

One of the questions I find hardest to answer as a pastor is "What denomination is your Church?". It's not a hard question because I don't know - Catalyst is part of the Church of the Nazarene. And it's not hard because I don't know about our denomination - we're going to talk a lot about it today.

No, it's a hard question because everyone has different experiences with denominations. Some people come from a specific denomination - Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian - and want a church that is close on the theological family tree. Others have no idea what denominations are, so when I tell them we're Nazarene, it doesn't mean anything at all.

There's also been a massive shift in my generation: baby boomers and older show a significantly higher amount of denominational loyalty - they move to a new town and if they went to a Methodist church, they find a new Methodist church. But Xers and Millennials are different. We're relationally oriented.

What does that mean? When I was in high school, 5 or 6 of my friends and I had a bible study that met before school. One of us was Catholic, another Methodist, another Presbyterian, a Lutheran. A couple of us were Southern Baptist. And none of us had any clue what any of that meant. None of us even thought about asking why we all went to different churches, or what those differences were. We just met together to read and discuss Scripture and pray for each other.

This is why a lot of younger generations are skeptical of denominations. They seem like arbitrary distinctions that separate us from each other when the heart of faith is relationship with each other.

And that can be the case, but it doesn't have to be. Today I want to talk about denominations and specifically our denomination here at Catalyst, the Church of the Nazarene. I want to explore why as a Church we are Nazarene and how our particular identity helps us know God better.

Message

[Series Master Slide] During the Summer, we're asking one basic question: How do we know God? We began last week with the conviction that, if God is our creator, then God is knowable. God is knowable because God wants to be known and, by becoming human in the person of Jesus, made himself knowable.

We have four major sources of knowing God: Scripture, the record of God's interactions with us throughout history; Reason, our ability to think and learn and discover; Tradition, how others on the journey of faith have known God; and Experience, what we learn about God from our own lives.

Throughout the summer, we're going to dive into each of those four sources of knowing God, and ask how we can know God better. We began with Experience, exploring how we can know

God better through what happens in our lives - our private practices and acts of service both in relation to others.

For the last three weeks, we've examined Tradition. We started with the universal church, how being part of a global family helps us encounter God in new ways. Then last week, we saw how Jesus invites us to know him better through Catalyst, our local church family.

Today, we're exploring that middle ground between the universal and local church - the denomination. As I mentioned in the welcome, depending on who you are, 'denomination' might have some pretty negative connotations. And that's not for no reason.

Denominations are often the result of deep disagreements that Christians simply can't reconcile - disagreements that often seem incomprehensible to us today. The first major split was between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches in AD 1056, and it was over one Greek word in the Nicene Creed.

Most of us in here are probably at least passingly familiar with the so-called Protestant Reformation, where men like John Calvin and Martin Luther broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. They had sharp theological disagreements and their breakaway groups often still bear their names today - Lutherans and Calvinists.

So it's true that most denominations originated out of an unwillingness or inability to find a middle ground or live together in disagreement. And there's a big part of me that wishes we could somehow go back and undo all that division so that God's church in the world really was one big happy family. But we can't unring that bell. Where we are today is where we are, so I'd rather ask, "How is God at work where we are today?" What good is there in our denominational divisions?

Rather than point fingers and ask which denomination is best, I prefer to look at us as a family tree. Asking which denomination God prefers is like asking a parent which kid they love most. God loves us all, in all our denominations. But that doesn't mean there's not something unique and special about the Church of the Nazarene.

There are two big questions I want to answer today: What does it mean to be a Nazarene church, and how does being part of the Church of the Nazarene help us know God better?

The Church of the Nazarene formed out of what historians call the Third Great Awakening, which began around 1850 on the US frontier. That was a time of great tension for Americans - millions were still enslaved, the nation was deeply divided and the military was removing and slaughtering Indians on the Western borders.

People needed hope and that hope came in the form of travelling preachers. Revivalists moved from town to town all across the American West. They set up a tent at the edge of town and pretty much everyone came out for the revival services. They'd stay a week or a month before

packing up and heading to the next town. This wasn't a one-time thing, either. This period of religious revival lasted more than 20 years, to the point that it became a hallmark of frontier religion.

There were two major effects of this movement on US religious culture. The first was a deepened commitment to and experience of God. What the revivalists had in common was a renewed insistence on the present work of the Holy Spirit to transform us. The revival preachers insisted we could have victory over sin in our daily lives, that the old habits and behaviors that destroyed us don't have to continue to characterize us. They pointed to passages like Paul's words to the Romans in chapter 8:

You are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. -- Romans 8:9-16

Those children of the revivals took this new life in the Spirit very seriously. And it wasn't just because the revivalists took their personal holiness more seriously. The Awakening spawned a number of social movements as well, including both the abolition of slavery and the prohibition of alcohol. Revivalists looked to passages like Ephesians 2 to understand that God insisted not only that we as individuals be made new by the Spirit, but that our whole world be renewed:

Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. -- Ephesians 2:14-18

The holiness movement took this to mean that we have an obligation to the margins of society, that the Church was to be a place for everyone, where no one was excluded from God's love. From the abolitionist movement to women's suffrage to those wounded by drugs and alcohol, those children of the tent revivals found themselves compelled to the margins of US society.

Not everyone went to the revivals. And not everyone who attended the revivals had the same experience of spiritual refreshment. Plenty of folks in the pews didn't want the poor, broken and outcast worshipping among them. So it created conflict in the churches - sometimes between the pastors and the congregants, sometimes among the congregants themselves. Nearly every denomination in the US was affected, and a lot of the folks who had experienced revival were gently or not-so-gently forced out of their churches. The Spirit was too disruptive.

These holiness folks called themselves the come-outers, and as they looked around, they saw they weren't alone. All over, there were folks who had been pushed out of their churches. One person here, a few over there, a dozen there. They began meeting together - Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians - believers of every stripe who had nearly nothing in common except for this fresh experience of the Holy Spirit.

They started churches here and there, and soon those church began working together. They formed micro-denominations which eventually found each other and started working together. Eventually, they formed larger networks until, in 1908, they officially founded the Church of the Nazarene, just about an hour up the road in Pilot Point, TX.

In the last 100+ years, the denomination has grown. We're the third largest mission-sending denomination in the world, and we have Nazarene churches in over 160 countries in the world. There are currently more Nazarenes outside the US than in the US. That lets us partner like we did last Advent when we raised money for bicycles for Nazarene pastors in Malawi.

And of course we have our struggles and problems like every denomination does. But from the beginning to today, we hold that faith can and should make a real difference in our everyday lives. We believe we as individuals should be transformed, becoming more like Jesus every day. And we believe we should be God's partners in making our world a better place, that there's no one who's an outsider in God's eyes, and that means we should be a people where everyone is welcome.

That's why Catalyst puts a strong emphasis on what Jesus is doing in our everyday lives. It's why we have time for prayer at the end of each gathering. We believe the Holy Spirit is our only hope for transformation - both personally and corporately. We believe that God brings people of all stripes, all races, creeds and colors. And just like in the beginning, it's often true that the only thing we all have in common is our experience of how the Spirit is making us new.

Of course you don't have to be Nazarene, or know what a Nazarene is, to be part of Catalyst. But you should know that, because we're Nazarene, we pay special attention to what God is

doing today. We expect the Holy Spirit to be changing us. We want to look more like Jesus tomorrow than we do today.

And it means we take seriously what Jesus is doing in the world. It means we care about racism, immigration, equality. Our denomination cares about the world, about justice and peace for everyone.

How is Jesus inviting you to know him better through this Church, through the Church of the Nazarene? How is Jesus at work in your life today?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus' table was the beginning of the story. We're on a journey of transformation.

1. How has God been present in your life in the last week?
2. How have you ignored or missed God in the last week?
3. How can you watch for God in this next week?