

# Protestantism

## Background

### *History*

Protestantism had its origins in the Reformation of the early 1500s when Martin Luther, along with his followers, broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. During that era, there was a lot of unrest in the Holy Roman Empire.

There were three major reasons for this unrest. Much of the upheaval related to nationalistic feelings within the various member states. A second reason was a significant amount of corruption which existed within the Roman Catholic Church of that day. A third major factor was the emerging humanistic philosophies of the Renaissance. This created a great deal of debate and turmoil within the academic community regarding the nature of the church and the authority of the pope. The actual event that brought all of the turmoil to a head was when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church.

In the strictest sense, Protestantism officially began when a group of politicians, and the leaders of several imperial cities, signed a document at the Diet of Speyer in 1529. This document prohibited Lutheran teachings in the entire Holy Roman Empire. There were many who disagreed with this decision and the word Protestant was coined to refer to these protesters.

The more common use of the word, however, refers to any of the Western European Christian religious groups which broke away from the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the influence of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Anabaptists. In modern times the word has taken on an even broader meaning and is often used to refer to any non-Catholic or Orthodox Christian group, even those with no historical connection to Luther, Calvin, or the Anabaptists.

The actual number of distinct Protestant denominations is hard to calculate, but has been estimated to be in the tens of thousands. There are larger groupings, though, that we can identify which at least gives us the broad parameters of the Protestant movement. These families of denominations include: Anabaptist, Anglican, Baptist, Calvinist/Reformed/Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Unitarian.

### *Basic Beliefs and Practices*

Roman Catholics and Protestants generally agree on the most basic theological issues such as: the virgin birth of Christ, the nature Jesus as fully God and fully man, the deity of Jesus Christ, the crucifixion, Christ's bodily resurrection, the second coming of Christ, heaven, hell, the Trinity and the belief that the execution of Christ provided the means by which man can be brought back into relationship with God.

The places where Protestantism parted ways with Roman Catholicism related to five distinctive theological doctrines. These include:

- C The Bible is the sole authority for Christian belief and practice.
- C One is saved through grace alone, without the intervention of sacraments.
- C Individual salvation occurs when a person trusts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior by faith alone.
- C Christ alone is able to accomplish the forgiveness of sin by his work on the cross.
- C The only purpose for our existence is for God's glory and we are under his authority.

There are a number of ways this plays out in actual practice including the following:

1. Baptism - Baptism is not a sacrament which bestows grace, but a symbolic testimony of salvation. Baptism is generally understood to only have meaning after salvation has been received.
2. Church structure - Most Protestant denominations are organized around some kind of democratic principal.
3. Clergy - Clergy tend to be elected by their congregations, are mostly male (though not exclusively) and do not have to be single.
4. Forgiveness of sin - It is understood that a person prays for forgiveness directly to God without a human intercessor.
5. Lord's Supper/Communion - This is generally understood to be a memorial meal which represents the body and blood of Christ symbolically, not a sacramental requirement for salvation.
6. Salvation - Salvation is achieved through Christ by faith alone. It is not dependent on any kind of sacramental works.

## **Authority**

Most Protestant groups accept only the 66 books of the Old and New Testament as scriptural authority.

## **Evidence for the Authority**

The basic worldview understanding of Protestant Christianity is in line with Biblical Christianity. Additionally, the concern over sacramentalism and extra-Biblical authorities, which exists with Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, is not a factor. The primary reason that Protestant Christians must be careful does not relate so much to theological understandings. Rather, it concerns a more personal matter in which people might depend on their association with the church or the practice of good works to achieve their salvation, rather than a genuine relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

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