

Newsletter May 2016

In our April 2016 Newsletter, we provided an introduction to church history in which we mentioned Christian denominationalism as a consequence of the *Protestant Reformation Movement*. In this newsletter we shall provide an overview of major denominations of the past as well as their development into current denominations. A denomination is properly defined as an organized group of churches that holds to the same distinctive doctrines and practices. A sizable group of individual congregations is generally considered to be a valid Christian denomination as long as they all hold to essential core Christian doctrines of the faith and ascribe to the *Apostle's Creed* (text of which is available through a link on the Reference page of this website). All denominations began as loosely affiliated movements at first; therefore, to study denominations commonly begins with the study of a movement. Through church creeds and other statements of belief, it is possible to reach a reasonable understanding of each denomination's core doctrines that were adhered to at its inception. Even so, one can find variations in both doctrine and practice from one individual local church to another within a denomination, and today's liberal churchianity has rendered many early creeds and statements of belief virtually meaningless as they gather dust in the archives of many of today's churches.

A *Major Church Denominations* chart is included on the very last page of this newsletter. It is also posted as a separate document through a link on the "Reference" page of this website. Since this chart will be directly referred to throughout this newsletter, the reader may want to keep it close at hand on a separate browser tab – or if preferred print out a hard copy. Running down the left edge of this chart there is a time-line beginning at AD 30 and ending with the year 2000. Major denominations placed within this time-line are represented by interconnected blue boxes. The direction of the arrows placed on connecting lines represent a general flow of influence from one denomination to the founding of the next. For those wanting more specific information regarding particular movements and denominations as we proceed through this overview, we have provided page numbers in superscript – all of which refer to relevant topics contained in the church history sections of *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity* Book III.

At the very top center of the chart we find a box representing the true church as it was first called into being on the day of Pentecost and as it continued through the Apostolic⁶³, the Sub-apostolic⁹⁴ and Post-sub-apostolic¹¹¹ ages. This first box is followed nearly three centuries later by another box representing the *Roman Imperial Church*, which came into existence in AD 313 through a coup d'etat by the Roman government to absorb and control every aspect of Christian thought and worship.¹³⁴ Coexisting for a time in opposition to the *Roman Imperial Church* were a few covert separatist churches represented by another box to the immediate left. Very little is known about these early clandestine churches or how long they endured with the noted exception of one prominent separatist group known as the *Donitists*,¹⁵² which were loosely associated with another violent religious order known as the *Circumcellions*¹⁵². Both vanished from the reach of history without leaving a trace during the Muslim conquests of the seventh century.

The *Imperial church* underwent a split much later in AD 1064 into the present-day *Roman Catholic Church* and the *Eastern Orthodox Church*¹⁹⁹. Also note that the *Russian Orthodox Church* of AD 988, which was early on loosely associated (represented with a dashed line) with the *Roman Imperial Church*, later came under the direct influence of the *Eastern Orthodox Church*. Many new believers, have fallen into the trap of assuming that the *Roman Catholic Church* must be the only valid church because of its ancient traditional moorings that would seemingly identify it favorably with the first-century church. However, as this chart demonstrates, the institutionalized Roman Church did not come into existence until the early fourth century – preceding which time the true church had been violently persecuted by the Roman political state. The early church's battered remnant was then forcibly absorbed into the decaying Roman Empire in AD 313 under the Emperors Constantine¹³⁴ and Theodosius¹⁴¹, thus fully encasing the true church in Roman-style churchianity, which quickly became infused with rank paganism.

Prominently located directly beneath the box representing the *Roman Catholic Church* you will find a notation in large capital letters signifying the "*REFORMATION MOVEMENT*,"²¹⁴ which began around the year AD 1182 within the Waldensian²¹⁶ movement. Churches following this date on the chart are all

commonly referred to as Protestant churches inasmuch as they protested the corrupt churchianity of the *Roman Catholic Church* out of which they were painfully extricating themselves to form their own churches. Protestant churches technically represent all biblically reformed churches that purport to operate under the sole authority of Holy Scripture rather than the edicts of a Roman Pope and the extra-biblical dogma of the *Roman Catholic Church*. However, it must be said that none of these churches have ever reached the pinnacle of biblical reform to which they have aspired. The reform effort failed to achieve unified biblical conformity due to sharp differences in interpretation of Bible texts – particularly those concerning the sovereign election of God's own as opposed to the determined efforts of mortal men to gain their salvation through personal works.²³ In addition, there were arguments over the supposed efficacy of the sacraments and other ritual practices in bringing about salvation, the retention of certain other false Roman traditions, and even political haggling. As a consequence, the reform effort became fragmented, as a first glance at our chart clearly demonstrates – and remember that we have only listed major denominations on this chart. Today, there are thousands of distinguishable Protestant denominations world-wide – by some estimates as many as twenty to thirty thousand!

Emerging out of the Reformation Movement, Protestantism was initially divided into three primary branches represented by the formation of three national churches as follows: 1) The *Lutheran Church*²³², established in Germany by Martin Luther²²⁵ and founded in 1522, 2) the *Reformed Church*, established in Switzerland by John Calvin²³⁵ and founded in 1523, 3) the *Church of England*, established through the efforts of Thomas Cranmer²⁴⁶ and founded in 1534. Churches within these three denominations are often referred to as “high churches” because their ecclesiology and formal liturgies remain closely associated with those of the *Roman Catholic Church*. For instance, all of these churches engage in the error of infant baptism, which had begun earlier in the *Roman Catholic Church* through the false doctrine of baptismal regeneration.²³ In addition, all deny many of the prophetic doctrines put forth in the book of Revelation,⁵⁸⁸ which includes a future millennial age on earth ruled over by Jesus Christ.^{551, 644}

The *Lutheran Church* along with the *Reformed Church* later contributed to the founding of the *Moravian Church* established by Nicholas van Zinzendorf²⁹⁰ in AD 1700. In addition, the *Lutheran Church* today continues on, and it consists of many churches throughout the world, as well as many separate but closely affiliated sub-denominations.

The *Reformed Church* directly influenced the founding of the *Presbyterian Church* in Scotland by John Knox²⁵⁹ in 1560. From the Presbyterian Church in Scotland various sub-denominations were formed, such as the *Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* (ARPC) founded in 1643, *The Presbyterian Church in the United States* in 1861, *The Presbyterian Church in America* (PCA) in 1973 and the *Presbyterian Church USA* (PCUSA) in 1983. The *Reformed Church* along with Lutheranism had earlier contributed to the founding of the intensely persecuted *French Huguenots*^{242, 334} in 1530. *The Reformed church* also contributed to the *Anabaptist Movement*²¹⁹ that was begun by Conrad Grebel²³⁵ in 1525. Out of the Anabaptist movement came the *Mennonites*²⁴³ in 1593, the *Amish*²⁴⁴ in 1693, and the *Church of the Brethren* in 1709.

The *Church of England*, known today internationally as the *Anglican Church*²⁴⁹ or the *Anglican Communion*, resulted in the founding of the *Episcopal Church* in America in 1776. Various separatist churches rose up in England in opposition to the Elizabethan compromise known as Anglicanism,²⁴⁹ most notably the Puritan churches²⁵⁰ of 1558 whose purity of doctrine and practice later played an important role in the founding of the United States.²⁸⁹ Later on came the *English Baptists*²⁵⁵ in 1609 and the Quakers²⁵³ in 1645 followed by the founding of the *Methodist Church* in 1791, which came about through the methodical teaching of John Wesley.²⁹³

The *English Baptist* churches of 1609 gave rise to the *First Baptist Church* founded in the North American colonies by Roger Williams²⁸² in 1638. Over the years additional Baptist churches were formed in the United States that became denominationally interconnected through an organization known as the *Triennial Convention*³³⁹ of 1814. “Triennial” in their name came about from the fact that they assembled together every three years. As the United States Civil War³³⁵ loomed darkly on the horizon, many southern churches broke away to form the *Southern Baptist Convention*³³⁹ in 1845 – which continued on after the war

ended and even expanded northward. Many Baptist churches remain affiliated with this convention yet today. The *National Baptist Convention* was organized in the north in 1914 out of the earlier *Triennial Convention* and was renamed the *American Baptist Convention* in 1950 – which in turn became known as the *American Baptist Churches USA* in 1972.

The *Church of Christ* was founded in 1794 on the American western frontier of Kentucky by Barton W. Stone.³³¹ It had its origin in both Baptist and Methodist churches, but moved backward theologically to embrace earlier doctrines of Roman Catholicism, especially those regarding the efficacy of the sacraments, in what was referred to as the *Restoration Movement*. Churches known today as *Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*³³¹ were simultaneously founded by a Presbyterian minister, Alexander Campbell,³³⁰ in western Pennsylvania out of this same restoration movement. In 1832 both groups merged with a simple handshake. There has been some confusion regarding individual church names since that time.

The *Methodist Church* later gave rise to the *Salvation Army* founded by William Booth³⁶¹ in 1865, and later on to the many churches of the *Holiness Church Movement*,³⁶¹ which began in 1863 over the issue of personal sanctification. These churches include *The Church of God* founded in 1886, *The Christian Missionary Alliance*³⁸⁶ established in 1887, *The Church of the Nazarene*³⁶³ founded in 1895, *The Assemblies of God* founded in 1914, *The Four Square Church* founded in 1927, and *The Calvary Chapel* founded in 1965. Most of these churches are involved in charismatic Pentecostalism.³⁶⁴ The *Wesleyan Church*³⁶² of 1843 had anticipated the holiness movement by more than two decades, when it was formed by a break away from Methodism due to a sharp disagreement concerning the issue of human slavery.

Three major American cults are also listed on this chart, two of which sprang out of earlier Christian denominations. These cults have been placed near the left edge of the chart between the years 1800 and 1900 with an “*” next to boxes that have a transparent background. The *Jehovah's Witnesses*³⁷⁶ cult came out of the *English Baptist* movement in 1870 via way of the *Millerite Movement*³⁷² of 1840 – which had erroneously set a failed calendar date of 1844 for the return of Christ. The *Seventh Day Adventists*³⁷³ (variously referred to as a cult or a valid Christian sect) also came out of the *Millerite Movement* in 1863. The cult of *Christian Science*³⁷⁷ founded by Mary Baker Eddy came out of earlier Congregational churches in 1879. *Mormonism*³⁷⁵ was uniquely fabricated out of whole cloth by its founder Joseph Smith; this cult's official name is *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. Often these cults are improperly referred to as “Christian cults” because of their false claim to the historic Christian faith; none of these cults are Christian in a sound biblical sense. Cults uniquely deny or severely distort one or more of the very basic tenets of the Christian faith and/or they profess a unique extra-biblical doctrine put forth by their founder.

Discounting obvious cults, we may wonder which of these denominations more closely represent biblical first-century Christianity. It is fair to say that none of them have attained that level of perfection due to non-biblical traditions that were retained and compromises that were reached in the very process of their formation. Omitted from this chart, however, is a wide array of non-denominational churches that operate outside of any formal affiliation. Included among these are innumerable community churches, which cater to believers (as well as many unbelievers) from every conceivable denominational or non-denominational background. They purposefully remain theologically vague in order to accommodate their highly diverse congregations. Some of these churches may have become so compromised over time that they should be classified as cults.

Nevertheless, there are other churches, which fall into this non-denominational category, that are genuine Bible-believing churches that ensure sound expository biblical preaching from the pulpit as well as reverent vibrant worship, which more closely aligns them with the first-century faith than can be found in any of the formal denominational churches that were established through theological compromise. The only way to determine where each of these self-governing churches stands doctrinally is by listening critically to many sermons delivered from their pulpits as well as very closely examining their Sunday School subject matter. Some churches post their doctrinal statements as well as their sermons on a website, which allows a believer to determine to some extent whether or not their teachings are Bible-based before attending, but their quality of worship and fellowship can only be determined by actually attending their services. All of this research

involves arduous effort and considerable time, but it can also prove to be well worth the undertaking. Many of these churches are quite unique – closely approaching the ideal temporal church, the significant attributes of which we put forth in our March 2016 newsletter. *Arthur J. Smith May 2016*

