence to the creeds of men is what produces denominations

- a. Accept the Bible only, and you become a Christian only
- b. Accept the Bible along with some Creed, and you become something else!
 - 1) Accept the Bible and the Book of Mormon, and you become a Mormon
 - 2) Accept the Bible and papal authority, and you become a Roman Catholic
 - 3) Accept the Bible and the Lutheran Catechism, and you become a Lutheran
3. Creeds are really not even necessary...
 - a. If they say more than what the Bible says, they say too much
 - b. If they say less than what the Bible says, they say too little
 - c. If they say exactly what the Bible says, then why not let the Bible be our creed book?
4. The fact is, creeds are filled with the traditions and commands of men, many of which conflict with and displace the commands of God! - cf. **Mk 7:6-9**

[Creeds of men, preachers, parents, majority rule, even the Old Testament itself, are some of the **objective** standards that people turn to rather than the authority of the Lord's apostles. But there are also...]

II. "SUBJECTIVE" STANDARDS OF AUTHORITY

A. CONSCIENCE...

1. "Let your conscience be your guide" is the motto of many
2. But our conscience cannot always be reliable
 - a. Paul had served God with a good conscience throughout his life - **Ac 23:1**
 - b. Even at a time when he was persecuting Christians! - cf. **Ac 26:9-11**
3. Our conscience is like a clock, which works properly only if set properly
4. Once our conscience has been "set" by "the apostles' doctrine", then it can be a good guide

B. HUMAN WISDOM...

1. Many feel that through their own wisdom they can determine right and wrong
2. But God's thoughts and ways are not always our own - cf. **Isa 55:8-9**
3. In fact, God has chosen to save man in a manner specifically designed to confound those who depend solely upon human wisdom - cf. **1 Co 1:18-29**
4. For us to know God's will, it was necessary for Him to reveal it to us - **1 Co 2:9-12**
 - a. This He has done through His Spirit-inspired apostles
 - b. Who in turn shared it with us through their writings - **Ep 3:1-5**

C. FEELINGS...

1. This is often the "standard of authority" for many people
 - a. Who go by whatever "feels right"
 - b. Who place stock in a religion "better felt than told"
2. Yet the Bible declares the danger of trusting in "feelings"
 - a. ***"There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death."***
- **Pr 14:12**
 - b. ***"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool..."*** - **Pr 28:26**
 - c. ***"O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks***

to direct his own steps." - Jer 10:23

CONCLUSION

1. Because the way we should live is "not in man"..
 - a. We need an "objective standard" for our authority in religion
 - b. We can't depend upon "subjective standards" like conscience, human wisdom, or feelings
2. But which "objective standard"?
 - a. Not creeds of men, preachers, parents, majority rule, or even the Old Testament
 - b. Only "the apostles' doctrine", i.e., the New Testament..
 - 1) For the apostles were personally selected to be Christ's ambassadors
 - 2) For the apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit, to be guided into all the truth
 - 3) And they were inspired to write all that Christ would have us to know and do
3. When we are content to abide in "the apostles' doctrine", then we can be assured that we are **"Following Jesus Without Denominationalism"**!

Are you following Jesus by "*continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine*"? Or do you follow some other standard of authority in religion?

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

Further Thoughts Related To Authority In Religion

INTRODUCTION

1. In the past two lessons in this series, I have stressed that to be free of religious division we must have the same "standard of authority"
 - a. That standard is the Will of Christ...
 - 1) As revealed in the "apostles' doctrine", that is, the teaching of Christ's apostles
 - 2) As inspired by the Holy Spirit, and preserved for us in the pages of the New Testament
 - b. Other standards, both objective and subjective, are not suitable guides to lead us in the way of salvation...
 - 1) Not the Old Testament, majority rule, parents, preachers, creeds and traditions of men
 - 2) Nor conscience, human wisdom, or feelings
2. Before we leave the subject of authority, there are some questions I believe worthy of our consideration...
 - a. Exactly how does one use the New Testament to establish authority?
 - b. Are there limitations placed upon how far we may go in matters of religion?
 - c. Will having the same standard of authority "guarantee" unity among followers of Christ?
-- In this lesson I wish to share some thoughts along these lines

[Beginning with...]

I. HOW AUTHORITY IS ESTABLISHED

A. AUTHORITY CAN BE ESTABLISHED IN ONE OF THREE WAYS...

1. **Direct command or precept** - a direct statement of something that can or cannot be done
 - a. E.g., "repent and be baptized" - **Ac 2:38**
 - b. E.g., "love one another" - **Jn 13:34**
 - c. E.g., "abstain from sexual immorality" - **1 Th 4:3**
2. **Approved example** - an illustration that shows a practice was done with the approval of the Lord's apostles
 - a. As an apostle, Paul taught by both precept and example
 - 1) He encouraged others to imitate him, and sent Timothy to remind people of "his ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church" - **1 Co 4:16-17**
 - 2) The God of peace will be with those who do the sort of things both heard (precept) and seen (example) in an apostle like Paul - cf. **Ph 4:9**
 - b. So when we have an example that meets with apostolic approval, we know there is authority for the practice
 - 1) E.g., having a plurality of elders in one church - **Ac 14:23; 20:28; Ph 1:1**
 - 2) E.g., meeting on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread

(i.e., the Lord's supper, cf. **1 Co 10:16-17**) - **Ac 20:7**

3. **Necessary implication, or "forced conclusion"** - something neither expressly stated nor specifically exemplified, yet it is necessarily implied by the clear import and meaning of the language used so that one can only draw a particular conclusion
 - a. Jesus appealed to necessary implication when He reasoned that there must be a resurrection of the dead based upon the implication of God's statement to Moses - cf. **Mt 22:29-33**
 - b. Peter and the brethren in Judea understood the necessary implication of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit, that it meant Gentiles were permitted to be baptized and enjoy the repentance that leads to life - cf. **Ac 10:44-48; 11:15-18**
 - c. Therefore, if the evidence of the Scriptures warrant it, we may draw certain conclusions because of the necessary implication
 - 1) E.g., the issue of baptizing infants...
 - a) The prerequisites for baptism include faith and repentance - **Mk 16:16; Ac 2:38; 8:37**
 - b) Infants are incapable of faith and repentance
 - Therefore the necessary implication (or forced conclusion) is that baptism is not required of infants
 - 2) E.g., the matter of using unleavened bread in partaking the Lord's Supper...
 - a) There is nothing expressly stated nor specifically exemplified in reference to using unleavened bread as we observe the Lord's Supper
 - b) But when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the Last Passover, we know that He was using unleavened bread - cf. **Lk 22:7-19**
 - Therefore the necessary implication is that we should use unleavened bread as we keep His command to observe the Lord's Supper

B. THERE IS BOTH "GENERAL" AND "SPECIFIC" AUTHORITY...

1. Using a "direct command" as an example, sometimes it is "general" in its authority
 - a. That is, "not limited in scope, area, or application" (American Heritage Dictionary)
 - b. E.g., the command to "go" in Mt 28:19 is generic enough to authorize all methods of transportation
2. Sometimes a "direct command" is "specific" in its authority
 - a. That is, "explicitly set forth; definite" (American Heritage Dictionary)
 - b. E.g., when God commanded Noah to build the ark with "gopher" wood (**Gen 6:14**), the specific nature of the command ruled out using any other kind of wood
3. A "specific" command may itself have a degree of "general" authority
 - a. E.g., the command to "sing" specifically authorizes acapella music
 - b. It is not generic enough to authorize instrumental music...
 - 1) ...which is totally different class (or kind) of music
 - 2) ...but it is generic enough to authorize different aids or "expedients" (see below), such as song books, to carry out the command to sing

C. "EXPEDIENTS" MAY BE USED TO CARRY OUT AUTHORIZED PRACTICES...

1. "Expedient" means "appropriate to a purpose" (American Heritage Dictionary)
2. Thus an "expedient" is an aid that is suitable for carrying out that which is authorized

3. Sample "expedients" based upon what is authorized in the Scriptures:
 - a. Assembling is authorized, so the meeting house is an expedient to carry out the command to assemble
 - b. Teaching is authorized, so arrangement in classes is an expedient to carry out the command to instruct
 - c. Giving is authorized, so collection baskets are an expedient for gathering the contribution
 - d. Baptism is authorized, so the baptistery is an expedient to provide a place for immersion
 - e. Singing is authorized, so hymn books are expedient to helping us sing

[These principles on how to establish authority from the Scriptures may seem prosaic, but they can be very useful in applying the "apostles' doctrine" (i.e., the Word of God) to our lives. When properly understood and applied correctly, they can be useful "tools" to maintain the unity and peace of a local congregation.]

Another question that often arises when the subject of authority in religion is being discussed: "Are there limitations placed upon how far we may go?" I.e., must we have authority for all that we do in religious matters? To help answer such questions, consider these...]

II. WARNINGS FOUND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. WE MUST NOT CHANGE ITS MESSAGE!

1. This is especially true in regards to the gospel of Christ! - **Ga 1:8-9**
2. Even if we claimed a change was authorized by an angelic messenger, we would be accursed!
3. Therefore, the gospel of salvation in Christ must be preserved in every respect!

B. WE MUST NOT ADD TO OR TAKE AWAY FROM IT!

1. We find such a warning at the conclusion of the last book of the Bible - **Re 22:18-19**
2. Though primarily applicable to the book of Revelation, this warning is consistent with others pertaining to the revelation of God's will to man - **Deu 4:2; Pro 30:5-6**

C. WE MUST ABIDE IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST!

1. Otherwise, we will not have fellowship with the Father and the Son - **2 Jn 9**
2. Is this passage referring to the doctrine "about" Christ, or the doctrine "taught by" Christ (along with His apostles)?
 - a. As pointed out in the Expositor's Bible Commentary, the question is of little importance for John holds equally to both positions
 - 1) It is fundamental to the faith to hold to the proper views about Christ - **2 Jn 7**
 - 2) It is fundamental to the faith to obey the commandments of Christ - **1 Jn 3:24**
 - b. Thus what John says here applies in either case

D. WE MUST NOT ALLOW "TRADITIONS OF MEN" TO MAKE THE "COMMANDS OF GOD" OF NO EFFECT!

1. Jesus charged the Pharisees with "vain" worship for doing this - **Mk 7:5-13**

2. In view of this warning, we should evaluate our religious practices:
 - a. Are they based upon "traditions of men", or the "commandments of God"?
 - b. If "traditions of men", does our keeping them render the "commands of God" of no effect?
 - c. E.g., by keeping the man-made tradition of sprinkling for baptism, we render the command of God for immersion (Grk. "baptizo") of no effect

E. WE MUST NOT ABUSE OUR LIBERTY IN CHRIST!

1. In Christ we enjoy wonderful freedom, but we must be careful in our use of it - **Ga 5:1,13**
2. We must be considerate of our brothers' consciences - **Ro 14:14-15:3**
3. We should be willing to forego our liberty rather than let it destroy a brother - **1 Co 8:9-13**
4. We should not only ask "Is it lawful?", but also "Does it edify?" - **1 Co 10:23-24, 31-33**

[With such "warnings" weighing upon our hearts, we are more likely to approach the Word of God with the humility it deserves as we seek to establish the authority for our service to God.

But one last question related to having the same standard of authority: Will it "guarantee" unity among the followers of Christ?]

III. AGREEING UPON THE SAME STANDARD WILL NOT GUARANTEE UNITY

A. THERE ARE STILL CHALLENGES TO FACE...

1. **Which commands are binding today?**
 - a. Some commands must be understood to be limited in application
 - b. Effort must be made to determine whether a command was intended to be limited or universal in application
2. **Which approved examples are to be considered normative for the church today?**
 - a. Much of what we learn about the church pertaining to its work and organization is by example, not precept
 - b. Effort must be made to determine whether an example should be understood as teaching a binding principle for the church to observe universally
3. **When are necessary implications really necessary implications?**
 - a. People often infer things from the Bible and call their conclusion a "necessary" implication
 - b. But it may only be a "possible" implication, not one "necessarily" inferred

-- These are some of the questions or challenges faced by every congregation of Christians

B. AS CHRISTIANS SEEK UNITY, WE NEED MORE THAN JUST THE SAME STANDARD OF AUTHORITY...

1. Barton W. Stone, an effective promoter of Christian unity in the early 1800's, had these insightful words in an article entitled "Christian Union" published in The Christian Messenger (1828):

"On no other foundation can the parties ever meet, than on the Bible alone, without note or comment; and in no other name will they ever unite, but in that given to the disciples at Antioch--CHRISTIAN. But should all the professors of Christianity reject all their various creeds and names, and agree to receive the Bible alone, and be called by no other name than Christian, will this unite them? No, we are fully convinced that unless they all possess the spirit of that book and name they are far, very far, from Christian union." (As quoted by J. M. Powell, *The Cause We Plead: A Story Of The Restoration Movement, 20th Century Christian*, 1987, p. 56)

2. In addition to agreeing on the same standard of authority (i.e., the Word of God), we need the proper spirit to "rightly divide the word of truth" - cf. **2 Ti 2:14-16**
3. As Paul told Timothy, the servant of the Lord must carefully apply the Word when seeking to teach others - **2 Ti 2:23-25**

CONCLUSION

1. The apostle Paul has more to say on the attitudes necessary to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace", but we will consider those in our next lesson
2. My purpose in this lesson has been to share some thoughts that I pray will help steer us in the right direction as we **"Follow Jesus Without Denominationalism"**:
 - a. The Bible teaches us, not only by way of direct commands, but through approved examples and necessary implications
 - b. It is helpful to understand the principles of general and specific authority, and when something may be expedient to fulfill things that are authorized
 - c. Warnings throughout the scriptures should serve to keep us on the "straight and narrow"
 - d. But as valuable and needful the same standard of authority may be, simple agreement on what the standard is will not guarantee unity - we need to apply the proper spirit of love, patience and humility as we grow together towards unity in Christ

What is your attitude toward the authority of God's Word? Are you willing to accept the authority of Jesus Christ, as delegated to His apostles? - cf. **Mt 28:18-20; Ac 2:36-38**

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

Maintaining Unity In The Local Congregation

INTRODUCTION

1. The challenge of "**Following Jesus Without Denominationalism**" to a great extent revolves around the problem of religious division that begins in the local church
 - a. Every denomination today began as a result of religious division
 - b. And religious division normally finds its origin with brethren in a local congregation unable to resolve their differences
2. While having the same standard of authority is essential to unity in religious matters, I also stated that it alone is insufficient, as suggested in this quote by Barton W. Stone:

"But should all the professors of Christianity reject all their various creeds and names, and agree to receive the Bible alone, and be called by no other name than Christian, will this unite them? No, we are fully convinced that unless they all possess the spirit of that book and name they are far, very far, from Christian union." (As quoted by J. M. Powell, *The Cause We Plead: A Story Of The Restoration Movement*, 20th Century Christian, 1987, p. 56)

3. It is essential that those who seek to allow the Bible, and in particular the New Testament, to be their standard of authority...
 - a. Possess the proper Christian attitudes
 - b. To apply those attitudes when handling the Word of God-- Otherwise, the "sword of the Spirit" (Ep 6:17) will be abused to the detriment of all parties involved

[To appreciate what I mean, in this lesson we shall examine how Paul dealt with the problem of division in the early church, and the solution he offered that we might "*maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" We begin by first noticing what Paul described as...]

I. A MAJOR CAUSE OF DIVISION

A. THE SITUATION AT CORINTH...

1. Paul found it necessary to write "that there be no divisions among you" - **1 Co 1:10**
 2. There were contentions among them, manifested by breaking up into parties and calling themselves after different men - **1 Co 1:11-12**
- Sounds a lot like religious division today, doesn't it?

B. PAUL'S EVALUATION OF THE PROBLEM OF DIVISION...

1. As Paul wrote to them, he realized he was dealing with "babes in Christ", who instead of being "spiritual" were "carnal" - **1 Co 3:1-3a**

2. Indeed, the root of their envy, strife, and divisions was their carnality - **1 Co 3:3b**
- Conditions today are not really all that much different; where division exists, carnality (or spiritual immaturity) is often a major cause of the problem!

[This is not to say that there are never any substantive issues at stake when division occurs. But any hope for resolving differences over such issues is stifled when the parties involved are filled with envy and strife.

This may help us appreciate why Paul so frequently focused his attention on the development of attitudes which increase the likelihood of overcoming differences so that unity might prevail. Let's take a look at these...]

II. ATTITUDES FOR MAINTAINING UNITY

A. TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS, PAUL TAUGHT THE VIRTUE OF...

1. **"Lowliness" - Ep 4:2**
 - a. This word means:
 - 1) The having a humble opinion of one's self
 - 2) A deep sense of one's (moral) littleness
 - 3) Modesty, humility, lowliness of mind
 - b. Without this virtue, members in the body begin trying to be the "head" of the body, a role reserved only for Christ
2. **"Gentleness" - Ep 4:2**
 - a. This word can be translated as gentleness, mildness, meekness
 - b. It is not a quality of weakness, but of power under control
 - 1) Moses was a meek man (**Num 12:3**), but capable of great strength and boldness
 - 2) Jesus was "meek and lowly in heart" (**Mt 11:29**), but we see where He drove the money changers out of the temple
 - c. Thus it is being gentle, even when there is the potential for being harsh, but gentleness is more conducive for maintaining unity
3. **"Long-suffering" - Ep 4:2**
 - a. The idea here is one of patience, forbearance, longsuffering, slowness in avenging wrongs
 - b. When the body consists of members who are not perfect, and often sin against each other, maintaining unity is not possible unless they are willing to endure each other's imperfections
4. **"Bearing with one another in love" - Ep 4:2**
 - a. Similar to longsuffering, "bearing" means to sustain, to bear, to endure
 - b. What makes such "longsuffering" and "forbearance" possible is another virtue: "love"
 - c. As Paul wrote in his chapter on love: love suffers long...is not provoked" - **1 Co 13:4-5**
 - d. Indeed, the virtue of love is the "tie" that binds all these virtues together - **Co 3:12-14**
5. **"Endeavor" - Ep 4:3**

- a. Displaying these virtues does not come naturally nor easy, nor does maintaining unity
- b. Thus the need for much effort, as Paul uses a word which means "to exert one's self, endeavor, give diligence"
- Only by giving diligence to display ALL these virtues, can we hope to "keep (maintain) the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" - **Ep 4:3**

B. TO THE CHURCH AT PHILIPPI, PAUL DIRECTED THEM TO...

1. **"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit" - Ph 2:3**
 - a. It is necessary to point out those attitudes we should NOT have!
 - b. For possessing these attitudes will destroy unity
 - 1) Both involve "self-centered" attitude
 - 2) Rather than a "Christ-centered" attitude
 - c. Therefore, it is required that we rid ourselves of:
 - 1) The **desire for exalting self** ("selfish ambition")
 - 2) The **improper estimation of self** ("conceit")
 - d. In place of these, we should substitute...
2. **"in lowliness of mind" - Ph 2:3**
 - a. In other words, humility - cf. **Ep 4:2**
 - b. This will effectively replace the problem of "conceit"
 - c. Humility should be easy to maintain if we remember our own faults
3. **"let each esteem others better than himself" - Ph 2:3**
 - a. This should be easy for us to do...
 - 1) For we are aware of our own defects, but we do not have the same clear view of the defects of others
 - 2) We can only see their **outward** conduct; in our case, we can look **within**
 - 3) We see our own hearts, with all its faults; we cannot so look into the hearts of others
 - b. In writing to the brethren at Rome, Paul exhorted them to outdo one another in this regard - **"in honor giving preference to one another" - Ro 12:10b**
4. **"look out...for the interest of others" - Ph 2:4**
 - a. This attitude eliminates the problem of "selfish ambition"
 - b. It is the attitude of **maturity**, and was the attitude of Christ! - **Ro 15:1-3**
 - c. So it should be the attitude of every Christian!
 - As strongly suggested by **Ph 2:1-2**, these qualities in verses **3-4** contribute to the unity that produces fullness of joy!

C. TO THE CHURCHES OF GALATIA, PAUL CAUTIONED...

1. Against the improper use of our liberty in Christ
 - a. While it is true that we must stand fast in our liberty and not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage... - **Ga 5:1**
 - b. ...we should use our liberty as an opportunity to serve one another in love - **Ga 5:13-14**
2. Otherwise, abuse of our liberty gives the flesh opportunity to destroy one another! - **Ga 5:15**

D. TO THE CHURCH AT ROME, PAUL WROTE...

1. We should pursue things that lead to peace and edification - **Ro 14:19**
2. That the strong should be willing to bear with the scruples of the weak - **Ro 14:1,13; 15:1-3**
3. That the weak in faith must be careful not to judge (condemn) those whom God has received! - **Ro 14:3-4**
- Such attitudes are necessary, are we will not be able "*with one mind and one mouth [to] glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!*" - cf. **Ro 15:5-7**

E. FINALLY, TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH PAUL MADE IT CLEAR...

1. That knowledge can puff one up, but it is love that edifies ("builds up", in contrast to knowledge which "puffs up") - **1 Co 8:1**
2. That we who have liberty in Christ should be careful that we don't use it to the destruction of our brethren who are weak - **1 Co 8:9-12**
3. That we should therefore be willing to forego our liberties if it can help keep a brother from stumbling - cf. **1 Co 8:13; 10:31-11:1**

CONCLUSION

1. From personal experience, I can attest that:
 - a. Where members display these attitudes in addition to their devotion to "the apostles' doctrine"...
 - b. ...there will be a congregation of Christians in which love and unity will prevail
2. That's not to say there will always be perfect understanding and agreement on every subject
 - a. When people from every conceivable background come to Christ, we should expect some differences
 - b. When there will always be brethren at various levels of spiritual growth, we can expect some challenges
3. But if we can...
 - a. Agree that the teaching of Christ as expounded in "the apostles' doctrine" is our standard of authority in religious matters
 - b. Inculcate the Christian attitudes described in this lesson into the heart of every member

Then we shall be able to "*maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (**Ep 4:3**) as we all continue to "*grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ*" (**2 Pe 3:18**), to the glory of God!

Following Jesus Without Denominationalism

How To Find A New Testament Church

INTRODUCTION

1. In this series of lessons I have sought to propose that "**Following Jesus Without Denominationalism**" is possible today when we:
 - a. Appreciate why denominationalism is wrong, and therefore disdain sectarianism
 - b. Imitate the example of Jesus by maintaining a nonsectarian relationship with God
 - c. Properly respond to the call of the gospel, for that is how Christ is adding people to His church
 - d. Allow "the apostles' doctrine" to be our standard of authority in religion, recognizing that is how Christ is directing His church today
 - e. Develop those qualities of Christ-like character enjoined in the apostolic epistles, so that we can "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"
2. What I have proposed is really nothing new, and has been a plea expressed by many others...
 - a. I am personally convinced that throughout church history there have always been groups of Christians seeking to follow Jesus in this way
 - b. Even today, there are thousands of congregations composed of those who are "**Following Jesus Without Denominationalism**"
 - Indeed, I believe there are many churches true to the example and pattern of the Lord's church as found in the New Testament
3. But suppose one wanted to find "a New Testament church" today?
 - a. Where would they begin?
 - b. What would they look for?
4. In this lesson, the final one in this series, I wish to offer some thoughts on "**How To Find A New Testament Church**"
 - a. Not an exhaustive study, of course, but some simple suggestions that might help one get started
 - b. These are the sort of suggestions that I myself would follow if I were seeking to find such a congregation

[First, I would...]

I. BEGIN WITH THE "NAME"

A. THE "NAME" OF THE CONGREGATION REVEALS MUCH....

1. It can quickly tell whether the church is concerned with "**Following Jesus Without Denominationalism**"
2. For if the name is a denominational name, religious division must not be a major

concern of those in the congregation

B. THE "NAME" SHOULD BE A SCRIPTURAL NAME...

1. There is really no one scriptural name for the Lord's church in the New Testament
 - a. The expression "*church of God*" (1 Co 1:2), "*churches of God*" (1 Th 2:14), and "*churches of Christ*" (Ro 16:16) are commonly used
 - b. Other terms are used also, and they all reflect an association with God and Christ (body of Christ, kingdom of God, bride of Christ, temple of God, etc.)
2. But the use of scriptural names instead of a humanly-conceived name...
 - a. Reflects a desire to follow the Scriptures, and not human tradition
 - b. Certainly conveys a desire to honor God and Christ, and not some man, creed or particular doctrine

C. UNFORTUNATELY, THE "NAME" ALONE IS NOT A SURE GUIDE...

1. Just as the name "Mrs. Copeland" alone is not a sure guide if you were seeking to find my wife
 - a. For there are a lot of women who go by the name, "Mrs. Copeland"
 - b. But only one who bears the name is properly my wife!
2. So there may be many congregations that bear the name of Christ or God that may not be truly honoring them!
 - a. For example, there are over 200 separate denominations that use the expression "Church of God"
 - b. Likewise, there may be "Churches of Christ" that are no less denominational than any church with a denominational name!
3. Yet I would still recommend beginning with the name, and in particular those congregations that use the expression "church of Christ"
 - a. Because so many denominations have chosen to use the expression "church of God", the likelihood of simply finding a denomination is much greater
 - b. Whereas most "churches of Christ" I have known are seeking to follow Jesus without denominationalism, therefore the possibilities of find a church true to the New Testament are greater

[But even when one has found a church that is nondenominational, that does not automatically mean the people are truly members of the Lord's body. That is why I suggest the next step is to...]

II. EXAMINE THE "GOSPEL" BEING PREACHED

A. REMEMBER HOW CHRIST IS BUILDING HIS CHURCH...

1. Through the gospel, Christ calls us - 2 Th 2:14
2. As we heed the gospel call, the Lord adds us to His body, the church - Ac 2:41,47
3. That is why it is so important that the gospel not be perverted in any way - Ga 1:6-9

B. IF THE GOSPEL IS DIFFERENT...

1. By changing either the facts or commands of the gospel
2. Then people are not being saved, and the Lord is not adding them to His church!

C. A CHURCH WITH A PERVERTED GOSPEL...

1. May have the nicest people, but they are still unregenerate people!
2. May wear the name of Christ, both as individuals and as a church, but are not truly the people of God!

[So while a group of people may identify themselves as a "church of God" or "church of Christ", it is only Christ who truly makes them such when they properly respond to the call of the gospel. That is why it is imperative a church teaches the pure and simple gospel of Christ!

A final suggestion, but one that might require very careful examination over a period of time, is to...]

III. COMPARE THE "PRACTICE" WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

A. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, WE FIND A PATTERN...

1. The N.T. describes the early church during its first 60 years
2. A careful study of Acts and the epistles reveal a picture of the church
3. From this picture, a pattern emerges in reference to:
 - a. The worship of the church
 - b. The work of the church
 - c. The organization of the church
4. This pattern emerges as we see the early Christians continuing steadfastly in "the apostles' doctrine"

B. A CHURCH ABIDING IN THE "APOSTLES' DOCTRINE" WILL REFLECT THIS PATTERN...

1. Their worship will be like that described in the New Testament
 - a. Involving such elements as singing, prayer, Bible study, preaching, and the Lord's Supper - **Co 3:16; 4:2; 2 Ti 2:2,15; 4:2; Ac 20:7; 1 Co 10:16-17; 11:23-29**
 - b. Their assemblies seeking to provoke one another to love and good works - **He 10:24-25**
2. Their work as a congregation will be similar to that found in the New Testament
 - a. Equipping the saints for ministry (edification) - **Ep 4:11-16**
 - b. Furthering the spread of the gospel by sending out evangelists (evangelism) - **Ph 4:15-16; 3 Jn 5-8**
 - c. Meeting the needs of the saints as problems arise (benevolence) - **Ro 15:25-26; 1 Co 16:1-4; 2 Co 8:1-9:15**
3. Their organization as a congregation will seek to be like that found in the New Testament - cf. **Ph 1:1**
 - a. With elders (also known as bishops, pastors, presbyters, shepherds) qualified to oversee and tend to the local congregation - **Ac 14:23; 20:28; 1 Ti 3:1-7; Ti 1:5-9; 1 Pe 5:1-4**
 - b. With deacons also qualified to serve as they minister to the local congregation - **1 Ti 3:8-13**
 - c. With saints (members) who sojourn in this world with conduct that is honorable and which gives glory to God - cf. **1 Pe 2:9-12**

CONCLUSION

1. By carefully studying the "pattern" of the Lord's church as revealed in the New Testament, we can know when a congregation is faithfully observing "the apostles' doctrine"
 - a. This places upon each of us the responsibility of carefully studying the Scriptures
 - b. For only then can we be able to distinguish between the "authentic" and a "counterfeit"
2. I am confident that there are many "authentic" congregations all over the world...
 - a. It is likely that one exists in your community already!
 - b. Please feel free to contact me if you think I might be able to help you find one
3. But even if we live in an area where there is no church that "*continues steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine*", we can start one in our own home! - cf. **Ro 16:5; Phe 1-2**
 - a. By proclaiming the simple gospel of Christ, and abiding in "the apostles' doctrine" as revealed in the New Testament...
 - b. This will not be some new denomination, but simply a church of the Lord, a congregation of disciples that meet together to worship God and edify one another in their service to the Lord

Are you "**Following Jesus Without Denominationalism**"? Don't you wish to? Remember the prayer of our Lord:

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;"

"that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."

"And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:"

"I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

-- Jn 17:20-23

May all those who believe in Jesus strive to be one!