

Do Protestant Divisions Matter?

by Sebastian R Fama

When challenged on their obvious disunity, Protestants will claim it to be insignificant. They will say they agree on all the important issues but only disagree on the minor ones. This oft repeated claim is problematic for two reasons. First, it is just not accurate. There are major differences between the different Protestant sects. Some Protestants believe that God determines before you are even born who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. They believe there is nothing you can do about it one way or the other. Others believe all you must do is commit your life to Jesus and you are saved. Some believe you can lose your salvation. Others believe you cannot. These are serious differences. Adopting the wrong beliefs regarding salvation can have tragic eternal effects.

Second, even if it were true, it would create a curious situation. Protestants say they are led by the Holy Spirit. And that raises an obvious question. Does the Holy Spirit not understand the minor issues? If Protestant denominations were truly being led by the Holy Spirit, all their teachings would be identical and they would be one church. Furthermore, they would never change. Also, if the one you refer to as the Holy Spirit cannot get the small issues right, what guarantee is there that he got the major issues right? By major issues I mean those doctrines that are exclusive to Protestantism. And if the distinctive doctrines of Protestantism really are from the Holy Spirit, why did He wait fifteen centuries to reveal them? Jesus told His apostles: "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). Did Jesus lie? Or did the Holy Spirit forget to do what He was sent to do?

Sinful human beings change; a perfect God never changes (Hebrews 13:8). To say otherwise is to say that God does not know His own mind. Another question can be asked; if their differences really are insignificant, why do they keep splintering off into new groups?

In Matthew 16, Jesus established one Church, not many. And He wished that Church to remain united. He said: "I pray not only for them, [Apostles] but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21). In other words, Jesus is saying His credibility with the world rests on Christian unity. And not just some general unity, but a unity that mimics the unity of God the Father and Jesus. In other words, absolute.

The early Church had a simple formula for unity. And it dovetailed nicely with Matthew 16. Writing in the year 189, the early Church Father, Irenaeus wrote:

... the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles. Peter and Paul, that church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. With that church, because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition (*Against Heresies* 3:3:2).

Far from being insignificant, the divisions within Protestantism show us that, unlike Catholicism, Protestantism bears no resemblance to the Early Church.