

# Major American Denominations

## American Denominations

**INTRODUCTION:** Denominationalism is an American phenomenon. Immigrants who brought the beliefs and practices of their old state church to America started many denominations. Many of these churches had offshoots and the number of denominations has mushroomed. This bulletin will look at only a few of the denominations found currently in America.

### **DENOMINATION:** *Baptists*

#### **Statistics:\***

American Baptist Association (1,705) 250,000  
 American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (5,823) 1,517,400  
 Baptist Bible Fellowship International (3,600) 1,500,000  
 Baptist General Conference (857) 135,008  
 Baptist Missionary Association of America (1,355) 231,191  
 Conservative Baptist Association of America (1,084) 200,000  
 Free Will Baptists, National Association of (2,496) 207,576  
 General Assn. of Regular Baptist Churches (1,458) 136,380  
 General Baptists, General Association of (876) 74,156  
 National Baptist Convention of America (2,500) 3,500,000  
 National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. (33,000) 8,200,000  
 National Missionary Baptist Convention of America (not available) 2,500,000  
 North American Baptist Conference (263) 43,236  
 Progressive National Baptist Convention (2,000) 2,500,000  
 Separate Baptists in Christ (100) 8,000  
 Seventh Day Baptist General Conference (86) 4,400  
 Southern Baptist Convention (40,039) 15,663,296  
 Sovereign Grace Baptists (300) 3,000

#### **History:**

Baptists have been classified as part of the radical reformation because of their objection to sacramentalism, infant baptism, and the

union of church and state. The first Baptist church in England was formed in 1611 when followers of John Smyth returned from Holland. Baptists have been influenced by both Arminian (General Baptists) theology and by Calvinistic (Particular Baptists) theology. The American Baptist Home Mission Society was formed in 1832. Baptists in the North and South separated in 1845 over the issue of slavery.

#### **Authority:**

The Bible is the sole source of authority for Baptists.

#### **Religious Practices:**

Baptists observe two church ordinances. The first church ordinance is believer's baptism by immersion. The second church ordinance is the Lord's Supper. Baptists have a congregational form of church government. The members of each local Baptist church make decisions for the church through democratic votes. Each church is autonomous.

#### **Religious Tenets:**

Baptism is only to be performed on those who have made a conscious decision to follow Jesus Christ through faith and repentance. Since the Bible is their sole authority, Baptists reject authoritarian creeds. They have, however, issued statements of faith that represent the beliefs of most Baptists. Baptists believe that the government should not be involved in the establishment of religion. Traditionally, Baptists have taken stands against the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, and in recent years, many have argued against abortion.

**DENOMINATION:** *Churches of Christ (Disciples of Christ)*

**Statistics:**

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
(4,036) 929,725  
Churches of Christ (13,020) 1,655,000

**History:**

Churches of Christ grew out of the Disciples of Christ movement that began in the early nineteenth century. They are part of the Restoration Movement that Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, helped establish. In 1832, they united with many of the followers of Barton Stone and later became known as the Disciples of Christ. In the early twentieth century, some Disciples of Christ felt their movement had drifted away from its original purpose. In 1906, a group led by David Lipscomb asked Federal census takers not to list Churches of Christ with the Disciples of Christ. This marked the beginning of Churches of Christ as a distinct group from the Disciples of Christ.

**Authority:**

The Churches of Christ claim the Bible as their sole authority. Their byword is "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

**Religious Practices:**

The Lord's Supper is one of the three elements central in Churches of Christ worship. The other two elements are preaching and believer's baptism by immersion in a Church of Christ. They observe the Lord's Supper each week. Churches of Christ have a congregational form of church government. Each local church is autonomous and self-governing. They have no formal denomination structure beyond the local church. The Churches of Christ do not view themselves as a denomination. They claim to observe no rituals that were not practiced in the first century church. Those associated with the Churches of Christ reject the use of instruments in worship.

**Religious Tenets:**

They are Arminian in their theology. They believe people are free to accept or reject God's offer of salvation. Each person must cooperate

with God's offer through his or her own response of faith, repentance, and baptism. Many understand faith as an intellectual acceptance of the biblical facts about Jesus. Churches of Christ teach that baptism by immersion for believers is essential for the remission of sins and is necessary for salvation. They believe that Christians may sin in such a way that they lose their salvation.

**DENOMINATION:** *Eastern Orthodox*

**Statistics:**

Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America (2)  
1,875  
American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox  
Greek 19,321  
Antiochian Orthodox Christian  
Archdiocese of 300,000  
Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the  
East, 120,000  
Armenian Apostolic Church of America  
(28) 180,000  
Armenian Church of America, Diocese of  
the (72) 414,000  
Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Church (9)  
1,100  
Coptic Orthodox Church (85) 180,000  
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and  
South America (535) 1,950,000  
Orthodox Church in America (600)  
2,000,000  
Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of  
America (37) 65,000  
Serbian Orthodox Church in United States  
and Canada (68) 67,000  
Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch  
(Archdiocese of the United States and Canada)  
(17) 32,500  
True Orthodox Church of Greece  
(SOMC), American Exarchate (9) 1,080

**History:**

The Orthodox Church traces its origin to the establishment of the Christian Church on the Day of Pentecost. They separated from the western Latin Church in A.D. 1054.

**Authority:**

Scriptures and sacred Tradition, especially as recorded in the writings of the Church Fathers.

### **Religious Practices:**

The Orthodox Church recognizes seven sacraments or mysteries. The sacraments of the Orthodox Church are the Eucharist, baptism, chrismation, ordination, penance, marriage, and holy oil for the sick. They believe that the elements of the sacraments become grace filled through the power of the Holy Spirit. Icons are used because they reject statues as religious objects. Orthodox clergy may marry before ordination.

### **Religious Tenets:**

The Orthodox Church rejects both the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome as well as his papal infallibility. Mary's immaculate conception is rejected because of their opposition to the doctrine of original sin. The perpetual virginity of Mary is affirmed, as well as her bodily assumption. She is also given the title "Mother of God." They also reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of the filioque that states the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Instead, the Orthodox Church maintains that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father.

**DENOMINATION:** *Episcopal Church ( a branch of the Anglican Church communion)*

### **Statistics:**

(7,388) 2,504,682

### **History:**

The Anglican Church originated when Henry VIII separated the English Church from Rome. The Episcopal Church, distinct from the Church of England, came into existence after the American Revolution. In 1988, the Episcopal Church began ordaining women to the priesthood.

### **Authority:**

The Episcopal Church believes the Bible is divinely inspired. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds are accepted.

### **Religious Practices:**

Two main sacraments of the Episcopal church are baptism and the Eucharist. Infants are baptized and several modes of baptism are acceptable. The Episcopal Church consists of a union of autonomous dioceses and each

diocese elects a bishop as its religious leader. Each parish elects a rector who oversees the local congregation. The worship service follows the Book of Common Prayer, with the most important part of the service being the Eucharist. The Episcopal Church has great diversity in its worship. Some churches are liturgical with a complex ritual, while other churches are more informal.

### **Religious Tenets:**

While the Episcopal Church accepts the Bible and the historic creeds of the church, it gives members freedom in doctrinal beliefs. The use of the Book of Common Prayer in worship is stressed more than the acceptance of particular beliefs.

**DENOMINATION:** *Lutherans*

### **Statistics:**

Apostolic Lutheran Church of America (60) 7,700

Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America (119) 25,548

Church of the Lutheran Confession (71) 8,864

Conservative Lutheran Association (8) 1,047

Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (23) 3,989

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (10,955) 5,190,489

Evangelical Lutheran Synod (128) 25,379  
Free Lutheran Congregations, Association of (234) 30,769

Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (55) 12,446

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (6,148) 2,596,927

Lutheran Churches, American Association of (94) 22,061

Protestant Conference (Lutheran) (7) 1,150  
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (1,252) 412,478

### **History:**

Lutheranism began in 1517 with the religious revolution begun by Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther's followers became numerous in Germany and Scandinavia. As people from these countries came to America they established Lutheran churches.

### **Authority:**

One of the key differences between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church was the issue of authority. Luther argued that the Scripture was the sole authority for determining belief and practice. The 1580 Book of Concord is the normative statement of Lutheran beliefs.

### **Religious Practices:**

Baptism is necessary for spiritual regeneration. The sacramental view of the Lord's Supper is retained but transubstantiation is rejected. There is diversity among Lutherans in church government. They range from congregational to Episcopal in church government. There is no uniform liturgy among Lutherans. The altars and vestments from Catholicism have been retained. The preaching of the Word is considered the most important part of the worship service.

### **Religious Tenets:**

Traditionally, Lutherans have believed in the sufficiency of Scripture alone as the guide to religious truth. They have also emphasized that redemption comes through faith alone and that the church sacraments are only helps to faith. Luther rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Transubstantiation claims that the elements of the Lord's Supper literally become the body and blood of Jesus during the Eucharist, though their outward or physical characteristics do not change. Luther instead advocated consubstantiation to describe the Lord's Supper. This view argues that the elements are conjoined with the body and blood of Christ.

**DENOMINATION:** Methodist

### **Statistics:**

African Methodist Episcopal Church (8,000) 3,500,000  
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (3,098) 1,230,842  
Allegheny Wesleyan Methodist Connection (120) 2,056  
Evangelical Methodist Church (132) 8,500  
Free Methodist Church of North America (1,068) 74,707  
Fundamental Methodist Church (12) 787  
Primitive Methodist Church, U.S.A. (79)

7,298

Southern Methodist Church (126) 7,876  
United Methodist Church (36,559) 8,584,125  
The Wesleyan Church (U.S.A.) (1,624) 115,867

### **History:**

In 1729, a group of students at Oxford University in England began meeting together for methodical prayer and Scripture reading. They were called Methodists because of their methodical approach towards prayer and Bible study. Methodism as a popular religious movement began in 1738 when John and Charles Wesley began evangelistic preaching. The Wesleys were ordained ministers of the Church of England. Their followers in America became an independent denomination after the American Revolution.

### **Authority:**

Methodist beliefs are derived from Scripture as enlightened by tradition, personal experience, and reason.

### **Religious Practices:**

Methodists have two sacraments which they believe are symbols and pledges of God's love: baptism and communion (Lord's Supper). Methodists practice infant baptism. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Methodists have an Episcopal form of church government that is similar in many ways to the organization of the federal government. United Methodists, for example, have the General Conference as their top legislative body, with the nine members of their Judicial Council functioning as a supreme court. The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church acts as an executive branch. There is a variety of worship styles among Methodists.

### **Religious Tenets:**

Methodists are Arminian in theology following the teachings of John Wesley. They believe that God's prevenient grace precedes salvation and makes it possible for the sinner to respond to the gospel. Methodists also believe that it is possible for Christians to sin in such a way that they lose their salvation.

## **DENOMINATION:** *Pentecostals*

### **Statistics:**

Apostolic Faith Mission (Portland, OR)  
(54) 4,500

Apostolic Faith Mission Church of God  
(28) 11,000

Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God  
(160) 12,369

Assemblies of God (11,823) 2,387,982

Bible Church of Christ (6) 6,850

Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) (6,060)  
753,230

Church of God in Christ (15,300) 5,499,875

Church of God of Prophecy (1,961) 72,859

Congregational Holiness Church (190)  
2,468

Church of the Foursquare Gospel (1,710)  
222,658

Open Bible Standard Churches (361)  
45,988

Pentecostal Assemblies of the World  
(1,760) 1,000,000

Pentecostal Church of God (1,224) 119,200

Pentecostal Free Will Baptist Church (163)  
18,500

United Pentecostal Church International  
(3,730) 550,000

### **History:**

The first contemporary instance of speaking in tongues occurred in 1901 in Topeka, Kan., under the ministry of Charles Parham. In 1906, speaking in tongues broke out among the followers of William J. Seymour in Los Angeles, Calif. They rented a building on Azusa Street and quickly grew, attracting much attention. From this group, the modern day practice of speaking in tongues spread across the world. The term "Pentecostalism" refers to a broad movement of groups concerned with speaking in tongues and Holiness.

### **Authority:**

The Scripture, and in some cases new revelations given by the Holy Spirit.

### **Religious Practices:**

Baptism by the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by speaking in tongues, is sought by Pentecostals. Most Pentecostal groups observe baptism (usually by immersion) and the Lord's Supper. There is diversity in church government

among Pentecostal groups, but many are congregational. The worship style is very spontaneous and informal, and speaking in tongues will often occur during Pentecostal worship services.

### **Religious Tenets:**

Pentecostals believe that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Bible are active and present in the church today. They claim that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is manifested by speaking in tongues. Pentecostals tend to be Arminian in theology with an emphasis on perfectionism and holiness. While many Pentecostals believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, there are Pentecostal groups that reject it.

## **DENOMINATION:** *Presbyterian (Reformed Churches)*

### **Statistics:**

Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church  
(General Synod) (206) 38,936

Cumberland Presbyterian Church (783)  
87,896

Evangelical Presbyterian Church (177)  
56,499

Korean Presbyterian Church in America  
(203) 26,988

Orthodox Presbyterian Church (181)  
20,151

Presbyterian Church in America (1,299)  
267,764

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (11,361)  
3,669,489

Reformed Presbyterian Church of North  
America (70) 5,657

### **History:**

John Calvin laid the theological foundations for Presbyterianism and other Reformed Churches in Switzerland during the sixteenth century. Calvin emphasized the sovereignty of God in all matters. Presbyterianism is the name given the church established by the followers of Calvin in Scotland. Under the leadership of John Knox, the Presbyterian Church became the official church of Scotland. The Presbyterian Church was planted in America as Scottish and Scottish-Irish immigrants arrived in the British colonies.

**Authority:**

The Scripture is their sole source of authority.

**Religious Practices:**

Presbyterians practice baptism (including infants) and the Lord's Supper with the elements symbolizing Christ's spiritual presence. Their worship services have little liturgy and the sermon is considered the most important part of the service.

**Religious Tenets:**

The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the established Presbyterian beliefs. Their Calvinistic theology has traditionally been summarized by the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

**DENOMINATION:** *Roman Catholic*

**Statistics:**

(19,726) 60,280,454

**History:**

Roman Catholics claim the Apostle Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, founded their church. Secular historians date the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution (with centralization and papal authority) to the fifth and sixth centuries.

**Authority:**

Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium (teaching authority) of the church are the three sources of authority for the Roman Catholic Church.

**Religious Practices:**

There are seven sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church: baptism (includes infant), confirmation, Eucharist (Mass), penance (confession), matrimony, and the anointing of the sick. Roman Catholic services are liturgical, but since Vatican II, the services are performed in the language spoken by the parishioners. The Bishop of Rome is the head of the Roman Catholic Church.

**Religious Tenets:**

Roman Catholics affirm the triune nature of

the God of the Bible. They believe that the pope is capable of making infallible statements on matters of faith. They maintain that Mary was born without original sin, that she continued as a virgin throughout her life, and that at the end of her days on earth she was taken up body and soul into heaven. Catholics believe that Mary and other saints can hear their prayers. Roman Catholics also distinguish between mortal and venial sin. Mortal sin destroys the sanctifying grace of God within the individual and necessitates forgiveness through the sacrament of penance. Venial sin is a sin that either is not serious, or does not involve full knowledge or complete consent. Unlike mortal sin, it does not destroy the saving grace of God in the individual.

**DENOMINATION:** United Church of Christ

**Statistics:**

(6,145) 1,472,213

**History:**

The United Church of Christ is the result of several mergers involving four distinct denominations. The last merger occurred in 1957 and established the United Church of Christ. The four denominations making up this new church are the Congregational, Christian, Evangelical Synod, and the Reformed Church.

**Authority:**

The Scripture is their source of authority. But members are free to follow their own perception of God's will.

**Religious Practices:**

Baptism (including infant) and the Lord's Supper is observed by the United Church of Christ. They tend to have simple worship services with the sermon as the central focus. Their churches are free to act in accordance with the collective decision of its members.

**Religious Tenets:**

The United Church of Christ adopted a non-binding statement of faith in Oberlin, Ohio in 1959. It stresses the priesthood of all believers and the freedom of members to believe and act in accordance with their perception of God's will. The church also encourages its members to work for justice and the liberation of all people.

\*All statistics are from the *1996 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, © National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, or from the *1997 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* Web site at [www.dnaco.net/~kbedell/ybstats2.htm](http://www.dnaco.net/~kbedell/ybstats2.htm).

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