

Experience, Truth, and Denominations

We have seen that the issues of polity (government), liturgy (worship), and soteriology (salvation) are major sources of denominational differences. With regard to liturgy, we've noted the difference between a sacrament and an ordinance - a sacrament confers grace; an ordinance is a command to be obeyed. One of the dangers of a sacramental approach is ritualism, just going through the motions. We've seen that John Wesley agitated for reform in the Church of England, in part desiring to encourage "individual devotion and piety in contrast to what he saw as the dead formalism of the Church of England." We will now survey the development of several denominations which originated due to a desire to emphasize an individual experience with God. We'll also see the further splintering of Protestant groups due to the rise of liberalism.

I. Revival and Fragmentation

A. Frontier Revival

In the eighteenth century, frontier preachers began to hold camp meetings to promote revival. The most famous camp meeting was the one held at Cane Ridge (KY) in August, 1801. Some estimates suggest that 10,000 people attended. It was marked by strange physical phenomena such as falling, jerking, rolling, dancing, and barking.

One of the results of revival was division within the churches. Division came among the Presbyterians when the Cumberland Presbytery ordained men without the required educational qualifications to minister to the increasing numbers of churches on the frontier. This division resulted in the formation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1810.

Another division was made by Thomas Campbell, a Scottish Presbyterian who came to America in 1807. When his church refused to permit him to administer Communion to those outside his own group, he decided to preach a non-creedal faith based on the Bible. He soon gained numerous followers among the Baptists; and, after his son Alexander came to America, he organized congregational churches that practiced baptism by immersion... By 1830 these churches separated from the Baptists and were known as the Disciples. In 1832 the Disciples united with the Christians who followed Barton Stone and so the Disciples or Christian Church [Church of Christ] was formed.¹

B. Holiness Revival

The Nazarene denomination began in Los Angeles in 1895. By 1908, many other churches who were dissatisfied with the Methodist denomination united finally under the name the *Church of the Nazarene*. They emphasize a second work of grace for sanctification as do most in the tradition of John Wesley.²

¹ Cairns, p. 418

² Ibid., p. 449

Pentecostals are another Wesleyan group that emphasized the need for personal holiness. They emphasize speaking in tongues as a second work of grace and evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They drew their membership primarily from Wesleyan holiness churches.

Many consider a Bible College in Topeka, KS as the beginning of this movement. In 1901 students were studying the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts, and one student, Agnes Ozman, asked others to lay hands on her so that she would receive the Holy Spirit. She spoke in tongues, and later other students also spoke in tongues.

Another school was opened in Los Angeles in 1905 by the founder of the Topeka college, Charles Parham. One of the students became leader of the Asuza Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906. Speaking in tongues became common in the mission. People who came to visit had similar experiences and carried the message to other places. The present *Assemblies of God* was founded in 1914 in Arkansas.³

II. Truth and Fragmentation

A. Bible Conferences

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conferences were held in various parts of the country to teach the Bible, with special emphasis on prophecy and sanctification. Famous conferences included the Niagara Bible Conference and Winona Lake (IN) Bible Conference. Some of the participants in these conferences were leading lights opposing the teaching of evolution, and liberalism in general, within the denominations.

B. Fundamentalism

Between 1910 and 1915 a series of articles was published called *The Fundamentals*. These articles detailed Scriptural teaching on cardinal doctrines such as the authority of Scripture, the blood atonement of Christ, His literal return, etc. Those who subscribed to these tenets became known as *fundamentalists*.

Fundamentalists went to war with liberals over control of the denominations. The fundamentalists eventually concluded that the mainline denominations were a lost cause and in the 1930's and 1940's began to leave to found their own institutions.

Westminster Theological Seminary, BIOLA University, The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, and many other institutions began as a result of this battle.

³ Ibid., pp. 457-58

Kirsopp Lake was a participant in these battles on the side of the liberals. His commentary on fundamentalism is enlightening:

It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that Fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind: it is the...survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians...The Fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the corpus theologicum (Body of Doctrine – KB) of the Church is on the Fundamentalist side.⁴

⁴ Quoted in Douglas MacLachlan, *Authentic Fundamentalism*, p. 2