

Christ Presbyterian Church

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**"Glad You Asked - Denominations:
'Why is the Church Broken into So Many Pieces?'"**

John 17:23

We wanted to say that the questions are just as important as the answers. The ability to ask questions with a belief that even if we don't understand, at the end we are still in a place where we know that all truth is God's truth, so we don't have to be afraid of the question *or* the answer. We were made in the image of God, in part, with a curiosity to see, to make things fit together. This week we are going to do our question time at the very beginning of the sermon. We are going to try to do this different ways, different weeks.

I took some of the 150 questions that we are not going to be able to get to in our sermons that connect to the idea of church, and I thought I would try to give five answers in five minutes. I've got to tell you, it didn't go too well last night, but today is a new day. I have Sarah's phone here which has a little stop watch, and then I gave myself one extra minute just to tell you the truth. You won't know how long it takes, of course, but just trust me on this. Five questions in five minutes. Let's start now.

Somebody asked, "Why should we meet on Sundays instead of on the Sabbath as God commands?" Somebody has an idea that I've got it wrong. Some traditions, Seventh Day Adventists and others, observe worship on the Sabbath, Saturday. Since honoring the Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments, they say God's Word is eternal, why aren't we worshipping then? Good question.

The Book of Acts is the story of the early church, and it says right from the start, that the followers of Jesus gathered together every day in the temple courts. Every single day they met in each other's homes for fellowship. So the real question, maybe, is, why do we meet so rarely instead of, what one day can we do it? That said, there are a lot of references about early followers of Jesus joining with the Jews on the Sabbath to pray and study the Scriptures. Acts 17:2 "As was Paul's custom, he went into the synagogue and for three Sabbaths taught."

But also, right from the beginning the early church met on Sundays. When Paul was with the believers in Troas and worshipped and celebrated communion, they gathered on the first day of the week. And, Paul tells the church at Corinth to do what he told the Galatian churches to do and set aside a sum of money on the first day of the week. Most Christian scholars believe the early church started gathering on Sunday because it was the day the Lord rose from the dead,

and they started to gather on that day to do a new thing and show that Jesus actually was the Messiah, and so that as Christianity spread past Judaism, there would be appeal to the whole world.

I don't know what's right, but I get this from Romans 14:5. They had the same problem. Paul says, "In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another. Others consider every day is alike. You should be fully convinced, each of you, that whatever day you choose is acceptable to God. Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor Him." That's long answer.

The second question, "Why do some churches use wine in communion and others use grape juice?" Very good question. Our communion is rooted in the Passover meal, the Seder meal. Jesus poured the wine that was specially used for the flight from Egypt. In the last couple hundred years, some churches, especially here in the West, have substituted grape juice for wine for the sake of the children or for health concerns or, most especially, as they have seen the epidemic of alcoholism grow, believing that they gave the same message with the grape juice and didn't have to worry about either temptation or supporting liquor. I was in an Episcopal church doing an internship, and this side of the church came forward and received wine, and that side came forward and received grape juice. I was always unsure how hard I had to announce that it is not what we drink; it is the Lord that we drink it with.

Third question: "Why do some churches baptize infants, other churches baptize adults, and this church baptizes anybody?" Another editorial. Well, for some churches baptism is an entry rite into the family of God. It is like Jewish circumcision. On the eighth day, the boy is circumcised and becomes part of the family. That is in the Bible. Paul talks about baptism as the new circumcision. Also in the Bible it says when we descend into the water, we die to sin. When we rise from the water, the Spirit brings us to new life. Repentance and baptism and new life. We don't want to make a false choice, so we celebrate that whatever way you do baptism, God takes the initiative. God chooses you. Baptism doesn't save us. It shows that God saves us.

Fourth question, "Why do you wear silly black dresses but only sometimes?" Somebody is getting a little personal here. In the first century the common dress in the Middle East was robes, but in Rome and in Europe, it was togas or shorter robes. As the Gospel spread, robes became passé in Europe because it wasn't practical to wear them. They went to the custom of only the leaders wearing the robes as a sign of allegiance to back to how it was in the beginning. In the third and fourth centuries, a few Christians started to say that the church was too political or too bureaucratic or too rich, and they moved out into the desert. They became the desert monks, the desert fathers. What they did was to put on desert robes, just regular old sackcloth work clothes. Robes then became not the sign of a sacred badge, but a mark of humility for a simple Savior. That worked for a long time. Then it became part of making the clergy look good until the Reformation when people resisted much of what Rome had done, and some churches just got rid of the robes all together. So now some have clergy wearing robes and others don't.

In the last couple centuries, one of the reasons for the robes has been--it is almost hard to believe this--but some people came to church all dressed up and made it a fashion show, especially on Christmas and Easter, and the clergy decided to resist the fashion trend. Judie Ritchie, a former associate, said, "I started to wear robes so nobody would look at what I was wearing." Again, it's not the dress; it's all of us in this together.

The fifth question that I'm getting to is "Why are there so many different churches? It all started as one." We need a lot more time for that. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, this can be, not silly but fun to realize how You are at work in Your church in different ways over the years, how You show us who You are through other people who are so unlike You. I pray today that You will not answer our question about whether it is one church or a million churches, You will show us what our part in Your church is. In Your Name. Amen.

So, why is the church that Jesus died for so fragmented?" Is there one church or are there many? I had the image that Jesus died just for one church, "Peter, on this rock I will build My church." Ever since I was old enough to know what they were, I saw all kinds of different churches all around us but, in fact, growing up I went to the only true church, the only good church. It looked a little bit like this church, that's what church is supposed to look like with incense and candles and holy water, but then I left Catholicism, my faith faded away, and when I came back, I came back to Christ. I didn't come back to church. I came back to Christ, and I started going to different churches. Frankly, given my Catholic background, I found these other churches strange.

I went to an African-American church once in Chicago, and it was really cool, loud and rocking and great music and loooong. It went on and on They had an offering and everybody got up and came forward and put their money in big baskets. I thought that was really cool. We all sat back down in our seats. Then the pastor looked in and said, "Not enough in here, come on again!" and they had a second offering. I love that church. We need to do that more often. I thought, "Wow! Churches *are* different." I had thought churches were always fairly tame and predictable until I went to a charismatic church when I was an intern in seminary. I was in Washington, DC, and I went to some Methodist African-American churches that were charismatic. They were phenomenal.

The people didn't just sit there. You people look like very polite, very embalmed white people. You just sit there, you know? These people, they were alive. "Tell it, preacher!" "Bring it home!" "Come on!" "Spirit, come!" I was like, this is sort of cool. I must be better than I thought. I wasn't. *They* were. And I thought this was great until the middle of the third week, and the sister in the back who has been waving and shouting, she stands up and goes, "Ooooooh, Jesus...." and boom! She's down, just goes out cold. I'm like, "Oh, is she okay?" and the brother next to me goes, "Oh, that's okay. The Spirit just got her." Slain in the Spirit. And I was like, "Wow! What if that happened in my church!"

The idea that the church would not be predictable was good for me, but I came to believe that the way Presbyterians worship is sort of a good blend. It gets people involved but is dignified. People are intellectual, and they are with you. Churches are all different, aren't they? They have some common elements, but they are all different. Here's what I'd like you to do. I'd like to take 30 seconds, if you are sitting next to somebody, tell them one thing that is different that you have seen in another church. Just think about one thing that is different that you have seen in another church. Okay?

What are some of the things you have heard? What are some differences that you have seen? Anybody see anything different at different churches? Some people have healing prayer right inside the worship service. What else? Speaking in tongues. Different churches, that's right.

What else? Altar calls, people coming forward. Some churches say you cannot take communion unless you are part of *our* communion, a closed communion. What else? Baptism by emersion or submersion, all the way down, keep them down. I hear you. Pastors who sing. Alleluia! In the back. People who would dance and sing. People would actually dance in the pews, right. There are a lot of different ways the church expresses itself all the way around the world, but does that mean that there are a lot of different churches? One church or many? Listen to Jesus. John 17:21 says it this way.

“I pray also for those who will believe in Me through the message of these first followers, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are One: I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me, and I have loved them even as You have loved me.”

One church or many? It sort of depends on how you define the church. The early followers of The Way of Jesus did not see church as a worship service or a building or even these people or those people. They saw the church as a movement. When the church is a movement, it's all moving in the same direction, but it does not look alike. There is diversity in the movement right from the start because there is diversity of culture as the Gospel spreads. As it goes to different nations, people sing different ways. As it reaches different personalities, it talks to them with different tongues. A teenage rock and roller is not going to hear the Gospel the same way as an elderly country and western fan or a person who likes opera. They are all going to have different needs. As the church went up and down the economic scale, it looked very different. Finally, as church moved further and further from being a Jewish religion, the movement looked very different in India than it did in England. In that diversity, though, there was one movement.

Another reason the church looks different around the world is what I call new wineskins. Remember, Jesus said, “I’m pouring new wine. You can’t use the old wineskins. They will pop.” Each generation needs its own wineskin because of its language, its technology, its preferences. Each generation almost has a need to rediscover, to reinvent. I also think that what started as one movement gets fractured because of the work of the enemy. Jesus does not want clones. Jesus loves Episcopal, Baptist, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and He is crazy about the diversity here. He made us different, but Jesus hates what the evil one does, turning us against each other. The evil one wants to disrupt the work of God, the movement of the Spirit. One movement but with many different ways. Is it one church too many? It depends.

If you start to see the church as the institution, then the answer is different, right? The original followers of Jesus start to get older and die, and they say, “Who is going to take over?” They start to pass on instructions for how you organize the movement. Organize the movement? Sounds like a contradiction, but how do you get the most important stuff across unless you tell people that this is the most important or this is less important. The church becomes an institution, and the trouble comes almost immediately.

Let me just ask you this and, if you don’t mind, just raise your hand. All right, how many of you grew up in a tradition that was Baptist? Put your hands up. Wow, a lot of Baptists! How many of you grew up in a tradition that was Roman Catholic? Former Catholics, raise your hands. How many of you grew up in a Lutheran expression? How many of you grew up in an independent church or no church at all? Raise your hands, okay. How many of you grew up in a Free Church

of some kind? A Reformed Church of some kind? A Pentecostal or charismatic church? You can raise your hand several times, okay. Good, back there. Okay, what am I forgetting? Methodists? Oh, sorry, I thought we were talking about Christians. Just kidding, don't throw things, don't throw things. What else? Covenant Church? What else? Oh, Presbyterians? I knew there was something I was forgetting. Presbyterians, raise your hands. Good, good, good. Now, if you are Presbyterian, you can't bring your hands down again because you are not used to moving. What did I hear? Somebody else? Greek Orthodox? Yeah, absolutely. And I am sure there are others. Congregationalists? Right.

This shows that when we create an institution, it breaks apart and multiplies and multiplies. First were Catholic and Orthodox, East and West. Then, Reformed in Anglican and Lutheran, and then Presbyterian. Then when we get to the Anabaptist movement, it goes all over. We are divided, I believe, by two things. First, by politics. Organizational structures start as a result of church leaders or secular leaders interacting. That's what happens. The Eastern and the Western churches split because of prideful popes who couldn't agree who was in charge. The Reformation survives because Germanic dukes wanted to oppose Roman control of their lands. Anglicanism starts because a corrupt king moves further and further from the church. Politics! Once started, it gains a life of its own. Any excuse to split will do.

There are currently 217 different denominations in the United States of America. There are currently 100-plus Presbyterian denominations in the country of Korea, and they have only had Christianity for 145 years. You have two Koreans in a room you will have three different denominations. It's just unbelievable. Because we find it easier to split, as we have, we split even more--partly due to politics, partly pride, partly theology. We split because we believe or have come to believe different things. Sometimes those issues seem very small in the rearview mirror. "Really, you would fight over that?" "You would kill each other over that?" "You would split over this?" But they always seem huge to the people going through them.

When we talk about communion, "This is My Body broken for you," is it the real presence of Christ, or is it an analogy? It seems important. Do you baptize infants or only those who believe in Christ and profess it? What is your view of when Jesus will come back? How important is that? Do you believe that you have to be born again, speak in tongues? My favorite distinction is there is a church that says, you have to give everything you own to your local church. I love that denomination. We are going to join it tomorrow. When we believe different things, and we believe they are the most important things, it doesn't seem like those are silly fights from yesterday.

Today the church is splitting over the ordination of women, the role of politics in church, whether Christianity is unique or just one of the world's great religions, and the biggest division of all, whether we should have organs or drums in worship. People a hundred years from now will look at us and go, "Ohhhh, have mercy."

We are gathering as Presbyterians, two million Presbyterians in the United States, here next month, and there will be huge fights, and they will be sexy fights. Do Presbyterians love Israel or do they hate Israel? Should we ordain gays or not? Should we marry folks like this or like that? These are the sexy issues, but they underlie deep theological divisions. Who is Jesus? How do you interpret the Scripture? At what point should we agree to disagree and just have two different Presbyterian churches following the same Christ?

When church is an institution, it is bound to fragment because of people. When it is a movement, it goes one way with different faces. When it is an institution, it splits and splits and splits, and the problem is, when it splits and splits and splits and splits, people start to say, "It is better to be a Methodist." "It is better to be an Episcopalian." "Baptists are the only ones in heaven." "No, no, no!" Missouri Synod Lutherans think everybody else is in big trouble, and we start to think what Kyle was saying in the children's sermon, our way is the only way. And the world looks and goes, "Really? Really?"

Churches are part of one movement. They are part of many institutions, but they are at the end. Congregations are gatherings of local people who decide how to follow Jesus together. I believe, in the end that that is where most of the damage is done because now we are not talking about *them*; we are talking about *us*. You know, membership in the local church was so important in the story told in the Book of Acts, about the very first church, that the apostle Paul says, "If he will not change his ways, throw him out of our fellowship for the destruction of his flesh." In those days, you could not survive as a follower of Jesus apart from the local fellowship. How far we have come!

One of the reasons you have such tenuous ties to this church is because of how easy it is to join another church. If you don't like it, you just go somewhere else. One of the things that has resulted in is turn followers of Jesus into consumers of religion, and consumerism always, always divides us. "The music is too loud." "The music is too old." "The preacher doesn't feed me." "This church is too small." "This church is too big." "This theological issue is the most important thing in the world." So we end up with 335,000 different churches, and you, unless you are a part of solving that, are a part of causing that. May I say that a different way? If you are not part of making one church, you are part of making many churches. I believe that Jesus Christ has one church but He has 335,000 different franchises.

So how do we build one church? Let me suggest that it starts with you seeing the diversity of God's creation in the church. Go to different churches. See how wildly different it can be to worship in different ways but then, go deep with one church. I pray that it is this church, but go deep with one church in a way that helps you build *the* church, not this church, *the* church.

Let me give you four ways you can build one church. The first and, perhaps, the most important, **do you come to this church as a servant or do you come as a consumer?** We do not help that. Pastors do not help that. Pastors gather together, and when we gather together, there is very sanctimonious talk about what the Lord Jesus is doing in our congregations. But in the end, the bottom line is bucks and butts. How many bucks in the plate? How many butts in the pew? That is not what Jesus sees as success. It makes you consumers, and Jesus wants servants. I have found that people who sit in the pews *only*, very quickly develop the spiritual gift of criticism, and they use it phenomenally well. But people who are engaged in a house-building trip in Mexico, in building Habitat houses, in feeding My Starving Children, in teaching second grade, in being involved in a Moms Morning group, they not only have less time to criticize, but they get skin in the game. It's Jesus' church now!

Second, you build one church **by resisting the evil of schism.** When the Upper Room and CPC divided, that was not schism. That was church planting. That was growing the Kingdom of Heaven. That was letting them be more effective doing what they do. Schism is dividing with rancor and anger, and we do that so often. We resist schism only with a positive spirit. You know how you get a positive spirit? You look for what God is doing out there in different fields.

You say, "Wow! I wish we loved social justice like the Catholics do." You point to the Pentecostals who are jumping up and down, screaming in different tongues, and you say, "Oh, that the Holy Spirit would move among Presbyterians like that!" Not often. Not much, but just a little bit. You look for the work of God and instead of condemning those megachurches, those big God-boxes, you say, "Thank God that there are some people who believe that people far from Jesus need to hear about Jesus, and they will do whatever it takes to bring them in." What if you became one of those people? That is the kind of person Nancy Beach talks about. She says, "At the end of the day, I want you to list me as one of the easily impressed." That means you are not joining the *other* group, the cynics and the gossips. I want us to praise the work of God around us and here so that our hearts are warm.

The third thing, the only way that this church stays healthy or becomes healthier or becomes more one, is **if we seek the truth**. Part of living in Minnesota that is so tragic is that you people have opinions just as strong as New Yorkers, but you don't tell the person who you are opinionated about. "How are you doing?" "I'm fine. I'm fine." You know, what they say in the South? They say in the South you can say anything you want to about anybody, be as cutting as you want to, as long as you end with a stock phrase. You can say, "Oh, is that not the ugliest dress you have ever seen, bless her heart!" In Minnesota we need to seek the truth, and we need to realize that gossip about other people is from the lips of hell.

I had a call this week from somebody connected with the Upper Room. She called me, and she said, "John, I've heard that you said this. Really, did you say that?" And I said, "Who told you that? I never said that. I don't believe that. That is not true." And she said, "Oh, thank God, I didn't push the speed dial to everybody else before I checked with you!" She spoke the truth to me so that the truth would gain out over the evil one. Are you doing that? When you say, "No, I'm not gossiping," are you listening to gossip and not telling the person they need to talk? That is very uncomfortable.

I guess the last thing, what I want to close with, is **unity of mission**. I believe that we are in a spiritual battle. I believe that Jesus has put us right into the middle of a world that is broken and flawed and going to hell, and He says, "You are My response to that. My one response to that is you, and I do not have Plan B because I have one church."

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You helped me to realize again last night that there are no perfect churches, and if I joined a perfect church, I would mess it up immediately. I pray that You will give me grace and humility, that I can say, "This is what I think," and then ask, "What do You think?" I pray You will help my sisters and my brothers here to find ways to serve so that their sweat talks louder than their voices and their love is stronger than any gossip that would divide us. Lord God, make Your church one, one solid foundation. In Your Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.