

# Protestants: Who are they?

A Protestant is a Christian who belongs to one of several independent Christian churches. Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox share the same essential beliefs about Christianity, but differ on several points.

Protestants value most highly the authority of the Bible and the right of each person to interpret it as they think best. Orthodox and Catholic doctrine values tradition more highly, and teaches that the Bible can only be properly interpreted by church leaders. Most of the differences between these three groups can be traced back to this fundamental difference of opinion.

Even with their differences, however, all Christians agree with Christ's prayer in John 17: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one..." Below are some specific answers to questions you may have about differences between the Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic churches. But first will be a short history of the Protestant churches.

## HISTORY OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES

One of the first protestant reformers was the priest and theology professor Jan Hus, a Slav from what is now the Czech Republic, who was martyred for the faith in 1415. Hus taught the importance of scripture over tradition. The Protestant Reformation spread all over Europe in 1517 when another Catholic priest and theology professor named Martin Luther called on the Catholic church to reform.

Luther said that when the Bible conflicts with church traditions, the Bible should be obeyed. He said it was wrong of the church to sell the right to go to heaven for money. He also said that salvation comes by faith in Christ rather than by trying to "earn" eternal life by doing good deeds.

This protestant reformation has now spread all over the world. The churches that were formed out of this reformation include Lutherans, Dutch Reformed and Anglicans, and later, Baptists, Pentecostals and others.

Protestants first came to Russia in the reign of Ivan the Terrible, and by 1590 were already as far east as Tobolsk in Siberia ("Icon and the Ax," p. 98) Today there are approximately one million Russian protestants ("Operation World," p. 467). (NOTE:

Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are not considered to be Christian churches by either Catholics, Orthodox or Protestants.)

Many protestants today seek to return to the purity of the church in the first century. Many of these protestants are called evangelicals, because they believe Christians should obey Christ's command to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel (evangel)... " (Matt. 28:19).

#### WHY DO PROTESTANTS INTERPRET THE BIBLE FOR THEMSELVES?

Protestants say that each Christian is responsible for his or her own spiritual life, and each can understand the Bible with God's help. Several Bible verses show that God Himself teaches us if we are willing: 1 John 2:27 says: "As for you, the anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit- just as it has taught you, remain in him."

Jesus said in John 6:45: "It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from Him comes to Me." "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; He will speak only what he hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come." (John 16:13)

Church leaders can help us understand the Bible, Protestants believe, but we need to be cautious for several reasons. First, the Bible shows many cases of church leaders who misinterpret scripture, as the Apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 2:1: "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them- bringing swift destruction on themselves."

Jesus even said the source of errors is due (at least in part ) to ignorance of the Bible (Matt: 22:29): "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." The Bible says we are to judge what people say by the word of God (Isaiah 8:20): "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn." The same thought is confirmed in the New Testament, where the Bible commends the Bereans for studying the Bible for themselves (Acts 17:11): "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." It is interesting to note that the Bereans were not yet even Christians, yet God's word commends them for double-checking in the Bible to see if Paul was teaching correctly.

#### WHAT DO PROTESTANTS THINK ABOUT CHURCH TRADITIONS?

Protestants are not opposed to traditions except when they conflict with scripture. They base this primarily on Jesus' comments in Mark 7:8: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men," and in Matt. 15:3 and 6: "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

the apocrypha as scripture for several reasons. First of all, Jesus never referred to them, and they are not quoted in the New Testament scriptures. This is in contrast to the other Old Testament scriptures, which were often used by Jesus and the New Testament writers, and referred to as scripture. Secondly, the Bible says that Jews were given the responsibility of preserving the Hebrew scriptures, and they did not accept these books and still do not. Rom. 3:2 says: "Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God." Lastly, several verses in the apocryphal books contradict the Bible. For instance, several passages in the apocrypha state that you can buy eternal life by giving money to the church (2 Mac. 12:43-45, Tobit 4: 8-11, Tobit 12:9, Tobit 14:10-11, Ecclesiasticus 3:30). This contradicts Bible passages that say eternal life is a gift of God that cannot be purchased with money. Ps. 49:7-8 says, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him...no payment is ever enough." In Acts 8:20 the Apostle Peter says, "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money." Rom. 6:23 says, "the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Lastly, it should be added that the apocrypha itself does not claim to be scripture nor inspired. For instance, the writer of Maccabees states that his book is simply an imperfect history of the events of the time: "...I will also here make an end of my narration. Which if I have done well, and as it becometh the history, it is what I desired; but if not so perfectly, it must be pardoned me...." (2 Mac. 15: 39-40).

#### HOW DO PROTESTANTS BELIEVE A PERSON CAN RECEIVE ETERNAL LIFE IN HEAVEN WITH CHRIST?

When a crowd of people asked the Apostle Peter that question in Acts 2:37-38, he said, "Repent and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Verses 41-42 say, "Those who had received his word were baptized...and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Jesus said in Luke 13:3, that "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Repenting means turning from your old sinful way of life and deciding to follow Christ, and confirming that decision by being baptized and trying to live a life that is pleasing to God. Repentance is itself a gift of God that you need to respond to without delay. Isaiah 55:6 says, "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call upon him while He is near." Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matt. 4:17) Will you answer His call to you? Will you accept Him as the Lord of your life? We have provided the prayer below for you: Father in Heaven, I confess that I am a sinner. I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me. Change my heart and make me the kind of person You want me to be. I turn from my sinful ways, and choose to follow Christ as Lord of my life. I believe that He died on the cross for my sins and rose the third day. Thank you for forgiving me! Lead me and direct me all the days of my life until I stand before you in heaven, forgiven and justified by the blood of Jesus, shed for me. In Jesus name, Amen. If you prayed that prayer sincerely, then God has already forgiven your sins! (1 John 5:13). You need to continue to walk with God in daily repentance, and to do that you need the help and fellowship of other Christians on a weekly basis. Read your Bible and pray daily, and walk with Christ.

this on Matt. 1:25, where it says Joseph, Mary's husband, "had no union with her until she gave birth to a son," and on other passages in the Bible that refer to Jesus' brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:46, 13:55-56, Mark 3:31, John 2:12, 7:3). Protestants do not believe Mary was sinless, as in Luke 1:47 she called God her savior, and if she was sinless, she would need no savior. The Bible says all have sinned (Rom. 3:23).

#### HOW CAN THERE BE MORE THAN ONE CHURCH?

Protestants believe that there is only one true church -- but don't believe it is confined to any organization of men, but is composed of all people who love and serve God in repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of to which organization they belong. The apostle Paul describes this universal church as follows: "...All who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours." (I Cor. 1:2)

#### DO PROTESTANTS ACCEPT THE SEVEN CHURCH COUNCILS? WHAT DO THEY THINK OF THE CHURCH FATHERS?

Protestants accept most of the decisions of the historical church councils, but do not believe they were without error. They base this on the fact that church councils, particularly the last two in Nicea, contradicted each other on the issue of icons. The one in 754 A.D. forbid the use of icons, while the one in 787 A.D. required them to be used. Protestants accordingly accept church councils only when they agree with the teaching of the Bible. Protestants respect and value the writings of the church fathers (leaders of the church who lived after the time of the apostles) when they agree with scripture, but don't equate them with the Bible as they often contradicted each other.

#### WHAT DO PROTESTANTS BELIEVE ABOUT RELICS OF SAINTS?

Protestants do not believe there is any special power in the relics of saints, because they believe the Bible does not teach this. Protestants think that the case of the bones of Elisha resurrecting a dead man (2 Kings 13:21) was in fulfillment of the promise of God to give Elisha a double portion of the spirit over Elijah (2 Kings 2:9). This miracle after Elisha's death exactly doubled the number of recorded miracles of Elijah. Protestants believe there is no other scripture teaching that Christians should venerate the bones of the dead, so they do not.

#### WHY DON'T MOST PROTESTANT MINISTERS WEAR ROBES? AND WHY AREN'T THEY CALLED FATHER?

Protestant ministers do not wear robes because neither Jesus nor the apostles wore special clothes, and the New Testament does not teach us to wear them. They are not usually called father because Jesus said in Matt. 23:9 to "call no man your father," which they believe refers to making someone else your spiritual master.

#### WHY DON'T PROTESTANTS MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS? AND WHY IS THEIR CROSS DIFFERENT?

Protestants do not object to making the sign of the cross, but since it is not commanded in scripture, they also do not command it. The Protestant and Catholic

churches prefer to use a simple cross, rather than the Orthodox one.

#### WHY AREN'T THERE ICONOSTASES IN PROTESTANT OR CATHOLIC CHURCHES?

Protestants and Catholics believe the iconostasis usually represents the curtain separating the people from the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem. They believe that when God tore it in two at the death of Christ (Matt. 27:51), He was saying that we are no longer separated from Him, because the blood of Christ has paid for our forgiveness, which we receive after we repent and trust in Christ for our salvation.

#### HOW CAN PROTESTANT CHRISTIANS HAVE CHURCH SERVICES IN PLACES THAT ARE NOT HOLY OR SANCTIFIED, SUCH AS MOVIE THEATERS?

Jesus said in Matt. 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." Protestants believe this means that what sanctifies a church service is not the place or the building it is held in, but the presence of Christ in the midst of the believers. The Bible also says that Christians are the temple of God, and not buildings: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) The Bible shows that early Christians met in many places. These include a school (Acts 19:9), Jewish synagogues (18:4,26,19:8), the Jewish temple (Acts 3:1), and in private homes. (Acts 2:46, 5:42, 18:7, Philemon 1:2, 18:7, Col. 4:15, Rom. 16:5, and 1 Cor. 16:19). Evangelistic meetings recorded in the Bible were held outside by a river (Acts 16:13), to a crowd on the street (Acts 2:14) and in the public market (Acts 17:17). There is no record in the Bible of the early Christians ever meeting in a church building.

#### DO PROTESTANTS BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN ATTAIN TO HEAVEN AFTER BEING PURIFIED IN PURGATORY? DO THEY PRAY FOR THE DEAD?

Protestants believe there is a heaven and a hell, but do not believe that there is a purgatory. Purgatory is not mentioned in the Bible, and several Bible verses contradict the idea of a purgatory. Heb. 10:14 says "by one offering he (Christ) hath forever perfected them that are sanctified." Protestants take this to mean that Christians are purified by Christ alone, forever, not by suffering after death or by the prayers of others. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is sufficient. Heb. 10:18 says that Christ's forgiveness of our sins eliminates the need for any subsequent payment or suffering: "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin." In other words, no suffering in purgatory is needed, if we've been forgiven. Protestants believe that 1 Cor. 3:9-15 refers to the testing of the works of believers on the judgment day, and not to purgatory. In Christ's description of paradise and hell in Luke 16:26, he did not speak of purgatory. Further, he said that it was not possible to go from hell to paradise. "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' Additionally, Protestants are concerned the doctrine of purgatory can mislead sinners into believing that they can atone for their own sins after death in purgatory, and therefore the incentive to repent in this life is removed -- they assume they can do it

later. Protestants believe the scripture shows that only in this life can we repent, and only Christ can atone for our sins.

#### HOW CAN PROTESTANT MINISTERS SERVE WITHOUT APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION?

Some Christian denominations believe in apostolic succession, which means that only those who can trace back their ordination to the original 12 apostles can serve as priests or ministers. The scripture does not support such a theory, most Protestants believe. It is the call of God on a person's life that qualifies him to be a priest or minister, not the approval of any human authority. Heb. 5:4 says, "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was." The apostle Paul, for instance, noted that his call to the ministry came from God and not from man: In Galatians 1:1 he says, "Paul, an apostle, sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father." Paul said he had no "apostolic succession" in Gal. 1:15: "But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus..." More light is cast on this question by Mark 9:38-39 (see also Luke 9:50): "And John answered Him, saying, 'Master, we saw one casting out devils in Thy name, but he followeth us not, so we forbid him because he followeth not us.' But Jesus said, 'Forbid him not, for there is no man who shall do a miracle in My name that can lightly speak evil of Me. For he that is not against us is on our side.'" It is clear that the apostles had not ordained or authorized this man to serve as a minister, but Jesus would not stop him, despite the complaints of the apostles. The apostolic succession theory is based on Matt. 16:18-19. In this passage Christ gave to Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The verse uses a singular Greek pronoun, meaning this gift was only for Peter, not for his successors. In addition it is important to note that when Christ said he would build his church upon the rock, he was not referring to Peter. The special name Jesus gave to Peter was the Greek word "Petros", which means small rock, but the word He used when referring to the foundation of the church was "petra", which means massive bedrock or foundation. Christ is the foundation of the church, as it says in 1 Cor. 3:11: "For no man can lay another foundation than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11) Protestants believe we can know if a leader or a church is from God by looking at their lives: "Watch out for false prophets...By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?...Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:15, 16, 21).

#### DO PROTESTANTS USE THE SAME BIBLE AS OTHERS?

Protestant and Jewish scriptures do not include the books called the apocrypha, which are found in the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments. Protestants do not accept

#### WHY DON'T MANY PROTESTANTS BAPTIZE THEIR INFANTS?

Many Protestants believe that children go to heaven automatically when they die. They also believe that the Bible shows baptism should follow repentance (Acts 2:38). They base this on 2 Sam. 12:23, which describes the death of King David's infant son. David said confidently that he would see his son in heaven. The Bible says that children are not conscious of good or evil (Deut. 1:39). Rom. 5:13 says, "Sin is not taken into account where there is no law." Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, for of such is the Kingdom of God." (Matt. 19:14) Protestants say there is no case in scripture of an infant being baptized, adding that even Jesus waited until he was 30 to be baptized.

#### WHY ARE PROTESTANTS SOMETIMES BAPTIZED AGAIN AS ADULTS? IS THAT A SIN?

Protestants refer to Acts 19:1-7 in answering this question. There the apostle Paul baptized 12 men who had previously been baptized. Many protestants believe baptism without repentance is meaningless. Since a baby cannot repent and is unaware of sin, it is often recommended that adults be baptized again after they repent.

#### WHY DON'T PROTESTANTS HAVE ICONS IN THEIR CHURCHES OR HOMES?

Protestants believe the 10 commandments (Ex. 20) forbid using of images in worship: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." Lev. 26:1 says: "Do not make idols or set up an image (which would be in Greek icon or eikon) or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the Lord your God." In Deut. 4:15-16 the Lord says: "You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape..." Therefore, Protestants do not use images in worship out of concern that some may worship or rely on those images instead of God.

#### WHY DON'T PROTESTANTS PRAY TO SAINTS OR MARY?

Protestants prefer to follow the teaching of Jesus, when he taught us to pray in Matt. 6:9, saying, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven." Protestants say that there is no example in scripture of someone praying to Mary or a saint. Protestants believe the Bible forbids praying to persons who have died, even Christians who are in heaven. They base this on Deut. 18:11-12, which says, "There shall not be found among you any...necromancer." The word necromancer means one who communicates with those who have died (Hebrew, "darash" to consult, enquire of, seek, or pray, and "muwth", the dead). God condemned Saul for contacting Saint Samuel after he had died (I Chron. 10:13-14).

#### WHAT DO PROTESTANTS BELIEVE ABOUT MARY?

Protestants believe that Mary was a wonderful example of Christian obedience to God, and that she remained a virgin until after Jesus was born. They base