

“Denominationalism”

Terry L. Johnson

This is the thirteenth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”

When our two older sons Drew and Sam were little boys, we periodically traveled to Greenville to visit grandparents “Netsi” and “Bop-Bop.” On one occasion they arranged a trip for the boys to the fire station. The firemen were kind to the little fellows, showing them their equipment and asking them questions about themselves. Upon learning that our family was from Savannah, one of the firemen concluded, “You must be Braves’ fans.” Drew immediately responded, “No, sir. We’re Presbyterians.”

Amusing as that story is, no doubt some believers might be horrified. They might conclude that our children were victims of an over-hyped denominationalism. Throughout the 20th century and to the present day, a growing number of Christians began to see denominations as a liability rather than an asset. Denominations are seen by them as representing petty divisions within Christianity and little else. Hence the impetus to belonging to a church that claims no denominational affiliation and is merely “Christian.” Nondenominational Protestants are now the second largest group of American Protestants after Baptists and ahead of Methodists and Pentecostals. So desirable has a nondenominational identity become that many denominational churches mask their denominational identity, calling themselves “Saddleback Church” (though a Southern Baptist congregation) or “Grace Church” (though PCA). Most so-called “community” churches (are other churches not a part of the community in which they are located?) are either nondenominational or intentionally hiding their denominational brand. When denominational labels are dropped, a church is able to project the message that says, “We care about what unifies Christians, not what divides them.” “We emphasize the important things that believers hold in common, not the secondary or even trivial matters that separate.”

Old school

This has not been our approach at Independent Presbyterian Church; rather, the opposite. We tend to fly our denominational flags. We *highlight* rather than *hide* our denominational identity. We think being Presbyterian is important. We think the distinctive set of beliefs and practices that make a Presbyterian a Presbyterian are worth preserving and even promoting. We think that when one leaves Presbyterianism for another brand of Christianity, one loses something important. This is not to say that we don’t have much in common with other Christian bodies. When we recite the Creed each week, we demonstrate the value we place on truly catholic (small “c”) Christianity. Yet what a nondenominational branding implies, we cannot affirm. What might that be? That one consider the sacraments, church government, form of worship, eschatology, and predestination/sovereignty of God as secondary issues.

If we focus on just the first of these, the sacraments, it is unprecedented in the 2000-year history of the Christian church to regard the sacraments as of secondary importance. Christians of previous eras were willing to die for their particular understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Blood was shed over whether the transubstantiation, consubstantiation, true (spiritual) presence, or no particular presence best describes the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. Or take another issue, church government. When oppressive church bureaucracies are suffocating some churches and unaccountable preacher-dictators controlling others, is this really the time to be saying that the form of church government doesn’t matter? Or, consider worship. Given the anarchy, given the pervasive chaos, given the continuing conflict over worship, is this really wise

to say it doesn't matter how one worships? Is someone really going to claim this even in light of the teaching of the Bible and 2000 years of church history?

Separating the primary from the secondary is a notoriously difficult task. The interrelatedness of the whole body of Christian truth makes identifying so-called core or main or central doctrines problematic. One may think that the doctrine of God's sovereignty is esoteric, but try withholding Romans 8:28 from someone whose family has just suffered a terrible tragedy. Is God working *this* for their good or not? Does He have a purpose in this or is it without purpose? without meaning? merely a matter of bad luck? The point is, we are not just Christian. We are Presbyterian. When we start new churches, we start Presbyterian churches. When we support overseas missions, we support Presbyterian missions. When we move to a new community, we look for a Presbyterian church. When we send our children to college, we look for a Reformed institution or a Reformed campus organization. Why? Because our distinctive beliefs and practices matter.

I understand why people say, "The main things are the plain things." There is no need to fight over everything. There is no need to give equal time to the most remote doctrines. C. S. Lewis likens "mere Christianity" to a large hall in which all Christians may gather. Leading out from the main hall are multiple doors opening into several rooms. These are the various denominations. One room is Episcopal. Another is Lutheran. Another is Baptist, and so on. It is in these side-rooms, he concedes, that all the important action takes place. "It is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals."¹ The main hall, common Christianity, is that to which evangelism aims. We wish to bring the unbelieving to Christ, to the Christian faith, as truly though perhaps not deeply understood. However, one must not remain in the main hall. Convictions must be recognized and honored regarding God, humanity, sin, salvation, the Christian life, and the last days, and not treated with indifference. The process of settling one's convictions moves one through an adjoining door and into a distinctive denominational room. It is there that Bible study occurs. It is there that fellowship is experienced. It is there that mutual care takes place.

It is ironic that nondenominational churches, for all their nondenominationalism, can be pegged denominationally in a matter of five minutes with a dozen or less questions. Indeed, most of the nondenominational churches are paedobaptist and dispensational in belief and practice. Most would fit comfortably in the Southern Baptist Convention. They only pretend to be nondenominational. And that is okay, so long as reality is recognized. Reality is, they are as theologically denominational as anyone.

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¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; New York: Harper Collins, 2001), xv.