

STANDARD C - WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PART OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

Lesson 3: Who Are Protestants?

Introduction

Most Christians are in agreement on basic beliefs. Most accept the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The divinity of Christ and the Trinity are common beliefs to followers of Jesus.

However, by the year A.D.1500 some important parts of the Church neglected clear biblical teachings about salvation. Instead, some Church leaders were teaching people may be saved by good works. This means we may earn our salvation by what we do. This teaching was against what Jesus taught regarding the Gospel and how to enter the Kingdom of God.

A. Martin Luther Started the Protestant Movement.

Martin Luther was a German monk, priest, and Bible teacher. From his study of the Bible and after a visit to Rome, Luther realized the church was very different from the church of early apostles. In the year 1517, he posted "95 Theses" (ideas he wanted to discuss) on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. The theses described some of the abuses and corruption in the church. Luther's goal was to reform the church, not to leave it.

Luther read in the Bible, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:17). This was the most important thesis or point for Luther. He saw the church teaching that if people would do certain good works or even pay a certain amount of money to the church their sins would be forgiven. Luther said it was only through Jesus Christ and by faith in Him we can be saved. Salvation is nothing of our own doing. Nothing we do or can do will bring salvation. Our salvation rests solely on what Christ has done for us. He gives us grace to place our faith in Him. The Bible says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

An important point for Luther was the Bible must be the only place where Christians get their basic Christian beliefs. Luther believed basic Christian beliefs should not come from other books or even the Church itself. Everything people need to know about how to be saved is in the Bible. The church, Luther learned, based many of its practices and teachings about salvation on tradition rather than on the Bible. Luther respected the past teachings of the church. He quoted from the church's respected teachers. But he believed every belief must be judged by the Bible. If there were any customs in the church contrary to the Bible, they must not be allowed. The Bible—not the church, the Pope, councils, or creeds—was the final authority on beliefs and practices. The Bible and the Bible alone must guide the church.

In 1521 the Pope expelled Luther from membership in the Catholic Church. After that, many people, including political leaders in Germany, separated from the Roman Catholic Church. Because they *protested* abuses in the church, they were called *Protestants*. This was known as the Protestant Reformation.

Question: Who was Martin Luther?

Question: What Bible verse was the basis for Martin Luther's protestings?

Question: Why was the work of Martin Luther so important?

B. What Protestants Believe

Protestants based their beliefs on these two important principles: (1) we are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ, and (2) the Bible is the sole guide for Christians' beliefs.

Protestants also rejected other Roman Catholic practices. For Protestants there are only two sacraments: (1) baptism and (2) the Lord's Supper. Unlike Roman Catholics, Protestants do not believe the bread and the wine (or grape juice) used in the Lord's Supper becomes the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Because our salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone and faith in Him, Protestants do not pray to Mary or other saints. Protestants teach that Jesus Christ is our Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). We pray, as Jesus taught us, directly to the Father (Luke 11:2). Both Christ himself and the Holy Spirit are speaking to the Father on our behalf (1 John 2:1; Romans 8:26, 34). Therefore, we come boldly to the Father for ourselves and for the needs of others (Hebrews 10:19-22). This is called the "priesthood of believers" (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

The Bible does not teach there was anything special about the birth of Mary. It does not teach she always remained a virgin. Instead, the Bible mentions Jesus' other brothers (Luke 8:20-21). Mary was a good and blessed woman. But she was not divine. If we pray to her as a mediator, it makes her equal to Jesus.

According to Protestants, marriage does not make a person less holy. So, unlike Roman Catholic priests, Protestant ministers may marry a spouse as a wife or husband. Jesus did not demand His apostles remain unmarried. Peter was married (Luke 4:38).

Protestants disagree with the idea the Pope is the head of the entire church. Protestants disagree with the idea the Pope is unable to make errors in his teachings. These ideas about the Pope come from the church's traditions, not from the Bible.

As stated before, Protestants believe salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. They believe in the Bible as the final authority for Christian beliefs and practices.

Question: What are the two basic beliefs of Protestants?

Question: In what ways do Protestants and Roman Catholics disagree?

C. Disagreements Among Protestants.

Protestants disagree among themselves on certain beliefs or practices. These disagreements come because of different interpretations of the Bible

Protestants disagree over baptism. Luther believed the Bible taught small babies could and should be baptized. Baptism was God's offering of grace to the child. The Anabaptists, or those who "baptized again," believed baptism should be only for those who had personally believed in Christ. Since an infant is too young to believe, they should not be baptized. The Baptists agreed baptism was for believers only. They also emphasized baptism should be by immersion, which means the person is dipped entirely into the water. For Baptists, baptism by sprinkling or pouring, which some Protestants practiced, was not a true New Testament baptism.

Anabaptists and Baptists argued that mere human beings produced the creeds and formal statements of belief. Yet, God himself had spoken in the Bible. The Bible was the only book they needed for guidance in beliefs and practices. They wanted to return to New Testament practices. They believed each local congregation should govern itself. Local pastors were accountable to God and to their own people, not to bishops.

Question: What are two Christian beliefs about which Protestants disagree?

D. Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin Were Reformers.

Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin were 16th century reformers, just as Martin Luther was a reformer. Like the Anabaptists, both Zwingli and Calvin removed any church practice that was not described in the New Testament. Luther, on the other hand, kept church practices unless they directly contradicted the Bible.

Calvin established a form of church government in which ministers of local congregations met in assemblies. There were no bishops. Ministers agreed upon statements of beliefs. Followers of Calvin began Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Many Baptists also accepted Calvin's teachings.

Calvin's ideas were very influential. He taught that human beings are totally sinful. They could do nothing to save themselves. They were able only to do evil. The human will was in bondage to sin. Since people can do nothing to save themselves, certain persons are chosen or "elected" by God to be saved. No one can reject the grace of God when it is offered. Once a person is saved, he or she cannot lose grace. Salvation depends on God's will. The saving benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ are available to those whom God chooses. Christ has "finished" our salvation, if we are among the chosen. Nothing human beings can do will defeat God's grace. These are all beliefs held by John Calvin

Question: Who were Zwingli and Calvin?

Question: What did John Calvin believe about salvation?

E. James Arminius Was a Protestant Teacher.

James Arminius, a teacher in the late 16th century, agreed with Calvin that persons are totally sinful. They can do nothing to save themselves. The human will is in bondage to sin. But Arminius said God gives grace to people to allow them to freely choose Christ. God wishes all people would believe. He wants all people to be saved. Christ died for all people. His grace extends to all, so anyone who believes will be saved. Salvation depends on a person's hearing the Good News, repenting, and accepting Christ as Lord. Some people accept; other people reject. Those who continually reject Jesus Christ will be eternally lost. Those who remain full of faith in Jesus will be saved.

Question: How did James Arminius and John Calvin disagree?

F. John Wesley Was a Protestant Leader.

In the 18th century, John Wesley, a minister in the Church of England, taught much the same way as Arminius. He agreed human beings could do nothing to save themselves apart from grace. Wesley emphasized a person could know now, for sure, that he or she was saved. Wesley also emphasized sanctification, which is the grace of God working in us. It washed or cleansed us within. By sanctifying grace, persons could walk obediently to God's will. As long as a person walked obediently, he or she was saved. Wesley formed the Methodist Society, which later became the Methodist Church. The Church of the Nazarene, the Salvation Army, the Free Methodist Church, the Wesleyan Church, and some other denominations are part of the Wesleyan family of churches.

Question: Who is John Wesley?

Question: How did John Wesley and John Calvin disagree in their beliefs?

G. Evangelicals Are Protestants.

Evangelicals are the Protestants who accept the belief Christians are saved by grace through faith alone. They teach the full deity of Jesus Christ. They defend the Virgin birth of Jesus and His resurrection. Evangelicals teach human beings are sinful. They can do nothing, without grace, to save themselves. They believe persons need Christ to be saved. They need to repent and be born again. The Bible is the final authority in all matters of beliefs and practices. Evangelicals believe Jesus Christ will come again.

Question: What do evangelicals believe?

Conclusion

The Church is a live and diverse body. It keeps growing. Where it is wrong, the Bible corrects it. Where it is dead, born-again people make it alive again. The Church is different in every place it exists. But it remains a faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

Activity: There will always be some disagreements among believers. Think about this question: Where or to whom should believers look for direction about what they believe? Talk about the answer with your disciple group.

Activity: Discuss the beliefs that caused the Protestant Reformation. How do these beliefs affect your beliefs as a Christian?