

## DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF THEOLOGY

### “I am on Paul, I of Apollos, I of Cephas, and I of Christ”

#### Key question

What are the most popular schools of thought within the broader Christian tradition and what can be learned from each of them?

#### Key text

### I Corinthians 11:18-19

“For in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.”

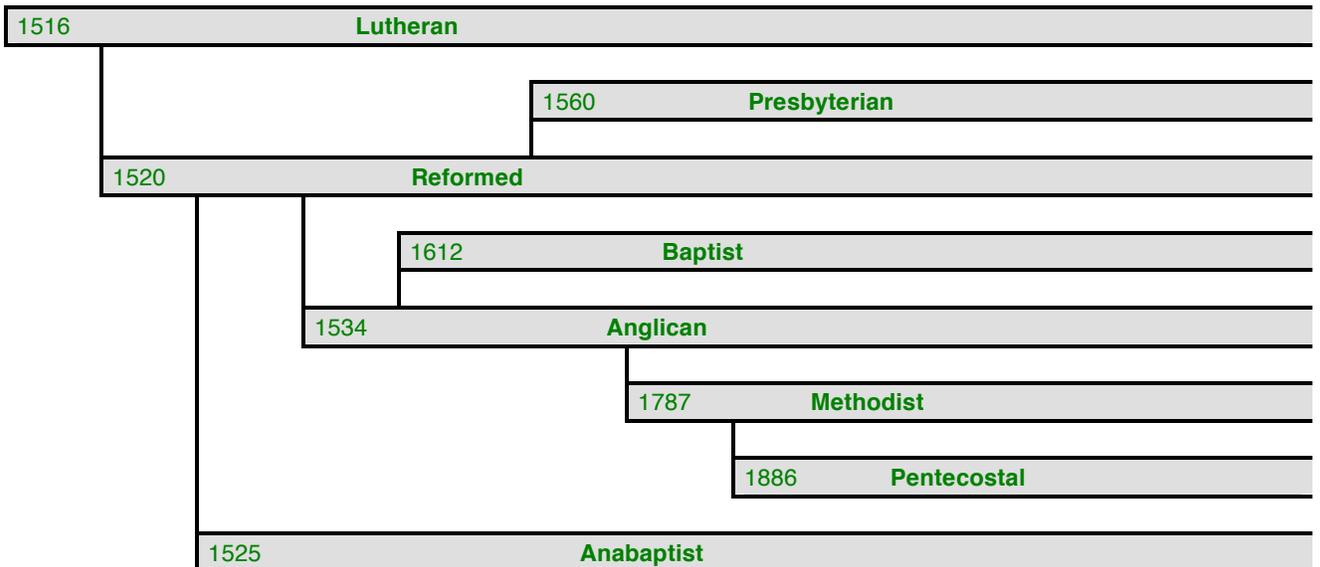
#### Introduction

1. Why are there so many denominations?
    - a. This question is often asked with the assumption that there are no legitimate reasons for so many Christian sects.
    - b. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* there are over 2000 Christian denominational bodies in the US. with 20,800 Christian denominations worldwide classified into seven major blocs and 156 ecclesiastical traditions.
    - c. While unity is a high priority, so is orthodoxy.
  2. Some legitimate reasons for various denominational groups.
    - a. **Apostasy** – One group departing from the truth requiring the faithful to separate from that group to remain faithful.
    - b. Apostasy is often a cover for the true reason for a denominational split (which may be less legitimate).
  3. Some illegitimate reasons for various sects.
    - a. Ethnic or national identity – various Lutheran synods.
    - b. Styles of worship, leadership, or ministry –
    - c. Power struggles –
    - d. Political differences – Northern and Southern Presbyterians.
- A. **The relative size of various denominations.**
1. It is estimated that there are over 385,000 congregations in the US.—most of them with less than 75 in weekly attendance.

2. Recent Gallup polls (report #259) indicate the following preferences among adult Americans.

- a. **Protestant** = 58%
  - 1. **Baptist** = 20%
    - a. Southern Baptist Convention = 10%
    - b. American Baptist = 2%
    - c. All other Baptists = 8%
  - 2. **Methodist** = 9%
    - a. United Methodist = 7%
    - b. All other Methodists = 2%
  - 3. **Lutheran** = 5%
    - a. American Lutheran = 2%
    - b. Lutheran Church in America = 1%
    - c. Missouri Synod = 1%
    - d. All other Lutherans = 1%
  - 4. **Presbyterian** = 2%
  - 5. **Episcopal** = 2%
  - 6. **United Church of Christ** (Congregationalist) = 2%
  - 7. **Disciples of Christ** = 2%
  - 8. Other Protestants = 16%
- b. **Catholic** = 28%
- c. **Jewish** = 2%
- d. Other = 4%
- e. No affiliation = 8%

3. The family tree of major Protestant denominational groups.



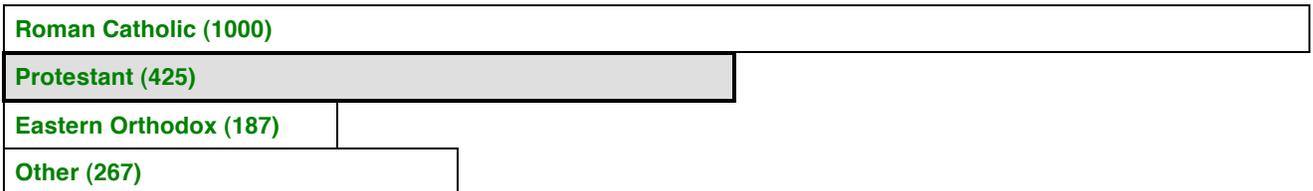
4. **Ecumenism**

- a. The modern ecumenical movement began in 1910 as an outgrowth of the missionary movement.
- b. While “**The World Council of Churches**” (American branch = “**National Council of Churches of Christ**”) grew out of a response to the embarrassing testimony of competing denominational missions it soon became mired down in the political and “watered down” compromises between liberal and conservative groups.
- c. Carl McIntire was instrumental in “**The American Council of Christian Churches**”, a conservative foil to the National Council.
- d. Reasons Evangelicals are not generally a part of modern ecumenical movements.
  - 1. Biblical precedent - I Cor.11:19 “For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.”
  - 2. Theological differences on fundamentals of the faith.
  - 3. Differing understandings of the nature of the church.
  - 4. Differing understandings of mission.

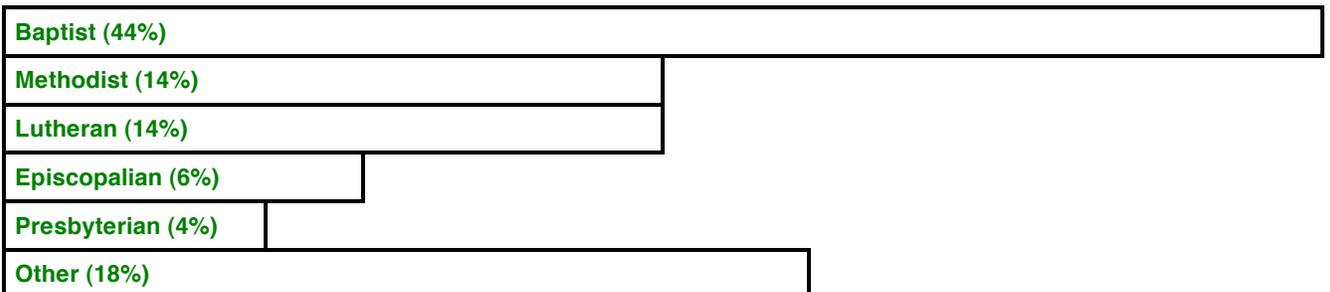
NOTE: Too many divisions in the church are not the result of anything other than selfish pride, narrow minded and dogmatic styles, and ethnic / cultural preferences.

5. The demography of the church.

- a. How do the various Christian groups compare in numbers of adherents world-wide? (numbers in millions)



- b. How do the various Protestant groups (in the USA) break down as a percentage of the whole?



## B. Differences between Protestant and Catholic doctrine

<b>Area</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Protestant position</b>	<b>Catholic Position</b>
<b>Scripture</b>	Sufficiency	Scripture alone	church tradition plus Scripture
	Apocrypha	rejected	accepted
<b>Man</b>	Original sin	total depravity and guilt inherited from Adam	corruption and predisposition to evil inherited from Adam
	Human will	in bondage to sin	free to do spiritual good
<b>Salvation</b>	Predestination	rooted in God's decrees	rooted in God's foreknowledge
	Atonement	Christ's death a substitutionary penal sacrifice	Christ's death the merit for blessings of salvation – blessings passed on to sinners through sacraments
	Grace of God	common grace given to all; saving grace given to elect	prevenient grace, given at baptism, enabling one to believe; efficacious grace cooperating with the will, enabling one to obey
<b>Salvation</b>	Good works	produced by the grace of God, unworthy of merit of any kind	meritorious
	Regeneration	work of the Holy Spirit in the elect	grace infused at baptism
	Justification	objective, final, judicial act of God	forgiveness of sins received at baptism, may be lost by committing mortal sin, regained by penance
<b>The church</b>	Church and Salvation	distinction between visible and invisible church	outside the (visible) church there is no salvation
	Sacraments	means of grace only as received by faith	convey justifying and sanctifying grace
	Priesthood	all believers priests	mediators between God and man
	Transubstantiation	rejected	affirmed
<b>After life</b>	Purgatory	denied	affirmed

This material is modified from Robert C. Walton's Chronological and Background Charts of Church History published by Zondervan

### C. Differences between Lutheran and Reformed Protestants.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Lutheran position</b>	<b>Reformed position</b>
<b>Order of decrees</b>	calling, illumination, conversion, regeneration, justification, sanctification, glorification	election, predestination, union with Christ, calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, sanctification, glorification
<b>Grace of God</b>	grace received through baptism or preaching, enabling one to avoid resisting the regeneration grace of God	irresistible
<b>Repentance</b>	leads to faith	flows from faith
<b>Baptism</b>	works regeneration, removing guilt and power of sin	Incorporation into the Covenant of Grace
<b>Lord's supper</b>	Christ present in the sacraments objectively	Sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace to believers; Christ present by faith
<b>Church and state</b>	state church to tutor in the faith the rulers who support Protestantism	holy commonwealth, in which church and state, both Christian, perform their separate functions
<b>Regulative principle</b>	whatever is not forbidden in Scripture is permissible	whatever is not commanded in Scripture is forbidden

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D. **Evangelicals** - those who claim to be “born again” make up about 41% (2006 Gallup pole) of the adult population of America. They come from many different denominations and tend to choose their faith rather than inherit it. (An evangelical is, according to George Barna, is defined as one who can answer “yes” to each of the following questions.)

- I have made a “born again” commitment to Christ (40% of total population say “yes”)
  - I have encouraged someone else to accept Christ. (48% say “yes”)
  - I believe the Bible to be the Word of God and to be taken literally. (37% say “yes”)
1. Evangelicalism is not just a set of beliefs but also a social movement and an all-encompassing identity.
  2. They often have a stronger attachment to “personal faith” than non-evangelical Christians.
  3. They tend to live out or act on their faith more than those who inherit their parents’ religion.
  4. They tend to place responsibility on the individual encouraging spiritual improvisation, creativity, and change.
  5. They feel a responsibility to care for society and the world.
  6. They tend to talk about the faith with the confidence of personal ownership of it.
  7. They study Scripture, read books on theology and Christian living, and participate in spiritual support groups more than non-evangelicals.
  8. They tend to be active in their churches.

Note: Robert Webber in *The Younger Evangelicals* notes stages in Evangelical development in the Twentieth Century

	<b>Traditional evangelicals 1950-1975</b>	<b>Pragmatic evangelicals 1975-2000</b>	<b>Young evangelicals 2000-</b>
<b>Historical events</b>	After WWII	After the 60s	After 911
<b>Symbolic leader</b>	Billy Graham	Bill Hybels	Brian McLaren
<b>Worldview</b>	Modern	Technological	Postmodern
<b>Communication</b>	Print – verbal	Broadcast – presentational	Internet – interactive
<b>Generation</b>	Booster – traditional	Boomer – innovative	Buster – deconstruction
<b>View of history</b>	Maintain tradition	Ignore historical roots	Return to past wisdom
<b>Theology</b>	Rational apologetics	Therapy for needs	Community of faith
<b>Apologetics</b>	Evidential	Experiential	Metanarrative
<b>Christendom</b>	Civil religion	Market driven	Countercultural
<b>Church style</b>	Rural	Megachurch	Intercultural
<b>Leadership style</b>	Pastor	CEO	Team, mentor
<b>Youth ministry</b>	Church -centered	Retreat centered	Spiritual disciplines
<b>Education</b>	Information centered	Need centered	Community centered
<b>Spirituality</b>	Keep the law	Prosperity and success	Authenticity
<b>Worship</b>	Traditional	Contemporary	Convergence
<b>Art</b>	Restrained	Illustration	Embodiment
<b>Evangelism</b>	Mass rally	Seeker service	Process

- E. **It is helpful to think of the Christian life in terms of God’s work for us, in us, and through us.** Various Christian groups can be understood in terms of their respective emphasis of one of these three areas.

Many of the details in the following material are modified from “Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine” by H.Wayne House

***Those theologies that have a strong emphasis upon  
What God has done FOR us.***

**1. Natural Theology (Deism)**

Natural theology is the attempt to attain an understanding of God and his relationship to the universe by means of rational reflection, without appealing to special revelation such as the self-revelation of God in Christ and in Scripture.

**2. Lutheran Theology**

Lutheran Theology builds around the three fundamental doctrines of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), and *sola fide* (faith alone).

**3. Reformed Theology (Presbyterian)**

Reformed theology builds around the central theme of the sovereignty of God. The whole of reality falls under the supreme rule of God.

**4. Fundamentalist Theology (Many ultra conservative denominations and independent congregations)**

([religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/fund.html](http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/fund.html))

Fundamentalist theology is evangelical theology with an attitude.

**5. Evangelical Theology (Most conservative denominations)**

Evangelical theology embraces the major tenants of the reformed faith as expressed in the following characteristics:

- a. It looks to the Bible as the supreme norm of truth for Christian belief and practice - the biblical message enshrined in its narratives and its interpretations of those narratives.
- b. It holds a supernatural world-view that is centered in a transcendent, personal God who interacts with, and intervenes in, creation.
- c. It focuses on the forgiving and transforming grace of God through Jesus Christ in the experience called conversion as the center of authentic Christian experience.
- d. It believes that the primary task of Christian theology is to serve the church's mission of bringing God's grace to the whole world through proclamation and service.

***Those theologies that have a strong emphasis upon  
What God has done IN us.***

**1. Anabaptist Theology (Baptist)**

Anabaptists did not stress systematic theological studies. Rather, doctrine was forged as it applied to life. Anabaptists were characterized by missionary zeal, separation of life, and an emphasis on ecclesiology.

**2. Arminian Theology (Methodist)**

Arminian theology is concerned to preserve the justice (fairness) of God. How could a just God hold individuals responsible for obedience to commands they are powerless to obey. Arminian Theology emphasizes divine foreknowledge, human responsibility and free will, and universal (common) enabling grace.

**3. Wesleyan Theology (Methodist)**

Wesleyan theology is essentially Arminian but has a stronger sense of the reality of sin and of dependence on divine grace.

**4. Pentecostal Theology (many denominations)**

Pentecostal theology is usually Arminian in its leaning with a strong emphasis on a “second blessing” or experience with the Holy Spirit that gives the Christian power to minister in the supernatural and a love for emotional praise and worship.

**5. Existential Theology (Elements in many mainline denominations)**

Existential theologians claim that we have to “demythologize” Scripture. “To demythologize Scripture is to reject not Scripture or the Christian message, but the world-view of a past epoch.” That means to explain everything supernatural as myth. The important part of Christian faith consequently becomes a subjective experience, rather than an objective truth (see Salvation). The Bible, when demythologized, does not talk about God, but about man.

**6. Neo-orthodox Theology (Conservative wing of many mainline denominations)**

Neo-orthodoxy is more a hermeneutic than it is a complete systematic theology. It reacted against late-nineteenth-century liberalism and strove to retain the essence of Reformation theology while still adapting to contemporary issues. It is a theology of encounter between God and man.

***Those theologies that have a strong emphasis upon  
What God has done THROUGH us.***

**1. Traditional Roman Catholic Theology**

Theology is constantly evolving in its understanding of the Christian faith. The Ignatian principle of accommodation and J.H. Newman's principle of development reflect the changing nature of Roman Catholic theology. Catholicism's trait of change is due mainly to the authoritative position given to church teaching.

**2. Liberal Theology (Elements in many mainline denominations)**

Liberal theologians seek to articulate Christianity in terms of contemporary culture and thinking. They attempt to maintain the essence of Christianity in modern terms and images.

**3. Liberation Theology (Politically activist liberalism in many mainline seminaries)**

Theology is not seen as a system of dogmas but rather as a way to initiate social change. This view has been called the "liberation of theology" (H. Segundo). This theology grew out of Vatican II and the liberal theologians' attempts to wrestle with social, political, and economic inequities in the face of a Christianity no longer based on a biblical world view. Much of the setting for liberation theology has been Latin America, and this theology has become an answer to the political oppression of the poor. The proponents often have different views; there is really no "unified" liberation theology. Rather, it is a number of closely related "alternatives" springing from common roots. Rather than a classical theology concerned with such theological matters as the nature of God, man, or the future, liberation theology is concerned with this world and how changes may occur through political action. In Latin America, especially, Roman Catholic theologians have sought to combine Christianity and Marxism.

**4. Black Theology (Some African American churches)**

Black theology is a form of liberation theology that has its center in the theme of oppression of blacks by whites. It came out of the "need for black people to define the scope and meaning of black existence in a white racist society" (Cone). It emerged in the last two decades in the wave of liberation movements as an expression of black consciousness and seems to speak to the issues that blacks must contend with on a daily basis.

**5. Contemporary Feminist Theological Models (Elements in some mainline denominations and seminaries)**

1. **Rejectionist** (Post-Christian) Sees the Bible as promoting an oppressive patriarchal structure and rejects it as nonauthoritative. This is sometimes termed "gender feminism."
2. **Loyalist** (Evangelical) Sees no radically oppressive sexism in the biblical record.

3. **Reformist (Liberation)** As with Rejectionists Reformists see patriarchal chauvinism in the Bible and Christian history and have a desire to overcome it. Its commitment to liberation as the central message of the Bible keeps it from discarding the Christian tradition.

## Pastoral advice

### What can we learn from each of these theologies?

1. Roman Catholicism's emphasis on the whole (church) being more than the sum of its parts (individual believers) is a strength.
2. Natural Theology's respect for common sense is its strength.
3. Lutheran's distinction between law and grace is a needed emphasis.
4. Anabaptist's separation of church and state is helpful.
5. Reformed Theology's attention to systematics and objective truth is a strength.
6. Arminian Theology's emphasis on human responsibility is important.
7. Pentecostal Theology's openness to emotional praise and the supernatural manifestation of the Spirit in the present.
8. Wesleyan Theology's emphasis on holistic conversion is important.
9. Liberal Theology's openness to all truth is admirable.
10. Existential Theology's emphasis on personal integrity of faith is vital.
11. Neo-orthodox Theology's emphasis on personal subjective encounter with Christ is admirable.
12. Liberation Theology's application of the gospel to social structures is important.
13. Black Theology's attention to the WASP influences on theology is helpful.
14. Feminist Theology's sensitivity to the abusive treatment of women by the church over the years is helpful.
15. Fundamentalist Theology's sensitivity to separation from worldliness and tenacity for the authority of the Bible is its strength.