



Why Are There So Many Different Churches Today?

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Why are there so many different churches today? I would challenge you to count all the different kinds of churches that meet in your community. Within what is commonly called “Christianity,” there are tens of thousands of different kinds of churches. There are Catholic churches, Baptist churches, Methodist churches, Pentecostal churches, Presbyterian churches, Lutheran churches, Nazarene churches, etc. And, even within some of these churches there are divisions. For instance, within the Baptist church, there are independent Baptists, southern Baptists, free will Baptists, fundamental Baptists, American Baptists, etc. Therefore, let’s search the Scriptures to investigate whether all of this religious diversity is something God approves.

God Did Not Create Religious Diversity

In order for God to be pleased with all of the thousands of different religious organizations that are claiming to follow Him, He would need to be the origin of them. You may recall that Jesus said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted” (Matthew 15:13). So, if God did not charter the existence of each one of these different religious organizations, then they cannot have His approval!

In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul says, “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

The oneness of Ephesians 4:4-6 is meant to be something which unites the followers of Christ and Ephesians 4:1-3 instructs and encourages unity. It also recognizes individual responsibility to unity. God, by implication, provided us with a plan in which we could be united – not divided!

Think about it! Do we serve a God who desires for us to be divided? Is all of the religious division in the world God’s fault? The Scriptures teach us that God is *not* the author/source of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). God simply does *not* desire for us to be divided! The religious division, therefore, is *not* the result of God; but, the result of men/women throughout history! In fact, God has intended and

instructed us to be united in “one faith” and has given us things we can be united in! These things are identified in Ephesians 4:4-6.

God, in His infinite wisdom and knowledge, could have chosen for each individual to be saved differently and belong to different groups (as there are today). Yet, God realized that this situation would only divide – and He desired for His followers to be united in “one faith”! Therefore, God has designed a plan and system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is completely united (as is demonstrated by Ephesians 4:1-6) – and God expects His people to eagerly maintain that unity!

The One Church Of Jesus Christ

So, if God is not the origin of this religious diversity that exists in the world today, when did it begin? Where did it come from? And, how does it continue today? Let’s consider these types of questions and evaluate some history of the “one faith” – and how “one faith” has become many faiths.

Throughout the Old Testament, prophecies were made concerning the coming of the Messiah, the gospel, and the kingdom of God. In the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts, we watch as these prophecies are all fulfilled. God sends His only begotten Son (Jesus Christ, the Messiah) into the world to be the ransom sacrifice for sin. Jesus Christ brings about the fulfillment of the Law of Moses (the Old Testament) and establishes His new (and better) covenant (the New Testament, the gospel). Then, those who are obedient to the instructions of the gospel are cleansed from their sins by the blood of Jesus Christ and are added to Christ’s church (see Acts 2:36-47)!

Acts chapter 2 marks a most significant point in human history. Acts 2 records the first time the gospel is preached since coming into effect – and marks the establishment of Christ’s church (God’s kingdom)! Prior to Acts 2, references to Christ’s church/kingdom are always in the future tense, since it was not yet established (see Matthew 16:18; Luke 9:27). Then, from Acts 2 and forward, the church/kingdom is always referred to as being in existence (see Acts 2:41, 47; Colossians 1:13).

There was only one church at this time – and local churches of Christ were established (see Romans 16:16). These local churches had God’s approval, as they were part of God’s plan. Furthermore, God had given instructions concerning how local churches were to be properly organized, concerning the work they were to be doing, and concerning how they were to worship Him acceptably. This was a time of great progress for the gospel and the expansion of Christ’s kingdom (church) – as many souls were being brought to the Lord and many local churches of Christ were being established throughout the world!

So, as the church of Christ is established – and local churches of Christ are established in many different communities within the time of the New Testament, God’s pattern and desire for His church is clearly observed! If we will simply hold fast to the pattern of sound words that is contained within the New Testament (2 Timothy 1:13), we can be united and simply be part of one church. However, mankind would not be content to hold fast to God’s pattern....

New Testament Warnings Of Apostasy

While the New Testament does not authorize the religious diversity that exists in the world today, it does help us to understand why it has come into existence. Even from the time when there was only one church in existence (during New Testament times), an apostasy was being foretold and division was

attempting to creep into Christ's church. Concerning such a threat, Jude wrote to some Christians, instructing them to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:3-4).

The word "apostasy" simply refers to the falling away from the one faith. Thus, religious division results. God knew that people would not remain true to the "one faith" revealed in the gospel. Now, take a moment to consider the warnings in Scripture about a coming apostasy. (1) Acts 20:28-31 foretells about some who would bring error into the Ephesian congregation and draw disciples away from the truth (note that Paul was speaking to the Ephesian elders). (2) 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 says that the Day of the Lord would not come before the "falling away" comes and the man of sin is revealed. Though the "man of sin" in this passage is not specifically identified, his description leads many people to believe that this is a prophecy about the establishment of the Catholic Church or the Pope (who claims to have all authority and be infallible). (3) 1 Timothy 4:1-3 records a prophecy that some would depart from the faith. (4) 2 Timothy 4:1-4 records Paul's instructions to Timothy to be diligent in preaching the word – and his warning about a time that would come when folks would not "endure sound doctrine," departing from the faith.

Factors That Would Be Part Of This Apostasy

Having seen that the New Testament foretold an apostasy, let's consider four contributing factors to this apostasy that are specifically identified in the New Testament.

(1) False teaching. There are many warnings given in the New Testament about some who would fail to accurately teach God's instructions, leading others into error. Please read and consider the following passages carefully. Particularly notice how the one true message of the gospel would be perverted/changed discretely and would be destructive to those who would teach and follow these doctrines. Read Galatians 1:6-12, Matthew 7:15-20, and 2 Peter 2:1-3.

(2) Itching ears. Though false teaching is a common cause for apostasy – as individuals preach different gospels and follow after the same, straying away from the faith; the Bible also speaks of those who would develop "itching ears." Read 2 Timothy 4:3-4. The picture in this text is one of an individual departing from the way of truth and seeking for someone who would teach a false gospel. Why would someone *desire* a false gospel to be taught? The text says that many will not *endure* sound doctrine (i.e. sound doctrine may require too much of them, they may consider sound doctrine to be too strict, they may not like the teachings and conclusions offered by sound doctrine, etc.). However, these folks may still desire the hope offered by true religion. So, they find someone who will teach them a different gospel with the hope of the true gospel (which becomes a false hope)!

(3) The traditions of men. Another factor that contributes to division that is seen in the New Testament is man-made tradition. These are the established ways of man – even his established religious beliefs and practices. And, when these established ways are held above the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the result is more division. Read Matthew 15 and Mark 7:8-9.

(4) Selfish ambitions. The pursuit of selfish desires above God's desires is also identified in the Scriptures as being a contributor to division. Certainly, any time that an individual puts himself/herself above God (by refusing to submit to God), he/she works to divide the church rather than unite it! While

there may be numerous things as the source of these selfish ambitions (i.e. wealth, power, prestige, etc.), it always works contrary to God's ways and His plan. Read and carefully consider the following examples from the New Testament of men who would pursue selfish ambitions. Read Acts 20:29-30, Romans 16:17-18, 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, and 3 John 1:9-11.

Conclusion

It did not take long for all of these factors to come together and produce division and religious confusion. "Church history" can be divided into four major categories: (1) A period of progress, during which time the one church Jesus established was thriving and the true gospel was being spread throughout the world (during the New Testament period of time). (2) As the New Testament period ended, a period of apostasy came upon the church – where all of these factors (and perhaps others) worked to bring about the Catholic Church. (3) A period of reformation began around the 15th century as some grew unsatisfied with the Catholic Church. The work of many of these "reformers" established new denominations (i.e. Lutheran Church, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, Baptist Church). (4) In the late 18th century, some began to be focused on restoring the practice of Christianity to what it was in New Testament times. And, after approximately 2,000 years, all of these factors have been working and the result is tens of thousands of different religious organizations that all believe, teach, and practice their (so-called) "Christianity" differently from the others. Yet, there are some today who continue to have the desire to only practice New Testament Christianity and do not desire to be part of any church that believes, practices, or teaches anything other than what the New Testament authorizes!

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