

## WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS?

During Jesus' ministry, he prayed that his future followers would exhibit a special kind of unity that would be a testimony to the world. So what happened? Rather than unity, harmony, and cooperation, Christians are often known for their squabbles and divisions. Even when they appear to get along, they divide up into hundreds of different groups, churches, and denominations. For those who are not Christians, it seems confusing. Why can't they agree on anything? Why are there sometimes four different churches on the same street? Even for believers, the question often arises: Why are there so many Christian denominations?

Before we explore this issue, let's survey the landscape. Within Christianity, there are three main branches: Eastern Orthodoxy (which is chiefly practiced in Russia and Eastern European countries), Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. In the United States, we're most familiar with Roman Catholic churches and Protestant denominations. While virtually all Roman Catholic churches have the same beliefs, form, and structure, Protestant denominations can vary. These include Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Pentecostals, and numerous other groups. In addition, some churches consider themselves within the Protestant stream, but do not affiliate with any specific denomination (such as Bible churches or community churches).

So, why are there so many different denominations and types of churches? There are several reasons. For starters, let's not forget that denominations are made up of churches and churches are made of people; and sometimes people just don't get along. After all, just because people are Christians doesn't mean they always agree. Moreover, Christians still struggle with pride, selfishness, and stubbornness, and this means they sometimes respond to relational conflict poorly. This has often led to debates and divisions within churches and denominations, which in turn leads to the creation of new churches and denominations. It's an unfortunate situation, but a reality given human nature. Maybe this is why Jesus focused so much on unconditional love and forgiveness as an expression of the kind of people he wants us to be.

Another reason Christians are sometimes divided is legitimate disagreements about secondary areas of belief or practice. What does baptism mean and who should get baptized? How should local churches be structured? Who should fill leadership roles? How often should communion be practiced? How should certain passages in the Bible be interpreted? These are good questions and the answers aren't always clear in the Bible. Perhaps this is the reason the Bible exhorts us to exercise wisdom and humility when it comes to secondary issues where genuine differences exist (Romans 14-15).

A third reason that so many different groups of Christians exist is differences in personality, passions, and talents. Some people are more inclined to worship God through the exercise of their minds. They therefore focus on analytical thinking and biblical knowledge. Others are more

artistically or creatively wired and the way they express their faith is quite different. Still others are more engaged in their relationship with God when they serve others. They find the greatest fulfillment when they can work with their hands or actively serve people with special needs in their communities. While all of these things are important, it's no surprise that different churches and even whole denominations would emerge in light of the unique personalities of their adherents.

Another example relates to the role of tradition. Certain types of people appreciate the structure and heritage of worshipping God according to traditions passed down over generations or even centuries. Thus, a more traditional church in the Episcopal or Lutheran denomination might feel more comfortable to them. Other people, however, prefer to explore fresh, innovative ways of growing in their relationship with God and often feel boxed in by long-standing rituals or traditions. Therefore, a nondenominational church might suit them best. Of course, these are not the only reasons that different churches and denominations exist, but such practical matters like the role of tradition in a worship service can often play a large role. A lesson we can learn from such diversity is that various churches and denominations can learn from each other and that together, they make up the larger community of faith known as the people of God.

Finally, people from different cultures will express their faith and worship God in their own distinctive ways. It shouldn't surprise us if churches in a middle-class Midwest American city are extremely different from those in a war-torn, poverty-stricken village in Africa. Consequently, various churches and whole denominations will vary greatly depending upon the geographical location and cultural values of the people themselves.

Despite these differences, there are a few central tenets that bind all Christians together, regardless of their particular church, denomination, culture, or geographical location. Christians believe in God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), that all humans are sinful and in need of grace, and that only Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to have a relationship with God through his death and resurrection. Christians also believe that the Bible most clearly reveals who God is, how we can have a relationship with him, and how we can extend God's love to other people. While other beliefs and practices are important, and often the cause of disagreements, they are secondary. God's story is bigger than our differences, and if we continue to seek him according to the longing and desires that he has given us, we can all begin to find our places in his grand story.