



February 18, 2026

MESSENGER

Quote of the Week

"Repenting is for getting rid of the debris of sin."

Pastor Connie in this week's message

INFO

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Contact Information:

Due to the fires, our mail has been forwarded. Please send mail to PO Box 91055, Pasadena, CA 91109. You may still call the church phone at 626-797-8970;

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WHAT DIVIDES US?

There's a great deal of conversation today about how polarized our society is, and a lot of it has to do with politics. But throughout my years in Christian ministry, I've been fascinated by the many divisions in the Church that was established 2,000 years ago by the followers of Jesus Christ.

When I was a young Pastor near Boston, a friend of mine had graduated from seminary and was looking for a church where he could begin his clergy career. He told me about a surprising opportunity in a small New Hampshire community that was interested in having him become the Pastor of two nearby Congregational churches close to the town square. Both groups were diminishing in membership and attendance, and neither one could support a Pastor's salary. Their creative solution was to *share* the expense of a minister's salary, as well as his ministerial functions. Their Sunday worship services would be scheduled at different times to accommodate his shared responsibilities.

When my friend visited to "candidate"¹ over a weekend, he preached at both services to very small gatherings, then met with leadership groups from each of the congregations. He was really puzzled, because the two groups seemed similar in every way: the same denominational connection, identical theological beliefs, similar demographic/cultural/ethnic makeup, meeting in roughly the same size buildings just several hundred feet apart. Why couldn't they pool their resources and join into one healthy -sized congregation? However, every time he tried to ask about this, the response in either group was an uncomfortable silence, followed by a change to another subject.

Finally, he was able to corner an older member from one of the churches and ask him straight out: What's the issue that keeps you divided? After an awkward silence, the old guy scowled and growled, "THEY HAVE OUR BELL!" That was it. A hundred years earlier the two groups had fought over who owned an old bell, and their descendants were still separated by the fallout from that bitter grudge. It had become a multi-generational clan fight.

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(Continued from other side)

This could only happen in New England. However, if you come to any town in America, no matter how small it is, you'll find more than one church. Why?

Of course, the obvious first reason probably comes from the historical splintering of Christianity into denominations over variations in theology and practice. Most American communities of even modest size have Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Beyond that, some other congregations may exist around nationality of origin, social class or racial identity. And there are still groups trying to start new churches in town.²

My first pastorate was in a church that bore the name "Evangelical Baptist" to distinguish it from "First Baptist" down the street because it had become too liberal. Ironically, a few years after my arrival, First Baptist called a new Pastor whose theological views were pretty close to mine, so the difference in preaching/teaching was not very significant. As I talked with people who could remember back to earlier history, it became clear to me that the original split may have been more about a conflict between strong personalities than about disagreement over Biblical beliefs. Roughly equivalent to "*They have our bell!*"

"Two Jews; three opinions" is a saying I've heard from Jewish friends. I did a little research and found that this may have been borrowed from an original "Two *Poles*; three opinions." Who knows? It may even have

started as "*Two Baptists*; three opinions." It's really a commentary on human nature. But this Jewish joke takes it a bit further:

"One Rabbi asks another Rabbi, 'Why do we always answer a question with a question?'

And the second Rabbi answers, 'Is there a better way?'"

There's something in us that wants a final answer; that's why the choice often seems to be between my way and your way. Maybe the truth is neither my way nor your way, but some third way between the two. At the very time we feel compelled to settle on which is the right *answer*, maybe we should be asking another *question* --- Is there a better way?

Maybe the bell belongs to the entire community!

Pastor George Van Alstine

¹ This is a term used in Baptist and Congregational circles to describe visits a potential new Pastor is asked to make to a church as a "tryout," where he/she spends a weekend guest, preaching, meeting with leadership groups and mixing with congregants to determine whether or not there's a good enough fit for an official "call" to become the new clergy.

² It seems strange to me that so much energy is invested by Converge, our denomination, as well as many other organizations, in "new church starts," as opposed to making efforts to revive and renew established churches that are struggling to find a more modern impulse and direction. During 2024 in America, there were more churches that closed than opened, and this disparity seems to be escalating: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/more-protestant-churches-closing-than-opening-in-america.html> . Furthermore, the mortality rate for "new church starts" is about 33% within the first four years of opening.