

*Read also Deuteronomy 6:4-15. Check out the service at [www.fpcd.org](http://www.fpcd.org).*

The question we discuss today is this: If we Christians serve one God, why are there so many types of churches? Good question! Let's explore what the first churches were like, how some of the denominations came to be, and then look at what is important to Jesus, as he speaks to the church in Ephesus, from Revelation.

John, the apostle, exiled for his faith to the Island of Patmos, off the coast of Greece, wrote the book of Revelation. He tells us he was caught up in the Spirit on a Sunday and he heard a voice that sounded like a trumpet which said, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches." He saw Jesus standing among seven lampstands, which represented seven churches. (see Rev. 1:10-20)

There were many more than seven churches when John received this message. The messages were to be taken as a whole—not just one message to one church, and another message to another church—but each church was to read all the messages. Each church had a little different emphasis. Probably they were sort of like denominations. They all needed to read the letters, as we do. As we read them, we begin to distinguish "personalities," just like different denominations have identifiable characteristics today.

Like the "frozen chosen" or the "holy rollers;" or those who dunk vs. those who sprinkle. Or baptizing babies vs. baptizing confessing adults. Or seven sacraments versus two. Or believers-in-predestination as opposed to free will.

Why do different denominations believe differently? Much of that has to do with circumstances, the culture, church tradition, and the value placed on Scripture.

At the time of Revelation, these churches had to guard against heretical itinerate pastors. Paul wrote to the Ephesians (Acts 20:29-30):

"I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. Watch out!"

So the apostles had to help the churches stay with what they had learned from Jesus. They were eyewitnesses.

It would be like you who have become an expert in say auto repair. You can see what needs to be done to repair a problem. Or, a CPA who has the answers to your tax questions, who is very familiar with the tax code and able to clarify against potential errors. Heads of the church held councils every so often to clarify the faith when people and churches got off track.

Over time, though, the church became so focused on its own traditions that pastors didn't teach the Bible much; lay people couldn't read and they all fell away from the truth. During the time of the Reformation (1500s), education became more important and theologians began studying the Scriptures in the original languages. They then discovered how far off they were.

In the Catholic Church at that time there was no assurance of salvation. You had to buy indulgences; work your way to salvation by assigned penances. Along comes a man named Martin Luther. He trained to be a priest. He found that he could never achieve “goodness.” He punishes himself by sleeping on the floor with no blanket. He fasts until he is gaunt. His colleagues believe he is mad. He is! He is becoming insane trying to be perfectly good. He cannot get rid of his sin.

But one day he is translating Romans and reads, “The righteous shall live by faith,” (1:17) Paul, who also struggled with sin, wrote the words, “Oh wretched man that I am! Who will free me from this life dominated by sin and death?” (Ro 7:24). And suddenly his eyes were opened. It is Jesus! It is faith in him! Luther is converted. Out of his own anguish over his sin, he is totally relieved of his fears, his anxiety, his insane approach to being justified by his own good works.

So he swings far on that pendulum of faith—the church declared him a heretic and threw him out. He didn’t mean to start a new denomination. It wasn’t his intention.

About the same time John Calvin is a budding young law student in Switzerland. He had a sudden conversion—and claimed it was all God’s doing. He didn’t feel that he had effected it at all. Thus he believed he was “predestined,” that it was God who called him, not he himself who had chosen God.

Now Calvin was stern and serious, though full of heart for God. He thought the church needed order and simplicity. No art, no fancy robes, no trappings; only the Word. He turned the whole town of Geneva to live by the Gospel.

You wonder why Presbyterians are so concerned with order? Why we have so many rules about what kind of art is allowed in the sanctuary? It goes right back to the particular focus of John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Then there are the Anabaptists, who did not believe in infant baptism. They believed in the individual decision for Christ. Many with this belief were martyred, yet the Baptist denomination came from those with this emphasis.

A hundred fifty years later in England, John Wesley was born. His mother was a devote Anglican. He was her fifteenth child. Faith should have been easy for him. But when he came to Georgia as a missionary to convert Indians, he failed miserably. One day reluctantly attending a Bible study, someone read Luther’s writing from Romans. Suddenly his heart was warmed and he turned to Christ.

But unlike Luther and Calvin, who believed you would only be free of sin at death, Wesley believed holiness can be accomplished on earth. Out of his ideas came the Methodist Church.

So it was the experiences of different men who reformed the church during those times that caused the separating of the church into particular persuasions.

Then early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Pentecostal Church was born at an old AME Church on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, when African American evangelist William Seymour led a multi-ethnic congregation in a revival. On April 18, 1906, the Holy Spirit fell on the entire place, just like the day of Pentecost. This denomination cherishes the fervor in worship and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now what does all of this have to do with the real church? Are they all real? Yes. They all have elements of faithful belief, but focus on these different persuasions.

Now let's turn to Revelation and the message of Jesus to one of the churches, Ephesus. This is the church which Paul predicted would have false apostles come in like wolves and try to devour them. It was now probably 30-35 years after he had said that to the church. READ Rev. 2:1-7

There it is. They had dealt with false teachers successfully—they were discerning and recognized them. They were also persistent. They had not quit. But Jesus said, "You have lost your first love." They had forgotten Jesus, discarded, neglected, rejected, and forsaken their love for him. They were doing church for the purpose of church. Coming and going to church, but not doing the works born out of loving Jesus first.

The wise church in 2015 applies this to themselves. The letter was meant for all to read. Have the Presbyterians lost their first Love? The Methodists? The Pentecostals? Baptists? Has First Presbyterian lost our first love? If not, *where's the fruit born of love?*

Think back to when you first came to church. What was it like? Were you glad to be in the church because your heart was "warmed" with love for Jesus? Did you want to do ministry—like children's church, or teach Sunday School, or fund the organ, or visit visitors and take cookies?

Did you joyfully do the work of the church?

Jesus boldly states, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."

Have you abandoned your first love? Are you doing the work you did at first? When was the last time you invited someone to church because you delight in Him and you believe He is the answer?

Jesus does not care about preserving a denomination nor does he care about you clinging to your particular denomination's style. He cares about your works making a difference in the community because you love Him.

I heard a story at the Duncanville pastor's gathering about Dr. S. M. Wright, the pastor of the People's Missionary Baptist Church in South Dallas. The story goes that the Dallas City Council were trying to pass a new ordinance which would prohibit small storefront churches. Regulations were being proposed requiring churches to have buildings and property in order to meet. This

would shut down hundreds of storefront churches throughout South Dallas. Christians, white and black, came to the meeting to protest, but it was not looking good.

Dr. Wright stood up. He said, “Who proposed this? If you proposed it you should be willing to state your name and show your face.” He continued, “These small churches keep the streets peaceful. They work with gangs to keep them from growing. They help the poor; work with at risk children; give food to the homeless, deal with people on drugs, all of which *you are doing nothing about*. You shut down these storefront churches, and you shut down South Dallas because all your efforts to contain the violence, trouble, and growth of gangs will never be as effective as the work of the churches.”

The proposal failed and the small churches stood.

Their light continues to shine today because Christians got out in the community and expressed their love for Jesus.

Jesus is asking you, First Pres, *What are you doing? Are you focused on being a denomination or on your first love?* Jesus doesn't mince words.

It's the people who make the difference. It's you. *Do you want your light to shine, or your lampstand to be removed?*

It's so simple. Stand up. Let your love shine.

AMEN