

Christian Denominations

Christ of course was not the founder of the religion that bears his name. He simply provided the spiritual basis and fundamental principles or teachings that subsequently energized the emerging Christian faith, which became a religion. Christ was indeed the inspiration. But it was Jesus of Nazarene who embodied the teachings and energy of the Christ.

Religions are of course never the actual intent of those who inspire them. Religions emerge as human beings interpret (and misinterpret) the teachings, and sincerely (or insincerely) live according to their understandings. Because of the strong human (personality) factor, religions are rarely integrated, and yet they still embody the needed inspiration and serve a considerable and useful purpose, especially in the sense of providing a preliminary spiritual path for millions of adherents.

Christianity is actually single religion having many and diverse facets or denominations. It has a long history of division and occasional reconciliation. Each division or denomination allows its adherents to believe and practice their faith according to what is comfortable for them.

The two principal surviving divisions of the Christian faith occurred in the middle ages. The first being the division of the "church" into the Eastern Orthodox tradition and the Roman Catholic tradition. The second being the division of the Roman Catholic tradition into various Catholic and Protestant denominations. In some sense, the Orthodox and Catholic traditions are quite similar, while the Protestant tradition is somewhat more divergent and certainly more diverse.

Within the Protestant tradition, the principal divisions occurred during the Protestant reformation in the 16th century. One branch has led to the Anglican, Episcopal, Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches. Another branch has led to the Mennonite and Amish churches. Yet another branch has led to the Lutheran church. A fourth branch has led to

the Reformed churches, which in turn have led to the Presbyterian branch and a branch leading to the Congregational and Baptist churches.

In many instances, each branch has suffered or enjoyed numerous further divisions, such that there now number some eighteen major groups of Christian churches containing some 170 identifiably distinct denominations or organizations of churches. These churches represent a spectrum of Christian faith and beliefs and practices, from very conservative or fundamental, to moderate, to liberal. The more fundamental churches focus on the presumed inerrancy of the Bible, and their prescriptive beliefs and practices tend to be a matter of rigid or literal interpretation. The very liberal churches encourage each adherent to interpret the Bible however he or she chooses. While the moderate churches fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

Of course denominationalism is not true Christianity. The fragmentation of the Christian faith into various sects and denominations is merely a convenience of "outer" Christianity, and serves the needs and interests of its members and adherents. The inner, higher teachings remain integrated and the true faith is not subject to denominationalism.

The issue is really one of separativeness. With separativeness, people see and focus on differences and distinctions. With inclusiveness, people see a greater, more unified whole, where differences and distinctions are simply not important. If one focuses on the inner, higher teachings, then it is those teachings (and the way of life that they convey) that are important.

One of the most remarkable aspects of denominationalism is that each denomination has some members who truly understanding the inner teachings. Thus within each denomination there is a core of relatively enlightened Christians who simply live according to the inner teachings and do not really concern themselves with superficial elements of their denomination.