



## *How Many Are Out There?*

In 1982, Oxford University Press released the first edition of the best-selling, World Christian Encyclopedia. In 2001, a second edition consisting of two volumes was published. An important piece of information from the second edition caught my attention:

"World Christianity consists of 6 major ecclesiastico-cultural blocs, divided into 300 major ecclesiastical traditions, **composed of over 33,000 distinct denominations in 238 countries**, these denominations themselves being composed of over 3,400,000 worship centers, churches or congregations.<sup>1</sup> (Volume 1, page 16, Table 1-5).

Yes, you heard correctly, 33,000 christian denominations! This number is based on the publication from 2001. I'm awaiting, with some expectations, the third edition of the Encyclopedia that is supposed to be released in January 2020, to see how many christian denominations are out there!

In the meantime, we can have an idea based on the study prepared by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary that reports that there are approximately 41,000 Christian denominations and organizations in the world today.<sup>2</sup>

41,000! That's a lot! And with the amount of debate and division over theology and orthodoxy since then, that number is undoubtedly higher. 41,000 Christian denominations and organizations. Is this God's idea for His church? For his Ecclesia? We have Jesus words as follows:

"I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to My voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd" John 10:16 (NLT).

The huge proliferation of Christian denominations has created a movement of people that don't want to be connected to any denomination, or as many say, 'don't want to be part of or belong to any church!' The reality is that many people today understand church as a denomination, as an institution. Well, let me ask you, what is a denomination? What is the first word, thoughts that come to mind when you hear or think about the word denomination? Take one minute to think it over and share your answer with those around you.

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<sup>1</sup> Barret, David B. World Christian Encyclopedia: a Comparative Study to the Churches and Religious in the Modern World AD 1900-2000. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Global Christianity: a Report on the Size and Distribution of the Worlds Christian Population. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2011.

## 1' Countdown: What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear the word 'denomination'?

Merriam-Webster's dictionary offers four possible definitions for the word denomination. The definition that relates to our discussion is the fourth one:

"a religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices."<sup>3</sup>

So, let me ask you, is the Church of Christ a denomination? Is denomination what God had in mind when He designed the church? A name, a set of beliefs, an organizational structure, standard practices and behaviours?

Today in our fourth message of the series "Breakthrough" the popular belief that must collapse is the belief that church is merely a denomination. I believe that God's Church is more than a denomination, it is a movement, a dynamic movement, a dynamic and organic movement of the Holy Spirit.

Before His ascension, as Jesus was giving His final instructions to His followers, "He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' ...'but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth'" Acts 1:4-5, 8 (NASB).

Jesus asked them to wait for the Holy Spirit. Yes, the Holy Spirit. Through the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, that group of believers would grow reaching all the corners of Jerusalem. The movement would multiply reaching Judea. Then the movement of the Holy Spirit would spread ending up in Samaria, but not stopping there, the movement would reach the whole world. God's Church is a dynamic and organic movement of the Holy Spirit!

How does the Holy Spirit manifest Himself in the church? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in His movement of believers? Take some time to read some bible verses and discuss the action of the Holy Spirit in God's church.

## 4' Countdown - Read: John 3:5-6; Romans 8:14-15; John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 12:4 and Acts 4:31.

A church without the Holy Spirit is not a church at all. The church, God's ecclesia is a result, a product, an outcome of the almighty manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> "Denomination" in Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed at [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/denomination](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/denomination).

The danger of the church in every age is to cease being a movement of the Holy Spirit and become instead a ministry that provides service to people, or, even worse, a place people simply attend, until it moves on and what is left is only a monument or mainly an institution.

"Churches with no movement dynamics are like a person on a life support machine." Timothy Keller

Pastor Timothy Keller in his book *Center Church* argues that human organizations exist along a spectrum. On one end we have institutions and on the other end we have movements. An institution is highly structured, hard to change, top-down and is united by rules. The movement is fluid, dynamic, bottom-up and is united by common vision. Being a movement of the Holy Spirit, we cannot be naive, thinking that we can operate without some institutional structures. The Bible requires a certain number of institutional structures for the church. But we are not mainly institution, but a dynamic movement led by the Holy Spirit with institutional structure for the sake of the mission.

"Structure, policies, and institutions all have vital roles to play in the organization of the church, but they are not the church's mission. When the church becomes centered on the preservation of the institution, diverted by arguments about policy and structure rather than focused on giving the good news of salvation, we know that we have lost the original intent of the organization. The church does not exist for the sake of itself as an institution, but for the sake of its people and its mission."<sup>4</sup>

As a church, we have understood ourselves more than a denomination or institution, we have understood ourselves as a movement. We have called ourselves the Seventh-day Adventist Movement. We can not lose that. We are a movement. A movement of the Holy Spirit, carrying the everlasting gospel, presenting the three angel's message to this world, proclaiming the good news of the soon return of Christ. It was about a movement, and not a denomination that Jesus said, "I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out", Matthew 16:18 (The Message). Let's be the Church - Loving and Serving.

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<sup>4</sup> Seventh-Day Adventist Elders Handbook. [Doral, FL: The Ministerial Association, The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2014], 17, 18.