

# A Positive Perspective on Church Denominations -

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Many have been surprised at my denominational affiliation over the last couple of years. Yes, I have been part of a denomination for over three years. The truth is I was never “non-denominational” in the sense of being opposed to denominations. In the early days of North County Christian Fellowship, I adopted the word “inter-denominational,” seeking to communicate the idea that I recognized denominations and wanted to work along with them. In reality though, working along with someone without really being part means very little. At any point of disagreement, either one may simply choose to go their own way. That to me did not feel like what God wanted for His church. I longed for more.

Over the years, I also had increasingly grown dissatisfied with popular ideas of church. The church had become a product, and people were approaching church like consumers buying a product. If the church met their perceived needs, and offered a good product, they stayed, but when a new product came along, or their perceived needs were not being met, they moved on to a new product. I knew that Jesus intended the church to be more. There was an element of commitment missing in our churches, an element that was necessary for spiritual growth.

Before I go much farther though, I should probably try and answer a question. What are denominations anyway? Is God opposed to denominations or are denominations the result of sinful people dividing themselves into factions and exclusive clubs? Probably at their worst, denominations (and independent churches for that matter) are just that, people grouping together around specific ideas or personalities with the belief that their way is the best, and others are somehow missing something. It is probably that attitude that Paul addresses in I Corinthians when he writes, “When one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” (I Corinthians 3:4) However, denominations at their best are family structures, and like families, a means to grow and protect those who are members.

It is not the idea of denominations that is wrong. The church up until the last couple of centuries, knew nothing of independent (or non-denominational) churches. Independent thinking is a product of our modern culture. It is no coincidence that the rise of the independent church movement and the present dominant post-modern world view with its emphasis on self and independence, coincide with each other. God created us for relationships of commitment. That is an expression of His triune nature. It is within relationships of commitment that spiritual growth take place.

The word family is important in considering denominations, for denominations are intended to be more like families than any other type of organization. Unlike other organizations, people do not choose a

family because they happen to like the same things, or enjoy being together. People do not even choose their families but rather are born into them and have to learn how to live in them. Maturity and growth come from that family process of learning to get along with other family members. There is a calling out of self and into a much larger world. However, the modern independent approach to church in our western culture is missing this huge element for spiritual growth. It is unfortunate that in reaction to the bad elements of denominationalism, many moderns have thrown out the proverbial baby with the bath water. We need one another and we need one another in the structure that denominations provide.

My journey to being part of a denomination grew out of this hunger for more and my intense dissatisfaction with this modern independent thinking. Rather than running away from denominations and church structure like so many are doing, I felt called to run toward them. There is nothing perfect about denominations. There is not a denomination that has it all. Like any church, denominations are filled with imperfect people acting imperfectly. It is that very element though that provides the environment for growth in Christ. It is easy to walk with people when you get along and think the same things. It is an invitation to growth when you are committed to walk with people that think differently or express themselves differently than you prefer. Haven't you ever wondered why Jesus chose such a diverse group for His Apostles?

On occasion, I have had other ministers from our community visit our morning church services. I have a friendship with many of them and it is an honor to serve with them and have them visit when they can. However, one Sunday, the Administrative Bishop over California and Nevada in my denomination came to visit our service. I was not only honored and touched that he and his wife came, but felt cared for and affirmed. We are part of a family together and have an accountability to one another that goes beyond friendship. He shares a responsibility for what goes on with me and with this church. He is not just a curious onlooker, but a committed partner, or better yet, a real family member.

There is no virtue in being an independent church. It is easier for sure, but I have always felt uncomfortable with that word independent. None of us are called to be independent, but rather to enter into committed relationships, covenant relationships. That is the gift that joining with a denomination brings. It will also bring its challenges. It is however in those challenges that we will be given the opportunity to grow, and help others grow as well. It is my prayer that we fix our eyes on Jesus and follow Him into these new paths (or is it rather an old, well worn path) of growth.