

Why so many denominations? * Q's from the pews
August 11, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The question that we're going to look at this morning is a good one – let me just read it for you here -

“Someone [once] said that ‘demon’ is part of the word ‘denomination’ and that Satan uses this to separate Christians. Why are there so many denominations and how can we show unity to those who don't know Christ when they are already confused about what ‘church’ is all about?”

Great question with that works on a lot of levels.

At one level, this is an historical question - ‘where do all these denominations come from?’ You look around and you see Uniteds and Lutherans and Reformeds and Anglicans and you think – how did we end up with all of these different subsets of Christians? Where do Baptists come from? Where do Presbyterians come from? For me as a history buff, I find that endlessly fascinating and we'll get into it a little.

But this is not just an historical question; it functions on a philosophical level too to ask – why are there these denominations? Why the diversity and not just the one capital C church? And that's a good question that we need to talk about too.

And then there's the third level – the practical and pastoral question – how can we, as members of different denominations express unity to a world that's already confused about what Church is? Great questions and I'm going to attempt to take them one by one today.

Now right off the bat, I think we need to deal with the philosophical question first. WHY are there denominations? I'm going to give you a charitable answer and then I'm going to nuance it as we go.

So here's the charitable answer. Why are there so many denominations? Denominations exist because through the years, faithful people who genuinely love Jesus have differed on the details of following Him. Did you get that? Denominations exist because through the years, faithful people who genuinely love Jesus have differed on the details.

Through the years, Christians have agreed that there is a central core to the Christian faith and that's probably best captured in what we call the Apostles Creed. The Apostles' Creed was written very early in the history of the Christian church and encapsulates the message of the apostles' teaching. I'll put it up on the screen here and let's read it together. Here's the core of our faith –

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic*(ie. universal) church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

That's the core of Christian faith and it expresses the basic boundaries of Christianity. If people believe outside of those bounds, they're not Christians. If people truly love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind and cling to these truths, then they are faithful believers.

But as you can imagine, some faithful people have carefully studied the Word of God and come to different conclusions on some of the details and on some of the things that are not mentioned here.

For example, faithful believers have come to different conclusions on the timing of when exactly he will come to judge the quick and the dead. Will it be immediately or will there be a thousand year reign where He rules on earth and THEN finally the judgment happens? What about the holy universal church? Is it made up of people who have been predestined to be saved or is it made up of people who have chosen God for themselves? And speaking of the communion of saints, what's our primary concern? Growing in faith? Mission work? Social justice work?

And then there's all of the things that aren't implied here – like 'what's the relationship between church and state?' 'Should Christians take part in war?' 'Is the OT Law something that we can keep or is it something that drives us in despair to the Gospel?'

In a lot of cases, faithful people have been able to negotiate these questions while remaining in church fellowship together and they have existed side by side within one church body. And ideally, that's how it would work. Christians should make every effort to as Paul says 'keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'

Sometimes though, in order for faithful people to continue to follow Jesus in good conscience, they have had to leave the church fellowship that they have been a part of, in order to establish a new fellowship that will enable them to act according to conviction.

That is not a decision that's taken lightly or on a whim – you do all that you can to maintain fellowship – but if it comes to it, you carefully ensure that your conviction is biblically sound and correct not just in your eyes but in the eyes of your community and then you take that next step.

That's exactly how many of the denominations that we know today came to be. The Reformation came from these very circumstances and it's because of the Reformation that we have Anglicans and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Mennonites so let's get into it.

Here's the historical answer.

In the 1500's, the Catholic church WAS the Christian church in the Western world. (Admittedly, the Catholic church had already split with the Orthodox church in the East 500 years earlier, so anyone who says that Protestants are the only ones who create divisions is flat out wrong – but that's beside the point). The Catholic church WAS the Christian church in the Western world and I'm willing to acknowledge that there were people within its ranks who truly loved the Lord. But there were also some really sinful people and by the 1500's, there was some real wonky theology going on in the Catholic church and theology based more on human tradition than on biblical evidence.

So when Martin Luther started digging deeply into the Word of God, he all of a sudden realized that the Catholic church's teaching on the forgiveness of sins was all wrong. They held, based largely on tradition, that they were the distributors of Christ's merit, bought on the Cross, and that that merit could be had through good works and monetary gifts.

Luther, who genuinely loved the Lord, looked at Scripture and said – 'hold on – salvation is by grace through faith alone. You can't earn it!' But in the interest of church unity, he made these concerns known, with the intention that conversation could be had and reforms could be made.

Now I know he did that, because his big reforming debut was the 95 theses – thoughts for scholarly reflection – that he published in Latin – which very few people but the church leaders could read. But then of course somebody got a hold of them, published them in German through this newfangled thing called the printing press and all of a sudden, everyone in Europe was talking about these concerns that this German monk had with the Catholic Church.

I don't think that Luther ever intended to leave the Catholic church to start a new denomination, but in order to act according to conscience, in line with what he read in Scripture, that's what he did, and in time, the Lutheran denomination was formed.

Now like I said, Luther's ideas took root all over Europe, and a lot of people picked them up and continued to think about them. One of these people was John Calvin, over in Switzerland. He agreed 100% with Luther that salvation was by grace through faith alone and that agreement was based on some very very careful study of Scripture. And so he, within his community of faithful believers, started to think that maybe a break with the Catholic Church would be necessary, but as it turned out, he and Luther differed on some of the differences. That thing about the OT Law – is it something we can keep or does it drive us in despair to the Gospel? That was Calvin and Luther respectively and their communities disagreed on other things too, like the nature of the Lord's Supper and then of course geography and language was an issue, and so another new denomination was born – the Reformed Church.

You can see from the handout I gave you that as Reformed theology spread, it took root in other countries and there again, faithful people disagreed on some of the details, for example, on how the church should be structured, and so Reformed thought took root in Scotland as Presbyterianism and then on the continent and in the Americas as Congregationalism.

Now if you keep moving down on that handout, you'll see that there was another group formed in the Reformation and that was the Anabaptist movement and this was formed by people who thought that the Reformers like Luther and Calvin were not going far enough in their reforms. Their careful study of Scripture convinced them that church and state ought to be entirely separated (where Lutheranism and especially Calvinism BECAME the State) and they began to push for the return to the biblical practice of

adult baptism as THE public sign to show that someone had come to faith. Luther and Calvin and others were firmly rooted in covenant theology and so they believed that infant baptism made the most sense, but the Anabaptists were convinced that believer's baptism was a necessary sign to show that a person had really truly come to faith. And so their movement became known as Anabaptist, which means, baptised a second time – once as a child and then as a believer. This is where Mennonite and Amish traditions come from and about a hundred years later, Anabaptist thought would merge with Reformed theology and Puritan Anglican faith to give rise to the Baptist tradition.

And speaking of Anglicans, the Reformation saw England leave the Catholic church in order to create a sort of midway point between the Catholic church and the Reformers on the continent and that gave rise to Anglicanism. Through time though, again, faithful people who loved Jesus carefully studied their Bible and became convinced that they would need to split from their parent in order to conscientiously follow Jesus and that led to the Puritan movement – some of whom became Baptist and some of whom arrived here as pilgrims on the Mayflower way back that first Thanksgiving and went on to establish another variation of Congregationalism.

Slide back up to the top of our handout – the Lutheran church was founded for good reasons as a really important renewal movement but in time it became very scholarly and intellectual and disconnected from the actual life of faith – in the 1700's, faithful people began to believe that they needed to be more heartfelt in their devotion to God – that led to a Pietist movement in the Lutheran church; John Wesley, who was Anglican, met a bunch of Pietists, came on board with their thinking and ended up establishing Methodism as a systematic way to bring heartfelt Bible study into the Anglican church – but then after Wesley's death, Methodism became its own thing.

And then you can see that that gave way to two different denominations – some people thought they should focus more on serving the world and that's where the Salvation Army comes from and some thought that they should withdraw more from the world and that's where you get the holiness movement. Then some people within the holiness movement began to study their Bibles and believe that they should expect more work of the Spirit in their lives and that gave rise to Pentecostalism.

And then you can see too that in 1925, the Methodists in Canada, the Congregationalists and a subset of the Presbyterians decided that they could best serve the world by joining together and boom – that's where the United Church came from.

All of these denominations were started by people who loved Jesus and who genuinely believed that they had understood something in the Bible that was different from the way the group they were currently in believed. And in an effort to remain true to conviction, they banded together with others who thought the same way and a new denomination began.

In most of these cases, I think that that was the right thing to do.

Luther was 100% right to oppose the Catholic church when they insisted that salvation was something to be earned, rather than a free gift to be received and lived out. Ideally, reform would come without a new denomination, but in God's providence, that's what happened.

When a Christian movement becomes dry and intellectual, you need a Puritan movement or a Pietist movement to come in and remind people that the life of faithful should be heartfelt and practical. Ideally, that would happen without a new denomination, but sometimes, that's what has to happen.

When a denomination begins to doubt the authenticity of Scripture, you need to split from it so that you can faithfully hold to the Bible as the very Word of God. That led to a split in Canadian Baptists around the time that the United Church was formed and that's the very same impulse that led you to leave the United Church back in the 80's.

When people who genuinely love the Lord disagree on the details of following Him, denominations happen. And in so far as those denominations allow people to live faithfully according to their biblically informed convictions, then I'm not sure that that's necessarily a bad thing.

Now, that being said, that is the *charitable* answer to that question.

There's another answer too and it's this – people in the church can be faithful AND flawed and it's sin that causes division.

The reason that the Catholic church and the Orthodox church split 500 years before the Reformation was as much political as it was religious. Originally there were five centres of Christianity – four in the East and one in the west – Rome but then Rome began to say that they had authority over everybody else. There's no biblical reason for that; that was straight up sinful self-interest.

Luther was 100% right to challenge the Catholic Church's assertion that you could earn your salvation but he faced such opposition from the entrenched Catholic church that he had little choice but to leave the fold in order to remain true to the Bible and his conscience. Now that being said, Lutheranism as a denomination was just as much a political move as it was a theological one. The German princes were tired of sending their tithes to Rome and Luther's critique of the Catholic seemed like a real good opportunity to keep their money at home.

The Anglican church, which DID undergo some meaningful reform under guys like Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer, was really founded because Henry VIII wanted to divorce his queen (Catherine of Aragon) but the Pope wouldn't let him. He saw the reforms on the Continent as a good excuse to leave the Catholic church, so he straight up pulled England out of the fold and then said to his church leaders, 'ok you guys work out the religious details.'

And look, I wasn't born yesterday. There are definitely fringe denominations that exist because some leader didn't get enough acclaim where he was before so he just struck off to form a new denomination. And that's no good.

So, to be frank, it is possible for Satan to use denominations to separate Christians. I mean, Anabaptists who promoted believers baptism in Reformed Switzerland were executed as enemies of the State. And you know how they did it? Reformed Christians drowned the Anabaptists as if to say – if baptism is so important to you, then I guess we're doing you a favor.' Absolutely, denominations can separate Christians.

I don't know that I would go so far as to equate demons and denominations (and the language nerd in me says 'they don't even share the same linguistic root) but I will acknowledge that denominations CAN separate Christians and that's a problem. I mean, Jesus' intention for us as a church WAS to be united so that people would recognize God's love in our fellowship. That's exactly what He prays for in [John 17](#) – He prays for His disciples and then says –

20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,
21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
(Joh 17:20-23 NIV).

So that leads to our final question - how do we as people who love Jesus show unity to the outside world when we are often divided into denominations? How do we unite with people from other denominations to express our shared commitment to our God's redeeming love?

Well, let me give you two ideas – serving together and disagreeing graciously.

So first, serving together. There is no reason in the world why denominations can't work together in ministry. We may have differences of opinion on some contentious theological points, but we can all agree that the Saviour we follow called us to let our light shine before men that they might know how good God is. If Living Water down the road invited us to partner with them, I think it would make total sense to work with them in ministry. If there was a city wide initiative to join churches together in service project, I think that it would be great if we could partner with them for God's glory. As members of different denominations, we can show unity to a watching world by serving together.

And second, we can show unity to the world around us by disagreeing graciously. If we are motivated by the love of God and acting within the boundaries of the Apostles' Creed, then I think that there is some room for us to disagree on some of the details.

Now I want to be VERY careful here because I am not just saying it doesn't really matter what you believe. I am not saying that you should just believe whatever you want for whatever reason you feel like. If you're going to hold a different opinion that threatens the unity of the church then you'd better have an awfully good biblical reason for doing so – but if you do, then I think that there is room for that. And I think that when we can negotiate those differences without threatening unity, that the Church is better for it. Now that doesn't mean that we all have to agree with each other; only that we should be able to discuss those disagreements with humility and grace.

That's a point that John Piper made when he was asked this question about all the different denominations. He said "It's those differences that give us an occasion to show the world what love-unity means" and then he describes this theoretical situation where a Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist, and a Pentecostal are sitting on a TV program with Larry King or something. And rather than tearing each other down over their differences, they would take seriously their shared commitment to Jesus and then discuss their differences with civility, in a way that would make the world say "Hmm. That's different than the kind of arguments I get into" (<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-it-okay-for-there-to-be-different-denominations-in-the-body-of-christ>).

That's significant in the era of Donald Trump. Public discourse seems to be 'you're on this side or that and the opposite side is your enemy;' at a time when that's the way of the world, we as believer's can demonstrate unity by disagreeing graciously.

And maybe you don't get into big conversations over theological particulars with your neighbours, but you know what, this might be as simple for you as acknowledging that there are people who love Jesus, just like you do, in every denomination.

An Anglican's first instinct might be to think that a Baptist is too uptight; a Baptist's instinct might be to think that a Pentecostal is too fruity; a Pentecostal's instinct might be to think that an Anglican's too stuffy - and a Lutheran might just think we'd all better go have a pint; but our first instinct should really be to think of one another graciously and to acknowledge that there are faithful believers in every part of God's Church. Paul writes in a very famous passage on church unity – 4 There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--
5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
(Eph 4:2-6 NIV).

I don't think it's by accident that he writes IMMEDIATELY before that -

2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Because Paul knows that for us to act with one Lord, one faith, one baptism, it's going to take humility and gentleness and respect.

And to be frank, I think that Langford is already putting this into practice in the way that we act together as a church. We come from all different places, don't we? Put up your hand if you're from a United background? Reformed/Presbyterian? Anglican? Baptist? Catholic? Orthodox? If we really pressed in, I know that we would discover some theological differences between us but it's not our differences that define us, is it? We are defined by the sacrificial love of God – His redeeming love for us and our shared love for Him.

Now that doesn't mean that we have no theological distinctives at all, and as a church we carefully study the Word to make conscientious and well-informed decisions about Langford's institutional theology, but our priority as a church is to love the Lord with all our heart and soul and strength and love our neighbour as ourselves. When we differ, according to conscience and orthodox biblical conviction, we extend each other grace.

There's a saying that's floated around in church history that I think serves well as a summary for all that we've said today, and really aptly defines our fellowship here at Langford, so let me just share it with you as we close.

In Essentials (the apostles creed, the doctrines of our faith) Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity

BENEDICTION

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,
6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.
(Rom 15:5-7 NIV).

Denominational flow chart

