

Denominations

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Maybe you consider yourself a "branded" Christian--Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic. Maybe you don't hold your brand loyalty close.

Either way, you've wondered about denominations. Do they matter for religious life today?

It's a question Presbyterians are asking right now--is our denomination dying... and if it is, is it worth saving? I've spent most of my life as a member of Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations and am ordained (and I get a paycheck) in that tradition. I've attended two non-denominational seminaries (Union NYC and Fuller) and have worked in a church for six years that is functionally non-denominational (Marble Collegiate in NYC). My own experience with denominations is that they are small-minded, culturally-limited, and completely necessary.

Denominations are the vehicles by which people experience Christianity. There is no Christian life that stands outside of the Christian family tree--and the branches are all denominations; even non-denominational churches are responding (in their structure and substance) to denominationalism. Denominational identity 1) shapes the structure and style of worship, 2) denominations validate certain ways of thinking and talking about the experience of God (and invalidate others), 3) they communicate in their organizational structures how the tradition understands power, authority, and proper modes of decision-making within the community of the church, and 4) they do the work of translating a transcendent concept ("church") into a particular cultural setting in which it can be lived by flesh-and-blood bodies.

If you say that denominations don't matter, you're not giving credit to how much denominational "vessels" shape our experience of the faith. If you were to attend worship at Marble Collegiate Church in New York, a

member of the Reformed Church in America, you would receive the sacrament of Communion four times a year (a vestige in some Reformed churches). How central would the sacrament be to the Christian life if you attend Marble, as opposed to the Church of the Transfiguration (Episcopal) around the corner, where they share the Eucharist every day? Juxtapose the centrality of the sermon at Marble against your local Catholic parish--or measure the sense of the Spirit's movement in human bodies in an Episcopal Church against the movement in bodies in a Pentecostal Church. The things churches emphasize in their common life, the things they leave alone, the things they do well, the things they couldn't do if you paid them--these differences are embedded in the particular histories of the respective denominations. In many cases, denominational uniquenesses were chosen and upheld by the originators of the denomination out of a sense that God needed them to be that particular way. It's not an exaggeration to say that the founders of many church movements that became denominations bled and died for their uniqueness. Theologically, Christians may talk about being "one body" and having "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," but every denomination does something unique that distinguishes itself from the others and makes the experience of the faith within that tradition substantively different for those who inhabit it.

Denominations are what shapes your experience of Christianity. The best analogy for denominations I can come up with is that of a family's role in an individual's development. It is the air you breathe, the water you swim in. Its dysfunctions are yours. Its modes of being seep into your unconscious mind, even if you can't name them until you end up on a therapist's couch decades later. Denominations are family--love it or leave it, you will always have one.

But as important as denominations are in principle and in practice, particular denominations still teeter precariously on the verge of irrelevancy for the Christian life, as Presbyterians are finding out.

Denominations are cultural constructs. They take their shapes and forms and ways of "doing Church" within particular socio-historical moments. Presbyterianism grows out of 16th century Western Europe; it is impossible to tease apart the influences of those origins from the shape

of Presbyterian life. Denominations don't "unlearn" the customs and habits of their genesis moments, because those customs and habits get woven into the core statements defining who and what that tradition is and believes. Presbyterianism, deeply embedded in 16th century Western Europe (and arguably even more deeply embedded in mid-20th century American culture as the central pillar of mainline Protestantism), struggles to adapt itself to the cultural patterns, aesthetics, and philosophical modes of 21st century America. Is anyone surprised?

Denominations feel permanent because they last; they last because they work. The ones that survive manage to capture a way of being Christian that makes sense to people. Ironically, "making sense" to a critical mass of people in a given cultural context may be exactly what ends up infecting a denomination with the disease that eventually kills them. Denominations "divinize" their longevity and success, and forget how contextually-rooted and therefore transient their corporate life really is.

The Presbyterian Church USA may have a "sickness unto death." It may have been infected by last century's "success"; it may be playing out Reformed Protestantism's seemingly endless process of one-upsmanship and schism; it may be one denomination among many that is being overwhelmed and transformed by seismic sociological changes that are shifting American living patterns, ways of thinking, and cultural connections. This may be death--or just a change that feels like a death.

I hope the PCUSA doesn't die--not soon. I think that the way it makes decisions is pretty amazing--trying to grant power to the people in the pews. Our polity system tries to protect minority perspectives while granting majority rule. Presbyterians have an ordination process that emphasizes good theological education and psychological health among clergy. Our theological tradition has valued theological depth, and because of that depth, it has valued theological diversity. It's a good denomination. It actually works pretty well.

But even if it dies in my lifetime, I won't weep. It will die because its inherent limitations made it unsuitable for modern life. Some other denominational identity will have grown up to replace it.

Christianity does not--it cannot--exist apart from the structural vessels that hold it. Denominations are flawed human creations... but without them and without the ways they allow us to be people of faith together, we have no access to a God any larger than the God of our self.

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