

Which Church



(if any)?



Jim Davies

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By Jim Davies

Introduction

The Christian religion began in 33 AD, or nearly 2,000 years ago and consisted of an inner circle of 11 disciples of their recently-executed leader Jesus, a carpenter of Nazareth, plus certain women associated with the group, plus some number of followers. The disciples (or “apostles”) vigorously preached Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and after persecuting them for a period one Saul, of Tarsus, joined them after a spectacular conversion, changed his name to Paul and became leader of the early growth of the Christian Church.

Three centuries later it had become the largest single religion in the Roman Empire, and was chosen as its primary or “official” one by Constantine the Great. Seventeen centuries after that, Christianity has about [2.2 billion](#) adherents and is the largest religion in the world.

As the religion grew, it divided into factions and denominations, sometimes with acrimony, and sometimes some such factions were disowned altogether by the others. Sometimes also, as we'll see, the divisions were more geographical or incidental, and most today are on friendly terms with each other with far more in common than in disagreement. However the result is a patchwork that seems confusing to the outsider – be he or she an immigrant to a country in which Christianity is the prevailing religion, or a young person wondering whether to join the church and, if so, which part. The purpose of this book is to offer an historic overview of the primary beliefs of the religion and of the way these denominations arose and how far they differ today, so as to help that person make his choice.

It will do so in six chapters:

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. Jesus - his ministry and identity | Page 3 |
| 2. The Early Church – its growth and divisions | Page 8 |
| 3. Nicea – the Establishment and the Creed | Page 12 |
| 4. Schisms and the Reformation | Page 17 |
| 5. Modern Denominations | Page 26 |
| 6. How to Choose: the Decision Tree | Page 30 |

Naturally, anyone can attend any church he wants, as often as he wants, for any reason. This book is just for those who would like to clarify his own beliefs, and to choose a church – if any – which most closely matches his or her own.

1. The Carpenter and Preacher

All we know about Jesus is contained in the New Testament of the Bible, and its first four books or “Gospels” record what he did and said, and what happened to him. The first three (those of Matthew, Mark and Luke) focus on a narrative and are called “synoptic” - they have a similar perspective – while the fourth, John's, adds more perception of what his words and actions *meant*, theologically.

All of the Bible can be read free on-line, and a good resource is BibleGateway.com – it offers several translations in English and numerous other languages.

The Synoptics begin by stating that Jesus didn't have an ordinary birth. They say his mother, Mary, was unmarried when he was conceived *and* a virgin; that the insemination was done by the Holy Spirit of God, the creator of the universe. This highly improbable claim is presented as fact without qualification; it becomes credible only after considering the life Jesus led and the death and resurrection that he anticipated and to which the apostles testified. If he was, as he and they claimed, God in human form, then the story about his birth is not fantastic. Otherwise, of course, it has no more substance than a pious myth – perhaps not very pious.

Little is told about his boyhood, except that as the young age of twelve he was debating with learned leaders of the Jewish faith, in the Temple at Jerusalem. His father Joseph was a carpenter and he learned the trade. It is not said that he married, even though at the time it was very unusual for a young Jewish man to remain single through his 20s.

At age 30 he got baptized in the Jordan, after which Mark says he heard a voice saying “Thou art my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” He then spent [forty days alone](#) in the wilderness, contemplating his future, after which his preaching began. It continued for three years, at the end of which he had so infuriated the established Jewish religious leaders that they persuaded the Roman government to execute him on a wooden cross; he had become so popular as to undermine their authority.

The content of his preaching contrasted sharply with what people were used to hearing. Instead of reminding them of duties to be performed and procedures to be observed, he focused on inward motivation such as kindness; the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is a classic example, in which he commended meekness, mercy, peacemaking etc., and contrasted his new approach with the old in such as “Ye have heard that it was said .. Thou shalt not kill; But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.” This formula “You have heard... but I say...” appears often, and expresses well what so riled up the established Pharisees, whom he was contradicting.

His preaching was accompanied, according to the Gospels, by various miracles – which served to attract yet more admirers and followers, and to alarm the Establishment further. They are well summarized in this [Wikipedia article](#).

More by far, in a very low-key way Jesus let his understanding of his identity be known. He never was so crass as to stand on a soap box and announce “Listen up, I’m the Son of God!” but rather waited for those who knew him well to reach that conclusion for themselves. The most significant occasion appears in [Matthew 16:13 ff](#), where he asks his twelve disciples who they think he is. Peter is the one who answered “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” and at once, Jesus replied “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”

That exchange is central to understanding the identity of Jesus, yet is very controversial – as we’ll see below. It’s a play on words. They were of course speaking Aramaic, which has fallen out of use except in a few parts of Syria, so we don’t know exactly what was said – but we do have Matthew’s Greek version, and the play on words is clear there.

“Peter” was the disciple’s name, a proper noun, Πέτρος (Petros) - and “this rock” was a noun, πέτρα (petra.) To what did “this rock” refer? - Roman Catholics insist it referred to Peter as a person, and his successors as (eventually) the Bishop of Rome. Members of all the other denominations understand Jesus was referring to Peter’s declaration of belief that he was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The latter makes far better sense in my opinion; the reader must decide for himself. If I’m right, it means Jesus was quietly saying he was the creator of the universe in human form, and that his church (those human beings who would become his followers from then forward) would be built on the foundation of that belief.

Let’s pause to check the meaning of the term “Christ.” χριστός is the Greek (Xristos) and the Jewish equivalent is “Messiah.” It has a special significance; in Judaism the Messiah was (and is) a kind of savior or deliverer who is to come at some future time to rescue Jews from their allegedly inferior position; to justify their claim to be a special people, God’s chosen. There are numerous prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament, and for someone to claim to be that deliverer was a very big deal. So Peter’s declaration of faith had two huge components: he held Jesus to be both the promised Messiah and the incarnate creator. And by immediately stating that he would construct his church on the basis of that belief, Jesus endorsed the claim to both titles. Those few verses therefore make an explosive passage.

John’s Gospel endorses the view that Jesus was God in human form. Two examples:

(a) in its [first three verses](#) it says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” By “the Word” (ὁ λόγος or logos, the expression or communication of God) John is referring to Jesus; and by “in the beginning” he is using the same phrase as [begins](#) the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” So he’s claiming that Jesus is the same creator as Jews have always worshipped; that he “was” - he existed – at that beginning of creation, that he “was with” God, and that he “was God.” Separate in one sense from God (“with”) but identical to him in another. This is the origin of the doctrine of the Trinity, which we’ll revisit in Chapters 2 and 3; here there are two persons or aspects, in one God. Yes, tough to grasp. And highly offensive to Jews, who were very strictly monotheistic.

(b) In [Chapter 19](#), John relates the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, the Roman

Governor who had been asked to crucify him. At verse 9 Pilate asked “Whence art thou? But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.” By that amazingly courageous, defiant reply Jesus was – at the moment when his life hung in the balance – laying claim to have authority higher even than the Roman Emperor; that any and all power Pilate might possess was his only because the creator had allowed him to have it, and that he, Jesus, had only to snap his fingers (as it were) and the entire Roman Empire would implode. No wonder that once again, Pilate backed off and tried to set him free, over Jewish objections.

The *claim* to be God in human form, whether made by Jesus himself or by his followers such as the Gospel writers, does not of course validate itself. He and they might have been delusional for example. For the reader to assess the claim some kind of external, objective proof is required; and that is offered in the form of the resurrection.

A proven resurrection would be adequate validation, for it would be a singular event in world history. So far there have been an estimated [107 billion](#) human beings born on this planet, of whom 7 billion are living today; hence, 100 billion have lived and died. Not one of them arose from the dead. It's true that some (especially in recent years) have been resuscitated after breathing stopped, for example some drowning victims remained in cold water which prevented the body fully closing down and were later brought back to life; possibly [Lazarus](#), in one of Jesus' claimed miracles, was such a case – he appeared to die and was placed in a cool tomb before Jesus called him out. But nobody became clearly dead, and subsequently clearly alive again. Any claim to have done that (which Jesus' apostles emphatically made) will have to withstand a probability of being false of about *one hundred billion to one*.

That the resurrection is of central importance is acknowledged by Paul. He wrote in his letter to Christians in Corinth ([1 Corinthians 15:17](#)) “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain.”

The reader will therefore want to examine carefully the evidence for the resurrection. It consists of two kinds: the testimony of the apostles, and the empty tomb.

In the couple of days after Jesus' crucifixion on a Friday his followers were, understandably, devastated. All their hopes of a glorious future following and supporting the Messiah had been dashed, when he had been very visibly executed and put in the grave – a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. Then they heard from two of the women who had gone to anoint the body when the Sabbath (the Saturday) was over, that the body was missing. Two of the men ran to verify that fact. After they had returned, [John 20:19 ff](#) says that Jesus appeared among them and conversed with them, inviting one of them – Thomas, who could not believe his eyes – to touch him. Subsequently they claimed to have seen and met him several times, before he “ascended into heaven” and left them to spread the good news.

The apostolic witnesses continued preaching the resurrection for the rest of their lives, and in some cases the persecution against them for so doing was lethal – they were killed for it. This is conclusive evidence, to my mind, that they sincerely believed it. Nobody dies for a known

falsehood. Nonetheless, that of itself is not proof that they were correct; they might have been delusional or hallucinatory. It's good evidence, but hardly proof.

The first time they preached the resurrection is described in [Acts 2](#), with Peter addressing a crowd in Jerusalem: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses" (vs 32) and in vs 36, "God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." I imagine him gesturing as he spoke, in the direction of the empty tomb, as if to say "If you want to check, be my guest – go see for yourselves!" No doubt he also meant, by "we are all witnesses", that he and his friends had actually met the risen Jesus.

Once again, their testimony is strong but not conclusive or objective; what *is* objective is the empty tomb. Jesus' body had been placed in it late on the Friday afternoon, and by early on the Sunday morning it had vanished, with the burial cloths being arranged in some neat way as if the body had passed through them. The Jewish leaders were extremely eager to deny the resurrection claim (they said the disciples had stolen the body during the Saturday night) but nobody could deny that it was empty; nobody could produce the body. So much is sure.

The evidence comes down therefore to one question: how did the tomb become empty?

Either there was a true resurrection as the apostles claimed, or else somebody removed the body and hid or disposed of it. Given the odds of 100,000,000,000 to 1 against the former, we must consider whether anyone present that weekend had the means, opportunity *and motive* to carry out the latter.

We can rule out any theft during the Friday night, because on Saturday evening Roman soldiers arrived on Pilate's orders to set up a guard; they would hardly undertake their duties without checking that the body was present. During the Saturday night it could have been taken only with their knowledge and approval, unless they were asleep; and Romans did not sleep on guard duty for it was a capital offense. Yet *that is what they admitted*, on the Sunday morning! - and they confessed it not to their superior officers, but to the Jewish leaders! Such very strange conduct strongly suggests they were acting on orders already given.

Jesus' disciples did not steal it, for they preached the resurrection even when killed for it – see above. The Jewish leaders did not steal it, for if they had they would have produced it quickly, to prove that the resurrection preaching was a fraud. Who else might have done it?

There's only one candidate, and that's Pilate. He could have readily had his soldiers take out the body and conceal it in the desert – he had means and opportunity. But how about motive?

There is one possible motive he could have had. During the previous week he, the ruler over the Jews, had been humiliated and manipulated by the Jewish leaders three times; he had not wanted to order the crucifixion but had been obliged to do so. He would have been sore, and eager for some way to gain a revenge and restore his prestige and authority, to show those leaders that he could still outsmart them.

And when on the Saturday afternoon they came to ask him ([Matt. 27:64-66](#)) to set a guard on the tomb, saying they would be highly embarrassed if the disciples removed the body and claimed Jesus had risen from the dead, he would have seen an opportunity to do exactly that.

So the removal could readily have been done. Pilate would say nothing, for he knew he'd have gained his revenge. His soldiers would say nothing, for he would have sworn them to silence and rewarded them for it. The Pharisees would say nothing, for that would have been to admit that they had been outsmarted. And the disciples would say nothing because they genuinely believed in the resurrection. It is, therefore, perfectly possible that the empty tomb had a natural explanation. The reader must decide for himself which version to believe.

In summary, therefore, the carpenter and preacher from Nazareth offered fine moral ideas for people to live by, and evidently lived an upright life – nobody accused him of hypocrisy. To that extent, the religion he founded can stand comparison with any of the other religions in the world ([21 major](#) and many hundreds of lesser ones) and come out ahead. However he went much further than that, claiming to be the creator in human form – and that claim is central to the religion because, as we'll see in Chapter 3, it was central to its key theme of redemption and salvation. When deciding whether or not to join it, the reader needs to assess that claim.

This first chapter has been about the teaching and identity of Jesus, but not so much the meaning and *significance of his crucifixion* – yet that subject too is entirely central to understanding this religion. We'll come to it a little in the next chapter, and particularly in Chapter 3 when reviewing the Nicene Creed.

2. The Early Church

What began when Peter proclaimed “this Jesus, whom you crucified, God hath raised from the dead” continued for the next forty years, at which time some of the then-elderly leaders of the Christian faith formed a written record of what was being preached and believed.

That was the time – around 70 AD – when the Gospels and Acts, to which we've already referred, were first written down. They were not the only records made, then and in the following years; there were several dozen “[apocryphal gospels](#)” published, and the number was reduced to four some three centuries later, as we'll see in the next chapter. Additionally other writings about what the apostles did were written, but also excluded from the New Testament “canon” or selection of approved works.

The originals are long gone, but sufficient fragments of copies of the four canonical gospels survived well enough for reconstructions to be made, and there's no contention here that the results are less than reliable, sincere records.

Letters, written by Paul and others to local churches¹ founded around the Roman world, form an important part of the New Testament and show what they were preaching. It's very clear that the Christian message was not just that of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus but also an understanding of what it all signified; most simply stated, that “Christ died for our sins” ([1 Corinthians 15:3](#).) That theme is central, and of course is found too in the Gospels, for example in [John 3:16](#), “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The background to that is that mankind is said to have disobeyed the commands of God in the Garden of Eden; that's the so-called doctrine of “original sin” that has affected everyone since. In order therefore to be restored to harmony with his creator and his fellow men, he needs to have the penalty for that sin (separation from a holy God) to be taken away; he needs redemption or salvation. That is what the death of Jesus is said to mean, it's what it was for. It's what the early Christians preached, and what Christian evangelists still preach. We'll meet more of that in Chapter 3.

Between AD 33 and 325 when (as we'll also see there) there was a significant change in the status of Christianity, there were almost three centuries of growth, within the Roman Empire. The terms of life under rule from Rome, for religions, were tolerant provided that everyone acknowledged the supremacy of the emperor, known as the Caesar. Unfortunately, that was a problem for Christians because for them, Jesus was supreme.

As well as the Father and Son, introduced in John 1 as mentioned in Chapter 1 above, the

¹ The word “church” carries at least three shades of meaning. (i) Here, “local church” refers to the set of Christian believers in a particular place. Then (ii) there's the whole “church”, referring to all such believers in all parts of the world. Lastly (iii) the word can refer to a building where local believers meet and worship.

Christian understanding of God is that he has three persons, the third being the Holy Spirit. This was Jesus' promise in [Matthew 28:20](#); after commanding his followers to “Go... therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” So Christians then and now believe that the Spirit is with them as a power, companion and encouragement. The early ones in the area governed by Caesar were not about to have him supplanted by a mere Emperor, and that brought trouble. They were periodically persecuted, despised, and killed – by being made to fight lions in the Colliseum for the entertainment of the crowds, where many



of them died with great courage. That tells us much about those Christian martyrs, about the crowds enjoying the gruesome spectacle, and about the government that provided it. It is an awesome experience to visit Rome and see the very place where it all happened.

It's worth noting the phrase above in Matthew 28:20: “Go... teach *all nations*...” This was a radical change! Judaism is a religion exclusively for Jews, who believe God has chosen them as a special people. Yet here, the (Jewish) founder of the new religion is saying it is for *everyone, everywhere* – that Jews no longer have a special or superior status. It's not hard to understand the hostility that this must have aroused among Jewish religious leaders. But it is what caused the early Christians to offer their good news to Gentiles as well as Jews.

[One estimate](#) is that in the first two centuries, despite the persecution the Christian church

grew by **40%** per decade; and [this source](#) estimates it numbered about 5 million after three centuries. If that is correct, it grew by (5000000 / 11) in 300 years, counting 11 as its initial size. That's a growth of 454,454 times or 4.4% per year or **54%** per decade. Or, if we assume 1,000 as the initial size in AD 33 (ie, adherents as well as the apostles) then the rate is 5,000 times in 300 years or 2.9% a year, **33%** a decade. It's impressive, whichever way.

It grew because individual believers found that following “The Way”, as it was known, was a fulfilling way to live, and commended it to neighbors and friends as well as their children. They appreciated the gentle, positive moral teaching such as what Jesus gave in his sermons and parables (see Chapter 1) and that they were forgiven or “saved” as a result of his sacrifice in their place and so could live at peace. They supported and encouraged each other in local churches - usually gathering in each others' homes rather than in purpose-built structures – and read what had been published in the first century and were guided by preachers and “bishops” as indicated by Paul's letters to such local churches. So it was a peaceful growth, and relied upon one-to-one introduction. It's by far the best way to grow any movement.

The early church used the symbol of a fish, rather than of a cross as is more common today. It's interesting that at that time, members apparently focused more on outreach - “fishing for men” - than on the sacrifice that had won their salvation; use of the cross for this purpose came a bit later, in the fifth century.

The fish symbol often contained the five Greek letters shown, ΙΧΘΥΣ – an acrostic from Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ, meaning “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”, but which also form a word meaning “fish.” Quite a neat way to summarize. The symbol may also have reflected the importance of Peter (formerly a fisherman) in the church in the imperial city of Rome, which he led.



While it's not correct to call them “denominations”, as time passed divisions arose within the early church, as a result of differing understandings of Christian doctrine – despite, no doubt, the efforts of traveling preachers to keep everyone on the same page.

Most of the important ones went astray in the matter of Jesus' identity. In Chapter 1 we noted what John says about that in his [first three verses](#), and I did say it was “tough to grasp”! The Arians veered off to suppose that Jesus was slightly inferior in status to God the Father, hence not actually God incarnate. It's curious in that the whole idea of redemption is that God provided himself (as the son) as the universal sacrifice. Curious, too, in the light of all the other claims we reviewed in Chapter 1, including that of the resurrection. Perhaps the Arians ran short of good copies of the gospels.

Another common heresy was Gnosticism, which differentiated too sharply between the material and spiritual, teaching that the body needed suppressing and the spirit, enhancing. They even denied the reality of the material world. Gnostics also held that there are two separate gods, creation and judgment being the work of “Demiurge” while redemption was the work of the God of Jesus. Possibly, they confused the two aspects in the character of the

Christian God – justice and mercy. Seems pretty bizarre, and Prof. [James Orr](#) has described it as a “fantastic product of the blending of certain Christian ideas, with speculations derived from a medley of sources – philosophies, religions, theosophies, mysteries – jumbled together in an unimaginable welter.”

Appollinarians denied that Jesus had a soul, while Nestorians gave him two separate persons, prompting Eutychians to merge his two *natures* (human and divine) into one. Yes it's tough to grasp, but these various folk seem to have their respective knickers in quite a twist.

Novelist Dan Brown has popularized the idea that Jesus was married (to Mary Magdalene) and had at least one child, and there is a papyrus fragment to support that. Whether true or not, the selection of gospels approved for the canon, as we'll see in the next chapter, made no mention of it. Presumably, it was treated as heretical; certainly, Dan was correct to observe that women have long been excluded from leadership positions.

This second chapter has outlined how Christianity grew in only three centuries from being an obscure provincial sect to a major influence in the civilized world. It did so by its own resources alone, on the initiative of its own members who wished to share what they had found; the growth was spontaneous and organic and it took place despite intermittent extreme hostility. While it was inevitable that some squabbling took place, it's arguably the most creditable period in the story of this religion. But as we'll see next, that was about to change.

3. Nicea

By 325 AD the Christian church had grown to about 5 million, the largest single religion in the Roman Empire, and members were influential throughout society. It had done so as we saw in Chapter 2 by one-to-one replication, without external support – indeed, frequently in the teeth of official harassment, because Christians would not acknowledge Caesar above God.

In that year, its status radically changed; Caesar Constantine made it the established or official religion of the Empire and furnished it with an ample supply of government money and favors. Prior to that event its average growth rate had been about 33% to 54% per decade; since that year to the present day, it has averaged 3.6% per decade. Government “help” proved, then as now, to be a curse in disguise.

A little background is needed, to understand why Constantine performed that *volte-face*.

Rome began as a village, ruled like the rest of Italy by a government in Etruria, a city to its North. In about 500 BC it broke free, and within a couple of centuries had [expanded](#) militarily to displace the Etrurians as the dominant force in Italy. The conquests continued, and the map shows the result by 337 AD:



The expansion was by force, but its success sprang from a key policy: having conquered some territory and plundered its resources, its people were *offered citizenship* in the Empire. This was very cunning, for normally it forestalled ongoing guerilla opposition. It didn't work out too well in the Jewish case, because of their deeply-ingrained belief about being God's

Chosen People; they rebelled in 70 AD, lost, and were scattered as a result in the “diaspora” which lasted until 1948. But generally, the policy was a winner. Even Paul, in [Acts 22:27](#), indicated satisfaction at having been born a Roman citizen.

Expansion by conquest brought however the seeds of destruction – because, by the 3rd Century AD, there were no new lands to conquer and exploit, close enough to be administered within the limits of communication. Ancient Romans had amazing skills of road and ship building, but no cars, telephones, faxes or airplanes. Now, given that its wealth had all come from theft, this meant there was no more to steal; whereas citizens had been tax-free in Italy between 168 BC and the end of the Republic, the increasing expenses of governing so vast an area imposed increasing taxation on an increasingly unwilling productive class. This is incidentally eerily similar to today's American “empire.”

Taxation was increased by stealth; for three centuries after AD 100, governments diluted the silver currency with base metals so as to transfer wealth to their treasuries from those who earned it,. Result: [inflation](#), at an average rate of 3.7% a year, almost identical to the rate at which the American government has increased the supply of its (paper) currency since 1913. There being nothing left to plunder, poverty replaced prosperity.

Thus, by AD 300, the bloom was off the Roman rose. Discontent was rife, and the Emperor needed something to restore morale; some myth, by which to recreate a patriotic unity. He probably cared little what it was, but at that crucial moment, Caesar Constantine looked around and found the biggest of all the religions in the Empire was the Christian one. So he crafted a proposition: get your house in order, prepare to take your faith to the ends of our world, and we will shower you with all the money you need, courtesy of the taxpayer, and equip you with the prestige of being The Official Religion of the Roman Empire. The deal was offered, and struck, at the Council of Nicea.

Nicea was a resort, to the South of what became Constantinople in Turkey, a town in the hills where bureaucrats could relax in the cool of the hill country. No trace has been found of Caesar's Palace, but one might otherwise compare it to Las Vegas. Today it's called [Iznik](#) and is on the tourism trail. The map above shows that it was probably a convenient center to which Christian bishops could travel, given the origins and concentration of churches in the Eastern part of the Empire. 300 bishops accepted the invitation.

Discussions were not always friendly, and one key outcome was to expel those adhering to the heresies mentioned in Chapter 2. Having “cleaned house” the deal with the government could be concluded, and it was. The church became a tool of the State, with appropriate funds and status, and an official statement of belief was agreed and published.

The Creed

That statement of faith was the most notable product of the Council, and it survives to this day as an eloquent summary of what Christianity is all about. It is recited verbatim in some denominations. For example, worshippers in an Anglican communion stand and say it in unison – it's an impressive thing, that people solemnly join and declare what they believe. All denominations embrace it and always have done, since Nicea; some of them emphasize

some of its articles more than others, and some teach as key doctrines items not found in the Creed; such might have been expelled as heretics had they been present. But that so many find it a satisfactory statement of faith after 1,700 years, all over the world, makes it highly remarkable and perhaps unique. Set by its side the [“five pillars of Islam”](#), for example, and there is simply no comparison, those “pillars” are not statements of faith at all, except for the first (which is wholly non-specific) – they make merely a list of religious duties.

All readers considering joining the Christian church in any of its denominations will do well to consider each of its components, for this is what Christianity *is*, and has been since the beginning. Does each make sense, to you? - is it credible? Incredible? Ponder it, and decide. To help, we'll take some space and time here to examine and comment on each clause.

I'll use the version finalized in the year 381, which slightly amended that of 325.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

Did the universe have a creator? - or did it exist always, meaning that time has no beginning and no end? [Psalm 90:2](#) seems to say the latter, while of course [Genesis 1:1](#) and [John 1:1](#) say the former. If it is timeless, was it “created”? - presumably not. Yet this primary tenet says that it was. The reader must decide – and if he concludes no, there was no creator, that will be a showstopper; there's no point in gathering to worship a God one doesn't believe exists.

To advance the view that a creator God exists, [Psalm 19:1](#) says “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.” Do they? It's awesome, to be sure. Glorious, yes. But the reader may also think the vast universe is cold and random and cruel.

Or, he may detect abundant evidence of intelligent design in the micro, as well as the macro, aspect of the universe and so feel well at home with this first clause of the Nicene Creed. There's more about it in the final chapter, under “decision tree”, but for now let's continue.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

Here is introduced the second person of the trinity, as we noted in Chapter 1. Tough to grasp (the Arians couldn't) but there it is: the carpenter and preacher of Galilee is “of one substance” with God the Father. This was Peter's brilliant insight, reported in [Matthew 16:16](#).

The reader will need to decide whether the evidence for the carpenter's identity, discussed in Chapter 1, is or is not convincing.

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

Now we're getting to the meat of Christian theology. Jesus was not just a moral teacher; he is

said to have taken human form *in order to save* those who trust him.

The manner of his descent is spelled out, and the reader may recall the third paragraph of Chapter 1; this is either an unbelievable myth, or else it's true truth. It's credible if, and only if, Jesus was, as above, "very God of very God." Notice though, this clause of the Creed says he was "made man"; that he was fully human, as well as fully divine.

he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried,

Deeper yet into that theology: Jesus was "crucified for us." Not just executed by government as nuisance to the established religion of the day, but as a [sacrificial lamb](#). The concept here is that the "[wages of sin is death](#)" and so sinful man needs a substitute to die for him. God the father provided that substitute, in the person of his son.

Note too: this clause of the Creed emphasizes that Jesus really did die; there was no question of being buried while injured but still alive.

and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;

We looked briefly in Chapter 1 at the evidence for (and against) the resurrection, and again: the reader must decide whether he is convinced. To be a believing Christian, he must be.

from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

Here's something we've not considered yet, but it's an important part of Christian belief: there will, it holds, be a Second Coming. When it happens, Jesus won't arrive as a preacher or carpenter but as a judge and king; the criterion for judgment will be whether each individual has or has not accepted his offer of salvation. "Quick" here means "living", so the clause refers to those who are alive at the time of his return, and to those who lived and died before that time. [Matthew 25:30 ff](#) report Jesus' own words about this subject.

They are tough to swallow. In that passage Jesus spoke of "outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in verse 30, and that some will "go away into everlasting punishment" in verse 46. So when the Creed says he will "judge", it's not kidding.

Bertrand Russell wrote: "There is one serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."

So this is another decision for the reader to make.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

Here the Creed refers to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This third person is believed to be the Christian's daily companion, whose guidance he seeks and with whom he prays. He's said to be wholly integral with the other two persons of the Godhead, and that he "spoke by the prophets." This means that in Christian belief the Bible – Old as well as New Testaments – is the word of God, the very expression of his Spirit.

Exactly what that means has been hotly debated; did the Holy Spirit inspire every syllable of the Bible, as a person might dictate to a typist? - if so, what's to be said about those who translated the original into languages we can read; were they too infallibly guided? - what of the many versions even in English; if the NIV wording differs from that of the KJV, which is right? Or was the inspiration more general, conveying just a broad idea ready for the human author to put into exact words? What about the more surprising parts of the Bible, such as the date of creation; it's been calculated by adding up the ages of each generation that followed that Adam and Eve were created in 4004 BC. Really?

Another decision for the long-suffering reader. And finally in the Nicene Creed,

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

So there is *one* church, and this refers to the whole set of believers, no matter where or when they live nor what denomination they prefer. It's "holy" - distinct or separate from the common run of mankind – and "catholic", and there's a word with controversy attached. It means "universal," as just stated, but today the Roman Catholic denomination likes to use it on its own to imply that they alone are the true church. That will affect the reader's choice of his preferred denomination, if that one is on his short list. By "apostolic" is meant that the church is engaged on a mission, that it's sent to evangelize the world. Christians undertake that work.

The next phrase in this clause seems to say that baptism remits sins, but in context it should be understood that baptism is the symbol or outward sign that sins have been remitted, ie that a person has become a Christian by accepting Jesus' offer of salvation. The word in Greek certainly means to *immerse*, like Jesus was immersed in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. It's strange that several denominations later substituted *sprinkling* for the symbol, as if there was a shortage of deep water – and even stranger that they administer it to newborn infants, who obviously have no ability (or need) to request it.

The Creed ends with a statement of expectation: that the dead will be raised and that there is another world, or life, to follow. This has been a comfort on innumerable occasions after a believer has died. The reader must decide whether or not it's true.

So there we have it: the Nicene Creed. As concise a statement of Christian belief as one could desire. All denominations embrace it; so must each who becomes a Christian, and it's not feasible to pick one clause but reject another. All of it is well grounded in and derived from the New Testament, so it should be accepted or rejected as a whole.

4. Schisms and the Reformation

Our purpose is to help the reader decide which part of the Christian church to join, if any, and the turbulent events of the Reformation, especially in the 16th and 17th Centuries, are critical for that purpose; but rather than leap over 1200 years of church history we'll begin here by sketching in what happened between the Nicean Council of 325 and the upheavals of Luther and Calvin beginning around 1525.

While neither party got a good deal, Caesar Constantine came off second best in the bargain he struck with the bishops. They emerged with a unified church and a clear statement of faith and an expense account to take it to the farthest corners of the empire at its peak, while he got an official religion with which to shore up the sagging unity and morale of an empire that was coming apart economically. It was not enough; by 410, the dinosaur was dead. The 700-year-old rampage had run out of steam; all that was left was the rump of the Eastern Empire, centered on Byzantium (which he re-named Constantinople.) Rome itself fell, to barbarians from the North. When they arrived, there was no there, there; for most city dwellers had returned to the countryside in order to grow food to eat. The State, with its taxes and inflation, had sucked them dry.

So 100 years after Nicea, the Christian church remained the only functioning part of the Roman Empire in the West. Politicians came and went, tribes warred for territory, but churches existed everywhere and accepted the leadership of the Bishop of Rome, who became known as the successor of Peter and used the title of Pope. Much later, that was to become a source of great contention.

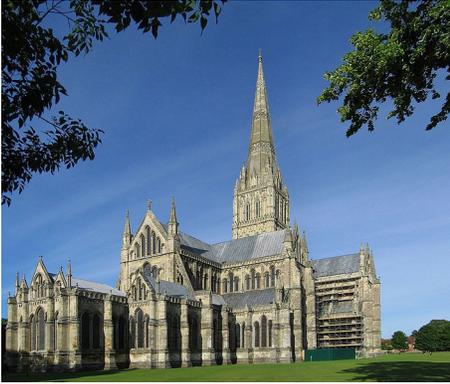
Roman leadership was challenged in time by the churches in the East, and little wonder given that Constantinople survived when Rome did not; and in the 1050s matters came to a head, with each half excommunicating the other. After 1054 there was the Roman church and the Eastern Orthodox church, though the Roman one continued to call itself "catholic" - universal. This was the Great, or East-West, Schism and although it was really a leadership squabble, there were also some doctrinal differences such as the heavy question of whether the bread used in Communion should be leavened or unleavened.

A rather bigger leadership squabble was the Western Schism, triggered in 1305 by the newly elected Pope Clement V. He was French and didn't want to move to Rome, so he ruled from Avignon. Fair enough, but his successors continued doing so for 67 years, building themselves a fine palace for the purpose; and eventually the strain was too much; a Bishop of Rome ought, after all, to reside in Rome. So after 1378 there were, incredibly, two popes – each claiming to be the infallible Vicar of Christ and Successor of Peter. This absurdity went on for forty years, until 1418 when Martin V restored



rule to Rome and the rebellion fizzled.

In humbler parts of society Christians had leavened it well, for example with village elders righting wrongs in rather informal courts out of which Law was *discovered*, rather than issued as an edict. Those with more education gravitated to monasteries and abbeys, there to meditate, pray, copy the sacred texts in the absence of Ctrl-copy keys, and minister to the sick. Was that the best use of their intellectual talent? - it can be debated.



But the tendency of the high and mighty to flaunt their power grew worse with time. Not only was a fancy palace built at Avignon, but the two centuries after 1200 was when the great, magnificent but horribly expensive cathedrals began to be built, ostensibly for the glory of God. They drew forth astonishing feats of architecture and engineering, but absorbed massive amounts of wealth which had been generated (there is no other source, ever) by the labor of ordinary people. Unless the resources were provided willingly and without constraint, it seems an awful waste.

Sometimes, wealth was transferred to the church in these late Middle Ages *with* constraint; or arguably by outright fraud. The scheme was for the pope to sell “indulgences.” By this time, the papacy had promulgated the doctrine of “purgatory”, said to be a kind of painful holding tank into which souls would pass at death, while awaiting transfer to heaven. The more saintly one had been in one's earthly life, the shorter the stay; and vice versa. But purchase an indulgence or two, and Papal intercession would curtail the delay. The reader will have noticed no mention of purgatory in the Nicene Creed, and will find none in the New Testament. Given faith in Jesus, according to [Luke 23:43](#), even the repentant thief being crucified next to him was promised “*Today* shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

“Power corrupts,” noted Lord Acton, “and absolute power corrupts absolutely” - and the popes of the middle ages form shocking examples of how right he was. [John XII](#) was one of the worst, ruling from 955 to 964; even the restrained Wikipedia article has him elected probably at age 18 and not older than 25, ordaining bishops for money (including one aged 10) engaging in fornication and incest and making his palace into a whorehouse, and castrating and then murdering his subdeacon John. A successor to Caligula perhaps, but hardly Peter.

The Roman church was therefore in serious trouble – at the top, if less so in its ordinary membership – around six centuries after Constantine had granted it monopoly status. The corruption became clear in terms of gross accumulation of wealth by the leadership, debauchery by the leadership, and heretical teaching by the leadership. Earnest Christians in monasteries and elsewhere began to see the anomalies and to protest.

One of the earliest came in 1170 from the Waldensians. Peter Waldo of Lyon began in about 1160 to take [Matthew 6:24](#) seriously, giving away most of his wealth and living simply, and preaching against the papal doctrines of purgatory (above) and “transubstantiation.” This was the idea that at Communion (in which Christians remember the sacrifice of Jesus by eating a piece of bread and drinking a sip of wine, symbolizing his body and blood) the bread and wine

are *literally changed* into Jesus' body and blood, instead of being merely symbolic. Perhaps it was promulgated so as to increase the power of the Roman priesthood; that is, an ordinary Christian could get real communion only by attending the monopoly church. Whatever the reason, it has no more foundation in the New Testament than does purgatory.

So Waldo's protest was not just about the moral corruption of the papacy, but more about its doctrinal heresy. He was evidently eager to preserve Christianity as it appeared originally, in the Bible. He may have been the first – though by no means the last – to liken the Roman Church leadership to a whore. Not surprisingly, that drew a reaction; he was excommunicated in 1184 and Waldensians were persecuted and killed during the next three centuries. Mergers with other denominations mean there are no Waldensian churches today in America, though a few can be found in Italy.

The next major protester against the papal grip on Christendom was an English scholar, John Wycliffe. He too denounced the doctrines of purgatory and transubstantiation, and – notably – he stressed that salvation came only by faith, not by faith plus something else. In that, he anticipated Martin Luther's great theme a century and a half later. He also deplored the Roman church's accretion of wealth and its closeness to secular powers. This latter was perceptive as well as brave; there is in my view a sinister synergy between religion and state in most if not all religions – and of course in the Christian case it began with the deal in Nicea.

Wycliffe's great lifetime achievement was to translate the Bible into English. He completed the work in 1382, at which time most English people could read no Latin and therefore had to depend on the priesthood to tell them what the Bible said. Remember that there was still no printing, so there were very few copies available, but still there was from that time forward a version in the language everyone could understand. The monopoly was beginning to crack.

His reward was posthumously to be declared a heretic; his body was exhumed in 1415 and burned, by order of the Pope. Monopolists really hate competition.

Jan Hus was Wycliffe's contemporary – born later, he too was burned as a heretic in 1415, but unhappily while still alive. It's especially barbaric to execute someone with whom one disagrees; a group such as a church is certainly entitled to cancel the membership of one who no longer believes as other members do – that is, after all, what the bishops did in Nicea to the heretics of that time - but to kill him or her proves the group has no respect for freedom, of speech or any other kind.

Hus was born in Bohemia and worked in Prague, distributed Wycliffe's writings and preached against indulgences. His protests were complicated by the Western Schism (above) with its two competing popes, and Hus got caught between them. Ever since, he has been seen as a Czech hero.



The Reformation Itself

It's amazing to me that this had to wait so long. Corruption at the top of the church must have set in well before 955, because John XII was *elected* Pope that year, while obviously entirely unsuitable. So those who elected him were clearly corrupt; the rot was well advanced 600 years after Nicea – yet apart from the heroic exceptions such as those we've just reviewed, little was done to fix the problem for *another* 600. Once power is acquired, it seems terribly difficult to take it away again.

Waldo, Wycliffe, Hus and others were precursors to the Reformation proper, and now the reader's great patience will be rewarded: we come to those for whom they had prepared the way, notably Martin Luther and John Calvin. Today there are no denominations among which he might choose that derive directly from those early protestants, whereas there is a rich abundance of Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational and other groups which can trace their origins to the latter two.

Martin Luther was the first to open the floodgates of reform. Born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany, he became an Augustinian monk at Erfurt in 1505, later being transferred to the monastery at Wittenberg. Ordained priest in 1507, he was appointed a theology teacher in the University there in 1508.

Those three years were critical for him. He later said "If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would certainly have done so" - he had an acute sense of his own sinfulness and wrestled with the logical problem of how to be reconciled with a perfect, holy God. The church-prescribed method was to confess, but Luther knew that he couldn't remember all his sins, and what he couldn't remember, he couldn't confess, so what happened to those? Eventually he searched the Bible for answers, searching its original Greek instead of the Latin "Vulgate" which the church used, and gradually he saw what had been there all along: that as Paul wrote, "Christ died for our sins" ([1 Corinthians 15:3](#).) It was therefore not a matter of confessing to a confessor all sins one by one, but of trusting in a sacrifice already made, once and for all. It's astonishing that he (along presumably with everyone else) had missed that, for it's about the most basic doctrine in Christianity; but gradually the church had obscured it with demands for confession (for which a fee was due) and with the fiction of purgatory, from which one could more readily escape upon appropriate payment.



Accordingly the extent of the papal deception began to be understood and Luther started asking awkward questions. His best known action was to draw up a list of objections to the practice of selling indulgences and nail them to his church door; these were the famous "[Ninety Five Theses](#)." (The original door has been replaced by this bronze one, inscribed with the theses.) They were meant for scholarly discussion, but before long they were printed and distributed widely, and that drew unwelcome attention. Little wonder, when they contained such assertions as the sixth: "The

pope cannot remit any guilt” or the sixty-sixth: “The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the riches of men.” Interestingly, the theses do not go as far as to deny that purgatory exists, even though there is not a shred of Biblical support for the idea; Luther simply focused on the outrage of selling pardons and remissions.

From there it was intellectually but a short step to Luther's most famous insight, the doctrine that to be “justified,” or made right with, God requires faith alone (*fide sola*) rather than faith plus good works, which was and is the Roman Catholic position. The distinction is a bit fine, for Jesus did say “Ye shall know them by their fruits” ([Matthew 7:16](#)) meaning that if someone claims to be a Christian but shows no sign of upright living, perhaps he isn't. But Luther was right; the word is “fruits” - a result of something else, namely justification. It's not the fruits that produce the salvation, but the other way round.

[Romans 3:28](#) is explicit: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” And the principle of *fide sola* undermined everything that the Roman pope and priesthood were doing and selling; they were making themselves indispensable for salvation whereas the believer could gain direct access to that without their participation at all. The “keys to heaven” which featured large on the pope's coat of arms, were not needed. The monopoly was undercut.



Undercutting monopolies is always highly hazardous, and Luther was In great peril as soon as he finished hammering the nail in his church door. He was called to account for his impertinence in 1520 by a demand from Pope Leo X to retract all he had written, and in 1521 he declined to do so before an inquisition

or “diet” in Worms, famously declaring “**Here I stand; I can do no other.**” Given that his life was balanced on a knife-edge, that has to be one of the most courageous utterances of all time.



His reward was to be excommunicated and declared an outlaw (so anyone could kill him without legal consequence) but before he could be burned at the stake he took refuge with a powerful supporter, Prince Frederick III, in his

castle at Wartburg. Once there, he wasted no time; he set about translating the New Testament into German, from the original Greek.

Some of his followers were too zealous, even to the point of violence, and Luther had to take time to cool their heads; but after getting married in 1523 he organized a new church in 1526; this was the source of the Lutheran denomination, and was the major way in which he could differentiate himself from the earlier reformers like Waldo, Wycliffe and Hus.

He did so with help from powerful secular friends, such as John the Steadfast, Elector of Saxony, and this led to more involvement of civil government with his denomination than he is thought to have preferred. But it was a trade-off; he did very well from such secular support.

His specification for services left plenty of Roman practice undisturbed – he just went for the important reforms. The “sacrifice of the Mass” became Communion, with the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation being replaced by “consubstantiation”; the bread and wine did not literally change into Jesus' body and blood, but Jesus was (he taught) certainly present at the Communion. This was a bit of a cop-out, since according to [Matthew 18:20](#) Jesus promised “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” - so the Holy Spirit was as present when a couple of believers were at home, just as much as when they attended Communion.

Luther wrote hymns for his followers to use, and they're pretty good. There's not much to match *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, belted out *fortissimo* with a pipe organ at full throttle, to warm up a congregation on a frosty Sunday morning – not even if it's sung in English.

As I see it, Luther succeeded where earlier protestants had not, because of five factors:

1. He escaped execution (a rather basic prerequisite!)
2. He cultivated and used powerful friends outside the church hierarchy.
3. He translated the Bible into the local language.
4. He made use of the new technology of *printing*, so everyone could read it for themselves.
5. He founded and built up a new denomination, separate from the Roman church.

Some of these applied to each of the precursors, but none could take advantage of all five.

He died in 1546 after his health had declined for several years, by which time Lutheran churches had been established throughout Germany and Scandinavia. Three hundred years later there were huge waves of emigration from those areas to the United States, and Lutheran churches were exported with them. Today there are over 17,000 in that country. Lutherans ought to be on the short-list of any denomination-seeker.

John Calvin was born in France in 1509, the year after Luther's brave stand in Worms, but unlike him he intended a career in the law. In 1533 however he, like Luther, suffered a heavy sense of unworthiness before a holy God, and found the same solution: that according to the New Testament, he could simply trust in Jesus' all-sufficient sacrifice in his place. By that year the findings of Luther were the talk of Europe, so Calvin didn't need to discover this from the get-go, he just had to keep his eyes and ears open.

Hostility to reform was powerful in France, and in 1536 Calvin headed for Strasbourg, where there was tolerance for dissenters. The French government was busy preparing for a war with Italians, so he was obliged to divert to Geneva. This proved to be a happy coincidence, for he stayed in that city for the rest of his life.

There's little difference on the important doctrinal items, between Calvin and Luther, but they

did diverge in a couple of practical ways. Instead of taking over existing church buildings and turning Roman Catholic into Protestant ones, so forming a new denomination, Calvin's teaching spread by word of mouth, very widely; and when a church building was needed for local worship, one was built – quite plainly and costing little. He emphasized that after being saved (by faith alone, of course, and only by God's grace) each believer had a duty to glorify his savior by working well and honestly, by helping the deserving poor, etc. His appeal was strong to businessmen, who traveled – so the word spread to centers of commerce like Amsterdam, Antwerp, London. In Geneva particularly, Calvin influenced local law to reflect his perception of what Christian conduct meant in respect of business. He favored controls on prices, for example, so falling into the medieval falsehood of the “fair price” idea (the only price that can ever be truly fair is the one equally acceptable to both buyer and seller.) Also, he taught that the lending of money should be subject to rules about interest rates; another basic economic falsehood, for the price of loaned money should be agreed by both borrower and lender, without constraint by a third party. But these errors were not fundamental.

From Scotland came John Knox to Geneva, to learn from the master; he returned home fired up to begin the Presbyterian movement, which (like Luther's) later came across the ocean to North America. Likewise William Whittingham became prominent in Geneva and helped import Calvin's teachings to England.

So Calvin's influence was huge, but did not result in a large “Calvinist” denomination, as such, but rather several sizeable ones including Congregationalists and a [long list](#) of “Reformed” churches worldwide. Puritans, too, certainly drew their inspiration from John Calvin.

His primary interest was to understand and teach theology. One of his first projects after being converted was to write the first edition of his “Institutes of the Christian Religion” - and one of his last ones, before his death in 1564, was to work on an updated edition. He dared to dive into questions that strain the brain, and arguably place a doubt upon the whole framework of the faith; for he became well known as the originator of the predestination question.

It goes something like this. According to the Bible, God has provided a way of salvation which can be accepted, by faith alone, by any person who wishes to do so - realizing that there is no other possible way to get right with God. So far, so fine.

That means that when the offer is accepted, the human being is exercising free will.

However God, being God, is omniscient: he knows *in advance* who will, and who will not, take that decision to accept the offer. Accordingly, in what sense is the person's will really *free*? - is it not much more accurate to say that he is predestined to make that choice?

Further, if that is true, must it not also be true that those who decline the offer are also predestined to do so? - and to suffer eternal punishment?

Hence the doctrine that some are predestined to spend eternity in bliss, while some are predestined to spend it in anguish. That seems to make God vindictive and capricious, contrary to the other premise that as well as being omniscient and omnipotent he is also benevolent. Accordingly, the premise that that kind of God exists is called into question. Or so,

I think, Bertrand Russell would argue; the reader may recall that in Chapter 3 we noted that he was repulsed by the concept of everlasting punishment, so how much more so would he be by the news that for some, it could not be avoided? It might be concluded that the Biblical offer of free salvation by grace is a sick, perverse and savage divine joke – or a total fiction.

Now, Calvin did not go nearly that far – but the reader might reason that such a conclusion does follow from what he did teach, and what he taught certainly follows from what the Bible says. So this is not so much a critique of Calvin, as of the theology he faithfully explored.

Modern denominations derive from two other movements in the 16th Century, as follows.

Anabaptists embraced what Luther and Calvin had rediscovered, but went one step further, in the important though secondary matter of the ceremony of baptism. This was a symbol of what it means to accept the offer of salvation by faith alone; one becomes re-born, as Jesus said is necessary, in [John 3:7](#). One is submerged in water, for the old self dies – then one is born anew by rising again from the water; it's a powerful illustration.

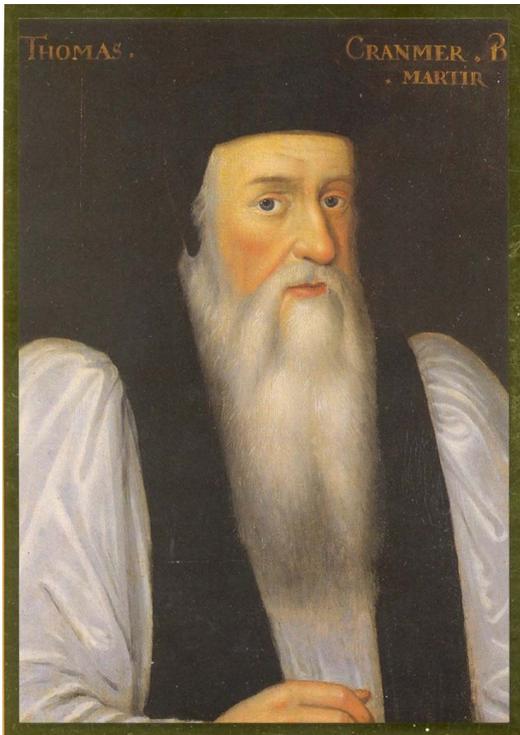
To call the sprinkling of newborn infants “baptism” is absurd, for none of that takes place; they are not immersed, and have neither ability nor need to renounce sin and claim salvation. That those who realized and promoted that understanding were slandered as “anabaptists,” or “re-baptisers,” was a falsehood; they were not repeating anything, because the infant sprinkling was never truly baptism at all. So the prefix “ana-” is a slander.

It's interesting that the origins of these baptists is rather obscure; unlike the denominations so far mentioned here, it's not feasible to name specific reformers who began the movement. Some theories about that are [shown here](#). The key factor is that all of them came to see that the only true authority for Christians was the Bible, and the Bible refers to believers' baptism, not to infant sprinkling. That these believers were in due course persecuted not only by Roman Catholics but also by fellow Protestants is a serious reflection on the latter.

At any rate, the movement gave rise in due course to the Amish, Mennonite and Hutterite denominations, and of course to the Baptist one, of which there are over 80,000 churches in the United States alone. They should be on the reader's short list.

The English Reformation followed a rather different path from that on the continent of Europe. After Wycliffe there was no single dedicated reformer to inspire a new grass-roots movement, to compare to Luther or Calvin; both influenced what took place (particularly the latter, in opposition to the official Protestants) but the story is inseparable from that of King Henry VIII. With his first wife Catherine he had the misfortune to lack a male heir. Being an imperious monarch, he demanded annulment of his marriage so as to try another wife. Pope Clement VII would (reasonably) not cooperate, so in 1534 Henry declared himself no longer subject to the Roman church, and proceeded anyway as head of a new “Church of England.”

His ecclesiastical advisors scrambled to make sense of the change, and they did include some men decidedly sympathetic to the reforms taking place on the Continent; notably Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury.



Cranmer was convinced of the Protestant cause, but also skilful enough a political player to advance it only step by step. He gave Henry what he wanted, and moved the church Henry headed towards reform. He got agreement for the Anglican church's "39 Articles" and its Book of Common Prayer, but waited for Edward to succeed as monarch before extending the latter to [42 Articles](#), cementing the church to Protestant belief.

The result was a denomination that retained the buildings of the Roman church, along with many of the rituals and vestments, but which changed the content of the services so as to exclude the "sacrifice of the Mass" with its transubstantiation doctrine, cancelled the sale of indulgences, abolished the fiction of purgatory, allowed ordained ministers ("vicars") to marry, established the doctrine of *fide sola*, and affirmed the supremacy of the Bible. It is very comparable to the Lutherans, but was distinctively English and under management by the English King. As such, however, it depended on what succeeding monarchs believed.

So it was not an unmixed blessing. Henry went through five more wives before he died and left but one male heir (Edward VI) who reigned for only six years before *he* died, a rather sickly youth. Then began a long, tense succession squabble, with rules quite obscure, that threatened to take England into and out of Roman Catholicism as if trapped in a revolving door. Such is the consequence of tying people's beliefs to the choice of one person.

It didn't turn out quite that badly. Mary 1st followed Edward and was Roman Catholic and reigned from 1553 to 1558, but after her came the popular Elizabeth 1st (Protestant) and then James 1st, also Protestant though quite tolerant. By the early 1600s, the country settled down.

One happy result of the English Reformation was a new translation of the Bible, prepared by a group of scholars and dedicated to James I in 1611: the King James Version (KJV) or Authorized Version as it's also known. It was well done, and the rendering is an exquisite example of English at its finest – made while Shakespeare was writing at his peak.

The victorious Church of England was then faced with Christian groups wishing to go further with reform and to dissent from *it*, just as it had done from Rome. At that point a double standard swung into play, and King James (head of State, recall, as well as head of Church) gave the Calvinist dissenters (such as the Brownist Congregationalists, who made up the first Pilgrims on the Mayflower) such a hard time that many of them emigrated, to North America. England's loss, America's gain. "Puritan" New England resulted, for good and ill.

5. Modern Denominations

With 2.2 billion adherents in 200 countries worldwide, a comprehensive catalog of Christian groups under this heading is not feasible in a work of this modest size, so we'll focus on the USA in this chapter, just as we focused on Europe in the last – necessarily, for that's where the Reformation took place. And there is no claim to be comprehensive, for there are over a quarter million local Christian churches in the US alone. The reader has a rich choice!

Modern denominations can be broadly classified as follows.

1. Roman Catholics
2. “Mainstream” Protestant denominations begun during or soon after the Reformation
3. Denominations and independent churches founded separately from that mainstream

Here's an idea of the numbers of local churches involved in the largest denominations.

Denomination	Number of US Churches
Baptist	86000
Pentecostal	41000
Methodist	35000
Church of Christ	29000
Roman Catholic	17000
Lutheran	17000
Presbyterian	15000
Holiness	12000
Evangelical	12000
Fundamentalist	8000
Episcopal	7000
Reformed	5000
Others	28000
Total	312000

An interesting trivium is that there is one church in America for every 1,000 residents! Actual membership in attendance however is of course smaller and highly variable. Roman Catholic churches for example tend to have a much larger membership than some in the “Others” category such as Brethren Assemblies.

The list is very striking in that the mainstream denominations which played such an important part in the Reformation five centuries ago - Baptist, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Reformed churches - account for only 45% of the total. All denominations, however, come from one or other of them; over the course of time there were offshoots and splits and local preferences that emphasized one aspect or other of Christian belief or practice.

Probably the first of them to do that was the Methodist one, which drew its early members from Anglican churches in England after those had lost their first enthusiasm by the 1700s. John and Charles Wesley were its founders – John known for his fiery preaching and Charles for his tireless ability to compose stirring hymns. These brothers traveled throughout Britain and the United States, founding churches. In turn the Methodists were later the main progenitors of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements noted in that list. The fictional, dour Presbyterian minister in the movie “A River Runs Through It” reportedly described Methodists as “Baptists, who can read” but that was, I think, a joke. On average Baptists are much more literate than the population norm, and Methodists still practice infant sprinkling.

A considerable number of churches are independent of any “denomination” including the 28,000 “others”, and the reader should not overlook them. Many formed during the 20th Century, a time when the US population was busy relocating, across country and into suburbs and Christians doing so didn't always feel the need to belong to one of the older groups. Instead they met and decided what particular aspects of the faith they wanted to emphasize, and went ahead and founded a local church. Many have been successful and a few have grown, with the aid of especially persuasive preachers, into “megachurches” with thousands of members and dozens of full-time ministers. Others are tiny “store-front” assemblies in poor neighborhoods of the inner cities, with one part-time minister – or none at all.

The fact that most of those listed do not bear the title “Baptist” doesn't mean they don't practice believers' baptism, instead of infant sprinkling; I'd say that most of them do that who are shown here as Pentecostal, Holiness, Evangelical and Fundamentalist, as well as “Others” and of course the Baptists so named.

Pentecostal churches rank second, and we've not met them yet in this book. The name comes from the feast of Pentecost, namely 50 days after Easter in the church calendar, and is the day noted in [Acts 2](#) when Christians preached in “tongues” or languages not their own, and everyone in the crowd, even though from foreign parts, heard him do so *in his own language*, or so we're told. This is called the “gift of tongues” and Pentecostals today claim to have experienced something similar. What purpose that serves when everyone present understands the local language is less clear.

Changes in the last half-Millennium

There are two of particular interest to the denomination seeker, in addition to those above:

1. Roman Catholics have improved a bit, and
2. All mainstream denominations suffered a meat-cleaver division a century ago.

As to the first, we've noted the gross immorality of certain popes, even turning their palace

into a brothel, and intermittently this continued through the papacy of [Alexander VI](#), known for the quantity of his mistresses and even of his children. There is of course nothing wrong with sex, marriage or children, but the Roman church forbids its priests to marry and preaches abstinence, so this was hypocrisy of the highest order, in the highest place. The prohibition is flat foolish and in no way Biblical; Paul does say in [1 Corinthians 7:8](#) "it is good for [the unmarried] if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." However Paul was constantly traveling; a wife and family would clearly have interfered with his work of spreading the gospel and caring for young churches. Pastors to a fixed congregation, in contrast, travel very little so that consideration just doesn't apply.

Since Alexander's time, though, such scandal has not marred the Roman church's reputation and the Council of Trent (1545–1563) went a long way to sharpening up discipline among the priesthood. In recent years it's been reported that priests have been sexually abusing children and that bishops have been lax in removing them from office, but that's still less outrageous than the hypocrisy of the pre-reformation era. And it might well be fixed by allowing marriage.

A further improvement: the Roman church published its own translations of the Bible into many local languages, and has encouraged members to read it! This has reduced a good deal the gap between Christians in that denomination and Protestant ones, and I've encountered several very sincere and spiritual members there. As a boy I briefly attended two of its schools (loved the first, hated the second) and the Roman church has done very well by instituting parochial schools with good quality and low cost, to offset the scourge of the government "education" monopoly, especially in the United States.

Best of all, the sale of "pardons" was abolished, so removing Luther's primary complaint.

But there are some badly needed improvements the Roman church has *not* implemented:

- The fiction of purgatory has still not been eliminated
- The *fide sola* principle has still not been accepted
- Confession to a priest is still expected, as a means of forgiveness of sin
- Transubstantiation is still assumed, to make its Mass the only valid form of communion
- It still teaches that "on this rock I will build my church" refers to Peter personally
- When speaking *ex cathedra*, the Pope is still taught to be infallible! ²
- The keys to heaven still feature on the Pope's coat of arms
- It teaches that Mary was "immaculate" at conception, so contradicting the Biblical doctrine that all people are born with "original sin" and need saving
- Mary, and even the "saints" have been elevated to the status of *intercessors*, as if believers were unable to pray directly to God the Father after being saved by faith alone

In other words, despite a great degree of piety on the part of many Roman Catholics, that

² Papal infallibility:

"The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful -- who confirms his brethren in the faith -- he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals" (Catechism of the Catholic Church (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications), 1994, p.235)

organization still claims, arrogantly, to be the only valid Christian church. Some review the list above and conclude that it isn't even a Christian church at all, but a heresy.

The meat-cleaver division (the second major change during the last 500 years) has to do with the trends in theological scholarship particularly during the century commencing about 1850. They have been given such names as “higher criticism” and “modernism” but they called into question the validity of the Bible as the source of all Christian beliefs.

In every major denomination, some accepted those “assured results of modern scholarship” while others denied them; hence the meat-cleaver division. It slashed them down the middle. Only the more recent independent churches, founded in defiance of such teaching, have been free of its influence.

With the exception of Lutherans (all Lutheran churches are or can be called “Evangelical”, no matter their pastors' theology) the term “Evangelical” usually indicates a church that has repudiated this modernism. So does a term like “Bible-based.” But the cleavage does mean that the denomination-seeker has to examine churches one by one, to discover what they really believe; mere adherence to an established denomination is no longer enough.

In essence, this modern scholarship has noted that when the Bible refers to natural events such as the Flood and the Creation and the movement of stars and planets, is flat wrong. For example if one counts back in time, the Bible's date for the creation is 4004 BC – as was done in the chronology of [Bishop Ussher](#). Several separate techniques of archaeology have shown that to be nonsense. Higher criticism also used a variety of tools such as linguistic analysis to determine the authorship and date of each of the books in the Bible, and found serious discrepancies with what was claimed internally. It also noted that at Nicea there was a deliberate sifting of documentary fragments available, so that the New Testament canon would be consistent, both internally and with what the attending bishops thought to be orthodox; hence, the true history of Jesus' life and that of the apostles may have been lost.

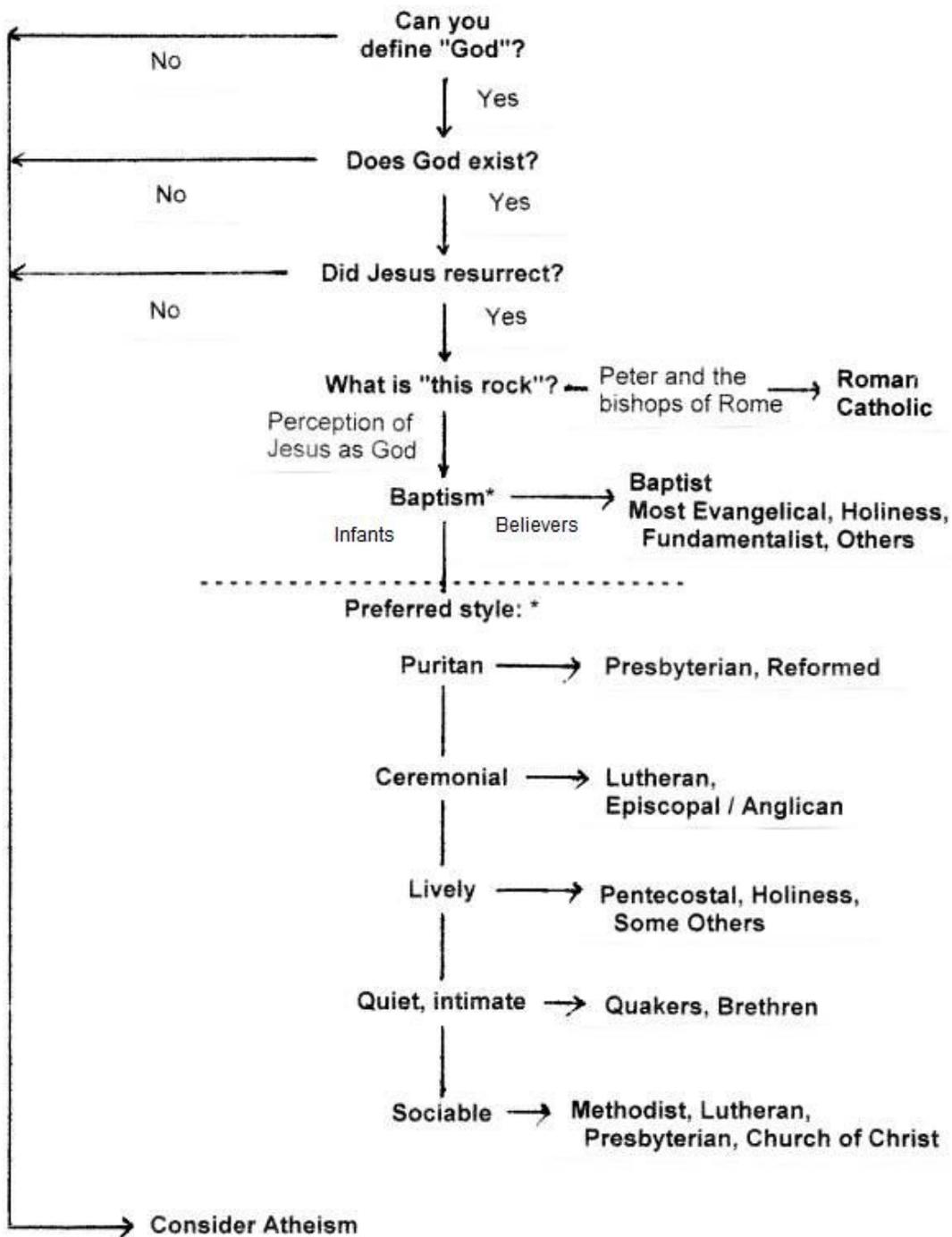
This was a radical departure, for previously the Bible had been taken as an inspired book; these “modern scholars” were taking it as just an ordinary book, and tried to see how it measured up. They found it wanting.

The division therefore comes down to whether or not the Bible is inspired, infallible, inerrant and therefore reliable as the foundation for the faith. If it isn't, then really “anything goes” - and in those churches on the left of the meat-cleavage, pretty well anything does go. On its right, where the Bible is taken as the inerrant word of God, one can find Christianity as Luther, Calvin and all other believers took it to be. There, the view is taken that the modern scholars' findings do not matter; even if there are minor scientific errors in the Bible, the divine inspiration of all vital questions of doctrine guarantees reliability.

The reader will have to decide about that too. For myself, it doesn't seem unreasonable that on the premises that God exists and that Jesus demonstrated his identity by the resurrection, he should also have safeguarded the crucial wording of the book that records it all.

Whether those premises are sound is, of course, another matter.

6. The Decision Tree



* Don't forget the meat cleaver!

In this chapter we'll examine the elements of the "Tree" diagram on the previous page. It shows the process by which I suggest the seeker of a denomination ("if any") can best make his choice. We'll then finish up with remarks about some groups on which comment has not been made elsewhere, and on the "Atheist" option at the foot of the Tree.

(A) Define "God". This will surprise some, but I think it a logical place to begin. I'm indebted for it to George H Smith who, in his book [Atheism](#), writes "With no description or definition to work from, we will literally fail to know what we are talking about" and proposes a dialog:-

Mr Jones: "A unie exists"

Mr White: "Prove it."

Mr Jones: "It has rained for three consecutive days – that is my proof."

While we might at first ridicule Mr Jones for his silly "proof", Smith reasons that the real fault here lies with Mr White, for *asking the wrong question*. Instead of demanding proof that a unie exists, he should first have asked "What is a unie?"

Had he done so and received a clear answer, it might then have been seen that three consecutive days of rain do, indeed, prove that one exists. But until he does, we cannot possibly know whether they prove it or not.

So, dear – and patient – reader: can you define the term "God"? I cannot, and have not met anyone else who can. The Bible begins with a dogmatic statement about what God allegedly did (created the heavens and the earth) and continues with accounts of other things he did and said and thought, but never once pauses crisply to define of what he/she/it consists. It speaks often of his *attributes*, but never of his *nature*.

This is, to put it mildly, a very serious defect. The reader may find it a show-stopper. The diagram suggests that a negative answer should lead one to consider the atheist option.

(B) Does God Exist? - that's the next logical question, after the reader satisfies himself that he knows how the term is to be defined. It's a huge one, that has stretched the mind of many a thinker since mankind first began to think. For our purpose here, I'll skip (A) (because I cannot) and assume the concept of God is valid and meaningful in some way. Then the question can be reduced to whether there is some kind of super-being who (as the Bible claims, and as many religions claim) created the universe and takes an interest in people.

I'll also assume for convenience that this super-being has the attributes the Bible gives him, such as omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection, love for all, etc.

A "yes" answer is promoted by the sheer beauty and elegance of everything we see around and within us. As [Psalm 19:1](#) says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." Look up at the stars, and they twinkle; but look closer, and they are terrible. They frequently explode and implode, sucking nearby stuff into black holes, destroying mass and emitting energy – that is what even our benevolent sun is doing, all the time. Sure, the swirling galaxies are beautiful, in a dreadful way. The energy produced is by nuclear fusion; combining hydrogen atoms to make helium plus a vast amount of deadly

radiation. When governments do that on Earth, it's the most horrible thing mankind has ever devised. Did God make all that, repeating it out to the edges of the universe, so far away that to date we cannot measure how far? Does it really declare his "glory"?

As to the intricate beauty and amazing functionality of what we find within our bodies: yes, it too is marvelous to behold. But if it didn't all run like clockwork, *we'd not be here to admire it*. This is what we are; to call it "beautiful" or anything else is purely subjective and the reasoning, circular. In any case this "argument from design" seems impressive but was quite easily demolished by Richard Dawkins in his "[Blind Watchmaker](#)." Intricate systems like an animal's body do not happen spontaneously all at once, of course, but they can readily evolve in an astonishingly small number of steps, as he demonstrated.

Then there's the celebrated "first cause" argument. The premise is that every event has a cause. The ball moves because the bat struck it. The rabbit leaps because she sees a tasty patch of grass. Since nothing happens without a cause, when the universe began (oops; did it begin? How do we know?) it, too, must have been caused to begin. We call that first cause "God." Ah, but wait; we must then ask, obedient to our premise, "What caused God?" and the answer is: nothing. Therefore we have just proved only that our premise is false. It's rather amazing to me that this argument was so well regarded for so long.

As well as arguments *for* the proposition that God exists, we should consider also some that are *against* it. Here are a couple.

First, open your dog's mouth and check his teeth. There will be seen some "canine" teeth. They are useful for tearing into flesh and ripping it to shreds. Most animals have some; most animals can live only by killing and eating other animals, that are smaller or less nimble. Even those that eat only veggies are still eating living things, that are also marvelous and beautiful. So if they were all designed and made by God, God is malicious and not benevolent. Jesus' statement in [Matthew 10:29](#) that no sparrow shall fall to the ground without God grieving at the death is shown as deeply hypocritical, for that's the way he set things up. Not long ago I happened to see a hawk capture a sparrow and clutch it in his talons, waiting a while on my driveway, perhaps to work up an appetite. The poor little bird was still alive, fearing but not knowing what was going to happen next. But I knew, so I opened the door noisily, in the hope of scaring the hawk into dropping its prey. But he only flew off with it into the trees, to rip up the sparrow and devour it.

If God were benevolent and omnipotent, he'd have made it differently. The premise is false.

Second, the elegance of Darwin's theory of evolution is now so very well supported, with many of the "gaps" he necessarily left now being filled, that many "creationists" are obliged to accept it but to say that God *designed evolution* – that it was simply the way he did his creating. Let's test that. The core of the theory is that species mutate, step by step, until a new species results; each change or stage either succeeds or fails according to whether the mutant is less, equally, or more able to survive in its environment. We now have a fair idea of how the DNA strands undergo change, so as to initiate the mutation: molecules of it are struck by radiation (probably alpha particles from the sun) and altered. That's a process as near to "random" as we can imagine. The mutant then survives and reproduces if and only if it can

get by as well as or better than its parent. If not, it starves or gets eaten by predators. That's a process as near to "cruel" as we can imagine. Accordingly, evolution is random and cruel. Both those properties absolutely contradict the premise that God is all-wise and benevolent. Accordingly, the premise is false.

We could go on, but we've looked at two arguments for and two against, so will leave it there. If the reader is not convinced that God exists, the diagram suggests he check out atheism. If on the other hand he is so convinced, then he should move on to step (C).

(C) Did Jesus resurrect? This was considered in Chapter 1, and here's a reminder that if he did, the event is truly singular; it beat odds of one in a hundred billion and that both supports powerfully the proposition that God exists, and confirms that Christianity (in some part) is the religion to pursue – for no other religion even claims anything comparable.

So the reader might review the evidence in that chapter and decide; if he answer is "yes" then continue to consider the various denominational options; but if "no" then the choice is either some other religion (not considered in this book) or, again, atheism.

(D) What is "this rock"? Recall that in Chapter 1 we considered the meaning of Matthew 16:13, where Jesus says he will build his church upon "this rock." Did he mean by that the perception that Peter had just spoken (that Jesus was God) or did he mean he would found it on Peter personally as the future Bishop of Rome, and on all his successors in that office?

The reader must decide, and if he chooses the latter then the decision is made; it's the Roman Catholic denomination for him. However, unless there is some other local, compelling reason to pick it, the list of errors noted in Chapter 5 is so blatant and persistent that I'm otherwise **unable to recommend Roman Catholicism**.

(E) Is baptism for infants? This is the next decision point, and the subject was explored in Chapter 3 and in Chapter 4 under "Anabaptists." I take the view that it's clearly meant for believers only, and so that it's inappropriate for infants; Christians in several denominations do not agree. The reader needs to review the reasoning and choose. If he agrees with me, and if the question seems important to him, he will pick a denomination that also agrees – and there are several as shown in the diagram, not just the one labeled "Baptist."

Those are the main decision points regarding *belief and doctrine*, which are treated in this book as of primary importance. The Tree shows a reminder to remember the "meat cleaver" division described in Chapter 5; whichever denomination is chosen, the local church may or may not adhere to Biblical teaching and the reader needs to make sure its choice in that regard is a match for his own.

Below the dotted line in the diagram are shown four other considerations, having to do with the *style* usually associated with the various denominations in their conduct and worship services. That may seem trivial, but the differences of belief among them are really not very great – so the choice may well come down to style. The reader can pick the factor that matters most to him, and then a denomination to fit.

(F) A Puritan style – by that is meant a slightly ascetic flavor to the church, in the manner of Calvin. Serious, dedicated, non-frivolous. Thorough expository preaching, singing to the best of everyone's ability and in some cases *a capella*, without an organ or piano. If this is the style preferred, the reader should pick from among the Presbyterian and Reformed denominations.

(G) A “ceremonial” or liturgical style means a church that in its worship services lays an emphasis on solemnity and form, with vestments etc. somewhat similar to Roman Catholic practice. Dignified, suitable as they see it for the business of addressing the creator of the universe. Church of England (and the derivative Episcopalians) and Lutherans do this best.

(H) A “lively” style is rather the opposite, where the congregation is encouraged to take an active part with “Amens” and applause, perhaps speaking in tongues and even dancing in the aisles. Quite common among predominantly Black churches in America, and typical of Holiness and Pentecostal ones. This is not everyone's cup of tea, but certainly there is never a dull moment and this style is a great icebreaker and remover of starch.

(I) A quiet and intimate style may be preferred and if so, it's well worth exploring a Brethren assembly or a Quaker meeting. Typically in those cases there is no pastor leading worship, but rather any member (or, *male* member at least) is welcome to propose a hymn or lead a prayer or offer an exposition. This style is the obverse of the Anglican one for example, with its set program following the Book of Common Prayer.

Quakers are well known for principled opposition to war, and refusal to take part in the military, and so set a fine example to several other churches which with little reflection tend to glorify or honor members who put on a government uniform and train to kill its enemies.

(J) Sociability – it's less than fair to say that Methodists and others shown here are more sociable than other denominations, but there may be a trace of truth in it. Attending a church should not be just a matter of meeting folk once a week on Sunday morning, but about making congenial friends of like mind; and some are better than others at this kind of mixing.

If the reader enjoys singing hymns, the Methodists may for him be #1, perhaps even more than the Lutherans. The Wesley brothers did particularly well in Wales, and the Welsh are said to start singing in harmony in the crib.

Oh, and did I mention? - *don't forget the meat cleaver.*

We'll wrap up this chapter and the book by tidying up some loose ends, and then expanding on the Atheist Option. First, the loose ends.

There are several groups that have arisen in America since 1800, home-grown religions maybe; the denomination-seeker will want to know: are they true Christian denominations or are they beyond the pale, the kind of group that the Nicean Council would have excluded as

heretics? Let's check four; Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists.

The SDA Church is pretty orthodox on the main doctrines of Christianity. They practice worship and rest on Saturdays instead of Sundays, following the Old Testament command instead of the New Testament celebration (of the risen Jesus, on the first day of the week.) That seems curious to me, but I'd not call it a show-stopper. Then they lay emphasis on the Second Coming of Jesus, a promise clear enough but yet to be fulfilled; and [Matthew 24:36](#) is rather explicit: "But of that day and hour knoweth no man." Despite that, William Miller, the originator of the movement, predicted expressly that the Coming would happen in 1843, then (when it didn't) revised the prophecy to 1844, and so on. So alarm bells ring here, but the reader should be able to judge for himself.

The Mormons (in full, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) also began in upstate New York, a few years earlier; one Joseph Smith claimed he had an amazing vision. An angel took him to dig up the golden plates of the "Book of Mormon", a history of an ancient people. He was inspired to translate it into English, but before anyone could verify the tale the plates of gold mysteriously vanished. Surprisingly, Smith convinced quite a following to accept this fable, and a church formed; they were not welcome, and had to keep moving. They got as far as Utah, and there settled, and did a very remarkable job during the next century, of making a desert land with a saline lake into a fertile, prosperous and productive state. We'd do well not so much to ridicule the obvious myth, as to heed this from the closing words of the Bible: "I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book" ([Revelation 22:18](#).) That's a rather unmistakable "That's all, folks" yet Smith ignored it.

Jehovah's Witnesses are known for their persistent evangelism, but fail several tests of orthodoxy. They reject the doctrine of the Trinity, which we met in Chapter 1, and deny that Jesus will one day return (so they'd not get on too well with the two groups above.) They insist that only (and exactly) 144,000 will get to spend eternity in heaven, in outright contradiction of the inclusive and unlimited offer of [John 3:16](#) that "*whosoever* believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." So this is not a Christian denomination.

Christian Science began in Boston, and teaches that God is not a person, but a principle – love – and that "There is no life, truth, intelligence, nor substance in matter. All is infinite Mind and its infinite manifestation, for God is All-in-all. Spirit is immortal Truth; matter is mortal error. Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness. Therefore man is not material; he is spiritual" (Mary Baker Eddy.) Its appeal owed much to the idea that sickness is not real, but just the result of wrong thinking.

Its similarity to Gnosticism (see Chapter 2) is striking, and it makes little effort to conform to the Nicene Creed; it's clearly not a Christian denomination. Mention appears here only because of its name; the claim to be "Christian" is clearly false. For that matter so is its claim to be "Science", for science stands foursquare on the principle of observing what is, forming a theory to explain it, then testing that theory by experiment so as to modify the theory. The idea that "there is no life, truth, intelligence, nor substance " for example is clearly nonsense by that rational standard.

So much, briefly, for some of the “loose ends”; now let's finish up with remarks about the Atheist option in case the Decision Tree should lead one there.

Atheism

The reader may wonder here about the absence of *agnosticism*; isn't it feasible to say for example at Branch (B) above “I don't know”? My answer is that certainly, many do say that – but should not. There are two possible reasons for claiming an inability to decide:

1. The person is too intellectually lazy to do the homework and reason it through, or
2. It really is impossible to find out.

I have no patience with the former – engage the brain and sort it out, for there can be no more important question! – and I reject the latter outright. The rationale is not difficult; a claim is made, that a super-being exists. The onus of proof lies on the claimant, for there is not a shred of primary evidence, such as can be detected by any of our five senses. If secondary evidence is to be used, let it be marshaled and presented. If it is convincing, accept that a God exists and follow that with action; in that case, life must be arranged in whatever way that God has prescribed. Or if it's not, then live as an atheist. Agnosticism is a cop-out. One thing or the other; don't try to sit on the fence. Fences make very uncomfortable seats.

Atheism is by no means a negative world-view, a mere absence of theism.

Rightly understood, atheism is *enormously liberating and exhilarating!* Once religious mythology is discarded, the mind can become wide open and rational, to explore an immense variety of discoveries; and one becomes, for the first time in life, *one's own master*.

We are all cared for 100% in the womb. Then in young childhood we are also protected and guided, by parents and others. This is as it should be; it's for our own good, and we need to be assured of stability so that self-confidence and self-reliance can grow. Religion – the belief that there is some kind of invisible friend and benefactor looking out for us – continues the process of keeping us in a cocoon. In a sense, we never grow up; we're never responsible for our own lives, actions and consequences. I've never learned to fly, but imagine that while doing so the instructing co-pilot is there to take over if one makes a mistake, ready to retrieve control the moment one loses it. But at some point, the student has to take a deep breath and fly solo. It's the same with life, except that many people never get that far.

The thought of doing so may be scary. Who wants to be alone in the universe? - answer: those who welcome the challenge of *reality*. We're all alone, in reality – we're born naked, and die the same way – but the atheist acknowledges the fact, and then learns to enjoy it. Now, by “alone” I don't mean one is literally friendless – not at all. The atheist looks on everyone close by as a potential companion, appreciating his or her qualities, respecting them and inviting respect in return.

The atheist senses what a *wonderful world* he lives in. It fairly boggles the mind, to grasp that life arose spontaneously out of the hot “primordial mud” and evolved over a few billion years into an immense variety of living things, simple and complex – so large I'm not sure whether anyone can count them – with new ones constantly evolving and others going extinct. Most of all, he marvels at the fact that the latest complex species, *homo sapiens*, has emerged from that primordial mud as an organism that is fascinated by its origins and, most of all, has a sense of right and wrong, of justice and compassion. We are saddened by death – not just when we lose a loved companion, but when a anyone's life is ended, even a stranger's. Even a sparrow's. And all this has evolved from “dust”? - *Yes! Isn't that totally marvelous?*

The atheist revels in *being rational*; he goes where reason leads him, for the ability to reason is the attribute that most distinguishes us as human beings. He treats fairy tales and myths like any other bit of fiction; useful to convey a lesson or idea, especially to children, but not to be taken as true or factual. His premises are primitive; for example, he may accept only that

1. he exists, and
2. he can reliably observe and reason about his environment

Hard to get more primitive than that! - and the fewer, or simpler, one's premises the better because no line of reasoning is any sounder than its premise. Since those two are irreducible, they are *axioms*; premises that can not be refuted.

Some atheists follow reason to the point of also becoming anarchist, because there is another primitive premise incapable of refutation: that each person *owns himself exclusively*. That is an axiom because if it were not true, somebody else would own him, and then we need to know how he acquired such ownership rights over a slave. Doesn't work. Anarchism is of course a separate subject, outside our scope in this book, but those interested can explore it one such web sites as TheAnarchistAlternative.info.

For more on atheism see George H Smith's [fine book](#) on the subject, mentioned above and subtitled “The Case Against God”.

That brings us to the end of our tour, and I hope the reader has enjoyed it. We've examined the life, death, and stated resurrection of Jesus, and noted his claim to be God the creator in human form, dying as a sacrifice for sin for anyone who accepts the gift. We saw the central importance of that resurrection claim, and noted that a natural explanation of the facts stated in the gospels does exist, and that the reader must decide whether or not the claim is valid.

We saw how the early church enjoyed rapid growth, slowing only after it struck a deal with the government of the day, and how the doctrinal divisions of the Reformation era settled how the church was structured through to our own day. We wrapped up by proposing the Decision Tree of this chapter. I hope the reader will be able to clarify his or her own mind, deciding first whether he can define “God”, then whether a God exists, then whether Jesus rose from the dead, and if so which of today's denominations best fits the New Testament model and his own subjective preferences. Or if not, I hope he will enjoy a lifetime of exploration and adventure as an atheist. Whatever the choice, my best wishes go with you.