

A History of Christian Denominations

By Martin R. Noland, Ph.D.

I. 49 AD- Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29; Gal 2:6-9) The leaders of the church discussed the issue of the authority of the Old Testament Law for the Gentiles. The presence of Paul and Peter preserved Jesus' teaching. The result of the council was the division of the Church into a Jewish-Palestinian church and Gentile-mission churches. Gentile-mission churches were under the authority of their founding apostle. Paul was the founder of Asian and Greek churches.

II. 50-100 AD - Apostolic Missions. The Twelve Apostles followed Paul's example and started mission churches: Peter in Rome, John in Ephesus, Andrew in Scythia, Philip in Phrygia, Bartholomew in Armenia, Thomas in India (Mar Thoma Church), Matthew in Mesopotamia, Simon the Zealot in Parthia, the lesser James in Arabia, Thaddeus in Edessa (Church of the East), Matthias in Egypt. Paul followed his own example, and started a church in Spain, possibly in Gaul. The Jewish-Palestinian church ceased with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Palestine was thereafter off-limits to the Jews, and the Christian Church was entirely Gentile.

III. 100-313 AD - Roman Persecutions. 10 major persecutions of Christians from Nero (64 AD) to Diocletian (303 AD). Theological issues centered on the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology. The heretics known as "Gnostics" claimed to have an authoritative oral tradition from the apostles, which re-interpreted the apostolic writings (Our New Testament). In response to the Gnostic threat, Irenaeus (100- 200 AD), Bishop of Lyons, Gaul, asserted the authority of the New Testament books over any oral tradition, an argument later developed by Luther. Cyprian (200-250 AD), Bishop of Carthage, N. Africa, asserted that the bishops have the same Holy Spirit given to the apostles, and are therefore the authoritative interpreters of the Bible to preserve the church from schisms. Cyprian's thought became the basis of the "Episcopal" system of church government.

IV. 313-325 AD - Organization of the Imperial Church under Constantine. The Arians, who denied Jesus' divinity and asserted that he was only a teacher of morality, attempted to gain

control of the church. The Arians were opposed by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, whose orthodox Christology won out at the Council of Nicea, 325 AD (our Nicene Creed). The Apostles and Nicene Creed were accepted by all Christians throughout the world. The Roman Empire was divided into church dioceses, with archbishops at Rome, Carthage, Thessalonica, Constantinople, Nicomedia, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria.

V. 325-450 AD - Period of Christological Controversies. The Church argued about how Jesus could be both divine and human. Nestorius taught that Jesus was actually two separate persons, one divine, one human, sharing one body. The council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius (431 AD). Nestorius' followers in the far- eastern churches separated from the Imperial Church.

The Nestorian churches included the Persian, Assyrian and Arabian churches, all under the political influence of the non-Imperial kingdom of Parthia. The bishop of the Nestorian churches became known as the Catholicos-Patriarch of the East, i.e., the head of the Church of the East. After its schism with the Imperial church, this church sent missionaries to India, Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Indochina, and as far as northwest China in the 7th century AD. In 845 AD, Chinese emperor Wu-Tsung persecuted and decimated the Christians in China. Similar persecutions over the centuries by Hindu or Buddhist emperors in the East reduced the Church of the East to isolated pockets of the faithful.

VI. 450-680 AD - Decline of the Roman Empire. After the fall of Rome in 410, both Church and State slowly disintegrated. The precise Christological definition of the Council of Chalcedon (450 AD) was rejected by the churches on the outskirts of the Empire for political reasons, and the State was too weak to enforce the definition.

Non-Chalcedonian churches which left the Imperial Church at this time included those in Armenia, Syria, Egypt, (the Coptic Church), Ethiopia, and India (the Mar Thoma church of the apostle Thomas). The term "Orthodox" was used to distinguish those churches which followed Chalcedon, as opposed to the non-Chalcedonian or Nestorian churches which did not. The Imperial Church lost territory and arch-episcopal sees at Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Carthage to the Moslems from 630-690.

VII. 680-1415 AD- The Middle Ages. The 6th Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (680 AD) rejected Pope Honorius the First's claim of papal infallibility when he supported the mono-theletic error (Christ had two natures but only one will), and

declared him to be a heretic. The Western churches, under the leadership of the Pope, then seceded from the Imperial Church with the support of the European-barbarian tribes (Rev. 17:7-18). "Orthodox Christianity" was now divided into East (Byzantine Empire and Eastern Orthodox Churches) and West (Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church).

Due to the loss of the traditional arch-bishoprics, the remaining arch-bishop of Constantinople became the spiritual head of all the Eastern Orthodox churches. Thus known as "The Ecumenical Patriarch," the archbishop of Constantinople sent missionaries and founded churches in Russia, among the Slavs, and the Balkan areas. These later were granted their own archbishops, and so became the Russian Orthodox Church, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, etc.

The Ecumenical Patriarch and the Christians of the Byzantine church came under Moslem subjugation in 1453 with the fall of Constantinople. From 1453-1830, the Patriarch was chosen by the Moslem-Turkish sultan, thus diminishing his ecumenical authority. Following the war of Greek independence in the 1820's, the Ecumenical Patriarch once again achieved his former position of leadership over the Eastern Orthodox churches throughout the world.

VIII. 1415-1530 AD - The Reformation of the Western Church. Beginning with the treacherous murder of John Huss of Bohemia by the Council of Constance in 1415, the Western church went into a turmoil over the increasing corruption present in the Papal Palace. This dissent was supported by many secular princes and kings who wanted to be free from the Holy Roman Emperor and Pope, from their laws, mercenary military, taxes, indulgences, etc. Luther's 95 Theses of 1517 found a ready audience because it challenged the Pope, and ably refuted Roman Catholic theology regarding the hated church "taxes," known as indulgences.

After a series of debates where the best theologians of the day could not refute Luther, it became a matter of Luther and the Bible against the Pope. The Pope claimed to be above the authority of Scripture, while Luther said that no word of man has higher authority than the Word of God. Luther was excommunicated as a heretic, and labeled as "Public Enemy Number One." Fortunately for Luther, "Public Enemy Number Two," the Turkish sultan and his armies were breaking down the walls of the Emperor's home capital of Vienna. Emperor Charles V was thus forced to cooperate with the German princes in matters of religion, in order to preserve the Empire.

The Augsburg Confession of the German princes of 1530 marked the factionalization of the Western Church into Roman Catholic and "Protestant" sectors. The Roman Catholics responded to the Protestants with the "Decrees of the Council of Trent," 1545-1563. Luther died in 1546, and his theology and practice was codified in the Book of Concord of 1580, the definitive collection of Lutheran Confessional writings. The Reformed, Anglicans, and Anabaptists produced their own confessions, creeds, and catechisms to define and defend their position. The Reformed followed chiefly the theology of Zwingli of Zurich and Calvin of Geneva. The Anglicans followed a hybrid of Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed theologies, being chiefly a state church independent of Rome, not a distinct theology. The Anabaptists were political revolutionaries advocating a communist society on the basis of Scriptures, but most found a quick and bloody end. Only the pacifist Anabaptists, such as the Amish and Mennonites, survived because they did not try to impose their ideas on the whole society.

IX. 1530-1660 – The Rise of Reformed Protestantism. Reformed theology was popular in Switzerland, the Rhineland, and southern Germany, the Netherlands, and in France. Where Luther intended only to reform the Church, Reformed theology also intended to reform the state and society. The Reformed intended to "complete the Reformation." The Reformed often allied themselves with enemies of the Emperor or King, and were thus viewed as revolutionaries. The Huguenots in France sparked the French Civil War, from 1560-1590, resulting in the mass exile of Calvinists to Prussia, Holland, England, and America. They did the same in the Netherlands, 1560-1580. The Calvinists in southern Germany sparked the Thirty Years War, 1618-1648. Finally, the Puritans in England invoked the English Civil War, 1640-1660. Exiles and revolutionaries from all these wars sought haven in the New World, which explains the dominant place of Reformed theology in America. Reformed theology thus gained in prestige because it justified the surge towards democracy, not because of its superior theological attributes.

X. 1660-1740 AD – The Factionalization of Reformed Theology and Its Conquest over Lutheranism. Having successfully won control of the British State in the Commonwealth of 1660, the Puritans immediately split into factions over the issue of church polity. Presbyterians, the most traditional and powerful of the Puritans, argued for an oligarchy of "elders," known as the presbytery. More radical were the Congregationalists, who argued for universal male suffrage. The New England town

meeting derived from Congregationalist polity. More radical still were the Baptists, who thought the unpious manners of Anglicans arose from the practice of infant baptism, and so practiced "believer's baptism." Most radical of the Puritans were the Independents, such as the Diggers, the Levelers, etc. who saw Christ's teaching as primarily social and political, not religious in intent. The Independent Puritans were the ancestors of 18th century Deists.

The Lutheran princes tolerated Reformed theology and preachers, and this proved to be eventual demise of Lutheranism in Germany. Pietism, a hybrid of Calvinism and Lutheranism, became popular with the writings of J.P. Spener (1675). Pietism accused the Lutheran preachers of being unloving and sub-Christian when they criticized the theology of the Calvinists. Holy living and obedience was the goal of the gospel, not doctrine or faith alone. Pietists combined Luther's teaching about Baptism and the Lord's Supper with the Calvinist teaching about salvation, sanctification, the Holy Spirit, and the Pastoral Office.

The Pietists gained the official support of the Prussian prince, Frederick the Great, when the Pietist leader Hermann Francke agreed not to protest Frederick's innovation of military conscription, which the Lutherans opposed as "prince's cannon fodder." The subsequent military successes of the Prussian princes united Germany, with Pietist religious conquests in its wake. By 1720 Lutheranism had completely succumbed to Pietism in the universities and bureaucracies, although some territories and isolated individuals continued in the theology of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. Lutheranism survived in this period partially because of the continued use of Luther's liturgy and the Lutheran hymn-chorales. Often the church cantors/musicians were more Lutheran than their pastors because of the theology of the Lutheran chorales, J.S. Bach being the most prominent example. The rise of Pietism in Germany also encouraged Pietist movements in the Scandinavian countries.

XI. 1740-1890 AD- Liberal Protestantism and the Evangelical Movement.

The Puritan Commonwealth experiment in England from 1649-1660 failed primarily because the Puritans were so factious. They could not agree on how much of the Old Testament was binding on Christians, but could not follow Luther's "evangelical" principle [i.e. only the NT was binding] because they needed the Old Testament support for their theocracy. The Puritan theocracy was also not appreciated for its "Blue Laws." The Restoration period which followed was Catholic-Anglican, but the British rightly feared the Pope's influence. A middle-of-the-road church partly formed, called the

Latitudinarians, what we would call "moderates." They argued that commands of God which were not in keeping with Natural Law or Reason, were only cultural accommodations to that period of history and not binding on Christians today.

In the person of John Locke, the Latitudinarian and Independent Puritan ideas combined to form Deism, a religion invented for the educated-merchant middle class. Deism is also the basic religious teaching of the lodges such as the Masons and the Odd Fellows, which groups originated in this period of time. The Deists argued that all of Christianity, at least in its original form, conformed to Natural Law and Reason. At first the Deists affirmed an uneasy harmony between the traditional teachings of the Church and Rationalism, but once they were accepted by society, they quickly began to deny the miracles and prophecies of the Bible, Christ's divinity and resurrection, and the Trinity. They argued that Jesus was merely a prophet of morality, whose disciples elevated him to the status of God. Deists were the first Liberal Protestants and they detested all denominational or doctrinal differences as a violation of Jesus' command to love the neighbor. Deism, in the form of Liberal Protestantism, was eventually to affect almost every Christian denomination known as the Unitarian-Universalist Church.

The growth of Deist thought in England occurred from 1690-1740. By 1740, the churches in England had become thoroughly liberalized and irrelevant to the spiritual needs of the masses. John Wesley and his followers, also known as the Evangelicals, rejected Deist religion. They combined traditional Anglicanism with German Pietism, with an emphasis on the experience of conversion (the "decision for Christ"), plus a method of sanctification known as "Methodism." In America, Wesley's teachings were spread by George Whitefield and the First Great Awakening, and had a heavy influence on the Southern Baptists. The Evangelicals were similar to the traditional Protestants in most doctrines, but were different in the emphasis they placed on religious experience and progressive sanctification. Where traditional Protestants were united on the basis of common doctrine, Evangelicals were united on the basis of a common religious experience. Ever since Wesley, the English-speaking Protestants have been dominated by the polarity between Deist Liberals and Evangelical Conservatives.

The Evangelicals consisted of both revivalist and denominational groups. Those who preferred a structured approach to religion organized themselves as "Methodists," while the revivalists remained free-wheeling and independent. Around 1800 in America, the revivalists began the Second Great Awakening in Kentucky and the Ohio River valley. The revivalists

Thomas and Alexander Campbell stressed the restoration of original Christianity and their followers founded the "non-denominational" Christian Church. Unlike Methodists, the revivalists and the "Christians" rejected infant baptism and urged their followers to get "back to the Bible," instead of Wesley's mix of Bible, tradition, experience, and reason. The Christian Church later split into a conservative branch, the Churches of Christ, and a liberal branch, the Disciples of Christ which publishes *The Christian Century*. Revivalists who remained independent included figures such as Timothy Swight, Lyman Beecher, Charles Finney, and Dwight Moody of Chicago. These independents were the forebears of twentieth-century fundamentalists and Evangelicals.

In Germany around 1740, the Rationalism of the English Deists began to influence the universities and seminaries. The real attack from Deism came from German theologian Gotthold Lessing in the 1770's, who argued that the historical evolution of religion was part of God's plan, from the primitive pagans, to the crude Jewish sacrifices, to the humane Sacraments of Christ, to the most reasonable and ethical Christianity of pure Reason. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 1800s combined these ideas with the experientialism of Pietism. He became the father of Liberal Protestantism in its classic form, which is an evolutionary form of Deism united by a common "religious experience." American and British forms of Liberal Protestantism stressed the "social gospel," and were often indistinguishable from socialism. A conservative reaction to Liberalism came with an Evangelical influence in Germany known as Neo-Pietism, which stressed the "awakening" of conversion and Bible basics.

The 1817 Prussian Union State church attempted to merge Pietists, Lutherans and Calvinists, in spite of the protests of the "Old Lutherans". The "Old Lutherans" urged a movement of "back to Luther" similar to the revivalist's "back to the Bible." In the 1830s "Old Lutheran" pastors were imprisoned and their lay-members' property confiscated, when they refused to use the new generic-Protestant liturgy. Groups of the "Old Lutherans" emigrated in the 1830s and 1840s to Australia under August Kavel, to Buffalo, NY under Johann Grabau, to Frankenmuth, MI under Friederich Craemer, and to St. Louis/Perry County, MO under Martin Stephan. Those who didn't emigrate formed the "free churches" in Germany, with leaders such as August Vilmar and Wilhem Loehe. All of these groups were known as "Confessional Lutherans" because they adhered to the traditional teaching of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. They were Lutheran by conviction, not just by tradition, heritage, or culture. These "Confessional Lutherans" resisted all influences from Liberals,

Evangelicals, Reformed, as well as the cultural-Lutherans who urged cooperation with heterodox church-bodies. The St. Louis group rose to dominance in America under C.F.W. Walther, who organized and united the "Old Lutherans" in the United States as the "Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States," later known as the "Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod."

XII. 1890-1991 AD- The Holiness Movement, Ecumenism, and Evangelicalism.

In 1880 several groups of the "Christian Church" restorationists and revivalists formed evangelistic associations to propagate the doctrine of perfect holiness. This holiness movement splintered into countless factions over the issue of the definition of holiness. The most traditional view, very similar to the Methodist teaching on sanctification, was propounded by the Nazarenes, now known as the Church of the Nazarenes. The more radical views were found in the Latter Rain movement, which argued that the supernatural gifts of Pentecost were necessary for the Church today, as represented by today's Churches of God. The emphasis on "speaking in tongues," which is not the foreign language gift of the apostles but more babbling, rose to prominence in Pentecostal churches, such as the Four Square Gospel Church, the Pentecostal Church, and the Assemblies of God. Evangelistic associations formed to propagate these holiness teachings in other denominations through the charismatic movement, which has adherents in almost every denomination today.

By 1890, the enduring influence of the Liberals and Evangelicals had conquered the old denominational differences in the Protestant world. The result was social and political demands for cooperation between church-bodies under the direction church federations. This new development in church structure was known as the "Ecumenical Movement," which had its roots in the "Evangelical Alliance" of 1846. Although the Ecumenical Movement began as an Evangelical Phenomenon, it was soon taken over by Liberal Protestant leadership. It began with a youth movement, the World's Student Christian Fellowship in 1895, then the International Missionary Conference in 1910, the Faith and Order group in 1920, and the Life and Work group in 1925. Progress in ecumenism was interrupted by World War II. Karl Barth's opposition to Hitler propelled his theology into the forefront of ecumenical endeavors following the war. The last "Old Lutheran" professor in the German State Church, Dr. Hermann Sasse, left both the ecumenical movement and Germany when Barth's theology took over. The final result was the World Council of Churches, founded in 1948, in Amsterdam. This was

coordinated with national groups, such as the National Council of Churches in the USA, and denominational groups such as the Lutheran World Federation.

Participants in the World Council of Churches [WCC] included all of the Eastern Orthodox, Non-Chalcedonian, and Nestorian churches, and almost all of the State church and Protestant churches. The Pope has resisted joining the WCC, because he believes that they should someday join "Mother Church" under his tutelage, as was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Evangelicals who protested the Liberalism of the WCC became known as "fundamentalists," a derogatory term, but they applied the term "Evangelical" to themselves to indicate their traditional link with Wesley and revivalism. The Evangelicals formed their own pan-denominational organizations, such as the National Association of Evangelicals, and became prominent especially in the United States through publishing, radio, TV, and national crusades. Evangelical figures include Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Carl Henry, Harold Lindsell, and Francis Schaeffer. A few denominations also did not join the WCC, namely the Southern Baptists and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which are the last major denominations in the world devoted to traditional Protestant teachings. A major setback for the ecumenical movement occurred in 1991, when the Russian Orthodox archbishops withdrew their church from the WCC, because of the neo-pagan rituals performed at that year's conference in Australia.

The ecumenical movement also resulted in the formation of numerous Liberal "United" churches, such as the United Presbyterians of similar traditions. More ambitious ecumenical denominations included the United Church of Canada, a merger of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists; and the United Church of Christ, a merger of the Congregationalists, one faction of the Christian Church, the German Reformed Church, and the German Evangelical-Union Church. The traditional Protestant denominational teachings are represented by small groups, such as the Wesleyans, the Congregational Christians, the Orthodox Presbyterians, as well as Confessional Lutherans and Confessional Calvinist denominations, many of who are associated with Evangelical organizations.

The Chief Types of Christian Church-Bodies

In each of the major types of Christianity, there is a different criteria for what is taught and what is practiced in the church-body. Such criteria is the "court of ultimate appeal":

- 1) Eastern Orthodox- Tradition.
- 2) Roman Catholic- The Pope.

- 3) Lutheran- Scripture alone (sola Scriptura), in its literal sense.
- 4) Reformed/ Evangelical- The "higher, spiritual" meaning of Biblical texts.
- 5) Anabaptist/ Holiness- The Holy Spirit.
- 6) Liberal- Natural Reason. "Common sense," natural law, modern science, and/ or historical evolution.
- 7) Liberation- Sociology of knowledge.

The first three types, Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran, are known as Sacramental churches. This is because they believe that people are saved from eternal damnation through faith in the Word and Sacraments and by means of the Pastoral Office ordained by Christ. Lutherans differ from Eastern Orthodoxy on the necessity of an Episcopal polity, on the relation between Scripture and tradition, and whether or not salvation depends solely on faith in God's promises found in the Word and Sacraments. Roman Catholicism follows Eastern Orthodoxy on these three issues, and then adds papal infallibility, Mariolatry, a penitential system, and the sacrifice of the Mass. Roman Catholicism in Third World Countries is barely distinguishable from the local pagan religions, a phenomenon known as syncretism.

All the other types of Christianity derive from the fundamental break with the Sacraments and Pastoral Office that Zwingli, Calvin, and the Anabaptists initiated. This is why Luther called them the "Sacramentarians," which is a more accurate description of their position than the terms "Reformed" or "Calvinist." In place of the Pastoral Office and Sacraments instituted and effected by Christ, the "Sacramentarians" substitute the direct filling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit thus becomes the center of their religion and devotion, instead of Christ. Although they may still have preachers, Baptism or the Lord's Supper, these are not necessary for salvation or a relationship with God. Although at first blush this rejection of the Pastoral Office and Sacraments might appear to be a liberation from the institutional church, in the end its results in searching for Sacramental substitutes, such as a "decision for Christ," speaking in tongues, filling of the Spirit, or most commonly, one's own good works as an assurance of salvation....

The Anabaptists and Holiness types, which we see among the Pentecostals and Charismatics, take the Reformed position one step farther, and elevate the inner voice in a person's heart over and above the Scriptures. They claim that this inner voice is the Holy Spirit....

Although the Liberal type is classified by most scholars as "Christian," even secular historians of the highest caliber question whether it may properly be called Christian. This is because it rejects the

fundamental teachings of Christianity regarding heaven, hell, salvation, Christ's divinity, and the miracles and prophecies of Scripture. The God which the Liberals worship is the God of the Deists, an uncreated Creator, an unmoved Mover, which Aristotle also believed in. Liberals are admittedly "religious," but Christ is merely a teacher of morals for them, who used imagery, symbols, and picture language to teach people to love each other. Adolf von Harnack summarized the position aptly with the phrase "The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man." That is all there is to the Christian religion in their opinion.

Although neo-Orthodox preachers and professors sound traditional, their German roots in Karl Barth were far more radical than American theologians realized. "Neo-orthodoxy" is a technique for teaching Liberal theology with orthodox or confessional theological language, by redefining all the key terms. They explain their theology as the necessary "reinterpretation" of traditional terms and concepts for a modern age, based on the linguistic teachings of existentialism.