

FROM CHRISTENDOM TO DENOMINATIONALISM

by R. Scott Sullender

Do you know the word "Christendom?" We don't hear the term much any more. It was very much in use at the dawning of the second millennium of the Christian era. "Christendom" described the larger body of Christian peoples and nations that made up western Europe. It was largely a homogeneous body, featuring one culture, one language (Latin) and one unifying and unified religion.

In reality Christendom was never quite as unified nor as pure as we believed. There was always a minority population of Jews that lived in the midst of the Christian majority. Further, there were Muslims in the form of Arabs, pressing against the borders of Christendom in Spain and central Europe, and barbarians to the north and east just out of the reach of civilization.

Through the centuries of the second millennium, Christendom gradually gave way to schism, division, conflict, wars and eventually denominationalism. This millennium has seen the self-destruction of the Christian Church, at least in so far as it was once a unified organization. And this self-destruction, in turn, has contributed to the decline of the

church's influence, authority and power in lives of individuals and nations.

The first schism in the Christian Church occurred soon after the opening of the second millennium in 1054 A.D. This schism was between the western or Latin Christian church, centered in Rome and the eastern or Orthodox Christian Church, centered in Constantinople. While this so called "Great Schism" formally occurred in 1054 A.D., the two Christian communities had been drifting apart for centuries. There were differences concerning the papacy in Rome and the political recognition of the Byzantine Empire, along with broader and more pervasive differences in language and culture.

The next most significant division of the Christian Church occurred in the 16th century Protestant Reformation. That Reformation initially resulted in the Lutheran Church, which came to dominate most of Germany and the Scandinavian countries. The next wave came with John Calvin, who created the first trans-national system of Protestant Christianity, based in a total re-thinking of the Christianity polity and theology "from the ground up." Calvinism in its various forms, spread to Scotland, Swit-

zerland, the Netherlands, England and eventually to America. The third wave of the Reformation occurred in England, when King Henry VIII broke political ties with the Pope, thus creating the Church of England. Since this break was largely political in nature, some have suggested that a true "reformation" of the Anglican Church did not occur until the Methodist movement two centuries later. The fourth wave of the Reformation was the Anabaptist movement, which spawned numerous sectarian Christian communities mostly in Germany. Basically, all of the Anabaptist groups had one thing in common, that is, they all thought that the Luther and Calvin did not go far enough in reforming the Christian Church and returning it to the pure first century form. By 1560, then, the main issues and doctrines of the Protestant Reformation had been delineated.

In the latter years of the 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church mounted a counter reformation, an effort to not only reform itself, but also win back the hearts and minds of Europeans. It was during this period the Catholic Church gave birth to both the Society of Jesus ("Jesuits") and the Spanish Inquisition. Yet religious motives were not the only forces at work in the Reformation and counter Reformation. Political, social and economic issues aggravated religious divisions, often leading to war. The century that followed 1560 A.D. has been characterized as "Wars of Religion." Catholic Spain tried to stamp out Protestantism in the Netherlands and England. In France Huguenots fought Catholics. In Germany the Thirty Years' War killed thousands of Lutherans and Catholics alike.

By 1648, however, at the Peace of Westphalia, the German state and Europe in general seemed to resign itself "to live and let live." Except for isolated examples, Protestants and Catholics would give up their respective crusades to convert one another. An uneasy peace would settle over Christendom, a Christendom now permanently and hopelessly divided.

The United States was unique, among the nations of western civilization, because it chose to have no established

(Continued on page 24)

**FROM CHRISTENDOM TO
DENOMINATIONALISM**
(Continued from page 23)

religion. Further, it championed the legal right of the individual or group of individuals to practice whatever religion or form of religion they deemed suitable. On a theological level, Calvin and certainly the Anabaptist theologians argued that any Christian church was legitimate to the extent that its worship, doctrine and practice were in accordance with the Bible, not to the extent that it can cite direct historical linkages to the authority of St. Peter. Thus, the legality of the state combined with the theological justification of the free church movement to open the flood gates in United States to an explosion of Protestant denominations and churches. In America any group of Christians, who believed themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit and in accordance with Holy Scriptures as they read them, can form a new church and claim legitimacy. In a similar fashion and for similar reasons, most of the major Protestant denominations divided again and again in the course of their American experience. Today, the United States has more Christian churches or Christian denominations of various kinds, shapes, and sizes, than any other nation on the face of the earth. At one counting there were over 100 different recognizable denominations.

The missionary activities of the 19th and 20th centuries accented the Protestant divisions. Some of the first efforts at cooperation between denominations occurred on the mission fields. In the last century there has been a gradual movement back toward more cooperation and ecumenical activities, particularly among the mainline Protestant churches.

As we enter the third millennium of the Christian era, the disunity of the Christian Church stands as a major issue, one that divides us and one that impedes our efforts to be a major force in the life of the world. There is no single voice for Christ on earth.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How well prepared is the Christian Church for the third millennium in or-

NEW RELEASE

The Shape Of The Christian Life

by R. Scott Sullender

How does a Christian person act? What is the shape of the Christian life? If you followed a Christian around all week, what traits or characteristics would stand out? Would the Christian person be different from the rest of the mass of humanity?

This adult study focuses on the "Fruits of the Spirit" found in Galatians 5:22-23 which describe a person who is "in Christ." The list serves as the outline of this study. Each lesson focuses on one trait, from both religious traditions and psychological studies, with special attention on how we increase this fruit within ourselves and our children. The outer life is a reflection of the inner life. If the inner life is "in Christ," the outer life will reflect that in one's "fruit."

The bearing of fruit is also the way the tree propagates itself. The seeds of a new generation of trees are found in the fruit. Christianity grows and expands by the fruit of its individual trees (e.g. its disciples). When we manifest these traits, these "fruits," we offer the best witness possible to our faith and by so doing, plant the seeds for the next generation of disciples.

Item: 6509

\$9.95

ISBN 1-57438-029-X

der for Christianity be a global religion, no longer a western European religion? Again, the issue arises, this time in perhaps an even more dramatic way, how do we maintain Christian unity and still allow for diversity of culture, language and ethnicity?

2. In some ways the Roman Catholic Church is in a much better position to deal with the globalization of the Christian Church in the third millennium than the various Protestant Christian Church, entangled as they are in the web of denominationalism. Discuss.

3. Has denominationalism been a good thing for the Christian Church? Some will argue that competition among denominations has generated an energy and vitality in American Protestantism that has kept it strong. Others will argue that we have spent too much time competing with each other and failed to fulfill our Lord's prayer that we shall be one (John 17:21), and taken energies away from the advancement of the Christian gospel. Discuss.

4. Does it bother you that there is no single voice for Christ on earth?

Should there be? If there should be, should it take the form of a single person, an annual council or the most media charismatic leader available?

5. Have you changed denominations in the course of your life? If so, why? What differences if any did you notice between your denominations? Were those differences important to you?

6. The United States has adopted a "free market approach" to religion—churches compete with each other and the "best church wins." How does denominationalism in the United States interact with and is influenced by the culture of consumerism with its emphasis upon pleasing the consumer? Discuss. Give examples.

7. Get a religion encyclopedia and read the names of the many denominations in USA. How did we get this way?

*Scott Sullender is Executive Director of the Samaritan Counseling Center in Upland, CA. He is author of *Passing Through: Meditations on the 23rd Psalm* and *The Shape of the Christian Life*, both available from Educational Ministries, Inc.*