

Denominationalism

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the doctrine of the church, but to define denominationalism, trace its origin and to describe its current use.

"*Denomination*" has become the most available term to delineate the mosaic of churches and sects in a country where none of them occupies a privileged situation and each has an equal claim to status as a Christian communion in the eyes of the law. Sydney E. Ahlstrom points out that especially among the mainstream churches of British origin, it very soon come to constitute a virtual theology of the Church. He says that denominational doctrine repudiates the insistences of "the Roman Catholic Church, the churches of the 'magisterial' Reformation, and of most sects that they alone are the true Church." ¹

1 Definition of Denominationalism

"Denomination. An association of churches with a particular name and a particular confession of faith ... When a body of churches or people deny basic Christian doctrine (e.g., the Trinity), they are usually called a sect. Denomination is normally reserved for churches that hold basic orthodoxy." ²

"Denominationalism denotes a pattern of religious structuring and of ecclesial diversity that appeared in the modern, Western world under conditions of religious pluralism, disestablishment, toleration and religious liberty." ³

"Denominations are association of congregations - though sometimes it might be said that congregations are localized subdivisions of denominations - that have a common heritage. Moreover, a true denomination does not claim to be the only legitimate expression of the church. A denominational heritage normally includes doctrinal or experiential or organizational emphases and also frequently includes common ethnicity, language, social class, and geographical origin." ⁴

The denomination "is the most manifest form of the organized church. Taken together, denominations remain vivid to any who own a phone book with Yellow Pages or who want to choose which clustering of congregations, which more-than-local part of the organized church should serve as an instrument for expressing their faith." ⁵

Denomination "is the common mold into which the religious spirit is poured to form and cool." ⁶

"Denominations are sociological groups whose principle of differentiation is to be sought in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes." ⁷

Until recently, use of the word "denominational" was confined to the Christian tradition. Presently, however, non-Christian religions and sects use the word, which makes it

even more difficult for our secular, irreligious society to define church, sect, cult and non-Christian religions.

2. Origins of Denominationalism

The word itself came into common usage only in the 19th century. As a concept it bears the marks of its origin in 17th-century England. It was first formulated by the small group of Congregational "Dissenting Brethren" who objected to the Presbyterian "inflexibility" of the Westminster Assembly (1643). The British 18th-century Evangelical Revival gave this view wide currency. John Wesley (1703-1791) stated: "I ... refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity ... I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of whatever denomination, I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all ... Dost thou love and fear God? It is enough! I give thee the right hand of fellowship." ⁸

Martin E. Marty observes that until about 1788 the church did not depend on denominations. He says, "The denomination, like the competitive congregation-system, the Sunday School, the mission movement, the voluntary society pattern, and even early ecumenism, is an invention of early industrial and democratic Western life." ⁹

During the 19th century the splitting of old denominations and the forming of new ones in the United States accelerated with such a rapid speed that it has become nearly impossible for a history to list all the churches which claim to be "authentic" churches. Charles Hodge said that the "unblessed ambitions of restless individuals" had made schism a major problem in his day. ¹⁰

In Canada there are approximately 100 denominations. Some of them have come about as Canadian denominations separated from their American counterparts. Ethnic or geographical differences mark out some denominations. Others have been formed due to theological or personal conflicts. ¹¹

3. Negative Attitudes Toward Denominationalism

Denominationalism is seen by many, especially in the ecumenical movement, as destructive for the church. H. Richard Niebuhr portrayed it as the "moral failure" of the church. ¹² Many mainstream Protestants find in ecumenism the purpose, vision and unity of the church.

In today's anti-institutional climate religious seekers ignore or are indifferent to denominations, or find them dysfunctional. ¹³ "Pick and choose" cafeteria, smorgasbord style, Christianity has become popular, but the denomination presents itself in a kind of "take it all" way, a package deal." ¹⁴

Martin E. Marty notes that "denominations appear to be demanding. Most of all, they seem to want money to run their programs, and their demands are more vivid and visible than are the services performed for each congregation and each congregant.

And there are also legitimate expressions of concern over the inevitable bureaucratization of the denomination, which was born as a bureaucracy and born to be bureaucratic. "15

Dr. John Vissers, professor of theology at Ontario Theological Seminary, Toronto, writes that denominationalism is a denial of faith's claim to believe one, holy catholic and apostolic church. And it stand as a sign of God's judgment upon the church."16

We live in a so-called ecumenical age. Never has so much been written about the unity of the church, but never has an age seen such fragmentation of the church. The secular spirit of individualism has made a powerful impact upon the life of the church, including its evangelical branch. The late Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones spoke of the endless divisions that have taken place among "men who have held to the same evangelical faith. They have divided on personality; they have divided on subtle, particular emphases." And he notes, "There is a multiplicity of denominations, and men do not hesitate to set themselves up and to start denominations - not in terms of vital truth but in terms of matters which are not even secondary, but of third-rate, fourth-rate, even perhaps twentieth or hundredth-rate importance."17

a. Marketing the faith

Dr. Craig Gay, assistant professor of interdisciplinary studies at Regent College, Vancouver, BC, observes that in responding to the competition in the religious market place various denominations have adopted very much like marketing strategies for attracting and keeping "their customers." Gay also claims that since religion has been relegated to the private sphere of personal fulfilment and identity, it is not surprising that many churches (denominations) have been almost entirely preoccupied with the administration of personal and family therapy.18

b. Critique of denominationalism

Martin E. Marty calls denominationalism "tribalism that threatens civil and ecclesiastical order." He also critiques the Church Growth School people who speak of the Homogenous Unit Principle. This means reaching out to special social groups, units or tribes, to establish in this way a homogenous church. And I believe that Marty is correct when he says that this Church Growth Principle denies much of that to which Christians ought to aspire. "It is successful precisely for the reasons all tribalisms tend to be successful in our time of eroded personal and social identities." 19

Dr. Leslie Newbigin, for many years a missionary and bishop of the Church of South India in Madras, now retired in Birmingham, England, calls for "a radical break with that form of Christianity which is called the denomination." He believes that denominations are a hindrance to missions. He writes that in North America the denomination is simply the institutional form of a privatized religion. "The denomination is the outward and visible form of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of our culture. Neither

separately nor together can the denominations become the base for a genuinely missionary encounter with our culture." ²⁰

Generally speaking, the negative voices outweigh the positive. Many scholars, both evangelical and liberal, have shown how the confusing denominational scene has contributed to the decline of the Christian faith in our 20th century.

4. Positive Attitudes Toward Denominationalism

Martin E. Marty claims that denominations are necessary. He does not provide theological but pragmatic reasons for his claim. He believes that the local church cannot effectively train ministers, engage in publishing across the spectrum of possibilities, or mobilize many people for refugee and relief services. And he says, "Denominations may and do combine in Church World Service and similar agencies. But such agencies tend to be inefficient and powerless if they do not, from the other direction, recognize the organization of life that consistently goes on in the denominations." ²¹

Helmut Harder, general secretary of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, wrote that the denominational head office can address national issues of politics and social policy with greater chance of being heard than local congregations. "The role of the denomination is one big voice." ²²

Rev. James MacKnight, general superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, says that denominations give churches "a sense of belonging to a large body." ²³

5. Spiritual Unity Rather Than Church Unity

Among evangelicals, committed to the sufficiency of the local church, the emphasis is on the invisible spiritual unity rather than on denominational unity. In general evangelicals have done little with the theology of the church. Dr. John Vissers comments that for a variety of social, cultural and theological reasons, evangelical Christianity has virtually abandoned the biblical doctrine of the church in the past thirty years. He says, "Anyone familiar with historic Christianity will recognize this radical departure from the orthodox faith." ²⁴

In *The Gospel in America*, the authors claim that Americans in the 19th century divided the body of Christ into so many pieces that it was no wonder that many became sceptical about the value of the church as an institution.²⁵ Abandoned by mainstream churches, denominationalism has prospered among evangelicals and conservative Protestants.

6. Sociological View of Denominationalism

Russell E. Richey, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA, recognizes in denominations and denominationalism a form of religious order and organization "peculiarly expressive of the social and cultural life of democratic capitalism."²⁶

7. Post-Denominationalism

In our post-modern times denominational identity is no longer an accurate predictor of theological stance, worship style, or social class as it once was. There is increasing congregationalism within denominations. With modernity came freedom of choice. Most of the time the choice is based on feelings. The truth factor is ignored by and large. Individualism has created havoc with the theology of the church. Consumerism also plays a significant role in the choice of churches. What programs and services do local community churches offer? Denominational loyalty is rapidly declining. A 1991 *Faith Today* opinion poll reports that only 36 percent of respondents think that denomination is an important factor in choosing a church with which to affiliate.²⁷ Maxine Hancock, a Christian writer and speaker living in Alberta, comments, "As we move deeper into the post-Christian era, we have to find ways to express our oneness in Christ, and denominational tags become less significant. Many people are wondering if we can afford to divide ourselves over too many particulars when there's a world to reach."²⁸

Denominations will not disappear as structures and cooperation between the local congregations are still necessary. As a matter of fact, globally the number of denominations increases by five a week.²⁹ The relationship of congregations to their denominational headquarters will continue to change, however.

8. Circulation of the Saints

Since a denomination is less an identifying factor, there is more "church hopping," a matter of concern to denominational leaders. The church population in Canada is not growing. Studies have shown that conservative churches are growing at the "expense" of liberal denominations. The charismatics draw from both spectrums. Few are won from the secular world. That is why I call this phenomenon of switching "the circulation of the saints." One important negative aspect of this switching trend is the consequent relativizing of Christian doctrine. There is more emphasis on personal ethics than on doctrine. And due to the privatization of religion the ethical questions centre on the family and its needs.

Post-denominationalism presents a peculiar challenge to the Alliance schools. The questions that must be asked today are vastly different from the ones that had to be raised when post-World War II immigrants founded the Christian schools. Most were from the Christian Reformed denomination, with its confessional and even ethnic loyalty. Today the denominational loyalty in the CRC is eroding. Christians from other denominations who may want to enroll their children in a Christian school will most likely have little understanding of the biblical doctrine of the church. And the loyalty to their own denomination is not strong.

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