

DENOMINATIONS: Introduction

Religion: the belief in a god

Denomination: a religious grouping where congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices

Synod: Greek for “walking together.” Congregations voluntarily choose to belong to a synod, which is a group of congregations that are in agreement with each other.

The Lutheran Vantage Point

- In this study we examine denominations from a Lutheran point of view. But we always attempt to describe their systems of teaching fairly.
- When the beliefs of these non-Lutheran systems disagree with Scripture, we shall point out why such teachings cannot be considered acceptable.
- On the other hand, we shall note with pleasure those teachings that emphasize beliefs also found in the Lutheran Confessions, those teachings often make applications to Christian life, etc., from which Lutherans can gladly learn.

Discussion Question: Why do you think there are so many denominations today?

WHY WE SHOULD DEPLORE DIVISIONS

Christians everywhere deplore the divisions that have torn visible Christendom apart. They remember the biblical truth that all who have saving faith in Jesus Christ are one body (1 Corinthians 10:17). They are aware of the difficulty in reconciling the disruption of the churches with what the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-6:

⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Many Christians have reasons to be confident that their separation from others who profess Christ is an act of faithfulness to Christ and to His Word. Even such Christians can still acknowledge with sorrow that the act can be done in an unchristian way.

Tragically, the disunion of professing Christendom creates difficulty for the non-Christian world whom Christian missionaries (and their Lord) are trying to reach. Those outside Christianity are understandably confused by the chaos of groups and repelled by the disgrace of it. Many are discouraged from joining the church. Or they may ask, “Which of the many churches should they join?”

Such disunity often confuses and offends non-Christians. We need a united church presenting a united message of grace and truth to the unbelieving world.

Denominational divisions are deplorable in many ways. Above all, many errors and departures from revealed Truth have been inherited and perpetuated by such divisions. Those errors have often caused controversies within the various groups. There is disunity about many important questions:

- *What authority does Holy Scripture have?*
- *Should we rely on good works for salvation?*
- *Does Baptism have saving power?*
- *Is Jesus Christ our divine Substitute for sin?*

These and many other conflicts are deeply distressing to the soul who longs to hear the truth taught in the Christian church.

Holy Scripture treats erring teachings as a serious problem. We find solemn warnings against being carried away by false doctrines (Hebrews 13:9; Ephesians 4:14). The Lord does not wish that error be taught among His people, for He says: “Let the one who has My word speak it faithfully” (Jeremiah 23:28).

God desires that Christian teaching be used for building up one another (Ephesians 4:29; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11). We can be glad and thankful for all the occasions when it does take place, also sometimes between Christians of different church bodies. But frequently the leaders and members of religious bodies fail to agree on how to understand and apply the Word of God.

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

Jesus founded His church on the scriptural foundation of the proclamations of the prophets and apostles (Ephesians 2:20). Accordingly, He sent out the great commission:

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20)

God directs the leaders and people of His church to teach the whole truth of God faithfully and to guard and warn against departures from it.

Jesus desires that His church continue steadfastly in His Word (John 8:31-32) and be careful about doctrine.

Not only the pastors and teachers, but all the members of the church have the obligation and privilege of professing, defending, and using the truths of their faith. Paul told the Thessalonian Christians, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

All believers should be growing in right knowledge of their Savior and of sincere repentance and the Christian life of obedience. This is the aim of the Lutheran church.

TRUTH

The church treasures and teaches God’s truth. This truth has been summarized in the ecumenical creeds: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. These creedal statements express the faith held by the Christian church throughout the world. Each ecumenical creed was written from Scripture to strengthen believers and guard them against errors.

INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

The Christian Church’s historical interpretation of the Bible has been known as the **Historical-Grammatical Method**. This method uses Hebrew and Greek to understand the meaning of the inspired Word and its vocabulary within its specific historical context.

The **Historical-Critical Method**, or Higher Criticism, became a popular method of interpretation following the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. This method places human reason in judgment over the content of Scripture and treats the inspired Word with skepticism.

RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a German Reformed theologian who was influential in popularizing Higher Criticism is credited as the father of modern Liberal Theology. Religious liberalism began to take root in the United States in the 1940s and became the main interpretation among mainline church bodies by the 1960s and 1970s. The advocates of religious liberalism emphasize freedom from tradition and authority. They claim to apply religious beliefs to modern scientific conceptions and modern thought, and also to adjust and conform the beliefs accordingly. Human reason becomes master in theology. Proponents make extensive use of historical criticism, which treats the Bible like any other book and does not recognize that, as God's Word, it is free from error and self-contradiction.

Religious liberals argue over whether to believe God's Word as truth. They argue over the Holy Trinity, the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His vicarious satisfaction, the bodily resurrection of Christ or of anyone else, justification by being credited with Christ's righteousness, the creation of the world in six days, and the unalterable moral standards of God's Law.

Many religious liberals claim loyalty to their denomination's heritage. At the same time, religious liberals want to erode specific loyalty to doctrine.

Brief History of Denominations

The Great Schism

Eastern Orthodox: On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert entered the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople just before the Divine Liturgy (Divine Service). He stepped to the altar and left a letter condemning Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople. Cerularius responded by condemning the letter and its authors. In that moment, Christian churches of the East and the West severed from each other. Their disagreements centered on what kind of bread could be used in the Lord's Supper and the addition of the filioque statement (Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son") to the Nicene Creed.

The Reformation

Lutheran: On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X wrote a letter condemning Martin Luther for his Ninety-five Theses. Luther's theses had challenged the sale of indulgences, a fund-raising effort to pay for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther's challenge struck directly at the papal teaching concerning the authority of Scripture, the nature of the Sacraments, the suppression of the Gospel in favor for church regulations, and the papal claim that doctrines absent from Scripture remain necessary for salvation. The pope's letter charged Luther with heresy and threatened to excommunicate him if he did not retract his writings within 60 days. Luther replied by publicly burning the letter. Leo excommunicated him on January 3, 1521, and condemned all who agreed with Luther or supported his cause.

Reformed: In 1522 the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, convinced people to break their traditional Lenten fast. Also, Zwingli preached that priests should be allowed to marry. Zwingli claimed that Word and Sacraments have a mere symbolic value. He said that God uses only the direct action of the Holy Spirit in the heart and divine providence. When local friars challenged these departures from medieval church practice, the Zurich Council supported Zwingli that the Bible should guide Christian doctrine and practice. Zwingli influenced Reformed churches in Switzerland and laid the foundation for John Calvin. Calvin and other Reformed theologians admitted that Word and Sacraments are more than just symbols, but they still differed greatly from Lutherans on the Lord's Supper and predestination. Churches of the Reformed tradition include Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

Anabaptist: In January 1525, Conrad Grebel, a follower of Ulrich Zwingli, rebaptized Georg Blaurock. Blaurock began rebaptizing others and founded the Swiss Brethren. Their insistence on adult believers' Baptism distinguished them from the other churches of the Reformation. Anabaptists attracted social extremists who advocated violence in the cause of Christ, complete pacifism, or communal living. Mennonite, Brethren, and Amish churches descend from this movement.

Brief History of Denominations, Continued:

The Counter-Reformation

Roman Catholic: When people call the medieval church “Roman Catholic,” they make a common historical mistake. Roman Catholicism as we know it emerged after the Reformation. As early as 1518, Luther and other reformers had appealed to the pope and requested a council to setting the issue of indulgences. Their requests were hindered or denied for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally, on December 13, 1545, 34 leaders from the churches who opposed the Reformation gathered at the invitation of Pope Paul III. They began the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which established the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic Church.

Post-Reformation Movements

Baptist: In 1609, John Smyth, while in Holland, a former pastor of the Church of England, baptized himself by pouring water over his head. He left England because of English persecution during the reign of King James I. He later formed a congregation of English separatists who opposed the rule of bishops and infant Baptism.

Wesleyan: In 1729, John and Charles Wesley gathered with three other men to study Scripture, receive Communion, and discipline one another according to the “method” laid down in the Bible. Later, John Wesley’s preaching caused religious revivals in England and North America. The legacy of the Wesleyan tradition includes the Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals.

Restoration: In the 1800s, Alexander Campbell, a former Presbyterian minister formed the Restoration movement as he adopted many Baptist teachings. Restoration churches include the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches) and the Churches of Christ.

Liberal: In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher attempted to make Christianity appealing to people influenced by rationalism. He argued that religion is not a body of doctrines, provable truths, or a system of ethics, but it belongs to the realm of feelings. His ideas never led to the formation of a new denomination, however he deeply influenced Christian thinking. His views have thoroughly affected the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, and the Unitarian-Universalist Association.

TABLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Is there ever a time when division is necessary? Explain.
Is there ever a time when division is not necessary? Explain.
2. Does it really matter to which church you belong to? If so, why?
3. Suppose someone says to you, “I don’t know what to believe about God or whether it makes any difference what I believe. What is your belief?” Give a brief answer.
4. What are your thoughts on Religious Liberalism? What has Religious Liberalism done to the Christian Church?

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