

Why So Many Protestant Denominations?

Part 1

Europe: The Reformation Personalities and Nationalities

October 27, 2019

**Premise: You Wake Up in a Small
Town somewhere in the U.S. on a
Sunday Morning...**

You tell your host, *“You know, I would like to go to church this morning”*.

She says, *“Great, which one?”*

“There’s the Lutheran Church (several actually)...”



“or the Methodist Church (also several), this one just slightly out of focus, or...”



***“the Presbyterian Church, of course,
or perhaps the...”***



***“United
Church of
Christ, or”***



***“St. Mary’s
Episcopal
(it’s tiny)...”***



***“or, maybe
the United
Brethren
Church
(many)...”***



“Or...”

- **The Antrim Baptist Church**
- **The Seventh Day Adventist**
- **The Church of Latter Day Saints**
- **The Assembly of God**
- **The Brethren in Christ**
- **The Otterbein Church**
- **Church of the Apostles**
- **St Paul's AME**
- **Etc., etc. – there are at least 50 different denominations in a town of 10,000**
- ***Including the Mennonites***

“However...”

- **No Unitarians**
- **No Quakers**
- **No Synagogue**
- **No Mosque**
- **No Eastern Orthodox**
- **But one Catholic Church**
- **Other than that -- pretty diverse.**

First Presbyterian Church



Or...

- Myers Park Presbyterian
- Covenant Presbyterian
- Trinity Pres.
- Sharon Pres.
- Carmel Pres.

**Or – the Moravians - the Granddaddy
of them All! (maybe)**



???

- The question is, why so many denominations?
- Are there that many fine theological distinctions regarding interpretation of scripture? Or are there other factors in play:
 - Cultural differences?
 - Political power considerations?
 - Or maybe human ego? Is that a possible distinction?
- And, there is that larger question...

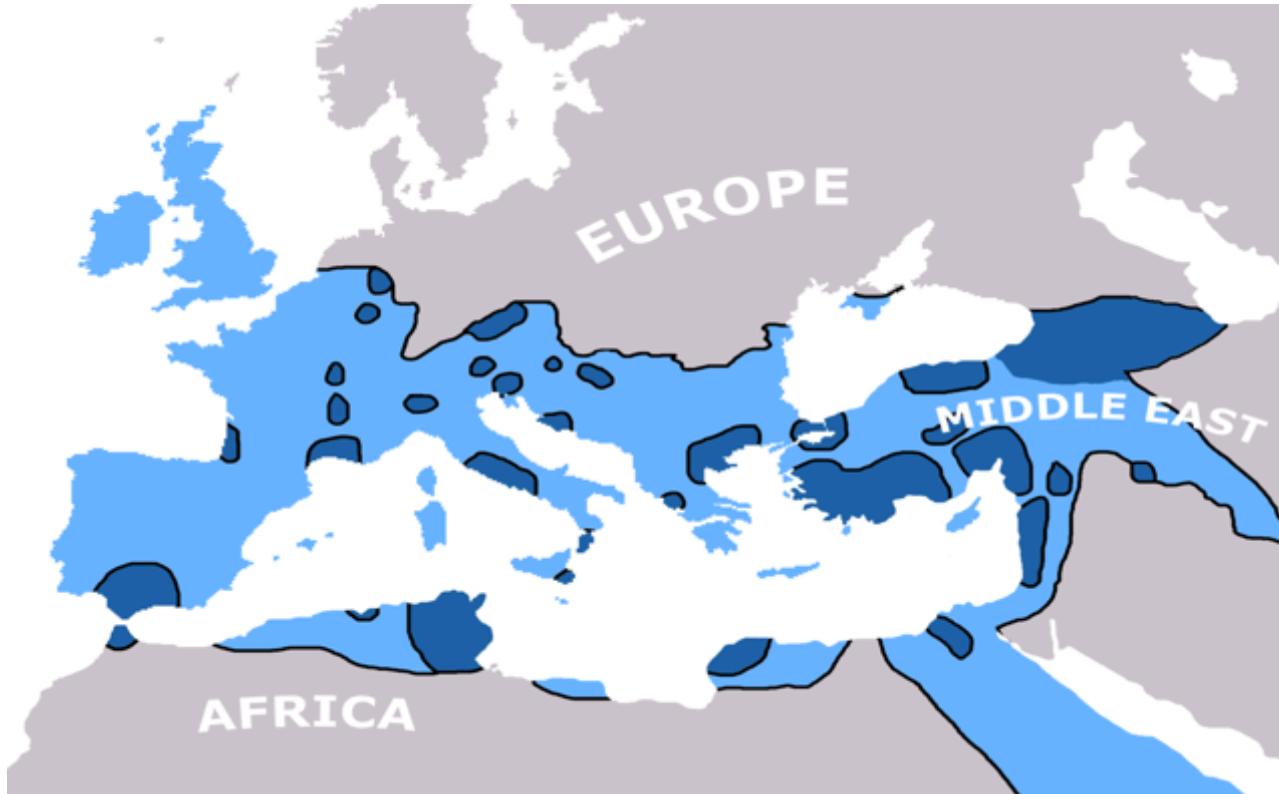
Disclaimer

*The Following May Contain Little or No
Theological Value*

Let's Start at the Beginning (Post Apostolic) 130 – 312

- Christianity – has spread to Gentiles via the good works of the Apostles.
- In pockets throughout the Roman Empire with a concentration in Asia Minor, the Hellenistic world.
- Maybe 5-10% of the population by 300 CE – a significant minority but winning adherents such that...
- Christians are periodically cruelly persecuted... Why?

Map of Early Christianity – (Dark Blue 300, All Blue 600)



Something Amazing Occurs

312 – 1054

- After Emperor Diocletian's cruel rule, Constantine the Great, has a Chi-Rho ✠ vision in 312.
- Persecution ends and then....
- Christianity, becomes the official state religion of the Roman Empire in 380.
- Christians increase from 4 to 6 million to 30 million!
- But not totally united – Constantine convenes the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE to settle the Arian controversy (not all Christians happy).

The Great Schism 1054 - 1201

- In 1054, the Church divides between the West, Rome/Latin and the East, Constantinople/Greek. Why?
- Dueling excommunications.
- There are attempts at reconciliation, but the sack of Constantinople by the 4th Crusade (1201) ends any hope of one Christian church.

The Once Tiny Church Becomes Mighty! 380 - 1500

- From 380 the Roman Catholic Church expands and by 1500 the Church is:
- The largest landowner in Europe.
- The wealthiest institution in Europe
 - Tithes and taxes
 - Sale of relics, indulgences, church positions, pilgrim tours.
- With all that money comes behavior that seems pretty... ah, questionable.
 - The Pope has an army and declares war
 - The Pope has concubines and children
 - The partying is legendary
 - The usual - greed, nepotism, murder, bribery, etc.

How Does Such a Little Church Get so Big?

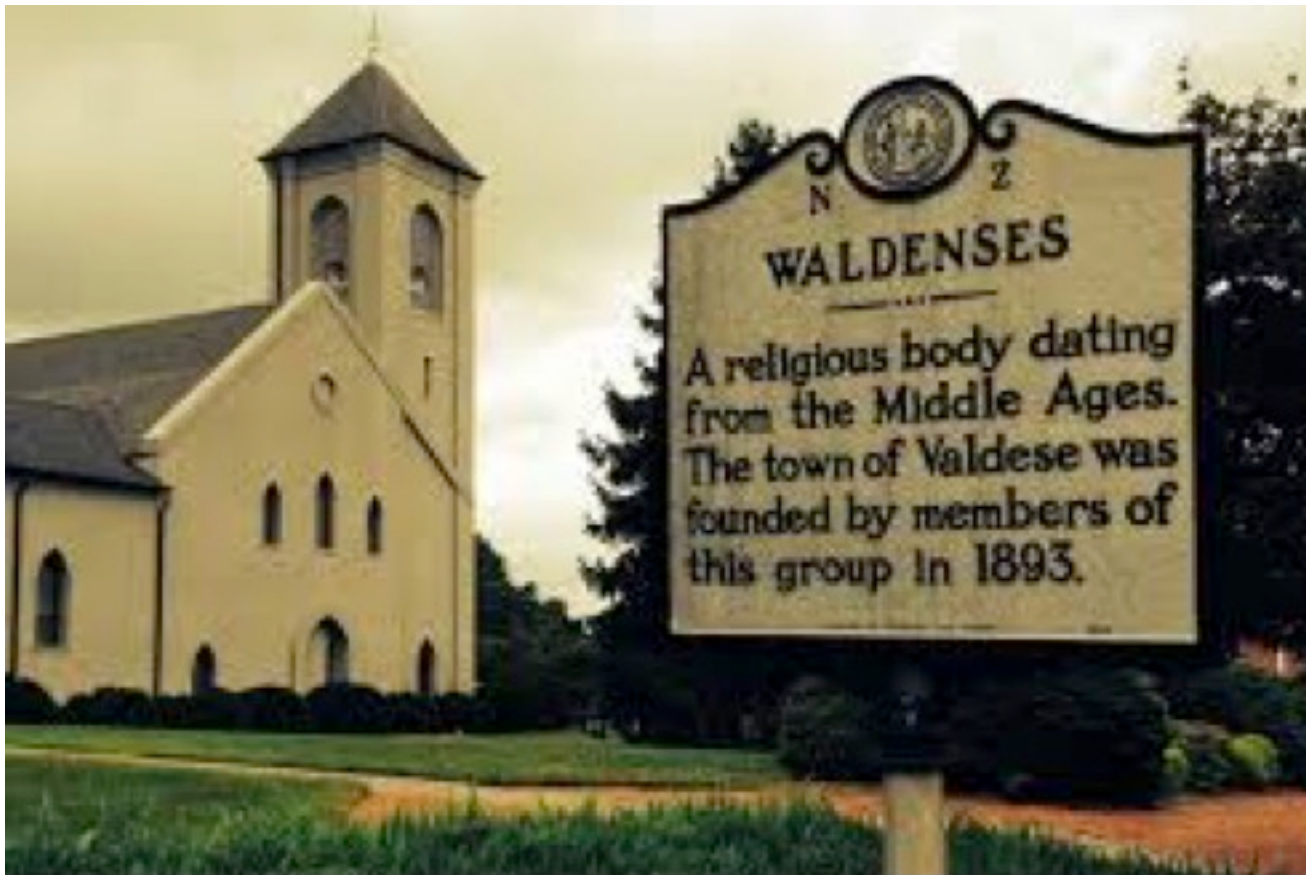
- The infallible Pope is undisputed head of the church (sort of like an Emperor).
- Supported by Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops (sort of like the Roman aristocracy).
- Hierarchy is further bolstered by a system of monasteries, priests, convents, deacons, laity (sort of like the Roman army and civil system).
- In other words, the Roman Catholic Church looks a lot like, well, the Roman Empire.
- Like the Roman Empire – the succession issues are messy.

Early Challengers

1184 - 1415

- Some folks are concerned with how the Church is going:
 - Peter Waldo of France and the Waldensians (1184). Heretic.
 - John Wycliffe of England (1377) translates Bible into English, challenges Transubstantiation, holds Bible as highest source of truth, and other radical actions. Heretic.
 - Jan Hus of Bohemia (1415) attacks the corruption and the authority of the Pope. Heretic. However, his adherents form the *Unitas Fratrum* – forerunners of the Moravians!
- One absolute and uncontroversial truth --- people in power don't like to have that power questioned.

Somehow End Up in North Carolina!



#1 Biggie – Martin Luther 1517

- In 1517 takes exception to the fund raising efforts of the local Archbishop, (i.e. indulgences).
- It starts out as a criticism within the Church.
- But, his criticism of the Church, expands:
 - Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone as sole authority (rejects authority of the Pope).
 - Sola Fide – Faith alone (not good works).
 - Salvation only through God's grace alone (which is free).
- Has to face the Diet of Worms!
- In addition:
 - Translates Bible into German.
 - Acknowledges only two sacraments: Lord's Supper (Christ present) and Baptism (infant).
 - Disavows monasticism and celibacy – marries!
 - Sees state and church as parallel but separate entities.

Holy Roman Empire 1477

Not Holy, Not Roman, Not an Empire



BTW - How is it that Luther Gets Away with it?

- Luther has something Hus did not have:
 - Protection (Frederick the Wise)
 - Social Media (printing press) new literary form – helps create the mass market for cheap pamphlets
 - Public distrust of the RCC (northern v southern Europe)
 - Good timing
 - Papacy weakening
 - Stronger secular powers

2 Biggie – Ulrich Zwingli 1519

- Zwingli of Zurich “claims” to have independently come up with criticism of the RCC that is remarkably like Luther’s.
- Zwingli’s ideas and written work are received well and spread.
- *Wouldn’t it make sense (theologically and politically) to combine forces and have ONE alliance to challenge the RCC???*
- Yes! A meeting between Luther and Zwingli is brokered.

Hey, Let's Get Together – 1529

- Luther and Zwingli convene in Marburg.
- Turns out they agree on everything (14 points), except for one little thing: The Lord's Supper.
- It gets bitter – Luther: *"This my Body."* Zwingli: *"Bread is Bread"*.
- The talk breaks down – *"we are not of the same spirit"* said Luther.
- Zwingli is killed shortly thereafter fighting the Catholics.
- Attempts at Protestant unity are taken up by Heinrich Bullinger (Zurich), Martin Bucer (Strasbourg), Philip Melancthon (Wittenberg) – they fail.
- Enter John Calvin.

Calvin – Let's Do This Thing

1549

- Calvin comes closer than anyone else to unifying the Protestant movement.
- Calvin calls for Protestant reconciliation – and gets Swiss Protestants in agreement on theological issues in 1549 – the Zurich Consensus.
- But though Melancthon seems in agreement, the Lutherans split into factions and no theological agreement (predestination v. limited human control) with the Swiss Protestants (Calvinists) is achieved.
- Reformed (Calvinists) and Lutherans are two distinct denominations. Is that such a bad thing?

#3 The Lunatic Fringe – the Anabaptists 1525

- Hey, if Sola Scriptura is the answer, then why not live your life straight out of the New Testament? No loyalty oaths, no military service, common ownership of property - loyalty only to God and scripture - Political authority does not apply!
- This is anathema to Luther and especially to Zwingli and other Reformation leaders – they don't want disorder.
- In 1525 – the ground swell of anti-RCC, anti-authoritarian activity results in the Peasant's War in Germany – 80,000 killed.
- After the catastrophe, the radicals preach withdrawal from Christian society, and pointedly mark their separation by practicing adult baptism. Menno Simons becomes an important leader.
- There will be no acceptance or attempt at reconciliation with this movement by the Lutherans or the Calvinists – they are despised by everyone – but their practices, particularly pacifism and adult baptism, prove influential.

#4 Take My Wife – Please!

1533

- King Henry VIII has a problem – his wife.
- In 1521, to demonstrate his anti-Lutheranism, Henry wrote a little piece called “Why I like the Seven Sacraments” to curry favor with the Pope – He gets the Defender of the Faith title!
- But, when he needs the Pope to annul his marriage to Catherine, the Pope doesn’t play ball.
- A cunning plan is hatched - Henry decides to become head of the church in England in 1533– clear break with Rome.
- Has his marriage annulled and helps himself to Church lands.
- Nothing theological about it – this is a political decision - no alignment with either Lutherans or the Calvinists.

Protestantism in Europe

1517-1533

- Four Main separate and irreconcilable strains:
 - #1 Lutheranism** – Germany, Scandinavia
 - #2 Calvinism (Reformed)** – parts of Switzerland, down Rhine into parts of Germany, over into France (Huguenots), the Netherlands and famously Scotland! (but national interpretations of Calvinism differ e.g. Dutch Arminianism – salvation has the condition of faith attached).
 - #3 Anabaptists** – scattered here and there.
 - #4 Anglicism** – England.

The Empire Fights Back

1546 -1555

- The RCC, the Empire (Hapsburgs) and Catholic princes attack on the basis that all Protestants are heretics (and a desire for political unity).
- General peace terms between the Emperor and the Lutherans at Augsburg in 1555 recognizes Lutheranism (Calvinists still heretics) and establishes the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* – let the prince decide the religion.

The Special Case of France

1559-1598

- Huguenots (Calvinists) have broad support with the bourgeois and nobility.
- Catholic v Protestant fighting - slaughter of Huguenots 1572 – St. Bartholomew Day Massacre.
- Huguenot Henry IV obtains crown, decides to return to Catholicism.
- Edict of Nantes in 1598 makes Catholic church the official state church.

Peace Until – the Defenestration!

1618-1648

- During the period 1555 -1618, the Catholicism regained much lost territory.
- War on the Continent starts 1618 and it is a doozy – the Catholic Hapsburg Empire wants to eradicate Protestantism.
- Starts out religious, ends up political – Protestant states v Catholic but Catholic France sides with Protestants against the Catholic Hapsburgs.
- Thirty Year' War extremely destructive - up to a third of Germans killed.
- Peace in 1648 recognizes Lutheranism and Calvinism (but not Anabaptists).

The British Isles - Revolution

1560-1660

- In Scotland - conflict between the Calvinists/nationalists and the Catholics/French sympathizers.
 - Calvinists, known as Presbyterians win, and John Knox becomes head of the Church of Scotland in 1560.
- In England - growing sympathy with and acceptance of Lutheran and Calvinist theology among the people but James I 1604 says, “No Bishop, no king” and defies the Calvinists (Puritans).
- James I’s words prove prophetic:
 - his son Charles I executed 1649 and the Puritan revolution spawns new religious sects (such a Congregationalists, Baptists and the Society of Friends) and paves the way for future toleration.

Aftermath of Religious Wars -1648



A Look Back



Recap 1517-1648

- Four major Protestant movements In Europe develop. They all survive.
- They fail to unite, and in fact begin to splinter.
- The concept of a state religion in Europe seems to prevail as of 1648.
- **Yet, Protestantism has unleashed the forces of individual conscience, freedom of choice, equality, and demand for toleration.**
- But where can the Protestants go for freedom of religion? The wilds of America maybe?