

Christian Denominations & Traditions

There are three main Christian traditions:

Protestant

Protestantism is different from Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy in that it holds to scripture as the only supreme authority for what to believe.

Scripture
↓
Tradition

Based on the teaching of scripture, protestants believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, based on the work of Christ alone.

Roman Catholic + Eastern Orthodox

Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy claim to hold both scripture and tradition (i.e., their church's official teaching) as their equally supreme authorities. However, since their tradition claims to tell us what to believe about the Bible, in reality this means that their tradition serves as their highest authority.

Tradition
↓
Scripture

Based on the teaching of their tradition, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy teach salvation by faith plus good works. We receive God's grace to do good works through the sacraments.

Prominent Protestant denominations and traditions with their noted distinctives:

Presbyterian

- Reformed / Calvinist.
- Baptize babies and include them in the church as unbelievers.
- Governed by groups of elders who come from multiple churches.

Lutheran:

- Baptize babies and include them in the church as unbelievers.
- Sacraments are the place where God saves us through faith.
- Governed by synods.

Baptist:

- Baptize people only after they believe. Thus the church only consists of believers, not unbelievers.
- Churches are governed by the congregation.

Anabaptist (e.g., Mennonites, Amish, Brethren)

- Baptize people only after they believe. Thus the church only consists of believers, not unbelievers.
- Known for taking a rather radical approach to Christian living.
- Pacifists – They don't believe in ever using violence.

Methodist:

- Baptize babies.
- Emphasis human free will in salvation (Arminian or Wesleyan).
- Believe Christians can reach a state of being sinless.
- Governed by bishops.

Anglican (or Episcopalian):

- Protestant in belief; Catholic in style.
- Baptize babies.
- Governed by bishops.

Pentecostal (e.g., Assemblies of God):

- Charismatic.
- Believe the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit occurs sometime after salvation ("second blessing").
- Churches are governed by the congregations.

Other evangelical groups:

- EFCA (Evangelical Free Church).
- Missionary Alliance.
- "Non-denominational" (typically evangelical and baptist-like in beliefs).
- Nazarene (= Wesleyan).

There are some movements or traditions that reach across multiple denominations. For example...

- **Evangelical** – *Evangel* is Latin for "gospel." So these are Christians who believe in the gospel – that we are saved by grace through faith. There are Methodist evangelicals, Baptist evangelicals, Presbyterian evangelicals, etc.
- **Reformed** – These are Christians that hold to beliefs that came to the forefront during the Protestant Reformation (hence "Reformed"). They believe that God is absolutely sovereign in salvation (this is sometimes called "Calvinism"). Presbyterians are Reformed. But there are also Reformed Baptists, Anglicans, and others.
- **Charismatic** – These are Christians who believe that supernatural gifts like healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues still exist for today. All Pentecostals are charismatics. But there are also charismatics in other denominations and traditions.

There are also both theologically liberal and conservative versions of most denominations. ("Liberal" and "conservative" here are not meant to refer to political views.) In other words, for example, not all Lutherans are the same; not all Presbyterians are the same; not all Methodists are the same; etc.

- **Liberal** – Think we should adjust Christ beliefs according to our modern opinions and sensibilities.
- **Conservative** – Believes the Bible to be entirely true and takes the Bible at its word. Holds to traditional, historic Christianity.

Finally, in every denomination, you will find a lot of variety. In other words, for example, just because two churches are Baptist doesn't mean they will be the same. There are a lot of different types of Baptists.