

we must be “Stone-Campbell Christians” or part of the “Church of Christ” denomination. The Bible condemns party names whether those names represent respected brothers in Christ or not (1 Cor. 3:4). Further, the term “**churches of Christ**” (Rom. 16:16) is used in Scripture of congregations of the Lord’s people who are in a saved relationship with Him, but never of some segment of the church universal that is a subset of the body of Christ.

On the other extreme, if it is not possible to be simply Christians without some denominational allegiance, we must accept that one can abide in Christ while failing to abide in His word! Are denominations following the word of God? No. They are divided in doctrine and practice and have adopted things that are outside of the word of Christ. As we saw above, by definition a disciple of Christ abides in His word (John 8:31). One cannot have a relationship with God while stepping outside of the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9). If I can be a Christian in a denomination then I am saying I can be a disciple while refusing to abide in the word of Christ.

“What About Grace?”

Someone might say at this point—“*But, what about grace?*” It is clear that our salvation is not accomplished by our meritorious, and flawless ability to follow the Law of Christ, but by the merciful willingness of God to forgive our sin by His grace through the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8). All souls fall short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23), and “**all those things which you are commanded**” are simply “**what was our duty to do**” (Luke 17:10). So, even when we do what we should we still need God’s grace!

We must note, however, some important facts about the grace of God. *Is it universal and automatic?* No. The soul outside of Christ will die in sin (John 8:24), and be condemned to hell. Paul said, “**Through HIM** [i.e. Jesus] **we have received grace**” (Rom. 1:5, emphasis mine). If one has not *put on* Christ in obedience to the gospel (Gal. 3:27), he or she is not yet a recipient of “**the grace of God that brings salvation**” (Titus 2:11).

Someone might then say, “*But what about those folks that are so close?*” The Bible does speak of those who are “**not far from the kingdom of God**” (Mark 12:34), but being *close* to the kingdom is not the same thing as being *in* or *a part of* the kingdom. Notice this in the example of Apollos. When Aquila and Priscilla learned that Apollos “**spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord**” and yet “**he knew only the baptism of John**” (Acts 18:25), they did not say “Oh, you’re a *John the Baptist Christian*—Let’s be in unity brother!” Scripture tells us, “**they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately**” (Acts 18:26). We can appreciate those we may meet in the denominational world who have a respect for God’s word and are close in their understanding of many things. But if we fail to *explain to them the way of God more accurately* or somehow communicate to them that they are acceptable before God in a condition in which they do not abide in the word of Christ we are contradicting the word of God! Our task is to be “**good stewards of the manifold grace of God**” (1 Pet. 4:10), not to put ourselves in the place of God passing judgments He has not revealed!



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Evangelist:
Kyle Pope

Is It Still Possible to Be Simply Christians? By Kyle Pope

When Jesus came to this earth He declared His intention to build His church (Matt. 16:18). The New Testament identified this church as His body (Eph. 1:22-23), and declared there is only “**one body**” (Eph. 4:4). In spite of these clear teachings many in modern times deny that it is still even possible to be what Christians were in the New Testament. Is the goal of being simply Christians without any denominational affiliation still even possible or must Christians concede to some unavoidable denominational identification?

Some Important Questions

To answer this question we must first ask ourselves a few other very important questions.

1. Are Christians commanded to be united? Yes. Paul commanded the Corinthians, “**that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment**” (1 Cor. 1:10). This is a condition toward which Christians must aspire.

2. Does God ever command things that are impossible for us to do? No, God never expects anything from us that we are incapable of doing. When God gave the Law to Israel, He made it clear that the commandment of the Law was “**not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off**” (Deut. 30:11)—it was near and accessible “**that you may do it**” (Deut. 30:14). The same is true of the Law of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13). So, if we are commanded to be united, we must conclude that it is possible to be united in doctrine and practice.

3. Is God pleased with Christians being divided in doctrine and practice? No. Jesus prayed that His disciples might be one (John 17:21), but He also warned them not to turn aside to false teaching (Matt. 7:15-20). We must conclude

that it is God's will that His disciples remain united in faith and practice and to do otherwise is to act contrary to God's will and in a manner displeasing to Him.

4. Can Christians depart from sound doctrine and still remain a part of Christ's body?

No. Jesus warned individuals that those who do not bear fruit will be cut off from Him (John 15:5-6). Jesus also warned churches unwilling to repent that they would be removed from His presence (Rev. 2:5). If an individual, therefore, departs from following the word of God he or she does not remain a part of Christ's body. John taught, **"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son"** (2 John 9). Groups of individuals who have departed from following God's word cannot, therefore, be representative of sound congregations of those who are a part of the Lord's church.

5. Is it ever necessary for Christians to separate themselves from those in error?

Yes. The church is to withdraw from one who refuses to repent when rebuked for sin (Matt. 18:15-17). Withdrawal from the unrepentant is aimed at the restoration of one in error (1 Cor. 5:5) and to keep the church sound (1 Cor. 5:6-8). An unrepentant Christian from whom the church has withdrawn may still be consid-

ered a brother (2 Thess. 3:15), but he or she is not in an acceptable relationship with God. Christians must not **"keep company with him that he may be ashamed"** (2 Thess. 3:14). Those who have never come to Christ cannot be counted as brethren. We may seek to teach such a person (cf. Acts 18:24-26; 19:1-5), but one who expresses tolerance and acceptance of that which is outside of the doctrine of Christ **"shares in his evil deeds"** (2 John 10).

Confronting the Reality of Division

In spite of all of these clear teachings in Scripture, it is clear that division exists among those who call themselves Christians. Let's consider a few questions about this:

1. Does simply calling oneself a "Christian" truly identify him or her as a Christian? No. Jesus said there would be those who would call Him "Lord" and yet by refusing to do His will be denied as His disciple on the Day of Judgment (Matt. 7:21-23). It is the Bible not human beings that define who is and is not a Christian, or disciple of Christ (cf. Acts 11:26).

2. What determines whether an individual or group truly belongs to Christ? Jesus said that abiding in His word determines if one is or is not His disciple (John 8:31). We must conclude therefore that if a group calls itself a part of Christ and yet does not teach and practice what is taught in the Bible, such a group cannot truly be said to be a part of Christ.

3. What is a "denomination"? We can understand how to define a denomination by considering the etymology of the word itself. In Latin the word *nomen* meant, "name." This came into English in our word *nominate*, which means literally to "name" a person for a task or office. The prefix *de-* when added to this word, either intensifies the primary meaning, or adds the sense of "away" from the thing *named*. To *denominate* something is to distinguish it in name from something else. Two things of a different "denomination" are not the same thing in nature or quality. A penny is not a nickel—a dime is not a quarter, etc.

The Bible never uses the word "denomination," but in English the dictionary defines a denomination as "a recognized autonomous branch of the Christian Church" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). This very definition shows the unscriptural nature of this concept. Jesus told His disciples, **"I am the vine, you are the branches"** (John 15:5). The "branches" of the Lord's church are individual disciples. An individual is either part of Christ or outside of Christ. To be *autonomous* is "acting independently or having the freedom to do so" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). An individual cannot be autonomous. Paul declared, **"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me"** (Gal. 2:20). Individuals have freewill, but we cannot act independently of Christ. Paul taught that Christians have become **"slaves of God"** (Rom. 6:22). In the same way, groups of people are either part of Christ or outside of Christ. If they are a

part of Christ they are the same in nature and identity. When Jesus taught His disciples not to elevate disciples one over another, He explained, **"you are all brethren"** (Matt. 23:8). We cannot *denominate* something from another thing and yet say it is the same in identity and nature.

We can speak of local congregations as autonomous, but that refers to issues of leadership. The New Testament teaches no church government higher than the eldership of local congregations (Acts 14:23) and yet lower than the headship of Christ (Eph. 5:23). One eldership does not rule over another church. In this sense congregations are autonomous, but even congregations must be in submission to the headship of Christ (Eph. 5:24). If two congregations are different and distinct in practice or teaching, one (or both) is either obedient to God's word or in rebellion to God's word. So, the individuals who are a part of that group are not, therefore, part of the church that belongs to Christ.

4. Is biblical unity accomplished by accepting unity in diversity?

No. Paul taught the same things **"everywhere in every church"** (1 Cor. 4:17). The Bible teaches patience and respect for conscience (Rom. 15:1), but it also warns that one may **"condemn himself"** by approving of that which is wrong (Rom. 14:22). Christians are taught to oppose apostasy. Paul commanded the Romans, **"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them"** (Rom. 16:17). On a personal level brethren are to bear with one another, teach one another, and be patient with one another, but that must never involve tolerance of sin or endorsement of error.

There are clearly matters of judgment in which congregations have the liberty to choose different ways to fulfill the Lord's commands. For example, while the church is commanded to *sing or speak to one another* in **"psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord"** (Eph. 5:19; cf. Col. 3:16), we are not told how many songs, or what order in which those songs must fall during a time of worship. We are not told whether the songs are to be in four-part harmony, or whether a congregation is to sing from a printed songbook or from a projection of the words and music. If congregations differ in these matters of judgment it does not compromise their unity or their obedience to the word of God—they are still fulfilling the Lord's instruction to *sing or speak to one another* in song.

On the other hand if a congregation decides to add a mechanical instrument into their song worship the members of that congregation are adding an activity to this instruction that the

Lord has not commanded. *To sing or speak* is not the same activity as *playing* an instrument. The words of Scripture do not authorize this addition. It is therefore a departure from Scripture that compromises abiding in the word of Christ (and therefore compromises unity between brethren). On a personal level faithful Christians may try to work with, teach, and persuade a brother or sister who improperly approves of this addition, but if this unauthorized act is compelled upon a group of Christians it must be opposed and rejected. If a group refuses to end this unscriptural act, a faithful Christian must remove himself from identification with such a congregation.

Can We Still Be Simply Christians?

We have attempted to logically and in an orderly fashion consider the issues pertinent to this question. After doing so, we can answer emphatically, *yes we can still be nothing more and nothing less than what Christians were in the New Testament!* Let us end by considering what this question really means. Sadly, even among brethren who once championed the call to be "Christians only" more and more from within our own ranks concede to the terminology of the world. What are we really saying if we do that? What are the logical consequences of taking such a position?

On one extreme, if it is not possible to be simply what Christians were in the New Testament then we cannot identify ourselves as "simply Christians." Instead,