

# The Problems of Non-Denominationalism

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Non-denominational Christianity is a rather recent phenomenon in Christian History. It is a result of three influences on the foundation of American individualism – Evangelicalism, the Para-Church movement, and the Charismatic movement. This essay will address the problems of non-denominationalism and the need for Christians to move away from this problematic approach to faith and practice.

The history of Judeo-Christianity is a history of traditions. The faith of the apostles was based on, and continuous with, the Temple Judaism of the first century. Called Judaisms rather than Judaism, because the religious traditions of the second temple period were divided into significant sects such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Samaritans and disciples of John the Baptist and Yeshua (Jesus). These proto-denominations each had a faith, practice and community that informed the members of that sect with respect to Scripture, Tradition, and relating to God that connected them within their sect and the other communities within Temple Judaism. When the teachings of Jesus (Yeshua) and the apostles formed communities, the faith and practice of the disciples of Jesus also developed into additional sects. Though all of them are not identifiable, it is clear that differences existed in the faith as practiced by Jewish believers, Gentile believers, and those living in the Land with access to the Temple and those in the Diaspora with less access to the Temple.

After the loss of the Temple, both Judaism and the emerging Christian traditions had to reform their understanding of worship and community life in a Diaspora context within the Roman Empire. In addition to the growing separation between the transitioning rabbinic Judaism, a multi-linguistic and cultural Christianity was developing. Greek, Latin, Coptic languages and doctrine variation based groupings struggled to express the faith. Five centers formed – Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople and each became a major religious hub and managed the faith, practice and community systems for Christians.

Christianity held together for the most part but significant tradition distinctions existed. The split with rabbinic Judaism was followed by a separation by the oriental Churches (called Oriental Orthodox). In 1050AD, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Church separated. In the Reformation and counter-Reformation the Roman Church split further creating the Protestant Denominations and the Free Churches which functioned as smaller sects within the Western tradition.

Each denomination struggled with the Biblical Texts, the Common Tradition, and their own perspective as Christians became denominational. While some of the variances were severe and at times the various Christians rejected each other as authentic believers, one can view the denominations as variations on a theme or as monetary denominations like a one dollar, five dollar, and ten dollar bill. Each is authentic but the value is different. In this case, it was their value in representing the truth and faith of the apostles that is at issue.

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## The Road to Non-denominationalism

In America, the Protestant denominations had to operate in competition with the Free Church denominations because of the absence of a State sanctioned Church, common in Europe. This created a more egalitarian influence upon American Christians who connected to their denominational preference with less coercion. The basic American individualism set a background for this.

Three movements pushed the American Christians toward a more non-denominational approach to faith and practice. These were Evangelicalism, the Para-Church movement, and the Charismatic movement. Each of these movements, separately and together, ties to individualism inherent in American culture to move Christians away from a stricter denominationalism.

The Evangelical movement grew out of the Fundamentalist – Modernist controversy brought about by modern science and the emerging Behavioral Sciences of anthropology, sociology and psychology. Darwin, Marx, and Freud (among others) presented a challenge to the traditional religious world view of the Greco-Roman Judeo-Christian amalgam of Western Civilization in its various linguistic and national cultural forms. The American churches had to address this change in world view. They divided into two camps, Fundamentalists, who sought to hold the traditional world view and Modernists, who sought to accommodate the scientific perspective within the faith. The Modernists won the protestant denominations and this so-called liberalism further removed their appeal to a religious populous in America. In response and reaction to the liberal shift, the Evangelical movement moved through the denominations giving a personal faith to many traditional Christians who wished to retain their denominational context. Most of the Free Church denominations moved into the Fundamentalist camp. The Fundamentalist – Modernist split was complicated further by a split among the Fundamentalist and Evangelicals. This was less over doctrine than behavior. Fundamentalists and Evangelicals believe quite alike. But Fundamentalists avoided drinking, dancing, movies and any so-called worldly behavior. Evangelicals were more moderate in these things and engaged in some levels of these behaviors, privately if not publically. While Fundamentalists isolated themselves from the world, Evangelicals sought to reach the non-churched and this was the impetus for the Para-Church movement.

Para-Church organizations became the evangelistic arm of the Free Churches and the evangelicals among the traditional denominations. Gideons, Youth for Christ, Navigators etc. formed outside of the denominational clash to make an impact on the unchurched and special age and interest groups. Many who joined or were converted within these groups saw the congregation as important but not essential to Christian development and ministry. These para-churches were non-denominational (not under any existing denomination) and could cooperate with various Christian denominational traditions. One's age and ministry interest dictated which para-church organization one supported.

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This fragmented denominationalism further. Free Churches connected well with the para-church organizations and many organizations connected converts to the church for discipleship. The non-denominational mind set was now within free churches (Baptists, Free Methodists, Evangelical Free, etc.) and evangelistic zeal was the primary focus of Christians in this context.

Pentecostalism had isolated itself as a movement and produced its own denominations (Foursquare, Assemblies of God, among others) and prior to the 1950's animosity between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals kept these churches separated. But during the 60's a modified form of Pentecostalism emerged. The Charismatic movement entered traditional denominations - Catholic and Protestant, Free Church and in some cases among Fundamentalists. The "Jesus movement", with its anti-establishment mindset resident in the baby-boomers, made Jesus "cool" and house churches formed without denominational connections. Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard, and Melodyland Christian Center created models of churches that were "denominational lite" at best. As a result, traditional churches saw their identity as a burden and changed their name and worship style toward this new eclectic and non-denominational approach. Non-denominationalism was now a valued and legitimate church identity.

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The disintegration of traditional denominational Christianity as a result of American individualism, intensified by the Evangelical, Para-Church and Charismatic movements, has reached a critical point so that today most Christians are suffering from several spiritual conditions. These conditions are the result of the success of non-denominationalism.

The first problem is a **loss of identity**. Meaningful faith becomes an identity which creates a sense of being and belonging. It tells me who I am and who we are. Historic Christians were brought to faith within a tradition that gave them a foundational structure for that faith (doctrine) and a behavioral system (practice) that expressed that faith. This in turn developed within them an identity as a kind of Christian. One was Catholic, another Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, or Quaker. To say I am a Christian today has no meaning. And asking what kind of Christian is also without meaning for non-denominationists. Non-denominational means I do not know what I have in common with other Christians and I do not necessarily behave similar to other Christians. Each person must be asked about every point of doctrine and behavior individually. In most cases, no answer is trustworthy. Most non-denominational Christians are shallow and inconsistent in doctrine and practice. They know what they like (based on their limited experience) and they know what they do or don't do, even if they don't know why. They often can give more reasons for why the cults and others are wrong than for what they believe and do. They are Rick Warren Christians, Joel Osteen Christians or John Hagee Christians. The personality cults of modern Christianity are not new. The Corinthians had them. But they are not commended by the Apostles because they divide the church. Believers today

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join a following rather than a community of faith within a larger tradition. And while this is also true of many Christians within denominations, at least in their case, a reasonable idea of what they should believe and do is available for comparison. This highly idiolectic and individualized Christianity has every believer doing and believing whatever is right in their own eyes. So, Christian identity has no serious way of connecting to others of like faith and practice. This leads to the second problem.

The second problem of non-denominationalism is an **absence of meaningful community**. Historically, a local congregation was a community of faith in that the membership was made up of families from a local geography and neighborhood with similar backgrounds, interests, culture and denominational identity. People worshiped together in multi-generational context and had a sense of belonging and continuity to that home church. Non-denominationalism has adapted to, and reinforced an individual membership that is based on similar tastes in worship, preaching style and programs, more than common doctrine and behavior passed on from generation to generation. We have a collectivity of purpose and style rather than community of being and living. Non-denominational relationships tend to be utilitarian and self-serving more than kinship and common good based. The congregations do not develop disciples, they entertain and motivate. The person sitting in the seat next to you can be a stranger or a different person each service and the quality of the experience is unaffected. The sense that we belong to each other (kinship), need each other (community) and participate in a purpose greater than our own interests (commitment) is missing. And it has been missing for two generations so that the loss is no longer felt or even considered. We are in a congregation for our self and if our needs are not met or we have an issue, we simply move on.

A third problem with non-denominationalism is its **eclectic approach to doctrine**. No common creed or doctrinal statement exists. Each believer and congregation creates its own confession of faith or doctrinal statement drawn from many different sources or based on a business type mission statement. And the language on most web sites is hard to distinguish the actual belief being described. In addition, most of the members (if the congregation has members – many don't) do not know what their church believes. They simply say, "We're non-denominational". Many use a favorite verse or a favorite song to describe their own doctrine. But often they have no idea what that means in the context of Biblical, systematic, or dogmatic theology. This approach to doctrine allows one person to ignore eternal punishment, another to redefine the trinity, and another to be a Baptist. And we read this into our many versions of the Bible creating what I call "Rorschach Theology" – projecting our own ideas onto the text and saying this verse means this to me.

Eclectic doctrine is only surpassed by the next problem - **non-behavioral religion**. Behavior to a large extent has been removed from the faith. Religious practice is as individualized as doctrine. Baptism is optional, mode is inconsequential. Communion can be practiced any time with any elements (leavened bread, unleavened bread, Oreos in some house groups) with almost any meaning. What at one time involved seriously considered variations of behavior (like leavened and unleavened bread) based on

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theological and denominational systems is now a matter of choice and taste. This ultimately moves toward a religion that has no behavior associated with it. What matters is what matters to the individual and draws the most people to a service. Faith alone has become faith only - my faith as I interpret it. It cannot be judged because it's between me and the Lord. There is nothing that must be done unless I am led to do it by the Lord through feelings or circumstances backed up by a verse out of context.

The final problem of non-denominationalism is the trajectory of the process resulting in a freedom of self rather than a freedom from self. Non-denominationalism claims to provide individual identity, collectivity, eclectic doctrine and non-behavioral religion leading to total freedom in Christ. But this freedom is not freedom as taught by Moses in the Torah or Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. It is closer to the freedom as expressed by Janis Joplin – *“freedom’s just another word for **nothing left to lose**”*. One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism and endeavoring to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace has become little more than a slogan. Non-denominationalism left uncontrolled leads to a meaningless truth with every Christian a denomination.

## **Multi-Denominationalism as a Method of Identity and Unity**

It doesn't have to be this way. We can return to a more meaningful and sustainable faith. I call it a multi-denominational approach. It is not a rejection of denominationalism, but an embracing of the richness of the various historic expressions of the faith. It is not ecumenicalism which involves the connecting and compromising of denominational structures and organizations under a World or National Council or other political approach. Multi-denominationalism is relational and operates from Christian to Christian and congregation to congregation.

The traditional denominations have left a rich legacy of their struggle with an authentic understanding of the faith and practice of Christianity. We differ on polity, sacraments and ordinances, clergy structures and ministry emphasis. But we have much in common. We have the scriptures in common, worship prayers and hymns, early creeds, and a history of our struggle with being God's people in a post-Babel world without hope. For Christians within those historic traditions, multi-denominationalism is a matter of knowing your tradition and then carefully and respectfully interacting relationally with Christians from the other traditions so that the common aspects of faith and practice unite us. In this manner we get to know and trust one another. This understanding also includes knowing where we differ so we do not have to violate our own conscience or pretend that we are the same. It requires a full understanding of your own tradition in order to appreciate the other traditions of our common faith.

I learned this from the martial arts. A person who learns an entire system (Judo, Karate, or Aikido) can appreciate another system and see the common skills and the differences in approach. This broadens the understanding of the practitioner so that when something is borrowed from another system, it is done so respectfully. Individuals who draws from

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several systems without fully understanding any one of them, usually creates a bad and ineffective blurring of the material which is of little use to themselves or others. This is why eclectic non-denominationalism is so dysfunctional.

For those in the Free Churches or independent churches with a lost or incomplete tradition, multi-denominationalism is more difficult. But it is of great benefit. Learning about spiritual relatives (other Christian groups) helps you understand who you are. Instead of looking for what is wrong with each of the denominations, consider what they are doing right. Christianity does not need to be re-invented by each generation. It needs to be passed on in a comprehensive and meaningful manner and then refreshed and internalized by each generation. By learning Church and denominational history, we learn our own story, the good and the bad, and we become part of the communion of saints – in heaven and on earth. There will be aspects of other traditions that you cannot accept. There will also be aspects that you may appreciate and include to supplement your own faith tradition and practice. Unity does not require uniformity. But unity does require that we understand each other and know whom and what to trust. There are tares in each congregation and denomination. But there is wheat also. We must connect relationally and “love one another” or our non-denominationalism will tear us apart more than denominationalism did.

I challenge you to start by learning the history of your own congregation. Then, examine the denominational history of your family and close friends. Experience these differences by visiting congregations and discuss them with other believers. Find your brothers and sisters, your mothers and fathers, your aunts and uncles and cousins in the family of God. You will know who you are and to whom you belong.