

# WORLD RELIGIONS

## History of Denominationalism

### Lesson 2

---

Christian denominations abound in the world. The number of them is staggering. It can be confusing to unbelievers. They hear people calling themselves Christians, but seem divided over minutia. Even for mature Christians denominations can be a daunting subject. Some denominations have become so liberal they are for the most part dead, the gospel is not preached, holiness does not prevail, and they might better fit into the category of cult than church. Even within denominations local congregations can vary significantly depending on the leadership of that particular church. Thus it is, in some respects, impossible to describe a denomination without being unjust to some. Calvary Bible Church, for instance, is an independent Bible church, but we are far different than other independent Bible churches. If someone were to make general statements about Independent Bible churches, some statements would describe us and others not. Since time is limited, we will be forced to make some generalizations in this study which will certainly not fit certain churches within the denomination being discussed. For this lesson we will examine the history of Christian denominations and seek to discover what forces brought about denominationalism, the present condition of denominationalism and finally the future of denominationalism.

#### I. THE IDEA OF A COMPOSITE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

##### A. The Seeds of Denominationalism

The seed of denominationalism comes from the idea of *composite, multi or plural religious societies*. If you look at church history you will discover that the early church existed in a society that had many religions. People were free to worship any number of pagan deities, or choose to be Jews or Christians. Though there were times when Jews and Christians were persecuted, the Roman empire tolerated a diversity of religious beliefs. This changed with Emperor Constantine (232-337) who decided to make Christianity the official religion of his empire.

This began an age of forced *unitarian Christian societies* where everyone had to be part of the state sanctioned religion. This then gave birth to the term "Christendom" that is a *Christian kingdom*. Though the idea of everyone being a Christian in a given society, culture, country, or empire is fine, the reality will never be achieved by man. People cannot be forced to become Christians. People become Christians by the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. Not understanding this, Constantine in 392 made Christianity the state religion of his empire, thus fusing government and church together into a ruling force. Pagan religions were no longer tolerated. People had to "become Christians" or be exiled.

As can be imagined, Christendom created all sorts of problems. What the Bible says about being a Christian was lost. Salvation by works, a heresy, was substituted for the gospel of grace. Unbelievers filled churches out of fear and were often led in worship by unbelieving pastors and priests.

In the seventh century the Islamic religion was born and Islam too pushed for a unitarian society. Though there is a degree of toleration within Islamic countries today, that toleration is usually only temporary and coerced. As soon as Muslim's become the majority, Islamic beliefs and law are enforced. While Christianity and Islam are similar in that both have as their goal to bring about a one world religion, the Koran sanctions bringing about Islamic dominance by force, while Biblical Christianity believes that Christ himself will bring in His kingdom.

The idea of Christendom persisted and was encouraged by the Roman Catholic church all through the dark ages (410 to 1300 AD). Even during the early days of the reformation unitarian societies were still the standard. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin encouraged microcosms of what Constantine tried to accomplish in his empire. The cities they lived in and influenced were not tolerant of other religions. Though Calvin and Luther preached the gospel, the idea of many religions coexisting peacefully in one society was not held.

In England, Henry the VIII (1491-1547) broke away from the Roman Catholic Church to start the Church of England. This started the English Reformation. The Church of England became the state sanctioned church and a unitarian religious society was enforced. The king was now head of the church, instead of the pope, and freedom of religion was not tolerated. As different kings and queens came and went, some protestant and others Roman Catholic, the country was torn apart. Acts of Uniformity were put into place in an attempt to unify Roman Catholic and Protestant factions, but all attempts were in vain. The Bible had become available to the common man and those who believed it saw the many doctrinal aberrations within the Roman Catholic Church. They could not in good conscience be united with those who preached a different gospel. Unity was not an option with those who knew and loved Christ.

During the height of the Puritan era, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the beginning thoughts of a solution were finally reached. It was the idea of a composite religious society. Though there was a state religion, the church of England, Roman Catholic, Presbyterians, Baptists, and the like were allowed to worship together in one society. While the full expression of a composite religious society took a while to form, even through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Puritans can be credited with the beginnings of a return to the biblical position.

Some Puritans, however, longed for more, and being persecuted, left England for America, to establish their own religious freedoms. Some gravitated back to a unitarian idea that favored their own particular beliefs, but others, having learned their lesson, encouraged freedom of religion.

Once in America the Puritans and Pilgrims merged and for the most part were very strict about the need for everyone to hold to their particular, conservative Christian views. Though not promoting “Christendom” per se, they certainly wanted a society where religious beliefs were unified and often punished, killed, or drove away dissenters. Thus only those who were Puritan had “religious freedom.”

It was at this time that God raised up Roger Williams (1603-1683) to be a proponent of separation of church and state and religious freedom in a composite religious society. Williams labored diligently to stress that there must be “soul freedom” and that salvation and faith in Jesus Christ was nothing that could be coerced or demanded. Though Williams had firm theological beliefs of the Baptist persuasion, he also believed that evangelism could only occur in open discourse in a plural religious society. Christianity could not be forced on anyone.

Williams’ views, though described in the New Testament’s early church, were considered radical. A majority of the Puritans discussed how to get rid of Williams who in all areas of life appeared to be a God fearing Baptist, but whose opinions they believed “infectious” and “new.” A few Puritans agreed with his ideas and eventually he and others established a colony on Rhode Island where religious tolerance was practiced. All of this became, in many respects, the foundation of denominationalism.

## B. Denominationalism In America

Bruce Shelley gives an excellent summary of the history in denominations:

“The religious diversity of the American colonies—though largely within the Puritan tradition—called for a new understanding of the church. We may call it the denominational theory of the church. The use of the word *denomination* to describe a religious group came into vogue about 1740 during the early years of the Evangelical Revival led by John Wesley and George Whitefield.[<sup>1</sup>] But the theory itself was hammered out a

---

<sup>1</sup>Whitefield and Wesley, a century after the Puritans, preached both in England and America. Whitefield was willing to fellowship with any who believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, regardless of their denomination standing. When Whitefield’s followers, the Methodists, began to form and Wesley, his close friend began to influence them along different theological lines, Whitefield, the founder of “Calvinistic Methodism” graciously handed the movement over to Wesley, who promoted “Arminian Methodism.” Whitefield practiced religious tolerance though he had strong doctrinal convictions.

century before by a group of radical Puritan leaders in England and America.

Denominationalism, as originally designed, is the opposite of sectarianism. A sect claims the authority of Christ for itself alone. It believes that it is the true body of Christ; all truth belongs to it and to no other religion. So by definition a sect is exclusive.

The word *denomination* by contrast was an inclusive term. It implied that the Christian group called or *denominated* by a particular name was but one member of a larger group—the church—to which all denominations belong.

The denominational theory of the church, then, insists that the true church cannot be identified with any single ecclesiastical structure. No denomination claims to represent the whole church of Christ. Each simply constitutes a different form—in worship and organization—of the larger life of the church.

The Reformers had planted the seeds of the denominational theory of the church when they insisted that the true church can never be identified in any exclusive sense with a particular institution. The true succession is not of bishops but of believers. Luther insisted that some institutional expression “in a place and in the things and activities of the world” was inevitable; but “in this life the church is not properly understood in terms of all this.” The outward forms of the church, said Luther, ought to give the Word of God free course in the world, not block its power to save.

In a similar way, Calvin in the preface to his *Institutes* indicated that it is impossible to draw precise boundaries to the Church of Christ. No one can determine with precision who is numbered among the elect of God.

The Reformers, however, never followed this lead. When religious dissent arose within a particular area, they tried to suppress it. They were still convinced that only one religion could exist in one region.

The real architects of the denominational theory of the church were the seventeenth-century Independents (Congregationalists) who represented the minority voice at the Westminster Assembly (1642–1649). The majority at the Assembly held to Presbyterian principles and expressed these convictions classically in the Westminster Confession of Faith and in the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

The Independents, however, who held to congregational principles, were keenly aware of the dangers of “dividing the godly Protestant party” in England so they looked for some way to express Christian unity even when Christians did not agree.

These Dissenting Brethren of Westminster articulated the denominational theory of the church in several fundamental truths:

First, considering man’s inability to always see the truth clearly, differences of opinion about the outward form of the church are inevitable.

Second, even though these differences do not involve fundamentals of the faith, they are not matters of indifference. Every Christian is obligated to practice what he believes the Bible teaches.

Third, since no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth, the true Church of Christ can never be fully represented by any single ecclesiastical structure.

Finally, the mere fact of separation does not of itself constitute schism. It is possible to be divided at many points and still be united in Christ.

Thus, the denominational theory of the church looked for Christian unity in some inward religious experience—and allowed diversity in the outward expressions of that personal faith.

This tolerant attitude was not born of doctrinal indifference. The Independent had no intention of extending Christian unity to all religious professions. The identity of the “one true church” was restricted to those who shared a common understanding of the core of the Christian faith.

This denominational view of the church found only limited acceptance in England where the Church of England retained a favored position, even after the Act of Toleration in 1689 recognized the rights of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers to worship freely. In the English colonies of America, however, the denominational theory gained increasing acceptance. It seemed to be God’s answer for the multiplying faiths in the New World.

Few advocates of the denominational view of the church in the seventeenth century envisioned the hundreds of Christian groups included under the umbrella today. They had no intention of reducing the basic beliefs of Christianity to a general feeling of religious sincerity. But they could not control the future. They simply knew that the traditional bigotry and bloodshed in the name of Christ was not the way forward.

In the end, then, the denominational form of the church has marked the recent centuries of Christian history, not because it is ideal, but because it is better than any alternative the years have offered.”<sup>2</sup>

### C. **Decline of Denominationalism**

While the number of denominations is increasing world wide, the number of those in main line denominations are decreasing. Why is this happening? Many reasons are listed below, the first six categories were taken from an article by John Dever in the *Review and Expositor*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Updated 2nd ed. (Dallas, Tex.: Word Pub., 1995), 306-08.

<sup>3</sup>John P. Dever, *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 90, 4 (Louisville, KY: Review and Expositor, 1993), 502-504.

1. **Social Class** used to play a part in American denominationalism. Those who attended certain denominations were often of the same social class. The rich often gravitated towards the older more formal denominations and the poor often filled newer more obscure denominations. Yet this factor in denominationalism has become significantly less prominent in recent years. Opportunities for education and to work one's way up the economic ladder has caused denominations based on social class to be less of a contributing factor in denominationalism.
2. **Ethnicity** also used to be a contributing factor in denominations. As many immigrated to America, they desired to establish denominations that practiced the worship styles they were used to in their homeland. While we still see this today among certain groups like Latin American and Armenian immigrants, the church in America, as a whole, has moved away from ethnic singularity to diversity. Dever notes, "Protestant denominations have now moved beyond these earlier ethnic and national orientations."<sup>4</sup>
3. **Region** also used to play a large part in denominations. Different societies with different cultures, like the south, often had denominations that were flavored with the culture. Yet with modern day travel, people are much more mobile and regional lines of distinction have blended denominational differences.
4. **Race**, though a misnomer, and often an expression of prejudice, since there is really only one race, the human race, still plays a part in denominational boundaries. Dever, noting the denominational boundaries that exist around skin color, says, "Roof and McKinney sum this up in one sentence. "Of all the divisions among the churches, the color line is the most rigid and enduring."<sup>5</sup> Yet this barrier is crumbling too.

Our culture is becoming more individualistic. People find it easier to break with tradition and "do their own thing." Those who once felt compelled to attend the brand of church they grew up with are wanting to pick and choose for themselves. Also, when people come to Christ and are born again, they are usually willing to cross skin color denominational boundaries in order to get good teaching. Churches that preach and teach the Bible in larger cities often

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>John P. Dever, *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 90, 4 (Louisville, KY: Review and Expositor, 1993), 503, quoting Roof and McKinney in *American Mainline Religion*, pg. 138.

attract all skin color types who unite around a central love for the Word of God.

5. **Privatization** is another denominational factor. As people have become more mobile, feel freer to pick and choose their religious beliefs, and as forces have pushed for greater degrees of separation between church and state, being a Christian or religious for that matter, has become a "private" part of one's life. There is pressure not to speak of your religion or beliefs in public. Thus people feel less constrained to align themselves with a particular denomination, though they may choose to do so, and keep their religion to themselves and those they worship with.
  
6. **Individuation (Voluntarism)** is another force eroding denominationalism. In our post modern culture, people have become increasingly more subjective. They want to find religions that they feel meet their own personal needs. What God wants and the truth are not their highest concerns. Thus they gravitate to whatever religious group meets their felt needs, often reacting negatively against the traditions of the mainline denominations. Dever rightly notes:

Baby boomers are the carriers and promoters of this new voluntarism. This large cohort of seventy-five million people born between 1945 and 1965 has had a major impact on organized religion. Discarding ascriptive loyalties, many of them began to "shop" for a church like they shopped at the supermarket. They discarded brand loyalty and adopted the church that best met their needs, and when another offered a better product, they switched. Stone in speaking specifically about the Presbyterian church said, "... religious institutions are becoming less a medium of religious legitimation and more a means of religious fulfillment by functioning as deliverers of the goods and services people desire."<sup>6</sup>

7. **Inroads of Liberalism** is another major factor in the decline of denominationalism. Denominations tend to decay over time sliding away from biblical authority, gospel preaching, and holy living. This usually happens gradually. Once biblical authority is rejected, compromises take place, holiness declines, and soon, what was once a church, becomes a spiritual mortuary. While not all local churches in a denomination decay at an equal rate, the overall

---

<sup>6</sup> John P. Dever, *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 90, 4 (Louisville, KY: Review and Expositor, 1993), 505, quoting at the end of the paragraph, Jean Caffey Lyles, "The Fading Denominational Distinctiveness," *Progressions*, Vol. 2, 1, (January 1990), 17.

decay often frustrates the more conservative pastors who end up leaving to start or join a different denomination. Thus all the old time denominations in America have suffered the inroads of liberalism to one degree or another and most are nothing at all like they were at their beginnings.

8. **Inroads of Tradition Over Truth** also contribute to the decline of denominationalism. Denominations establish traditions, rules, and ways of doing things that are extrabiblical. While these traditions are not unbiblical, they often are treated as if they were of the same authority as Scripture. The longer a denomination practices their unique traditions, the harder it is to get rid of them. Soon churches within a particular denomination can place more emphasis on holding to their traditions than holding to the truth. When new times and situations suggest that they should change to better reach people for Christ and equip the saints for the work of the ministry, there is fierce opposition. Our post modern society reacts against conformity and hence many are abandoning denominational churches in order to free themselves from what they believe are archaic and restrictive traditions of men.
9. **Frustration with Ecclesiastical Structures** is a final eroding factor in denominationalism worth mentioning. Younger pastors, entering the ministry, often find ecclesiastical structures within mainline denominations frustrating. Having little or no history with a denomination or its history, they often have little appreciation for how things are done and why. Wanting to be part of the fast lane of what is happening in the church, they often feel restrained and hindered by committees, synods, and counsels which preside over them. Full of idealism and energy, they are forced to minister in a system full of men who have become comfortable with the status quo.

Thus they often conclude that trying to change the established traditions and hierarchy of their denomination is too daunting a task and in order to keep the peace bow out respectfully. Once they depart, they immediately enjoy being freed from the albatross of denominational structures and feel freed up to focus on the primary tasks of preaching, teaching, and evangelism.

10. **The Critical Factor** in the decline of denominations is the lack of sound, biblical, gospel preaching and belief in the inerrancy and infallibility of the Word of God. History has proven times without number that gospel centered preaching and teaching which does not cater to the whims of men is the single greatest factor in the health of any church or denomination.



## D. Future of Denominationalism

### 1. Denominationalism Will Cease During the Tribulation

During the future tribulation the Antichrist will again attempt to force the world into a unitarian religious society, merging government and religion. He will do this partly because he knows that Christ will do this during his kingdom reign.

- a. **Dan. 11:36-38** “Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done. 37 “He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women, nor will he show regard for any other god; for he will magnify himself above them all. 38 “But instead he will honor a god of fortresses, a god whom his fathers did not know; he will honor him with gold, silver, costly stones and treasures.”
  
- b. **Rev. 13:11-18** Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb and he spoke as a dragon. 12 He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. 13 He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. 14 And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life. 15 And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. 16 And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, 17 and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. 18 Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.

- c. **Rev. 20:4** Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

## 2. **Denominationalism Will Cease During the Millennium**

After Christ returns to earth, He will rule the world in righteousness and establish a one world religion.

- a. **Isa. 9:6-7** For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. 7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.
- b. **Jer. 23:4-5** “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. 6 “In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The Lord our righteousness.’”
- c. **Dan. 2:44** “In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.”
- d. **Zech. 14:4, 9** In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. 9 And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one.

- e. **Rev. 17:5** Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."

## II. APPLICATION OF THE HISTORY OF DENOMINATIONALISM

- A. As the proverb states, "those who will not learn from history are bound to repeat it." While there is an appeal to have a society made up entirely of believers, and it certainly is a worthy goal in evangelism and a future reality in heaven, we must not make the mistake so many others have made before us of thinking that we can create such a society by force.
- B. When you see evil, corruption, and wickedness in the world, do not let your mind run to the government for hope and deliverance. Though government's primary function is to protect the rights of its citizens, it is no savior. Government cannot transform the hearts and souls of men. A society is only as good as the number of men and women in that society who are transformed by saving grace.
- C. Let us be ever careful to not let extra biblical traditions usurp the place of the truth in our lives and hearts. May we always be ready to let go of them if prayer and a study of the Word of God tell us it would be wise to do so.
- D. May we never forget that God is in control of and is guiding church history to accomplish His intended purposes. Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church. The gates of hell may prevail against denominations or particular local churches, but they will never prevail against the universal church of the redeemed. Therefore we must not grow anxious but trust in Christ to shepherd His sheep.
- E. Finally, we must never give an inch to those who would cast doubt on the reliability, authority, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Word of God. Satan is wise and has often destroyed denominations by making a small crack in the foundation of their beliefs. He gets one or two men to adopt a position that merely entertains the possibility of a Bible without integrity. Once these men become accepted, he moves them to the next level of doubt. More teachers and theologians are added who are like them or worse. Soon the entire foundation of doctrine has been cracked into rubble and the denomination, once a bastion of truth and an association of gospel preaching churches, becomes a religious society of the dead.