

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES ESSENTIAL TO PROTESTANTISM

1. Regarding the nature of man:

Man is totally corrupt.

Hence there arises the tendency to limit religion to matters of sin and justification: repentance, conversion, making a decision for Christ, bewailing one's sins, condemning as evil what common experience and Catholic doctrine teach to be good; self condemnation easily translates into seeing evil in one's own society and governmental policies when such condemnation is not justified.

2. Regarding the nature of grace:

Grace is totally extrinsic.

This follows from No. 1, for if man is totally corrupt then grace cannot be intrinsic to him, for then he would be transformed into something good and no longer corrupt. The Blood of Christ covers over the sins of man, hiding them from the sight of God, but man remains as corrupt as before. Thus is undermined any motivation to strive to overcome vices and imperfections in one's self or in society. Indeed, the notion that man is totally corrupt and its corollary that grace is only extrinsic stem historically from Martin Luther's despair in trying to be chaste.

3. Regarding the nature of salvation:

Man is saved by faith alone.

The way you get the Blood of Christ to cover your sins it by believing that it does. Hence comes Luther's adage, Sin strongly but believe more strongly. When one breaks through to the conviction that, despite his inability to change, one is absolved from all responsibility, the ensuing exhilaration is the conversion experience, and the tendency is to teach that one is not saved unless one has this emotional high. Some go so far as to deem one's salvation lost if this state of excitement cannot be regularly repeated.

That man is saved by faith alone also means that good works are unnecessary and merit is non-existent.

4. Regarding the nature of the Church:

The Church is solely an invisible society.

The Church consists only of those saved by the Blood of Christ. But these are only those who believe that they are so saved. (See no. 3.) But belief or faith is invisible. Therefore the Church is purely and only invisible. Therefore a visible hierarchy and also sacred images are contrary to the true faith, and the tendency is to see them as coming from the devil, with the visible (i.e. Catholic) Church being the Whore of Babylon and sacred images being idols.

5. Regarding the nature of the priesthood:

The only priesthood that exists is that common to all the faithful.

Hence both the ministerial priesthood and the sacrifice of the Mass are denied. Since everyone in the community is hierarchically equal, the faithful have the right and indeed only they have the authority to select and ordain their ministers; ordination is merely the community's commission and does not in any way impart a new character or status on to the recipient.

6. Regarding the nature of revelation:

Rule of faith is Scripture alone.

Hence both tradition and the authority of the Church to interpret are denied.

7. Regarding the nature of Scripture:

Scripture is subject only to the private interpretation of each individual.

Hence man is seen as in immediate contact with revealed truth without any mediating agent other than the words of Scripture themselves. Hence both reason and the Church are rejected as proper channels of true interpretation. The view that man is not in need of mediation regarding the interpretation of Scripture leads to the position that man needs no mediation in any aspect of religion. Hence not only the priesthood is seen as an intrusive interference but also the role of the angels, saints and Mary -- even though Luther himself retained devotion to the Mother of Christ.

In fact, these principles are not put into practice with consistency by any group because they would cause too much disunity. But these principles are adhered to verbally; if they were to be abandoned, any group still claiming to be Christian would have no logical choice but to rejoin the Catholic Church. Just because, therefore, a denomination does not live up to these principles does not mean that it does not simultaneously proclaim them as the ideal. When listening to explanations from Protestants, note the presence of these principles not only directly and explicitly, but especially indirectly and implicitly. If not already so, make the principle in their explanation explicit, and then show how it is contradicted by themselves in practice and in theory. On the other hand, if the Protestant explanation holds to the Catholic position on one or more of these seven points, agree and reinforce it.

Some further observations:

1. Basing herself on precisely the Scriptural use of the idea of being born again or anew, e.g. Jn. 3:1-5, the Catholic Church sees this event as occurring at baptism. Many Protestant denominations, especially those of the Pentecostal variety, identify being born again with the emotional exhilaration mentioned in the explanation of principle No. 3 above. Scripture does not know this second meaning.

2. Historically and psychologically, the most important of the seven principles is No. 1. It arose from Martin Luther's exaggerated interpretation of his own personal experiences with sin. The other six principles were developed to shore up principle No. 1. However, theologically the most important principle is No. 6, and if this principle can be seen as untenable, the other 6 will come tumbling down. With regard to principle No. 1, the Catholic view is that everything that God has created is good (Gen 1:31), so that the mortal sinner seriously abuses, perverts and diminishes his own goodness but does not

totally destroy it, for he remains a creature of God. Thus Abraham Lincoln, though a Protestant, spoke Catholic wisdom when he said, "There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us that it never behooves any of us to speak ill of the rest of us." With regard to principle No. 6, the Church remains faithful to the teaching of Scripture itself that Scripture is incomplete and must be supplemented by tradition (e.g. Jn 20:30, 21:25, 2 Thess 2:15: "Therefore, brothers, stand firm. Hold fast to the traditions you received from us, either by our word or by letter.").

3. Much more can be said about each of the 7 principles and about the Catholic position on each of these areas, but the above will get you started on your own thinking and study.

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