

Everyday religious questions: Why are there so many denominations?

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Q: Why are there so many Christian denominations?

Answer: To give a partial answer to that question would be to note America's belief in religious freedom.

Many people from colonial times to the present day have come to America to escape religious and political persecution. Some of the world's conflicts have resulted in waves of immigrants bringing their cultural and religious values to America creating diversity in both areas.

The right to religious freedom in America has enabled people to worship as they please by choice of religion, choice of denominations and by variations of existing religious beliefs.

Most Christian denominations hold basic doctrinal beliefs, but have different interpretations and practices.

Most sources cite more than 200 Protestant denominations in the United States, and worldwide there are thousands.

To look specifically at our Christian heritage, we can read Matthew 16:18 in which Christ comments on His Church as the church for Christians. "And I say unto thee thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Peter is considered to be the first bishop of the Christian Church.

In the 5th century, the church was ruled by five centers called Apostolic Sees in Rome, Constantinople (Byzantium), Alexandria (Egypt), Jerusalem, and Antioch (Syria).

The first major split in the Christian Church occurred in 1054 A.D.

The Bishop of Rome claimed a "primacy of authority" over all Christians. The Bishops in the East were willing to grant "a primacy of dignity" to the Bishop of Rome because he occupied the seat of St. Peter, but they insisted that all Bishops were equal in authority.



earl crow

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This, along with certain differences in the wording of the Nicene Creed, led to the split between Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The seeds of the Protestant Reformation came from Jan Hus, Master at Charles University in Prague. He was summoned to Rome to account for some of his teachings; and though promised safe passage, he was imprisoned and burned at the stake in 1415.

This action precipitated a rebellion among his followers, resulting in the Hussite Wars.

In 1457, a new church was constituted and named the Unitas Fratrum, United Brethren. They became known as Moravians.

They spread into central Europe, most notably Germany, where they were welcomed on the estate of Count Nicholas Von Zinzendorf. They migrated from the continent to England and on to America.

Three of their early communities were established in our area in the 18th century, Bethabara, Bethania and Salem.

The Moravians continue to be an important part of our community.

Martin Luther corresponded with the Moravians and discovered many similarities.

Since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, there have been innumerable splits. Many were national, some had differing views regarding polity, and others were based on different theological tenets.

Most of the theological differences were not major but were a matter of emphasis.

Certainly, there should be room for differences among Christians. Some prefer more formal services, others less formal. Some like gospel music; others prefer Bach or Mozart.

These differences should not become competitive, and the table of communion should be open to all. They should not be based on economic status or race.

Religion never should be a dividing force; it should seek to unite. Historically, ecumenical efforts have had limited success.

Would Christianity be a stronger force in the world if Christians emphasized their basic tenets instead of their denominational differences?

Q: Are the Unitarian Universalists Christians?

Answer: If Christian is defined by certain theological tenets, they may not qualify. I am listing just a few of the Unitarian Universalists beliefs to show some of the differences.

They believe God is One, not triune.

They believe in universal salvation.

They have a discipline of gratitude and an ethic of gratitude.

They believe Jesus to be a great spiritual leader, not divine.

They read more than one text, including the Bible.

They believe in the worth and dignity of all humans and are appreciative of rational thought which are two things all Christian should accept.

To their great credit, they uphold a strong and active belief in social justice.

Interestingly, the Unitarians were very active in the founding of the United States.

We often refer to our Christian founding fathers. Three of our first five Presidents were Unitarians: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and John Quincy Adams.

Earl Crow taught religion and philosophy at High Point University. He has pastored churches and still performs weddings, preaches and offers seminars. He majored in religion at Duke University and attended the Duke Divinity School and has studied at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Manchester, England. His column is published Saturdays in the Journal. If you have questions about religion or faith, email Earl Crow at ecrow1@triad.rr.com.