

## **A Brief History of the Modern Protestant Denominations in America**

### **Lutheran Churches**

- This is the oldest denomination that sprang up directly from the Reformation
- Named after Martin Luther; though not until after his death
- The Augsburg Confession of 1530 is essentially the earliest statement of Lutheran doctrine (also Luther's Smaller Catechism in 1529)
- The Book of Concord (in 1580) established the fundamentals of Lutheran doctrine
- From 1580–1689 the Lutheran church focused on defining its position against Roman Catholicism (and also other Protestant groups)
- The dead orthodoxy of this period was challenged by the Pietism of August Francke of Count Zinzendorf (this movement emphasized the necessity for good works and a holy life)
- Pietism dominated Lutheran theology from 1689–1750.
- After 1750, Pietism was replaced by rationalism (the assertion that human reason is sufficient to solve all of mankind's problems)
- In 1817, Claus Harm responded to rationalism in a way that allowed evangelical Lutheranism to regain a foothold
- Others, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) responded to rationalism by promoting liberal ideas (influenced by Kant and Hegel); he emphasized intuition and feeling over dogma; Schleiermacher's views had influence on Walter Rauschenbusch who is the father of the social gospel in America
- Schleiermacher's views were challenged in the mid-1900s by the existentialism of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner
- In America, Lutheranism is largely liberal; most Lutherans are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
- One bright spot is the Missouri Synod, which on the whole remains more theologically conservative and committed to biblical inerrancy

## **Reformed and Presbyterian Churches**

- The Reformed movement was really begun by Zwingli; the major difference between the Swiss Reformed and the German Lutherans was with regard to how they viewed the Lord's Table
- John Calvin continued the Swiss Reformation after Zwingli's death in 1531
- Many followed in the Reformed tradition, including Beza, Bullinger, and Oecolampadius
- The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Synod of Dort (1618) gave doctrinal stability to the Reformed movement
- The reformed movement is the parent body for the Reformed Churches of Switzerland, France, Holland, Germany, and America. Out of it also grew modern Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, and modern Baptists. Calvinism's influence (as a school of thought) is felt in all of these denominations today (even in those that began as a reaction against some aspects of Calvinism).
- With regard to Presbyterians in particular, John Knox brought Calvinism to Scotland after 1555. By 1560, the Parliament had adopted a reformed confession known as the Scottish Confession of 1560.
- Early Presbyterians were known as Covenanters, a label that was derived from the small covenants they signed to affirm their beliefs
- Scottish Presbyterians joined English Puritans to help produce the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1647
- Presbyterians have been part of American history since the Colonies
- In the mid- to late-1800s liberalism began to make significant inroads within Presbyterian circles; theological conservatives like Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, and B. B. Warfield remained strong
- In 1929, fundamentalists were finally forced to leave Princeton Seminary (and subsequently start Westminster in Pennsylvania)
- Today, PCUSA is liberal while groups like the PCA, OPC, and Bible Presbyterians are more conservative

### **Anglican (Episcopal) Churches**

- Result of the English Reformation; took its final form under Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), being somewhere between a Roman Catholic and a fully Reformed Protestant position
- In the 1600s, the rise of the Puritan movement (including the temporary reign of Oliver Cromwell) attempted to bring Anglicanism more in line with Calvinism; eventually the Puritans found greater freedom to pursue their ideals in America
- In the 1700s, the Methodist movement arose within Anglicanism as an attempt to revive and reform it; eventually, Methodism became a separate movement (under the leadership of the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield)
- In the mid-1800s, liberalism began to gain a foothold within the church of England
- Within the church today, there remains a strange co-existence between theological conservatives (such as John R.W. Stott) and theological liberals (such as John A.T. Robinson)
- The American Episcopal church is largely liberal; though Anglicans in other parts of the world (such as Africa) are far more conservative
- On a side note, the Plymouth Brethren movement is an offshoot of Anglicanism—being influenced by John Nelson Darby who left the Church of England in 1828

### **Methodist Churches**

- Started under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield
- Primarily Arminian (due to John Wesley's influence)
- In America, Methodists were active during the Second Great Awakening (from 1784 - 1830), where they utilized a system of circuit riding preachers and camp meetings (under the leadership of Francis Asbury)
- From 1830–1890, the circuit riding system was eventually replaced by stationary pastors who could meet the shepherding needs of local congregations (rather than constantly travelling from place to place)
- In the 1800s, the Methodist Church split over the issue of slavery
- In the late 1800s, Methodism was affected by the revivals of D. L. Moody (a Congregationalist) and Ira D. Sankey (a Methodist lay evangelist)

- Also, the Holiness Movement began to develop as a reaction to what many felt was too much formality in the church; the Nazarenes and Pentecostals (including the Assemblies of God) trace their roots back to the Holiness Movement
- In 1865, William Booth (a former Methodist) founded the Salvation Army
- Around 1870, the focus in the Methodist Church changed from soul-winning to a social gospel; such that the Methodist missionary movement of the early 1900s was almost entirely focused on the social gospel and social programs
- Today, the United Methodist Church is largely liberal with an emphasis on social concerns; Arminianism is also a prevailing trait within most Methodist circles

### **Congregationalist Churches**

- Congregationalism originated during the English Reformation; similar in doctrine to the Puritans and Presbyterians, but believed that the local church should be independent of hierarchical or governmental control
- The Pilgrims on the Mayflower were Congregationalists (who came to Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620)
- Early leaders included Thomas Hooker; John Cotton; Richard Mather; and Cotton Mather
- Congregationalism became strong in Connecticut and Massachusetts; Harvard and Yale were established as Congregational schools; Pilgrims and Puritans shared Puritan doctrine and by 1648 a Synod at Cambridge accepted the Westminster Confession as doctrinal standard for the Congregational Church
- Jonathan Edwards is America's most notable Congregationalist minister
- In 1801, Unitarianism arose within Congregationalism as an Anti-Trinitarian movement; Unitarians formally split from Congregationalists in 1820
- During the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s, Congregationalist preachers and leaders included Asahel Nettleton, Charles Finney, Lyman Beecher, and Henry Ward Beecher.
- Impacted by the social gospel in the late 1800s
- In the 1900s, Congregationalists either merged with larger groups (such as the United Church of Canada) or formed smaller, less significant denominations
- Important preachers include J. H. Jowett and G. Campbell Morgan

- As a movement, very susceptible to Unitarianism, liberalism, humanism, and higher criticism; in part because it is actively opposed to what is perceived as stagnation or intellectual dullness
- In 1961, the Unitarians merged with the Universalist churches to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in North America

### **Brethren Churches**

- Early Anabaptists split between more radical groups (like the Zwickau Prophets) and more peaceful moderate groups (like the Swiss Brethren and the Mennonites)
- Today the Mennonite Churches and the Amish Churches trace their heritage back to the Swiss Brethren of the Anabaptist Movement.
- Anabaptist distinctives included believer's baptism, the authority of the Bible, the priesthood of all believers, a personal relationship to Christ, and pacifism. Some of these distinctives are found in other evangelical groups.
- Throughout history, the Anabaptists have at times influenced other groups ... such as the Mennonite influence on some of the early English Baptists
- The Grace Brethren movement arose later, stemming from the Sharzenau Brethren—a group that was formed during the German Pietist revivals of the early 1700s
- The Plymouth Brethren were founded by John N. Darby in 1831. Another prominent figure in the early Plymouth Brethren movement was George Mueller, minister and founder of orphanages in Bristol, England.

### **Baptist Churches**

- Founded by John Smyth in the early 1600s; Smyth was educated as an Anglican, and then a separatist
- He and his congregation left England and went to Amsterdam, Holland due to persecution for their anti-Anglican views
- In 1608, Smyth was influenced by the Mennonites and embraced anabaptism; eventually he joined the Mennonite Church
- Thomas Helwys, a colleague of Smyth, took over the English-speaking Baptist congregation after Smyth died (in 1612); opposed both infant baptism and Calvinism

- These Baptists were known as “General Baptists” and were distinct from the “Particular Baptists” who were Calvinistic
- The Particular Baptists arose independently of the General Baptists, and officially began in 1638 in England; they were led by John Spilsbury and were convinced that only regenerated believers should be baptized
- In 1639, Roger Williams helped found the First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island
- In 1644, 15 Particular Baptist pastors (including Spilsbury) signed the 53 Articles of Faith known as the London Confession, which stipulates believers’ baptism by immersion
- One of the most well-known early English Baptists is John Bunyan (author of Pilgrim’s Progress), who became a member of Bedford Baptist Church in 1653
- Religious freedom came for English Baptists in 1689 when the Toleration Act was passed under William and Mary (following the English Civil War and the return of Charles II)
- John Gill (1679–1771) is a notable Baptist minister and Bible scholar of this time period
- The Methodist revival of the 1700s impacted the Baptist movement as well; Baptists began to concentrate on missions; William Carey (1761–1834), who went to India, is one of the more well-known Baptist missionaries of this time period
- During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Baptist movement grew tremendously; From 1791 – 1845 (the Second Great Awakening), Baptist numbers in America increased from 65,000 to 720,000 with almost 10,000 churches.
- Adoniram Judson (1783–1850), America’s first overseas missionary, had a huge impact on the nation of Burma
- Prominent preachers including Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892); Alexander Maclaren (1826–1910); and F. B. Meyer (1847–1929)
- In 1845, the Southern Baptist denomination was formed, in part over the issue of slavery; today the SBC is the largest and fastest growing of Baptist organizations
- Due to the success of the revivals under men like Charles Finney and D. L. Moody, Baptists adopted certain aspects of their evangelistic techniques (including Finney’s prolonged invitation method)
- Both the Southern Baptists and the Northern Baptists were rocked by modernism in the early 1900s; as a result a number of off-shoot groups developed as fundamentalists responded to the liberals in their denomination

- The General Association of Regular Baptists started in 1932 as a protest movement against the liberalism of the Northern Baptist Convention
- GARBC approved schools include Baptist Bible College and Seminary (in Pennsylvania), Northwest Baptist Seminary (in Tacoma, Washington), and Grand Rapids Baptist Bible College and Seminary (in Michigan)
- The Conservative Baptist Association began in 1947, as a reaction to liberalism within the American Baptist Convention; the CBA was not as separatistic in its outlook as the GARBC
- CBA schools include Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary (1950), Western Seminary (1951), Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis (1956), San Francisco Seminary (1958), Conservative Baptist Seminary (1986)

### **A Few Final Observations**

- A “denomination” is a major religious body that is identified by a certain name; a “sect” is a smaller more doctrinally distinct group; a “cult” is a group that is identified with major doctrinal deviation (such that the gospel has been lost)
- Initially, Protestant groups developed as a reaction to the false doctrine that had come to characterize the Roman Catholic Church; because the gospel has been lost in the RCC, it is not incorrect to consider Roman Catholicism to be a “cult”
- From the 1500s to the 1800s, Protestant denominations held much in common including a belief in the inspiration of the Bible, the sinfulness of man, the gift of salvation through Christ, the Trinity, the second coming, and the invisible Church made up of all believers. Points of disagreement centered on the practice of the ordinances, church polity, eternal security, the role of tradition, etc. But the true gospel was represented in the major denominations.
- With the onset of liberalism, higher criticism, and modernism (in the mid to late 1800s), the mainline denominations abandoned the true gospel. Insofar as a mainline denomination has been overcome by liberalism, it might be rightly considered a “cult”
- New, theologically conservative groups began in the early 1900s as fundamentalists separated from the denominations that were going south; also in the mid 1900s, the independent church movement saw the rise of churches with no official denominational ties
- Hence, the spiritual landscape that exists today in the United States.

