

# Why Denominations Cannot Complete the Great Commission

by David Watson on September 10, 2009

First of all, I am not anti-denominational. I spent more than 15 years as a denominational employee and 10 years in various denominational church staff roles, and have been a member of the same denomination's churches for 50 years. So, please reserve your judgments until you finish reading this article.

What distinguishes a denomination or denomination-like church is the insistence that all related churches and any churches they start adhere to a particular and peculiar perspective and associated practices related to the Bible, as well as their particular church history. All denominational churches are Bible-based and history-based. They may require a strict or loose adherence to their doctrine and/or practices. Their doctrine, however, is at best a subset of what Scripture has to say, and at worst contain extra-Biblical teachings and practices based on their church history. All worship styles, leadership styles, and governance styles are mostly extra-Biblical, even though all denominations will claim a Biblical background for their practices.

All denominations and denomination-like churches exclude or minimize certain passages in the Bible and highlight other passages that support their views. They will often play the "interpretation" game when challenged with passages from the Bible that do not support their doctrine, or they may even redefine those passages as "spurious" or not really Scripture, or not relevant today.

In almost all cases denominations and denominational-like churches will raise their historical extra-Biblical beliefs and church practices to the level of Scripture. Some denominations openly embrace this practice. Others deny it, but in practice affirm it. I'll let you look at your own denomination and determine where your beliefs and practices are in light of the whole counsel of Scripture. (Hint: Look at the doctrines and/or practices on which you are unwilling to compromise or look at the doctrines and/or practices for which you criticize others.)

And herein lays the problem. When we look at the attendance records of any given denomination, even in state church countries, we find that a small percentage of the population even attend any particular church. In most cases this number is only 2 to 5 percent, even in countries with state churches. Everyone who wants to go to a particular church is already attending. Everyone else knows something about that church and chooses not to attend and not to be a part of organized and religious Christianity.

So, no matter what denominational stance is comfortable to you, it will only appeal to about 5% of the population, at most. And everyone who is interested is already a member, most of whom only attend on special occasions.

So, what makes us think that any one denomination or even all denominations working for the Great Commission can succeed in reaching the world for Christ? We have had 1600 years of denominational Christianity, and best case numbers of those who call themselves Christian put us roughly at 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the world's population. And we know that only about 20% of so-called Christians ever participate in any kind of church on a regular basis.

If we keep doing what we have always done, we will keep getting the same results. Denominational approaches to the Great Commission have not succeeded in 1600 years or the 492 years since the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517. The reality is that Christianity does not have a good name in most of the world. We have made Christ like us, which is the vilest form of idolatry, instead of becoming like Christ. What makes us think

that anyone wants our religion? They have seen it at work, and have rejected it. And the heart of Christian religion is denominationalism.

Another barrier that results from denominationalism is that leaders must go through extensive educational and indoctrinational processes before they are qualified to lead. This bottleneck precludes any hope of completing the Great Commission before another generation dies. All the seminaries, theological schools and Bible schools combined cannot produce enough leaders to finish the task. The denominational education and indoctrination processes make it impossible to fulfill the Great Commission. We have come a long way from First Century illiterate fishermen entering new people groups, nations, and cities and starting a church within months and then moving on. With the loss of simplicity we lost the ability to replicate leaders quickly and move through people groups efficiently. By over training and over managing new believers we stop the process of replication that could reach a nation and a world.

Jesus left eleven men, some of whom doubted, standing on a hilltop. Some were illiterate. Others were rebels. All would be considered ill prepared to fulfill the task Christ gave to them and the Church. If Christ deemed these eleven-very-marginal-leaders fit enough to carry forward the Great Commission, perhaps we need to rethink what we are doing.

CPM is about doing what was done in the First Century. Give the Gospel to a people and teach them to obey it. See them become faithful Disciples of Christ. Leave them to struggle in obeying the Word of God in their own context and history, developing their own unique practices for worship, leadership, and governance within the confines of Biblical obedience.

When denominations forget their differences and get back to planting the Gospel instead of their doctrines, we may have a chance to complete the Great Commission. When we turn to making Disciples of Christ instead of converts for our denominations, we may have a chance to complete the Great Commission. Until then we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of our forefathers. I prefer to learn from mistakes, not repeat them.

When denominations and denominational-like churches begin to plant the Gospel, make obedient Disciples of Christ, and forget their own pet doctrines and practices, we will see the Great Commission fulfilled in a generation. When denominations and denomination-like churches do this, they will see their own denominations grow as never before, because they will become relevant to the people as they serve them in obedience to the Word of God.

In the mean time, I will keep working with lost who want to know the Creator, and help them to become obedient Disciples of Christ who will take seriously the planting of the Gospel, the making of Disciples, and the salvation of a generation.

Blessings!

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