

Non-Denominational Christianity

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Salem

Ephesians 1:3-23

INTRODUCTION:

As I was preparing for this morning's lesson I found a BBC News website that was reporting about a census that was taken in Australia a number of years ago.

- When answering a question about religious preference there were more than 70,000 Australians who had chosen to refer to themselves as members of the Jedi faith.
- And yes, I am referring to the Jedi that are in the movie, Star Wars.
- In the 2001 Census, 0.37% of those in Australia said that they believe in **"the force."**
- Those who compiled the numbers believe that most of the 70,509 people who wrote **"Jedi"** on their census forms probably did so as the result of an e-mail that was sent out, trying to get Jedi recognized as an official religion.
- What started out as a prank, therefore, has had some very interesting results.
- Once I had read the article, I went to a search engine and typed in **"Jedi Creed."**
- And wouldn't you know it; there is a **"Jedi Creed"**!
- For those of you who are interested, I have posted a copy of the Jedi Creed on the bulletin board.
- We are not adopting the Jedi Creed here in Salem, but I thought that some of you might be interested...

Apparently, then, there are some people in the world (or in the Universe, perhaps I should say), who take this rather seriously.

- But we hardly need to go to Australia to understand that there are many people out there who have some rather strange beliefs when it comes to the matter of religion.
- In fact, it is rather safe to say that we live in a world of serious religious confusion.

It is my understanding that 30 years ago there were somewhere around 2000 different groups that claimed to follow Jesus Christ.

- And as you know, the number of groups has not grown smaller.
- But rather, with each new twist of doctrine, religious groups continue to splinter and divide.
- I tried to find a number, but as you can imagine, the scope of this problem is almost too wide to even comprehend.
- One website gave a figure of more than 9,000 Christian denominations operating in the world today, but I would imagine that even that figure is probably fairly low.
- We know what it means to look at the religious world and see division in all directions.

And yet we can look at the prayer of Jesus in **John 17**, one of the most fervent prayers recorded in the entire Bible, and we find on the night before His death that the Lord prayed that all of His disciples would be one.

- Jesus prayed that His followers would be **"...perfected in unity, so that the world would know..."** that Jesus had truly been sent by God.

This morning, I'd like for those of us who are New Testament Christians to try to cut through the confusion in the religious world and just try to appreciate how special we are here in the Salem area.

- This isn't a matter of bragging, but it's a matter of being thankful for what the Lord has done in our lives.
- Please turn in your Bibles to **Ephesians 1**.

Maybe some of you have heard the story of a young man named Victor who always felt like a complete loser.

- He did not do very well in school, and when he was 16 years old, a teacher advised him to drop out of high school and get a job.
- He didn't do much better in the working world, and by the time he was 32, he had failed at 76 different jobs.
- However, as he applied for job #77, he was required to take an I.Q. test—a test designed to measure his intelligence.
- As you might know, a score of 100 is considered normal. Well, Victor scored 161.
- No one had ever noticed it before, but Victor was a genius...and having that knowledge had a way of changing his life.
- Victor Serienko went on to become famous for his research in laser surgery and to become president of MENSA, an organization of geniuses—all because a test said he was special.

I only tell this story because the Bible also tells us that we are special.

- In **Ephesians 1**, Paul starts out with his normal greeting, but then he goes into a long paragraph—**verses 3-14**—actually one long sentence, and he tells the Christians in Ephesus how wonderful it is that they had been saved.
- Over and over again, Paul refers to being *“in Christ.”*
- I have read that in all of Paul's letters combined, Paul uses the words *“in Christ,”* in some form or another, *“in Him,” “in the Lord,”* and so on, no less than 164 times, and a lot of those are concentrated here in the first half of **Ephesians 1**.
- These people had been saved out of idolatry, out of materialism, superstition, and hedonism.
- And when we think about it, life in Ephesus back then was a lot like life here in this area!
- But these Christians were people who were different—they were in the Lord, and Paul was excited about what the Lord had done.

All of this brings us up to the second half of **Ephesians 1—verses 15-23**.

- As we will see in just a moment, Paul starts out in **verse 15** by saying, *“For this reason....”*
- In other words, with all of these blessings in mind, there is a point that Paul is making, there is something that we as Christians really need to appreciate.
- And so today, as we look around us at all of the division and confusion in the religious world, let's look together at what Paul has to say. Please read with me **Ephesians 1:15-23**

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints,
16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers;
17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.
18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,
19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might
20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,
21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.
22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,
23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

This morning, as we try to cut through all of the confusion, as we look at the dozens of denominations represented here in the Salem area, as we think about those 9,000 distinct religious groups all teaching something different, I'd like for us to focus in on two very basic ideas that Paul brings across in this paragraph we've just read.

I. First of all, we find that **PAUL REFERRED TO GOD AS THE ONLY AUTHORITY IN ALL RELIGIOUS MATTERS.**

And we notice here that Paul does not say, *“Obey God or else...”*, but he puts it in very positive terms.

- Up in **verse 15**, Paul refers to *“...having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you....”*
- By the time this book was written (around 60 AD), these people would have been second generation Christians.
- Most of them had probably not seen the Lord face-to-face, but their faith was based on the word of God.
- As Paul wrote in **Romans 10:17**, *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”*
- These people were Christians, but they had never seen a denominational handbook.
- In fact, they had never even seen a denomination, but they were Christians.
- Their faith was based entirely on the word of God.

Paul, of course, knew that it would not always be this way in Ephesus.

- You might remember the time when Paul met the elders from this congregation on the beach near the city of Miletus as he was passing through on his way home on the Third Missionary Journey.
- In **Acts 20:29-30**, Paul spoke to the elders from Ephesus, and Paul said, *“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”*

Thankfully, though, at least by the time **Ephesians 1** was written, the church was still firm in their faith in the Lord Jesus.

- They were still using the word of God as their only authority, and Paul was so excited to hear of their faith!

We can go down to **verse 17**, and we see another reference to the fact that they were using God's word as their authority.

- In **verse 17**, Paul prayed that they would have *“...a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.”*
- And again, as we look back on this almost 2,000 years later, we understand that God has revealed Himself through the Scriptures.
- Certainly Paul agreed with what Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 9:10**, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*
- We learn to fear the Lord as we gain knowledge through the Scriptures.

In **verse 18**, Paul goes on and he prays that the eyes of their hearts would be *“enlightened.”*

- Paul wanted them to *“...know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.”*
- In **verse 19**, he wanted them to know *“...what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.”*

- All of these concepts are things that could be known through the word of God, just as we can know and understand these same concepts today.

Isn't that exciting? Everything they needed to know could be known through the word of God!

- There were no creeds, there were no denominations, no governing bodies voted on the next doctrine, but they simply used God's word as their only authority—just as we can also do today!

II. As we move on, we see a second very basic idea, and it comes through the fact that **THE APOSTLE PAUL VERY CLEARLY HAD THE IDEA THAT THERE WAS ONLY ONE CHURCH.**

In **verses 22-23**, we have the first reference to the church itself in the book of **Ephesians**.

- In these two short verses, we find that Jesus is the head of the church, ***“which is His body.”***
- The word church comes from a word meaning ***“assembly.”***
- It was a common word and was sometimes even used to refer to a mob of people.
- In that sense, I guess, we are God's mob—we are God's people, we are God's group, we are people who have assembled to honor our Father in heaven.
- We are the body of Christ. We have been called out of society to be different from the world.

As the body of Christ, we are in a unique position.

- When we go to look for a person here in this life, we usually recognize them by their body—by the way they look.
- And in a similar way, when people go looking for the Lord today, they will also recognize the Lord...by His body.
- They will find the Lord in His church!
- Redemption, forgiveness of sins—all of these things are available in the body of Christ, in the church.

We can look very carefully at the New Testament, and we find that the early church was ridiculed for being a ***“sect”*** (**Acts 24:5**).

- In fact, its membership was so exclusive that it was often spoken of as ***“the Way”*** (**Acts 9:2, 19:9,23, 24:14,22**).
- Individually, disciples of Jesus were simply known as ***“Christians”*** (**Acts 11:26, 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16**).
- As a group, they were known as ***“the church.”***
- For example, they were known as ***“the church of the Lord”*** (**Acts 20:28**), the ***“churches of Christ”*** (**Romans 16:16**), the ***“church of God”*** (**1 Corinthians 1:2**, et. al.), ***“the church of the Living God”*** (**1 Timothy 3:15**), and ***“the church of the Firstborn”*** (**Hebrews 12:23**).
- As far as geography is concerned, various congregations were referred to as the ***“church”*** in their particular location.
- They were ***“the churches of Asia”*** (**1 Corinthians 16:19**), ***“the churches of Macedonia”*** (**2 Corinthians 8:1**), ***“the churches of Judea”*** (**Galatians 1:22**), and so on.

And yet as we look at all of these descriptions in the Bible, we find that there was not a single denomination.

- In fact, in New Testament times, denominations did not exist.
- If we had asked Peter, James, or John what denomination they were a member of, they would not have even understood the question.

There were no creeds, there were no regional boards, there were no national conferences, but all Christians were united on the word of God alone.

- As we might say today, the Bible was their only creed.

Many times when we talk to people about religion these days, they want to know what we are religiously.

- And so we say, **“I am a Christian.”**
- At that point they have the **“Well...duh,”** expression on their face, and they want to know what kind of Christian we are.
- And of course, we explain that we are not any particular kind of Christian.
- Sometimes they get frustrated, and they want to know what denomination we are a part of.
- And of course we tell them that we are not a part of any denomination.
- The religious world is so twisted, many people are puzzled by the idea of non-denominational or pre-denominational Christianity.

A number of us here this morning have never been a part of any denomination.

- We simply came to the age when we realized we had sinned, and then we were immersed in water for the forgiveness of those sins, and at that point we simply became Christians.
- Others here this morning have left various denominations.
- You have realized what the Bible teaches about religious division, and you have repented by stepping away from it.

After all, if we look in the dictionary, we start to understand what the word **“denomination”** actually means.

- It goes back to a Latin word meaning **“to name.”**
- In other words, when we have given a name to one group as opposed to another group, we have denominated, we have divided by name.

In math, we know what a **“denominator”** is.

- It is the number under the line, the number by which the number on top is divided.
- In the case of $\frac{1}{2}$, it shows that the number 1 has been divided by 2, and so there is no longer one part, but two.
- And so I guess we could say that in the religious world right now, the number is $\frac{1}{9000}$.
- Is the Lord happy that there are 9000 religious groups in the world, all teaching at least 9000 different doctrines?
- Is the Lord happy that His name has been divided?

As I said, there were no denominations even referred to in the New Testament, but there is one passage that gives us just a tiny bit of insight into what the Bible writers might have said about the religious situation we see around us today.

- In **1 Corinthians 1:10-13**, Paul said...

10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.

12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.”

13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Wouldn't it be safe to say that the church in Corinth had been **“denominated,”** that they had been divided by name?

- The Apostle Paul was horrified and told that church to repent.

And now, almost 2,000 years later, it is still possible to simply be a Christian without being a part of any man-made denomination.

- In **Luke 8:11**, Jesus described the word of God as a seed.
- Peter tells us in **1 Peter 1:23** that we are born again by that seed.
- So when we turn away from our sins, when we confess our belief in Jesus as God's son, when we are buried with Christ in baptism, and when we are raised up to live a new life...we are born into the family of God.
- We are added to the Lord's church.

SUMMARY:

As we close, as we review what we already know, and as we think about going out and telling people about the great blessing of being Christians, let's remember what Paul had in mind here in **Ephesians 1:**

- God is the only authority—as Christians, our only creed is God's word.
- And God's eternal plan was for there to be only one church—His Son's body—not divided and denominated, but unified on the word of God.

CONCLUSION & INVITATION:

The important question at this point is: **Are you a simple New Testament Christian?**

- The question is not: **Have you joined a church?**
- Because the Bible never speaks of "**joining a church.**"

But the Bible does refer to obeying the gospel.

- We obey the good news about Jesus dying for our sins by reenacting the death, burial, and resurrection in our own lives by dying to sin, being buried in water, and then by being lifted up out of the water as newborn children of God.

If you have been a member of a denomination in the past, the Bible teaches that you must repent of that sin.

- You must leave behind the sin of dividing the Lord's church, you must leave behind all man-made creeds, and you must leave behind all man-made titles and labels, simply obeying the good news.
- How refreshing it is to be a Christian!

If you have any questions, we hope you will write to us today.

- But if you are ready to turn your life over to God right now, we would like to encourage you to not wait in your decision.
- Please contact us and we'll help you find a good church in your area.

Comments or Questions?

Please contact Kevin Morkassel by email... kmorkassel@ussonet.net