

Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 (Opening)

⁴ “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

How many different flavors of potato chips are there?

Well, let's see. You've got your basic plain potato chip, and your barbecue; sour cream and onion; salt and vinegar. And then it just starts getting crazy.

Cheddar and sour cream.

Ranch.

Cheesy garlic.

Dill pickle.

Tomato and basil.

Sweet southern barbecue.

Flamin' Hot barbecue.

I'm sure there's lots I'm not getting to. There's probably over 30 different flavors of potato chips out there. Why? Because people can't agree what the best flavor is for potato chips.

Can we compare Christianity to potato chips? Well, I'm going to.

Here are the top 15 "Christian" denominations. I'm putting "Christian" in quotation marks, because one of the defining aspects of denominations is the beliefs of each group, and those beliefs can, by some definitions, make a group fall out of the definition of "Christian" as following Christ.

But here they are, in order of number of members of each major denomination:

Catholic

Orthodox/Eastern Christian

African indigenous sects (AICs)

Pentecostal

Reformed/Presbyterian/Congregational/United

Anglican

Baptist

Methodist
Lutheran
Jehovah's Witnesses
Adventist
Latter Day Saints
Apostolic/New Apostolic
Stone-Campbell ("Restoration Movement")
New Thought (Unity, Christian Science, etc.)

What's a denomination? What is it that separates each of these major groups from the others?

Well, primarily, their basic body of beliefs is what separates them. There are some major beliefs of each denomination that keeps them from totally agreeing with another denomination regarding their particular religious practices.

And, just to muddy the water a little bit more, each of these denominations I've listed has sub groups that splinter the list even more. There are about 4600 major denominational groups in Christianity.

I'm sure you're wondering why I'm bringing this up; especially since I've been focusing on talking about Jesus this month.

Factions and denominations aren't a new problem. If you look back during the time of Jesus, there were factions then, too. Today I want to take a look at the major factions in Judaism during the time of Christ, so we can get a feel for what the general religious environment was like when Jesus started His ministry.

If you ask most Christians today, they could tell you that there were two major factions or sects in Judaism during the time of Christ; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. That's true, but it's only scratching the surface of the "who's who" of Jewish sects in the time of Christ. But

let's start by taking a look at the two we most know about; first, the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were one of the groups that Jesus spoke out against the most. The Pharisees were the largest of the Jewish "denominations". The Hebrew word for the Pharisees was *pěrûshîm*, which means "set apart". The roots of the Pharisees come from around 150 BC, and were an off-shoot of the separationist movements in Judea, caused by the Greeks and then the Romans trying to, and succeeding in taking over the area.

The Pharisees were very legalistic in their interpretation of the Torah, the Law of Moses. They also had another group of writings they followed and memorized, the Talmud, which was a basic interpretation of the Torah by religious scholars over the years. (Sort of like the way we sometimes include the footnotes and commentaries in our understanding of the Bible). The Pharisees also had a third collection of writings, the Mishna, which was a compilation of wisdom from the great Pharisees over the ages.

Pharisees believed the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4 & 5, our opening scripture this morning. They believed the defining aspect of Judaism, the fact that there was only One God. They also believed in resurrection and a reigning messiah after that resurrection.

So, who were some influential Pharisees during Jesus' ministry?

Well, Nicodemus in John 3:1, 2 is a Pharisee. He and Joseph of Arimathea were members of the Sanhedrin, but also made sure that Jesus had a proper burial in John 19:28-40.

One of the more influential Pharisees during this time was Gamaliel. We see him in Acts 5:34 defending Peter and the Apostles when they were brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Israel.

Acts 5:34-41

³⁴ *But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.* ³⁵ *And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men."* ³⁶ *For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing.* ³⁷ *After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.* ³⁸ *So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail;* ³⁹ *but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"* ⁴⁰ *So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*

Another influential Pharisee around this same time was one of Gamaliel's students; his name was Saul but we know him as Paul.

Acts 23:6

⁶ *Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial."*

Paul here uses his knowledge of one of the major differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees to his advantage, to divide the Sanhedrin when he'd been taken before them for trial.

So, we see that the Pharisees were a large group of the Jews of the time. They were influential, and popular (Gamaliel is still revered today by Hasidic Jews, the remnant of the Pharisees). The Pharisees were popular with the Jewish middle-class, the average Joseph if you will.

I've already referred to another denomination of the Jews of the time, the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the upper-class Jews. They had the power and the money of the time. Most of them were Levites, so they were the priests and High Priests. Amazingly, the Sadducees didn't believe in the spiritual realms. They didn't believe in resurrection, or angelic messengers. They believed that, opposite of the song that we sing, this world was in fact their home, and there was no other afterward, so they believed whatever reward or punishment they would receive from God, they would receive here in this world.

The Sadducees lost a lot of their power and popularity after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. But until that time, they enjoyed great power and influence on the Jews and the direction of Judaism in general.

It's very likely, since the Sadducees were mostly priests, that Caiaphas, the high priest that condemned Jesus, was a Sadducee, and likely many members of the Sanhedrin, although we know from Acts 23 that they were mixed, both Pharisee and Sadducee.

Pharisees and Sadducees were the two major denominations of Judaism. However, there were other, smaller factions, some of which were just as influential, but nowhere near as large.

One of those groups were the non-religious Jews. We would call them non-practicing. They were Jews, but they didn't participate in the religious aspects of Judaism. Some had fallen away, and some had run away. The Pharisees and Sadducees lumped them into two groups: tax collectors and sinners. They would do whatever they could to make life easier for themselves. They were collaborators with the Romans, and the Greeks before them.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the Zealots. The Zealots were a militant group of Jews who wanted to help God bring about the freedom of the Jews from the oppression of Rome. They were very pro-

messiah, but believed the messiah was going to be their earthly king and help them overthrow the Roman occupation of Judea. Last week, during Bible class, I talked a little about Sepphoris, the city in Galilee that was destroyed because of a Jewish uprising and the Romans “quelling” it by burning the place to the ground and crucifying 2000 Zealots who were captured during the attack.

The best group I can think of to compare the Zealots with is the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Zealots were organized terrorists, not above killing collaborators in broad daylight. They had their own self-appointed religious police force that would try to enforce their particular view of Judaism on the people around them.

Another group, and one that is becoming more well-known, was the Essenes. It’s long been assumed that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by the Essenes. They were isolationists; not only did they not agree with the collaborators, but they avoided them and the Romans like the plague. They isolated themselves in the desert, living by very strict interpretation of the Torah and little else. Some writings say the Essenes were celibate, even if they joined the group after marriage. The Essenes were like the Shakers in that way. The only way they could grow in number was by conversion and adoption. Also, like the Shakers, they lived in a communal society, similar to the way the early Christians did in the first century, and the Kibbutz of today in Israel.

Those were the major groups at work during the time of Jesus. But here’s the interesting thing – Jesus had people from most of these groups in his group of followers. In fact, His disciples were made up from these groups.

Most notably, the two extremes, Simon the Zealot, and Matthew the Tax Collector; how can a man of peace like Jesus have both a collaborator with the Roman government and a Zealot in His followers? The rest of them were mostly more middle-of-the-road kind of people, but there were many personality conflicts.

Let's take a look at the people that Jesus picked as His inner circle.

First, we have Simon (Peter), Andrew, his brother, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were later called the Sons of Thunder. All four of them were fishermen, and three of these four, all but Andrew, were closest to Jesus. They were the ones who went up on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, and they were the ones most likely arguing who would be the greatest in Jesus' Kingdom. John, the writer of the Gospel of John and the three letters that also bear his name, is called "The disciple that Jesus loved".

We don't know much about Philip, except that he defended Jesus to Nathanael in John 1:43-46. With a name like Philip, it's very likely that he spoke Greek as his primary language (since Philip is a Greek name), which would put him in with the collaborators.

Nathanael and Philip were from Bethsaida, where Peter and Andrew were from. Nathanael was also called Bartholomew in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Bartholomew could mean "Son of the Plowman". We don't know much more about him, either.

Thomas was the doubter that we see in John 20:24-28.

John 20:24-28

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and

place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

He was also called Didymus or “The Twin”. We don’t know for sure if he really was a twin, or if he just looked like someone else. Either is possible. But with a name like Didymus, another Greek name, he could probably be lumped in with the collaborators as well with Philip.

Probably the worst of the collaborators in the group was Matthew. Matthew was a tax collector, a sell-out to the Roman government. He, like Zacchaeus, collected the taxes from their fellow Jews, and then collected just “a little bit” more for themselves. Tax collectors during this time were notoriously corrupt, and would often end up being very rich, based on how much “skimming” they did. In Mark 2:14, the same situation as the calling of Matthew is described, but the tax collector responding is Levi, the son of Alphaeus. Most scholars agree they’re the same person.

Now for an interesting twist. The next apostle listed in the Matthew 10 account is another James, and he’s the son of Alphaeus. He was also called James the Lesser or James the Younger, depending on how you want to translate the Greek, to differentiate him from James, the brother of John. If James the Lesser was also the brother of Matthew (or Levi), we’d have yet another pair of brothers in the Twelve.

The next in the list of the Apostles is Jude. He’s also called Judas (not Iscariot), and Thaddaeus. As we get closer to the end of the list, we have less and less information about them. But, in some ancient manuscripts, he is referred to as Judas the Zealot.

Next we have Simon, not Peter, who is always identified as a Zealot. He was a Jewish extremist, willing to die for the fight against Rome.

Last we have Judas Iscariot. Judas and Jude had are both translated from the same name, the Greek from of Judah. Iscariot could mean that

Judas came from the town of Kerioth, or could be taken from the Aramaic word meaning “assassin”, referring to his betrayal of Jesus. We know that Judas was the treasurer of the group following Jesus.

John 13:29, 30

²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Also, Judas was known to be a not so trustworthy treasurer. In John 12:4-6 it says this:

John 12:4-6

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.

It looks like Judas was the most spiritually weak of the twelve, and of course we know he was the one who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

Quite a diverse group of people. You can’t say that Jesus didn’t believe in diversity. Four fishermen, a tax collector, a religious terrorist, a liar and thief, and five “average guys”, all following this poor, homeless, fatherless man of questionable parentage. It’s no wonder that Jesus prayed for their unity when He was in the garden, before He was betrayed.

John 17:20-26 (Closing)

²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Questions

1. Of the four groups, Pharisees, Sadducees, collaborators and Zealots, which group do you think you'd most likely associate with, and why?
2. Do you think that Jesus intentionally chose the twelve from their diverse backgrounds? What advantages and disadvantages would there have been in this group?
3. Do you think there's significance to the fact there were twelve apostles?