
WHY DENOMINATIONS MATTER

I left my denomination.

Not for long, but it was a firm departure. It didn't make a big difference when I left. Not even sure most noticed. This was before the social media trends of today when most would share it publicly, and perhaps more permanently.

In some years of education I began wandering far afield from my denominational roots, geographically, theologically, and ecclesiologicaly. I struggled through some very hard questions myself. This all led to some deep questioning of the tradition I sprang from, and the leaders I had respected, many of whom I began to think had already failed me (not to mention their churches and their families) by my twenties.

After that season I went into church planting and returned to the denomination of my roots.

Sort of.

I remained a critic of my denominational tribe. I became the "loyal opposition." I wanted to see many things changed and advocated for them. Of course, this is not all that unique among young, brash leaders. Perhaps the difference for me is that I actually published these ideas print and online. One of those became [a full length book](#) where I argued with my father about my denomination. So I couldn't really deny and bury my dissent as I grew up.

I didn't leave my denomination again, however. Some forget that being a part of the loyal opposition is to actually be loyal. Such dissent is a part of loving something and believing it is important enough to work to change for missional reasons.

You can imagine my surprise when Dr. Jo Anne Lyon called and offered me a job. Lyon, the newly elected sole General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church, asked that I would come work for her in the denominational headquarters as her chief of staff. I soon found it was much easier to either leave or just complain, rather than to actually roll up your sleeves and be a part of the solution, as I had to do in the next season of life.



In this journey I've processed through why denominations might matter so much. I began to exegete why, as a young leader, I was so adamant about the need for change in our denomination; why did I care about it so much to expend such effort?

I cared because denominations matter.

This is counter-intuitive for many. Some think it cool to be non-denominational or even "trans-denominational," the word non-denominational people use to appear they are morally superior to denominational differences, in the condescending way a cyborg might call themselves trans-human. Others say they are "inter-denominational," which is another way of saying "we steal sheep regardless of wool color."

I'll admit it: nobody ever woke up on a Monday morning thinking denominations were inherently relevant.

However, I do think denominations have a unique purpose in the kingdom of God. In fact I have a list of 15 quick reasons denominations matter...

1. Unity

Denominations matter because unity matters. You cannot stroll across earth with your piccolo, attracting followers in all places, Pied Piper-ing your way so the whole earth revels in your unifying glory. Unity must have a starting point, a genesis community. Being a part of a denomination is a way to actually demonstrate unity with some group of people in the Christian church before moving to the entire Christian church. You have to have a little unity before a larger one. In John 17:21, Jesus prays, "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." A denomination is the perfect starting point to live out this unity, for the sake of mission, that the world may believe.

2. Development

A denomination is a place that you can be developed in and that you can use as a platform to develop others. Eventually, all Christian leaders discern that leadership development must happen in them as well as through them. The latter is not an afterthought. Non-denominational leaders often seek out denominational connections just to find a place to develop others and not selfishly focus internal (and of course they get the benefit of a fresh talent-pool to recruit from.)

3. Finances

Denominations help support with finances, for education, for training, for assessment, for church health, and church multiplication. They empower other ministries beyond these by the dozens. What's more, they provide accountability for financial integrity. This oversight is so needed as financial shenanigans can plague a church without accountability. My father has often told me "there is a slow way and a fast way to fall from the ministry. The slow way is financial impropriety."

4. Ethics

This is the "fast way" to fall from the ministry: ethical impropriety. Denominations help support an ethical

code for ministry and church life. They provide a framework for how to live, and how to interpret the scriptures so you have a hermeneutical pathway for living, including a clarification of what modern sin looks like, and what things might not be sin, but might be avoided in order to live above reproach. This comes with accountability just like finances, which is done through ordination councils, regional superintendents or bishops, and district boards of ministerial development.

5. Global

Denominations provide a ready-made way to engage globally and so many not in them are not truly engaged globally without them. And a denomination helps you do the "near, far, hard" trio that Dennis Jackson, Executive Director of Global Partners, talks about. We have a near ministry as a church, and a far one (a.k.a.: "missions") but must not neglect the hard places, where results are hard to come by, and persecution is difficult to face. A denomination is the place to become truly global in your worldview, and not try to reinvent-the-cross-cultural wheel while doing so. The global ministry ditches are full of churches that failed while doing mission work on their own, thinking with quaint confidence that they knew what they were doing in their suburban paradise, so it must translate well overseas.

6. Diversity

Denominations force you to think in terms of diversity, and not limit yourself to thinking of only your community, which may be mono-ethnic. Instead, your region or country together provides a diversity to engage with through your denomination.

7. Power

This one relates in part to diversity. In a denomination you share power with those different from you, and actually submit to them. You can give power away, and learn submission. This matters, and non-denominational types need never learn it if they don't want to. Submission is never learned in a leadership vacuum.



8. Planting

A denomination provides the conscience and peer pressure for churches to plant churches, otherwise few would do it--because it's hard, and costs tithing people sent, energy expended, focus diverted, attendance adjusted, and money invested. But we still do it--for the convincing kingdom reasons that are often not mentioned outside of a denominational family.

9. Doctrine

The unique distinctives of each denomination are often the only cited reason for having them in the first place. As you can see I have 14 other reasons, not just this one. But this one counts. Each denominational distinctive is a hard truth of scripture kept alive in a way that it is easy to gloss over. In a non-denominational attempt to make the Bible palatable to the masses we often lose the hard truths of scripture. Denominations keep truth alive in the collective conscience of Christianity, lest we forget the deep and wide demands of our faith.

10. Ecumenics

In order to engage ecumenically you have to have an answer to the ecumenical question: "From whence do you come?" You have to have a tribe or family you hail from. I do ecumenical work all the time—perhaps more than any other person in my denomination as it is a part of my role to represent us. I can tell you that every single person at those tables as peers is a denominational person. Non-denominational people are not intentionally engaged in this true broader form of Church unity, which betrays an isolationism counter to its principles. Sorry to break it to you, but you have to be on a team to play ball.

11. Postmodernity

Postmodern ways of thinking have influenced every day life so much that there is some small advantage in "coming from" a group of people you can represent in dialog and the public space. By being a part of a denomination you have a people group that may even be considered a minority group to speak for. This will only become increasingly true in the days to come.

12. History

It can seem frustrating, but one benefit of being a part of a denomination is that is to not be so locked in the present. In a denominational tradition, history gets a vote, not just the present. We can overrule history, of course. It usually only takes a majority vote, or in extreme cases a 2/3rds vote. But history does get to "vote" so that we don't repeat the mistakes of history. Denominations matter in part because history matters.

13. Health

Another counter-intuitive perspective here, but one I am convinced of. Yes, many denominational churches can be unhealthy—but I find that they are unhealthy for a shorter period of time. Part of this is a matter of polity. The discipline structures of a denomination provide the polity accountability to ensure the "unhealthy" can be rooted out if used well. Think of it this way: Polity is like an autopsy of the problems of the past. All polity was developed in order to solve some problem of health in the past, and we merely need to uncover these pitfalls to see why it is written like it is, and use it to avoid the same problems.



14. Legalities

In recent years Christians in North America have become concerned about religious freedom, exposure to being sued as churches, or being forced to do things contrary to the conscience of faith. It turns out that being a part of a larger structure of conviction is a much safer course than saying what courts hear as: "We eight elders got into a board room six years ago and decided this for ourselves." Denominations provide greater legal coverage for deep biblical conviction.

15. Prayer

Now, you may be in a network of churches that doesn't call itself a denomination and you object and say, "Wait, I still have all those things above." I agree. I would just say you're in a denomination that doesn't call itself a denomination. Good for you!

Others may say: "But my denomination is so broken I'm going to leave it." Okay, I hear you. More than 100 years ago many people left the Methodist church because it was so tolerant to slave-holders, and with that conviction and no recourse to reform, they left. Some called them the "come-outers." Of course, that group became my own denomination: The Wesleyan Church. It is certainly true that at times unity is broken and must be demonstrated by getting smaller again, to reestablish unity around core doctrines and convictions. But the solution is not to float out into non-denominational land, but instead to find a group whose convictions match yours, or to start a new one so the above 15 things might be provided.

You may also say: "I still have a long list of what's wrong with denominations." I do too, even about my own. As I said I've been talking about that list for more than a decade. But I thought it was time to be specific about why denominations matter today, and are worth our time to reform if at all possible.

"And above all, you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and paneling...the question should never be: 'Do I like that kind of service?' but 'Are these doctrines true: Is holiness there? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to move to this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike for this particular door-keeper?' - C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*—DD

Reflect or Discuss:

- A. What is your experience of denominations or churches in denominations in the past?
- B. What potential disagreements do you have with the list here? Are some of them a stretch?
- C. Which one on the list was a new perspective of you and you now agree with?
- D. In what ways might you get involved in a more intentional way in supporting the denomination you come from and are still a part of?
- E. Are there ways for you to seek more unity across denominational lines?