

Denominational, Inter-Denominational, and Non-Denominational

Let's start with some hopefully not-too-boring-but-accurate definitions of terms.

"Denominational" is a word used to describe a church which is bound by association to an outside organizational headquarters. How much control is exercised over local congregations by the parent headquarters varies from one denomination to another.

"Inter-Denominational" is exactly what the word implies- a church comprised of members from various denominations. Such congregations often disavow controlling outside influences from denominational headquarters, but typically retain some standards, practices, and teaching of them internally. However, inter-denominational groups usually think of, and refer to themselves as "non-denominational," despite the continued acceptance of their concepts and doctrines. By contrast, truly "non-denominational" congregations shun all denominational control, practices, organizations, and teaching. Each congregation is instead completely autonomous (*self-governed*), and therefore, what is taught and practiced is determined within the local congregation itself. Furthermore, in this "non-denominational" arrangement, there is no structure above or beyond the local church; there are no earthly "headquarters" or outside "organizational associations." Now, the big question: Which of these arrangements is correct? The question is easily answered by a simple search of the New Testament to see which one God ordained. Let's see what the Book says.

Ephesians 4:4, "*There is one body....*" Since Ephesians 1:22-23 identifies "*the body*" as "*the church*," having multiple denominations all teaching and practicing different things is not the biblical plan or arrangement. While some seek to use 1Corinthians 12:12ff to authorize the existence of many divergent denominations because the passage speaks of differing "*parts of the body*," a careful reading of the context reveals that Paul is actually saying that the **local congregation** is "*the body*" in this case, and its distinct "*parts*" (i.e. the *foot, eye, hand, etc.*) are the **individual members**, see vv.12-27. Simply put, Christ built "*one*" church, and expects everyone to be "*one*" within it. "*I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one...*" John 17:20-21. Multiple "denominations" (which implies *division*) teaching and practicing different things, but all claiming to follow the Bible, was never the intention of Jesus. Instead, Christians were exhorted "*by the name of Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment,*" 1Corinthians 1:10.

Additionally, the "denominational" arrangement has another significant problem. The New Testament simply does not authorize any organization larger than the local congregation. Local congregations are to be led by *overseers, bishops, elders, or pastors*- which all refer to the same office according to Acts 20:17,28 (the terms are used interchangeably). These *overseers* must meet the qualifications for the office as given in 1Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9. Furthermore, their *oversight* is clearly limited to the local congregation in which they have become qualified, 1Peter 5:2 ("*shepherd the flock of God among you*"). There is just no provision in the New Testament for a separate board of directors, council, or denominational headquarters. Each congregation is to be led by a plurality of *elders* (more than one, according to Acts 14:23) who take the Bible as their only creed, and teach and practice what it dictates.

What about the “inter-denominational” arrangements? The problem with “inter-denominational” is that it either: 1) accepts denominational biases and practices despite differences, instead of insisting on unity through “book, chapter, and verse” authority; or, 2) forces the compromise of convictions for the sake of ecumenism (accepting divergent beliefs and practices despite contrary personal conviction). Neither of these consequences agree with scripture. *“If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the **same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose,**”* Philippian 2:1-2.

What have we learned? The New Testament teaches that God’s ordained arrangement of the church, and its subsequent congregational government, requires: 1) local autonomous groups; 2) led by multiple *overseers* who meet the specified qualifications; 3) and lead the congregation according the Bible only; 4) without the additional control of external boards or associations. Anything else (or more!) just can’t be found in the New Testament, and thus is an arrangement of man rather than God. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)