# WHY ARE THERE SO MANY DENOMINATIONS?

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In Texas, they tell the story of a young lady who went to her bank to get traveler's checks. The teller asked, "What denomination?" She replied, "Why Baptist, of course!" To some, there is only one denomination—theirs! On the other hand, many ask, "Why are there so many denominations?" Christians, as well as non-Christians, have asked me that question many, many times.

The word *denomination* comes from the word *denominate*, which means "to name." A denomination is "a name" or "the name of a class." In the case of Christianity, it is the name of a group of Christians. To answer the question of why there are so many denominations, it is necessary to understand the origin of the denominations. The following is an overview of church history, focusing on how the major denominations started.

## The Start of the Church (30 AD)

God the Father planned to form the church (the "universal" church) in eternity past (Eph. 1:3-23). Jesus, God the Son, said He would build the church (Mt. 16:16). God the Holy Spirit began the church (Eph. 1:22-23) by baptizing believers into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) on the day of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:5, 2:1-4 and 11:15-16).

Local "chapters" of the church ("local churches") were also started. Christ commissioned the Apostles to make disciples (Mt. 28:19) by preaching the Gospel (Mk. 16:15), baptizing those who believed (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16), and teaching them to keep His commandments (Mt. 28:20). In short, they were to start churches. The first local church was started in Jerusalem (Acts 2:40-47). People who trusted Jesus Christ for eternal life were baptized and formed an autonomous (free from ecclesiastical or governmental control) local church.

From Jerusalem, the church spread all over the world. At first, there were no "denominations," just individual churches. In the beginning, all the churches: 1) accepted the Scripture as the authority for "faith and practice" (that is, what is believed and what is done in the church), 2) preached salvation by faith, 3) practiced baptizing those who believed, and 4) were autonomous (that is, independent of other churches and the state) local congregations.

## The Slide of the Church (100-1517)

After the Apostolic period (the first century), slowly over several centuries, ideas that are not in the Bible began to be added to what the churches believed and practiced. Some said salvation was obtained by something other than trusting Jesus Christ for eternal life (for example, baptism was said to be necessary to be saved). By about 200, some churches began to baptize infants.

Early Christians endured a series of persecutions, starting with some of the Apostles (as recorded in the book of Acts) and continuing for several hundred years. Some waves of persecution were local and sporadic; others were empire-wide, officially sanctioned by Roman Emperors. When Constantine's father died in 306, Constantine was proclaimed Emperor by his troops, but there were many competitors. In 312, Constantine marched on Rome to face his first formidable

opponent, Maxentius, who relied on pagan magic. Constantine told Christian historian Eusebius that as he was praying, he had a vision of a cross of light in the heavens bearing the inscription "Conquer by this." In the dream, he saw the same sign and was told by God to make a likeness of it and use it as a safeguard in all encounters with his enemies. He did and was victorious in taking possession of Rome.

In 313, an Edict of Tolerance (also called "The Edict of Milan") was issued, which brought freedom of worship to all religions, including Christianity. While Constantine did not make Christianity the sole religion of the state, he began to take an active part in the affairs of the church. He built churches, gave Sunday a legal position, and called and presided over the church's first General Council. He thus established a precedent which his successors followed. Later, Christianity was made the sole religion of the state (Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, pp. 91-93).

So, from the simple beginning of a group of people who trusted Christ alone for eternal life, being baptized, and forming autonomous churches, Christianity slid into being a state church, baptizing infants and teaching that people had to do something, like be baptized, to be saved. These notions did not come out of the New Testament. They developed over time. Tradition became as authoritative as Scripture.

By the time of the Protestant Reformation, churches generally 1) accepted tradition as well as Scripture as authoritative, 2) preached salvation was by doing something, 3) practiced baptizing infants, and 4) were state churches. Not all churches accepted these ideas. Periodically, churches, even groups of churches, arose that were separate from the mainstream "organized" church.

In other words, over hundreds of years, the church slowly slid away from what it was supposed to be according to the Bible to something very different from what God intended.

## The Schism of the Church (1054)

A great schism divided Christianity in 1054. The roots of the schism go back hundreds of years. In 330, Constantine moved his capital to Constantinople. In 395, Theodosius I put the eastern and western areas of the Roman Empire under separate administrators. The separation of the East and West was finalized when the Roman Empire fell in the latter part of the fifth century. The churches in the East were under the control of the Emperor. Without effective political control in the West, the bishop of Rome (later called the Pope) became the leader, especially during a crisis. In a sense, the Emperors in the East were almost Popes and the Popes in the West were almost emperors.

In 1054 AD, the churches in the East and the churches in the West split. The patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, condemned the church in the West for the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist. Leo IX, the Bishop of Rome, sent a delegation to the East to settle the dispute. As a result of the discussions, the differences of opinion only widened. On July 16, 1054, the delegation put a decree of excommunication of the patriarch and his followers on the high altar of the cathedral church of St. Sophia. Not to be outdone, the patriarch anathematized the bishop of Rome and his followers. Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI removed this mutual excommunication on December 7, 1965 (Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, pp. 203-206).

From that point, Christianity was split into the Orthodox churches in the East and the **Roman Catholic Church** in the West (west of Greece). The Eastern churches were divided along national lines. The major divisions of Orthodox churches are the **Greek Orthodox Church**, the **Russian Orthodox Church**, the **Antiochian Orthodox Church**, and the **Coptic Orthodox Church** (Egyptian).

## The Protestant Split (1517)

Centuries after the Great Schism, Protestants split away from the Roman Catholic Church. Just before the Protestant Reformation, virtually everyone in Europe was a Roman Catholic. At that time, the consensus was that 1) there were two authorities, the Bible and tradition, 2) there was a state church, 3) salvation was obtained by doing something, and 4) infants were routinely baptized. The reformers protested some of these unbiblical practices. In England, the split from the Roman Catholic Church was because of Henry VIII, a king, not a reformer. John Knox was the reformer in Scotland.

*Martin Luther (1483-1546)* Luther was a Roman Catholic priest and professor at Wittenberg, Germany. Between 1512 and 1516, through studying Scripture, he realized that justification is by faith.

In 1517, the Catholic Dominican preacher Tetzel began selling indulgences, which he claimed gave forgiveness of sin, to raise money to build Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. On October 31, 1517, Luther publicly protested by posting 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The purpose of such an act was to debate these issues. This date and this act are usually considered the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. It was nothing more than an attempt to *reform* the Catholic Church by *protesting* the selling of indulgences for the forgiveness of sins. It quickly became much more serious and widespread.

By the fall of 1518, Luther publicly denied the Pope as the final authority and insisted on the Bible being the only authority. *Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone) became the essence of the Reformation. The Lutheran Church became the state church of Germany. Today, in America, there are a number of different Lutheran denominations, including the **Lutheran Church**—**Missouri Synod**, the **Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Synod,** the **Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America**, etc.

*Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531)* Zwingli was also a Roman Catholic priest. In 1519, he became a pastor in Zurich, Switzerland and as a result of coming in contact with Lutheran ideas, he was converted. In his *Sixty-seven Articles*, Zwingli emphasized the authority of the Bible, salvation by faith, the headship of Christ in the churches, and the right of the clergy to marry.

By the way, in 1529, Luther and Zwingli had a meeting and could not agree on Christ's presence in communion. Zwingli died in 1531 and, eventually, his followers merged with the Calvinists in the Reformed Church of Switzerland (1549).

*John Calvin (1509-1564)* Calvin studied at the University of Paris, where his cousin introduced him to Protestant ideas. About 1533, he was converted to the ideas of the Reformation and, at the age of 26, completed the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), the first systematic theology in the church history. In 1536, he began his ministry in Geneva, Switzerland, where he spent the rest of his life except for a brief period. The Reformed Church was the state church of Geneva. Today, there are several Reformed denominations in America, including **The Reformed Church in America** and **The Christian Reformed Church.**

All three of the major reformers believed that 1) the Scriptures are the only authority, and 2) salvation is by faith, but they also believed that 3) there was a state church, and 4) infants were to be baptized. In other words, they protested *some* of the departures from Scripture, but they also retained some of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

*Henry VIII (1491-1547)* There was a Reformation of the church in Roman Catholic England, but it was different than the Reformation in any other country. Henry VIII wanted a legitimate male heir, but his wife Catherine never had a son. The Roman Catholic Church, the church in

England at the time, forbade divorce. So, to divorce Catherine and marry the woman he loved, Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII freed the church from the papacy and put it under royal control as a national church. The Act of Supremacy of 1534 declared that the king was "the supreme head of the church of England." The Roman Catholic Church in England became the **Anglican Church** (or, as the British say, the **Church of England)**. "Anglican" means "of England" because the English people were of Anglo-Saxon descent. In America, the Anglican Church became known as **The Episcopal Church (**although some call themselves Anglican**)**.

By the way, Anne Boleyn had a girl, Elizabeth. Anne was beheaded for adultery in 1539. Henry then married Jane Seymour, who bore a son named Edward before she died. Henry later married Anne of Cleves, whom he executed and Catherine Parr, who outlived him. In his will, Henry decreed that his son should take the throne, followed by Mary, followed by Elizabeth.

Hence, like the Lutheran Church and the Reformed Church, the Anglican Church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church to form another state church and like the "Reformation churches," it retained some of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

*John Knox (ca. 1514-1572)* Knox was ordained to the priesthood in 1536. He was greatly influenced by Calvin, even spending time in Geneva. In 1560, he led the Scottish Parliament to declare that the Pope no longer had jurisdiction over the churches in Scotland, to forbid the Mass, and to adopt a Calvinistic confession of faith. Like Luther and Calvin, Knox instituted the Reformation through the civil authorities. The Scottish Church was organized into presbyteries, synods, and a national assembly. The Presbyterian Church eventually became the established Church in Scotland. Today, there are several Presbyterian denominations in America, including the **Bible Presbyterian Church**, the **Orthodox Presbyterian Church**, the **Presbyterian Church in America**, the **United Presbyterian Church of North America**, etc.

To sum up, the Reformation began in Germany and spread from there. Lutheranism began in Germany, and the Reformed Church emerged in Switzerland. John Knox studied in Geneva and took the ideas of the Reformed Church back to Scotland, where the Presbyterian Church was eventually formed. Thus, in protesting Roman Catholicism, the Lutheran Church in Germany, the Reformed Church in Geneva, the Anglican Church in England (the Episcopal Church in America), and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland were formed. *All Reformation churches were state churches.*

The Reformation churches: 1) returned to the belief that Scripture is the only authority for faith and practice, 2) preached justification by faith alone, 3) still practiced baptizing infants, and 4) remained state churches.

## The Separation

People historians call "radical reformers" felt that the reformers did not go far enough and, thus, separated from them. The Reformed movement consisted of people within the Roman Catholic Church who split away from it, so the radical reformers were within the Reformed movement and separated from it.

*The Anabaptists* The Anabaptists were radical reformers. There were many different Anabaptist groups with slight variations of beliefs, but there were several doctrines all Anabaptists held in common. They did not want to reform the church; they wanted to restore it to what they felt the church was supposed to be according to the Bible. They believed that the Bible was the sole authority for faith and practice, that a church should consist of the regenerated people rather than a state church with unsaved people in it, and that believers, not infants, should be baptized.

This last issue is how they got their name. The word "Anabaptist" means "second baptism." Since virtually everyone in Roman Catholic Europe had been baptized as an infant, when the Anabaptists baptized adults, they were baptizing people a second time. The Reformers broke with Roman Catholicism but continued the practice of infant baptism. By rejecting infant baptism and insisting that Scripture taught believer's baptism, the Anabaptists broke with the Reformers.

Conrad Grebel (1498-1526) is considered the founder of the Swiss Anabaptist movement. He was converted in 1522 and worked closely with Zwingli. Zwingli wanted the city council of Zurich to make the changes in the state church called for by Scripture. His early view that infant baptism had no biblical basis appealed to Grebel.

After several years of debate over the civil government's role in the Reformation of the Church, on January 21, 1525, the Zurich city council forbade the "radicals" to assemble or disseminate their views. That evening, in the neighboring town of Zollikon, Grebel broke with Zwingli and baptized George Blaurock, who then baptized Grebel and several others. That was the first "free church," free from the state, in modern times. These and other Anabaptists were so oppressed with fines and exile that by 1535, the movement was practically nonexistent in Zurich. The **Amish** of Pennsylvania trace their roots to this group.

Balthasar Hubmaier (ca. 1481-1528) was an early leader of the German Anabaptists. He pastored at Waldshut, a town near the Swiss border. As a result of his contact with the Swiss Anabaptists, he adopted their views. In 1525, he and three hundred followers were baptized by affusion (pouring water over the head). He was burned at the stake in 1528.

In 1535, an Anabaptist group with radical views almost completely destroyed the Anabaptist movement. With cruelty and destruction, they sought to establish the millennial kingdom in the Catholic city of Münster. Jan van Leyden pronounced the north German city a new Zion. He had himself crowned king, took sixteen wives, confiscated all private property, and expelled all Lutherans and Catholics. In a reign of terror, he executed all who opposed him. The Münster Rebellion, as it was called, was suppressed, but it caused the Anabaptists all over Europe to be persecuted because, like the fanatics at Münster, they were a threat to law and order.

In 1536, a Roman Catholic priest named Menno Simons (1496-1561), who had embraced Anabaptist views and had given up his priesthood, assumed the leadership of the Anabaptist movement. In the Netherlands, the Anabaptists adopted the name "brethren" to eliminate the stigma attached to the name "Anabaptist." After his death, the brethren were known as the **Mennonites**.

*(The Puritans)* The Puritans were not "Separatists," but they were the next development that ultimately produced the Separatists. As has been mentioned, the Anglican Church was created because Henry VIII wanted to divorce Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn. Unlike the Reformed churches, it was not formed because of theology. As a result, the Anglican Church still resembled the Catholic Church in many ways. Some within it claimed that too many "rags of popery" were still in the church. So, they wanted to *purify* the Anglican Church. Although various leaders wanted to do that for many years, they were not nicknamed "Puritans" until after 1560.

The Puritans wanted to purify the church in accordance with the Scriptures *from within the church*. Theologically, they followed the Calvinism of William Ames (1576-1633) and William Perkins (1558-1602; Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 335). At first, their objective was to rid the Anglican Church of Catholic practices such as the liturgy, the sign of the cross, etc. Later, the focus of reform turned to theology and church government. After 1560, they were nicknamed Puritans.

Among the Puritans, there were several different ideas concerning church government. Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603), a professor of theology at Cambridge, and his followers adopted a Calvinistic theology and a Presbyterian form of government. They opposed government by Bishops and wanted a Presbyterian state Church. According to this view, elders elected by the congregation should rule the church. This system was essentially that of Calvin. Henry Jacob (1563-1624) and his followers favored congregationalism. They desired a congregational state church. In 1603, Jacob was imprisoned for his view that each congregation be allowed to choose its pastor and manage its affairs. These were known as Independents, but *they did not want to separate from the Anglican Church*.

*The Separatist* Others did want to separate. Appropriately, they were called Separatists. As early as about 1567, Richard Fitz set up a church based on a church covenant.

Robert Browne (ca. 1550-1633) and his followers wanted the separation of church and state and the congregational government of the church. In 1580 or 1581, he formed a church that used a covenant that bound Christians together. As a result, he had to flee England (later, others were hanged for such views). He later returned, was ordained in the Anglican Church, and served there for the remainder of his life.

John Robinson (ca. 1575-1625) was the pastor of a Separatist group in England. Under his leadership, the group settled in Leyden, Holland, in 1608. In 1620, members of this group migrated to America on the Mayflower.

*The Baptists* There are three theories of the origin of the Baptist church. The secessionist theory is that Baptist churches existed from New Testament times, beginning with John the Baptist, the ministry of Christ, or the Day of Pentecost. According to this theory, a chain of churches through the ages has been Baptistic. The succession has been explained as either 1) apostolic (a chain of ordination), 2) baptismal (a string of proper baptisms), 3) church (a sequence of local churches with certain characteristics), 4) principles (a series of individuals or groups who have held to Baptist principles).

Several seventeenth and nineteenth-century Baptist historians held this view. In the early twentieth century, J. M. Carroll, a Southern Baptist in Texas, wrote a popular booklet, The *Trail of Blood*, exposing this theory. While there have been groups throughout church history that have adhered to beliefs common to Baptist doctrine, a continuous chain cannot be documented historically.

The Anabaptist hypothesis is that Baptists came from the Anabaptists. Some Anabaptist beliefs like religious liberty, congregational autonomy, and believer's baptism closely parallel Baptist teaching, but the Anabaptists believed in several major things that have not characterized Baptist churches, such as pacifism, soul sleep, refusing to hold public office, and refusing to take an oath. Furthermore, a direct historical link between Anabaptists and Baptists is difficult to document.

The English Separatist view is that Baptists came from the Puritan *Separatists*. The Puritans wanted to "purify" the Anglican Church in accordance with the Scripture *from within the church*. The Separatists decided to separate from the Anglican Church. Most scholars believe the Baptist movement grew out of the seventeenth-century Puritan Separatists. Today, in America, there are a large number of Baptist denominations, including **American Baptist Churches**, **Southern Baptist Convention**, **Baptist General Conference**, **Conservative Baptist Association of America**, **General Association of General Baptists**, **Free Will Baptists, Seventh Day Baptists**, **Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists**, etc.

John Smyth (ca. 1565-1612) was an Anglican preacher who became a Separatist. Thomas Helwys was also a noted Separatist and a member of Smyth's congregation. About 1608,

persecution convinced Smyth and Helwys to lead their congregation to Amsterdam. Smith became convinced that "the churches of the apostolic constitution consisted of saints only" and that baptism should be reserved for believers. He found no warrant in Scripture for infant baptism. He set forth his views in a pamphlet issued in 1609 entitled *The Character of the Beast*. In that same year, he baptized (by pouring) himself, Thomas Helwys, and other members of his flock, a total of about forty. Later, Smyth was introduced to the Mennonites. He concluded that they constituted a genuine church and recommended that his congregation join with them. Helwys and others opposed that move and returned to England. The group that remained in Amsterdam eventually disbanded.

Thomas Helwys (ca. 1550-ca. 1616) and his followers returned to England and organized the first English Baptist Church (ca. 1612). They practiced baptism by affusion (pouring) and held to the Arminian doctrine of unlimited atonement. Consequently, they were known as General Baptists because they held a general (unlimited) atonement. Thus, the first English Baptist Church emerged from the Separatist, Congregationalist group of Puritans.

In 1638, a Baptist church was formed in London, which was more Calvinistic, adhering to a particular (limited) atonement and the covenant theology expressed in the Westminster Confession. In 1640, some members of the Particular Baptists became convinced that baptism should be by immersion.

In 1792, Englishman William Carey (1761-1834) was instrumental in organizing the Baptist Missionary Society. He became its first missionary to India. This began the modern missionary movement.

While Baptists have formulated statements of faith such as the London Confession (1689) and the Philadelphia Confession (1742), which closely followed the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians and the New Hampshire Confession (1832), which is less strongly Calvinistic, these confessions have no specific authority. Baptists reject authoritative creeds because they believe the Bible is the sole source of authority in questions of faith.

There are, however, certain cardinal principles to which all Baptists adhere, including the authority of the Scripture, the separation of church and state, the autonomy of the local church, church membership being limited to believers, believer's baptism, and the priesthood of all believers (that is, each believer has the right to interpret the Scripture according to the dictates of conscience).

*The Methodist* John Wesley (1703-1791) was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1728. He became a leader of the "Holy Club" at Oxford. The members of this club were nicknamed "Methodists" by the students because of their methodical Bible study, prayer habits, and regular social visits in jails and the homes of the poor. Between 1735 and 1737, Wesley served as a missionary in the state of Georgia. After returning to England, on May 24, 1738, while listening to the reading of Luther's preface to his *Commentary on Romans*, Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" and he trusted Christ alone for salvation. His brother, Charles, had a similar experience two days later. John, who preached over 42,000 sermons and Charles, who wrote over 6,000 hymns, were the moving forces behind the formation of the Methodist Church. Because they broke away from the Anglican Church and not the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodists rightly belong in the Separatist category rather than the Reformation classification of denominations. Today in America, there are several Methodist denominations, including the **United Methodist Church**, the **Southern Methodist Church**, the **Evangelical Methodist Church**, the **Primitive Methodist Church**, the **Church of the Nazarene**, the **Wesleyan Church**, etc.

The people who separated from the reformers formed churches that 1) believed that the Scripture was the final authority for faith and practice, 2) preached justification by faith alone, 3) practiced believer's baptism, and 4) founded autonomous churches. Historically, the majority of "Separatists" are the Mennonites, the Baptists, and the Methodists. Others today, such as the Congregationalists, could be included in this category.

## THE SPLINTERS

Perhaps another category of denominations should be added. This group of churches did not break away from the Catholic Church or the Reformed churches but away from one of the churches in the Separatist category, namely, the Methodist church. In that sense, these are splinter groups from the Methodists.

*Pentecostalism* In October of 1900, Charles F. Parham began the Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. Before leaving to speak in Kansas City, he assigned the students the task of determining the "Bible evidence of the baptism of the Holy Ghost." When he returned, all the students reported that the "indisputable proof" was that people in the New Testament spoke with other tongues. At the watch night service (December 31, 1900), Agnes N. Ozman (later LaBerge) requested that Parham lay hands on her so that she could receive the Holy Spirit because "she hoped to go to foreign fields." When he did that and prayed, she "began speaking in the Chinese language and was unable to speak in English for three days." Parham called this "the restoration of Pentecostal power." With that act at Bethel Bible School, the Pentecostal movement was born. The date that is usually given is January 1, 1901. Several days later, Parham spoke in the "Sweedish (sic) tongue, which later changed to other languages." Parham is the first person in church history to lay hands on a Christian for that individual to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues (Sarah E. Parham, *The Life of Charles F. Parham*. Baxter Springs, Kansas, 1930).

Parham traveled to Texas. In 1905, a black Holiness preacher named William J. Seymour came under the tutelage of Parham in Alvin, Texas, a few miles south of Houston. Seymour went to Los Angeles, where he began meeting in a house on Bonnie Brae Street. Those meetings were moved to Azusa Street in downtown Los Angeles. From there, starting in 1906, Pentecostalism spread.

Today, in America, the largest Pentecostal churches are the **Assemblies of God** and the **Church of God in Christ.** There are many other much smaller Pentecostal denominations.

*The Charismatic Movement* Most historians date the beginning of the charismatic movement to April 3, 1960. On that day, Dennis Bennett, the rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California, announced to his congregation that he had received the fullness of the Holy Spirit with "speaking in unknown tongues." After much opposition, Bennett resigned from his position at St. Mark's and accepted an invitation to become vicar of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Seattle, Washington, which grew to be one of the strongest charismatic churches in the Northwest. For a decade, it was one of the major centers from which speaking in tongues would spread worldwide, especially in the mainline denomination.

Shortly after Bennett's experience in Van Nuys, California, Larry Christensen, a Lutheran pastor in San Pedro, California, said the same thing. The Pentecostal experience had crossed traditional denominational lines. The **Charismatic** movement was born.

In 1967, a group of Catholics at Notre Dame claimed to have the Pentecostal experience. Thus, the Catholic charismatic movement was launched.

The Charismatic Movement originated within mainline denominational churches but eventually formed its own churches. Today, the major Charismatic denominations in America are **Calvary Chapels** and the **Vineyard**, although many others exist.

The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches 1) recognize the Scripture alone as their authority, 2) preach salvation by faith, 3) baptize believers, and 4) are autonomous churches. They would add that the gift of tongues is valid for today.

**Summary:** In the beginning, churches 1) accepted Scripture as the only authority for faith and practice, 2) preached salvation by faith, 3) practiced baptizing those who believed, and 4) were autonomous congregations. Soon after the first century, churches began slipping away from what they were originally. Several centuries after the great schism between the East and the West, the Reformers split away from the Roman Catholic Church over the issues of the authority of the Scripture and salvation by faith. The "radical reformers" agreed with the Reformers concerning the authority of the Scripture and salvation by faith but separated from them over the nature of the church (made up of only believers and separated from the state) and who should be baptized (infants or believers). Another group of churches broke away from the latter group over speaking in tongues, though some within traditional denominations now embrace that experience.

Five issues have provoked the formation of denominations, namely: 1) the authority of Scripture alone (versus Scripture and tradition), 2) salvation by faith alone (versus salvation by faith and works), 3) baptism of only believers (versus the baptism of infants), 4) the autonomy of the local church (versus some hierarchy over the local church), and 5) speaking in tongues today (versus tongues being for the first-century only). Each Protestant denomination was formed to return to what they believed was a biblical position on one or more of these issues. Some did not go far enough. Some went too far.