

The Brown Street Beacon

*"...Shine out among them like beacon lights,
holding out to them the Word of Life" (Phil 2:15-16)*



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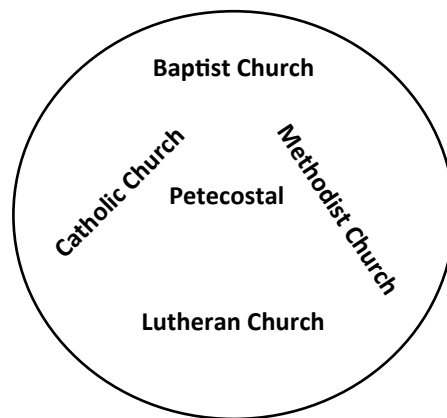
Number. 13

What Is a Denomination?

We say that we oppose denominationalism, but we sometimes do not understand exactly what a denomination is. In secular circles, a denomination is *"a large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy"* (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). I like to say that a denomination is a church of churches headed by a man or group of men.

What do you think a denominational person would say if you asked him if Jesus only built one church? Most of them, believe it or not, would say yes. The passages are too clear to deny this (Ephesians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Matthew 16:18). What do you think their response would be to the question, "Is Jesus the Head of the church today?" They would of course say yes (Ephesians 1:22, 23; Colossians 1:18). Their error, however, arises from their view of the church. They view the church as a body of denominations over which Christ is Head. Their view of the one universal church would be something like this:

Universal Church

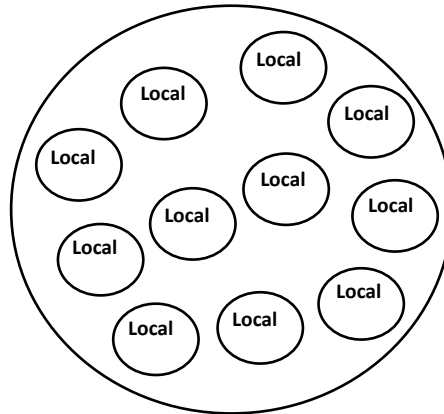


The problem is the one church of the New Testament is not made up of denominational churches, it is made up of people. In regard to the one body, Paul said that we are *"individually members of it"* 1 Corinthians 12:27). The truth is, there were not any denominational churches to be a part of the universal church in the first century. There was only one church made up of individual Christians who had obeyed the gospel of Christ and were thus added to the church (Acts 2:47).

Sadly, there are some brethren who have a similar view of the universal church, only they think it is

made up of local churches instead of denominations. Their concept looks like this:

Universal Church



This second view of the church is just as wrong as the first. It is still a church of churches. There is nothing in the New Testament that looks like this. In the New Testament we see the church existing in two ways.

First there is the universal church. The universal church is the one church Jesus promised to build in Matthew 16:18. It is the church under consideration when Paul says there is but one body (Ephesians 4:4) That the body is the church is seen in Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:18.

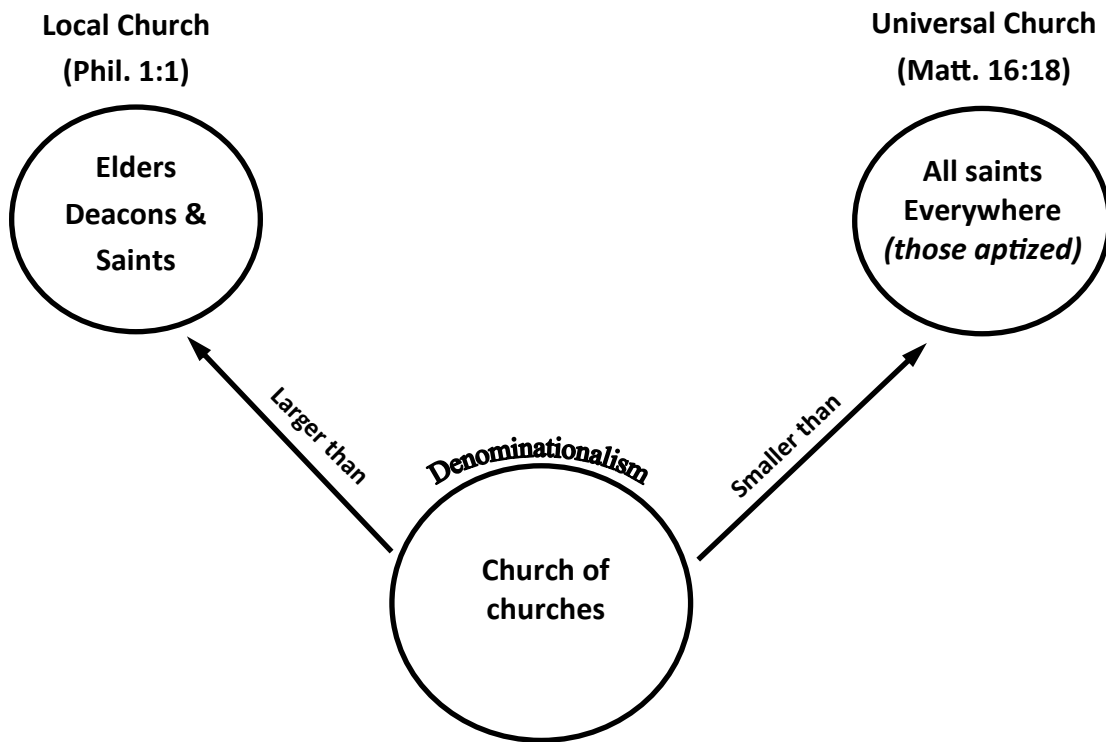
As we have said, this one church is not made up of denominations or of local churches, it is made up of individual Christians.

Second the church of the New Testament is viewed from a local standpoint. The local church is made up of a group of Christians who agree to work together in a certain geo-graphical location. We read in the New Testament of the church of God at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2), the church of Ephesus (Revelation 2:1), the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thes-salonians 1:1), etc. These are all churches that are composed of saints who live in a particular area and who have agreed to work together in furthering the cause of Christ in a specific area.

While the universal church has no organization (it is simply made up of all saints everywhere), the local church is organized with elders, deacons and saints (Philippians 1:1). The elders of a given local church oversee the flock which is among them (1 Peter 5:1-2).

This is the only view of the church we have in the Bible. Either it is pictured in the universal sense or the local sense, but never somewhere in between. Any religious group that is bigger than the local church, yet smaller than the universal church, is a denomination. Your average denomination is bigger than a local church. It is composed of several local churches, all under the leadership and control of a group of men headquartered somewhere here on earth. The collectivity of the various congregations within the denomination make up that church. For example, the Baptist church is made up of local Baptist churches found all over the world (of course there are several different kinds of Baptist denominations, e.g., First Baptist, Southern Baptist, etc.). Every denomination is organized like this. They can all be described as a church of churches. That is an arrangement that is larger than any local church in the New Testament. Yet, most denominations claim to be just a part of the saved. They do not believe that they are the universal church, but just a part of it. Thus, each denomination is smaller than the universal church, yet bigger than a local

church. This view of the church something foreign to the Bible.



Let's be sure that we are members of the universal church of Christ by obeying the unperturbed gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16). Let's also be sure that the local church with which we decide to associate is not a part of anything larger than the local church, and is completely autonomous in nature. Below is a good diagram of the church of which you should want to be a part.

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