

History of Church Divisions

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Introduction

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build My church." Throughout the pages of the New Testament we read about that one church of Christ. Today, however, there are literally hundreds of denominations throughout the religious world. We have divided ourselves from that one original church into numerous groups with distinctive names and various teachings. And this is what the world sees: a divided group of people urging them to believe the gospel and accept Jesus as their Savior... each in our own particular way stressing our own particular beliefs. How did all this come to pass?

Division in the 2nd Century Church

Scripture (as well as secular writings of that time) gives us a reasonable understanding of what the church was like in the 1st century. Our Lord established one church and pleaded for its unity. But, in the 2nd century, following the death of the apostles, this unity began to suffer as some began to introduce some teachings and practices that would result in a church far different than that one found in the writings of the NT.

Paul had warned the elders in Ephesus, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30).

It happened as Paul had predicted: the first change was in regards to the manner of church government, in particular, the eldership. According to Scripture (Acts 14:23; also confirmed by secular writings of that time), each individual congregation was governed by a plurality of elders (also known as bishops, overseers, or pastors). It was perhaps around 150 AD that some decided to alter this divine pattern by elevating one elder above the others and giving him alone the title of bishop. Ultimately the plurality of elders was replaced with only one bishop in each congregation.

Soon these bishops met together to discuss church policies and procedures. Throughout the next several centuries, a variety of doctrines and teachings would be introduced. Preachers came to be called priests and were forbidden marriage. The Lord's Supper became the Eucharist and the Mass. The doctrine of original sin was introduced; infant baptism then followed. Pagans came into the church and brought with them numerous traditions that would eventually be integrated into the church. Heathen temples became places of worship; their ornate statues came to represent Mary and other "saints."

The name "Catholic" was adopted; it means universal even though there were always those who opposed this majority (such were deemed as heretics and often persecuted). Eventually there developed a three-fold hierarchy of the pope, cardinals, and bishops who would dictate the beliefs and practices of the church. Though it was claimed that all such teachings were of divine institution from the apostles, no direct reference to such was/is to be found in Scripture. Little by little this "magisterium" of men continued to introduce new doctrines and practices. As each century passed, this developing church organization looked less and less like the simple Christianity of the NT.

Further Divisions

Early in the 4th century Christianity became the state religion. When the Roman Empire divided, so also did the Catholic church. A schism gradually developed between the Eastern and the Western church regarding the authority of the pope. The East disagreed with the primacy of the Roman bishop and instead demanded that disputes be settled by an Ecumenical council. The gap widened even further with the teaching of papal infallibility. The division was culminated in **1054** with the establishment of the **Orthodox** church.

(There would later be further divisions as many opposed Roman doctrines such as celibacy, papal infallibility, birth control, etc.; they are known as **Old Catholics** or **American Catholics**.)

In the **1530s**, King Henry VIII wanted a divorce from Queen Catherine. When the pope refused to grant it, the king eventually began the **Church of England** (also known as **Anglican**) and made himself the supreme head of it. When the United States of America later gained independence, the Anglican congregations there broke their ties to England. Thus was born the **Episcopal** church with Samuel Seabury becoming the first bishop in Connecticut in **1784**.

The invention of the printing press and the distribution of the Bible in the common language of the people helped to bring about the great reformation movement.

- Early in the **16th century**, a priest named Martin Luther pointed out 95 teachings of the Catholic church that directly conflicted with Scripture; he was excommunicated; numerous people followed him and referred to themselves as **Lutherans**.
- Later that same century (around **1560**), John Knox (who had studied with John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland) was instrumental in the beginning of the **Presbyterian** church in Scotland.
- The **Methodist** church is an outgrowth of the Church of England; began in **1729** by John Wesley and his brother Charles.
- The line of churches by the name of **Baptist** began in **1610** by John Smyth, a bishop of the Church of England; he resigned and left the church because he felt that many of the doctrines and practices of the church were not Biblical and that it was necessary to start over.
- **Free Will Baptists** opposed the prevailing Calvinistic doctrine of their day and began a movement in the early 17th century with first organized church beginning in **1727**.
- A group of conservative Baptists withdrew from others in **1832** and became known as **Primitive Baptists**; they stressed the need to return to NT Christianity as it was originally; they have no denominational structure or headquarters and do not believe in instrumental music in worship.
- **Southern Baptists** became organized in **1845** in Augusta, Georgia; they have 16 million members in more than 40,000 churches in the US.
- In the **1800s**, the **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)** grew out of two simultaneous movements led by Thomas and Alexander Campbell in Pennsylvania and Barton W. Stone in Kentucky; these men desired to "unite Christians in all the sects" through a return to NT Christianity; those that opposed the use of instrumental music came to be referred to as **Churches of Christ** in **1906**.
- In 1820, Joseph Smith claimed that God and Jesus appeared to him and told him that all existing churches were wrong; in 1823, Smith claimed to see a resurrected being named Moroni who directed him to a hill where he would find several metal plates that, when translated, would become the Book of Mormon; the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** was then officially organized in **1830**.
- Several groups using the name **Church of God** appeared in the **late 1800s**; they stressed practices such as divine healing and footwashing.
- The name **Seventh-day Adventist** was chosen in **1860** by a group who emphasized Bible prophecy and observance of the Sabbath; they believe the writings of Ellen G. White, one of the early spiritual leaders, to be inspired.
- The **Salvation Army** began in **1878** by William Booth, a Methodist minister; they "declared war" on sin and poverty and thus formulated their structure on military lines, including the use of military titles and the wearing of uniforms.

- **Jehovah's Witnesses** began in the **1870s**; they emphasize the necessity of using the name Jehovah and believe that they are the only one true religion; they teach that Christ was a created being not equal to God and that He died on a pole instead of a cross.
- In **1879**, Mary Baker Eddy organized the **First Church of Christ, Scientist**; its main doctrine concerns divine healing; they do not believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; they do not believe in heaven or hell; they do not practice baptism or partake of the Lord's Supper.
- About **1894**, various groups emerged using such names as **Holiness, Pentecostal,** and **Apostolic**; most teach baptism for remission of sins; speaking in tongues is a common practice (some say it is required for salvation); many believe in divine healing and practice footwashing; some believe in abstaining from wearing makeup and watching TV, etc.; the **Assemblies of God** was organized in **1914**.
- The **Church of the Nazarene** began in **1908**; it has over 1 million members in about 12,000 churches; its distinguishing doctrine is that of entire sanctification (the belief that God cleanses the heart from original sin and leads one to a life of holy living).
- The **Worldwide Church of God** began in the **early 1930s**; its leader, Herbert Armstrong, had many unusual doctrines, including the necessity of observing not only the Sabbath, but many additional Jewish holy days, etc.; after his death in 1986, his followers came to realize that many of their doctrines were erroneous and could not be supported by Scripture; to their credit they abandoned many of these doctrines and practices (similar to Reformation Movement), even though it resulted in the loss of many members; their website once proclaimed: "We acknowledge that many of our doctrines were erroneous. We acknowledge that the WCG would not exist without those erroneous doctrines. But we do not conclude that Jesus Christ rescued us as a group merely to have us disband. He has bought and paid for this church. It belongs to him, and we have told him that he can have it! If it is of any value to him, he can use it as his instrument, and we are happy to let him lead us. We are learning to function in new ways. Our strengths as a denomination include a high respect for Scripture and a willingness to do what it says. We recognize that Jesus, as our Savior and as our Lord, gives us instructions for our thoughts, words and actions. We know that Christ makes a difference in the way we live. He transforms our lives in this age, as well as giving us eternal life. We have also stressed prayer and study as important aspects of spiritual growth. Our recent history gives us a concern for grace, and an awareness of legalism. Of course, the story is not yet over. Jesus is not done with us yet. We are still being shaped and fashioned for his purpose. We praise him and worship him, and seek to know his will for our lives."

Conclusion

It is commendable when people acknowledge that they have strayed from the truth and that they need to return to being what they ought to be. There is a story in the Bible about such; it is recorded in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34. The religion of Israel had adapted so much to its culture that it no longer resembled the religion God had originally established through Moses. Numerous kings had done evil in the sight of the Lord and the temple of God itself had been corrupted by foreign idols, etc. But then Josiah became king, and he was not the kind of king like those before him. Josiah was a very good king, a king who did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and a king who determined that he would rebuild the temple of God.

While the workers were repairing the house of the Lord, the Bible says that they found the book of the law that the Lord had given to Moses years before. It was brought before King Josiah and read to him. 2 Chronicles 34:19 says, "And it came about when the king heard the words of the law that he tore his clothes." King Josiah was indeed greatly distressed because hearing the words of the law which had been neglected for so long made him realize how drastically Israel had moved away from what God had commanded. And so he began the greatest restoration movement in Israel's history. He was determined to go back to the way that God had commanded. Throughout the years before him, the people had moved further and further away from God's ways, but Josiah took the book of the law and lead the people back to the way they should be.

Throughout history, there have apparently been many men like Josiah. Time and time again these men have looked anew at the written word of God and determined to make changes in hopes of drawing nearer to God's will. While such an attitude is to be commended, it must also be noticed that each new effort of reformation brings yet another group with another name.

Perhaps there may always been hundreds or thousands of diverse groups wearing different names in recognition of their diverse beliefs and practices. But let us always remember that we ought to hold one name and one name alone above all man-made names: JESUS CHRIST! He alone is our Savior. Let us unite to promote Him and His saving gospel far above those things that would otherwise divide us.