

Three Views Of Christianity Protestants Must Pick From

Protestantism and Moral Relativism: The Trilemma

The biggest reason I think that Protestantism lies at the heart of relativism is this. Protestants are in the awkward position of saying, "All of Christendom c. 1516 and before, you all misunderstand Christianity!" This means that they necessarily have to come to one of three unfortunate conclusions: either (1) that there was no authentic Christianity prior to 1517 A.D. - that it had simply disappeared in a "Great Apostasy" that eliminated 100% of Christians; (2) that the only authentic Christians during this period were super-secretive about their Faith; or (3) that Christendom c. 1516 and before was "good enough" for salvation, but still needed Reform. None of these solutions are satisfactory. Today, I'll look at the first view, the Total Global Apostasy view. Tomorrow, I'll look at the Remnant Theory, and Wednesday, I'll make a few general points on the umbrella "Good Enough" theory.

Protestant View #1: Total Global Apostasy

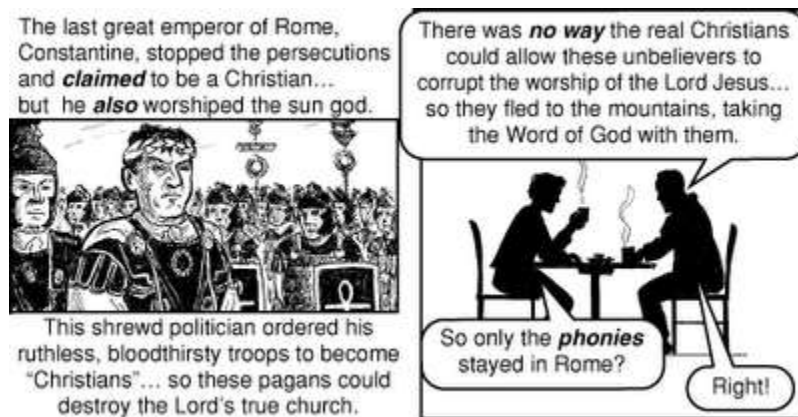
(1) requires you to come to a really bizarre and anti-Scriptural conclusion. Where Christ says, "I will be with you always until the end of the world" ([Matthew 28:20](#)), and promises that He will not leave us as orphans ([John 14:18](#)), but rather will ensure that the Father sends the Holy Spirit "to be with you forever" ([John 14:16](#)), and to "teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" ([John 14:26](#)), so that the "gates of Hell shall not prevail" against His Church founded upon the rock, Peter ([Matthew 16:17-19](#)), **Protestant View #1 - typically held by only the most fiercely anti-Catholic Protestants, but also by Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses - requires that we believe that sometime shortly thereafter, the Church - indeed, the entire Church - fell away from the Faith.** That the Holy Spirit didn't preserve a single person, that there was no remnant, etc. Under this view, we were left orphans for a millenium under a false pagan faux-Christianity called Roman Catholicism that mislead millions of people to eternal damnation. This view suggests a God unconcerned with preserving His Gospel message (to allow it so quickly to become corrupted by so many, such that even an honest observer would mistake pre-Reformation Europe for Christian); it suggests that Jesus meant the opposite of what He seems to be suggesting strongly in the above passages; and perhaps most confusingly, **it suggests that the Bible, and the writings of the early Christians, were painstakingly preserved by this false pagan faux-Christianity called Roman Catholicism, while it fought fiercely against every other heresy.** Once Catholicism had taken over 100% of Christianity, why not simply do away with the Scriptures? Why the constant proclamation that "Jesus is Lord," if the Catholic Church is guided by the devil instead of the Holy Ghost?

Finally, Christ predicts that the Kingdom of God on Earth will be like a mustard seed which grows into the largest of all plants ([Mark 4:30-32](#)). This would be a strange way of predicting that the Church will die out until Martin Luther, Joseph Smith or Charles Taze Russell resurrects it.

The (Invisible) Remnant Theory of Church History

Protestant View #2: The Remnant Theory

(2) runs into almost the exact same problems as (1). Because the problems with Protestant View #1 are so severe, and because even the verses cited for the notion of an end-times apostasy (like [Matthew 24:10-14](#)) suggest a general falling-away from the Faith, rather than a global abandonment [the verse I mentioned before even refers to some persevering to the end], Protestant View #2 devised a "remnant" solution. This is the view that the Waldensians developed. Here's the Jack Chick version, in a single comic panel:



In short, it's that only a remnant of the faithful remained after the Great Apostasy, as in certain previous times in Israel's history. On face, there's absolutely nothing wrong with a remnant theory. It's quite possible that Christianity will become a religion practiced by very few, and that many of these people will have to be in hiding (at least periodically): we've already seen Christianity in that position in Her earliest days. It's even possible that a great many, even a majority, of the Church's leaders will be heretics themselves: we've already seen that, in the days of St. Athanasius.

But the problem with Protestant View #2 is that every time in the Church's history that we've found ourselves in that position, there's been a long evidentiary trail. By this I mean, when the early Christians

were being put to death by the pagans, they wrote a lot of letters, which we Catholics still value highly. The writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Clement of Rome, St. Justin Martyr, St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Irenaeus, St. Polycarp, Tertullian, Origen, and many others from the first two centuries are still highly regarded by most historically-minded Christians. In addition to the writings, there's lots of religious art, and religious sites, like the underground city of [Derinkuyu](#), the catacombs, etc. It's true that the Christians fled from the Romans, but it's also true that they were constantly trying to convert them. What's more, they're (and we're) **required to evangelize** in the Bible, most notably in the Great Commission ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)). They're forbidden by Christ from hiding their light under a bushel basket in [Matthew 5:15](#). The idea that this remnant just disappeared for a millenium with no art, no writings, and no known churches, and that they didn't evangelize is striking. There's not even a record of the Church condemning their views as a heresy. They just voluntarily vanish, and are never heard from again. So again, we're left with another theory squarely at odds with the Bible.

We have the Roman Catholic Church on one side, fighting heresies galore: the Gnostics, the Manicheans, the Donatists, the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians, the Arians and Semi-Arians, the Montanists, the Messalians, the Docetists, and so on and so on and so on. In at least most of these cases, perhaps all, even Protestants will agree that the Church "happened to be right," while the non-Catholics happened to be wrong on every area that they disagreed with Catholicism. Beyond that, it was in the Catholic Culture that you see the spread of the love of Christ around the globe, that you see the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, of our understanding of Jesus' dual natures, and so on. On the other side, Protestant View #2 says that we have a "remnant Church" so intent on self-preservation that they don't bother to evangelize or save the souls of millions of innocent Catholics, they don't oppose any of the heresies above, nothing. They just hide out in mountains without leaving any written or visual clues to their existence. From just that description, we can see that the Catholic Church is living the Gospel, while the alleged remnant isn't.

So even if a group of people who considered themselves an authentic remnant of historic Christianity *did* exist, they weren't what they claimed to be: they didn't live out the Gospel, evangelize, risk seemingly anything for Christ, etc. But more striking is the fact that the remnant **didn't exist**. The Waldensians and Jack Chick have to imagine a remnant *contrary to history*. Now, if the Catholic Church had indeed fallen away from the Truth of Christianity, why *didn't* we see a remnant? Or a Reformation? Why is it that in every record we know of, when a group splits off from Rome in the first 1000 years or so, both Protestants and Catholics can agree that the group was heretical? In short, if the Catholic Church *wasn't* the true Church of Christ, and He *didn't* abandon His Church, **where was it?** Saying "the mountains" doesn't cut

it.

These first two theories come from the camp that says Catholicism isn't really Christianity. But what about those who want to affirm Catholicism as Christianity, while affirming their separation from Her?

Good Enough Christianity?

Protestant View #3: Good Enough Christianity?

The [first view](#) is directly contrary to Scripture, while the [second one](#) is directly contrary to history (and less obviously, contrary to Scripture as well). As cooler heads have prevailed after the Reformation, it seems that many Protestants are admitting the break with Rome occurred over some pretty unimportant stuff, or just because some Catholic clergy were corrupt jerks, a problem plaguing any Christian denomination of size. So the third view, then, is a collection of views, which posit that Catholicism is Christianity, but just imperfect Christianity. Protestantism added unique contributions which were worth separating from Rome over - "a more perfect disunion," perhaps.

This is the view that most self-respecting Protestants take, and it is by far the strongest of the views. It is also the most dangerous of the views, though, for a simple reason. Rather than holding out a belief that there's a True Christianity that either lived up in the mountains, or was lost and came back, Protestant View #3 necessarily says that there's only *truer* Christianity, that there's no single True Christianity which can be found anywhere on Earth. That's why, like every other form of Protestantism, it creates theories that the only Real Church is the Invisible True Church. It has to think this, because its adherents believe that we had Good-Enough Christianity for a millenium and a half until Luther (or some other Reformer) discovered or invented Better Christianity. The obvious, glaring problem with this is that if Luther, et al, can discover/invent Better Christianity, why can't Jim Jones or Bishop Spong create Better Yet Christianity? So it's a system doomed to perpetual schism in an idealistic (but usually well-intentioned) quest for a purer Faith.

The Problem of Schism in the Third View

Unique amongst the three theories, this one runs flat into the question of schism. Because they

acknowledge Catholicism to be authentically Christian, they have to account for resisting full union from Her. After all, from a strictly historical perspective, the Reformers are the divorcing party. They're the ones who have to deal with the Biblical prohibition on divorce (or in this case, it's analogue, schism). This is true particularly of those who *leave* Catholicism for one of the manifestations of Protestantism: I think that there will be many who grew up outside of the fullness of the Faith who loved God with all their heart, mind, and soul, who rejected a fun-house mirror distortion of the Catholic Faith and never gave two thoughts to why they weren't Catholic.

But those who turn their backs on the Faith have to deal with passages like [John 17:20-23](#), in which Christ prays for us to remain one ("completely one," even). St. Paul pleads in [Philippians 2:1-2](#) that if we "have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." In other words, not simply a unity of love, but a total unity, where we're like-minded, pursuing the same goal. St. Peter says something very similar in [1 Peter 3:8](#), where he commands us to "be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, being lovers of the brotherhood, merciful, modest, humble..." Finally, St. Paul gives us God's view in [1 Corinthians 10:24-25](#), when he says that "God has so constructed the Body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so **that there may be no division in the Body**, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another." Indeed, the KJV even reads "that there may be no schism in the body." The first two camps had an excuse for their schism: they split from Rome because She wasn't Christian. The third camp doesn't have that excuse. They think Rome's Christian, but mistaken on some issues. If *that's* the standard, it'll be hard to even find two or three to gather in His Name, since virtually no one (particularly when they're interpreting the Bible individually) agrees 100% with one another. I think that schism is an under-mentioned danger for Christians, in this age of constant church-shopping. God takes it very seriously, modern denominations don't. You choose.

Other Problems

It also runs into the same problems as the earlier theories, in that contrary to the passages mentioned from John's Gospel ([John 14:18](#) and [John 14:26](#)), this view holds that the Holy Spirit *didn't* tell the successors to the Apostles quite everything that they needed to know, or protect them from all errors of Faith. But unlike the first two theories, this one doesn't think that those errors are significant enough to threaten the Church's status as Christian.

Of course, some errors **aren't** enough to threaten one's status as Christian. But who gets to decide which

ones do, and which ones don't? Regarding *individual* judgment, that's a domain for which God alone is responsible: we should refrain from declaring that anyone is definitively damned, and the only way that the Church can proclaim Saints in Heaven is through confirmation from God Himself through miracles. But who determines which issues are so vital that they can cost someone their Earthly membership in the Church? Well, Church leadership. [Matthew 18:15-18](#) makes that pretty clear.

It's an important power to have on Earth. The first-century *Didache* cites three valid forms of Baptism. The 21st-century Baptists claim that one of those (Baptism by pouring) doesn't count. This is one of those issues where few Christians can imagine God saying, "You chose wrong, go to Hell." And thus, these are issues where only a minority of Christians can imagine creating schism over. On the other hand, there are divisive issues where there is only one legitimate Christian view, and everyone else is wrong - and at least potentially, damnably so. Because of the stakes - on the one hand, you don't want constant schism; on the other, you don't want to abide heresy, or allow people to damn themselves - it's important that we, as humans, know the non-negotiables. And yet, while almost every Protestant seems to agree with that notion, they can't agree as to what those non-negotiables even are!

Here's an [imaginary dialogue](#) Mark Shea constructed that parallels enough real-life ones that I've had that I found it too good to pass up presenting in whole:

Evangelical: You must not worship Mary!

Catholic: Relax. I don't worship Mary.

Evangelical: Oh, but you do!

Catholic: Actually, I think I'm the only one qualified to make that call, aren't I?

Evangelical: But it looks to me like you worship her! You pray to her and ask her to intercede for you, don't you?

Catholic: Yes, I do like to talk to my mother about things. But I don't worship her and I don't think she's God. She's a creature, a fellow Christian (albeit the great one). How would you feel if I said, "You worship your barber! I know you do, because you sometimes ask him to pray for you?"

Evangelical: That's totally different!

Catholic: Actually, it's exactly the same. Which is why Scripture says don't judge by appearances. If you'd just ask me rather than telling me, I'd be happy to tell you what I worship. I worship Jesus Christ fully present in the Holy Eucharist-body, blood, soul, and divinity.

Evangelical: I don't think the Eucharist is Jesus' body and blood, but simply a symbol. But let's not argue over such fine points of theology as "transubstantiation". We both celebrate Communion in our own ways. And that's the important thing.

Catholic: Did you hear me? I said I fall down in worship and adoration before something that looks just like a piece of bread and a cup of wine. I say "Hosanna" to it. I adore it as the very God of the Universe! The Eucharist is my Lord and my God, my salvation, my life, the very source of my being!

Evangelical: Yes. I think that's a bit overboard, but let's not argue about it. You have your version of Communion and I have mine. Now: about Mary worship--don't you see how incredibly dangerous it is for you to commit the grave sin of idolizing Mary....

Like I said, some errors aren't enough to threaten one's status as Christian. But in the case of Catholics, we worship what is either the Body and Blood of Christ, or a chunk of bread. If it's Christ, we're right, and every Protestant denomination is wrong, on the most important issue -- still Christians, but Christians who answer one question very much incorrectly. If we're wrong, though, we're idolaters. We can't even be considered Christians, and are universally damned, according to [1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#), [Ephesians 5:5](#), [Revelation 21:8](#), and [Revelation 22:15](#). So if a person adopts this third view, and says, "Catholics are idolaters, but they can still go to Heaven anyways," what views **do** bar one from going to Heaven?

So the third view seems to leave us with the following claims: (a) we have a Church which is probably better than before, but probably still not what God wants; (b) we won't ever have the perfect Church here on Earth [that is, we'll never get all of the question right]; (c) in the name of Christian charity, we should overlook the fact that we think some Christians are, in fact, idolaters (or at the least, the fact that 1500 years of Christianity was in fact, all idolatry, doesn't mean it wasn't also Christianity).

Right for You, Wrong for Me?

Obviously, Catholics are fondest of the people who fall into this third camp, but I can't say we really understand them. Are we *really* going to expand the title Christian so broadly that it covers everyone who worships what they think is Jesus, whether it's really Him, or a piece of bread/Bread, or "the God within"? Is it any surprise that we've seen growing in this well-meaning camp a growing sense of moral relativism: a "right for you, wrong for me" attitude towards everything? After all, this seems for all the world to be the standard view on the Eucharist and other issues -- put another way, a sane Protestant would consider it

rank heresy and idolatry to worship something they were convinced was neither God nor even living; but that same worship is okay (or at least not enough to disqualify one as Christian) if it's from one's Catholic neighbor?

This "right for you, wrong for me" attitude, combined with the notion that the Church can always be *more* right on things than it is (and that no visible church possesses the whole Truth infallibly), creates fertile soil for moral relativism. After all, many a Christian suffers from homosexual tendencies. Sure, that'd be wrong for *me* to act upon, but for him... well, who am I to say? Besides, the most obvious passage damning it ([1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#)) damns idolatry in the same breath. Budge on one, why not budge on the other?

And if Catholics can worship bread and still be Christian, why can't Oneness Pentecostals worship a non-Triune God, and still be Christian? After all, they still proclaim the name of Christ, still love God and try and serve Him, etc. Why not Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and perhaps Muslims (who, like Mormons, hold Christ in rather high esteem, despite not thinking of Him as uniquely God).

Hopefully, it's clear from the sketch I'm trying to draw that Protestantism, by nature of its belief structure, must either take a view of Church history which contradicts Scripture (the first view), contradicts Scripture and all known history (the second view), or a view which leaves itself wide open for moral relativism.

(Source: Shameless Popery)