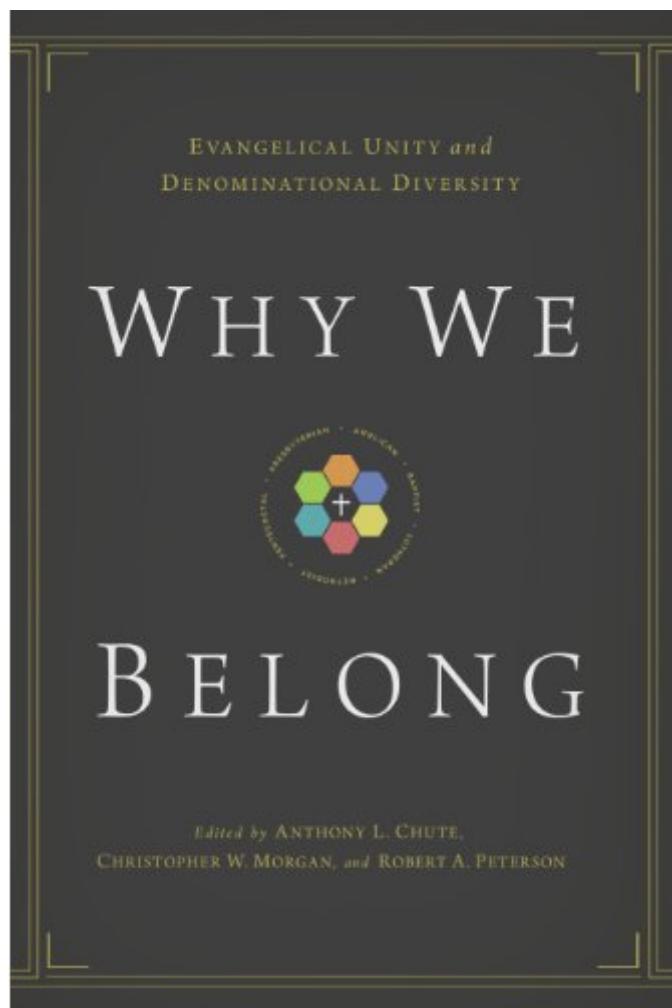


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# Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity And Denominational Diversity



## **Synopsis**

Denominations. The word itself often sparks strong reactions, causing us to wonder if there are merits to our factions and if it's possible to come together as one. Showing how denominational affiliation can be natural without being negative, and how evangelical identity can help rather than hinder Christian unity, *Why We Belong* explains both the personal and doctrinal reasons each of the following contributors fit not only in their church, but also in the Church: Gerald L. Bray (Anglican) Timothy F. George (Baptist) Douglas A. Sweeney (Lutheran) Timothy C. Tennent (Methodist) Byron D. Klaus (Pentecostal) Bryan Chapell (Presbyterian) Demonstrating that Christians have significant reasons for identifying with a denomination, this book also helps us see and belong to something much larger than our own traditions—the family of God.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

If you aren't a church historian and desire a very well written view on how the book's six denominations came to being, Anthony Chute's chapter "One Lord, One Faith, but Many Expressions" is worth

the price of the entire book. Further, the three chapters on Presbyterians, Methodist, and Lutherans respectively provide great summaries on the teachings of Calvin, Wesley and Luther and how these doctrines shaped these denominations. Though I am not a Presbyterian, Bryan

Chappell's presentation was inspirational. He wrote as a true elder and father within the body of Christ: honestly, ecumenically, wisely and with nuanced thoughts shaped by years of experience. He showed a willingness to humbly state his doctrinal positions, give liberty for other persuasions, and leave the reader with the impression that he was open to learning from others outside his denomination. Each author had a similar story: temperament, gift mix, positive and negative personal circumstances, personal calling and doctrinal preferences on secondary issues that brought them to the current denominational setting or a place where they currently have found a fit and are joyfully flourishing. Within today's American church though people still consider a denomination when "picking a church, they also factor in location, friends who go there, what's going on at that particular church, how it affects their kids, etc. And, as per the theme of this book, that's okay. Why? Of greater importance is that people are in an accountable, healthy Christian community of faith or where Jesus is confessed as both Lord and Savior or one composed of old and young, mature and immature, leaders and followers, teachers and learners or disciples making disciples: a place where a person can fit and flourish.

This edited work from a denominationally diverse, expert body of contributors endeavors to define their individual, evangelical, denominational commitments. In other words, in an age where people in general and evangelicals in particular are shunning denominational identity and loyalty, these conservative Christians tell us why they remain. It is, as are many edited works, uneven in execution. Some contributions are quite personal and satisfying (Timothy George's explanation of why he is a Baptist). Others are overly long and "school-bookish" such as the chapter by Bryan Chappell. By far, the best and most illuminating chapter came from Gerald Bray who graces the reader with a profound but simple description of why he is an Anglican. Alone among the offerings, it seemed to capture the essence of a denomination's ethos and appeal. The book may be a worthy purchase on that basis alone.

This is a good book to read for some great biblical truths

This is by far my favorite read of the whole semester. People today constantly wrestle with what it means to be a part of a denomination and this book really clears up the unnecessary disunity within the church

Loved the way each of these denominations were presented. No one was shown as superior or inferior. Unity was shown throughout!

Excellent study of denominational differences, and the ways they unite under the evangelical umbrella.

Dialogue between the different traditions that claim the term "evangelical" hasn't always been gracious or effective. In both history, as well as my own experience, sometimes when different "denominations" talk, they often talk past each other. How can those who claim to be "evangelical," which I would assume means there are some shared beliefs, not be interested in partnering together? Imagine sitting in a room where six denominational representatives were able to talk clearly, graciously, and lovingly about their traditions and distinctives while also talking about their shared unity? Thankfully, there is a new book that helps us reflect on these questions while focusing on the unity and differences that evangelicals hold. *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*, edited by Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson attempts to tackle this provocative subject. The book's introduction starts us off towards thinking through both the negative and positive aspects of denominationalism. As many people will testify, the concept of denominations does not always bring fond thoughts or pleasant experiences. However, we read, "In spite of the perennial predictions of the death of denominations, the fact remains that evangelical Christians typically have core beliefs that lead them to identify with other like-minded Christians. Given the plausibility of continued division, is there a way in which evangelical Christians can maintain their distinctive doctrinal beliefs while communicating to the church and the world that they have much more in common? We believe there is, and such is the purpose of this book." (p.15) So the authors believe that there's a positive way to view denominations while also maintaining the tension between having differences and commonality. This is a worthy goal in itself, I think. After the introduction, *Why We Belong* offers two chapters setting the foundational tone: Morgan's "Toward a Theology of the Unity of the Church" and Chute's "One Lord, One Faith, but Many Expressions: Denominations and Their Stories." Both chapters are quite interesting and, as far as I'm concerned, help lead readers into the subject matter both

biblically, theologically, and pastorally. Morgan's essay should be read by all pastors because it lays out an extremely well argued case for the unity of the Church. Much of his discussion centers on how Church unity is a way of showcasing or displaying certain concepts, characteristics, and qualities that people can tie back to God. For example, he writes how the unity of the church showcases God's purposes of cosmic unity and how unity of the church displays the unity of God. He writes how unity of the church is both a current characteristic and a perennial pursuit as well as how unity of the church fosters and is itself fostered by love and humility. Finally, he writes how the unity of the church is both an important doctrine and an important praxis. One of the ideas that Morgan writes that demands much reflection is when he writes that "church unity is a meaningful concept only in terms of genuine Christianity" (p.33). When we begin discussing "genuine Christianity," we must begin to ask questions related to just what exactly is "genuine Christianity"? And how can we determine what is orthodoxy? I'm inclined to refer readers to G. K. Chesterton's Orthodoxy but also believe this issue to be rather important when discussing how we're united. In my reading, I think Morgan does a good job of laying out what true Christian unity is and what it isn't or what it shouldn't be. Chute's brief, and I do mean brief (28 pages!), lays out a simple "history" of church denominations, specifically those that are featured in this book (Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian). It'd be a great chapter to discuss with advocates of these Christian traditions because it, generally speaking, creates some gracious talking points.

Interestingly, throughout the brief histories, one walks away sensing the tension between unity and diversity as we read about how even within these traditions, there are differences! For example, there are differences historically between Pentecostals on issues related to Spirit baptism and glossolalia (speaking on tongues), Presbyterians on certain aspects of the Lord's Supper, and Baptists on free-will and predestination (Arminianism and Calvinism). Yet, as is obvious, there's still unity. The next six chapters are written from different authors covering their respective tradition.

Gerald Bray writes on Anglicanism, Timothy George writes on Baptists, Douglas Sweeney writes on being Lutheran, Timothy Tennent writes on being a Methodist, Byron Klaus writes on being Pentecostal, and Bryan Chappell writes on being Presbyterian. Informed readers will recognize all of these names as being excellent picks to represent their denominational traditions. There were also some helpful challenges offered by different authors to their fellow evangelicals that I found interesting. Each lays out a case as to why they share unity in evangelical identity as well as diversity as they differ on certain doctrinal and practical matters. I'm not going to provide detailed interaction with these chapters, but will suggest that readers give each a fair read. You might walk away having a bit more respect for a tradition than you had before. In my case, I enjoyed Tennent's

chapter on Methodism, especially his discussion on "sanctifying reorientation of the heart." I was left with the impression that there still are some very "evangelical" Methodists out there, despite what I have experienced in past discussions. This was encouraging, to say the least! Finally, the book ends with a chapter by David Dockery, "Denominationalism: Historical Developments, Contemporary Challenges, and Global Opportunities." This chapter presented some keen observations and also left me hopeful of the future of denominations working together and, most importantly, continuing the Missio Dei. What I liked about this book is that it is pretty comprehensive for a single work. I'm hard pressed to imagine that representatives of any of denominations discussed will feel misrepresented or frustrated by how they are identified. In fact, even though my own denominational affiliation didn't have a chapter (Vineyard), Klaus' chapter on Pentecostalism mentions it and does a good job of laying out some of the differences. This was true of all of the chapters. In the end, I'd recommend this book to anyone who is thinking through issues related to evangelical identity, Church unity, and denominational distinctiveness.

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