

Branches of Christianity

Christianity has undergone many changes over the course of history. Though it began in ancient times as one church, it has divided into many separate churches, each with its own set of beliefs and practices. For non-Christians, understanding the differences among Christian churches can be difficult.

The most significant division within Christianity occurred in 1054 CE when the Eastern and Western churches separated. The Eastern church, as seen on the map below, was composed of the churches of Greece, Russia, Eastern Europe, and Western Asia. The capital of the Western church was Rome, and the Roman Pope, or Bishop of Rome, claimed authority over both churches. The Western church believed that the Pope was the person closest to God and, therefore, most capable of leading Christians. But the Eastern church did not believe the Pope should have power over them. This conflict, when added to the disputes of the past, finally caused the churches to split. From then on, the Roman Catholic Church has been led by the Patriarch of Constantinople, or the Pope.

In the 16th century, a movement called the Reformation caused a split which divided the Roman Catholic Church. At that time, there were many independent Christian groups. Although they did not all share the same beliefs, they each rejected the central authority of the Pope and came to be known as Protestants. It is difficult to speak about Protestantism as one religion since it has divided itself into hundreds of separate sects. They include such groups as the Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians.

Each of these branches of Christianity maintains different beliefs and practices in different ways. The chart on page 66 will help you follow the branching of Christian churches. Use your encyclopedia to find out more about the denominations listed on page 66.

