

WHENCE DENOMINATIONS?

Dear _____,

Several days ago you asked why there are so many denominations, sects, and cults in “Christendom.” Since then, I have had the issue on my mind a lot; here are some points that describe the situation as I see it.

Denominations come mainly from a combination of (1) doctrinal differences and (2) influential personalities. Historical situations push these two factors to combine in various ways that lead to additional factors that have produced the situation today. Beliefs and the people who hold them will probably continue to fragment Christ’s followers as similar things come up over time.

Even before the church began, Jesus prayed that his disciples would not get divided (John 17). In the early church, divisions came up almost immediately. From the Jewish background, some early Christians had the idea that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses—“Judaizers.” Paul fought against that idea particularly in the Book of Galatians. From the Gentile background, people tried to combine Christianity with the philosophy they already held. The basic idea in that case was Greek dualism, the concept that spirit is good and matter is evil or at least to be depreciated. That led to nearly opposite beliefs about how to act in the physical realm. On the one hand, it does not matter what people do in the body (debauchery); on the other hand, people must avoid physical desires as much as possible (asceticism). Several places in John’s and Paul’s writings oppose these teachings.

In the first few centuries of the church, a number of doctrinal beliefs became matters of debate, and church councils assembled to discuss them. That led to conclusions about those issues, and people were disfellowshipped if they did not accept the councils’ conclusions.

Over the years the church got aligned with the Roman government, which led to problems created by this “union of church and state.” Along with that process came the organization of the church into territorial segments at various levels, much like local, state, regional, and national segments. Because of doctrinal differences and people’s power plays, the church divided between the eastern church (Eastern Orthodox) and western church (Roman Catholic). When different religious leaders (people) in the countries of Europe rose up in opposition to the Catholic church, those states formed their own state churches. State churches then came to exist in both the eastern and western halves of the church universal.

These divisions spread to the New World when the Americas were discovered. Subsequent missionary work spread these and other divisions into other parts of the world where the gospel had not yet gone.

In addition, new groups keep arising. Some denominations have come under the control of people that do not believe the scripture completely or have begun teaching doctrines that have caused those denominations to split into new ones. Sometimes groups within a denomination have been forced out; these have formed new denominations, and the process keeps going. At other times, Christians encounter cultural pressures to believe

and practice what is contrary to the Christian faith. How they respond to these pressures provides another source of division.

New false teachers arise claiming to have further revelation or unique insight into God's will. They write books that become secondary literature their followers use along with scripture (ideas). Using such literature along with the Bible create "sects." If a strong personality is involved, we call them "cults" (personalities).

Denominationalism has five elements:

(1) separate organizations. This is the aspect noted in the previous paragraphs. It involves organizational levels above the local congregations. To help avoid this contribution to division in Christianity, churches like the one we are working and worshiping in here have maintained separate organization while encouraging personal fellowship with individuals in other such "autonomous" congregations to whatever extent they can do so. How far they can do so depends on their level of agreement and the degree of commitment they share toward Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

(2) peculiar doctrines. Different ideas about what scripture means on various topics weaken people's associations with each other. Depending on the seriousness of the issue, that situation creates separation. The issue here is to decide how important these differences are and whether agreement on them is worth separating over.

(3) distinguishing names. For people to know what set of doctrines are believed by other individuals, congregations, or groups of congregations, they come adopt labels to describe them. Others have tried to avoid that mentality by referring to themselves as Christians and letting it go at that.

(4) restricted fellowship. When differences become important enough, people with one set of beliefs quit associating with other groups to avoid outside influences.

(5) exclusivistic attitude. This problem stems from one group thinking another group is too different to be part of Christ's family. Although such a reaction is understandable, it often comes more from religious pride. Getting rid of that attitude is basic to avoiding new divisions and overcoming old ones. Humility and caring about other people set the stage for working out doctrinal differences and their domino effects. That fosters a sense of relationship that helps work against restrictive fellowship. With the disappearance of prideful attitude, the other four elements can disappear as well.

Hopefully we can foster an atmosphere that brings us together as time goes on. Unity is increasingly important as the cultures around us becomes more unchristian and even anti-Christian in beliefs and practices. That shared opposition should encourage our unity because we face a common threat. Having the same opponent makes us concentrate on the things we share rather than the things we differ on. Emphasizing personal relationship to God and to each other is the starting point for reversing the downward spiral into division. We can then broaden the area that we share with each other as we worship, fellowship, and reach out to make new converts to Christ and his way of life under God the Father.

These notations may help answer the questions you raised. Good luck.