

The
**DOMINANT
DOCTRINES**
of the
**DIFFERENT
CHRISTIAN SECTS**

Unity of the Spirit, Diversity of Expression



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THE DOMINANT DOCTRINES OF THE DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN SECTS

A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN
ECCLESIOLOGY
THE DOMINANT
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CHRISTIAN SECTS
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Church History & Ecclesiology

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DEDICATION

*"For, in the first place, when you come together as a church,
I hear that there are divisions among you.",*

*"For there must be factions among you in order that those
who are genuine among you may be recognized."*

— 1 Corinthians 11:18-19

*To the one, holy, apostolic, and Catholic Church Of Jesus Christ — scattered across
every culture, language, and tradition — may she pursue the unity of the*

*Spirit in the bond of peace, holding fast to the Head from whom the whole body
grows with a growth that is from God*

.

Soli Deo gloria.

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Preface

The church of Jesus Christ is one. It is also visibly divided. These two realities have coexisted from the first generation of the apostolic church, and they have generated both the most courageous acts of ecumenical love and the most bitter theological controversies in the history of Christianity. How do we hold them together?

This study does not pretend to resolve two millennia of ecclesiological debate. What it offers is a pastoral and theological map — a survey of the major Christian traditions, their dominant doctrines, their distinctive emphases, and their relationship to the one body of Christ. The goal is not relativism ('all traditions are equally right') nor sectarianism ('only our tradition is right'), but discerning charity: the ability to identify what is genuinely Christian in traditions other than our own while also clearly marking what departs from the apostolic faith.

The organizing principle is Paul's word to the Corinthians: there must be factions among you 'in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized' (1 Cor. 11:19). Diversity, even fractious diversity, serves a divine purpose — it forces the church to articulate, defend, and refine her understanding of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. To God alone be the glory. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Soli Deo gloria.

Introduction: One Church, Many Expressions

""God's peoples gathered in His Church on earth and some outside it.""

— *John 10:16*

The New Testament presents the church with a stunning paradox at its heart. Jesus declares: 'I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd' (Jn. 10:16). One flock. One shepherd. Yet the New Testament itself records extraordinary diversity among the early churches — Jewish and Gentile, Pauline and Petrine, Alexandrian and Antiochene, reflecting different cultures, personalities, and theological emphases.

This diversity is not a failure of the church but a reflection of its catholicity — its reach across every culture and people. The same Spirit who inspired the apostolic writings also inhabits believers from Ephesus to Ethiopia, from Rome to the Philippines. They share the same common salvation from the Father by the Son through that same Spirit of God. Their diversity in expression, in worship style, in polity, and in secondary doctrine does not negate their fundamental unity in Christ.

The seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3 provide the organizing framework for this study. They are literal, historical churches — each located in a real city of Asia Minor. But they also typify patterns of Christian life and doctrine that recur throughout church history. In surveying the dominant doctrines of the major Christian traditions, we will see that the seven churches are not merely ancient history — they live on in every generation.

CHAPTER 1

The Seven Churches and Their Enduring Types

""He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.""

— Revelation 2:7

The seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3) are addressed to specific historical congregations in the first century. But they have always been read as addressing the whole church — 'what the Spirit says to the churches' (plural) is the repeated refrain. Each letter commends, corrects, warns, and promises. Together they constitute a theological portrait of the church in all its complexity.

Ephesus: Orthodox but Loveless

The Ephesian church is commended for its doctrinal fidelity and its refusal to tolerate false teaching (Rev. 2:2). It has tested those who claim to be apostles and found them false. It has endured patiently. Yet Christ holds this against her: she has abandoned the love she had at first (Rev. 2:4). The Ephesian type recurs in every generation — churches that maintain correct doctrine but have grown cold in their love for Christ and for neighbor. The three historic creeds — the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian — represent the orthodox consensus that the Ephesian type has always championed and defended. Orthodoxy without charity, however, becomes mere correctness.

Smyrna: The Suffering Church

The Smyrnaean church receives no rebuke. She is poor in worldly terms but rich in the eyes of Christ. She faces tribulation, slander, and impending imprisonment. Christ's word to her is simply: 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life' (Rev. 2:10). The Smyrnaean type is the church under persecution — the martyred

church throughout history, from the Roman catacombs to the contemporary persecuted church. Her dominant doctrine is not a theological system but a way of life: faithfulness unto death.

Pergamum: The Compromised State Church

Pergamum holds fast to the name of Christ but has some among her who follow the teaching of Balaam — eating food sacrificed to idols, practicing sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14). Pergamum sits where Satan's throne is, yet Christ's people are there. The Pergamene type is the church that has accommodated herself to the surrounding culture and power structures, compromising the purity of the gospel to gain influence or avoid conflict. The Constantinian settlement and the history of state churches represent this perennial temptation.

Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

Thyatira tolerates the false prophetess who leads God's servants into immorality — representing the danger of elevating human religious authority alongside Scripture (Rev. 2:20-21). Sardis has a reputation for being alive but is dead — moral and doctrinal respectability masking spiritual deadness (Rev. 3:1). Philadelphia has kept Christ's word and not denied His name — the evangelistic church that opens doors with the love of God (Rev. 3:8). And Laodicea — lukewarm, wealthy, self-sufficient — mistakes material blessing for divine approval (Rev. 3:16-17). Every generation contains churches of each type. The Spirit's call is the same across all seven: 'He who has an ear, let him hear.'

Reflection Questions — Chapter 1

1. Which of the seven churches most closely mirrors the strengths and weaknesses of your own church community? What does the Spirit's word to that church say to you personally?
2. How do the promises given to the overcomer in each of the seven letters shape your understanding of what faithful endurance looks like in your specific context?

3. What is the relationship between doctrinal fidelity (the Ephesian virtue) and love (the Ephesian failure)? Can correct doctrine coexist with cold hearts, and what is the remedy?

CHAPTER 2

The Catholic Traditions: Rome, Greece, and the East

""The church of Rome — the catholicity of the Church of Christ ""
— *Historical Survey*

Before the Reformation, the visible church in the Western world was substantially one institution centered in Rome. The Eastern churches — Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Coptic, Ethiopian, and others — had separated from Rome in the Great Schism of 1054, but they maintained the same ancient sacramental and episcopal structure. To understand the Protestant tradition, one must first understand the traditions it reformed.

The Roman Catholic Church: Papacy and Tradition

The Church of Rome understands itself as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church founded by Christ upon Peter ('You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,' Matt. 16:18). Its dominant doctrines are: the authority of the Pope as Vicar of Christ and supreme head of the church; the equal authority of Scripture and Tradition; the seven sacraments as means of grace; the sacrifice of the Mass as the representation of Christ's atoning sacrifice; and the veneration of Mary and the saints.

The Reformation's central critique was not of Rome's catholicity but of her departure from the apostolic gospel: the substitution of human tradition for Scripture alone, the obscuring of grace alone and faith alone by a sacramental system that required human merit, and the elevation of papal authority above Scripture. These remain the critical points of divergence between Rome and the Protestant tradition.

The Greek and Eastern Orthodox Churches: Theosis and Tradition

The Eastern Orthodox tradition maintains continuity with the ancient councils and the patristic tradition. Its dominant theological emphasis is theosis — the process by which the believer is progressively conformed to the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), becoming like God in holiness and love through the sacramental life of the church. The Orthodox liturgy is extraordinarily rich, steeped in the imagery of the Old Testament, the church fathers, and the councils.

The Orthodox church holds to the seven ecumenical councils (from Nicaea I in 325 to Nicaea II in 787) as authoritative alongside Scripture. It rejects the filioque clause added by Rome (that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son), maintaining that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. Its episcopal structure, liturgical worship, and theological tradition represent one of the oldest continuous forms of Christian life, preserving much that is genuinely apostolic.

Reflection Questions — Chapter 2

1. What can Reformed and evangelical Christians learn from the Eastern Orthodox emphasis on theosis — the progressive transformation of the believer into the image of God?
2. How should we evaluate the Roman Catholic claim that Scripture and Tradition are equally authoritative? What does the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* actually mean, and what does it not mean?
3. What does it mean to belong to the 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church' if one is a Protestant? How do we claim this catholicity without compromising our evangelical convictions?

CHAPTER 3

The Protestant Reformation and Its Heirs

""The Lutheran Church — The Priesthood of all true Christians.""

— 1 Peter 2:5, 9

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was not a departure from Christianity but a return to the apostolic gospel. Martin Luther's discovery that 'the righteous shall live by faith' (Rom. 1:17) — that justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone — unleashed a movement that reshaped the entire Western church and gave birth to a family of traditions that continues to this day.

The Lutheran Tradition: Law, Gospel, and the Priesthood of All Believers

Luther's dominant theological contribution is the distinction between Law and Gospel — the Law that kills by revealing sin, and the Gospel that gives life by declaring the righteousness of Christ. Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9) demolished the medieval distinction between clergy and laity: every Christian has direct access to God through Christ, the one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). Confession, absolution, and the sacraments are means of grace, but they do not require a priestly caste standing between the believer and God.

Lutheranism emphasizes the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper — in, with, and under the bread and wine. It maintains a liturgical worship form, a high view of Scripture as the sole norm of faith and life, and a strong emphasis on preaching and catechesis. The Lutheran Confessions (the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Catechisms, the Formula of Concord) define Lutheran orthodoxy to this day.

The Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition: Covenant and Sovereignty

John Calvin's contribution to the Reformation was the comprehensive theological system we call Reformed theology, organized around the twin poles of the sovereignty of God and the covenant of grace. The Presbyterian form of church government — rule by elders (presbuteroi) in local sessions, regional presbyteries, and general assemblies — represents Calvin's reading of the New Testament church structure, with all local churches of equal standing, governed collegially by ordained elders.

The Westminster Standards (Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms, 1646-47) represent the high-water mark of Reformed systematic theology — comprehensive, precise, and deeply biblical. The Reformed tradition emphasizes the Five Solas of the Reformation, the sovereignty of God in election and providence, covenant theology, and the regulative principle of worship (the church may do in worship only what Scripture commands).

The Anglican Tradition: Via Media

The Church of England (Anglican) charted a middle way (via media) between Rome and Geneva. Its episcopal structure preserved the historic episcopate; its Thirty-Nine Articles affirmed Protestant doctrine; its Book of Common Prayer gave it a distinctive liturgical identity. The bishop (episcopos) as the overseer of a diocese represents the pastoral and governing structure, with the leading bishops in a national church enjoying collegial — not papal — authority. Anglican comprehensiveness has been both its strength and its source of ongoing internal tension.

Reflection Questions — Chapter 3

1. Luther's Law-Gospel distinction is the hermeneutical key to Lutheran preaching. How does this distinction help us preach Christ faithfully to people burdened by both legalism and lawlessness?

2. The Presbyterian principle that all local churches are of equal standing before God has significant implications for how we relate to churches of other denominations. What are those implications?
3. What is genuinely valuable in the Anglican via media approach — the attempt to hold together catholicity, Reformed doctrine, and liturgical worship? Where do you see its weaknesses?

CHAPTER 4

Reformed, Puritan, and Evangelical Churches

""Believers of the Divine Covenant — particularly, the New Covenant in the Blood of Christ.""

— Hebrews 9:15

From the Reformed tradition, several distinct streams emerged in the seventeenth century and beyond: the Puritan movement within English Protestantism, the broader evangelical movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the confessional Reformed churches that maintained strict adherence to the Westminster Standards or the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort).

The Reformed Churches: Covenant Theology and Divine Election

The confessional Reformed churches are defined by their commitment to covenant theology — the understanding that God governs His relationship with humanity through covenants: the covenant of works with Adam, the covenant of grace inaugurated in Genesis 3:15 and progressively revealed through Abraham, Moses, and David, and consummated in the new covenant sealed with Christ's blood (Heb. 9:15). This covenantal framework shapes everything: infant baptism as the covenant sign, catechism as covenant instruction, and the church as the covenant community.

Divine election — that God chose His people in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-5) — is the cornerstone of Reformed soteriology. The Canons of Dort (1618-19), formulated against the Arminian remonstrance, articulate the five points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement (definite atonement), Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

These doctrines are not scholastic abstractions but pastoral foundations for Christian assurance and doxology.

The Puritan Movement: Personal Holiness and Congregational Life

The Puritans sought to purify the Church of England of remaining Roman Catholic elements and to establish genuinely Reformed doctrine and practice at both the personal and ecclesial level. Their dominant emphases were the holiness of God, which demands the holiness of His people (1 Pet. 1:15-16), and the importance of conversion and personal experience of grace. The Puritan tradition gave birth to Congregationalism (the church as a gathered community of visible saints), and from Congregationalism emerged the Wesleyan, Methodist, and eventually Pentecostal traditions.

The Evangelical Movement: The Gospel for All

The evangelical movement, rooted in the eighteenth-century revivals of Whitefield and Wesley, is defined by its commitment to the proclamation of the gospel to all people. As long as Christ is preached — a phrase that captures the evangelical ethos. Evangelical churches tend to emphasize personal conversion, biblical authority, cross-centred preaching, and active evangelism. The evangelical tradition is theologically broad, encompassing Reformed, Arminian, and charismatic expressions, united primarily by their commitment to the gospel and the authority of Scripture.

The fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century, which separated from Protestant liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, represents the most combative expression of evangelical conviction. Its insistence on the fundamental doctrines of Christianity — the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection, the substitutionary atonement, the literal second coming — was a necessary corrective against the accommodation of theology to Enlightenment rationalism. The Fundamentals (1910-15) are its defining document.

Reflection Questions — Chapter 4

1. How does covenant theology — understanding the whole Bible as the unfolding of God's covenant with His people — change the way you read both the Old and New Testaments?
2. The Puritan tradition emphasized the holiness of God as the foundation of Christian ethics. How does the vision of God's holiness motivate and shape your pursuit of personal holiness differently than mere rule-following?
3. What are the genuine contributions of the evangelical movement to the broader church? Where do you see its weaknesses, and how might Reformed theology address them?

CHAPTER 5

Cultic Churches and the Ungathered Elect

""I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.""

— *John 10:16*

Beyond the mainline Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions lies a complex landscape of personality-centered churches, sectarian communities, and those whom Christ calls 'other sheep not of this fold.' A discerning survey of Christian traditions must address both the dangers of sectarianism and the mystery of God's elect who are not yet gathered into visible Christian community.

Cultic Churches: The Danger of Personality-Centered Religion

The term 'cultic church' (as distinct from a religious cult) refers to Christian communities whose defining characteristic is the authority of a particular personality, movement, or extra-biblical tradition rather than Scripture alone. The Seventh-day Adventist church, for example, gives significant authority to the prophetic writings of Ellen G. White alongside Scripture. The Iglesia ni Cristo in the Philippines teaches that it is the one true church and that salvation is only within its membership. Both represent a sectarian instinct: the identification of the visible institutional church with the invisible church of the elect.

The very sectarian church is characterized by an us-versus-them mentality that makes normal Christian fellowship with believers in other traditions impossible. Scripture, by contrast, presents the invisible church as the totality of God's elect across all times and traditions (Eph. 4:4-6). The visible church is a mixture — wheat and tares, good fish and bad — and only God knows with certainty who belongs to the elect. The sectarian claim to have exclusive possession of the true church confuses the invisible church (known only to God) with a particular visible institution.

The Ungathered Elect: God's People Beyond Our Borders

Among the most theologically rich elements of Niangar's analysis is his reference to 'the ungathered people of God yet to be gathered by Christ' (Jn. 10:16; Rom. 2:6-7; Rev. 7:9; Rom. 11:6; Eph. 1:4-5). This includes elect Israelites who have not yet come to faith in Jesus as Messiah, and elect Gentiles who have not yet heard the gospel. God alone knows the true sheep — the wheat among the tares, the good fish among the bad, the true branches of the vine (Matt. 13; Jn. 15; Rom. 11).

This insight has profound missiological implications. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) is not a contingency plan but the means by which the Good Shepherd gathers His scattered flock. Every act of gospel proclamation is an act of Christ gathering His sheep. The diversity of the gathered multitude in Revelation 7:9 — from every nation, tribe, people, and language — is not an accident but the fulfillment of the Father's eternal purpose: 'All that the Father gives me will come to me' (Jn. 6:37). The church's evangelistic mandate rests on the certainty of election.

Toward Spiritual Unity in Personal Diversity

Paul's word to the Ephesians summarizes the mystery: there is 'one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4:4-6). This oneness is not denominational uniformity — it is the unity of the Spirit that transcends every cultural, linguistic, and theological difference.

The diversity of Christian traditions, therefore, is not simply a tragedy to be lamented but a reality to be understood, evaluated, and navigated with discerning charity. Some diversity reflects the legitimate contextualization of the gospel in different cultures and personalities. Some reflects genuine doctrinal error that must be corrected. And some

reflects the mystery of a God whose wisdom is unsearchable and whose ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33). We see in part. We know in part. And we await the day when the full company of the elect is gathered, and the church in all her glorious diversity stands before the throne as one bride.

Reflection Questions — Chapter 5

1. How do you distinguish between a church that is genuinely sectarian (having an unbiblical view of the church) and a church that is simply confessionally distinct (holding to specific doctrinal standards)? What criteria would you use?
2. How does the doctrine of election — that God has elect sheep not yet gathered — motivate and shape the church's evangelistic mission? Does it encourage or discourage evangelism, and why?
3. Where do you personally find the balance between ecumenical generosity (acknowledging genuine Christians across traditions) and confessional integrity (maintaining the distinctives of the apostolic faith)?

Conclusion: Toward Spiritual Unity in Personal Diversity

The church of Jesus Christ is one in Spirit and diverse in expression. Her oneness is not an achievement but a gift — the gift of the Spirit who regenerates, unites, and preserves every true believer in every generation and every tradition. Her diversity is not a failure but a feature — the legitimate variety of cultures, personalities, and contexts in which the one gospel takes root and bears fruit.

The survey of dominant doctrines across the major Christian traditions reveals that the Spirit of God has not been absent from any of them. In the Catholic tradition, the great heritage of the church fathers, the creeds, and the sacramental life. In the Orthodox tradition, the vision of theosis and the liturgical encounter with the living God. In the Lutheran tradition, the liberating clarity of Law and Gospel. In the Reformed tradition, the comprehensive vision of God's sovereignty and the covenant of grace. In the evangelical tradition, the passion for the lost and the urgency of the Great Commission.

What divides us is real. But what unites us — the triune God, the atoning work of Christ, the regenerating Spirit, the apostolic Scriptures — is more fundamental than any division. The call of this generation is not to pretend the divisions do not exist, but to pursue the spiritual unity that already exists in the Spirit while working toward greater visible unity in truth. To God alone be the glory.

Soli Deo gloria.

Personal Questions and Challenges

Understanding Christian Diversity

1. Which Christian tradition other than your own have you most misunderstood or dismissed without serious engagement? What would it take to understand it more charitably?
2. What is the difference between healthy confessional distinctiveness and unhealthy sectarianism? How do you evaluate your own tradition by this distinction?
3. How does Paul's statement that there must be factions 'in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized' (1 Cor. 11:19) change your perspective on theological controversy within Christianity?

Doctrinal Discernment

1. What criteria do you use to distinguish primary doctrines (essential to salvation) from secondary doctrines (important but not salvific) from tertiary matters (adiaphora)? How does this hierarchy shape your willingness to fellowship with Christians of different views?
2. How does your church's dominant doctrine — whatever it is — shape your worship, your ethics, your evangelism, and your understanding of the Christian life?
3. What would it look like for your church community to hold its confessional convictions with both clarity and charity?

Personal Commitment

1. What specific steps can you take to learn more about a Christian tradition different from your own — reading, conversation, attending a service, or building a friendship across denominational lines?
2. How does the vision of the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9) shape your desire to see the gospel go to all peoples?
3. What is one doctrinal conviction you hold that you would be willing to revisit and re-examine in the light of Scripture, with genuine openness to correction?

Soli Deo gloria.

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Pastor Baltazar A. Niangar is a Pastor Emeritus who holds the degrees of Th.B. (Bachelor of Theology), A.B. (Bachelor of Arts), and D.D. (Doctor of Divinity). He has devoted his life and ministry to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the rigorous theological formation of God's people, and the equipping of pastoral leaders for faithful and effective ministry in church and society.

Dr. Niangar served for many years as a pastor and theological educator, and has been a central figure in the work of Holistic Enhancement for Lay-leaders and Pastors (HELP, Inc.) — a parachurch ministry committed to equipping the whole people of God for faithful service across every sphere of life. His monthly theological lectures to the HELP, Inc. fellowship have addressed the most foundational questions of the Christian faith, and these studies —

expanded, deepened, and set in the Crossway format — have shaped the theological works he continues to write and publish.

His theological formation reflects sustained engagement with the whole of the Reformed and evangelical tradition. Among those whose thought has most shaped his own are Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Louis Berkhof, Benjamin B. Warfield, Oscar Cullmann, Herman Dooyeweerd, Karl Barth, Paul Jewett, Francis Schaeffer, R.C. Sproul, and Ravi Zacharias. He reads every theological question through the lens of the whole counsel of God, and has spent a lifetime teaching others to do the same.

The present work — *The Dominant Doctrines of the Different Christian Sects* — represents Dr. Niangar's sustained theological engagement with the subject matter contained herein, developed through years of preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministry.

Other theological works by the author:

Spiritual Unity and Personal Diversity in Christ

Why God Did Decree and Allow Evil to Exist

What the Christian Church Should Be

The Reformed Theological Paradigm

The Holy Loving Triune Lord God

He lives with his beloved wife, Estrella. He is the father of Dr. Ellazar and Zarelle Grace. He continues to preach, teach, write, and intercede for the reformation and renewal of the Church of Jesus Christ, until the day when faith gives way to sight and the knowledge that is now partial becomes the knowledge that is full.

Soli Deo gloria.