

## **What is An Independent Church?**

### **Tracing the Historical Roots and Practices of the Independent Church**

By Pastor Kelly Sensenig

On July 4, we have all witnessed fireworks exploding in the night sky, as we celebrate America's day of independence. Our country's freedoms and liberties should not be taken lightly. Americans should be grateful for the liberty and independence they still have in this country. It's truly something to celebrate. The same should be true in regard to the independence and freedom that churches can experience and practice. I'm not necessarily referring to religious freedom, but the freedom and liberty independent Christian churches can experience from the damaging effects of apostasy, false doctrine, compromise, and worldliness. Churches, which are independent, also have a tradition and legacy which they should celebrate. It's a legacy of liberty or freedom from doctrinal and worldly compromise, which independent churches have historically experienced and practiced, down through the centuries. The independent church celebrates its independence, as an autonomous, self-governing group of people, residing in a given locality, but it also celebrates the independence or freedom it has to build a church, which is free from apostasy, compromise, and worldliness. The independent church movement should cherish the spiritual liberties it has been given by God, so churches can live separate from all doctrinal and worldly compromise. We cannot afford to forget the birth and history of this movement. If we forget the past, we won't understand the present.

George Parsons said:

"If you want to know today, you had better go back to yesterday."

We must go back to the roots of our liberty and maintain our freedom as independent churches, which is freedom to gather together, as a self-governing body of believers, who are representative of the Church, which is "the pillar and the ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). I hope we will see some fireworks before this study is completed!

Many people, including Christians, don't understand why there are churches dotted across America, and the world at large, which remain

independent of the major church denominations, and which choose to be self-governing and self-sustaining. Most people don't know the reasons or the history behind the independent church movement. In this study, we would like to trace the history of the independent church movement, and give the reasons why there are many independent, Bible believing churches, which have refused to associate with the major denominational ecclesiastical bodies, within our present society. Below is a basic summary of the journey that we will be taking throughout this study.

### **The Six Stages of Church History In Relationship to Independence**

1. The early church stage (independent house churches) – A.D. 33-200's.
2. The denominational stage (rise of Roman Catholicism overtaking the independent churches) – A.D. 300's-400's.
3. Middle or Dark Ages (continued denominational rule of Roman Catholic Church) - A.D. 500's -1500's.
4. The Reformation stage (break away from Roman Catholic false teachings regarding salvation and newly formed denominations – Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Anglicans, Moravians, Mennonites, Baptists) - A.D. 1517-1648.
5. The Puritan and Pilgrim stage (colonial America, the 13 colonies, Revolutionary War for independence from England) - A.D. 1620-1700's.
6. Corrupted denominations and return to independence (break away from all denominational ties and the formation of independent denominations (Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc.) and Bible churches – 1800's to the present.

### **The Definition of Independence**

What is an independent church? An independent church is a church that has no religious affiliation, association, connection, cooperation, or unity

with the mainline denominations. It's a church that is autonomous (free), which adopts its own government, doctrine, policies, practices, and experiences freedom of worship. It's a church that chooses to remain solely independent from the many structured religious organizations of today and is not controlled or influenced by any of the major Protestant denominations. An independent church has no dictates or authoritative orders that come from any denominational office or ecclesiastical structure. It is independent from the authority of all denominations and church councils. The independent church is led by the pastor(s) or elder(s) (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2-3) and deacons who assist the leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). The people (congregation) corporately choose the elder(s) to represent the congregation in leadership and also their deacons for the basic functioning of church ministry and life (Acts 6:3, 5; 14:23; 15:2, 22).

### **The Historical Purposes of Church Independence**

One primary purpose for the autonomy (independence and freedom) of the New Testament church was to promote freedom of worship and government among the local assemblies. The autonomy of the local church is seen in that the congregation disciplined its own members (1 Cor. 5:1-5), elected its own leaders (Acts 14:23), officials (Acts 6:1-6), commissioned its own missionaries (Acts 13:1-3), and provided accountability in ministry efforts (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:19, 23). Independence means the people can choose their leaders and representatives, without a system of religious hierarchy presiding over them, and function as an autonomous group of believers in a given locality, practicing a self-governing democratic rule.

Following this pattern, today's independent church depends upon the Holy Spirit's direction (Rom. 8:14), chooses its own name, government, doctrine, and programs. It is free to call its own pastor and invite into the pulpit any speakers it deems sound in the faith. Independent churches are free to seek God's direction in supporting those ministries they find acceptable. Of course, the primary aim of all missionary and evangelistic effort is personal salvation and discipleship through Christ.

In short, an independent church is an autonomous (independent, free, self-governing) body of Christians that is not directly linked or associated with any other church denomination, fellowship, organization, or religious

system of authority. When a church is independent, it means that it is not influenced or controlled by any outside religious influences. It is unconnected and unattached from mainline religious bodies and all other religious affiliations, and the influence of outside ecclesiastical governments, doctrines, and teachings.

A second primary purpose why New Testament churches practiced independence was to maintain purity of doctrine and practice (2 Tim. 2:18-19; Titus 1:9; 2:1; Rev. 2:2, 6). This is why the early apostolic churches disciplined those members who went astray morally and doctrinally (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:17-19) and why they were commissioned to “try the spirits” (1 John 4:1). The original independent churches, during the days of the apostles, were taught to refuse fellowship with the works of darkness (Eph. 5:11), prove what is wholesome and right (1 Thess. 5:21), and never endorse, promote, sanction, or partake (1 Tim. 5:22) of doctrinal errors and worldly practices (1 John 2:15-17). They were instructed to separate from false religion (2 Cor. 6:14-17).

The doctrinal teaching of Bible separation has always been the hallmark of independent Bible-believing churches. If a church repudiates the doctrine of separation, they have abandoned their historical roots, and the apostolic teaching, which were given to the original independent churches. This is why one could write the word “Ichabod” (1 Sam. 4:21) over many independent churches today. In short, they have lost their former glory of remaining pure and separate from doctrinal corruption and contamination from worldly vices or trends (James 1:27).

Being able to have an autonomous, self-governing body of Christians was wonderful, but along with independence, came responsibility. The independent local churches were to adopt apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42; 2 Thess. 2:15) which was the pure and sound teaching of God’s Word (Titus 2:1; 1 Tim. 4:6, 13, 16). It was to remain separate from those who taught contrary doctrines and positions which opposed the truth (Titus 1:9-11; Eph. 4:15). Hence, the hallmark of independence was to remain separate from unhealthy teachings and to maintain purity of doctrine and practice within the local assembly (Rom. 12:2; 16:17; 2 Cor. 6:14; 7:1; 1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:5; 2 John 10-11). This was true for the independent churches during the apostolic era and is still true today. The mark of an autonomous, free, self-governing, independent New Testament Bible preaching and teaching

church was their choice and practice to remain independent from doctrinal heresy and practice, as outlined by apostolic teaching.

### **Independence and Bible Separation**

The original independent apostolic churches had the privilege and responsibility to practice their independence and freedom from corrupt doctrinal influence, religious paganism, and worldliness (2 John 9-10; 1 Cor. 10:20; 1 Tim. 1:18; Rev. 2:2, 6) which was an ever-present threat to their assemblies (Acts 20:28-30; Rev. 2:20). The first churches, which are to be role models of independence (autonomy), have historically practiced Bible separation, as outlined by the apostles in the epistles. This was a Bible separation from corrupt doctrine and worldly practices. The historical reason for being independent was to remain free from doctrinal heresies and worldly pagan practices. This is why independent churches (independent Baptist, independent Methodist, independent Presbyterian, independent Bible) have *historically* chosen to remain separate (2 Cor. 6:14-17) from the original liberal compromises found in the mainline denominational churches (1900's – 1930's). They had chosen to follow their roots and the historic reason for the independent church movement.

All independent churches that have chosen to remain true to their historic purpose, practice, and position have practiced Bible separation from the worldly influences and ecumenical practices of New Evangelicalism, or compromised Christianity (non-separated Christianity), which chose to ecumenically unite with liberalism, promote unscriptural Charismatic experiences, and endorse other worldly music and methods (1940's to present).

During this time period many independent churches were formed, which were restored to the original apostolic blueprint for autonomous churches, in order to separate from apostasy and worldly, compromising Christianity, since this was a key historical purpose for church independence. Through the years, independent churches were formed, who wanted to follow the apostolic purpose for independence, which was to remain pure in doctrine and practice. It's these churches that have drawn a line in the sand, and have chosen to take the safe road, by refusing to link up with other church denominations, church ministries, and religious oriented programs that promote contrary doctrines, charismatic chaos, and carnal practices, which are not honoring to God's holiness (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

Many independent churches were revived in the mid to latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continue to this day (1940's-present), to avoid interaction and fellowship with brethren on an ecclesiastical or church level (Eph. 5:10-11), who promote ecumenical practices with apostate Protestantism, false doctrines regarding the Holy Spirit, errant teachings on eschatology, and who engaged in irreverent actions (1 Tim. 3:15), such as worldly forms of music or carnal expressions of worship (2 Thess. 3:6-14; 2 Tim. 2:16-21; Titus 3:10).

The basic teaching and principle of separating from worldly brethren is taught in the Bible. There are times when fundamental/separatist churches cannot fellowship and participate with brethren in a particular church setting, or service, who have become doctrinally unsound and worldly. What the brethren represent and promote are grounds for Biblical separation. This is the historic reason why many independent churches began to be dotted across this land of America. Christians did not want to accommodate apostasy, charismatic chaos, or worldliness in any fashion. The answer to their dilemma was to form independent churches that stood for truth and godliness in the midst of compromise and carnality.

The original independent movement away from the denominations formed churches that upheld the historic doctrines, the fundamentals of the faith, of their beloved denominations (1900 – 1930's). These believers separated from the original modernists. They were involved in the original modernist/fundamentalist controversy. However, as time progressed (1940's - 70's), other splinter groups emerged, which wanted to separate from the ecumenical compromises taking place with liberalism, through the Billy Graham crusades, and other compromises of this era. These independent groups also wanted to separate from the false teachings and experiences of the Charismatic Movement, as well as other worldly trends being promoted within compromised Christianity (1940's to present). The independent groups upheld their own distinctive teachings regarding separation from liberalism, worldly practices, New Evangelicalism, false views on eschatology, and Charismatic doctrines. The majority of independent churches (Baptist, Bible, Congregational, etc.) and institutions (Bible institutes and colleges) were originally formed to move away from the ecumenical compromises with corrupt denominationalism and also separate from worldly brethren, who promoted false teachings and experiences, related to the Charismatic Movements, or other rigid teachings which did not align with Bible doctrine.

For example, if a church or brother promoted ecumenicalism, hyper-Calvinism, an errant view on eschatology, Charismatic teachings and experiences, or carnal expressions of music and worship (music being an issue 1970's – present), the independent church or institution would choose to break church ties with them. The independent churches and institutions originally refused to partner, promote, and participate with the ways of doctrinal error or worldliness. The Bible commands us to “neither be partaker of other men’s sins, keep thyself pure” (1 Tim. 5:22). The principle of all Bible separation is clearly seen in these words: “Be not ye therefore partakers with them” (Eph. 5:7). We are called upon to depart from doctrinal and moral impurity. 2 Timothy 2:19 commands us: “Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” The text especially refers to doctrinal impurity (2 Tim. 2:18).

The original purpose of the independent church movement of the 1940's – 1970's was to separate from the brethren (New Evangelicals) that espoused ecumenicalism and overlooked other false teachings. This particular independent church movement avoided condoning the false teachings of corrupt denominationalism along with Charismatic teachings and carnal experiences and expressions of worship that were not Biblical (Eph. 5:10-11). The original independent church movements embraced the basic tenants of Bible separation and refused to fellowship with the darkness, unrighteousness, error, or evil ways of the enemy (Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 6:14-17).

In summary, independent churches were historically formed to practice Bible separation from the liberals who took over the denominations (fundamentalist/liberal controversy – 1900's to 1930's). However, other independent church groups were formed later to separate from brethren, who did not want to make a clear break from the liberals, Charismatic teachings, experiences, and other worldly trends of the day (Fundamentalist/New Evangelical controversy – 1940's to present).

John Miles, the president of the school where I attended, once said: “Believers can lead us into compromising positions more quickly than anyone else. So, though we long to fellowship with believers, and recognize the unity of the body of Christ, if a believer leads us into a compromising position, where our loyalty to God is going to be questioned and compromised, then we have to part company with that believer.”

## **The Origin of the Independent Church (A.D. 33-200's)**

The Biblical concept of an “independent church” actually began in the first century as the apostles began spreading the Gospel and planting churches. As the Gospel message traveled throughout the world (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15) local independent churches sprang up and were established according to the inspired Biblical truths passed on by the apostles (Jude 17). The early churches were independent local churches which bore no denominational tags and religious associations. The early Christians would meet in different homes (Acts 8:3) within a given locality or geographic region (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phil. 1:2) and these local church houses were networked together as the one local church of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2) or Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:1). In other words, there was more than just one house church in a given region. If three thousand souls were saved in one day in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41), you can be sure there was more than just one church! The house churches were singled out, as separate churches, which represented the one geographical church in a given region (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1; Titus 1:11). In other Scripture references, all the saints of the local house churches, in a given region, are corporately addressed (Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1).

Acts 9:31

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified (built up spiritually); and walking in the fear of the Lord (worshipping reverently), and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost (resting), were multiplied (growing numerically).”

Acts 16:5

“And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.”

This is church planting! One thing is certain; the original house churches within the early church were independent, autonomous, self-governing groups of Christians, which followed the Biblical guidelines established by the apostles. God’s original idea and purpose for the local church was independence. The local churches in a given area were not designed to be governed by a central bishop or a hierarchical body over which all churches must answer. The idea of popes, priests, and powerful religious bodies presiding over the local churches was absolutely foreign to God’s purpose for the independent local assemblies.



Of course, the apostles were the original founders of the first local churches, as they went about preaching and building the original local assemblies in Jerusalem, and the surrounding areas (Acts 2:42; 5:42; 16:4-5; Eph. 2:20). Their teachings became the basis for the local church gatherings (“the apostles’ doctrine” - Acts 2:42). However, with the passing of the apostles, there was no central governmental structure, which replaced the apostles’ authority, nor was there any Biblical instructions given by the apostles to form a centralized governmental structure. The whole idea that Peter was the first pope of the church and that popes are the successors of the apostles is unscriptural. There is not one shred of Biblical evidence to prove this theory. In fact, Peter was never in Rome! The apostles founded the church with their teachings and authority (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 4:11-12), but there was no continued apostolic line of succession designed to run the local churches. You don’t go back to the foundation once it is finished (Jude 3). The apostles never taught nor set in place apostolic succession. The simple truth is that every New Testament apostle had to be a witness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22; 4:33). Since every apostle was required to be a witness of the resurrected Christ, there can be no apostles in the church today, or a continued line of apostolic succession and authority.

For about 200 years, as these independent churches were dispersed throughout the ancient world, they had no church buildings as such, and were not organized into distinct denominations. There was fellowship among the independent churches and a plurality of leadership represented in the local geographic regions (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5) but the churches never lost their independent elder rule and self-governing status. The local churches in the cities, which had been evangelized, operated independently and autonomously (self-governing), using the guidelines passed on to them by the apostles, and those instructions recorded in the books of the New Testament (2 Thess. 2:15 – “hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle”). These churches practiced their independence and autonomy (freedom) by choosing their own leaders and missionaries (Acts 6:1-6; Acts 13:1-3; 14:23) and promoting a self-governing democratic rule in a given house church and locality. The local assemblies were also to practice their independence by remaining separate and pure from doctrinal compromise, religious paganism, and worldliness (“come out from among them” - 2 Cor. 6:17).

## **From Independence to Denominations (A.D. 300's-400's)**

Independent churches continued to exist and function according to the design of the apostolic churches, which were founded to operate independently of a hierarchy system ruling over them, and which followed the distinctive of apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42). However, as time passed, groups of local churches in particular geographical areas began to develop strong bonds with each other, and banded together with the intent of forming a church system of authority. These unified fellowships gave rise to a movement that stressed a common hierarchy over the local churches. This is when the change from independence to the denominational structure began to emerge. Independence began to be lost during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. The seed bed for this movement was seen even during the first century in the Nicolaitans, who tried to establish a hierarchy over the people, and rule them according to their dictates and doctrines.

Revelation 2:6

“But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.”

Revelation 2:15

“So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate.”

The name “Nicolaitanes” means to conquer, govern, or rule the people. It's believed by various scholars that the Nicolaitanes, at least in their practice, became the seed bed movement for the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, which would eventually dominate many of the independent churches, and merge them into the great harlot system of Roman Catholicism. By the 200's (3<sup>rd</sup> century) local churches throughout the Roman Empire began to be grouped into divisions and they began to lose some of their independence and autonomy. However, it was not until the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries (300's – 400's), that a strong central authority began to emerge and raise its ugly head, which eventually controlled many of the Christian churches.

To put it simply, many of the independent churches were gradually linked to the larger church bodies during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Here is how it happened. As time progressed, there was a multiplication of churches, and in some larger communities people felt the need for security in a

hierarchical type of leadership. The churches in these bigger metropolitan areas eventually developed into major ecclesiastical organizations or denominations. For instance, the Church of Rome became the Roman Catholic Church; the Constantinople Church became the Eastern Orthodox Church (basically a sister church to Rome); the Armenian Church developed in Armenia; while the church in Alexandria Egypt, evolved into the Coptic Church. These were the larger church bodies which began to adopt doctrinal corruptions and philosophies contrary to Biblical revelation.

Sometime around the fourth century (300's), Christianity was considered to be concentrated in five primary centers: Alexandria (now Egypt), Antioch (now Greece), Constantinople (now Turkey), Jerusalem (now Israel), and Rome (now Italy). As Islam grew and competed with some of these centers, Rome and Constantinople became the main Christian centers. However, for political, cultural, linguistic and some religious reasons, the powers in Rome and Constantinople formally separated in 1054 AD. This separation is also referred to as the Great Schism or East-West Schism. Despite the break, many of the belief structures between the two are largely similar.

These metropolitan areas became centers of influence for the smaller town and city churches. In other words, the influence and pressure of these large Roman Catholic ecclesiastical bodies in Europe, caused many of the local independent churches to join their ecclesiastical organizations. As a result, the Church became largely denominational and religiously structured or organized throughout the period of time known as the Middle Ages (500-1500 A.D.). It was the time when large ecclesiastical bodies ruled over the people. The apostolic church blueprint for independent and autonomous churches was vastly lost behind formal state run religion.

During the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries the Church of Rome was considered to be the Roman Catholic, or universally true Church. Of course, the universal true church is the entire body of believers that is linked to Christ through salvation (Eph. 5:23; Heb. 12:23 – “the general assembly” whose names are “written in heaven”). This was long before the Roman Catholic Church came into existence! The true Church is those who are saved and linked to Christ's body. However, the Roman Catholic Church, under the title and disguise of Christianity, was recognized by the emperor Constantine, as the official state religion (324 A.D.), and it became a powerful political force during this era. There was a union of both church and state. The

independence of the early apostolic churches was vastly lost under the state run religion of the Roman Church.

Between 313 and 590 A.D. much of the organized church in Europe changed into the Roman Catholic Church, as we know it today, with all of its doctrinal dogmas, corruptions, and paganisms starting to be introduced. In time, pagan Rome was eventually succeeded by a so-called Christianized Roman Empire (800 -1806 A.D.), with its capital moved to Constantinople. Rome itself was left under the domain of various popes and was later reconstructed as the “Holy Roman Empire,” which historians have often noted was neither holy nor Roman, and was not even an empire! A strong central authority of papal and ecclesiastical authority continued to develop and exist throughout the Middle Ages (500-1500 A.D.) in Western Europe, and was not seriously and effectively challenged until the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Independence Lost - The Dark Ages (A.D. 500-1500)**

The Middle Ages was also a time known as the Dark Ages (500-1500 A.D.). As already confirmed, this was an era of time when the large bodies of denominationalism ruled over the people and failed to teach them the great truths of the Bible. One writer said: “The organized church of the Middle Ages became characterized, not by true biblical Christianity, but by ‘more or less corrupt hierarchy controlling the nations of Europe.’” During this era of Church history truth was hidden. It’s no wonder this period of history was termed “The Dark Ages.” When truth is no longer embraced, only spiritual darkness can abound (Eph. 4:18; 2 Cor. 4:4); however, when truth is preached, light or illumination can be revealed (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9; John 8:12). God’s people are summoned by apostolic authority and God to study and search the Scriptures (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 2:15).

One writer described the Dark Ages in this manner:

“As the world slipped into the dark ages, the various denominations held a strong influence over their members. Literacy for the common man was an exception. There were few Bibles in the world. Religious leaders would tell their congregations what they should believe and how they should live, often with more regard for human traditions and forms than the teachings of the Word.”

Not long after the reign of Constantine, when the church was married to the state (312 A.D.), or when the church married the world (Rev. 2:14), Rome and Roman Catholicism became the effective center of church affairs. What was known as the Dark Ages of Church history (500-1500 A.D.) officially began. Great corruption and wickedness set into the state church. The church became the home to heathenism and false teachings of every kind.

The historian Gibbons wrote of this time period:  
“The history of the church is the annals of hell.”

During this era, pagan gods became Christian saints, and they were worshipped. Pagan priests and nuns became the ordained servants of the church. In short, paganism was incorporated into Christianity. The worship of Mary was incorporated into the church in 381 AD; however, many more Babylonian false teachings (Rev. 17:5) were introduced in this era.

Doctrine of Purgatory-Gregory I .....593 AD  
Prayers to Mary & dead saints .....600 AD  
Worship of cross, images & relics .....786 AD  
Canonization of dead saints .....995 AD  
Celibacy of priesthood .....1079 AD  
The Rosary .....1090 AD  
Indulgences .....1190 AD  
Transubstantiation-Innocent III .....1215 AD  
Confession of sins to a priest .....1215 AD  
Adoration of the wafer (Host) .....1220 AD  
Purgatory proclaimed as a dogma .....1439 AD  
The doctrine of the Seven Sacraments confirmed .....1439 AD

2 Timothy 4:2-4

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

Certainly, this was the case during the Dark Ages (500-1500 AD), when truth was abandoned and corrupt doctrine embraced. It was during the Dark Ages that the inquisitions of Roman Catholicism took place where true

Christians were martyred for not following the dogmas of Roman Catholicism. The inquisition brought the persecution and martyrdom of all those independent groups of Christians, who rejected Roman Catholic teaching, throughout Europe. In fact, during this time, any religious group that did not bow the knee to Roman Catholic doctrine was faced with death.

The Inquisition was a tribunal held in the Roman Catholic Church and directed at the suppression of heresy (those who rejected Catholic doctrine or teaching). Loyal Roman Catholics were to turn in the names of heretics so they could be killed. Untold thousands were jailed, tortured, and executed for refusing to recant the truth or by opposing Roman Catholic teaching. Inquisitors acted in the name of the Pope and with his full authority to destroy the heretics who opposed Roman Catholic dogmas. This was a terrible time for true Bible believing Christians who embraced the truth of God's Word. The Bible forewarned of this terrible treatment (2 Tim. 3:12; Rev. 2:10, 13).

Foxes Book of Martyrs, written by John Foxe, is an English Protestant account of the persecutions of Protestants, mainly in England, many of whom died for their beliefs within the decade immediately preceding its first publication. Roman Catholicism, as a state run religion in Europe, was responsible for the deaths of untold thousands. Historians teach that the death tolls of those who were martyred by Roman Catholicism in Europe vary between 50,000 to 135,000. It was claimed that the Spanish Duke of Alva was responsible for the death of 100,000 Protestants between 1567 and 1573. History will someday repeat itself when apostate religion, headed by Roman Catholicism, is given the chance to run the world (Rev. 17:6).

It was also during this era that the so-called holy Crusades of Catholicism took place, which were a series of military campaigns waged by Western European Christian nations (so-called) from 1095-1291, as they sought to defend the organized Church of Rome and its teachings. These Catholic crusades were designed to kill people in the name of holy war. They were usually sanctioned by the Pope in the name of Christendom with the goal of recapturing Jerusalem and the sacred Holy land from Muslim rule. It's no wonder why Muslims hate anything that is related to the church today! The Muslims still think they are in a holy war with the invaders from the west which today are identified as American Christians. Throughout the Dark Ages the church strayed far away from the apostolic blueprint for local

church independence. State run churches filled with doctrinal departures, along with moral and ethical crimes, was the norm. It was a time of Bible illiteracy along with doctrinal, spiritual, and moral crimes against God and the truth.

### **The Independent Remnant**

There have been independent churches during each period of church history, even the Dark Ages. Similar independent churches today continue to flourish throughout many parts of the world, effectively ministering God's Word. Despite the popularity and influence of the geographic denominations within Europe, throughout the Middle Ages (500-1500 AD), there continued to be small pockets of people, who formed independent, Bible-believing churches and small fellowships. This has been true throughout the history of Christianity. A notable example is the Waldensian Church of northern Italy, which continued to exist from before the Middle Ages, into the twenty first century. This independent group, and others, arose to condemn and reject the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, believing that most of them were contrary to the Bible, in both doctrine and practice. There have always been independent, lay, reform groups, and churches, which refused to espouse and endorse the corruptions of the larger local ecclesiastical churches.

Luke 12:32

“Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Revelation 3:4

“Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”

Revelation 12:17

“And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

God has always had a remnant. Since the first century, and down through the centuries, as Christianity continued to grow and flourish, individual and independent groups have stood against heresy and heretics (Messalians, Euchites, Novotians, Paulicians, Bogomilians, Peterines, Waldenses,

Albigenses, Anabaptists, etc.). These groups held some differing views and doctrines but they also embraced common ground in that the Bible was to be the believers standard of faith and source of authority, the Gospel was the way of salvation, God's people were to live separate from the world and organized religion, the Lord's Supper was a memorial rather than a sacrifice, infant baptism was to be rejected, people were to express faith in Christ alone for salvation, and churches were to be self-governing. Of course, there were many other individual groups and churches whose names have never reached the history books. They will never have their names recorded in the annals of church history but God will not forget them (Rev. 2:13).

Renald Showers has stated:

“From the time that the organized church began to go apostate to the time of the Reformation, God preserved a small remnant of people who opposed the apostate church.”

God has always had a remnant of people who stood against error and abuses in the organized church. For instance, toward the end of the Middle Ages John Wyclif (1329-1384) stood against the organized Church and embraced the truth of Scripture. He offended the state-run Roman Catholic churches. He attacked the doctrines of the medieval church opposing the doctrine of transubstantiation. He taught that the Church did not need a priest to mediate with God for the people (1 Tim. 2:5; John 14:6). A group of organized followers, who embraced Wycliffe's teachings, became known as “Lollards” (mutterers or mumblers), who spoke against the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. They believed the Bible should be available to everyone in their own language. John Wyclif has been called the Morningstar of the Reformation. Wyclif and his followers paved the way for the Reformation in England and Europe. Then too, there was John Huss, who was burned at the stake for standing against the errors of Romanism. Jerome Savonarola was a fiery preacher of truth that stood against the false teachings of the organized state Church. God always has a remnant of people who want to espouse truth.

During the first part of the 1800's, there were Christians who began to feel uncomfortable about denominationalism, a clerical hierarchy, and certain “compromises” creeping into their denominational churches. They resolved to simply read their Bible and try to gather in the same simple manner as Christians did in the New Testament. As some of these Christians began to



travel and preach, they found believers in other cities and countries who were doing the same thing. Independent churches were being formed as they separated from the status quo and staleness of Reformed Churches. For instance, during this time (1827) the Plymouth Brethren became prominent and began to teach a dispensational approach to the Bible and a literal hermeneutic of Scripture. We owe much to this group and John Nelson Darby who began to revive the prophetic Scriptures, the truth about the Rapture of the Church, the Tribulation Period, premillennial eschatology, and a literal Millennium. Until Darby's time, many Christians believed that the church was a continuation of Israel, and some others believed that the church replaced Israel, due to the Reformed Teaching of Augustine.

God always has a remnant! In one sense, all the brethren associated with independent and separated churches have a rich spiritual heritage, which can be traced back to the days of the apostles - not the Reformation. It's also important to understand that *God's remnant of independent, Bible-believing, separated communities did not begin their existence at the Reformation*. Although many independent churches would eventually spawn from the Reformation, Puritanism, and the Pilgrims, and represent the apostolic church tradition, *there were pockets and remnants of believers that never became part of Rome and the system of Romanism*. These brethren were actually reformers before Luther and Calvin were born and they did not have to come out of Rome. They continued to represent the independent church example, pattern, and traditions (2 Thess. 2:15) established by the apostles. Nevertheless, throughout church history, there were reformers from *without* the organized Church and reformers from *within* the organized Church, who were in some measure, seeking to condemn a religious system that was promoting error and apostasy.

Of course, no specific denomination of today can legitimately claim to be *direct* descendents or heirs of the apostles, or any one Christian group of people, whose roots can be traced back to the days of the apostles (Acts 2:42). This is because no specific church groups or denominations existed in the early days of Christianity (Rev. 1:11) and there are no historical records or definitive evidence that exists which can link one Christian group of people to the days of the apostles. For instance, one does not read in the Bible about the "First Baptist Church of Antioch" nor do we read of the "Waldensian Church of Ephesus." Those who claim to have a *direct* line of succession to the apostles, or to one group that stems from the apostles,

are making unwarranted and spurious statements from a historical standpoint. We simply don't possess all the links in the chain that lead back to the days of the apostles. Like the bones of Moses (Jude 1:9), God has chosen to not reveal these records, knowing the prejudice and pride that would result from these findings (2 Cor. 10:12).

The truth is this, all the brethren associated with the independent churches, which teach the Bible, preserve truth, and stand for Biblical separation, can in a *general* way trace their *spiritual* roots back to the original Christian communities. This is because they are perpetuating and preserving the apostolic example, teachings, and principles, which have always been practiced throughout the ages of church history (2 Thess. 2:15). No specific group, whether Baptist or Brethren, possess any legitimate historical evidence, which proves they have *exclusive* blood ties or physical roots to the apostles. Although some (J. M. Carroll) have tried to create the "Trail of Blood" theory, there are no accurate historical records reflecting this, as unbiased historians would agree. However, all is not lost! Independent church communities, who follow the historic Biblical teachings and practices of the apostles (Acts 2:42), do maintain a general historic example of the original Christian churches, which were founded by the apostles. They are a continuing remnant of the early Christian communities that stood for truth, godliness, and separation. In short, all independent, Bible-believing, and separated church fellowships, which have previously existed, or which come into existence, can in a general way trace their spiritual roots and origins back to the days of early Christianity.

### **The Move Back to Independence - The Reformation (A.D.1517-1648)**

After the Dark Ages came the Reformation! The Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) was a religious reformation that created a number of new authoritative Protestant bodies or "denominations" that were designed to protest against some of the cardinal teachings and abuses of the Roman Catholic structure, declaring that justification was by faith alone, without human works (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 1:17; 3:28). These denominations wanted to break away from Roman Catholic doctrine and tyranny with the thought of being free, or independent from Rome's iron fist. Although the Reformers promoted state run churches, the feeling of independence was in the air. A break from the powerful grip of Roman Catholicism was the first step back to independence. The Reformation at least set the stage for greater church independence to be experienced by many more people. In fact, a large

movement of independence would occur, when the denominations themselves would become corrupt, after a period of time.

At least three main traditional denominations emerged as a result of the Reformation: the Lutheran Church (in Germany and Scandinavia); the Reformed Church (Switzerland, France, Holland, and Scotland) and the Church of England. These major Reformation denominations developed in Europe, as they sought separation and independence from the doctrinal and moral abuses found in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformation was primarily a rediscovery of the Gospel of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, which was lost in the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church (Eph. 2:8-9). The Reformation was a return to the Bible. Scripture became the final authority instead of the pope and Catholic traditions (1 Thess. 2:13). The people were encouraged to study the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15). Also, every believer was said to be a priest who had access to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). The words of 1 John 2:8 can apply to the time of the Reformation, which followed the Dark Ages: "because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth."

In a sense, this took place during the Reformation era of history. The new denominational churches emerged to counteract and separate from the denominational corruptions of the state run Roman Catholic Church. They wanted to expose the darkness, and turn on the light of truth, which had been diffused for so long. There was a turn toward independence as the light of the Reformation began to dawn on the darkness of church history.

Matthew 4:16 gives an accurate description of this time:

"The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up."

During the Reformation the flood of Bibles began. Prior to this time (the Middle Ages) the Bible was written in the Latin language. Latin was becoming a dead language and most people could not read the Bible and understand it. However, the Reformation brought a reformation in Bible printing, so the Bible could be understood in the European languages. Bibles in German, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Danish, and the English languages were printed. William Tyndale produced the first English translation of the New Testament. The invention of the printing press in Gutenberg Germany (Western Europe) in 1440 allowed the Bible to be circulated more widely than ever before.

One of Wycliffe's followers, John Hus, actively promoted Wycliffe's ideas, that people should be permitted to read the Bible in their own language, and they should oppose the tyranny of the Roman church, which threatened anyone with execution who possessed a non-Latin Bible. Hus was burned at the stake in 1415, with Wycliffe's manuscript Bibles used as kindling for the fire. Some of the last words of John Hus were these: "In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed." Almost exactly 100 years later, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses of Contention (a list of 95 issues of heretical theology and crimes of the Roman Catholic Church) into the church door at Wittenberg. The prophecy of Hus had come true!

The Reformation churches or Protestant churches, those who protested against Roman Catholic doctrine and practices, developed strong leaders, and sprang up throughout Europe. Through the leadership of the great reformers like Martin Luther (Germany – birth of Lutheran Church), John Calvin (Southern Switzerland – birth of Presbyterian Church), Ulrich Zwingli (Northern Switzerland – birth of Reformed Church), John Knox (Scotland – Presbyterian Church), King Edward VI (supporting the birth of the Anglican Church in England), Jacques Lefevre (Reformed Church in France where protestants are known as Huguenots), and Conrad Grebel along with Menno Simons launching the Reformation under the Anabaptists (later known as Mennonites) in the Netherlands. These churches spread and developed over Europe. As already mentioned, the spirit of independence was in the air, as these new religious movements began to break away from the doctrinal departures and iron rule of Roman Catholicism throughout Europe.

Some of the churches, such as the English or Anglican Church in England, the Lutheran Church in Germany and Scandinavia, the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland, and the Swiss Reformed Church in Switzerland actually became state churches, indicating that a country, which had previously been Roman Catholic, was changing its denomination. However, the Protestants were severely persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church. Battles occurred between the Catholic and Protestant forces which resulted in 30 years of war (1618-1648).

Many deaths took place in the name of religion. The Protestant groups were persecuted and killed including the Anabaptists, who were the forerunners of the Amish and Mennonites. The Anabaptists were

considered a heretical group and were severely persecuted for their rejection of infant baptism and Roman Catholic teachings. We must remember that the brethren of the independent church movement, who separated from doctrinal error and corruption in Europe, were severely persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). In short, the fight back to independence had a price tag attached to it. This has always been the case in regards to religious and political freedom. We should not take our religious freedoms lightly in America. They were bought with a price – the blood of martyrs in both Europe and our own homeland!

### **Independence and American Churches (A.D. 1620-1700's)**

Because of religious persecution, many Separatists from the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church left England and came to the New World, which would later become known as America. They were known as the Pilgrims and Puritans. These people were called *pilgrims* (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 2:11) because they came searching for new land where they could practice religious freedom without the fear of persecution from the Church of England. They were called *puritans* because they tried to purify the Church of England, which did not remove itself from all the Catholic corruptions of the past decades (Titus 1:5; 2:14). The Puritan brethren of the newly formed denominations, such as Lutherans, Congregational, and the Presbyterian persuasion, sailed for the New World and began to colonize North America in the early seventeenth century (1600's).

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Protestant groups from Britain and Europe arrived in the New World, such as the Lutherans, Presbyterians, Dunkers, Moravians, Mennonites, Huguenots (French Reformers), Episcopalians, and Baptists in order to colonize America. All thirteen colonies were founded upon Christian principles. The colonists possessed missionary zeal and a desire for freedom of worship. They longed for a society that would be ruled by God. The Reformation had given people the spiritual motive for emigration to the New World and practice independence. The Reformation brought many Christian groups across the ocean, so they could practice church autonomy and freedom of worship.

Another example would be the Baptists. The origin of the Baptists is connected with the name of John Smyth, pastor of a church at

Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, which had separated from the Church of England. About 1606, this pastor and flock wanted to escape persecution, and immigrated to Amsterdam, where they formed an English congregation in 1609. The group's embracing of "believer's baptism" became the defining moment which led to the establishment of this first Baptist church. Shortly thereafter, Smyth left the group, and layman Thomas Helwys took over the leadership, leading the church back to England in 1611. Most Baptist historians teach that Baptists originated from the English Separatist (Congregationalist) movement in England at the end of the Sixteenth Century. This view of Baptist origins has the most historical support and is the most widely accepted view of Baptist origins. Representative writers include William H. Whitsitt, Robert G. Torbet, Winthrop S. Hudson, William G. McLoughlin and Robert A. Baker.

The two figures of John Smyth and Robert Brown are often viewed as fathers of the Baptist church. John Bunyan (1622-88), the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was a Baptist, who suffered for his faith in Bedford England. It is generally held that the first Baptist congregations in the United States were in Newport, Rhode Island (1638) and Providence, Rhode Island (1639). The Baptists have a godly heritage. They were one group, among others, who stood for doctrinal purity and godliness, during distressing times, when truth and morals were abandoned.

It's interesting that the Puritans, who settled in New England, were also the originators of the Congregational denomination. The congregational churches taught they were a "free" church and encouraged the other Pilgrims to practice local church autonomy. It would be accurate to say that the Congregational church, and many others, began to function like the independent churches do today. They wanted to be removed from dictating power and influence of a religious hierarchy. Famous preachers and theologians in the congregational denomination were men like John Cotton (17th century), Jonathan Edwards (18th century), and Henry Ward Beecher (19th century). There were many colleges started by Congregationalists (Harvard and Yale were both originally started as Christian colleges for pastors), but the schools, like the majority of the denominations, eventually became very liberal, as we will see in our next major point.

It should be remembered that the distinctive of groups like the Congregationalists, Baptists, and other "free" Protestant churches was their emphasis on the autonomy, or the self rule of each local congregation in

establishing its own policies and choosing its leadership. This brand of separatist Puritanism began in England because of the condition of the state church. The Reformation had not done a good job at changing all the teachings and rituals of this state church. Therefore, the Puritan movement aimed at purifying the Church of England from error and dead orthodoxy. We too must remember to purify our own lives in light of Christ's coming and do what is right and holy (1 John 3:2-3; 2 Corinthians 7:1). The Puritan movement began in 1558 under the rule of Elizabeth the First. Puritans made a return to the Bible and solid Biblical teaching (2 Tim. 4:2). They emphasized salvation and godly living (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Their return to the Bible and truth in England and voyage to the New World is what ultimately gave birth to the religious heritage of America.

Some of the Puritans wanted to remain in the Church of England and try to reform it from within. However, there were other Puritans who chose to separate from the Church of England (known as separatists) in order to obey the command to separate from unbelief, unbelievers, and all apostasy, which was being accepted in the Church of England in that day. These Puritans formed a separatist group, which withdrew from the Anglican Church completely. They obeyed the command in 2 Corinthians 6:17 which says: "Wherefore come out from among them (unbelievers), and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you."

The separation from the Church of England gave birth to the English independent or Congregationalist movement. This was a movement that emphasized a return to the independent autonomy of local churches where congregations were no longer under the authority of a state church. The Pilgrim separatist people originally migrated to the United States, established the New World, and formed what became known as the Congregational Churches, within the early American history of the pilgrim colonies (1620-1649). In short, Puritan congregationalism arose from the nonconformist religious movement in England during the reformation of the Church of England. In Great Britain, the early Congregationalists were called *separatists* or *independents* from the Church of England. Some Congregationalists in England still call themselves "Independents."

The migration of these separatists and Puritan people to the New World came about due to their persecution by the state Church of England. They were being imprisoned and harassed for their beliefs. Many fled for refuge

to other European countries and to America. The desire for freedom of worship brought thousands of these separatist Puritans into the United States. The early pilgrims, or separatist groups, landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. They were strong believers who were people of the book. These separatist believers (“Pilgrim Fathers”) helped the other incoming Puritans to develop a more separated position from the “mother church” of England.

The Separatists and Puritans, who formed the colonies, were God fearing people (Prov. 3:7) who wanted to live separated lives and follow the teachings of the Bible (Psalm 119:105). It was these people who formed the basis for our country. America has a Christian heritage based upon the Christian principles of Puritanism. Puritan teaching, which emphasized salvation and godly living, as outlined in the Bible, laid the Christian foundation for the United States. It’s sad when we realize how America has departed from its original history of separated, Puritan beliefs.

Psalm 33:12 declares:

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord: and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.”

Between 1648 and 1800, Anglicans (members of the Church of England) also came from England and made Anglicanism (the religion of the state church of England) the denominational church of Virginia (1607 Jamestown Virginia), New York, Maryland, Southern Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina. Anglicanism (state religion of England) was never popular in the colonies. Both the political rule of England and the religious rule of the state Church of England were being felt in the New World. A fight for the religious and political freedoms of the New World would change the political and religious landscape of this country forever. This fight became known as the American Revolution. American colonists fought off the British army in the American Revolutionary War of the 1770’s and issued a Declaration of Independence in 1776 from England. During this time the Thirteen Puritan Colonies of North America overthrew the governance of the British Empire, and collectively became the nation of the United States of America. Following the American Revolution, Anglican congregations in the United States were reconstructed into independent churches with their own bishops and self-governing structure. There was a new sense of both political and religious freedom from the pressures of England.



Here is the point. The spirit of independence began to be experienced through the new doctrinal emphasis of the original reformers in Europe (Calvin, Luther, etc.) and their emphasis on breaking away from the religious dominance of Roman Catholicism. This began a new wave for independence and set the stage for a return to the autonomous (free) church. Independence was further influenced by the Separatist movements of Puritans and Pilgrims that originally came to this country as a result of the Reformation. Independent churches would eventually spring forth from the Puritans and Separatists, who were willing to sail across the Atlantic Ocean, and come to America in order to find religious and political freedom from England. The desire for independence was bred in the Pilgrims, who wanted freedom from England's religious and political power.

It should also be noted, after a period of time, there was a need for revival within the colonies. Dead formality and sinful practices in early American history needed to be replaced by a fresh wind of the Spirit (John 3:6; 16:8; Acts 1:8). The Great Awakenings were several periods of rapid and dramatic religious revival in colonial America, generally recognized as beginning in the 1730s. The First Great Awakening was a period of heightened religious activity, primarily in Great Britain and its North American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards were responsible for many conversions and changing the course of the country. In North American colonies it began in Northampton, Massachusetts, under Jonathan Edwards, in 1734. Whitefield and Edwards traveled through the colonies in 1739 and 1740. Everywhere they went they attracted large and emotional crowds, resulting in countless conversions, as well as considerable controversy.

The Second Great Awakening (1790–1840s) was a period of great religious revival that took place prior to the Civil War period of the United States, with widespread Christian evangelism and conversions. It generated excitement in church congregations throughout New England, the mid-Atlantic, Northwest and the South. Individual preachers, such as Charles Grandison Finney, Lyman Beecher, Barton Stone, Peter Cartwright, and Asahel Nettleton became very well known as a result.

The third Great Awakening (1857-1858) in our country came about through prayer meetings that were conducted by Jeremiah Lanphier. Within a few months, business prayer meetings were being held in New York City and eventually spread to other major cities coast to coast. Untold thousands of

people attended these prayer meetings. They were praying for the salvation of souls and the revival of the country. It is estimated that during this 24-month prayer revival that over one million people came to Christ. More than one million souls were saved during a time when the total population of America was only about thirty million. Some suggest that this revival continued throughout the days of the Civil War, and following the war, with the revival preaching of Moody, who died in 1899.

During these revival times of spiritual awakening the city bars were closed and whiskey was poured out on the streets. Shopkeepers in New York were hanging out signs at noonday, which read, "Closed-Be Back After Prayer Meeting." The police and fire departments opened their buildings for prayer services at noon. Numerous churches were overflowing with praying businessmen. Ministers made themselves available to those who needed spiritual help. Stories of conversions appeared on the front pages of daily newspapers in New York, such as the New York Tribune. This prayer revival spread to other cities, such as Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago and Atlanta. News about this spiritual awakening spread all over the United States. Within the cities saloons were converted into prayer halls. The Atlanta police department dismissed half of its force because of reduced crime. Grocery storekeepers also rolled out their barrels of beer and wine and poured it into the streets. The revival even spread to the nation's Army and Navy.

### **Back to Independence (1800's to present)**

A European peace treaty was signed in 1648 and most religious persecution and fighting between Roman Catholics and Protestants ended. The Protestants had won. Holland and Switzerland are recognized as independent Protestant states. Lutheranism and Calvinism become recognized religions in Germany. Eventually Protestants received the right to hold offices in Roman Catholic governments. However, history repeats itself. In time (the early 1800's), the mainline denominational churches in protestant Europe, which initially stood for truth, also became noticeably corrupted by rationalism, anti-supernaturalism, and classic Liberalism, which denied the inspiration of the Bible, Christ's virgin birth, deity, death, resurrection, Second Coming, and the fundamentals of the faith.

It was during the first part of the 1800's that Christians began to feel uncomfortable about denominationalism, a clerical hierarchy, and certain

“compromises” creeping into their denominational churches. They resolved to simply read their Bible and try to gather in the same simple manner as Christians did in the New Testament. As some of these Christians began to travel and preach, they found believers in other cities and countries who were doing the same thing. Independent churches were being formed as they separated from the status quo and staleness of Reformed Churches. For instance, during this time (1827) the Plymouth Brethren became prominent and began to teach a dispensational approach to the Bible and a literal hermeneutic of Scripture. We owe much to this group and John Nelson Darby who began to revive the prophetic Scriptures, the truth about the Rapture of the Church, the Tribulation Period, premillennial eschatology, and a literal Millennium. Until Darby’s time, many Christians believed that the church was a continuation of Israel, and some others believed that the church replaced Israel, due to the Reformed Teaching of Augustine.

In the later 1800’s and early 1900’s, the Liberalism which began in the Protestant denominations in Europe, spread to America, so that by the early twentieth century (1930’s), religious liberals had a major controlling influence in most of the mainline denominations in America. Thomas Todhunter Shields (T.T. Shields) was a leading Baptist figure to separate and stand out from among the liberal denominations. Many followed in his footsteps and began to form independent organizations away from all denominational ties and associations. Shields remarked: “We remember our faults to this day. We ourselves did not know that Modernism was so deeply rooted.”

The movement toward independent churches, which was the Biblical design of the early apostolic church, reemerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1900’s), due to the corruption within the denominational structures. By the turn of the century (1900’s) Darwinism and liberalism had begun to affect all mainstream denominations, and the more educated denominations were affected first. The mainline denominations no longer believed in miracles, the virgin birth of Christ, the atonement and bodily resurrection of Christ, the Second Coming of Christ, nor the existence of the devil or hell. As a result, the people left the denominations and formed independent churches that would uphold the major historic doctrines of the Bible.

Since many of the mainline American Protestant denominations were beginning to move away from the traditional doctrines of the church, an

independent church movement sprang up, which would reflect the independent, local structure in the days of the apostles. It was an independent church movement that was designed to steer away from all denominational associations and structures that had become leavened or corrupted.

Matthew 13:33

“Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.”

Independent churches, some bearing the name of their denomination (independent Baptist, independent Methodist, independent Presbyterian), and other various independent churches, began to be established. The First Congregational Church of Dallas, which at one time was pastored by C.I. Scofield (editor of the Scofield Reference Bible), became independent in 1908, and was later named the Scofield Memorial Church, one of the older Bible churches in the Dallas area. The faithful people withdrew from the corrupted denominations and formed independent churches that would adhere to strict doctrines and practices which revolved around sanctification or holiness. They no longer wanted any association with the denominations, since they had departed too far from historic doctrines.

In some cases, interdenominational community churches were formed in rural communities, who were actually associated with the Fundamentalist Movement. They banded together to react against the modernism which was running rampant in the denominational structures. Others chose the title “undenominational” as a reaction to the liberalism in the denominations. One later example of this would be “Calvary Udenominational Church” in Grand Rapids, Michigan, whose founder, M. R. De Haan, reacted to liberal teaching.

Conservative Bible-believing Christians responded to the liberal challenge taking place within the denominations, by emphasizing the doctrinal essentials of the faith, such as the inspiration of Scripture, the deity and virgin birth of Christ, His substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection and His Second Coming. These became known as the "five fundamentals," while those holding these crucial doctrines were called fundamentalists. Nearly all historians agree that the Fundamentalist Movement received its name from the publication of a series of volumes called “The

Fundamentals.” These were first published in 1909 and experienced wide circulation until 1920. The articles contained fundamental truth that the denominations needed to adhere to in light of the ever increasing threat of liberalism and modernism which has entrenched itself within the denominations. Contributors to this series of articles included such scholars as James M. Gray, Benjamin B. Warfield, James Orr, W.J. Erdman, W.H. Griffith Thomas, Melvin Grove Kyle, H.C.G. Moule, and G. Campbell Morgan. The Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy within the denominations was a long fight, but modernism eventually won. The denominations were too far gone and could not be saved. The leaven had done its work (1 Cor. 5:6).

Radio ministries also attacked the spread of modernism in the churches. Such radio ministries as "The Old Fashioned Revival Hour" under Charles E. Fuller became widely known and the most popular religious broadcast in the country. Millions also heard Martin R. DeHaan's "Radio Bible Class" ministry. "The Bible Study Hour" under the teaching ministry of Donald Grey Barnhouse also stood for truth in these compromising days. Sadly, Barnhouse never left his denomination and later paid the price (1 Cor. 15:33).

Another example of the Independent Church Movement was the founding of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (known as IFCA International). This was and still is today an association of independent churches located largely in the United States. It was organized in June 1930 as a successor to the American Conference of Undenominational Churches. It was formed in order to reject theological modernism within the denominational structures and reaffirmed the traditional, fundamental doctrines that underlie Christianity.

Another movement on the horizon would also threaten the doctrinal purity of the Church. It has been called the “New Evangelical Movement,” which is really compromised Christianity with liberalism, various false doctrines, and worldliness (1940’s to present). The founding father of New Evangelicalism, Harold Ockenga, said: “The New Evangelical has changed his strategy from one of separation to one of infiltration.” John Ashbrook has called this movement “The New Neutralism” because it sought the middle ground, through compromising theology and Biblical separation principles, with the modernism and liberalism of the day (the 1940’s and 50’s).

During this same time, the New Evangelical Movement (non-separated Christianity), sought to join, or ecumenically unite with corrupt denominationalism, with the prospect of correcting and changing the denominations. Billy Graham, who is historically called, the father of ecumenical evangelism, sought to religiously unite with the corrupt or liberal denominations and Charismatic practices. Over time, Graham shared his religious platforms with avowed liberals and made friendships with the Roman Catholic Church and popes. These types of ecumenical compromises continue on to the present day as a result of the spreading virus of New Evangelicalism.

Dr. Bob Jones Sr., a fundamental separatist of this era of compromise, likened the New Evangelical man to a soldier in the Civil War who tried to save his neck by wearing a Confederate jacket and Union pants at the same time. The Yankees fired at his jacket and the Rebels shot at his legs. It never does pay to compromise!

In 1956, the magazine "Christianity Today" began publication, which became the major magazine of New Evangelical thought. In 1957, the giant ecumenical crusades came on to the horizon. There was ecumenical fever spreading among the New Evangelicals. Since these days, and up to the present time, every phase of the Christian ministry has come under the mood and practice of New-Evangelicalism. Churches, once fundamental schools, Sunday School literature, publishing houses, evangelism and music have all been affected by this New-Evangelical spirit of compromise, with liberalism, false doctrines, and worldly practices.

The independent churches became more popular and stronger during this era, as they reacted to the New Evangelical philosophy of infiltration and false unity (Eph. 4:13), with corrupt denominationalism and liberal Protestantism. Many independent Bible churches, and other variously named churches, without a denominational label or tag, sprang up, in order to declare a stand against modernism, and dissociate themselves from the New Evangelical movement, with its involvement with liberals. The 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be a large scale return to the historic independence of local, autonomous churches, which were free of church hierarchy and corrupt denominational practices.

Many of the splinter groups, completely dropped their denominational names, and opened their own schools to train ministers in the orthodox

doctrines and Bible separation. The Grand Rapids School of the Bible and Music, where I attended in the early 1980's, was an institute that was originally formed to separate from liberalism, charismatic practices, and teach the doctrines of the Bible, including separation and dispensationalism. Missions were also a vital part of the break from liberal denominations. Most of the mission boards were controlled by the denominations; therefore, independents no longer wished to support them. As a result, new independent mission boards, along with the Bible institutes and independent churches, were started. China Inland Mission (CIM), founded by Hudson Taylor, Africa Inland Mission, and Sudan Interior Mission were some fundamentalist missions that originally stood for truth and separation.

Since the 1920's and 30's, there has been a strong effort to plant other Bible churches through the influence of the older, established Bible churches, and through the efforts of the students graduating from non-denominational, Bible-teaching seminaries, Bible institutes, and colleges. Some independent fellowships and churches in different parts of the country have linked together in loose fellowships, such as the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (no longer a strong separatist organization) or the Independent Baptist Church movement, (still a strong separatist movement).

Another example would be the International Council of Christian Churches in America. This is a movement of voluntary churches who are associated together, as fundamental believers, to insure the continuance of a true Christian voice against modernism, communism, neo-orthodoxy, the papacy and the unscriptural charismatic hysteria that is sweeping the country. The council in no way exercises control over the local congregation. It is a means whereby any believer can lend support to the united force for fundamentalism. The point is this; some churches have linked together, while maintaining their autonomy and distinctiveness as individual assemblies, while other churches have chosen to remain totally independent in relationship to their doctrinal associations, affiliations, and practices.

In summary, we can conclude that the groups that broke away from the denominations (1900's – 1930's), and then New Evangelicalism (1940's to present), did so out of obedience and deep convictions (2 Cor. 6:14-17). They separated from the liberals, false doctrines of modernism,

ecumenicalism, compromising Christians, charismatic teachings and experiences, and other worldly trends developing in the Church (carnal music and worship). When the original groups separated from the denominations, they began to experience local church autonomy, and the freedom of New Testament Christianity. This separation began a large scale return to local church independence.

Some of the people who broke away still bore their denominational badges such as "Baptist," "Presbyterian," "Methodist," etc. They simply placed the name "independent" in front of the denominational name. Others, however, dropped the denominational badge altogether, and wanted nothing to do with denominationalism. The Independent Bible Church is an example of the latter option. These churches wanted to convey a totally independent name and not associate with the liberal denominations and compromises of the time. This is why we have many independent Bible churches dotted across America today, which are still holding the line doctrinally, and who refuse to identify with the enemy, through ecumenicalism, pragmatism, and worldliness. The historic hallmark of church independence has always been separation from false doctrine and ungodly living (Titus 2:11-14). This was true in the days of the apostles and also during the time when the Fundamentalists broke away from the liberal and corrupt denominations (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, etc.).

If independent autonomous churches have remained true to the Scriptures, along with the doctrine of sanctification ("the doctrine according to godliness" - 1 Tim. 6:3), they represent the apostolic model, teaching, and practice of the early church. There should not be an avowed separation among brethren, who are of like-minded faith, if they are upholding apostolic teaching, proper church government, and sanctification. The real issue for today is theological and ecclesiastical agreement in philosophy and ministry. We must be careful of becoming caught up in labels, or possessing pride in some religious denomination, and ask two questions. What do you favor and what do you oppose?

We must also remember that independent churches, whether independent Baptist or Bible, were initially formed to separate from the doctrinal corruptions taking place in the denominations, and the spirit of compromise being promoted in the New Evangelical Movement. Therefore, if these historic purposes are upheld or maintained in independent fundamental churches, there should be room for fellowship and a common bond (Acts



2:42). We should be able to fellowship with one another, when we remember our historic roots, and the united goals and purposes that we possess, as independent churches and institutions, which separate from ecumenicalism (2 Cor. 6:14-17), false doctrine (2 Tim. 2:18-19), liberals (2 Tim. 3:5; 2 John 2:10-11), and those brethren who have adopted worldly methods and behavior in their worship services (2 Thess. 3:6-7).

The evangelist, Oliver Green, once said:

“Some of you people are so independent that the termites in your independent churches won’t fellowship with the termites in other independent churches.”

Let us not become so narrow-minded and nit-picky that we can’t fellowship with other brethren who are like-minded in doctrine and practice. And let us also remember that we don’t have to agree on every little detail to have fellowship with other brethren.

John Miles used to say:

“The main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things!”

In summary, the independent church enables Christians, who are like-minded in faith and practice, to build a church that is founded on the traditional doctrines of the Bible, and gives them the autonomy to see that this foundation is not disrupted or corrupted in any way with false doctrine, compromise, and worldly practice. The mark of their independence or freedom from church councils, false doctrines, and unwholesome practices, reflects the original design and purpose of the independent, apostolic churches (Rom. 16:17; 1 John 2:15-17).

### **Independent Bible Churches**

The independent Bible churches of today (Berean Bible Church, Faith Bible Church, Community Bible Church, Grace Bible Church, etc.), and other undenominational churches, which are given various names and titles (Grace Community Church, Calvary Church, Church of the Open Door, etc.) are not directly associated or affiliated with denominationalism. They are not organizationally controlled by denominations or bound to them. They are self-governing, autonomous congregations free to choose their leaders, doctrines, and separated positions. They are also evangelistic and missionary churches.

When independent Bible and Baptist churches follow their historic purpose and apostolic roots, which calls for separation from false doctrine, apostasy and worldliness, they are similar to one another in their doctrinal stance and practice. The history of the Independent Bible Church Movement is similar to the Independent Baptist Movement, in that both independent church movements occurred, as a result of groups breaking away from denominational apostasy.

An Independent Bible Church is a Bible-teaching and preaching church that believes in using the Scriptures to guide men through life (2 Tim. 3:16). The independent churches (Bible, Baptist, etc.) eventually grew out of the teaching and doctrinal positions of the Fundamental and Bible Conference Movements (1875-1920) and also the Prophecy Conference Movements (1878-1914) which took their stand against liberalism, false teaching, and the allegorical method of interpreting Bible prophecy.

Such men as George C. Needham, A. J. Gordon, James Brooks, T.T. Shields, H. Gratten Guinness, C. I. Scofield, A. C. Gaebelien, Ford C. Ottmon, William Pettingill, William Moorehead, A. T. Pierson, A. C. Dixon, William Erdman, Robert Cameron, William R. Nicholson, E. P. Goodwin, Charles Trumbell, W. E. Blackstone, Nathaniel West, Wilbur Chapman, James. M. Gray, and Charles Blanchard. The prophetic conferences reacted to the modernistic tendencies to embrace amillennialism (transformation of society and the social gospel) and the allegorical interpretation of Bible prophecy (non-literal approach to Bible interpretation).

As a result of these conferences, most Bible churches, who still follow their historic roots, espouse a literal interpretation of Scripture, which takes the meaning of Bible words in their normal, natural, and usual sense, seeking to understand each passage in the context of the surrounding passages (2 Tim. 2:15). When studying the Bible in this fashion, the Independent Bible Church concludes that the Bible must be studied from a premillennial and dispensational viewpoint. A premillennialist is one who believes that a literal 1,000 year period of universal peace and righteousness is coming to the earth and that Jesus Christ will return to usher in the Millennial Kingdom. A dispensationalist believes that the Christian lives under a new administration of grace, not under Old Testament law, that God has covenant promises that are going to be experienced by Israel, and that there will be a Rapture (secret coming of Christ) for His Church, prior to a

seven-year Tribulation Period, which precedes the Second Coming of Christ to earth.

Independent Bible churches believe in the eternal security of the believer. True salvation can never be lost. However, the Independent Bible Church tradition does not normally accept a strong position on Calvinism (hyper Calvinism) and Reformed Theology. They are not reformed in the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) and take a literal approach to the Scriptures and fulfillment of Bible prophecy (eschatology). Independent Bible churches, who have remained true to their historic separation from modernism, New Evangelicalism, and worldliness, also preach against the modern trends of worldliness that are in the church today (Contemporary Christian Music, worldly pragmatism, ecumenicalism) and the errors of Charismatic teachings and practices (tongues, second work of grace, healing, wealth health gospel). Finally, Bible churches generally are characterized by a congregational rule, where the people choose their pastor and deacons, and allow them to guide and take care of the church.

### **Removing the Name Independent**

Many churches that were once independent have undergone a name change. Churches, which were once labeled independent, have chosen to remove the name “independent” from their fellowship, since they want to disassociate themselves from the historic “independent” church movement that separated from corrupt denominationalism, Liberalism, and New Evangelicalism. Removing the name “independent” from a church is one way to remove “the old landmark” (Prov. 23:10) and disavow fundamentalism and separation, which is what the name “independent” has historically represented.

Today leniency and compromise (Rev. 2:20) has replaced independence from apostasy, worldliness, and ecumenical practices. Churches still want their autonomy or independence but they don't want to be labeled a fundamentalist or separatist any longer. Sadly, many of the undenominational churches of today have lost sight of the historic reason why independent churches were originally formed. These types of churches began in order to separate from apostasy and the compromises that were plaguing the denominational churches. They wanted to separate from the inroads of New Evangelicalism (compromising Christianity) and uphold the apostolic blueprint for Bible separation, by declaring their independence

from doctrinal corruption, religious paganism, and worldliness (2 Cor. 6:14-17).

Many independent churches of today no longer embrace the purpose and philosophy for their existence, since they have espoused worldliness and compromise with apostasy through ecumenicalism. The “doctrine of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14), which results in corruption and compromise, has invaded many of the independent churches that were once separated, and has caused a “stumblingblock” (Rev. 2:14) for many Christians in the area of sanctification. Beloved, beware of the drift of the times and possess an “understanding of the times” (1 Chron. 12:32) in which we are living. Don’t remove “the ancient landmark” (Prov. 22:28) of independence and Bible separation.

### **Choosing an Independent Church**

What should you look for when choosing an independent church? One thing that you should look for is the name “independent” somewhere in its description. This can often be a good indication that the church still wants to maintain Bible separation from ecumenicalism and worldliness (1 Tim. 6:5; Rom. 12:2). You should also look for a church where the preacher does expository or expositional teaching and preaching from Bible texts (“line upon line” - Isa. 28:10). There can be no improvement upon the way the Holy Spirit has systemized His Word. You will grow when a preacher moves through entire Bible texts and books, keeping them in their context, and applying them to your daily life (1 Pet. 2:2).

People have asked me what the difference is between preaching and teaching (Acts 15:35; 28:31). Preaching and teaching are much alike in content and are distinguished primarily by the nature of presentation. Preaching is the public proclamation of the truth, intended primarily to move the will of the hearers to respond (2 Tim. 4:2). Teaching is directed more at causing the mind to understand (Neh. 8:8). Preaching involves admonition and exhortation, whereas teaching involves illumination and explanation. All good preaching has elements of explanation, and all good teaching includes some exhortation. The teacher brings a person to say, “I see that.” The exhorter brings us to say, “I’ll do that.”

Other things that must be taken into consideration, when looking for an independent Church, would be its doctrinal statement, or “those things

most surely believed” (Luke 1:1) among the church group. Does the statement spell out its beliefs in a general or more specific way? After reading the doctrinal statement, does it leave any doubt in your mind regarding what the church actually believes on such issues as dispensationalism, Reformed Theology (Calvinism), and ecclesiastical separation? Is it a missions-minded church? What is the church government? What requirements are there for church membership? Does the church emphasize soul winning, straightforward preaching, and general separation from the world? Is it really conservative, or does it promote contemporary worship, instead of Scriptural and reverent worship (Ps. 89:7)?

Here are some more questions. Does the church demonstrate overall reverence in the way it conducts its meetings and how people dress and present themselves on the Lord’s Day? Is it still singing the hymns, using the King James Version of the Bible, and following in the fundamentalist traditions of the old time faith without apology? Does the church seem to be practicing the unity of the Spirit and is there a real sense of love, excitement, and expectancy in the church services? Is there accountability in relationship to the finances of the church? Does the pastor really preach the Word, have a servant’s heart, and love the people?

These are some of the key things that you can ask yourself, as you begin to look for a true independent church, which is still abiding by its Biblical and historical roots. Don’t sell yourself short and compromise. It never pays to compromise (Gal. 6:7-8). Get established in a good, Bible-believing, independent, soul-winning church. Stand by the pastor, support it financially, prayerfully, and begin to serve and grow.

### **An Independent Church Statement**

This independent, autonomous, and self-governing local church has chosen to follow the apostolic and historic purpose for independent churches, which is to separate from all false doctrine and worldliness (Rev. 2:2, 6). Therefore, this church will remain exclusively independent from other church ministries, or religious associations, which promote unsound doctrine, charismatic experiences, ecumenical evangelism, Contemporary Christian Rock Music, and other worldly-oriented practices (Eph. 5:10-11; 1 Thess. 5:21). The aim of this church ministry is to promote healthy teaching or doctrine (Titus 2:1; 1 Tim. 4:6) and practice ecclesiastical (church)

separation from all apostasy, either directly, or indirectly, by refusing to promote, fund, and participate with ministries, which are themselves apostate, or even those church ministries and religious organizations, who have questionable associations with apostasy, through ecumenical practices and interfaith relationships. Guilt by association is still a valid reason for separation (1 Tim. 5:22; 1 Cor. 5:7; Rev. 18:4).

This independent church does not want to become part of a chain or link that leads to the promotion and endorsement of apostasy and corrupt denominationalism (2 John 1:11), nor do we want to pitch our tent toward ecumenicalism, worldliness, and carnal forms of music or worship (Gen. 13:12). Cooperation in any way with those men, movements, and ministries that teach error is compromise - not contending for the faith (Jude vs. 3). Condoning worldly worship and unscriptural experiences is partnership – not personal holiness (1 Pet. 1:15).

Based upon the principles of light verses darkness, righteousness verses unrighteousness, Christ verses Satan (Belial), and a believer verses an infidel (unbeliever), we must ecclesiastically (in a church and religious setting) separate from *anyone* that is the enemy, *everyone* who represents the enemy, *anybody* that mixes with the enemy, and *anything* that reflects the enemy (2 Corinthians 6:14-17). These Scriptural commands and principles, which teach us about incompatible realms and incongruous relationships, call for a clean break from apostasy, in every way, and forbid harboring and promoting the works of the enemy, either directly or indirectly, through ecumenical evangelism and pagan/worldly worship (1 Cor. 10:20).

Ernest Pickering has wisely said:

“God has separated light from darkness and no one, not even in the cause of evangelism, should attempt to take down those divinely erected barriers.”

As an independent and autonomous church, we also follow the teaching and Biblical principle that grants us the right to withdraw fellowship from those Christians who walk disorderly (2 Thess. 3:6), and who have become divisive, due to their doctrinal departure from the clear teachings of Scripture on various subjects (Titus 3:10). This means we will not support, finance, or participate with any religious based ministries that promote unscriptural worship, ecumenicalism, and false teachings regarding the

cardinal doctrines of the Bible, which include eschatology and pneumatology (Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts).

Other grounds for separation would include such things as Calvinism (Reformed teaching), Charismatic/Pentecostal teachings (tongues, faith healers, second work of grace, etc.), and the Wealth/Health teachings. In a day when the boundary lines are disappearing and being erased, God has called us to separate from all religious departure in both doctrine (teaching) and deportment (behavior). In short, God has called us to live separate from sinners and their sinful patterns of lifestyle (Heb. 7:26). We are not to walk as unsaved men (1 Cor. 3:3). God has called us to be different (2 Cor. 5:17).

In summary, the church will not promote or endorse apostasy, ecumenicalism, charismatic, or Calvinistic practices, in any way, or actively engage itself in ministries, which are not in accord with its own doctrinal stance and statement of separation. This means the church cannot openly support or endorse certain missionaries, missionary agencies, Bible colleges, Christian schools, prison ministries, teen programs, and other religious-based outreach ministries, which are not independent and doctrinally aligned with its own statement of faith, or that fail to promote Bible separation and holiness, which honors God.

1 Timothy 4:12

“Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”

This independent church chooses to take the safe road, instead of the unsure path (Prov. 2:8-9; 4:14-15), which can often lead to unexpected religious compromises with worldly practices and Christians, who have espoused different doctrinal viewpoints and specific worldly trends, which are not wholesome, and honoring to God (1 Cor. 10:31). Although this church recognizes that God is working in various ways, through other church-related organizations and ministries, it also tenaciously clings to its loyalty to God (Rom. 12:1-2) and truth (2 Cor. 13:8; 1 Tim. 3:15), above all else (Ps. 138:2). The unity we possess and practice on the local church level and with other independent Bible-believing church organizations or fundamentalist ministries, of such like faith, is a unity based upon doctrinal truth and holiness (Eph. 4:13; 2 John 1:1).

Pastors, who seek to maintain an independent, separated, Bible Church ministry, are often misunderstood by some of the brethren in the church, who may want the assembly to support their own personal ministry, or some other specified ministry of their own choosing. However, if this ministry does not practice Bible separation from false teaching, apostasy, unscriptural experiences, and worldly practices, the pastor, as the overseer (1 Pet. 5:2), and protector of the flock (Heb. 13:17), reserves the right to refuse promoting that ministry and participating with it, through the local church, which God has appointed him to shepherd. May the Lord find us faithful.

1 Corinthians 4:2

“Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.”

“God has not given us the spirit of fear,  
But has given us the strength to obey.  
With power and sound mind,  
With love, the unfailing kind,  
O be not ashamed of His way.

May the Lord find us faithful  
May His Word be our banner held high.  
May the Lord find us faithful  
Every day, though we live, thou we die.”