

WHO IS A PROTESTANT?

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Last August the Pew Research Center released some startling statistics: half of America's professing Protestants (52%) say that good deeds plus faith in Christ are necessary for salvation. In other words, *sola fides* is a minority view. About half of Catholics and Protestants in Europe say that the two religions are "more similar than they are different," which leads a *Christianity Today* article to conclude that "many Protestants are closer to Catholics than Martin Luther."¹ Some so-called evangelicals, in view of Catholic/Protestant conciliation, have decided that the Reformation is over. It simply is no longer relevant.² So what exactly should it mean to be a Protestant? In answering that question, I would like us to consider three contexts that I trust will help us to determine whether we are Protestants and if indeed we should be Protestants: definition and origin, historical identification, and contemporary application.

Definition and Origin

There are several ways of defining a "Protestant." Broadly, a Protestant is any Christian who is neither Roman Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox. Using that categorization, we can identify 560 million Protestants represented in over 30,000 different Protestant denominations throughout the world. In a more narrow sense, the term has been inseparably connected to the movement we celebrate this month known as the Protestant Reformation, epitomized by sixteenth century reformers Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox, who opposed the apostasy of Roman Catholicism. The term was first applied to the German princes who supported Lutheran doctrine at the Diet of Speyer in 1529. They protested the decision of the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor to suppress the Reformation. As an oppressed party, they complained that "Christ was again in the hands of Caiaphas and Pilate." They protested against all those measures of the Diet which they saw as contrary to the Word of God and conscience—the very grounds of Luther's protest at Worms eight years earlier. In their motto, "The Word of God abideth forever," they were re-affirming the primary apostolic principle of the Reformation, *sola scriptura*. They were confident that they were adhering to Paul's timeless admonition to take the whole armor of God in the face of satanic opposition, to stand squarely against evil, putting on the helmet of salvation and taking up the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Eph 6:17). Compromise was not an option for them. In God's providence, they became part of a modern movement that would

¹"500 Years After Reformation, Many Protestants Closer to Catholics than Martin Luther," Sarah Eekhof Zylstra, *News and Reporting*. [Http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/august/500-reformation-protestants-catholics-luther-sola-fide-pew.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/august/500-reformation-protestants-catholics-luther-sola-fide-pew.html). Accessed 5 September 2017.

²See Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

end the medieval era and inaugurate modern western civilization.

The Protestant reformers were *reactionary* and *revolutionary*. Using the Word of God as both their offensive weapon and defensive security against a thoroughly corrupt papacy, they knew that the battle is the Lord's, that they were his prophetic spokesmen and protective shepherds opposing evil forces seeking to destroy the flock of Jesus Christ. In reaction to the false teachings of Catholicism, they revived and re-asserted the neglected (if not rejected) fundamental doctrines Christianity: the formal principle of the absolute authority of Scripture, the material principle of justification by faith alone, and the social principle of a universal believer priesthood. Each of these was a deliberate reaction to antichristian papal perversions: an absolutely authoritative magisterium, a justification by meritorious works, and an elite professional priesthood claiming the right to mediate salvation through sacraments.

The Reformation was more than a renaissance. The Renaissance aided the Reformation in providing resources for Bible study and translation, but it was not redemptive. The Reformation on the other hand, was a spiritual revolution. A revolution is an upheaval, a dramatic and often violent change in society. Revolutions normally include both destruction and construction. The character of a revolutionary is revealed by what he wants to destroy and what he wants to build. A godly revolutionary is one who seeks to destroy the works of Satan and build the church of Jesus Christ. Such were the *Protestant* reformers.

Their protests were marked by clarity and courage. Listen, **“the most intrepid revolutionary is the one who has a fear greater than anything his opponents can inflict upon him. Luther, who had so trembled before the face of God, had no fear before the face of man.”**³ And so, before the impending imperial council of Worms in 1521, he was determined, in the face of almost certain martyrdom, to protest the papacy: “If they burn my books, I will repeat what I have said. In this I am so bold that for it I will suffer death.” The two highest potentates in the land had condemned him: the pope, Leo X, and the Holy Roman emperor, Charles V. In the face of Leo's bull *Exsurge Domine*, officially pronouncing Luther a heretic, he bravely replied,

Our warfare is not with flesh and blood, but against spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places, against the world rulers of this darkness. Let us then stand firm and heed the trumpet of the Lord. Satan is fighting, not against us, but against the Christ in us. We fight the battles of the Lord. Be strong therefore. If God is for us, who can be against us.... Whatever may happen, I am not moved, because nothing can happen save in accord with the will of him who sits upon the heavens directing all.... It is but a little thing that we should die with the Lord, who in our flesh laid down his life for us. We shall rise with him and abide with him in eternity.⁴

Luther minced no words in condemning the papal decree: “Whoever wrote this bull, he is

³Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), 104.

⁴*Ibid.*, 116.

Antichrist.... I protest before God, our Lord Jesus, his sacred angels, and the whole world that with my whole heart, I dissent from the damnation of this bull, and curse and execrate it as sacrilege and blasphemy of Christ.” His constant argument was “let them show that I am a heretic” from Scripture. They could not. Therefore, he was adamant in his defense of what he wrote. “And as they excommunicated me for the sacrilege of heresy, so I excommunicate them in the name of the sacred truth of God. Christ will judge whose excommunication will stand.”⁵

Luther was summoned to appear before the Diet of Worms in April 1521 to answer the charges laid against him. His patron, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, asked the reformer if he would go. Luther replied,

You ask me what I shall do.... I will go even if I am too sick to stand on my feet. If Caesar calls me, God calls me. If violence is used, as well it may be, I commend my cause to God. He lives and reigns who saved the three youths from the fiery furnace of the king of Babylon, and if He will not save me, my head is worth nothing compared with Christ. This is no time to think of safety. I must take care that the gospel is not brought into contempt by our fear to confess and seal our teaching with our blood.

Luther realized the enormous gravity of the situation with this further note to Frederick: “I am heartily glad that his majesty will take to himself this affair, which is not mine but that of all Christianity and the whole German nation.”⁶ **He understood that he represented a cause much greater than himself, but that God had chosen him to represent it.** This was true of the other reformers, like John Calvin.

In 1539, when Cardinal Sadoletto attempted through deceit and flattery to lure the Geneva Protestants back into the Catholic fold by attacking Calvin’s character and motives, the reformer strongly protested: “it’s not about me, but the gospel.” He could easily forgive the attack on himself, but not a ministry sanctioned by God. Therefore he would not be silent, since the ministry was that of Christ to His people. The cause to be defended was the work of God. Calvin was saying, “I am not trying to justify myself but commending God’s message of justification by faith.” He was direct: God’s people were alienated from the Catholic church “by the many examples of cruelty, avarice, intemperance, arrogance, insolence, lust, and all sorts of wickedness.” The strong necessity which moved Calvin was “that the light of divine truth had been extinguished” and needed to be rekindled.⁷

⁵Ibid., 125–26.

⁶Ibid., 135–36.

⁷*John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto: a Reformation Debate*, John C. Olin, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 50–51, 74–75.

The Protestant reformers, like Luther and Calvin, were those who affirmed and defended the fundamental doctrines of Christianity with boldness, selflessness, and recognition that a righteous cause transcends personal safety and reputation. They realized that with every affirmation of truth there is of necessity a corresponding condemnation of error. They proved to us that **a genuine biblical Protestant is simply one who contends for the truth of God against the lies of Satan.** Their mission was governed by a profoundly simple but immensely important message: Truth is found in the Bible; falsehood is found in the degenerate world system over which the Devil rules and unregenerate man is bound by his sin. Only the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ can save him.

We rightly associate Protestantism with the early reformers. This does not mean we must agree with everything they taught. We must evaluate their doctrine, as we must everything, by a faithful interpretation of Scripture. The reformers rightly repudiated the medieval allegorical method in favor of the exegetical, but in some cases misinterpreted the Scriptures. Some obvious examples are Luther's doctrine of consubstantiation, Zwingli's claim that ancient philosophers such as Plato were Christians, and Calvin's magisterial approval of capital punishment for heresy. They are also to be faulted for condemning wholesale the Anabaptists who, while having defective views of justification and human government, nevertheless recognized the New Testament truth of separation of church and state and a regenerate church membership guarded by credo-baptism.

But we extol the reformers as Protestant pioneers in defending the essential salvific doctrines of Scripture, and rescuing Christianity from the shackles of Roman Catholic superstition and sophistry. Now let us note examples of others who continued the reformers' legacy of contesting falsehood in light of scriptural truth.

Historical Identification

The Protestant reformers established a solid doctrinal platform on which their successors could build the superstructures of the major branches of the Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican. The biblicist Anabaptists, marginalized by the mainstream Reformation, progressed independently of it into the Mennonite family of churches. While disagreeing on matters of church polity, worship styles, and theological particulars, all the denominational branches claimed to be Protestant, adhering to the five *solas* of the gospel as reflected in their respective confessions of faith. Salvation comes

sola scriptura — according to Scripture alone.

sola fides — through faith alone.

sola gratia — by grace alone.

sola christus — in Christ alone.

sola deo gloria — for the glory of God alone.

From their centers of influence—Wittenberg, Zurich, Geneva, and Canterbury—Protestantism, in spite of enormous cost of life and limb, spread through western Europe and then to America. While Lutheranism had impacted Germany, Scandinavia, and portions of America, by far the most popular branch of Protestantism was Calvinism. The reason for this is varied. The Genevan system not only embraced a theology that was further removed from Catholicism than either Lutheranism or Anglicanism, it embodied an entire social, political, and economic system that was more democratic. For example, the Swiss republican form of government, Geneva’s capitalistic economy, and social ethics accenting industry, integrity, frugality, creativity, lawful liberty, charity, sobriety, and respect for authority, were the standards of those persecuted Protestants who came to our shores, planted our colonies, and established our government. These Protestant people groups were the moral and spiritual bulwarks of society, sometimes driven out or slaughtered—to the great detriment of their respective nations. Philip Schaff, in the preface to his volume on Modern Church History, reflects on the virtues of these godly people.

Calvinism breeds manly, independent, and earnest characters, who fear God and nothing else, and favors political and religious freedom. The earliest and most influential settlers of the United States—the Puritans of England, the Presbyterians of Scotland and Ireland, the Huguenots of France, the Reformed from Holland and the Palatinate,—were Calvinists, and brought with them the Bible and the Reformed Confessions of Faith. Calvinism was the ruling theology of New England during the whole Colonial Period.⁸

Among the many superlative Protestant confessions of faith, the most significant by far has been the Westminster Confession (1646). Originally produced by Presbyterians, it was adopted with amendments by Congregationalists in the Savoy Declaration (1658) and the Baptists in their Second London Confession (1689). It excels in its precise orthodoxy and biblical genius. It is the best example of Protestant apologetics and polemics, which we find missing in confessions subsequent to the tragic Enlightenment Period or Age of Reason. Nomenclature has never been more sorely misrepresented than with these humanist titles. **True reason never supplants divine revelation but submits to it.**

Perhaps the most influential Protestants in both England and America were the Puritans, begetting other denominations who retained the best virtues of their parents while embracing new “radical” ideas, such as separation of church and state and freedom of worship. Here we would place the Separatists (among whom were the Pilgrims of Plymouth), and the Baptists (both the Arminian and Calvinist persuasions). Every one of their confessions, catechisms, and covenants, including the Mayflower Compact, uses Protestant language that exalts God and condemns sin. Any candid reading of the confessions of the early Baptists makes it abundantly clear that they wished to be known as Protestants. Their evolution can be easily traced from establishment Anglicanism through nonconformist Puritanism through exclusive Separatism, retaining what they considered the best from each while adding their own New Testament convictions.

⁸Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 8:vi.

Revivalist Protestants also came to America or emerged from indigenous revivals. These were European Pietists, such as the Moravians, followed by the Methodists whose practical evangelism made a huge impact in America. Aided by the climate of political freedom, the draw of the western frontier, and dynamic preaching, the more evangelical Protestant denominations—Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists—proliferated.

Sadly, the eighteenth century Enlightenment, with its exaltation of human reason over divine inscripturated revelation, by the end of the nineteenth century, had secularized much of Europe through its spawn of evolution, higher criticism of the Bible, and communism. These systems eventually prevailed in the colleges, former bastions of militant Protestantism, but hijacked by theological liberalism and cultural modernism. After dissenting long and hard, many Protestants grew weary of the fight and made peace with Modernism, creating an ominous theological hybrid called new evangelicalism. As a reaction to various forms of liberalism—modernism, neo-orthodoxy, and new evangelicalism—another formidable protest movement emerged in the early twentieth century called fundamentalism. Like the Protestant reformers before them, fundamentalists were militant and outspoken in the defense of the Faith. One of their early leaders, William Bell Riley, likened the movement to the Protestant Reformation—a kind of third fulness of time in which God would defeat the forces of apostasy by a mighty revival similar to the Great Awakening. He rallied the fundamentalists to believe that powerful Spirit-filled preaching, like that of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Gilbert Tennent, would drive the liberals from their school classrooms and church pulpits. That optimistic sentiment did not prevail, but in connecting the two movements, the fundamentalists made it clear that they were historical Protestants who stood firmly on the Word of God.

Contemporary Application

We have before us abundant examples of protest against falsehood wherever (and from whomever) it threatens the peace and stability of the churches and undermines the truth of Scripture:

Paul against Peter (law vs. Christian freedom)
 Athanasius against Arius (Christ as God vs. Christ as creature)
 Augustine against Pelagius (total depravity vs. total ability)
 Zwingli against Luther (memorial vs. physical presence of Christ in Eucharist)
 Luther against Pope Leo X (Christian gospel vs. antichristian traditions)
 Calvin against Sadoleto (true vs. false catholicism)
 John Knox against Mary Queen of Scots (freedom of worship vs. Catholic imposition)
 Roger Williams against John Cotton (Soul liberty vs. imposed religious conformity)
 Jonathan Edwards against Unitarians (Original sin vs. human idealism)
 Andrew Fuller and William Carey against the Hyper-Calvinists (free offer vs. restriction of the gospel)
 Spurgeon against the Downgraders (affirmation vs. denial of fundamental doctrine)

William Jennings Bryan against the evolutionists (supernaturalism vs. naturalism)

John Gresham Machen against the modernists (true faith of Christianity vs. pagan philosophy of liberalism)

Bob Jones against Billy Graham (biblical separation vs. evangelical compromise)

You against whatever satanic stratagem threatens the spiritual welfare of your church

Why did Christ call the Pharisees hypocrites and why did He drive out the moneychangers and overthrow their tables? Because they were corrupting His Father's House!! At stake is the orthodox freedom of worship and the glory of God versus humanly devised idolatry and the glory of man.

The real battle is not just a cultural but a spiritual war. The weapons of our warfare, then, must be spiritual—the armor of God. The victory is assured. In the meantime we must continue to protest evil for the sake of the truth, for the safety of Christ's flock, and for the glory of God. We are stewards of a trust, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility to distribute it faithfully and defend it courageously even as Protestants did five hundred years ago. We do this in the face of diabolic schemes and attacks against Christ and His beloved that are more varied and dangerous than ever. These are reflected in post-modern changes affecting Christian vocabulary—no longer protestant but pacifist, less offensive and more conciliatory:

Conversation rather than confrontation
 Relationship rather than repentance
 Discussion rather than affirmation
 Pragmatics rather than principle
 Suggestion rather than challenge
 Error instead of heresy
 Conciliation instead of ultimatum
 Change of direction instead of apostasy
 Misguided instead of totally depraved
 Social or cultural development rather than divine providence
 Gays instead of sodomites

Our focus has changed from the biblical and theological mandates of God to the cultural and psychological concerns of man. Pious platitudes have replaced prophetic pronouncements of judgment. We must protest these changes and insist on a return to scriptural solutions using biblical terms to deal with human problems. Our great problem is sin, and the final solution is gracious expiation found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. ***Those who minister on Christ's behalf but do not protest evil regress into obscurity or digress into irrelevancy.***

This means that we must solemnly vow to follow the godly admonition Paul delivered to the Ephesian pastors in Acts 20:

1. Serve the Lord in the midst of trials (v. 19).
2. Proclaim the *whole* counsel of God by expositional preaching (vv. 20, 27).
3. Testify to all men the gospel of repentance toward God and genuine faith in Jesus Christ (21).
4. Recognize that afflictions are part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit (vv. 22–23).
5. Persevere in the preaching of the gracious gospel of God (24).
6. Care for the sheep (the church belonging to God): nourish them (v. 28), protect them (vv. 29–30), warn them (v. 31), and never take advantage of them (vv. 33–35).
7. Depend on the Word of God and the grace of God to build up the Church of God (v. 32).

Blessed are you if you do these things, as Protestant pastors who watch over the souls of men, as those who must give an account for their charge before the throne of the sovereign Judge.

Conclusion

I conclude with these timely words—an admonition from the nineteenth century Scottish Free Presbyterian preacher and hymn writer, Horatius Bonar (1808–1889), a man who exemplified what it means to be a Protestant.

For there is some danger of falling into a soft and effeminate Christianity, under the plea of a lofty and ethereal theology. Christianity was born for endurance; not an exotic, but a hardy plant, braced by the keen wind; not languid, nor childish, nor cowardly. It walks with strong step and erect frame; it is kindly, but firm; it is gentle, but honest; it is calm, but not facile; obliging, but not imbecile; decided, but not churlish. It does not fear to speak the stern word of condemnation against error, nor to raise its voice against surrounding evils, under the pretext it is not of this world; it does not shrink from giving honest reproof, lest it come under the charge of displaying an unchristian spirit. It calls sin sin, on whomsoever it is found, and would rather risk the accusation of being actuated by a bad spirit than not discharge an explicit duty. Let us not misjudge strong words used in honest controversy. Out of the heat a viper may come forth; but we shake it off and feel no harm. The religion of both Old and New Testaments is marked by fervent outspoken testimonies against evil. To speak smooth things in such a case may be sentimentalism, but it is not Christianity. It is betrayal of the cause of truth and righteousness. If anyone should be frank, manly, honest,...(I do not say not say blunt or rude, for a Christian must be courteous and polite); it is he who has tasted that the Lord is gracious, and is looking for an hastening unto the coming of the day of God.... I know that charity covereth a multitude of sins; but it does not call evil good, because a good man has done it; it does not excuse inconsistencies, because the inconsistent brother has a high name and fervent spirit; crookedness and worldliness are still crookedness and worldliness, though exhibited in one who seems to have reached no common height of attainment.⁹

This admonition gives definition to the term “protestant.” Who is a Protestant? One who courageously and confidently contends for the Faith.

⁹Horatius Bonar, *God’s Way of Holiness* (reprint ed., Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999), 114.