

## **Why So Many Denominations Today?**

**PLEASE NOTE:** This was delivered by Rev. Ian McPhee as a luncheon address at the 2019-Feb-21 "Lunch 'n Learn" event at WFPC

Picture of four churches on corner.

*Picture of the Catholic Jesus*

*Picture of the Orthodox Jesus*

*Picture of the Anabaptist Jesus*

*Matthew 16:18-19*

<sup>18</sup> *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

*Ephesians 2:19-20*

<sup>19</sup> *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*

### **From Christ to Chalcedon:**

*Various Heresies:*

**Docetism:** (1<sup>st</sup> cent) argument against found in some of New Testament texts: John 21 with Jesus eating fish. Also 1John: "every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God." It speculated that Christ only appeared to be human.

**Marcion:** (2<sup>nd</sup> century) God of the O.T very different from the one of the New. He excluded all the O.T. and included only Paul's letters and Luke. Any sniff of the O.T. in the New he excluded. Marcionite churches spread up to the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

**Gnosticism:** (2<sup>nd</sup> Cent) combination of Platonism, pagan religions, and early Christianity. It held to an extreme dualism, body and spirit.

*The evil demiurge had created the physical universe. The soul could only escape body prison through the gnosis or divine knowledge. (Platonism) The letter to the Colossians addresses this (2:8ff and 16ff)*

**Arianism:** (3<sup>rd</sup> Cent) popularized in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century by Arius. Believed Jesus was a created being, not eternal, and therefore subject to the Father. Similar to modern Jehovah Witnesses.

**Nestorianism**, as it was understood at the time, he so insisted upon the full humanity of Christ's human nature that he believed that Jesus was divided into two persons, one human and the other divine. Whereas orthodox Christology holds that Christ has two natures, divine and human, ineffably united in one person, or hypostasis, Nestorianism so stresses their independence as to suggest that they are in effect two persons, or hypostases, loosely joined by a moral union.

### **Ecumenical Councils**

**Council of Nicaea (325)** Convened by Constantine and addressed primarily these various heresies. Nicene Creed adopted a strong Trinitarian confession. We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.

**Apostle's Creed (4<sup>th</sup> Century)** An early version called the Old Roman Creed dates back to 2<sup>nd</sup> century, but earliest form found in a letter in 341AD. Our present Apostle's Creed dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Council of Chalcedon (451)** Sought to address the controversy (Nestorius) that in Christ there were two distinct Natures-divine and human, often referred to as the Monophysite controversy. He had already been condemned at council of Ephesus (431). After the Council of Chalcedon, the Monophysite controversy led to a lasting schism between the Oriental Orthodox churches, on the one hand, and the Eastern Orthodox and Western churches on the other. The

Christological conflict...lasted from the third through the eighth centuries and left its mark on all but the first two Ecumenical councils.

*We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.*

Can Mary be called the “Mother of God” as did Chalcedon? Was Jesus one “person” of two natures, or two “persons” inside one body? What was really at stake was the “incarnation”. By calling Mary mother of God they argued that Jesus really was one person with two natures. And with such we are saying that God and humanity were totally integrated in Jesus of Nazareth, and is of the same substance as both the Father and us.

Chalcedon birthed three Christian bodies: Eastern Orthodoxy, Western Christianity, including Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, and Oriental Orthodoxy which includes the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, and Ethiopian communities.

**1054 AD Great Schism.** Permanent split of eastern orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches: one Greek, the other Latin. One used unleavened bread for the mass (Latin) and believed that the Spirit proceeded from God the Father and the Son, while Constantinople believed that the Spirit proceeded from the Father.

This was also a political reality. Charlemagne’s crowning as Emperor of the West in 800 made the Byzantine emperor redundant. Also had

roots in differences: Eastern Church had Greek philosophy at its roots while Rome's theology based on Roman Law.

**Western Roman Catholicism:** The medieval church provided a unified structure and communication across national boundaries. Religion permeated every aspect of life but doesn't mean all were necessarily pious. One writer states: *although we can speak of the church as a single entity within Medieval Christendom...it was no monolithic institution, but rather a dizzying assemblage of units managed by clerics with overlapping and sometimes conflicting authority...*

**Medieval Dissent: Cathars** (pure ones) Christian dualist or Gnostic revival movement that thrived in some areas of Southern Europe, particularly what is now northern Italy and southern France, between the 12th and 14th centuries. Persecuted by the church; not recognized as being Christian. Sometimes known as Albigensians after city in southern France where they were centered. Arguably just as interesting, Protestant ideas share much in common with Cathar ideas, and there is some reason to believe that early reformers were aware of the Cathar tradition.

**Waldensians:** 12cent; declared heretical by Pope. Rejected many of Rome's teachings: transubstantiation, pilgrimages, relics, and holy water. Called Rome the harlot of the Apocalypse. In the Reformation many of those in movement joined the Protestant communities. Today the Waldensian church considers itself a Protestant church.

**John Wycliff** (1320-1384) translated bible into English. Followers known as Lollards. In 16<sup>th</sup> cent they were viewed as precursors of the Reformation. He taught that scriptures were the authoritative centre of the faith, that monasticism was corrupt, and priests were immoral. Declared a heretic in 1415 and writings banned.

**John Hus** (1370-1415) Professor in Prague, reformer, spoke out against indulgences, against hierarchy of church, appealed to Jesus Christ as the supreme authority and judge. Tried and burned at stake in 1415

**Babylonian Captivity** of the church (14cent.) Contributed to the dissenting voices around Europe.

**Renaissance:** With fall of Constantinople in 1453 to Islam (Turks) there was an exodus of Greek scholars and books to the West. Also from Islamic Spain's amazing civilization (far ahead of the West) came books and translations of the ancient Greeks and Roman civilization. Both streams led to development of Renaissance in Europe. Independent thinking, science, math, literature, political theory was all swirling throughout the Italian city states.

**Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity:** opened Europe to Roman & Greek sources of science, mathematics, poetry, literature, drama, etc. The cry became "back to the sources". It was an intellectual movement that prized rational thought over dogma and superstition. We use the term "humanism" to describe these developments. It describes the Italian "studia humanitatis" or the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and ethics. Through this they sought to dethrone theology as the queen of the sciences. It was a world no longer dominated by clerics, a world of a rising merchant class and the sovereign state. Italian humanists rewrote history by developing a new historical perspective on how to view the past. Conceiving of the millennium 400-1400 as a distinct period and as an age of darkness was the great imaginative leap of the Renaissance.

**Social/Political change:** medieval society was structured rigidly around serfdom, the land, nobility and the Pope and clergy. In the 15th century this uniform social structure began to break down. Urban centres developed, (towns and cities), commerce and trade grew and a money economy developed, and nation states began to flex their muscle. Protestantism used to be identified with the rise of capitalism. And with these development there was the rise of a middle class or merchant class in towns and cities. Individualism was stimulated by the shift caused by the Renaissance/ Reformation. It's impossible to minimise the invention of the Printing Press by Gutenberg in 1440. For centuries books were scarce because they had to depend on monks to copy them. The medieval monastery had kept civilization alive during the dark ages after the fall of Rome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century

through to the 12th century. It was their monks who could read and write and they copied the books that were available to the West. The largest library in the West had a total of 50 books. Cordoba in Spain had a library of 500 thousand books.

**Gutenberg** made possible the mass production of books in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and made the Reformation possible. Luther's 95 theses nailed to the door in Wittenberg were spread throughout Europe within days and weeks in thousands of copies.

**Copernicus** in the early 16<sup>th</sup> cent shattered the assumptions of the church that said the sun, not the earth was the centre of the universe. It was a common assumption of all people, supported by the church's theology, that earth was flat, accepted the Aristotelian tiered universe as gospel, and the centrality of the earth. The story was broken, the common imagination dispelled. The unity of the church, the broad consensus on cosmology, about the nature of social/political structure, about economics, was undermined by the Renaissance ideas, the rise of nation states, the slow disintegration of serfdom and the rise of the towns and cities and ultimately by Reformation ideas.

Once over the Alps this new vision and body of literature opened scholars like Erasmus to work on the Christians sources like the New Testament. It was back to the biblical sources, the Fathers, Latin and Greek, to reinterpret the faith. Sought to rediscover an original Christianity or "pure" faith.

Establishment of schools throughout Europe for families to have their children trained in humanist learning. These children would become well-round lay folks who engaged in many professions.

***Humanism in the North:***

*Erasmus, Thomas More,  
Mastery of Greek sources*

Erasmus

Published the first N.T. text (1516)

***Erasmus:*** *Hereafter I intend to address myself to the Scriptures and to spend all the rest of my life upon them. Three years ago, indeed, I ventured to do something on Paul's Epistle to the Romans ... and*

*would have gone on, but for certain distractions of which the most important was that I needed the Greek at every point. Therefore for nearly the past three years I have been wholly absorbed by Greek; and I do not think my efforts have been altogether wasted.*

### **The Reformation:**

**Luther.** Read widely as he lectured on the Psalms, Romans.

Influenced by five traditions:

1. Augustinian theology
2. Renaissance Humanism
3. German Mystical Tradition
4. Late Scholastic via moderna-stressed the radical otherness of God
5. Conciliarist Movement-denied Popes were ultimate authority

**Breakthrough:** How is one saved? “God’s justice” troubled him. How can any sinful human be made righteous when we are sinners? In Romans 1:7: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* <sup>17</sup>*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.*

Luther says: *I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, that is, by faith... This made me feel as if I had been born again and passed through open doors into paradise itself.*

What Luther’s reformation achieved was to shift the source of authority from the Pope and clergy to the bible. His immediate impact was found in making the bible available in the native language of each country. Authority began to move from Rome to the biblical text. Luther and the Reformation is the child of the Northern Humanism and the Medieval Dissent movements.

**The Reformation-a paradigm shift.** At its heart was a dynamic change in religious ideas, but alongside were all kinds of shifts in social, economic, political, and cultural changes. Not only was religious unity disrupted forever, but also assumptions about cosmology, science, miracles, and the sacred were shattered.

The Reformation opened the door to the secularization of the west. Religion became a private concern rather than a public one. But the fragmentation of Christendom was the most long-lasting effect. The plurality of churches and worldviews it spawned stays with us today. It also more importantly led to the creation of huge gaps in European thinking and assumptions for other forces, fed by science/secularism, to enter in gradually and these only strengthened over the past hundred years.

At its heart the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> centuries desecralized the world. It redefined the realm of the sacred as confined to heaven. It reduced the scope of the supernatural on earth. By so restricting the supernatural to heaven and the ancient past was to change the very essence of the Christian religion as it had been lived for the previous 1500 years.

Luther's Reformation resulted in many reformed families spitting off: Lutheran, Reformed/ Calvinist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Anabaptist communities.

Phyllis Tickle in her book, ***The Great Emergence***, says this about the Protestant Reformation: *While we may laugh and say that divisiveness was Protestantism's greatest gift to Christianity, ours is a somber joke. Denominationalism is a disunity in the body of Christ and, ironically, one that has a bloody history.*

Anabaptists or the Radical Reformation originated in Zwingli's Reformation in Zurich. They desired a voluntary church, baptism of adults, no allegiance to the state. Baptism is only valid when a person confesses their faith. The church is a community of believers, not a parish for the whole neighbourhood. Most were pacifists.

**Menno Simons** was an important member of the original community in the Netherlands, and who eventually would form the Mennonite tradition. Related to this Anabaptist movement were the Baptists who originated with **John Smyth** in 1609. He led a group of separatists in the Netherlands to start the General Baptist Church. In 1616 Henry Jacob led a group of Puritans in England with a Calvinist theology to form a congregational church that would eventually become the

Baptist community. In the 18 & 19<sup>th</sup> century the movement came over to the colonies.

All of the ***non conforming evangelical denominations***: Baptist, Methodist, Christian Missionary Alliance, Associated Gospel Churches, Nazarene Churches (out of holiness movement), the Pentecostal church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a host of others

Reformed Churches: Reformed Church of America or formally Dutch Reformed, Christian Reformed (split in 1857 from American Reformed Church, Canadian Reformed (post 2<sup>nd</sup> world war immigrants) Ebenezer Reformed Church, etc.

Where are we Headed?

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (Church reformed, always reforming) according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

### ***Responses to the latest paradigm shift:***

Presbyterian Church USA: instituted a new vision for the church called: ***Starting New Worshipping Communities***.

In our ***Presbytery*** we have invested in a new venture called ***Church Re-Plant*** with a full time minister dedicated to this ministry. Heritage Green and now Erskine are recipients of a Canada Ministries Grant to enable them to venture out in new ministries in a replanted community of faith.

There are a variety of new ministries already in flow: new church plants in established churches; The Meeting House; The emerging church movement, Vineyard Churches, House churches, among many others.

These are some of the responses to the current malaise of the established churches. As in all hinge moments, like the Reformation, in the midst of decline and upheaval, new and fresh approaches spring out of the old bodies. With Luther and the Reformers, and the Radical Reformers, they stepped out of the medieval straightjacket of church hierarchy and the Pope, out of the dominance of the clergy

and Latin liturgy, to a priesthood of all believers, to a biblical, experiential faith, to a vernacular based liturgy, and to a Christ centered and focused worshipping community and mission.