

WHERE DID ALL THESE DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS COME FROM?

John 17:20-21

"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 also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Guess how many denominations there are in the United States? According to the *Directory of Religious Bodies in the United States* there are over 1,500. David Barrett has identified over 20,000 Christian denominations worldwide. (Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, 351)
- B. Baptists originated within 17th century Puritanism because they were fed up with the spiritual deadness of the Church of England. Roger Williams established the first Baptists church in America in Rhode Island in 1639. Today in America there are over 50 distinct Baptist denominations, led by the 14 million member strong Southern Baptist Convention. (Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, 110-111)
- We have three Baptist churches in Snohomish alone: Baptist Bible Fellowship, American Baptist, and General Association of Regular Baptists.
- C. Altogether I count 36 churches with Snohomish addresses which includes four Lutheran churches, two Presbyterian, two Methodist, a smattering of community churches, representatives of CMA, Nazarene, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Foursquare, Assembly of God, EFCA, and more, plus three "Christian cults" (Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormon). The most intriguing name is a little church on the south shore of Blackman's Lake: *The General Assembly and Church of the Firstborn*.
- D. Now that diversity really bothers some people. And here's why. Listen to part of Jesus' prayer recorded in **John 17:20**, *"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 also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. 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.*
- E. I hear it from Christians and non-Christians alike: *If Jesus Christ is really who you say He is, how come His followers are so divided? How come the church isn't one big happy family of the children of God?*
- F. Promise Keepers' Coach Bill McCartney weighs in on the issue: *[W]hat I know is that Almighty God wants to bring Christian men together regardless of their ethnic origin, denominational background, or style of worship. There's only one criterion for this kind of unity: to love Jesus and be born of the Spirit of God. Can we look one another in the eye—black, white, red, brown, yellow, Baptist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Catholic, and so on—and get together on this common ground: "We believe in salvation through Christ alone, and we have made Him the Lord of our lives"? Is that not the central, unifying reality of our existence? And if it is, can we not focus on that and call each other brother instead of always emphasizing our differences?* (Al Janssen and Larry K. Weeden, eds., *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, Focus on the Family Publishing, Colorado Springs, CO, 1994, 161-162)
- The race issue? Absolutely...no question. There is absolutely no excuse for God's people to indulge in racial prejudice. It's just like we sang in Sunday School as kids: *Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight...* That's not just for the little children.
- The denominational issue? Now that one gets a little more complicated. Let's walk through this issue this morning...
- G. We've been going through a series of sermons on the great mega-stories of the Bible. We've started with Noah's flood and tracked through Abraham, Moses, the kings of Israel, the Babylonian captivity, the birth of church. Today we're getting into the

unfinished part of the story. What happened to Christianity after the end of the New Testament? That's a huge part of the story...

I. TRACE YOUR SPIRITUAL ROOTS

A. What Is the Heritage of Snohomish Community Church?

1. The Ancestry of Alderwood Manor Community Church (the “mother” church that planted Snohomish Community Church 10 years ago)”
 - American Sunday School Union
 - AMCC started as an ASSU project. ASSU was founded in 1824 to start evangelical Sunday Schools all over America and they were most successful in rural areas. In 1919, Alderwood Manor was a rural area with mink and chicken farms. And it boasted a new Sunday School meeting in private homes. It grew rapidly and within a year it incorporated as Alderwood manor Community Church.
 - IFCA: In 1967 the church formally affiliated with a national fellowship of churches called the IFCA (Independent Fundamental Churches of America). The IFCA was born out of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that was fought in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The modernists were adjusting the Christian faith to the changing culture. The conservative fundamentalists were fighting for the beliefs of traditional, evangelical Christianity, like the accuracy of the Bible and the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. When some of these conservative pastors realized that they had lost their denominations to liberal theology, they bailed out and reconnected with other conservative pastors in forming the IFCA in 1930.
2. The Task Force Team of SCC: When we decided to start SCC, our first step was to identify a Task Force Team composed of four couples. All had had a healthy background of service and leadership at AMCC. These 8 adults carried varied backgrounds from their past: community churches, Evangelical Free, Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Methodist, Nazarene, and Mennonite. They were a veritable melting pot of American denominations.

B. What Is the Journey That Brought You Here?

1. No Denominational Background: Some of you here today had no church or denominational background at all. I love it when I meet someone in the lobby who tells me this is the first church they've ever connected with in their life. I am so glad you are here! Somehow God has stirred in your heart to create an interest in learning more about Jesus Christ and their Bible. I hope you're enjoying the ride.
2. Left Denomination Unhappy: Some of you have a strong background in a denomination. But at some point you concluded that what your denomination believed about the Bible was no longer what you believed. You probably were very patient and tried to be a positive influence. But in the end, you went looking for a church that held the same core spiritual values that you believed were God-honoring. We're glad you're here.
3. Don't Care About Denominations: Some people don't understand and don't care about denominations. They pick a church based on convenient location, or the quality of the music, or how they teach the Bible, or the children's or teen programs. That's why more and more denominational churches have taken the name of the denomination off of their sign and out of their name. When you saw “Community Church” on our sign, that was good enough for you.
4. Still Love Your Denomination, but can't go there. You may be a dedicated Southern Baptist, but the closest Southern Baptist churches are in Monroe or Marysville and you're not willing to drive that far. You really want to be part of a church in your own community. SCC is a good doctrinal fit for you, so here you are! And a warm welcome to you.

NOTE: You'll find just about any major American denomination in the people of this church, and a good representation of small denominations also.

II. UNDERSTAND THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

NOTE: Here's what the church looked like in its infancy in Jerusalem: **Acts 2:44**, *All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.*

But now almost 2000 years have passed. How did we get from one happy church in Jerusalem to the thousands and thousands of denominations today?

A. What Are the Major Groupings of Denominations?

1. Christendom vs. World Religions

- Before we address Christian denominations, we have to acknowledge that the majority of the world is not Christian.
- The world of religion sorts out into three big buckets:
 - Eastern family of faith (Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age)
 - Western secular family of faiths (atheism, naturalism, and secular humanism)
 - Biblical family of faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). That's not to say that there are not big differences within these families of faith, but they share the distinctive of a belief in an infinite, personal God) (Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home*, Waterbrook Press, Colorado Springs, 2001, 70)

2. Roman Catholicism vs. Protestantism (Christianity)

- If you want to be a good Catholic you need to believe the primacy of the Pope, the intercession of the saints, the immaculate conception of Mary and her mediatrix role, purgatory, the confessional, the sacrifice of the mass, and the urgency of the seven sacraments.
- There's been a lot of discussion in the last 20 years or so about whether or not there really is a difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. That's a great question.
 - We at SCC are part of Christian Protestantism. We were born out of a religious protest movement. It started in earnest in the 16th century with the big-name leader, Martin Luther. He was a very conscientious Roman Catholic priest living in Germany.
 - He was deeply conscious of his sins and was fearful of the judgment of God. He felt he could never do enough religious duties to be forgiven. Through the New Testament books of Galatians and Romans he came to grasp that salvation is by faith in the finished work of Christ.
 - He was deeply disturbed by the institutional excesses of the Roman Catholic Church, such as the sale of indulgences.
 - When he nailed his written 95 thesis on the door of the church at Whittenburg, he hoped to trigger helpful discussion to reform the church, but what he actually triggered was an open battle with the authority of the church. If Luther had not had friends in high places, he would have been burned at the stake as a heretic.
 - Luther's ideas gained widespread acceptance and Germany became home to the Protestant Reformation

which soon spread across Europe with other great names like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin.

- The Reformation emphases were three: Scripture alone, faith alone, and grace alone.
- Even today when there is a significant moderation of hostility between Catholics and Protestants, still everybody acknowledges that there are some big theological differences.

3. Liberal Vs. Evangelical Protestantism

- Evangelical Protestants actually have more in common with Roman Catholics than they do the liberal Protestants. Traditional Catholicism believes in the miracles of the Bible, the creation of Adam and Eve, the virgin birth and real resurrection of Jesus Christ, the deity of Christ, and the Trinity.
- Liberal Protestants do not believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God without error. They don't believe in the miracles of the Bible. They believe that somehow people of all faiths will get to heaven, if they even believe in a real heaven at all. They do not teach that people are lost in sin and need the salvation of a crucified Savior, Jesus Christ. They use the Bible but they have stripped it of its authority.
- It is from the liberal denominations that we read news reports of same-sex marriages, homosexual ordinations, defense of abortion rights, and sponsorship of church-women's re-imagining conferences with worship of the goddess Sophia.

4. Evangelical Protestantism

- Evangelical is a very broad word to cover those churches in the world that still believe in the real authority of the Bible and still believe that people are lost and going to Hell unless they accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. "Evangelical" is a word that literally means "characterized by the good news," i.e., the Gospel, the Good News about the Savior, Jesus Christ.
- Within evangelicalism are included many of the denominations such as most, but not all, Baptists groups; Free Methodists; the charismatic churches like Vineyard and Assembly of God; Foursquare; Evangelical Free, Christian and Missionary Alliance; Christian Church; some, but not all, Presbyterians and Lutherans, etc.

B. Is There Anything Wrong with Denominationalism?

1. Diversity Has Its Advantages

- Cultural homogeneity
 - Many of our denominations started among immigrants. They were able to do church with their cultural distinctives and with their own language: Dutch, Swedish, German, etc.
 - Today there is a new wave of ethnic denominations: Hispanics, Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese.
- Safety from centralized control
 - Whenever a denomination has gained a monopolistic control over the people of a country, it has gotten dangerous.
 - John Bunyan was imprisoned in 1660 in England for 12 years because he was preaching without a license from the state church.
 - It was a powerful English state church that killed good men like the reformers Hugh Latimer (1485-1555-burnt at the stake), William Tyndale (1494-1536-stragled and burnt), and John Wycliffe (1329-1384-body exhumed and burnt)
 - All over America there are community churches that were twice paid for. When Presbyterian congregations became alarmed over the liberal drift of their denomination, some of them decided to

separate from Presbyterianism and become independent congregations. Denominational headquarters informed them that the building belonged to the denomination, not the local people. They were told that they had to repurchase the building or move out. Multiple court cases were fought over this dispute and the denomination usually won. It was a bitter pill to these local congregations to have to cough up the money to a second time purchase the place they had paid for in the first place.

- The purity of the church
 - Many new denominations have arisen because the mother denominations eroded biblically over time.
 - In 1860 the Methodist Episcopal Church started kicking reformer members and pastors out of their movement. These dispossessed Christians got together and formed a new denomination called the Free Methodists. They used the word, "Free," because they stood for free pews, freedom of slaves, and freedom in worship. PS: Pew Rents - In colonial America, when a church was built, the major contributors were assigned the best seats toward the front. Later, the best seats were given to the more affluent people who gave most to the church annually. The poor people were always seated in the back.
 - As fresh as today's news is the upheaval in the American Episcopal Church. *On November 2, Gene Robinson, a non-celibate homosexual, was consecrated as bishop of the diocese of New Hampshire in a service that the denomination's leaders blessed. Immediately...many American parishes and dioceses began separating themselves from the ECUSA. Christianity Today magazine has a major editorial article lamenting this doctrinal drift in the Episcopal church, entitled, "Sailing off into irrelevance." (December 2003, 33) All Bible-believing Christians should applaud those Episcopal churches that are separating from their denomination. Given enough time we will probably see a new, purified, breakaway Episcopal denomination.*
- Let me throw out one other thought. When you go shopping for clothes, you have lot of choices: Sears, Target, Walmart, Costco, Nordstrom, Pennys, Bon-Macys, Seattle Blue, The Gap, REI, and dozens more. They all sell clothes and they're pretty good clothes. But they each have a distinct style or flavor. We all appreciate the fact that we have a choice.
- The majority of the churches in our community are faithful to the Bible. Each one reaches people no other church is reaching. We are not in competition with each other, but we each have our distinctive flavor. I am glad people have a choice, just like clothing stores. I am glad we don't have one monolithic state church.

2. Diversity Has Its Disadvantages

- Elitism: Some denominations arrogantly proclaim that they are the only true church, or that they are the only spiritual church.
 - The Apostle Paul deflates that spirit of elitism in Philippians 1:14, *Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. 15 It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. 16 The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.*

*18 But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, **Christ is preached**. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,*

- Fighting over minutiae
 - *During the seventies the fundamentalist movement became more fragmented over the issue of second degree separation. First degree separation involved separation from any association with liberals. This was practiced by fundamentalists during the war with liberalism when they withdrew from the mainline denominations. Second degree separation was separation from another evangelical who may have been tolerant of liberals by staying in a mainline denomination. Third degree separation was separation from another Fundamentalist who was friendly with an evangelical who may have been tolerant of some liberals...ad infinitum. (Edward Dobson, *In Search of Unity*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1985, 63)*
 - During the 1950's Billy Graham was the darling of both fundamentalists and evangelicals. That changed in 1957 when Billy was setting up his New York crusade. Jack Wyrzten insisted that all the participating ministers should sign a basic statement of faith. Billy accepted an alternative New York invitation that required no signed doctrinal standards. To this day there are fundamental denominations in America that preach against Billy Graham, and make your attitude toward Billy Graham a test of fellowship. (Dobson, 61-62)
- False Doctrine:
 - In the 4th century there was a church leader named Arius in Alexandria, Egypt. He taught that the Son of God was a created being who had not existed eternally as the Second Person of the Trinity. His teaching became known as Arianism. The church leaders got together to deal with the "diversity" at the Council of Nicea in 325, in Persia. They formulated the Nicene Creed which soundly condemned the Arian heresy. Here's just part of what the Nicene Creed says about Jesus Christ: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.* By the way, the most visible Arian group today is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who reject the deity of Christ and believe that he is a created being, namely the archangel Michael.

III. EMBRACE THE UNITY OF ALL TRUE BELIEVERS

A. How Do We Define a True Believer?

- What does he believe about Christ?
 - Does he believe that Jesus is the eternal, Son of God?
 - Does he believe that Jesus was virgin born, lived a sinless life, died on the cross, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and is coming again?
 - Does he believe that people are sinners and must trust in Jesus as their Savior?
- The irreducible Minimum
 - Our church doctrinal statement is pretty detailed. You can disagree with parts of it and still be a true believer.
 - But there is a core of Christian doctrine that all true Christians believe:
 - The Bible is the Word of God
 - The Trinitarian nature of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
 - The reality of sin and the need for salvation through Christ
 - The great teachings about the deity and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

- ❑ True believers disagree on a lot of other things: when Jesus is coming back, can a Christian lose his salvation, the possibility of moral perfection in this life, and speaking in tongues. Those are not watershed issues for true Christianity.
 - ❑ But there are watershed issues.
 - In 1922 a liberal minister named Harry Emerson Fosdick, a liberal Baptist preacher in a Presbyterian church in New York, preached a sermon called, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” *[H]e argued that such matters as the virgin birth, the inspiration of Scripture, and the second coming of Christ were not the main issues of Christianity and therefore should not separate Christians.... Several weeks later Clarence E. Macartney, a Presbyterian minister from Philadelphia, responded to Fosdick's message in a sermon entitled "Shall Unbelief Win?"* Then Macartney asked the Presbyterians to investigate Fosdick's beliefs. After two years of study, they asked Fosdick to sign their statement of faith. He refused and resigned his position as a Presbyterian pastor. (Dobson, 41-42)
- B. What Does Unity Look Like?
- ❑ Speak respectfully of other believers. Whenever I speak about other Christian pastors and churches, I speak of them with respect, because they are fellow-members of the family of God. Jesus loves them and I should too.
 - ❑ Respect our differences. I do not agree with many of the things that are taught in some other Christian churches. But I do try to understand their history so I know where they are coming from. I try to understand what biblical arguments they use. I can disagree without demeaning.
 - ❑ Fellowship with freedom. I know at least a third of the local Christian pastors. I enjoy their friendship.
 - ❑ Value their contribution. When I talk to new people who are looking for a church, I ask questions to ascertain what their background is. My goal is not to get them to come to our church, but to make sure they find their way to Bible-preaching church that will fit them. I appreciate having other churches in the area to refer people to.
 - ❑ Envision their heavenly presence. Whenever I get frustrated with another Christian, I take a deep breath and give myself a little talk. It goes like this: *Jesus loves this person. Jesus died for this person. Someday Jesus is going to take him and me to heaven and we are going to live together for all of eternity. Tim, get over it.*
- C. Why Do We Have to Draw Some Lines in the Sand?
- ❑ Institutional integrity regarding membership and leadership
 - We have some distinctives in this church that we rightly protect. They are core values to us.
 - We have written those things down in our statement of beliefs. We expect the members and leaders of our church to be agreed on those things.
 - Imagine how confusing it would be for our church if I preached one Sunday that the Bible is a good moral guide but it has mistakes in it. Then Pastor Gordon gets up the next week and teaches that the Bible is without error of any kind.
 - What if your child's Sunday School teacher tells your fifth grader that if she hasn't spoken in tongues she isn't a true Christian, while your preacher tells you in church that tongues are not an important issue today.
 - What if one Bible study leader tells you that you can rejoice in the security of your salvation, and the next Bible study leader tells you that you could lose it tomorrow.
 - ❑ Protection from false teaching
 - ❑ When Paul had his summit meeting with the Elders of the Church at Ephesus, he warned them that they had to draw some lines in the sand. **ACTS 20:25-31**, *"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. 26 Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. 28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God,*

which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears

- Later, Paul wrote to young pastor Timothy at the same church and warned him about the dangers of false teaching:
 - I Timothy 1:3
 - 4:1-2
 - 6:3-5
 - 6:20-21
- Jesus was very kind to common sinners, but he was ruthless toward the false teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. **Luke 20:45**, *While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, 46 "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."*
- Here at SCC, in that same spirit of Christ, we warn you about the dangerous teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the Church of Christian Science. We warn you about the decaying doctrines of liberal Protestantism.

CONCLUSION:

- A. Madonna says, *I don't think there's anything wrong with the teachings of Jesus, but I am suspicious of organized religion.* (USA Today, April 18, 2003)
- B. I, in turn, am suspicious of Madonna. And I am also suspicious of a lot of organized religion.
- C. But I love every church and every denomination and every Christian who is committed to the truth of the Bible and the saving message of Jesus Christ. The more, the better.
- D. Now, the next time you move, when you start looking for a new church, ask to see their written statement of faith. If they don't have one, move on down the road. If they do have one, please read it. Look carefully at what they say about God and Jesus and the Bible and sin and Salvation. That won't tell you everything you need to know about that church, but it's the best place to start.

Timothy G. Walton
Snohomish Community Church
Snohomish, WA
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