

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

MADE EASY



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Christian Denominations Made Easy
Copyright © 2025 Rose Publishing
Published by Rose Publishing
An imprint of Tyndale House Ministries
Carol Stream, Illinois
rose-publishing.com

The Made Easy series is a collection of concise, pocket-sized books that summarize key biblical teachings and provide clear, user-friendly explanations to common questions about the Christian faith. Find more Made Easy books at rose-publishing.com.

ISBN 978-1-4964-9026-1

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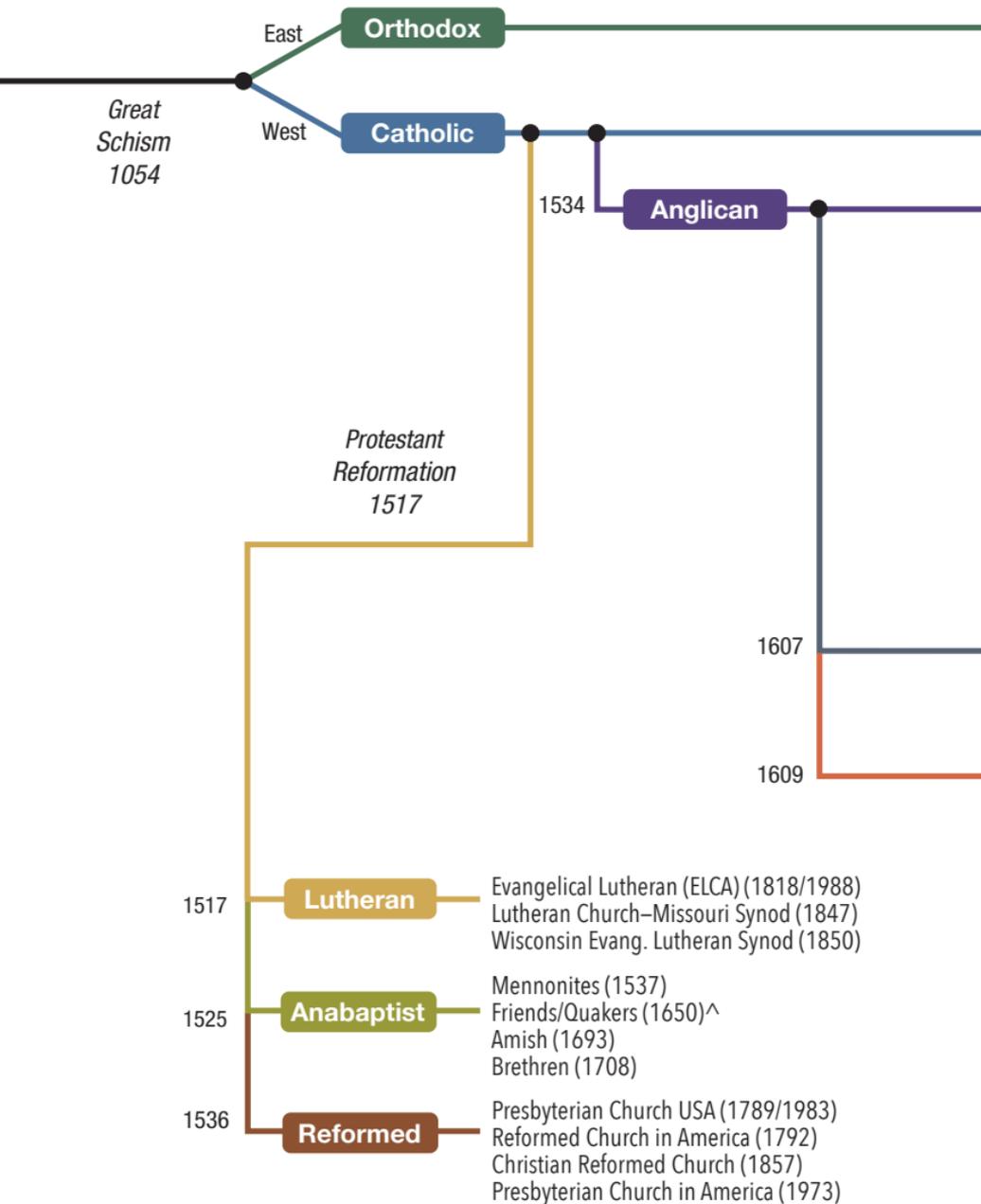
Printed in the United States of America
July 2025, 1st printing

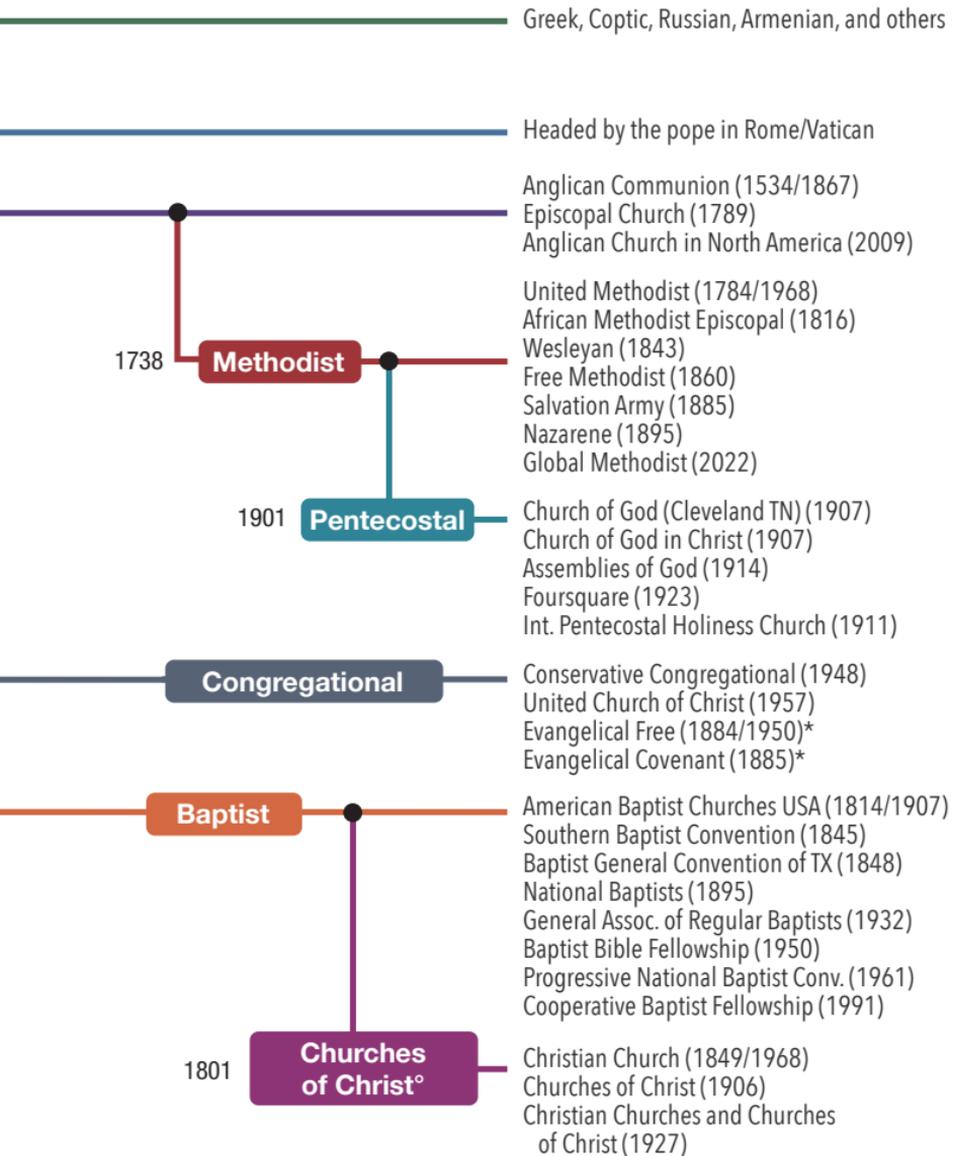


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FAMILY TREE OF DENOMINATIONS





* Historically from Lutheranism; Congregational in polity

^ Historically from Anglicanism; Anabaptist in practice

^o Arose from various Protestant denominations



WHAT ARE CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS?

WHAT IS A DENOMINATION?

In a strict sense, a denomination is a group of congregations and church bodies that associate together and have a formal name by which the group is known, such as “American Baptists Churches USA.” In a looser sense, a denomination may be churches that share a similar heritage, as in “the Baptists.” They can also be administrative organizations with affiliated congregations, as in “the Southern Baptist Convention.”

Many denominations are administratively distinct groups (often in different nations or states) that share beliefs and objectives. Denominations seek to foster unity among historically related churches. They maintain consistency in doctrine and practice as they grow and establish new, like-minded congregations. Working together as a denomination, churches can pool resources to establish hospitals, universities, mission agencies, seminaries, publishing houses, and provide disaster relief.

The word *denomination* comes from the Latin *denominare*, which means “to name” or “to dub.” Some denominational groups are named after their founders, such as the Mennonites, who were founded by Menno

Simons, a prominent Dutch Reformer in the 16th century. Others acquired names that reflect a distinctive teaching or spiritual practice, such as Holiness churches, which sought the complete holiness (or sanctification) of Christians. Some denominational names started as disparaging nicknames. For example, supporters of the German Reformer Martin Luther preferred to be called “evangelicals” from the Greek word *euangelion*, referring to the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ. But outsiders called them “Lutherans,” and in time, Luther’s adherents accepted the name. In fact, the name “Christians” was itself a nickname given to believers in Christ by pagans in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

It can be difficult nowadays to identify which denomination (if any) a local church belongs to. Many churches no longer include their denominational affiliation within their name, while still remaining part of the denomination; for example, calling their church something like “Community Church” instead of “First Baptist.” (You may need to check their website or ask someone at the church to find out its denomination.) Also, many unrelated denominations have similar names. For instance, the United Church of Christ is not related to the Churches of Christ and differs from it in doctrine and practice.

Some groups do not like to be labeled as a denomination, even though in the usual sense they are a denomination. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) started off in the 19th century as an anti-denominational revival

movement, but it eventually took on all the features of a denomination. Calvary Chapel churches, which emerged out of the Jesus Movement in the 1960s, prefer not to be classified as a denomination, but today their churches share the same name, have policies for their congregations and leaders, and so on, much like a denomination.

One of the most noticeable trends today is the rise of nondenominational churches, especially in the US. These are churches with no official ties to a denomination or direct connection to a historical denominational movement. Of the 100 fastest-growing churches in the US, nearly half (48%) are identified as nondenominational.¹

WHAT MAKES THE DENOMINATIONS CHRISTIAN?

Christianity, simply put, is the world religion that originated with Jesus Christ. Today there are many different types of Christian churches, denominations, and movements. In the US, Christian denominations number into the hundreds, and globally into the thousands. Yet all major branches or streams of Christianity have historically agreed on some basic beliefs. So before we look at what makes the denominations in this book different, it is important to understand what makes them similar—in other words, what makes them *Christian*.

SCRIPTURE

All Christians recognize the Bible—two collections of books—as Scripture, that is, divinely revealed writings.

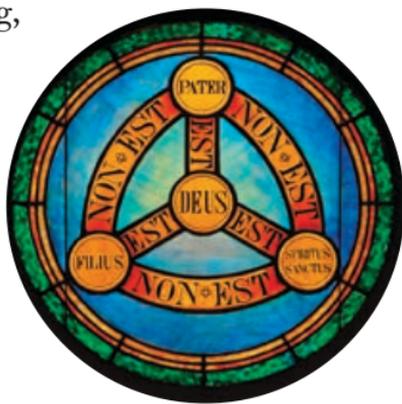
The Old Testament (c. 1400–400 BC) is the Christian term for a collection of texts written before the time of Jesus. This collection includes at least 39 books accepted also in Judaism as Scripture. For Catholics and Orthodox Christians, it also includes other Jewish writings, referred to as deuterocanonical writings or the deuterocanon; Protestants call them the Apocrypha.

The New Testament (c. AD 45–100) is a collection of 27 texts written by Christian apostles (spokespersons for Jesus Christ) and their associates.

These books together are called the Bible and are considered the canon (rule, authoritative list) of Scripture.

GOD

Christians are monotheists, that is, they believe in *one* God. Christians worship one God who alone created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing, meaning without using some eternal substance). God alone sustains and rules over all things. He is a personal being of spirit, not of matter. He has always existed and will always exist as the unchanging God. He alone has absolute power and knowledge. God is perfect in holiness, goodness, justice, and love.



Trinity symbol

Through events unfolding in the 1st century AD, Christians came to understand this one God to exist eternally in three “Persons”: God the Father, his eternal Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Later theologians called this the Trinity.

JESUS CHRIST

Historically, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew in the 1st century who taught about the coming of God’s kingdom. During his short, three-year ministry on earth, Jesus performed miracles, healed the sick, taught his disciples, confronted the religious leaders of his day, and claimed God as his Father. He was put to death by order of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Nailed to a cross, killed, and his body placed in a tomb, Jesus laid down his life. Three days later, the tomb was discovered empty, for he had risen from the dead. The resurrected Jesus appeared to family members and many disciples. He then ascended to heaven, promising to return again one day.

These events convinced many people that Jesus was truly the Messiah (“Christ”) that God had promised to the Jews in the Old Testament. As they reflected on his miracles, holy life, and resurrection in the light of what he said about himself, they understood that Jesus was the divine Son of God. The Father had sent his Son from heaven to die for our salvation. The belief that Jesus was both fully divine (God by nature) and fully human is known in Christian theology as the Incarnation.

SALVATION

Christians believe that human beings are accountable to God for their behavior. All people (except Christ) are subject to eternal condemnation for the sins or offenses they commit. By coming as a human, living a sinless life, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead, Jesus Christ provided the means for people to be saved from condemnation. This salvation is a free gift of God's grace (undeserved favor) that he offers those who have genuine faith (trust) in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

THE AFTERLIFE

Believers who have died are with Christ spiritually while they await the return of Christ. At that time, all the dead will be raised, and Christ will judge all humanity. Those counted as righteous through the saving work of Christ will enjoy eternal life in immortal, glorified human bodies. They will live forever in a world free of sin and death. The Bible calls this future world "the new heavens and new earth." Christians often refer to it more simply as heaven. Those counted as wicked, who did not turn away from their sins and trust in God's mercy displayed in Christ, will be eternally separated from God (what is traditionally called hell).

THE CHURCH

The church is the community of people who have entered into relationship (both corporately and individually) with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The church in this sense includes all believers in Jesus, both living and

dead, since the beginning of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2). This is sometimes called the church universal to distinguish it from the local church, which refers to specific congregations or groups of congregations (like a denomination) who meet together regularly.

SACRAMENTS/ORDINANCES

Virtually all Christian churches practice at least two rites, called either sacraments or ordinances.

The first is baptism. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ, after his resurrection, told his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is initiation with water to welcome people into the church. For many, it is a way to publicly proclaim faith in Christ. Baptism methods and requirements vary across denominations.

- ◆ Many churches will baptize infants, seeing baptism as being primarily about God initiating a person into the covenant community, based on the Old Testament model of circumcision. This includes Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Presbyterian traditions, among others.
- ◆ Other churches baptize only adults and older children who profess faith in Jesus, seeing baptism as primarily about a person’s identification with the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. This includes most Churches of Christ, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches.

- ◆ The methods of baptism in different churches may be sprinkling, pouring, or immersion.

The second sacrament is a rite of eating bread and drinking wine or grape juice.

This practice comes from the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples when he broke bread and drank wine, telling his followers to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Participants recall Jesus’s sacrificial



death on the cross, with the bread representing his body broken and the wine his blood poured out. Different denominations call this rite Communion, the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper.

ETHICS

The Christian ethic is shaped by the liberating words of Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39). The Christian life and the church (including local bodies and denominations) are to be characterized by love of God and love of others.

In modern times, many denominations have divided over issues such as abortion, the ordination of women, same-sex marriage, and other matters of gender and sexuality.

Historically and traditionally, the major branches of Christianity have been pro-life (opposed to abortion), taught that God created humans as male and female, viewed marriage as the union of a man and a woman, regarded homosexual activity as sinful, and ordained only men to the clergy. Most denominations today have varying percentages of members and local churches who question or reject these teachings, and the mainline denominations have abandoned these traditional views.



The next chapter focuses on major denominational traditions that historically accept the Bible as the full collection of Scripture, God as the creator of all things out of nothing, and the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as taught in the historic church creeds. As such, this book does not cover groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), or Unitarianism. Some specific denominations mentioned—especially mainline denominations—no longer hold to all of the following historical positions described, either officially or in practice. (See *Current Divisions and Trends* for further discussion.)