

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Learning about the histories of Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events, and leaders of our Judeo-Christian Biblical Heritages.

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Have You Ever Wondered Where Your Religion Came From?

By Jim Myers

Unless you belong to a recently created religion, you can be sure of one thing – *your religion has changed and it is not identical to what it was at the beginning.* This isn't something that many religions teach their members or reveal to those considering joining. Usually members believe God was involved with the founding of their religion. Since God does not change -- then what they believe is correct, and if other religions teach something else or someone challenges what they believe, *the outsiders must be wrong.* This behavior can clearly be seen in Christian, Jewish and Islam. But, I didn't know this for a very long time.

I graduated from high school before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, lived in the South, and attended schools that were not segregated. No black person attended my schools or belonged to my church. During my youth, I went to church on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings and Wednesday nights. I never thought about asking why we went to that church instead of one of the other churches in located in our neighborhood. But if anyone had asked why we went there I would have told them that it was because Jesus founded our church - *and John the Baptist baptized just like we do.*

Our church belonged to the Southern Baptist denomination. We heard sermons about why women could not hold positions of authority, God was the Trinity, our mission was to save all of the "lost" people in the world, the Jews killed Jesus because of their unbelief, the pope was the Antichrist, all businesses were supposed to be closed on Sundays, and once saved always saved. We knew they were true because that is what our Bible said – *and we believed it was the inerrant infallible Word of God.* It – *the King James Version* -- came directly from God and not a word in it had been changed, conflicted with anything else in it, or could be wrong.

When I was in my 30s, I became a minister. I founded and pastored a nondenominational church in a town with a population of about 25,000. The town already had over 100 churches when I founded a new one, even though many had fairly low attendance rates that were dropping. It didn't take long to learn that pastoring a church was a highly competitive endeavor. As a "rookie" pastor I

believed that it would be easy to get my 100 + fellow pastors to work together. After making a lot of calls and visits to the other churches, I soon realized that plan would never work. It was during this period that I decided to examine the history of my Christianity, starting with the church I attended before I graduated from high school. I want to share some of those things and hope that you will check out your religion's history too. The first thing I did was learn about our denomination, which I discovered was founded in 1845 CE (AD) – *which was a very long time after Jesus was executed by the Roman army.*



It has only existed for 168 years, which means it didn't exist during the 1,812 year gap between Jesus and its founding. *Eighteen centuries of history passed in which my denomination did not exist.* Now that was an eye opener! It also raised some very important questions:

- *When and why was my denomination founded?*
- *Where did our beliefs and doctrines originate?*
- *What are its claims of divine authority based on?*

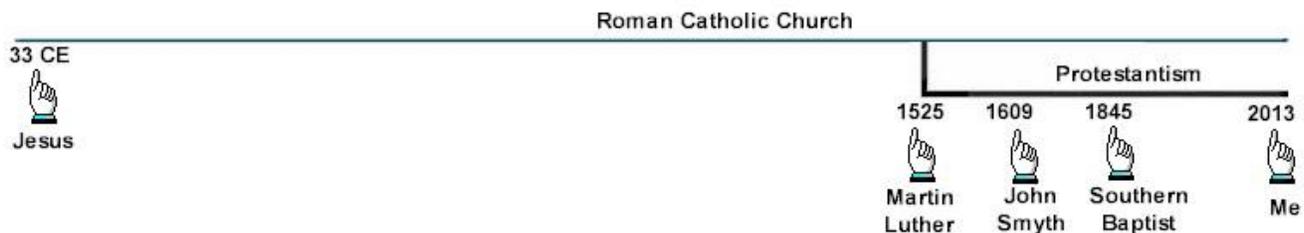
Let's start with the first and easiest question. In 1844, Basil Manly, Sr., president of the University of Alabama, a prominent preacher and a major planter who owned 40 slaves, drafted a resolution that slaveholders be eligible to hold denominational offices in the Baptist denomination. It failed to be adopted. Georgia Baptists then recommended a slaveholder to the Home Mission Society for the mission of being a missionary. The board refused to appoint him. In May 1845, the southern members of the Baptist denomination met at the First Baptist Church of Augusta and formed the Southern Baptist Convention.¹ My denomination came into existence because of its founding members disagreed with the above decisions that involved slavery. Its founders chose to leave the denomination and form a new one in which slave owners could hold denominational offices and be selected to be missionaries – *some of whom would go to Africa.*

Members of the Southern Baptist Convention were on the losing side of the Civil War, so what did they do when it was over? Did they seek to restore the broken relationship with their former denomination? Did they apologize to former slaves and America's black population? The answers to all of these questions are "No." It would be 150 years before they issued an official apology in 1995.² Today, there are 31 Baptist conventions in the United States, not just one or two. One source listed 126 different types of Baptist's belief systems. We never heard about any of this at our church.

Next, I turned to the 1,812 year gap in which my denomination did not exist, to find out what connected it to Jesus and where our beliefs and doctrines came from. So, my first quest was to discover the origin of the first Baptist. I was hoping it would be John the Baptist.



It was founded by a man named John but his last name was Smyth. Historians trace the earliest church labeled "Baptist" back to 1609 in Amsterdam, with English Separatist John Smyth as its pastor.³ So, the gap had shrunk down to 1,576 years, but that gap had no Baptist in it. I had also entered a period before the United States existed. But, I knew my next challenge was to find information about "Separatist" -- *and that ultimately took me to Martin Luther.*



Martin Luther was a German, monk, Catholic priest, and professor of theology that strongly "protested" the Roman Catholic Church's fund raising program based on the selling of indulgences, which promised freedom from God's punishment for sins. Luther protested so much that Pope Leo X excommunicated him in 1521⁴ and the new religious movement he created was named "Protestantism" (**protest** + ism). Members protested about more and more as time passed. Luther's movement began in the early 1500s and the Roman Catholic Church had existed for centuries before Martin Luther was even born.

A foundational doctrine of the Roman Church was that only its members will be saved from spending eternity in Hell. However, members that failed to participate in Church rituals, such as the Eucharist and Confession, could spend some time immediately after death in Purgatory before being allowed to go to Heaven. It is important to clearly understand what was at stake for Luther when the pope excommunicated him – *he was cut-off from the only way of salvation.* He couldn't simply join another church and do what it said to be saved.

Luther had a major problem and his only choices were submit to the pope or find another way to be saved. Luther chose the second option. His movement is often mistakenly called the "Reformation" (**reform** + a + tion) and thus viewed as a movement to "reform" the Roman Catholic Church – *and that is not true.* **Luther created a completely new religion that had never existed before.** This created an interesting situation in Germany for the "common people." Now they had two choices, but both churches denied the truth of the other's claims. The

Roman Church called Luther a heretic and Luther called the pope the Antichrist -- Satan himself.

Many Catholics were ready for a new option and rushed to the new religion. But, Luther had an authority problem. How could he claim his doctrines were authorized by Jesus and would save people? Luther was separated from the Jesus by a gap of almost 1,500 years. Ultimately, he established his divine authority by creating a group of doctrines he called the Five Solas (Latin word *sola* means "alone" or "only").

- *Sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone)
- *Sola fide* (by faith alone)
- *Sola gratia* (by grace alone)
- *Solus Christus* (through Christ alone)
- *Soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone)

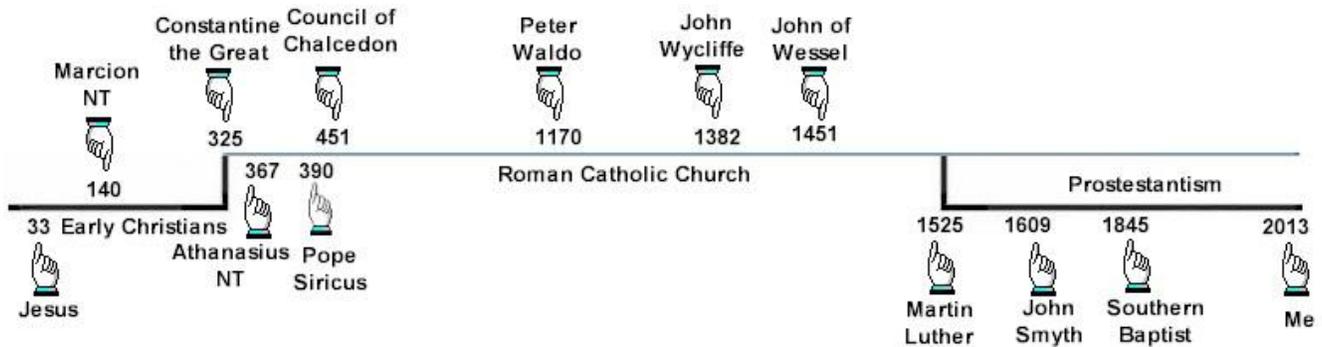
We will return to them a little later, but now we need to consider the divine authority claim of the Roman Catholic Church. Its history begins when the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great decided to call the Council of Nicea in 325. The first foundational doctrines were established there with the primary focus was defining who Jesus was and how he was related to God. The council ruled "*Jesus and God were of the same essence.*" But, instead of answering the question, it ignited a great debate over what the answer meant – *was Jesus "the one and only God" or "another God."*



After the Council of Nicea, the power of the emperor was used to enforce the doctrines and rulings of Church Councils. During this period, the Church also formulated the *Doctrine of Apostolic Succession*. According to that doctrine, Jesus authorized the Peter the apostles to rule after him as the first pope, Peter authorized the next pope after him, and from that point on it the authority had been passed on from pope to pope. The fact is, however, that the first person to actually claim the exclusive title of "Pope" was Siricius in 390. But, from the fourth century forward, the *Doctrine of Apostolic Succession* was used to

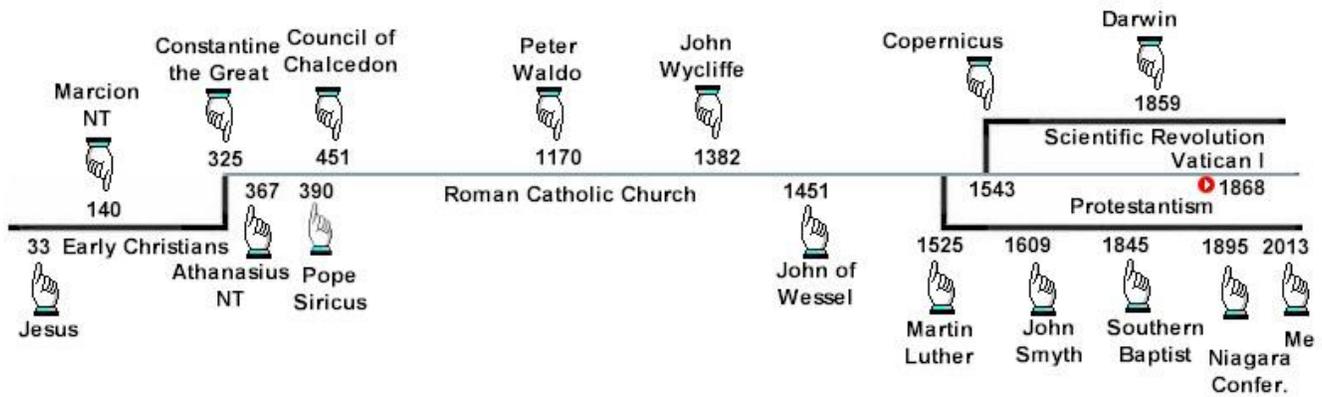
establish its claim of divine authority. But, there was still a gap of almost 300 years separating the Roman Catholic Church from Jesus.

Now let's return to Luther again. His claim of divine authority ultimately rest on his interpretations of the words of his Bible, specifically his German translation. The Roman Church did accept Luther's translation into a common language, or any other translation in a common language as Scripture. One of the first such translations was made in 1170 when Peter Waldo persuaded a priest to make a translation. The first English translation was made by John Wycliffe in 1382.



This raises another problem because Luther's doctrines were based on verses from the New Testament, but the New Testament didn't exist at the time of Jesus. The books of the New Testament were not read or even known by Jesus or the apostles Jesus personally selected. It was not their Scriptures. The first New Testament was created by Marcion in Rome (144) before the Catholic Church was created. His New Testament didn't include all of the books that were in Luther's New Testament. They were written in Greek, not German. Centuries later, an Alexandrian bishop named Athanasius created a New Testament with the same books as the modern versions. Luther's salvation doctrine was "salvation by grace through faith alone." Luther, however, wasn't the first to publish it. It is found in the writings of another Catholic theologian name John of Wessel who lived before Luther. We don't know if Luther "borrowed" it from Wessel, but the similarities are remarkable. Luther denied ever reading any of Wessel's writings.

This is just a very quick overview of some of the things I discovered when I examined the history of my religion. A pattern became very clear -- new religions "borrow" beliefs, doctrines, rituals, etc. from old religions, add new things to them and claim divine authority to be "an" or "the" agent of God. The Roman Catholic Church "borrowed" from the Jews, from the Jewish Jesus, and from groups of other Christians, including the writings of a Roman citizen named Paul. It made the writings of Jesus, Paul, and a few other authors, their "New" Scriptures and then connected them to the Scriptures they "borrowed" from the Jews. As Gentiles joined - and founded - new groups of Christians, they also brought beliefs and ideas from their former religions and incorporated them into Christianity too. The process still continues today, as can easily be seen by the thousands of different churches and denominations that exist today.



One other factor entered the picture a few years after Luther, in 1543, when the writings of Nicolaus Copernicus -- *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* -- was published. The **Scientific Revolution** introduced critical thinking and the system of scientific examination of evidence as a basis for determining truth. The new method challenged the validity of a growing number of religious truths, beginning with astronomy. But, the greatest challenge arose when **Charles Darwin** published his book, *The Origin of Species*. It was viewed as a direct challenge to the authority of the Bible by many Protestants and Catholics.

A few decades after its publication two events took place that shaped modern Christianity. In 1868, the pope called for the Vatican I Conference. It declared the doctrine of the "Infallibility of the Pope." In 1895, the Niagara Bible Conference issued a list of required beliefs for one to be a Christian. One was the "Doctrine of the Inerrancy of Scripture." The answer to scientific challenges by churches became their doctrines of infallibility, which required members to choose authoritarian doctrines over scientific facts. Infallibility doctrines about Scripture forced Bible readers to read their Bibles in light of the doctrine instead of what was actually written in the biblical text.

These are some of the things I learned when I examined my religion. It seems incomprehensible to me now that I used to believe and teach some of the things I did. If I hadn't checked things out myself, I might still be doing it. *Many of us have invested lots of time and money in our religions and that alone should make checking them out a requirement. **Now it's your turn.*** **BHC**



The Facts Will Set You Free!

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Baptist_Convention
² <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112329862>
³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptists>
⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther

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