

“THE ROMAN CATHOLICS, THE PROTESTANTS, & THE BAPTISTS”

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Each year on this date, two groups of people celebrate. One group celebrates Halloween, which I think is a despicable and spiritually desensitizing practice that cultivates a casual attitude toward spiritual conflict, turning it into a game. At the same time, the other celebration remembers the Protestant Reformation.

Vastly oversimplifying an ongoing discontent across Europe and the British Isles, the Protestant Reformation can be described as igniting when an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg door, challenging indulgences, papal authority, and salvation by works.

If we confine our attention to Western Europe, without having to deal with the Greek Orthodox movement in Eastern Europe, here is what happened over the course of two thousand years. I paint a verbal picture using *very* broad-brush strokes.

The Lord Jesus Christ established His Church about 33 A. D. For almost three centuries, Christianity spread, Churches were established, and the constant tendency to deviate from doctrinal purity and practice in churches was addressed. In 312 A. D., Constantine I, Roman Emperor from 306–337, who is often credited with ending persecution of Christians and legalizing Christianity in the Roman Empire, was supposedly converted, a pivotal and debated moment in church history. As a consequence of Constantine’s conversion and the empire’s changed attitude toward Christianity, overwhelming numbers of unsaved people flooded into congregations, and the development of Roman Catholicism, centered around the congregation in Rome, began in earnest.

I will leave it to you to research church history to trace Catholicism’s changes over its centuries of degradation into apostasy. Still, I can recommend Loraine Boettner’s *Roman Catholicism* as a great place to start.¹ Catholicism became so debauched that the Protestant Reformation erupted into a back-to-the-Bible, back-to-the-Gospel movement that swept across Western Europe, leading to wars and the establishment of a number of Protestant denominations, such as Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and Anglicanism.

Since the Protestant Reformation, several denominations have sprouted, including Methodists, Nazarenes, Plymouth Brethren, Church of Christ, Pentecostals around 1900, and Charismatics in the early 60s, besides the cults of Jehovah’s Witnesses, 7th Day Adventists, and Mormons.

What about Baptists? My view agrees with Charles Spurgeon’s in the essentials.

“Charles H. Spurgeon, the famous 19th-century Baptist preacher, strongly rejected the idea that Baptist churches originated with the Protestant Reformation ... Instead, he advocated a ‘spiritual succession’ or ‘Landmark Baptist’ view, arguing that true Baptist principles—particularly believer’s baptism by immersion and local church autonomy—have existed in every age since the time of Christ, even if not always under the name ‘Baptist.’

Key Spurgeon Quote (from his sermon ‘The Perpetual Standing of the Church,’ 1862): ‘We believe that the Baptists are the original Christians. We did not commence our existence at the Reformation, we were reformers before Luther or Calvin were born; we never came from the Church of Rome, for we were never in it, but we have an unbroken line up to the apostles themselves.’ Another direct statement (from a

¹ Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: The Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing Company, 1962)

lecture on Baptist history): ‘The Baptist Church has existed in all ages of the world, under different names, but always holding the same principles.’

Context of His View: Spurgeon traced Baptist distinctives (especially credobaptism) back to New Testament churches. He pointed to groups like the Waldenses, Paulicians, Donatists, and other pre-Reformation separatist movements as evidence of a continuous ‘trail of blood’ (a phrase later popularized by J. M. Carroll). He dismissed pedobaptist (infant baptism) denominations as departing from apostolic practice ...

Summary: Spurgeon taught that Baptist churches did not begin at the Reformation but have existed in principle since the apostles, preserved through a spiritual succession of Bible-believing, immersion-practicing congregations in every era.²

My understanding of history, then, is that the first three centuries of the Christian era were centuries of beliefs and practices of Baptist Churches. When Constantine came on the scene, an unknown number of Baptist congregations were destroyed with an influx of unconverted members (I greatly oversimplify). Then, in 1517, Martin Luther led a movement that voiced loyalty to God’s Word and a commitment to the rediscovered (among the Protestants) doctrine of justification by faith.

But they were Protestants, meaning they protested against the Roman Catholicism they had separated from. That said, their departure from the Church of Rome was not so clean. Without seeing every issue clearly, great and godly as so many of them were, the Protestants who departed Rome were nevertheless loaded with baggage from the Church of Rome.

The following are a few of the numerous topics, of varying significance, that distinguish Roman Catholics from Protestants and Baptists.

First, THE FOUNDING OF THE MOVEMENTS

Though the Roman Catholic Church claims a first-century founding, history, beliefs, and practices reveal the Church of Rome to be the offspring of Constantine’s so-called conversion to Christ and the flooding of the Churches with unsaved Romans.

As for Protestants, no one claims that Protestantism originated earlier than the 16th century.

As for Baptists, though not all Baptists claim an ancient heritage, I am in accord with Charles Spurgeon and Dr. Paige Patterson, former president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in maintaining a first-century origin for Baptists.

Next, THE POLITICAL POSTURE OF THE MOVEMENTS

For three centuries, Christians had a relationship with governments that recognized Rome’s role in Christ’s crucifixion and the Savior’s declaration that “my kingdom is not of this world.” However, when Rome’s emperor claimed he was a Christian, the separation of Church and state so prized in our country ended so far as Roman Catholicism was concerned.

When the Protestant Reformation began, Protestantism as a movement fully embraced the union of church and state, with Anglicanism being the Church of England, Presbyterianism being the Church of Scotland, the Reformed Church and government of Geneva being one, and Lutheranism being the state Church of Germany,

² <https://x.com/i/grok?conversation=1984368187119714328>

Norway, Sweden, Finland, and so on. In our colonies before the American Revolution, each colony had a state church, be it Presbyterian, Congregationalist, or Episcopalian (the American version of the Church of England).

What about the present consideration? Consider the COVID-19 lockdown. Though some Protestant congregations resumed worship services after acceding to Governor Newsome's lockdown order during the COVID crisis, the only congregations I know of that *never* interrupted their worship services in California, steadfastly refusing to comply with the government's directive, were Baptist Churches (but, sadly, not all the so-called Baptists).

Baptists have never been state churches, even though the offer was once made and refused. And those Baptist congregations that chose to comply with California Governor Newsom's illegal and medically unwarranted lockdown order.

It should also be noted that Baptist congregations have *never* been governed by an authoritative denominational hierarchy but have steadfastly maintained local congregational autonomy. Protestants, while never submitting to the type of control Roman Catholicism has over their subjects, are influenced to a degree quite foreign to Baptists throughout history.

Third, THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSTURE OF THE MOVEMENTS

Rome's attitude has *always* been that if you live in a place that it controls, you are required to be a Catholic. So, in Italy, Spain, France, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, and Scotland, until the Protestant Reformation. And you recall the Pope dividing South America between the Spaniards and Portuguese.

Did you know Protestants did the same thing? Before the American Revolution, New England was divided between Presbyterian and Congregationalist territories. Such practices are related to their failure to embrace the separation of church and state, as do the Baptists.

Baptists have always ignored geographical considerations and have spread wherever the lost are located, regardless of any geographic or political situation.

Fourth, THE ANTI PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY POSTURE OF THE MOVEMENTS

It is one thing to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, on one hand, and to decide for them without their knowledge or approval what their future spiritual obligations will be. One's relationship with God, with Christ, and with your Church is supposed to be a matter of conviction, consideration, and personal commitment rather than any decision your parents have made in place of your free moral agency. But Rome denies that to infants when they are christened without their permission or awareness, wrongly persuading youngsters that they have thereby been spiritually blessed when no such thing has happened.

Protestantism has, until the last century or so, done the same thing with its commitment to pedobaptism. I wonder how many Protestant kids have grown up thinking their spiritual concerns had already been addressed, only to learn moments after their death that they were still damned?

Though we have many flaws, Baptists are not guilty of that offense. We embrace the notion that baptism is for believers only, that it is by immersion only, and that one becomes a Church member voluntarily.

Fifth, THE ANTI MEMBERSHIP POSTURE OF THE MOVEMENTS

How important is church membership when you have no say in the membership matter, and when nothing you say or do affects your membership? Is it not that way with Catholics, who can commit adultery, promote

and obtain abortions, identify as Lesbians or homosexuals, and who knows what else, without it in any significant way impacting your church membership?

Is it not the same with Protestants, with millions of members in their churches who might never have attended a single service after their christening, and who immerse themselves in all sorts of sins without any membership consequences? On top of that membership neglect, some Protestants ignore church membership altogether. To them, I would recommend Peter Masters' wonderful ***Church Membership In The Bible***.³ Is membership important? Membership faithfulness in a rightly constituted New Testament Church of Jesus Christ is the Lord's basis for rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.⁴

Baptists only voluntarily welcome members into a congregation. And even though so many Baptist congregations do not dutifully practice church discipline as they ought, some do. I have never been made aware of a Protestant congregation exercising discipline over a member.

Let me conclude by being very clear about the Protestant Reformation. I am convinced it was an excellent work of God that resulted in many coming to Christ, where the Gospel was clearly proclaimed. I sadly acknowledge that many Baptist brethren utterly deny that God had *anything* to do with the Reformation. However, I am persuaded they are tragically mistaken.

When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 and Greek manuscripts were transported into Europe, well-trained men who had never seen a Bible had access to God's Word for the first time. Over the next half-century, they studied Scripture, and their lives were transformed.

Justification by faith in Christ, plus nothing and minus nothing, was reclaimed by Martin Luther and other Reformers, and praise God for that. That they carried the spiritual baggage of numerous unbiblical practices into their new life in Christ, however, is not to be denied.

I have mentioned several features of Romanism, Protestantism, and the Baptists. I have not mentioned the Gospel, not found anywhere in Romanism, found but sometimes seriously skewed in Protestantism, and seriously compromised in too many Baptist congregations.

Let us celebrate the Protestant Reformation, a celebration that Baptists can embrace while not being Protestants.

³ Peter Masters, ***Church Membership In The Bible***, (London: The Wakeman Trust, 2008).

⁴ John S. Waldrup, ***The Church of Jesus Christ: 28 Truths Every Christian Ought To Learn***, (Monrovia, CA: Classical Baptist Press, 2019), page 339-347.