



The Orthodox Presbyterian Church

In Franklin Square • www.OPCLI.org • E-Mail: Info@OPCLI.org

What is a Protestant Church

By Pastor William Shishko



What makes a "Protestant" church different from a "Roman Catholic" church? or from a Jewish synagogue?

All three deal in matters regarding God, eternity, and how to live now; but what

makes a Protestant church different? Keep in mind that not all Protestant churches are the same (many have strayed from the most fundamental principles of Protestantism), but let us consider three distinctive beliefs which, historically, have distinguished true Protestant churches.

First, a truly Protestant church has an unhesitating commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture in all areas of faith and life. Agreeing with the apostle Paul (II Tim. 3:16-17), true Protestants see "all Scripture" as "given by the inspiration of God" and "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

It is true that all nature clearly displays God's handiwork, and that all people do know the true God as they perceive the Creator's imprint on every facet of "the universe" (cf. Psalm 19; Romans 1:19-20). Nevertheless, this knowledge is insufficient to explain God's will for His people. A sunrise, for example, surely displays God's glorious power; but it gives me no instruction for rearing my child! Therefore, God the Creator spoke to those persons He had made. Because man is the image of God, and because God is Lord of both man's tongue and his words, God is truly able to speak to man using human language. For hundreds of years God spoke through His chosen instruments (ie. prophets and apostles), and His words were preserved in the book we today call "the Bible". The Bible is given to the Church to direct it in all areas of faith and life. Certainly it is not the only book we are to read, but - because it is God's Word - it is the supreme authority in all matters to which it speaks.

This means that, in a truly Protestant church, the pulpit ministry is primary. A Protestant minister takes seriously the fact that he is a pastor and a teacher. He explains the Word of God, both from the Old and the New Testaments. He applies the Scriptures to the lives of his hearers. He proclaims the message of the Bible as God's clear directive for the world today. A minister who offers his opinions in the pulpit (however well-spoken or agreeable those opinions are) is not a true Protestant minister. Protestantism does not make an idol of the Bible, but it takes the Scriptures with utmost seriousness as God's words, spoken in truth. Protestant churches (true Protestant churches!) believe the Scriptures, proclaim them and teach them, and labor to see them lived out in Christian families, as well as in the Church itself. Nothing less is a description of historic Protestantism.

Second, a truly Protestant church believes and teaches that a person is declared righteous before God by means of faith in Jesus Christ alone. Scripture teaches (and society constantly demonstrates) that people, by nature, are not good and obedient, but are evil and disobedient. Mankind, because of sin, is under the wrath and curse of a holy God who will by no means clear the guilty. Quite obviously we must ask: "How, then, can a person be righteous before God?" Putting the matter personally: "How can I, as one who has offended my Creator by disobeying Him, stand before Him in the day of judgment?" As surely as you will one day face death, so surely will you face the God who made you and preserved you during your earthly life.

Protestantism fairly shouts with the answer to this critical dilemma! The demand of perfection was met by God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The inestimable curse for the sins of Christ's people was absorbed in the body of Jesus Himself as He accepted the wages of sin by His death on the cross. At the same time, Jesus offered up a perfectly spotless body and soul as a sacrifice to His Father. By the resurrection of Christ, God vin-

dedicated Jesus, and declared His sacrifice an acceptable substitute for those who could never perfectly be righteous in themselves.

How, then, does God's Word make provision for a person to be declared righteous (ie. justified) before the perfectly just God of heaven and earth? This provision comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone as Redeemer and Lord. "For in (the Gospel) a righteousness from God is revealed, from faith to faith." (Romans 1:17). Protestant churches call their hearers (all of whom are sinners!) to turn from their sins unto the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting fully in His sacrifice of Himself on the cross. As a result, God grants forgiveness and, because of Christ's work for them, He treats those who believe "just as if they never sinned." That is the Gospel. It is real "good news", and is ever announced in true Protestant churches.

Protestant churches certainly emphasize good works, but they never tell a person to trust in good works as a way to stand before God. Because even the best of our works are tainted with sin this is not possible. Prominence is given to Christ's work of redemption, resulting in Christians who are joyous because of the full forgiveness of sins, and because their consciences are cleared so they may serve the living God without fear. It is this joy which produces a zeal for spreading the Gospel message to others. Such zeal (which was also a mark of the early Christian Church described in Scripture) is a characteristic of Protestant churches which are faithful to the Gospel message.

Third, a truly Protestant Church stands for the priesthood of all believers in Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter describes the Church as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (I Peter 2:10). Protestants believe that Jesus Christ was the supreme and final priest, of whom all the Old Testament priests were only a type or picture. As Jesus' work on the cross did away with the Old Testament system of sacrifice, so Jesus' person (now seated in the presence of God as mediator for His people), does away with the necessity of the Old Testament system of priests.

This means that true Protestant churches emphasize that each individual has access to God apart from any priest other than Jesus Christ. We have no need for a priest to pray for us, for example,

but we may pray confidently in the name of (ie. by the merits of) Jesus Christ only. This also means that Protestant churches emphasize that each individual Christian has the obligation to offer himself in daily in devotion to God. As Old Testament priests were always to be pure for their service, so those who receive God's blessings of redemption are to be "holy and acceptable unto God, which is their spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1). A true Protestant church has ordained ministers, but they are not priests with a special relationship to God. They are a part of the entire body of Christians, all of whom have the priestly obligation to live lives of holiness before a holy God. True Protestantism produces true holiness, not just in its "clergymen", but also in all of its adherents.

We prefer to see Protestantism not as a "branch" of Christianity, but as the very trunk out of which all the branches of the historic Christian faith have come forth. I think you will agree that these truths commonly designated as "Protestantism" are not the exclusive property of one branch of Christianity, but, rather, form the very substrata of every page of Holy Scripture. True Protestantism is Biblical religion. It challenges the modern inability to know what is true by an authoritative "thus says the Lord." It lifts the crushing weight of guilt from the shoulders of sinful men, women, and children by a joyous proclamation of righteousness through faith in the person of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for sinners. It offers meaning and purpose to all Christians by addressing them as priests of God in Jesus Christ. Such is true Protestantism. Such is the religion of the Bible. It is for these convictions that we stand, and we heartily encourage you to stand with us in this expression of the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

SOLO CHRISTO