AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF PROTESTANTISM

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Lutherans

Traditionally, the Protestant Reformation is dated to 31 October 1517, when Martin Luther (1483-1546) attached to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany, a set of propositions (the *Ninety-five Theses*) that disputed Catholic practices on indulgences. By the time Luther was excommunicated by the pope (1521), he was teaching other doctrines that contradict Catholicism.

* Human nature was severely wounded by the fall. (Luther saw humans as far more damaged by the fall than Catholicism ever had.)
* Luther’s low opinion of human nature was one reason that Protestants eliminated most sensory aids to worship: candles, incense, vestments, statues, the rosary, icons, holy cards, etc.
* Justification (the establishment of a right relationship with God) is by faith alone. A person’s good works contribute nothing to salvation: faith is all that is required, and faith is a gift from God. (Catholicism says that, at justification, God gives a person hope and love as well as faith, so that love, and acts of love, are also involved in a person’s salvation.)
* Justification is forgiveness of sins only. Justification occurs when God acquits a human being of sins. (Catholicism teaches that justification also includes God transforming a person’s human nature, making the person more holy. That is why Catholicism celebrates saints [from Latin *sanctus*, holy] and Protestants for the most part do not.)
* Saved humans are not righteous (upright); they remain untransformed. Rather, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to them. Humans remain just as sinful after justification. Hence they are *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and a sinner.
* *Sola scriptura*: only the scriptures are authoritative in religion. Church Fathers, councils, papal decrees, the liturgy, traditions, etc., are not.
* Luther removed seven books from the Old Testament (Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch) and four from the New Testament (Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation). After Luther’s death, Lutherans added back the four New-Testament books. But for Protestants, the Old Testament books remain “apocrypha” (hidden, i.e., non-public: they are all right to read in private, but are not to be used in worship services or for doctrine).
* Indulgences (which lessen the time one is punished for sins) do not extend to purgatory. (Most Protestants now deny that purgatory, a place of purgation in the afterlife, even exists.)
* The church is the collection of all who believe in Christ. (Catholicism teaches that, in addition, Christ founded an institutional church.)
* Political leaders receive their authority directly from God, and it is up to them to reform the Church. (This position resulted in national churches rather than a universal church.)
* There are only two sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist (aka communion, or the Lord’s supper). (Luther eliminated Catholicism’s other five sacraments: confession, confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and anointing of the sick [last rites].)
* Luther denied the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that, during the Mass, the bread and wine cease to be bread and wine and become Christ’s actual body and blood). Instead, he taught that Christ is “in, with, and under” the bread and wine (a position which has sometimes been called “consubstantiation,” “con-” meaning “with”).
* The Eucharist is not a sacrifice. (Catholicism says that the offering of Christ’s body and blood on the altar during Mass is mystically connected to Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary.)

Anabaptists

Some reformers in Holland came to the conclusion that the Catholic practice of infant baptism is also not part of the Christian faith: baptism is only valid when a person consents to it. Since they and their children had already been baptized as infants, they began, in 1525, rebaptizing each other. The Greek prefix for “re-” is *ana*-, so they became known as “Anabaptists.” The major Anabaptist groups today are the Mennonites and the Amish. They are known for their pacifism (conscientious objection to war), and the Amish are known for rejecting some technological innovations.

Calvinists

John Calvin (1509-1564) largely adopted Luther’s ideas but added some new ones.

* He denied a natural knowledge of God (which is inferred from creation): God is only known from scripture.
* Determinism: God’s will determines all that happens, including all human actions, good or bad.
* Determinism led to the doctrine of irresistible grace. (God’s grace, when he offers it, cannot be rejected.)
* It also led to the doctrine of unconditional election. (God does not elect [choose] certain persons on the basis of any criterion; the only basis is his own inscrutable will.)
* It also led to the doctrine of perseverance of the saints (“saints” here meaning church members). (Since whatever God wills must happen, those chosen to be saved cannot fail to be saved.)
* Double predestination: even before creation, God predetermined who will end up in heaven and who will end up in hell. (Catholicism teaches single predestination: God wills the salvation of everyone but permits those who reject him to spend eternity separate from him.)
* From double predestination, it follows that Christ did not die for everyone but only for the elect, those whom God selected before creation. (This doctrine is called “limited atonement”).
* The Eucharist is neither transubstantiation nor consubstantiation, but a largely symbolic memorial of the Last Supper, done to strengthen faith.

Five of these Calvinist doctrines—total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints—are often grouped together under the acronym “TULIP.” (Calvinism dominated in Holland.)

Calvinism is also known as the “Reformed” tradition.

Anglicans and Presbyterians

King Henry VIII of England (reigned 1509-47) asked the pope to annul Henry’s marriage, but the pope refused. So, in 1534, Henry declared himself, rather than the pope, to be head of the Church in England. He kept most Catholic doctrines: 7 sacraments and so on. But during the reigns of his successors Edward VI (r. 1547-53) and Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), the Church of England became more Protestant and especially more Calvinist.

From Catholicism, the Church of England retained bishops. In fact, Anglicans in America became known as “Episcopalians.” (“Episcopalian” is from the Greek New-Testament word *episcopos*, “overseer.” In English, -*piscop*- became “bishop.”)

Meanwhile, John Knox (1513-72), a Scot who, in Geneva, Switzerland, learned Calvinism from Calvin himself, returned to Scotland and founded the Church of Scotland, which became the established church (the civic religion by law) in 1560. (Even today, these two national churches, the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, remain the established religions in their respective countries. By contrast, the United States in 1791 adopted the First Amendment to its Constitution, whose religion clause says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .”)

Members of the Church of Scotland became known as “Presbyterians”: each congregation is governed by a committee of elders. (“Presbyterian” is from the Greek New-Testament word *presbyteros*, “elder.” In English, *presbyt*- became “priest.”) Above the congregations are other representative groups: presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies.

Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists

One group of Calvinistic Anglicans wanted Anglicanism to be purified of its remaining “Catholic” practices (vestments, statues, etc.). They appeared around 1550 and became known as “Puritans.”

Some of these Puritans decided Anglicanism was too far gone to be reformed, so they separated from Anglicanism and became known as “Separatists.” Some Separatists thought that each congregation should decide for itself all matters of doctrine and discipline: no form of organization above the congregation should exist, except voluntary associations. These Separatists became known as “Congregationalists.”

Many Separatists, including many Congregationalists, fled Anglican persecution by emigrating to Holland and Belgium. In 1609, one group in Holland adopted the Anabaptist belief that only adults should be baptized, and they became known as “Baptists.”

A non-Baptist group of Congregationalists in Holland decided that starting afresh in the New World would be best. These “Pilgrims” landed at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts in 1620.

In 1652, George Fox (1624-91), an English Puritan, had a mystical experience. He founded the Society of Friends to restore Christianity to its New-Testament form. His group became known as the Quakers. (In Isaiah 66:2, God favors the one “who trembles [quakes] at my word.”) Fox emphasized accessing “the light within.” Many Quakers are, like Anabaptists, pacifists.

Almost a century later, a group of Anglicans branched off from the Anglican Church. They were called “Methodists” because their founder, John Wesley (1703-91), advised his followers to be methodical about becoming holy. Wesley had a mystical experience in 1738, a reasonable date for the founding of Methodism (although Wesley himself always saw the movement as part of the Church of England). The Methodists were not Calvinists; they were optimistic about human nature and believed that a person’s response to God’s offer of salvation affected that person’s salvation. Wesley also began the notion of a “second blessing”: at conversion one was justified, but a subsequent moment of grace perfected one’s holiness. This experience came to be known as being “born again.” (See John 3:3: “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”)

These groups that branched from Anglicanism in the 1500s-1700s—Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists—emphasized the need for a personal relationship with Christ. They were part of a larger movement called “pietism,” which manifested itself not only in Anglicanism but also in Lutheranism and Calvinism.

Early Evangelicals

Not just the Pilgrims, but members from all of the Protestant groups mentioned thus far crossed the Atlantic in the 1600s-1700s and flourished on American soil.

In the early 1700s, a religious revival began among the Puritans of New England. It spread through the American colonies and became known as the First Great Awakening (1727-c. 1775). Jonathan Edwards, Congregationalist theologian and president of Princeton University, preached “that individ­uals could have a direct relationship with Christ—and that Christ would save not just the apparently worthy, but all those who would receive His grace. [In response] People laughed and wept, some saw visions, and many were filled with hope and joy.” (FitzGerald, Frances. *The Evangelicals*: *The Struggle to Shape America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017. 16-17.)

Another religious revival began after the American Revolution and became known as the Second Great Awakening (1785-1860). Americans who entered the frontiers of Kentucky, Tennessee, and the South lived beyond the reach of the denominations. To ensure that they were “churched,” itinerant preachers held tent revivals. The preachers produced a simplified (sometimes anti-intellectual) frontier theology. It said, in effect: “You are a sinner in danger of eternal torment; only Christ can save you. A dramatic and emotional conversion is proof of your salvation.” Through the 1800s, this frontier theology accompanied pioneers all the way to the Pacific.

Because of their emphasis on the good news and on evangelism (preaching to win converts), the denominations that participated in the revivals—chiefly the Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist—became known as “evangelical.” (“Evangelical” is from the Greek New-Testament word *euanggelion*, “good news,” which in Old English was *godspel*, “glad tidings,” and in modern English is “gospel.”)

Pentecostals

On 1 January 1901, at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, a woman began speaking in tongues. This aroused interest in the “charisms” (spiritual gifts) that Paul mentions in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Ephesians 4. (Since, according to Acts 2, speaking in tongues occurred on the day of Pentecost, those who emphasize charisms are known as “Pentecostals.”)

In 1906, the center of the movement shifted to Asuza Street in Los Angeles, where black and white Pentecostals worshiped together. Pentecostals adopted from Methodism the emphasis on being born again.

Pentecostals are now the largest Protestant denominational family, with 280 million adherents worldwide. In recent years they have especially flourished in Latin America and Africa.

Fundamentalists

From 1910-15, conservative Protestant scholars wrote a collection of 90 essays in 12 paperback volumes; the volumes were entitled *The Fundamentals*: *A Testimony to the Truth*. The essays were largely a Calvinist reaction against the “higher criticism” (historical analysis) of the Bible that began in Germany in the 1600s and was by 1900 influential in many liberal American seminaries. (Higher criticism investigates the Bible with the same historical tools as would be applied to any other ancient text.) To counter higher criticism, *The Fundamentals* emphasized the inerrancy (errorless-ness) of the Bible to the point of saying that its original manuscripts had no errors whatsoever, even in matters of science and history.

Fundamentalists were soon distinguished from Evangelicals proper because of their intense opposition to secular culture and their refusal to cooperate even with non-fundamentalist Christians.

The fundamentalists came to prominence in 1925 at the Scopes trial. The state of Tennessee had outlawed the teaching of evolution; so when a high-school teacher in Dayton named John T. Scopes taught evolution, he was put on trial. The prosecuting attorney was William Jennings Bryan (who unsuccessfully ran for president in 1896, 1900, and 1908), and the defense attorney was Clarence Darrow. Though Scopes was found guilty and fined $100, fundamentalists were scorned in the national press. They became increasingly identified with the American South.

Neo-Evangelicals

In 1949, fundamentalist Billy Graham (1918-2018) began preaching revivals, this time not in tents but in auditoriums. The revivals were immensely successful throughout the 1950s and 1960s—perhaps in part because, after World War II (during which 60 million died in 6 years, 1939-45), people were looking for spiritual guidance. The “neo-Evangelicals” (so-called to distinguish them from the early Evangelicals of the two Great Awakenings) were largely fundamentalist; but, whereas fundamentalists tended to refuse to work with more liberal denominations or even non-fundamentalist Evangelicals, neo-Evangelicals were willing to cooperate with other Protestants.

Evangelicals Today

Evangelicalism today contains the various emphases of the traditions that fed into it: the Calvinism of the Puritans, Presbyterians, and Baptists; the optimism and emphasis on holiness of the Methodists; the non-denominationalism of the frontier revivalists; the emotionalism of the Pentecostals; the emphasis on inerrancy of the fundamentalists.

Present-day Evangelicals emphasize the Bible as the sole authority in religion, the importance of a personal conversion experience, and active evangelization to convert others. Historian David Bebbington’s list of four characteristics of Evangelical religion has been widely adopted: “Conversionism, *the belief that lives need to be changed*; activism, *the expression of the gospel in effort*; biblicism, *a particular regard for the Bible*; [and] crucicentrism, *a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross*.” (*Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*: *A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. 3.)

Worldwide, there are now about 620 million Evangelicals (including Pentecostals); that is 7.75% of the world’s population (1 in 13 humans). From 1960-2000, “the global growth of the number of reported Evangelicals grew three times the world’s population rate . . .” (“Evangelicalism.” *Wikipedia*. 21 Jan. 2023. 22 Jan. 2023.)

In the United States, Catholics are larger than any other Christian group, 23% of the population; the next largest group is Southern Baptists, 11.3%. But all Evangelicals together comprise about 33%. Evangelicals’ political power became evident after 1979, when Jerry Fallwell founded the Moral Majority. In 2016, 81% of white Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump.

APPENDIX: MAJOR FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY

Small capitals: the five major forms of Christianity.[[1]](#footnote-1) Italics: movements (not denominations).

Numbers of adherents are from “List of Christian Denominations by Number of Members” (*Wikipedia*, 15 Jan. 2023).

**ad 30** Roman

Catholicism (1.345 billion)

│

Council of Ephesus: │ ad 431 Assyrian Church of the East, Ancient Church of the East (Nestorians) (600,000)

Council of Chacedon: │ ad 451 Oriental Orthodoxy (monophysites) (62 million) (in communion with each other)

**ad 500** │ │

│ │ │ │ │ │ │

│ Armenians Jacobites Malankarese Copts Abyssinians Eritreans

│ (Syria) (India) (Egypt) (Ethiopia)

│

**ad 1000** │

Eastern Schism: │ ad 1054 Eastern Orthodoxy (220 million)

│ groups in communion: schismatic groups:

│ Greek Cypriot Ukrainian

│ Russian Georgian Belarusian

│ Serbian Albanian Macedonian

│ Romanian Bulgarian Montenegrin

│ Czech-Slovak Polish Old Believers

**ad 1500** │

Reformation: │ ad 1517 Protestantism (900 million-1 billion)

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│ │ │

│ *mainline Reformation* *radical Reformation*

│ │ │

│ │ │ │ │

│ Lutheranism Calvinism Anglicanism Anabaptism

│ (Germany, 1517) (Switzerland, 1536) (England, 1534) (Netherlands, 1525)

│ │ ↘ │ ↙ │

│ Presbyterianism (1560) │ Mennonites (1525)

│ Dutch Reformed (1571) │ Amish (1693)

│ │ │

│ │ │ │ │

│ │ Congregation- Baptists *evangelicalism* (1727)

│ │ alists (1592) (1609) │

│ │ │

│ │ │ │ │

│ │ │ Methodism (1738) │

│ *premillennialism* │ │ │

│ (1820) │ │ │

│ │ Christian Church (1832) *holiness* Adventists

│ │ (Disciples of Christ, *movement* (1843)

│ │ Churches of Christ) (1839)

│ │ │

│ *fundamentalism* (1878) *Pentecostalism* (1901)

│ │ │

│ │

│ │ │

│ *neo-evangelicalism* (1949) *neo-fundamentalism* (1979)

**ad 2000**

1. “Christianity” here means groups that affirm the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. Groups not listed include Quakers (1648), Unitarian-Universalists (1796, 1778, respectively; merger, 1961), Mormons (1830), Spiritualists (1848), Jehovah’s Witnesses (1872), Christian Science (1879), Unity (1889), Church of Scientology (1953), Unification Church (1954), etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)