**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**The Undenominational Church**

There is a movement going on in our society to move from the old established denominational churches into more independent, nondenominational type of churches. This can be a good thing if the undenominational concept of the church that people have is the Biblical concept. The church that we read about in the Bible was undenominational. And that is what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about the undenominational concept of the church that we read about in the Bible. I want to ask the question, if we lived in the first century when the church was established what concept would we have had of the church in that day? And then I want to ask the question, is it possible to have that same concept of the church today? This is the focus of our lesson today.

First of all, in the Bible the word church is used in at least two senses. First, it was used to refer to all God’s people universally. That is, all who were saved from their sins, who were in the family of God were known as the church. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, *“…on this rock I will build My church…”* The word “church” in the singular form here refers to His people, all who would be His, all who would be saved by His death on the cross. The Lord’s church is not a building. It is not some institution separate from the people. The church of our Lord is people, saved people. Luke records in Acts 2:47 concerning the Jews in Jerusalem who obeyed the gospel, *“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”* Secondly, the word church is used in a local sense. A local church as we find it in the Bible is a group of Christians, God’s people who happen to live at the same time in the same place, and who have agreed to work and worship together with Jesus as their only Head, or Legislator. This local group of Christians follow the Lord in all things He has commanded them to do as a local church. And so we read about the church of God at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), or the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:1), or the seven churches which are in Asia (Rev. 1:4, 11). The local church functioned collectively under the oversight of elders, also called bishops and shepherds. These men were overseers of the local church, with the responsibility to make sure the words of Christ were respected and carried out among them. Local churches also had special servants among them called deacons.

Now, suppose you were living in the first century, and you became conscience of your sin, and you wanted to find forgiveness. What would you do?

Look with me in Acts 16. We read of Paul, with other disciples, coming to Philippi. Keep that in mind. They are in Philippi. On the Sabbath day they went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made and they spoke to the women who met there (v. 13). Paul preached the gospel to them. It goes on to say, *“Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ So she persuaded us.”*  And so Lydia and her household hear the gospel, they are convinced of their sins, they come to believe in Christ and are baptized. They are saved from their sins, just like the Jews who obeyed the gospel in Jerusalem, and just like the Jews in Jerusalem they are added to the church by the Lord. They become a part of that saved body of people known as the church of the Lord.

Later Paul and Silas are imprisoned in this same city, Philippi. In the middle of the night there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed. The jailor is awakened from his sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. Paul called out and said, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.” Then the jailor called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. *“And he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.”*

(Acts 16:25-33) It looks like to me they did the same thing that Lydia and her household did. They did the same thing the Jews did in Jerusalem. They heard the gospel, and hearing the gospel brought them to believe in Jesus Christ, and they were baptized. Believing and being baptized they were saved and being saved they were added to the universal body of Christ, the church.

Now we learn later that there was a local church in Philippi. The Philippian letter was written to the church in Philippi. Philippians 1:1 says, *“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.”* Here you have a local church, a group of saints with the bishops and deacons. Now since Lydia and the jailor and their households lived in Philippi we can assume, if they still lived there, that they are a part of this church to whom Paul is writing. They heard the gospel, they believed the gospel, they were baptized, the Lord saved them and added them to the universal body of saved people, and then they along with others who were saved form the church in Philippi, the local church there with its bishops and deacons. And if you lived in the first century in Philippi, wanting to be saved by Christ, that is exactly what you would have done, and you would have been a part of the local church there.

Look with me in Acts 8. Beginning with verse 27 we read of a man, a eunuch from Ethiopia returning home from Jerusalem where he had been to worship. He was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip, a preacher of the gospel came along, having been sent by God, and the Ethiopian asked him to come up and sit with him in his chariot. Beginning with verse 35 it says, *“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.”* It sounds like he did the same thing that Lydia and her household had done, and the same thing the Philippian jailor and his household had done. He heard the gospel. He was brought to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel. He learned what he needed to do to be saved, and he did it. He believed and was baptized. He was saved and he went on his way rejoicing. Now having been saved the Lord added him to the church. He is now a part of the universal body of saved people. But at this point he is not a part of any local church, is he? In fact, as far as we know he has never seen a local church. There are those today who believe that one is saved by faith alone, and then sometime later a vote is taken by a local church for him to be baptized in order to become a member of that local church. What local church voted on the Ethiopian eunuch for him to be baptized? There is nothing in scripture that teaches that a vote must be taken by a local church for one to be baptized. The Ethiopian eunuch heard the gospel, learned from this preaching that he needed to be baptized to be saved, he obeyed the command to be baptized, was saved and the Lord added him to universal body of the saved. Now, no doubt, being a disciple of Christ when he arrived home in Ethiopia, he, along with other disciples would form a local church in the place where he lived.

And so there are two things done here: first, one is saved through his obedience to the gospel and is added to the church, the universal body of saved people. And then secondly, he along with other saved people form a local church with the bishops and deacons. That is what was done in the first century.

Now we need to emphasize that these local churches were not formed in any way that the people wanted them to be formed. They didn’t take on any name that suited them. They didn’t worship based on their own likes and dislikes. They were not organized just in any way that suited them. They were organized and worshiped and worked according to the instructions of the apostles who were led by the Holy Spirit in the instructions they gave. Concerning those in Jerusalem who had obeyed the gospel and were saved it says, *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”* (Acts 2:42) They followed apostolic teaching. The apostles in their teaching gave them a pattern to follow concerning the local church, and the first century Christians followed that pattern. Paul, the apostle, said to the local church in Philippi, *“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”* (Phil. 4:9). If you lived in the first century and were a disciple of Christ you would be a part of a local church that was patterned after the teaching of the apostles. And that pattern was the same for every church. Look with me in 1 Cor. 4:17. Paul said to the local church in Corinth, *“For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.”* What the apostles taught in one church they taught in another. They taught the same thing in every church. Consequently if you were in Philippi one Sunday and worshiped with them and the next Sunday you were in Thessalonica you would notice similarity in their worship. Why? They were both following the same teaching. These local churches were not different denominations that believed and practiced contradictory doctrines. No, they were all to continue in the pattern taught by the apostles. If we lived in the first century we would not have joined a denomination because there were no denominations in the first century. We would have simply been Christians, a part of the one universal body of saved people. And we would have formed ourselves with other Christians into a local church, a church that was patterned after the teaching of the apostles who were guided by the Holy Spirit.

We have that same apostolic teaching today preserved for us in the New Testament. We can today obey the same gospel they obeyed, be added to the same universal church they were added to and form a local church patterned after the teaching of the apostles just as they did. It’s just a matter of following their teaching. If they did it in the first century why can’t we do it today? We can, but we must give up human doctrines and traditions and commit ourselves to continuing in the apostles teaching as it is recorded in the New Testament. Why not start doing that today?

Our time is gone for today, and we thank you for listening.

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