Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 21: Analyzing Christian Movements

Christianity has given much to the world. Western, predominately Christian (albeit secularized) nations have led the world in invention, economy, human rights, education, and modes of governance. Yet many also attribute the stagnation of the medieval “dark ages” to the oppression of the church, and the advances from the Renaissance through the Age of Enlightenment, industrialization, and the Information Age, to the subsequent separation of church and state and the adoption of modes of scholarly inquiry and scientific analysis in contrast to reliance on interpretations of scripture for understanding of the natural world.

Christ's teachings and example must be distinguished from the acts of individuals and organizations claiming His name who have violated His precepts. The tenet that “the truth shall make you free” - that believers have nothing to fear from honest investigation of the material world - is a distinctly Christian one. Many scholars and scientists today remain believing Christians even in highly secularized nations, noting that scientific inquiry and religious teachings address fundamentally different types of questions and citing overarching harmonies and compatibility where other have posed false dichotomies attempting to portray science and religion as fundamentally at odds.

Many differences exist among Christians. More than 30,000 Christian denominations proclaim Christ's name. Some claim a universal mandate on truth; others, a local monopoly; still others claim to be franchises or branches of a larger movement with no particular claim to truth or inspiration beyond the Christian label. Is any church acceptable to Christ so long as it claims to be Christian? Should we be swayed by traditional religious monopolies catering to specific cultures? Is the decision of which Christian church to affiliate with, if any, merely a matter of preference and personal convenience?

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If ancient truths of the Bible are accepted, the next question must be: who has God's authority and an ongoing connection with God today? Several tools can help us to analyze faiths that claim to be Christian. First, how do the organization, teachings, and conduct of the faith compare to that taught in the scripture they claim to acknowledge? Second, does the faith demonstrate continuity with its founders, and do the contemporary works of the faith demonstrate God's hand today? Third, what do the other spiritual tools for finding faith tell us about the Church's claims?

Catholicism
The Catholic Church claims to have received the apostolic mantle from the Apostle Peter, yet its key hierarchal offices of pope,

cardinal, archbishop, vicar, and so forth, are nowhere mentioned in scripture and are acknowledged by the church itself as inventions of man. The long history of intrigues, scheming, infidelity, and politicking among medieval popes, the persecution of individuals of conscience who did not bow to non-scriptural dictates, and a host of religious wars wage against fellow Christians, all suggest that the Catholic Church is a very different organization than the New Testament church of Christ and his apostles, and has been led by men rather than God. These were not isolated events or the acts of a handful of renegade priests, but fill the annals of history.[1]

Most Catholics adhere to their faith not because of a receipt of a personal witness of truth through diligent study and earnest prayer, but because of the forced mass conversion of their ancestors mandated by secular authorities and the subsequent perpetuation of tradition. The Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity a state religion and mandated the conversion of his subjects under force of arms. Countless pagans across Europe and the Middle East were ordered by crusaders to convert, and those that did not were put to the sword. Readers can consider for themselves whether this is the path of the scriptural Church of Christ.

In recent years, the Catholic church has done many good works with programs to care for the poor, assistance in international development, and has taken firm doctrinal stances on many moral issues. Catholicism claims continuity with the New Testament Church and affirms authority from the Apostle Peter. However, numerous doctrinal changes, deviations from the New Testament Church in practice, and the acceptance of numerous non-scriptural teachings without any formal method of receiving divine revelation according to the scriptural model, all raise question of whether the Catholic Church indeed represents the authorized perpetuation of the scriptural church, or whether divine power and authority were lost through apostasy.

Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox movement, with fourteen independent churches including the Russian, Ukrainian, Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, and other Orthodox Churches, essentially claim to be local franchises administering Christianity to national or ethnic populations according to general Orthodox beliefs and traditions. Historically, many of the Orthodox churches were founded as state religions by mandate of secular rulers for reasons unrelated to divine revelation or the study of scripture. Some no longer have such status, but still occupy privileged positions within their societies in what are often virtual religious monopolies, enjoying significant political, social, and cultural influence, favored treatment by the government, and state subsidies or access to special revenues. The Russian Orthodox Church, for instance, ran lucrative duty-free tobacco and alcohol businesses until 1997. In return for the church's privileged status, the government is able to exercise a degree of control over religious matters. Changes to Eastern Orthodox worship and practice made by decree of secular rulers like Peter the Great rather than divinely-called prophets are well documented.

Local people often experience strong pressures to remain affiliated with the national church, regardless of whether they are believing or practicing Christians. Those who investigate or join other faiths may be accused of betraying their heritage and patrimony because of the strong association between national or ethnic identity and religious affiliation. Privileged national churches often create hurdles for other faiths that may restrict proselytism. Supporters argue that such measures are necessary to protect national heritage and provide some compensation for local faiths of limited means following the ravages of communism in contrast to better-funded Western churches. Critics have expressed concern that such measures demonstrate more concern over sectarian denominational affiliation than with adherence to Christ's teachings and the personal and societal blessings of service, cooperation, and Christian living.

The model of the national church "franchise" faces several difficulties. Christ did not tell his disciples to establish one church for Romans, one for Greeks, one for Hebrews, one for Ethiopians, and one for Indians. He commanded His disciples to go into all the world, to preach the gospel, and to bring new disciples into the fold of a unified church directed by God. Christ admitted no division of His church into franchises. He taught that believers should "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."[2] Just as law and taxes are domains of secular authorities, Christ's church must be directed by Him and not by the decrees of secular rulers or the perpetuation of national tradition. Many Orthodox believers discount other Christian faiths, stating: "we have our own." Yet it is not what is their own that is important, but what is Jesus Christ's, as Paul observed: "For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's."[3] True disciples must follow Christ through the church He conducts and leads. Any church not led by Christ is led by man.

The mandate of truth implies an obligation to share it. Christ's church was a missionary church; the Orthodox churches are not. This is a problem of priorities, not resources. Christ sent his disciples without purse or scrip, and early believers met in homes rather than chapels. Christ's gospel went to all the world even as many of the Hebrews rejected Him. Yet Christianity was, in many cases, imposed upon most Orthodox nations by the decisions of political leaders rather than because of grass-roots conversions. The Greek Orthodox or Byzantine Church is the Eastern counterpart of the Catholic Church, separated by the East-West Schism of 1054 AD, and suffers from the same historical difficulties as the Roman Catholic Church, with which it was united until that time. The "Baptism of Rus" in 988 AD, viewed as the great spiritual event from which the Orthodox churches of Russia and Ukraine draw their origin, occurred when Prince Vladimir of Kiev ordered his soldiers to round up the peasants and drive them into the river by force. Nationalistic Orthodox accounts portray this as a miraculous and inspired event; no mention is made in the official record of how many peasants may have been drowned or killed, what happened to those who may have resisted their "conversion," or the political factors underlying the prince's decision to become Christian. Both favorable and unfavorable interpretations generally do not dispute that the conversion of the masses was forced. This contrasts to the stories of mass conversions in the New Testament in which individuals chose to become disciples of Christ through voluntary, uncoerced choice, and where the primary emphasis was on learning and following Christ's teachings rather than merely accepting a denominational label. Historically, Orthodox faiths have had to rely primarily upon forced conversions to gain a following and favored governmental status with the restriction or severe limitation of other faith groups to maintain their flock. The reliance upon such means appears to convey discomfort about these faiths' prospects for competing for informed, scripturally literate believers in a truly free religious marketplace.

Protestantism

From the late fifteenth century onward, increasing numbers of Christians began to speak openly about what they viewed as problems with the Catholic church. As they read the Bible for themselves, many noted major discrepancies between the

teachings of scripture and the practices of the church. Some desired to reform the church from within, but finding themselves oppressed and persecuted by the Church hierarchy, branched out to establish new churches where they could worship according to their own conscience and understanding of scripture. Although such movements were suppressed in areas where Catholics held political power, many states broke away from the Roman pope, primarily in northern Europe.

Just as Eastern Orthodox faiths are niche churches catering to specific ethnicities, Protestant denominations are niche churches catering to differentiating doctrinal viewpoints, although competition for adherents has led to overlap and redundancy. The names of many Protestant denominations reflect differentiating beliefs. For instance, the Baptist faith is so named because of beliefs regarding the age and manner of baptism. The Methodist church emphasized a methodical approach to scripture study and Christian living. Seventh-day Adventists teach that believers should worship on the Hebrew Sabbath rather than Sunday, the Lord's Day on which Jesus was resurrected and on which early Christians met after the resurrection.[4] Pentecostals emphasize the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Lutherans follow the teachings of Martin Luther; Calvinists follow John Calvin. The Presbyterian faith emphasizes the need for presbyters (the Greek word for elders), and the Episcopalian church is named after the Greek word for bishop.

Paul warned that the contentions and sectarian divisions arising in the early Church even during his lifetime, when individuals would claim to be disciples of various prominent Christian teachers and ministers, represented apostasy. He admonished: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"[5] Yet today, the world of sectarian Christianity is far more fragmented than in Paul's day. The body of believers across all Protestant denominations is sometimes referred to as a Church in an abstract or euphemistic sense, although his heterogeneous group of nominal Christians among whom virtually no point is without controversy has little commonality with the New Testament church.

Some branches of Protestantism, particularly the Pentecostal and Charismatic wing, claim the gifts of the spirit in modern times, including speaking in tongues, prophecy, and faith healings. Yet Pentecostal theology suffers from a logical disconnect. If God calls people from among them by the Holy Spirit and works miracle, then why has He not called prophets to teach His unifying word for all people? Incoherent babbling claimed to represent speaking in unknown tongues, testimonials from individuals allegedly cured by faith healings, and alleged prophecies among Charismatics make for curious showmanship, yet closer examination demonstrates that such claims can rarely endure scrutiny. If individuals truly have a connection to God, then they should come to the same conclusions regarding His will. Pentecostalism seeks the miracles and gifts of the ancient church without divinely called prophets and apostles to regulate the Church, to convey God's will, and to transmit priesthood authority, and thus falls short in offering form without substance.

Some Protestant churches have tried to escape denominational labels by calling themselves non-denominational Christian churches or Bible churches, although their teaching draws heavily from extra-biblical philosophies of post-apostolic early church fathers and teachings of reformers and theologians. The Bible is declared to be the complete final and infallible word of God, yet its adherents rely upon dogmas found nowhere in the Bible and formulated by the ministers of the very Catholic Church from which they separated because of their own acknowledgment that the Catholic Church had deviated from the path of scripture. Rather than arising from tabula rasa examination of scripture, so-called non-denominational churches are merely Protestant churches which have dropped their denominational labels to achieve wider appeal.

Protestant churches of today are very different from those of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, or even of a century ago. Values which were once universally held have been progressively eroded as churches have asked less and less of their adherents. Pastors have become more reticent to denounce certain behaviors as sinful in order to avoid offending parishioners who might go elsewhere if they do not like the message, or might not attend at all. Doctrine has also shifted to accommodate numerous unbiblical practices such as the ordination of women to the priesthood and even the acceptance of openly gay clergy in some denominations. The morality of the reformers and of the early New England settlers is long gone, and most modern Protestants live lifestyles similar to non-Christians.[6]

All of these competing denominational claims cannot be correct. Thoughtful individuals must ask: which of all of these diverse faiths, if any, is directed by God, rather than representing the interpolations of man? There is no scriptural precedent for a church without divinely-called prophets and apostles, and nothing in scripture which would give individuals license to start their own churches in Christ's name based on their personal interpretation of doctrine. Protestant theologians have contrived a range of interpretations to rationalize the authority they claim and to give credence to the litany of competing and contradictory faiths. Many ministers interpret Christ's teaching in the 24th chapter of Matthew regarding his second coming that individuals should not believe if any say that Christ is here or there, as meaning that there is no church on the earth with direct communication with Christ and no unifying faith with a divine mandate to teach God's word. Surely Christ was not saying that there was no full truth on the earth and no church led by revelation with the authority to act in his name; otherwise Protestants would have to write off the entire New Testament Church following Christ's crucifixion as an organization with no divine mandate, authorized hierarchy, or binding revelation which would put it on a level above that of any of the thousands of competing churches today, and their own teachings would have to be written off as mere opinion rather than inspired truth as they claim. There would be no reason to heed the words of the Apostle Paul - not one of Christ's original twelve, and of whom we have no record of any contact with Christ during His mortal ministry - any more than modern televangelists like Benny Hinn or Creflo Dollar. Claims of Protestant ministers that there is no church with the single or complete truth are discerned by thoughtful people as self-incriminating acknowledgments of the claimant's awareness of his own lack of divine guidance and full truth. Yet no one cannot deny others of knowledge that may lie beyond their own personal experience or spirituality.

The name of the Protestant movement highlights its role as a protest to alleged errors of Catholicism. Protestant and reformed churches may offer some improvements over their parent organizations, yet still depend on the authority of the mother church for any offshoot to have claims of authority. If the parent church was not led by God, the daughter church also will not have divine authority. One may recognize flaws in an organization, but the institution of reforms does not make one a prophet or bestow divine mandate. Orson Whitney quoted an eminent Catholic scholar:

> "You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don't even know the strength of your own position. It is so strong that there is only one other tenable in the whole Christian world, and that is the position of the Catholic Church. The issue is between

> Catholicism and Mormonism. If we are right, you are wrong; if you are right we are wrong; and that's all there is to it. The Protestants haven't a leg to stand on. For if we are wrong, they are wrong with us, since they were a part of us and went out from us; while if we are right, they are apostates whom we cut off long ago. If we have the apostolic succession from St. Peter, as we claim, there was no need of Joseph Smith and Mormonism; but if we have not that succession, then such a man as Joseph Smith was necessary, and Mormonism's attitude is the only consistent one. It is either the perpetuation of the Gospel from ancient times, or the restoration of the Gospel in latter days."[7]

Protestant churches have accomplished much good. Yet the confusion, the contention, and the record of word and deed which fall far short of the scriptural mandate also suggests that we are unlikely to find the final destination in our search for spiritual truth in the creeds of Protestantism.

[1] A more detailed (although far from comprehensive) review of such histories is found in James E. Talmage's The Great Apostasy.
[2] Mark 12:17
[3]Philippians 2:21
[4] Acts 20:7
[5] 1 Coronthians 1:11-13
[6] Barna, George. The Second Coming of the Church, p. 7.
[7] Orson F. Whitney, The Strength of the 'Mormon' Position (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1917), 9-10.