Why Are There So Many Protestant Denominations?

There are many reasons why there are so many Christian churches. We will look at several of those reasons here.

I. Things that differentiate true Christian churches:

1. Different methods of interpreting the Bible (sola scriptural, historical, etc.) (1Cor 2:13)

2. Different interpretations of doctrine (2Pet 1:20)

3. Different views on the importance of biblical doctrine versus extra-biblical tradition (2Thes 2:15, 2Thes 3:6)

4. Different styles of worship service (1Cor 11:1-2)

5. Different racial, age, economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Gal 3:28)

6. Different personalities of church leaders (1Cor 1:12-13)

II. Some major <u>doctrinal</u> differences that separate churches from each other:

1. Opinions of what the Gospel is (i.e. Some have a false free-will gospel. Some have the true Gospel of salvation by grace alone.)

2. Views about the nature of God (Some correctly believe that God is Sovereign and He alone chooses individuals for salvation based solely upon whom Christ suffered and died for at Calvary. Some wrongly believe God loves everybody and He wants to save everybody but He is unable to do so because it is up to the sinner to accept Christ and so they believe that the sinner's choice gets him or her saved.)

3. Methods of water Baptism (sprinkling, pouring, total immersion)

4. Views on eternal security (assurance of salvation – can you lose your salvation?)

5. Interpretations of the gifts of the Spirit ('sign' gifts such as speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, prophecy)

6. The importance of traditions (both biblical and extra-biblical)

7. End-time prophecy (rapture timing, millennialism, etc.)

8. Right doctrine but wrong practice (not practicing what they are preaching)

9. Structure of leadership (multiple-elder run, pastor run, congregation run)

10. Format of church meetings (highly structured, run by a select few, very informal, everyone participates)

11. The condition of man and the doctrines of Grace (i.e. Does man have a 'free' will?, Did Christ die for everyone?, Is man totally depraved?, Can man resist God and His grace?)

12. Bible versions and views on the preservation and inerrancy of God's word

13. Views on who can receive communion (members only, etc.)

14. Views on the role of women in the church (with respect to authority over men)

III. Why then do true Christian churches differ?

OR IN OTHER WORDS…

> *Why do churches have different interpretations/views of various doctrines?*

1. They are out of balance

There is an overemphasis and/or under-emphasis on some belief or practice, for example:
overemphasis on some spiritual gift – such as teaching or giving (1Cor 12:27-31)

overemphasis on unity – at the expense of truth and integrity (Gal 4:16, 1Thes 5:21)

underemphasis on evangelism (Rom 10:14-15)

underemphasis on fellowship (John 13:35)

overemphasis on fellowship **with** an underemphasis on teaching the Word (1Pet 3:15)

overemphasis on church discipline **with** an underemphasis on forgiveness and restoration (Gal 6:1)

underemphasis on church discipline **with** an overemphasis on forgiveness and restoration (Rom 6:1)
PLEASE NOTE: *These examples are not meant to cover ALL areas that can*

be out of balance in a church.

> **Matt 23:23 –** "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."
>
> **Luke 11:42 –** "But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."

2. They are legalistic

There is an overemphasis on the outward appearance and an under-emphasis on the inward condition of the heart. This results in the truth being distorted by misapplying scripture. In extreme cases, people can be led to think that their salvation depends on their adherence to legalistic practices promoted by their church. Legalism often results when believers have a preoccupation with any of the following kinds of issues:
style of dress, hair (even when people are already dressing modesty and tastefully)

mode of baptism

type of bread used in communion

things where there is no scriptural prohibition against nor any endorsement in favor of – either directly or implied

preoccupied with outward appearances rather than the condition of the heart

Often the side effect, if not the cause, of legalism is that secret sins or certain classes of sins tend to be ignored or swept under the carpet. Leaders may preach against minor things that most members agree with and avoid preaching about sins that would get them in trouble with the congregation.

> **Col 2:8 –** "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."
>
> **Col 2:16-18 –** "16 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: 17 Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ. 18 Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,"

1 Sam 16:7 – "But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for *the LORD seeth* not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart."

Matt 23:5-7 – "But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, 6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi."

3. They are following the teachings of men instead of searching the scriptures for themselves:

Many churches strictly follow church bylaws or denominational creeds. Those documents are what usually defines their church. And for various reasons they never alter their teaching from those "official" documents, even if they learn that there may an error or two in those documents. The leaders of those churches would probably be out of a job if they taught different doctrine from that which is spelled out in the creeds and bylaws.

4. They are following men and trusting men's teaching more than they should

Many church leaders fall into the trap that all of us can fall into: they trust famous teachers and preachers too much, be it "church fathers" or the Reformers or seminar professors or famous/popular Christian authors or whomever. Many church members fall into the trap of assuming their church leaders are correct because of their status in the local church (i.e. they are teachers and were probably formally trained somewhere).
A very subtle practice that leads people to trust men so much is the use of *titles* for these men.

Today's titles that are equivalent to 'Rabbi':

Reverend, Pastor, Father (in Catholicism) or any title that sets a man apart. Even the word 'elder' when used as a title.

What titles can do:
elevate men (and women)

segregate people into groups – the supposed educated (the clergy) and the supposedly ignorant (the laity)

hinder honesty and openness

discourage correction of those who are thought to be in an elite or untouchable class

(see John 3:30, Mark 9:35, Mark 10:44)

Titles all believers have:
1. priests

2. kings

3. Christians

4. saints

5. brethren

6. ministers

7. ambassadors

8. servants
We are all one in Christ (see Gal 3:28, 1Cor 3:4-5)

> **2Cor 10:12 –** "For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."

(See also Mark 7:1-13)

5. They have the wrong interpretation of scripture

This actually covers items 1 & 2 which are tied to the method used to interpret scripture. Many different views on biblical doctrine would disappear if believers were rightly dividing the Word of Truth instead of basing their beliefs and practices on church tradition, denominational creeds, experiences, etc.

Themes relating to God's Word:
What do we get from God's Word: 2 Tim 2:15, 3:16-17

How do we get truth from God's Word: Psa 119:99

Diligence in searching the Word for truth: Acts 17:11, Jer 29:13, Heb 11:6, Psa 119:2,

Warnings against adding to God's Word: Deut 4:2, Rev 22:18-19

Permanence of God's Word: Matt 5:18, Matt 24:35, Luke 16:17, 1Pet 1:24-25

6. They do church in such a way that prevents believers in

the “corporate Church” from arriving at the same conclusions about doctrine

When you do church in an environment that only lets the “official” teachers do the teaching, and where you do your best to adhere to “official” church documents or denominational creeds, the possibility for correcting doctrinal error is very small. Here are a couple of related articles on this subject that you are strongly encouraged to investigate:
The Clergy System

Biblical Patterns For The Local Church

IV. Differences that don’t matter:

personal preferences – like style of worship or personality issues.

> **Rom 14:1-6 –** “1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, *but* not to doubtful disputations. 2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. 3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. 4 Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. 5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day *alike*. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. 6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth *it* unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard *it*. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.”

V. Differences that enrich the total body of Christ:

racial, age, male/female, economic, personality, occupational, marital status, cultural and ethnic differences

(see 1Cor 12:4-6,28 – keyword: diversities)
1Cor 12:4-6 – “4 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.”
Ver. 5 (Gill): **And there are differences of administrations**, &c.] Or ministries; offices in the church, ministered in by different persons, as apostles, prophets, pastors, or teachers and deacons; who were employed in planting and forming of churches, ordaining elders, preaching the word, administering ordinances, and taking care of the poor; for which different gifts were bestowed on them, they not all having the same office.

Ver. 6 (Gill): **And there are diversities of operations**, There are some that are ordinary, as the good work of grace, and the several parts of it, the work of faith, the labour of love, and patience of hope, which the Spirit of God

begins, carries on, and finishes in all the elect of God, and members of Christ; and there are others which are extraordinary, and are here meant, and hereafter specified.

> **1Cor 12:28 –** "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."

VI. What unites the true Christian churches?

Regardless of all the differences between denominations and individual believers, there are some basic things that unite all true believers:
1. First and foremost: the Holy Spirit who dwells in all true believers (see Rom 8:16, Eph 4:4-6, Eph 4:30)

2. The correct understanding of who Jesus Christ is (see Matt 16:16, John 1:1, John 8:58, 2Tim 1:12, Eph 4:4-6)

3. Understanding that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (see Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:5, John 14:6)

VII. Food for thought:

1. Can we ever fully understand **everything** in the Bible? (see Isa 55:9, 1Cor 13:12)

2. Can we at least reach correct conclusions about major doctrinal differences? as a whole? as individuals? (see 2 Tim 3:14-17)

3. Should we be satisfied with the opinion of our teachers and pastors or our denomination's "official" viewpoint if we have not done a thorough study ourselves? (see Acts 17:11)

4. Is a church a true Christian church if they do not believe that the Bible is the final authority for a Christian?

5. Can a church be a true Christian church if they do not believe that the Bible is the literal and inerrant Word of God?

6. With so many Bible versions available today, how do we know which Bible is the Word of God (versus Bibles that may 'contain' the Word of God)?