

Undenominational Claim—Denominational Worldview

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I am part of a fellowship that claims to be undenominational. In fact, our traditional position has been that everyone else is a denomination, and we are not. We deny denominationalism while we look at the world through denominational eyes.

I have recently preached about and discussed the Christian worldview. Many Christians use a “denominational framework” to develop a worldview. What framework is used to develop an understanding of how the church fits into one’s worldview is especially important. Using a denominational framework to develop a worldview means that the thought structures and categories used are shaped by denominational understandings. Those who use a denominational framework end up with two ways to define churches: denominational or non-denominational. Some contemporary churches deny traditional denominationalism because they use a different framework to understand the role of the church in a Christian worldview. Contemporary understandings of the church which conflict with or deny a denominational approach to worldview include missional, attractional, community, and inclusive.

How does one understand church if one begins with a denominational framework? What are the characteristics of a denominational worldview? Following are four understandings of church that reflect a denominational framework or beginning point. This is not an exhaustive list but serves to illustrate the problem. You may have a denominational worldview if you believe the following:

The church is exclusive. If you believe God’s plan for the church is exclusive (with the intent to exclude certain people), you may read the Bible through denominational eyes. This attitude results in selective evangelism—we do not take the gospel to certain groups, either within our nation or in mission work. An exclusive attitude keeps the church socially and economically consistent. That some churches refuse involvement in prison work may be a sign of exclusivism. This view is also reflected in the idea that each church is unique and distinct and has little or no fellowship with others. An attitude of exclusivism is best seen by what one practices, not by what one claims. Exclusivism seeks to draw lines and maintain separation. One can affirm exclusivism and still acknowledge that other church options may be valid. Nor does exclusivism forbid an ecumenical attitude.

The church is parochial. This is simply a way of saying that local churches have geographic boundaries. Parochial understandings limit the local church to a concept narrower than the Bible. One example of parochial thinking is to suggest that the local church has an obligation to evangelism in the local community and no obligation to evangelizing the world.

The church exists for itself. The application of a denominational worldview produces selfish churches. A denominational worldview produces self-centered churches. A denominational worldview limits the church’s ability to see outside itself. A denominational worldview causes the church to look inward and to evaluate itself internally. Frequently, denominational churches cannot see outside themselves.

The church must be controlled. The denominational worldview seeks to control what occurs in the context of church rather than equipping and empowering the church so that its members are released for service. Denominationalism depends on humanly-defined belief systems and traditional practices. Maintaining such traditions requires control rather than release. Only those who demonstrate commitment to the system can be equipped and empowered.

Each of these four beliefs has a corresponding action. Those who see the church as exclusive, isolated, and separated from the world around it will not practice much evangelism. Those who limit the church geographically will have little heart for missions—either foreign or domestic. Those who see the church as existing for self will focus inwardly so that church is more interested in maintenance than mission. Those who would control the church fail to see the power God can unleash when disciples are freed, equipped, and empowered to go into the world as salt and light and leaven, modeling discipleship, making more disciples, marking those disciples, and maturing those disciples.

In our changing world, we need new, fresh ways of understanding what God is calling his people to be and do. An older tract published among us was titled, “Neither Protestant, Catholic, nor Jew.” Today, that description fits numerous churches that do not have strong roots in the Reformation. We live in the midst of hundreds of restoration-focused churches. How sad that we seldom if ever talk with them!