

What Caused Denominations To Come Into Existence?

Bible Answers About Denominations

The word “denomination” means, “A collection of individuals classed together under the same name; a religious sect or body having a common faith and organization, and designated by a distinctive name.” A denomination is essentially any aggregation of congregations, the sum of which is less than all of the universal church of Christ. Denominations are commonly recognized as religious bodies known by specific names (or, doctrines, organizations, etc.). As the word is used in most Protestant literature, a denomination is any “Christian” church that believes itself to be a part of the universal church (of Christ), but only one part among many (which may differ in doctrine or practice).

The threads of modern denominationalism reach back to the early years of the second century. Departures from the ancient pattern first appeared in the generation which followed that taught personally by the apostles and original disciples. Many of those departures have continued until today. Ignatius chronicled and defended the rise of the “monarchical bishop” over the eldership. This phenomenon began early in the second century, and soon became the norm. It survives (and thrives) in Roman Catholicism, in the “pastor” system characteristic of modern denominations, and in the “discipling” movement of recent years. The rise of Gnosticism, and then the heresy of Montanus, in the mid second century also caused some to abandon the original pattern of the faith, to form their own “Christian” religions. These differed in doctrine from the apostolic churches, but were insignificant in actual size.

By the seventh century, the primacy of the Roman bishop over other bishops became an accomplished fact. Long the seat of Imperial government, the city of Rome lent to that bishop an extra prestige and visibility which some (Innocent I, 402-417; Leo I, 440-461; Felix III, 483-492; et al.) exploited as much as possible. The commonly accepted date (among Protestants) for the establishment of the Roman Catholic religion is 606 A.D., when Boniface III managed to assert and maintain (through military might) the title of “universal bishop.” It was also during this period that the seeds were sown for the next great division in “Christendom.” Constantine in 330 had moved the Imperial capital from Rome to “New Rome” (Constantinople); this began a rift between the Eastern (“Greek”) churches and the Western (“Roman”) churches which ultimately led to the separate establishment of the Eastern Orthodox Church (about 800 A.D.). The Russian Orthodox Church declared its independence from the patriarch of Constantinople in 1448. Further schisms among the heirs of these apostasies continue to this day, with the “Eastern” denominations developing mostly along national lines, while the “Western” denominations progressed through theological and doctrinal differences. These departures from the Bible pattern, and divisions based on man-made doctrines brought about the establishment of the first denominations.

By the sixteenth century, men began awakening to the disastrous “mess” they had made of “Christianity.” Under the guidance of Roman Catholic popes and leaders, what passed for “Christianity” had come to greatly resemble heathenism. Fleshly lusts were endorsed and “indulged,” ignorance of God’s Word was encouraged among the populace, and political dominance was the chief objective of much that passed for “faith.”

In 1517, Martin Luther publicly challenged the practices and teachings of Roman Catholicism in a series of 95 theses he nailed to the door of the castle church building in Wittenburg (Germany). He did not intend to leave the Catholic Church, nor divide it, but to “reform” it into the image of the apostolic church. His actions and teachings, however, along with those of men like Philip Melanckthon and Uldrich Zwingli, promulgated the establishment of Lutheranism. Martin Luther seized upon the statement by Paul in Romans “The just shall live by faith” as being the answer to his unrest and confusion with regard to the intricate rituals, forms, and ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church and concluded that the just shall live by faith only. The reformation was grounded in the “faith only” doctrine from the very outset. This was one of Luther’s chief erroneous concepts, and his other chief erroneous concept was that he should expend his efforts in an attempt to reform the then Roman Catholic Church. He did not entertain the concept that he should resort to the New Testament as his standard of authority and thus proceed from there to restore the New Testament Church.

Presbyterianism appeared next, founded on the teachings of John Calvin. In 1533, John Calvin experienced “a sudden conversion,” and he joined the cause of the reformation. Though he rejected the papal authority of the Roman Catholic Church, together with the numerous rituals and regulations, yet he held many of the Catholic doctrines – particularly the doctrine of original sin and predestination. Calvin proceeded to systematize protestant thought through his “Institutes of the Christian Religion.” Calvin’s system consisted of five very erroneous doctrines – namely, total depravity, unconditional predestination, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.

Another contributing cause of the rise of denominationalism was the crystallizing of the doctrine of divine grace – or the direct operation of the Holy Spirit – among all of the denominations. The case is that this doctrine is held in common by all of the denominational churches – some churches hold that this direct operation is irresistible; whereas, others hold that the Holy Spirit, with effort, can be resisted. This doctrine made every man who “received” the Holy Spirit a standard of authority within himself. The Bible very naturally took second place with every person who imagined that he had received an experience of grace as a result of a direct operation of the Holy Spirit.

Still another contributing cause of the rise of denominationalism were the efforts of certain movements, from time to time, to move closer to the truth. To illustrate, the sect of the Anabaptists arose to oppose infant baptism. Those of the sect rightfully declared that baptism should be administered to believers only, but they granted that sprinkling is baptism. In about 1608, John Smyth baptized himself and began to advocate that only immersion would suffice for baptism – a step closer to the truth – but he did not regard baptism as being a condition of pardon for the alien sinner. This gave rise to the General Baptists. In 1644, there arose the Particular Baptist – which was a sect devoted to the Calvinist doctrine that came to embrace immersion only as baptism. In America the Particular Baptist divided into two different fellowships – the Hard Shell Baptist and the American Baptist, which includes especially the now Missionary Baptist. The Hard Shell Baptist

teaches that the direct operation of the Holy Spirit is irresistible; whereas, the Missionary Baptists hold that, with effort, the direct operation of the Holy Spirit can be resisted.

The crux of all this is that every erroneous doctrine embraced made for division; and further, every step toward truth provoked violent reactions. Extremes begot extremes – the Lutherans against the Calvinists, the Calvinists against the Armenians, the bishops against the presbyters, and the Presbyterians among themselves. There was a pressing need for a restoration based solely on the authority of the New Testament. This is the Biblical plea and this is our plea as New Testament Christians. Would you join with us and plead for a restoration of the New Testament Church based upon God's Word?

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