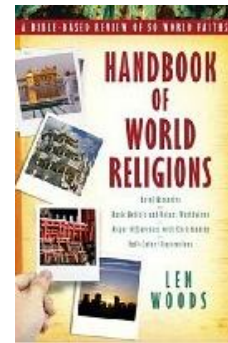


What's the Difference?

Lesson # 9, 3/22/2009

Dealing with Differences: Denominations and Pluralism



THE THEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF DENOMINATIONS

Last week, we talked about different denominations and how they emerge in different locations in time and space—as this is a primary reason for the many different denominations. However, there are theological differences. Perhaps the biggest are in regards to the structure of the church and the nature of the sacraments (every church has some view). Other issues are distinctive of different movements. We want to highlight some of these (see chart on back of lesson 8).

Structure of the Church: *How the Church is Led*—3 Different views

Episcopal: Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, modified in Methodists, Lutherans

This view believes that Christ has entrusted the government of the Church exclusively to an order of bishops (for some, these are the successors of the apostles). The civil equivalent is that of a monarchy. The order of bishops is independent, self-perpetuating, and sovereign in its governing of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church is the clearest example of this form of government, with the Pope, being the successor of Peter, functioning as an absolute monarch.

Congregational: Congregationalist, most Baptist, independent churches

Each individual congregation or church is an independent and complete church, so the authority is exclusively with the members of the congregation; there is no control by outside forces like bishops or presbytery. The civil corollary with congregational government is that of democracy. Officers within this system administer the affairs of the church but have no governing power beyond other members. The scriptural bases for this form of government are that Christ is the head of the Church and that of the priesthood of all believers. Christ's priestly work has done away with the necessity for earthly priests as mediators.

Presbyterian: Presbyterian, Reformed, modified in some Baptist

Leadership and governance comes from a plurality of elders (presbyters). The local congregation elects its presbyters (session) which govern its affairs. The church is led by a teaching elder who is chosen by the congregation, but who is also a member of the presbytery. The presbytery is a representative body (teaching and ruling elders) of a group of churches which has governing authority over the group. The civil corollary Presbyterian government is Federalism/republic.

Sacraments: *Nature of Sacraments (see Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 27)*

Sacrament as Giving Grace (Roman Catholic)

In this view, the visible signs of the sacraments and the invisible grace they give are inseparably linked; grace is conveyed through the channel of the sacrament and they are effectual. Apart from Christ, the Church, and the sacraments there is no salvation. Sacraments are emphasized over the Word. The Word is preparatory, while the sacraments are effective.

A sacrament, administered properly in the way established by Christ and with the proper intention, gives the grace it signifies. It is effective not by reason of the power of intercession of priestly prayer nor on account of the worthiness of the recipient, but solely by the power of Christ. The power of Christ lives in the sacraments. The effect of the sacrament is independent of the sinfulness or unworthiness of the minister. The Church has never tolerated any subjective qualification of the objective effectiveness of the sacraments *ex opere operato*. This would ultimately be to conceive the way of salvation as being man's way to God and not God's way to man. <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/sacrament.php>

The Sacrament Connected to the Word (Lutheran)

The Word of God is the means of grace, so the Sacraments have their significance only with the Word, as they are the visible Word and are as effective as the Word is effective. Although they do see faith as being required for effectiveness in conveying the grace of God, they do not entirely break from the Catholic view that the grace of God is contained in the visible signs. ("in, with, and under")

Not a Sacrament, but an Ordinance (Baptists, many evangelical)

This groups view the sacraments (called ordinances) as a memorial only. They are given by Christ as object lessons (no sealing power). They do not see God as linking or binding himself to any ordinary means in the distribution of His grace. God works directly in the heart through the power of the Spirit and the Word and sacraments point to the internal grace of God. Originally was a reaction against the Roman Catholic view (Zwingli), and seen as the only alternative to their view.

Sign and a Seal By Faith (Reformed/Presbyterian)

There is a *union between the sign and the thing signified*; that is, there is a spiritual relationship between the two because there is a divine promise attached to the right administration and reception. The cause of that effect is God, and not the instruments or the actions. God has appointed them as ordinary means by which he works in the heart of sinners. The Word can never be separated from the sacraments because they are a visual representation of the Word.

Number of Sacraments

Protestant churches will hold to two sacraments (Baptism and The Lord's Supper), which are directly instituted by Christ in the New Testament (some churches in the Anabaptist tradition will have a third: footwashing based on John 13). The Roman Catholic have five additional Sacraments—Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction. Protestants might say that these are good things but they do not fit the criteria of a sacrament because they were not given by Christ nor sign and seal salvation.

Nuance of Sacraments--Baptism

There are a variety of issues that separate churches in regards to baptism—its mode (immersion or sprinkling), its recipients (infants [paedo-baptist] or only those old enough [credo-baptist]), and its relationship to salvation (is it required or just commanded). This understanding relates back to the issue of the nature of the sacraments, which in turn hinges on particular passages as well as words

Baptism as Regeneration (Catholic, most Lutherans, many churches of Christ)

Baptism erases original sin and allows us to begin our journey of following God; it bestows light on the recipient. Therefore, everyone should be baptized because it has real power.

Baptism as Proclamation (Baptist/many evangelical churches)

Baptism is the outward sign of a confession. Therefore, only those old enough to make a credible confession should be baptized and this is to be done by immersion.

Baptism as Initiation (Reformed/Presbyterian)

Like circumcision in the OT, it is a sign and seal of cleansing and purification, entrance into God's covenant family, and of membership in God's covenant family. Believer's children should be baptized. Baptism does not need to be done by immersion.

Other Theological Emphases of Particular Groups

Salvation—the role of humans and the role of God

Calvinism (Presbyterian/Reformed)

Election and predestination by God is emphasized; we cannot choose God because of our sin. We cannot lose salvation because God keeps His elect.

Arminian (Methodists/Wesleyan)

The idea of prevenient grace and free will of humans is emphasized; people choose to accept or reject. Salvation can be lost through apostasy.

Cal-minians (Many Baptists and Evangelical Groups)

Many will not take a clear stance on this issue and allow for diversity or freedom on this issue. This is true even within denominations.

Spiritual Gifts—NT gifts like speaking in tongues, continuing prophecy, healings, etc.

Continuation (Pentecostal, Assemblies of God, Vineyard; some in mainlines)

In a variety of different ways, these churches emphasize that these gifts still happen today and we should expect and seek them. Assemblies of God emphasize speaking in tongues as the sign of the Spirit; others are a little less on this idea and might focus on prophecy, healing, etc.

Cessation (Many Baptists, many Presbyterians, many mainline)

Many see these gifts in the NT as being signs of the apostles and the early church to authenticate the message, since Scripture was not readily available yet.

Non-emphasis (Those who do not fit in either of them)

Those who are a bit uncertain, usually non-practicing and skeptical of continuationists but not convinced by Scripture that these gifts can't happen.

Second Coming of Christ—what we know will happen

Secret rapture at the beginning of end times (Most Baptists, Pentecostal, Independent)

These groups emphasize that there is a timeline of the end, featuring a rapture, a real antichrist, 7 years of tribulation (see *Left Behind* novels)

The end will happen...that's it! (Presbyterians, many others)

These groups make it somewhat of an open issue; God has not clearly revealed what the end will look like so we shouldn't seek too much knowledge on it.

Style of Worship

Liturgical (Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran)

Non-liturgical (Pentecostal, Baptist, Brethren, etc.)

These groups are usually against liturgical because it is not from Bible or from the heart. In many ways, though, they form their own liturgy!

Mixture (Presbyterians, Methodists, others—on the rise with evangelicals)

These groups use liturgical elements but because they are biblical.

Sin

Very Strict—No Alcohol, Secular Entertainment, etc. (Many Baptists, Wesleyans, etc.)

Very Loose—Allowing Homosexuality, Abortion (UCC, mainline denominations)

Clear on Big Issues, Conscience on Small Issues (many evangelicals, PCA as example)

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS

- Something to take out of this is that the differences in denominations are by and large differences in *applying and living out the gospel!* Let's focus on similarities—the gospel!
- In fact, in some ways we should be thankful for the different denominations. While to some it shows division, it also shows that there are essentials and non-essentials of Christianity. In addition, different types of churches increase the chances to reach different types of people or those who have had bad experiences in a particular spot.
- We also need to remember that not all Presbyterians are the same. That is, some Presbyterian lay people do not understand the gospel...and some Presbyterian churches do not preach the gospel. Therefore, look at each person and church individually.
- In addition, we must remember that live in an increasing post-denominational world. There is more interaction across denominations and also less focus on denominations.

"WE ARE LIVING IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD..."

"Religious pluralism" can be understood in several different ways, so we have to define the sort of pluralism we are talking about. Many of the "hodge-podge" religions—where people seem to take things that they like from different religions and mold them together—come across as being "pluralistic" in some sense, but understanding **how** that is the case is vitally important. In this sense, pluralism is only a "problem" if we understand it in a certain way.

Different understandings of pluralism

Descriptive Pluralism:

There are many different religions. This is a point that all of us should have no problem agreeing on, because it is a bare fact. When people talk about "the problem of religious pluralism," they could very well only be pointing out the fact that there are many different religions and that the people within those religions think that their beliefs are true. While we want everyone to know Christ, we also respect the fact that people can make choices and should not readily have a problem with descriptive pluralism (as it allows us to believe and share our faith!).

Prescriptive pluralism:

1. Cultural—religions are useful avenues of human and cultural expression and people need to find a path of faith that is appropriate for them. "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something."
2. Philosophical—all major religions offer genuine contact with transcendent, sacred reality, therefore all religions can—in principle—be justified in their own truth claims.

Universalistic Pluralism:

All religious individuals will be saved or liberated, but generally this salvation/liberation is quite possibly mediated through one religious tradition (i.e., Christian universalists believe that salvation is available **only** through Christianity, but this salvation is appropriated in other religious traditions due to the nature of atonement). This can be seen in the Vatican II understanding of “anonymous Christians.” A difference with this form of universalism, though, is that *all religious individuals* are saved, not all people.

Why Do People Believe in Pluralism?

Due to the different meanings of “pluralism,” each understanding has several things in its favor. However, since our major concern is with the prescriptive types of pluralism, there are several reasons why religious pluralists feel that pluralism is the best option. Generally, here are some of the **cultural and philosophical** reasons:¹

1. Cultural postmodernism: cultural postmodernism is a mode of “keeping oneself in check.” Postmodernists believe it is wrong to see human history from a particular point of view and are generally distrustful of any absolute or universal “value” that defines human existence.
2. Philosophical postmodernism: “truth” is a purely interpretive venture that is used for pragmatic purposes and nothing more. To speak of “truth in religion” is simply to describe why a particular religious tradition is meaningful for a certain person, at a certain time, in a certain context.
3. The universe is “religiously ambiguous.” **No** person can state with any degree of certainty that their own religious tradition is true and all others are false. How is it possible for us to justifiably hold our own tradition in such a high view?
4. People within different religious traditions show evidence of a changed life because of their religious beliefs even though the content of those beliefs is different in each tradition.
5. The problem of hell. **Why** should we believe that most people will not have justice completed for them only because they didn’t “have the right beliefs?”

What does this mean for us?

The various problems of religious pluralism grow larger as globalization happens. The conflict between cultural, religious and societal values is especially significant due to the ease with which we can get information and the constant contact we have with other individuals. Therefore, we cannot ignore this issue.

The Christian Church cannot afford to adopt some form of “religious isolationism.” We cannot leave our understanding of religions to a simple “we are right and they are wrong and that’s all that matters.” If we want to be effective witnesses of the Gospel, we **must** be able to demonstrate why Christianity makes a difference. However, we will only be able to do so if we can give coherent and justified reasons for why this is the case.

We need to learn “not to sweat the small stuff.” In an age where culture and religion are conflated onto one another—a person’s culture is their religion and a person’s religion is their culture etc.—we cannot allow “Christian subculture” to dictate what our religion is “supposed to look like.” The Christian message transcends every culture and is therefore **viable** for every culture!

¹See Tim Keller’s *The Reason for God* for good discussions about the presuppositions of these ideas.

We need to focus on relationships. People today want to have contact with genuine individuals, they have no interest in “drive-thru evangelism.” As we have said before, if a person thinks that the only reason you are talking to them is to “convert” them, they will immediately be turned off! When you approach an individual, their immediate impression of you should not be “what are you selling?” It is not about “selling the gospel!”

FOLLOWING UP...PCA AND PCUSA

The usual labels are “conservative” (PCA) and “liberal” (PCUSA), but these labels are not always helpful or clear. What these titles attempt to reflect is the difference each group takes in regards to interpreting Scripture. A liberal view of the Christian faith will often say that certain teachings of Scripture were tied to previous time and need to be re-interpreted in light of the shifts of modernity, industrialization, urbanization, etc. A conservative view does not mean that there are no teachings cultural bound in the Bible, but it a lot smaller and more caution to overthrow Scriptural teachings due to advances of the “modern world.” Two historical illustrations might help.

The OPC (a similar group of the PCA) was formed by Greshem Machen because what became the PCUSA was ordaining people as missionaries who did not believe in issues like the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the need to preach the cross. Not *all* of the pre-PCUSA was like this, but portions were. Therefore, the OPC (and similarly the PCA) was formed in an attempt to have strict affirmation of these doctrines.

The current debates also help to show the issue. For the PCA, it is whether a new reading concerning Paul’s letters (that he is confronting cultural exclusivism in Judaism rather than salvation by works) is true to Scripture. In the PCUSA, the issue is whether a practicing homosexual can be ordained as a minister. The latter is not an issue in the PCA; it sees the issue as settled in clear passages already. However, within the PCUSA, there are questions about how to read these passages in light of changes of science and culture.

Therefore, the willingness to re-examine certain teachings of Scripture seems to be the big difference. The PCUSA allows for more “liberty of thought and teaching” among its clergy, which leads to much more diversity of theological thought in the group. Whereas ordained teaching elders in the PCA have to declare their acceptance of the Westminster standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture (and any exceptions are voted on), the range of acceptable exceptions would be much greater in the PCUSA. Something else to keep in mind is in how each group defines itself. The PCA defines itself as a church that has sharing the gospel at the forefront of its mission; very rarely will it speak into political situations (though it will handle social issues like divorce, homosexuality, etc. and will be involved in mercy ministries, etc.). On the other hand, the PCUSA has made statements in terms of how members should interact in the Israeli-Palestinian situation or about whether a nation should be at war. This sort of difference also led to the split and shows why the PCA says the spiritual mission is at its forefront.

In conclusion, the PCUSA is a “mainline” denominations, which means evangelicals (those who hold to the authority of the Bible, the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross, the need for personal conversion, and the idea of living out one’s faith in action) are in it but in the minority. On the other hand, the PCA fits into the idea of an evangelical church; it seeks to define itself upon Scripture, the Great Commission, and godliness.

(This last section was written up by Brian, if you have questions, comments, issue, please let him know ... and cries of outrage, please blame him not Steve or Jon!).