

## “Why Do Christians Disagree About So Many Things?”

Date: November 18, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: John 17:18-23; Ephesians 4:1-6

Theme: Disagreements, unity

Occasion: Ask series

Welcome to the last Sunday in our series “Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age.” I hope you’ve found this series to be helpful. Today we ask the question, “Why do Christians disagree about so many things?” At last count there are now around 41,000 different Christian denominations. And they disagree on a host of issues.

Christians disagree about the right way to baptize someone – adult versus infant; about the way we interpret the Bible and what we mean when we say it is divinely inspired. Christians disagree about whether women can be clergy, whether gays should be allowed to marry or be ordained, and who is allowed to receive communion in their church.

We disagree on such issues as capital punishment, divorce, abortion, immigration, gun control and racism. Jesus prayed that his followers might all be one, but we are divided on many issues. And there has been conflict since the beginning of the church – Peter and Paul arguing over whether Gentiles had to be circumcised before they could become Christians.

I’m reminded a joke I heard a number of years ago. A certain fellow was stranded on an island for a number of months, living all by himself. When a rescue boat finally arrived, he invited his rescuers on a tour of the island and he showed them three grass huts. He said, “This one is my home and this one is my church.”

One of his rescuers was curious and asked him. “What about this third hut? What’s that?” The lone survivor on the island said, “Oh, that’s my last church. I left it. I didn’t get along with the people who worshiped there.”

Why do Christians disagree about so many things? We are all followers of Jesus and yet we have so many different denominations. How is a non-believer supposed to know which one is right? How do we explain it to someone who isn't a Christian; why we have so many different kinds of churches?

One simple answer is this. We're human; why wouldn't we disagree? Everybody disagrees about things; why should Christians be any different?

Another explanation is that we are all greatly influenced by our families and our parents. Much of what we believe is not because of what we hear and learn about in church; it's what we've grown up with at home. So, what's taught at home may not be in agreement with what's taught in church, but our parents taught us and we believed it, right or wrong.

For some people, the reason they are United Methodist, or Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic is simply because that is the church they were raised in. They didn't make a choice because of the right doctrine or teachings of the church; it was simply the one they knew since childhood. It was familiar.

But how did we come to have so many different denominations? To really answer that question we'd have to do a full year-long course in church history and look at all of the divisions that occurred during history. For the first 1,000 years there were major divisions about the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ – his divinity and his humanity.

In 1054 a major split occurred between the Greek-speaking eastern part of the church and the Latin-speaking part of the western church. This split between the churches centered on the authority of the Pope, the Holy Spirit's relationship to God the Father, and issues involving worship and liturgy.

Within Western Europe, Roman Catholicism faced a major split in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As the Holy Roman Empire became weaker, nation-states developed and different languages replaced Latin. The invention of the printing press in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century sharpened the question of whether the Bible should be translated in the languages of the people. That and other factors led to the Protestant Reformation.

And since then, churches have been dividing over and over again, over such issues as who governs the church, how scripture is interpreted, the right way to baptize, and what is the correct way to worship. All of the various reasons as to why churches split are a major part in understanding church history.

Today, another reason Christians disagree on so many issues is that we have access to information in so many ways, and we are all reading and hearing and learning new things. Which television station we watch for our news may influence our decisions on major ethical issues more so than our understanding of what the Bible teaches. Or which magazines we read, or which blogs we read online. Lots of factors influence what Christians are thinking and believing.

Another way to answer the question of why we disagree is to look at our changing world. As the world changes, the churches must respond in some way. And the ways we respond to those changes are not always uniform.

For example, as women have gained more rights and have begun working in the work force, it has challenged the traditional male understanding that only men can be clergy. Throughout history women have played an important role in the life of the church, but should they be allowed to be ordained? Some churches say yes, some say no.

Another major issue is Christianity's role in the wider culture. Christianity has traditionally been the dominant force in the culture of Europe and the Americas. The church used to shape holidays, education, family life and morality. As the process of secularization has progressed, Christian convictions about marriage, sexual relationships, divorce have been challenged. Some even call it a war on Christians, others, change.

Even changing patterns of technology and music and communication have caused disagreements about the proper way to worship God. In some churches you have guitars and drums and lasers and smoke during worship, and in some you still have stained glass and organ music. Which one is the right way to worship? Christians disagree.

There is a lot of stress in our culture and it has had an impact on the church. Sunday mornings used to be sacred. Now, there are many more options for people to choose from as to how they will use their Sunday morning time. While they may agree in theory that the commandment to honor the Sabbath is important, if they get to church once in a while, they feel they are being faithful. Other churches say that if you don't attend church on Saturday or Sunday, you have committed a sin.

Well, it seems as though there is not much that we do agree upon. However, Christians are not as divided as many people believe. Most Christian denominations hold the vast majority of beliefs in common. Most recognize each other's baptisms and recognize the members of other churches as Christians. Not all, but most.

Churches are also finding numerous ways to work together in mission and ministry. While we may not always agree on theology and polity, we can often find ways of serving together. Food pantries, ecumenical worship services, disaster relief projects, Koinonia, Kairos, CROP Walk, the

overflow shelter for the homeless: these are all ways that Christians have been banding together in the name of Christ to serve the world.

Still, there is division – even within our own denomination and probably within our own congregation. We do not all think alike. The disagreements and the divisions in the body of Christ are a hindrance to the Gospel. The amount of time Christians spend arguing with each other gives the impression that we don't truly love each other.

Christians should find ways to be more united. One of my favorite John Wesley quotes is this one: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things charity." He's saying that there is a core set of beliefs we can all agree on. Some things we will not agree on, but let them be the nonessentials. And in both, let us love one another.

That's not always easy in our very politicized and polarized country right now. Many people are digging in their heels and not giving an inch, or else they have retreated to their corner and they don't want to come out and deal with anyone, they're so tired of controversy.

As Christians, I urge us to find ways to disagree well. May we be a witness to the world that even when we disagree we can still be agreeable with one another. Jesus prayed that we all might be one. He didn't mean we would all think alike, but he wanted us to stay united in love.

I see that most clearly when we come together at the Lord's Table. Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, pro-life and pro-abortion, pro-gay and pro-traditional values – at the table of the Lord we are all one. We are all sinners in need of grace.

As Paul said to the Ephesians: "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is over all and

through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4) My dear friends, our unity is in Jesus Christ, not in our uniformity of opinions.

I love what Paul says to the Romans (12:18): “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” May it be so! Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, by Scott J. Jones and Arthur D. Jones, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015; pp. 115-125.