Why are there so many denominations?

Christian History · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/why-are-there-so-many-denominations/

There’s definitely fragmentation in Christianity, no argument there. But the situation is often overstated. The commonly repeated claim that there are “40,000 denominations” is misleading because it counts many administrative groupings, regional branches, and independent networks as separate denominations—even when they share virtually identical theology. Christianity is not divided into 40,000 different belief systems.

Across historic Christianity, there is broad agreement on the central truths of the faith: the Trinity (Matt. 28:19), the deity of Christ (John 1:1), salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8–9), justification apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:28), and the bodily resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Mainstream Christian denominations also overwhelmingly agree that followers of Jesus are not required to keep the old covenant rituals such as dietary laws, feast days, and ceremonial regulations (Acts 15:1–29; Col. 2:16–17).

The existence of denominations does not necessarily mean Christianity is false or hopelessly confused. In many cases, denominations exist because Christians disagree on secondary issues rather than the core Gospel itself. These differences may involve church structure, baptism, spiritual gifts, worship style, the Lord’s Supper, or questions about the end times. For example, some churches baptize infants while others reserve baptism for professing believers. Some church traditions are governed by bishops, while others are led by local elders or congregational voting. These disagreements are real, but they are not the same as denying the core truths of Christianity.

It is also important to recognize that some denominational divisions arose from legitimate historical and theological conflicts. The Protestant Reformation, for example, centered on crucial issues such as the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, and the nature of salvation. Martin Luther and the Reformers were not trying to create endless division; they believed the Gospel itself was at stake (Gal. 1:6–9).

At the same time, Christians should admit that some fragmentation is unhealthy and reflects human sinfulness. Pride, politics, tribalism, personality conflicts, nationalism, and power struggles have all contributed to unnecessary division in the church (1 Cor. 1:10–13). The New Testament

repeatedly calls believers to humility, unity, patience, and love (Eph. 4:1–6). Jesus Himself prayed that His followers would be one (John 17:20–23).

Theologically speaking, the New Testament distinguishes between unity and uniformity. Christians are called to unity in Christ, not necessarily institutional sameness. Even within the first-century church, there were disagreements and distinct ministry contexts. Jewish and Gentile believers wrestled through major theological tensions (Acts 15; Gal. 2). Paul and Barnabas even separated for a time over a ministry dispute (Acts 15:36–41). Yet despite those differences, the apostles still recognized one Lord, one Gospel, and one faith (Eph. 4:4–6).

Historically, Christianity has also spread across thousands of cultures, languages, and nations over two millennia. Some diversity is inevitable when the Gospel moves from Jerusalem into the entire world (Matt. 28:19–20). A church in rural Kenya, an Orthodox church in Greece, a Lutheran church in Germany, and a Baptist church in Tennessee may look very different externally while still confessing the same crucified and risen Christ.

The real question is not, “Are there denominations?” The real question is: What does a particular church teach about Jesus, the Gospel, Scripture, and salvation? That is where the dividing line truly matters.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Ephesians 4:4–6 — Paul emphasizes one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.
- 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 — Paul rebukes sinful divisions and personality-driven factions in the church.
- John 17:20–23 — Jesus prays for unity among His followers.
- Acts 15:1–29 — The early church worked through major doctrinal disputes together.
- Galatians 1:6–9 — Some doctrinal differences are serious enough to distort the Gospel itself.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: “If Christianity were true, Christians would all agree.”

Response: Disagreement among followers does not disprove the truth of what they follow. Scientists disagree about many things, yet science itself is not false. Political parties disagree internally, yet governments still exist. The New Testament itself acknowledges that Christians will struggle with error, immaturity, and division this side of eternity (1 Cor. 3:1–4).

Common Objection: “There are thousands of denominations, so no one can know the truth.”

Response: The core teachings of Christianity are remarkably stable across history and denominations. Most doctrinal disagreements involve secondary issues, not the identity of Jesus or the Gospel itself.

Common Objection: “Denominations are completely unbiblical.”

Response: The New Testament condemns sinful division but recognizes differences among churches and ministry contexts. The existence of denominations is not ideal, but neither does it automatically mean the Gospel has been lost.

Why This Matters

This question matters because confusion about denominations can discourage people from taking Christianity seriously. But the existence of different church traditions should not distract us from the central reality of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ crucified and risen for sinners.

It also matters because believers need discernment. Not every church that claims the name “Christian” teaches the historic Gospel faithfully. Christians are called to test teachings against Scripture (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1), while also maintaining humility and charity toward fellow believers who differ on secondary matters.

Ultimately, the unity of the church is not grounded in organizational structure, denominational labels, or cultural identity. It is grounded in Christ Himself.

Recommended Resources

- *Mere Christianity* — Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis
- *Why We’re Protestant* — Why We're Protestant by Nate Pickowicz
- *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* — The Church: The Gospel Made Visible by Mark Dever
- *Paul and the Power of Grace* — Paul and the Power of Grace by John Barclay
- *Christianity Through the Centuries* — Christianity Through the Centuries by Earle E. Cairns
- *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1* — The Story of Christianity, Volume 1 by Justo L. González