Scientific exploration is designed for debate and working out differences. When studying a problem, different scientists approach it in different ways, studying different data with different methods and, lo and behold, they get different results. Remember when all cholesterol was bad for your heart and then, later, scientists discovered that some cholesterol was good for the heart?

It is not just that different scientists disagree. Sometimes one investigator will come up with conclusions opposite their earlier discoveries. It is good scientific procedure to announce and distribute the new results, but think for a moment of the personal experience. After years of publishing one set of conclusions, you start publishing ideas that contradict the previous ones. Embarrassment and soul-searching accompanies any such change, and colleagues will question the accuracy of your new work because of your previous positions.

In a religion, the same situation is more than embarrassing; it can be catastrophic. Religious pronouncements are often taken by the members as Truth, with a capital “T.” Issued by a god as a guide for belief or practice, such statements become hard and fast doctrines or rules that must be followed. Deviation from them can lead not just to embarrassment, but to expulsion from the religion.

Statements issued by a religion and its leaders in the past become Truth for the future. It becomes seemingly impossible to make a change in the present, even if it will produce benefits in the future. How can Truth change? If Truth can change, then it is not Truth. Right?

Because of this dynamic, it becomes difficult for religions to look to the future. They must always look to the past, and stay in line with their previous pronouncements. So, as the future comes toward them into the present, the Truths expressed in the past constrain their options for meeting it. The longer a religion’s past (i.e., the older it is), the fewer viable choices for future directions.

So, how does a religion change?

The Protestant Reformation provides a test case. The Protestant groups that arose during the 1500s and 1600s followed different paths, but two commonalities appear among the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Calvinists and others.

First, each Protestant movement created a new religious organization. By becoming new, they were able to divorce themselves from Catholicism’s past and, just as important, from Catholicism’s organization.

Second, the new types of Christianity then changed the past. For example, they altered the foundational sacred text, the Bible, by removing 18 books and parts of books from the Old Testament. Once that was done, nothing could remain the same.

Of course, a new denomination cannot stay new for long. To maintain itself, a religious organization must institutionalize its Truth. It must pass itself on to each new generation and transmit its True practices and beliefs. And, so, the process continues. After a century or two, a religious group has built up enough past Truth to begin constraining its future.

To address the future, then, new religious organizations must form. Today there are more than 300 Christian denominations in America, and that is not counting the independent churches. My own small town of 30,000 people has more than 40 different churches.

In recent decades, the “new” evangelical denominations have been on the rise. They separated from “mainstream Protestants” (sometimes more than a century ago). They then changed the past by giving the sacred text, the Christian Bible, a new character, as eternally valid, unchanging and literal.

The evangelical alliance with the powerful political ideologies of the Republican Party has brought them and their Truth into prominence and increased their membership. And they have done this at the expense of the older denominations.

But time moves on and circumstances continue to change. Alongside evangelical denominations, the new mega-churches are becoming more widespread, especially in urban areas. As new, independent organizations they repeat the cycle by eschewing denominational pasts and the Truth of those traditions for the new.

This has enabled mega-churches to adopt new forms of worship, experiment with new ways of building community, and to propound new beliefs and ideas. Freed from the past, they can create their new Truth as they and their congregants see fit.

Are these radical changes? Perhaps, perhaps not. The important point is that they simply continue the cycle of religious change that has been going on for centuries. Truth may not change, but humanity’s understanding of it is continually renewed.