

WHY SO MANY DENOMINATIONS?

John 17:9-19

Critical Searching Inquiries (CSI) Series

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In asking the question “Why So Many Denominations?” a very short and simple answer is that most came into existence as the result of some beliefs or practices that people were against. For example, the formation of our Lutheran denomination was mostly a response against certain practices and ways of understanding Scripture of the Roman Catholic Church at that time.

Martin Luther attacked the papacy and the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the use of buying indulgences and doing good works to earn salvation. He also spoke out against the church claiming they can forgive people’s sins and the teaching that people had to pray to God through a mediator such as a priest or a dead saint.

Luther rather taught that salvation and forgiveness are gifts of God’s grace—that any person can pray directly to God through Jesus. He also taught that all believers are priests, and that there should be no hierarchical system where priests or bishops are given special grace. All are one in Jesus.

In this Protestant Reformation in the early 1500’s; in this fight against certain doctrines and traditions the Lutheran denomination was born. It became a place where many theologians who held the same beliefs could find a home. And yet, of course, others had different ideas and beliefs which led to other denominations coming into being.

For example some people like John Wesley and John Calvin questioned certain things about Luther’s teachings; they were concerned about the kind of piety in living that a true follower of Christ should exemplify. Their teachings as a result led to the formation of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.

Then there were the people and groups who were against the practices of infant baptism. These theologians interpreted the Bible and specific passages to mean that when a person is touched by God’s grace, comes to faith in Jesus and wants to commit their life to serving Christ that baptism as an older child, or adult, is a symbol of that commitment.

This debate alone against infant baptism, of course, has led to a number of churches and denominations who practice what is known as “believer’s baptism.” The Baptist Church, of course, was one of the first. And yet now most of the newer churches, like Evangelical Free and most independent community churches follow this understanding and practice.

Coming to America from countries with “state churches” where the government was directly involved in the church structures a number of denominations became defined by being against this kind of state control, or by being against any kind of hierarchical system of governance.

For example, the Congregational Church came into being and focused completely on the congregation being the center. They rejected any kind of top-down decision making. And that was true of the governance structures of most of the churches coming to America.

They wanted a congregational, representative, democratic system rather than the system where popes, bishops or governments dictated how a church should operate. So each church denomination is also often defined by the various ways they are organized and structured.

In our Lutheran denomination you may find interesting that this reaction against state controlled churches in Germany, Norway, Denmark and Sweden led to our structure in this country where each congregation is autonomous.

In other words Messiah is free to call our own pastors and staff, set our own mission focus, decide our own worship style and programs, and make decisions about our own building and property. As long as we abide by the basic Lutheran beliefs and structures that are spelled out in our church constitution we are a free and autonomous congregation.

The truth is that most denominations came into being as a reaction against another church, or church theology, or church practice. And some came into being because they promote high liturgical worship while others are more focused on a more personal and less liturgical worship. The great thing about our Lutheran church is that there can be lots of worship variety in our church—each pastor and congregation is often different.

And yet what about denominations today? The reality is that our present and emerging generations of people most of them could care less about what denomination a church is. Most of these people do not care what things a certain church is against. They do not care about many of these age-old church debates and arguments.

Rather the important thing for most people today is what is the church for? What does the church stand for? What are they actually doing to live out their faith in Jesus? What difference are they making in people's lives and in the community in which they live?

Jesus, of course, prayed in John 17 for the unity and oneness of his church. He prayed that his disciples, and his church, would be one like he and his Father are one. Jesus prayed that we would be kept from Satan, the evil one, whose mission is to destroy the church by turning people against each other.

And we know that this unity that Jesus prayed for his disciples and church was centered in his Great Commission in Matthew 28, to *“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*

This unity is also to be found in Jesus' Great Commandment, *“To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”* To be for God and on his side means that his Lordship, his mission, are the center of our mission and purpose as a church. It is the reason we call ourselves Christ-followers.

One of the great things that is happening in many churches today is to unite together with churches of other denominations in supporting each other in our mission for Jesus Christ. It is exciting to see churches who were once fighting against each other, or who allowed various understandings to divide them, who are now working together in mission.

It is true that those in certain backgrounds used to accuse us of being wrong and not real Christians because of our understanding of baptism. And it is true that we used to accuse them of being wrong because they emphasize that adults make a decision to follow Jesus—and yet today our common faith in Jesus and his mission has the power to unite us.

The reality is that there is nothing in the Bible about eternal life being only for people of a certain denomination, or only those who are baptized or worship a certain way. All these things are not central to our faith in Jesus.

What is most important is that we proclaim Jesus is Lord, that he is the way, the truth and the life, and that we are to commit our lives and faith to him. We are saved by God's amazing grace, not by our church practices and structures. And all God asks is that we believe in him and that we live our lives serving in his mission.

Oh, I know there are some who still seem more focused on preserving their denomination than on working with certain denominations. There are some who say they are against large churches or that certain churches like that are threats to the traditions they hold sacred.

And yet I like to think of it more like Paul's description of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. These churches may have certain gifts that are reaching certain people with the love of Jesus Christ while a church like ours may have different gifts or ways of doing things. People are not reached for Jesus in just one way.

That is why God has allowed different denominations to happen, as well as many different kinds of churches. For the purpose is not to divide the church but to provide a united mission in reaching people for Jesus Christ. It is time we stop being threatened by other churches and unite together in reaching this world for God's kingdom.

So what are we for here at Messiah Lutheran Church? As I have stated a number of times the purpose of our congregation is not to make "Lutherans," or to promote our denomination as being an exclusive club. Rather, our mission is to keep Jesus and His Word of truth at the center of everything that we do.

Our mission is to center in Jesus' great commandment and great commission—to love and worship Jesus in the best ways we can and to focus all we do on helping people to come to know Jesus in a personal way. Our mission is centered in Jesus and his Word of truth.

And in that our mission is to partner with Christians of other denominations—Christians who share our Biblical beliefs, and mission, and to partner together in growing Christ's kingdom. For we have a lot to learn from others and they have a lot they can learn from us.

Thank goodness my friends the old models of denominations being against each other is dying—at least among most progressive churches and people. For our mission today is way too great to hide behind the non-essentials. For Jesus, I believe, continues to pray that we may be one in him, and one his mission and purpose.