



This lesson provides a brief overview of the key differences that exist among the various “Christian Denominations.”

Observations

Churches have existed in every generation since Christ preaching the Gospel. There has not been a generation without a faithful church witness. (Matthew 16:18)

During the 16th century, various movements against the Catholic Church (see lesson 2.0) across Europe became known as the Reformation, giving birth to Protestant churches. The grievances were many, but key among them were “Scripture Alone” (as opposed to the Catholic position on Scripture + Church Tradition + Magisterium) and “Faith Alone” (justification by faith alone rather than faith + sacrament). The most well known leaders of the Reformation were Martin Luther, from whom came the Lutheran Church, and John Calvin, from whom came the Presbyterian Church as well as the Soteriology best known as “Calvinism.”

Through the centuries since other denominations have come on the scene, many splits from other groups. Further, denominations have experienced change, some moving toward a more liberal theology.

The Primary Question

The primary question among denominations is dual in nature yet inseparable involving the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus. Since the Gospel of Jesus is presented in the Bible, one’s view of and interpretation of the Bible inevitably shapes one’s view of the Gospel.

The primary question is this: How is a man justified before God?

Our answer is: By faith alone in Jesus alone. (Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 4)

It is not that some denominations do not preach a gospel that sounds familiar, e.g. same lingo, same Scripture references, etc. But it is that some change the content and/or the cause and thus alter the gospel.

For example, some change the content by requiring something beyond faith alone. They may add sacraments, e.g. baptism or communion as necessary for salvation. Or they may insist on “good works” to acquire or to retain salvation. But anything added to Christ diminishes the goodness and work of Christ and exalts the supposed goodness and work of man. The book of Galatians was written to dispel this soteriological error in the first century.

Also, some change the cause of the gospel by applying it to social redemption rather than to personal redemption. They view the work of Christ in life, death and resurrection (Gospel) primarily as means by

which the church confronts social injustice, poverty, environmental ills, etc. with the view to bringing about the reign of God on earth. Clearly, as Christians living in a fallen world we should seek justice, we should be compassionate and we should not abuse the world God has given us. Further this world will one day melt away with a fervent heat and the Kingdom of God will be established perfectly and eternally in the new heaven and new earth. But the Gospel is also clear: Jesus came into the world to save sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15)

A division on the primary question results in an inability to fellowship in religious matters (Galatians 1:8-9) because the Gospel is everything.

Secondary Questions

Secondary questions flow out of the Gospel. For example, while much of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. has embraced liberalism that includes questioning the deity of Christ and authority of Scriptures, the PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) maintains a conservative theology with which we would find much agreement. However, their continuance to “baptize” infants while the Bible teaches “believers baptism” ultimately leaves us at an impasse on church fellowship though we may yet be brethren through our faith in Christ alone.

Tertiary Questions

Tertiary questions are those third level questions which maybe not should divide us, but do. These may be questions of policy, methodology and sometimes even personality. These are the kinds of questions that often have divided Baptists.

Concluding Questions

For the class collectively, are there specific Christian denominations that you need or want to know more about maybe because of friends, family, co-workers, etc.?

For you personally, do you believe in Jesus alone?