

Why Do Churches Disagree with One Another?

Rev. Brian Bill

June 8-9, 2019

A man came up to another man who was leaning on a rail overlooking a flooded river (sound familiar?) so he decided to ask him some questions.

“Are you a Christian or a non-Christian?”

He said, “I’m a Christian.”

“Me, too, small world...Protestant or Catholic?”

He answered, “Protestant.”

“Me, too, what denomination?”

He replied, “Baptist.”

“Me, too, Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?”

To which he said, “Northern Baptist.”

“Well, ME TOO! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?”

He smiled and said, “Northern Conservative Baptist.”

“Well, that’s amazing! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist?”

He said confidently, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist.”

“Remarkable! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern Region?”

He eagerly answered, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region.”

“That’s a miracle! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?”

He boldly declared, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.”

To which the first man replied, *“DIE, HERETIC!”* and pushed him over the rail.

As we continue in our “Glad You Asked” series, our question today is this: “*Why do churches disagree with one another?*”

If you were to read through the New Testament you’d discover a number of conflicts among the first Christians – disagreements about eating meat sacrificed to idols is detailed in Romans and 1 Corinthians. The Book of Colossians addresses the proper role of angels and New Moon celebrations and in Philippians the Apostle Paul makes a strong plea for unity between two women who weren’t getting along.

Please turn to John 17 where we see the longest recorded prayer of Jesus. This prayer is protracted in length and in scope. It covers a lot of verses and it covers a lot of time. In fact, it stretches across 20 centuries! After Jesus left the Upper Room He paused along His walk to the Mount of Olives and in John 17:1 we read, “*He lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said...*”

Three requests fill His heart.

- **For Himself to be glorified (1-5)**
- **For His disciples to be protected and sanctified (6-19)**
- **For all of us to be unified (20-23)**

Let’s listen to part of the prayer from John 17:20-23: “*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they **may all be one**, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that **they may be one** even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may **become perfectly one**, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*”

The best advertisement is a witness of oneness to the world because when we’re unified we display the personality, purposes and power of God. We could say it like this: “No church can do everything but every church can do something and together God can do anything!”

I see four expectations about unity in this passage.

1. The parameters of oneness include all believers. Jesus doesn’t want us to just get along with a few people we happen to like, or only with those in this

church, but ***“that they may all be one.”*** His prayer is much deeper than *“us four and no more.”* In verse 23, Jesus longs for us to ***“become perfectly one.”*** True believers in Christ share a common unity or community, with believers in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Let’s consider three cautions:

- **Abandon extreme separatism.** Some believers refuse to acknowledge there are true Christians in other churches. Here’s a news flash: *We don’t have an exclusive lock on truth.* I love being a Baptist but that doesn’t mean we’re spiritually superior to others. If someone is a born again follower of Jesus Christ, then he or she is my brother or sister.

Look at it this way. Even with our renovation and addition, Edgewood can’t reach everyone. It’s easy to think the Quad Cities is saturated with churches getting the gospel out. In a 2015 Barna study, our community was #27 on the list of America’s top churchless cities. According to these stats, there are about 200,000 people in the QCA who don’t go to church!

In a new Barna Study released just this week called, “The Most Post-Christian Cities in America in 2019,” the QCA is ranked #15 out of 100. This makes me sad on the one hand and mad on the other because this has happened on our watch! It says a lot when San Francisco is ranked lower than we are. We must redouble our efforts to live on mission in our mission field, reaching our neighbors and the nations for Christ!

Listen to what God says in Ezekiel 20:30: ***“And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none.”*** Will God find no one in the QCA to do this? Will you stand in the gap by building gospel bridges with those who don’t yet know Christ?

I’ve gotten to know many gospel-preaching pastors in the QCA and sense a growing commitment to pray for a spirit of evangelism in our churches. When Jesus looked at how harassed and helpless the lost were, He was filled with compassion and said these words to His disciples in Matthew 9:37-38: ***“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*** Here’s what I’m convinced of: *We need more new churches, more revitalized*

churches, and more revived Christians if we hope to reach this community for Christ.

I want to pause and say I'm thrilled to see how Edgewood is focused on reaching the next generation with the gospel. One of the main reasons we've launched Grow Time is to create ministry space for children and students to hear the gospel message. Props to Sheila Kuriscak and her team for all they've done to transition children to newly designed space on the lower level under the gym and to host Super Saturday even while our building is being renovated.

I'm also thankful for Pastor Kyle and his team for equipping students to live on mission. As you and I continue to give to Grow Time, students will have their own space as well. Here are some pictures from this past Wednesday night while they were doing an activity called, "Do You Love Your Neighbor?" They finished the night by praying for high school graduates.

- **Avoid ecumenical sloppiness.** Ecumenical means to be "all-inclusive." The push for uniformity among churches should also be avoided. There *are* doctrinal differences and biblical distinctions that must be maintained. Earlier in this same prayer, Jesus established that sanctification can only happen when it is based on Scripture in verse 17, "***Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.***" Truth alone must determine our alignments and partnerships. Frankly, we are not all headed in the same direction and we do not serve the same God. Only those who are born again are really our brothers and sisters in the faith. Write this down: *Compromise on essentials is an essential error.*

It was Malcolm Muggeridge who said this about the World Council of Churches: "*They agreed on almost everything because they believed almost nothing.*"

- **Adhere to unity but not uniformity.** It's possible to be diverse and yet not divided. We're all distinct pieces of the puzzle, and variety is valuable because we have different gifts, abilities, personalities, thoughts, and opinions. We're not called to be the "same," we're called to be one. That means we can disagree without being disagreeable. It's not simply *what we believe* but *how we behave*. We can have harmony even though we're not

homogeneous. Unfortunately, all too often Christians divide over matters of taste, not truth.

Pastor Brown would often quote this phrase from Augustine, *“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”*

2. The pattern for oneness is linked to the unity within the Trinity. In verse 11, Jesus prayed that His disciples would experience the oneness that exists in His relationship with the Father. In verse 21, He prayed, *“May they also be in us...”* In verse 22: *“...that they may be one even as we are one.”* The unity Christ wants us to have is so intimate, so personal, and so vital it is patterned after, and based on, the relations that exist in the Godhead. BTW, our topic in two weeks is the Trinity.

3. The purpose of oneness is to accelerate evangelism. Look at verse 21: *“that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”* The most winsome witnessing is unity within the church.

4. The practice of oneness puts God’s reputation on display to the world. Verse 22 says we have been given the glory that was given to Christ. The word “glory” represents the visible manifestation of all of God’s attributes. When we are united, the world will stand up and take notice of God because they will see Him glorified in us. Matthew 5:16: *“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

If Jesus prayed for unity, why are so many churches not united? Translated from the Greek *ekklesia*, the word “church” means, *“to call out from among.”* There are two ways the word “church” is used in Scripture.

- **The universal church.** The universal church represents all born again believers called out from all walks of life in every culture and country around the world. True believers are joined together as one people who share in one Spirit (Galatians 3:28) and worship one Lord (Ephesians 4:3-6).
- **Many unique churches.** While there is one universal church, it is represented by many unique churches scattered around the world. We see this in 1 Corinthians 1:2: *“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in”*

every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” The New Testament strongly urges believers to gather in local churches and Hebrews 10:25 urges us not to forsake meeting together.

I’m sure unbelievers have asked you why there are so many denominations in Christianity and why there are so many disagreements between Christians. Here are some ways you could answer that question.

Why Churches Disagree With One Another

1. Dispersion. One big reason there are differences among churches goes back to the command of Jesus to make disciples of all nations as fleshed out in Acts 1:8: ***“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*** Acts 1:15 tells us about 120 believers gathered in Jerusalem. Just a short time later, Acts 2:41 says 3000 were saved as a result of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. This number grew to 5000 as stated in Acts 4:4. Samaritans and Gentiles were added to the church and then it spread to strategic cities like Antioch, Ephesus and Rome.

As the first believers took the gospel to different cultures and countries, the message and methods became contextualized. That happened in our country when colonists gathered as Congregationalists in New England, Roman Catholics in Maryland, Quakers in Pennsylvania, Presbyterians in Virginia, Swedish Baptists in the Midwest and Green Bay Packers in Wisconsin.

The universal church and unique churches are made up of people from all cultures, languages and backgrounds, some who quote creeds and others who don’t. Some are liturgical and others are more free form in their approach. This isn’t necessarily bad. Related to this, I’m praying Edgewood would become more racially diverse.

2. Doctrine. Some churches disagree because of doctrinal differences. This is no small matter because Jude 3 urges us ***“to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”*** We will not compromise on the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, and other key beliefs. Related to this, we will continue to proclaim life begins at conception and marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman for life.

3. Depravity. One big reason congregations splinter and denominations divide is simply because we are self-centered and selfish sinners. Sometimes the only explanation is the evil in our hearts as graphically described in Galatians 5:15: *“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”*

4. Divisiveness. Related to this, a spirit of divisiveness can settle on Christians as described in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13: *“‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”*

5. Disputes. In the first part of Acts 15, the early church was faced with a theological crisis which was ultimately resolved when the Jerusalem Council established that Gentiles don’t have to become Jewish in order to be saved because salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. When this was put in a letter and delivered to believers, Acts 15:31 tells us how it was received: *“And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.”*

6. Disagreements. While a peaceful resolution was found to a very divisive and difficult dispute, in the same chapter Paul and Barnabas end up having a relational rupture related to whether John Mark still had a future. We see this in Acts 15:39: *“And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.”*

7. Devotion. The final factor I want to mention is sometimes churches disagree and divide because of mission or methodology. As I read through the history of denominations this week, I discovered groups often splintered because some believers were looking to go deeper in their faith or become more outward focused as stated in Romans 12:11: *“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”* In short, they wanted to grow and then go with the gospel in order to reach their neighbors and the nations.

Denominational Distinctives

There are three main branches of Christianity:

- Roman Catholic
- Eastern Orthodox
- Protestant

While some skeptics like to say there are 33,000 Protestant denominations, this is a myth. There are actually closer to 300. Some that come to mind are Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, Pentecostals and Evangelical Free. And right here on 38th Street, three different groups gather – Assembly of God, Nazarene and Baptist.

Baptist Beginnings

My guess is you've been asked what a Baptist believes. There are some 60 different Baptist denominations in the United States, though many would prefer the term associations or conventions. I like to tell people we're not the weird ones, like the group in Kansas that protests at military funerals. We're also not the group of Baptists who separate from everyone, nor are we those who no longer hold to the inerrancy of Scripture.

While it's difficult to trace a straight line to the beginning of the Baptist tradition, one could say our roots are in the teachings of John the Baptist. It's clear there were organized Baptists in England in the early 1600s who were originally part of the Puritan movement.

While there are many flavors and branches of Baptists, I have found this acrostic helpful in explaining our core beliefs.

- B** Biblical Authority (1 Thessalonians 2:13)
- A** Autonomy of the Local Church (Colossian 1:18)
- P** Priesthood of the Believers (1 Peter 2:5)
- T** Two Ordinances (Romans 6:1-5; 1 Corinthians 11:23-24)
- I** Individual Soul Liberty (Romans 14:12)
- S** Saved and Baptized Church Membership (Acts 2:41-47)
- T** Two Offices of the Church (1 Timothy 3:1-13)
- S** Separation of Church and State (Romans 13:1-3)

I would add that Baptists helped found the modern missionary movement and most Baptists today believe in the importance of evangelism.

Baptism and Communion

Other questions submitted for this series have to do with baptism and the Lord's Supper. These topics have caused much disagreement and even division among denominations.

It's interesting that Jesus began his official ministry with baptism and ended with Communion.

Baptism and Communion are called "ordinances" because they were especially "ordained" or ordered by Jesus. We don't use "sacrament" because that word carries connotations, which can lead to confusion. The Latin word *sacramentum* speaks of giving "grace" or the granting of some kind of special favor from God. For instance, according to the Catholic Church: "*There are seven sacraments. They were instituted by Christ and given to the Church to administer. They are necessary for salvation. The sacraments are the vehicles of grace which they convey.*" That's not what the Bible teaches.

While ordinances are important they are not in and of themselves grace-giving elements that contribute to our salvation. Our commitment is the same as the Reformers – *The Scriptures alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone!*

Baptism and Communion are symbols, or visual aids of the gospel as they retell the story of redemption. Ordinances are determined by three factors: they were instituted by Christ, taught by the apostles and practiced by the early church.

Matthew 28:19-20 describes baptism as a distinctive mark of discipleship: "***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***"

Simply put, we believe in baptism and practice it, because Christ commanded it. Making disciples of all neighbors and the nations includes baptizing them. Here's one overriding truth from all the passages on baptism – it *always* takes place *after* belief! The order is critical – the next step after being born again is to be baptized.

According to contemporary lexicons, the primary meaning of "baptize" is "*to dip, plunge, or immerse.*" The secondary meaning is to "*bring under the influence*" and the root means, "*to totally overwhelm.*" Interestingly, while there were Greek

words available for sprinkling or pouring, the writers of Scripture chose the word *baptizo*, or immersion.

Let's ask and answer a few questions.

1. What about infant baptism? In the Bible, belief always precedes baptism so this would preclude babies getting baptized. Without the ingredient of faith, baptism becomes just another church ritual. Someone put it this way: *"Unless you have already come to faith in Jesus, being baptized does no more than get you wet."*

2. If I was baptized as an infant do I need to be baptized again as a believer? Yes. Since baptism is *a public statement of your own personal faith in Jesus Christ*, it's important to make your statement as a believer. Actually, you're not really being baptized again because when you were sprinkled as a baby it wasn't biblical baptism. When you are baptized as a believer by immersion, it will be your *first* baptism.

Our next baptism will be on Sunday, August 18 at Tom and Sue Hammar's home. They have graciously offered the use of their pool. Eight people have already expressed interest.

Let's look now at Communion...

The night before Jesus was crucified He had a final meal with His closest followers. This dinner was more than just a social gathering. It was rich in spiritual meaning with sweet symbolism that goes back to the first Passover. This explains Luke 22:15: *"And he said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.'"*

The disciples knew the drill, and could recite every word from this annual celebration supper. And then in Luke 22:19, everything changes: *"And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"*

Before they could fully recover from this shocking statement, we read in Luke 22:20: *"And likewise the cup after they had eaten..."* This is likely the third cup, commonly called the "cup of redemption," which was set-aside for the anticipated Messiah!

The script for the supper is back on track and then, in the second half of verse 20, Jesus startles them again when He says, ***“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*** The cup represents His bloody death, which would inaugurate the new covenant, spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah.

Communion Correctives

As far as we know this memorial meal was celebrated with dignity and decorum (see Acts 2) until we get to the chaotic and confused church in Corinth. Please turn to 1 Corinthians 11. We see four “Communion Correctives” in these verses – I’ve mentioned these before but they bear repeating.

1. To Remember – “Look Back” (23-25). Paul received these instructions from Jesus Himself: ***“I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”*** Twice in this passage we’re told to remember what Jesus did for us. *The celebration of communion is to be contemplative because it helps us remember what we tend to forget.*

Recognizing there is wide disagreement about communion among different denominations let me make just two points.

- **The bread and the cup serve as memorials of the Lord’s death; they don’t mystically *become* His body or blood.** None of the disciples would have thought the bread and the wine were turned into the body and blood of Jesus – After all, He was still in the room with them and He was holding the bread and the wine in His hands. When they saw Jesus hold these elements, they would have immediately recognized them as tangible representations of a far deeper reality.
- **We are remembering His death, not *repeating* the sacrifice.** Some of us come from a tradition which teaches Jesus is sacrificed again and again through the celebration of the Mass. According to Hebrews 10:10, Jesus has completed His sacrificial work on our behalf: ***“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”***

2. To Rejoice – “Look Forward” (26). *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* We’re to look back and remember the cross and also look forward to the crown. To **“proclaim”** means, *“to announce publicly, to declare, publish, and perpetuate.”* The bread and the cup tell the story of redemption and look ahead to the culmination of history. We eat and drink now in anticipation of a glorious banquet to come.

3. To Repent – “Look Within” (27-28). *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* Once we remember by looking back, and rejoice by looking forward, we can’t help but look inside and see our need to repent. We’re cautioned about approaching the Lord’s Table in a trite manner.

4. To Reconcile – “Look Around” (28-29, 33-34). *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself...so then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another -- if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.”* Before taking communion, be sure you’re living in union with those you’re in community with because communion is communal.

Is there anyone you need to ask forgiveness from? Anyone you need to extend forgiveness to?

In the Bible, dining together signifies two things: *appropriation* and *participation*. By eating the bread and drinking from the cup we’re saying we have received redemption and we’re declaring we are in community with one another and with the Lord.

Communion is for sinners in Corinth and sinners in the Quad Cities. Let’s pray as the deacons prepare to serve us.

Communion

Commissioning

- **Summit Ministries Team** – Summit is a 2-week long worldview and apologetics focused camp in Colorado (think entire college class in 2 weeks) with lectures from nationally known speakers and authors. Pray for Pastor Kyle, Liesl Parks, Shalom Warrington, Emily Lewis, Faith Smith, Noah Hanson, Addy Mitchell, Emma Janacek, AJ Langworthy, Nick and Jake Frey, and Adam Rangen.
- **Joel Smith** - Is going to Hungary, Romania and Slovakia to plant gospel seeds and teach English.