

Understanding Denominations in Christianity

QUICK HISTORY OF JESUS & THE EARLY CHURCH (1st Century AD)

Christianity began and is rooted in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth from Galilee, born before 4 AD. He did not begin to teach or perform miracles until after his public water baptism. In many ways, Christianity began as a form of Judaism in that Jesus and his early followers were observant Jews. However, since Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures to the point of saying that he was the long awaited Jewish Messiah, he was soon rejected by many religious authorities. He was sentenced to crucifixion by Pontius Pilate around 38 AD. Disciples claimed that he rose from the dead three days later and was seen by over 400 people before ascending to Heaven.

Even after Jesus was gone, the number of his followers continued to grow rapidly. Prominent leaders in this early movement, which would later be known as the Early Church, were the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul. The majority of members of the early church belonged to lower classes. Their communities were small, poor and scattered throughout the Empire of Rome. Yet in 64 AD, Roman Emperor Nero blamed the great fire in Rome on this religious movement (entitled 'Chrestians'). Fierce persecution (imprisonment & public death) continued for followers of Jesus until 312 AD, when Constantine converted to the Christian faith and encouraged conversions of the faith throughout the empire. (Although Constantine 'legalized' Christianity through the Edict of Milan, many of his political campaigns, or Crusades, looked more like traditional Rome than the traditional theology or practice of Early Christianity.) In 380 AD, everyone under Roman dominion was required to confess Christianity. Christianity was no longer simply about following Jesus.

The imperial power in Western Europe weakened after 400 AD and religious leaders (popes) began to emerge as religious and political forces in their own right. Over the next several centuries, Christianity expanded and developed under papal leadership. The first formal Christian separation came in 1054 AD between what we know as Orthodox and Catholic churches.

The Book(s)

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW...
Christians, by and large, accept the Bible as the inspired word of God. The Christian Bible includes 39 sacred Hebrew and Aramaic books as well as 27 books (or letters) from the years following Jesus' ministry. A number of books and fragments (a.k.a. the *Apocrypha*) are also held to be inspired by some Christians.

Justin Martyr

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW...
Justin was killed in Rome around 165 AD for following Jesus. He wrote,
"We ourselves were well conversant with war, murder and everything evil, but all of us...have traded in our weapons of war. We now cultivate the fear of God, justice, kindness, faith, and the expectation of the future given us through the crucified one. The more we are persecuted and martyred, the more do others in ever increasing numbers come believers."

THE BASICS

COMMON FOR ALL CHRISTIANS (from the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD)

We believe in GOD

...the Father, the Almighty, Maker of Heaven & Earth, Maker of all that is seen and unseen

We believe in one LORD in JESUS CHRIST

...the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father, through Him all things were made

We believe in JESUS CHRIST for our SALVATION

...he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit & the Virgin Mary and became truly human, for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, on the third day he rose again in accordance with the [Hebrew] Scriptures, he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father

We believe that JESUS CHRIST will COME AGAIN

...to judge the living and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end

We believe in the HOLY SPIRIT

...the Lord, the Giver of Life, who comes from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets

We believe in ONE HOLY & CATHOLIC & APOSTOLIC CHURCH

We believe in ONE BAPTISM for the forgiveness of sins

We look for the RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD and the LIFE of the world to come

SOURCES:

The Baker Pocket Guide to World Religions by Gerald R. McDermott (Baker Books, 2008)
The Complete Idiot's Guide to Christianity by Jeffrey B. Webb, Ph.D. (Penguin Group, 2004)
Jesus For President by Shane Claiborne & Chris Haw (The Simple Way, 2008)

The 1st Church Split - Roman & Orthodox

Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy had already begun to move down different paths before the official Schism in 1054 AD. Racial, ethnic and linguistic differences played a role. Churches in the east (Asia Minor & Greece) spoke & wrote in Greek and developed church leadership with bishops out of Constantinople. Churches in the west were influenced and led by Rome and used Latin. They also placed significant weight on the role of papal supremacy. Eventually, Pope Leo IX excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople (Cerularius) for using the Nicene Creed differently and insisting on a certain kind of bread in the Eucharist.

Roman Catholic

3 CATHOLIC FOUNDATIONS:

1. The Roman Catholic Church (led by the Pope) has the final say in how the Bible should be interpreted.
2. The Eucharist is vital to a union with Christ because it contains his real presence (bread & wine actually transform into the body & blood of Jesus.)
3. Catholic spirituality extends beyond mass to include daily devotions, prayers and intercession (asking those on earth or in Heaven to pray on your behalf.)

Eastern Orthodox

3 ORTHODOX FOUNDATIONS:

1. Religious images (icons) are very important because they are thought to reveal the presence of God (and glory of Heaven) to the believer.
2. Focus is placed on the Holy Spirit - whom they believe came before God the Son.
3. Incense, candles & brightly colored robes add to Mass - which is traditionally sung while the people stand. Like the Early Church, services are often led in Greek.

The 2nd Church Split - Catholic & Protestant

By 1350, the church seemed to be broken in the eyes of many observers due to the wealth and political power of church leadership. John Wyclif took great issue with *indulgences* (or a priest's declaration waiving a sinner's punishment for sinning) as they were often sold by church leaders. An educated monk, named Martin Luther, began the Reformation as a movement to reform the Roman Catholic Church - not to start a new denomination. Themes that emerged from this movement:
-*Spiritual cleansing comes from repentance & faith (not confession, penance or indulgences)*
-*Christians are saved from sin & death by God's grace, not good deeds or personal qualities*
-*Beliefs should be based on the Bible, not decrees from the Pope or church tradition*
Three major streams emerged: Lutheran, Anabaptist & Reformed (others soon followed)

Liturgical Protestants

FOUNDATIONS:

Kept the Sacraments of Catholicism while using manuals and written confessions to express beliefs.

MAINLINE PROTESTANTS - Confessions of Faith
Congregation Church, United Church in Christ

EPISCOPALIANS - Catholic elements
Church of England (Anglican), Protestant Episcopal

LUTHERANS - Faith/Grace/Word Alone
Evangelical Lutheran, Lutheran (Missouri Synod)

REFORMED - God's sovereignty
Reformed, Christian Reformed, Presbyterian

Pietist Churches

FOUNDATIONS:

Sought to escape formalism in worship and association with politics to emphasize focus on Jesus Christ.

ANABAPTIST - Non-violence & simple living
Mennonites, Brethren, Amish

BAPTIST - Purity & separatism
National, American, Regular, Southern (Baptist)

QUAKERS - Non-violence, silence & Inner Light
Society of Friends, Hicksite, Gurneyite, Wilburite

METHODISTS - Grace & Christian perfection
United Methodist, United Brethren, African Methodist

Second Authority

FOUNDATIONS:

Typically refer to a 2nd source or person for revelation

MORMONS - Revelation of Joseph Smith

God was once man, man may become God

CHRISTIAN SCIENTISTS - Mary Baker Eddy
Sick from bad thoughts, sin...no eternal consequences

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS - William Miller
Avoid "unclean" until Jesus comes (very soon!!!)

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES - Charles Taze Russell
Jesus returned in 1874, 144,000 go to heaven forever

Holiness & Pentecostal

FOUNDATIONS:

After forgiveness, & obedience...focused on complete perfection and freedom from sin through Spirit baptism (Most separated from the Methodist Church after 1800)

HOLINESS - Victory over sin in heart & world
Wesleyan, Free Methodist, Church of the Nazarene, Church of God, Christian & Missionary Alliance

PENTECOSTAL - Gifts of the Spirit & Healing
Churches of God, Assemblies of God, Foursquare Gospel, Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship