

# WHAT IS PROTESTANTISM?

THE ESSENCE OF TRUE PROTESTANTISM IN THE CONTEXT OF  
THE MODERN CHURCH

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**A**s the New Testament Church emerged from the narrow streets of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and began to obey the divine injunction to go into all the world, it did so under a wave of persecution. That initial persecution was by the Jews and it was some time before the Romans would join the intolerance of Christianity. The reason Roman persecution was not immediate was that the system of paganism that existed in the empire was so flexible that no one religion excluded another. Each country had its own local deity and the empire had room enough in its ecumenical paganism for the variety of superstitions.

When New Testament Christianity arose in the empire and made its presence felt, it was assumed that they would fit the mould of the empire without causing a stir. But Christianity proved to be a different sort of religion. Christianity is a principle that has its origins outside of human society; it is a Divine working on the intellectual and moral nature of man.<sup>i</sup> There is in Christianity a vital element that overthrows the superstition of the human heart and a missionary spirit that has no compromise with the articles of another faith. Christianity therefore threatened the destruction of all other religions, not by a physical warfare but with the weapon of the Word of Truth, the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17).

Thus, when the spirit of Christianity was felt in the empire, the Roman government came down heavy in waves of successive persecutions. Throughout these persecutions, beginning in AD 64 under Nero, the Church of Jesus Christ thrived, the translation of the Scriptures in the language of the Roman world, the fidelity and zeal of the early disciples and the heroic deaths of the martyrs only added fuel to the spreading flame of Christianity and proved its divine origins.<sup>ii</sup> Rising up with greater influence than ever before, Christianity gained continued prominence until it was elevated to state recognition and consequently, respite from persecution under Constantine in 312 AD. Such a move by the emperor was both unexpected and unscriptural according to the early martyrs who saw Christianity irreconcilable with the office of the Roman Emperor.<sup>iii</sup> But the imperial approval that the Church enjoyed was very easily accommodated insofar as they saw it as a theocratic state similar to that of Israel under the Old Covenant.

From this point in history the Christian Church, which had maintained its purity and vigour amid the fires of persecution, began to suffer and become weak under the imperial favour, secular advantages and worldly cares. This acceptance and incorporation of the Church by the state proved to be the greatest obstacle the Church would ever face. It was in essence the secularisation of the Church.<sup>iv</sup>

Disputes were no longer handled as a Church, but rather the bishop's decision was final and could not be appealed even in a legal court, giving the bishop sole authority. The Church polity was modeled after the civil government where a Patriarch was set over a diocese, governing the clergy under his domain. The brotherhood of the saints was eroded and the lust for rank and status was fostered which led further to a spirit of friction and disputes. With this authority, the Patriarch of Rome grew in status until the emperor saluted him as Father.

Under all of this external polity and corruption, the Bible was hidden from the people. The teaching ministry of the pulpit was transformed into a sacrificing priesthood. They were no longer servants of the people pointing them to Christ, but made themselves masters over the people, and mediators between them and God. The Gospel became less and less of grace and more and more of merit. The Church thus became the final authority rather than the Scriptures and the means and source of salvation rather than the Saviour.

Worship, instead of being the spontaneous thanksgiving of the soul, became a mere formal ritual. Jewish ritualism, Greek philosophy and pagan idolatry were all embraced.<sup>v</sup> The superstition of the barbarian tribes was kept in tact as this new secularised church spread throughout the Roman Empire. It became the Church of the populace; whole nations and tribes were received in and baptised. The gospel of Christ, which alone can enlighten the understanding and regenerate the heart, was less and less articulated, as Christianity became a mongrel system. Under this confused syncretism Christianity became a fashionable institution, spiralling more and more into apostasy.<sup>vi</sup>

It was out of this apostasy that the Protestant Reformation rose up. There had been many calls for reform in the Church over the centuries as sin became more and more blatant and destructive. But with the

totalitarian ecclesiastical system that had developed, reformation from within proved to be impossible. Those who would live for God in purity found that they must leave established Christianity behind and hide in the mountains to worship in secret. If the Church was going to experience a reformation and a return to purity it was going to take an act of God; it was going to take a revival of religion in the heart.

Such a move of God came in the heart of Martin Luther. As Luther emerged from the depression of his own sin to the realisation of the gospel of Grace without self, and faith without meritorious works, he came to understand the depth of sin in which the purity of the Church had drowned. He saw through the splendour and riches of the Roman system, through the rituals and idolatry of her priests, through the oppression of the poor darkened people to a reality that lay beyond Papal authority. He looked to Christ as he is revealed in the Word of God. Romanism therefore came under the searchlight of the word of God and could not bear it. Luther's first demonstration against the Papal authority was on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517. He was brought before the Church courts in Worms in 1521 and asked to retract, to which he replied; "Here I stand I can do no other, May God help me, Amen." With these words ringing in the ears of the Church Council Luther's life was threatened under the ban of the empire.

By 1529 at the Diet of Speier Luther had gained significant support and the gospel was taking root to such a degree that all Germany was in an uproar. On the 15<sup>th</sup> April a protest was handed to the Roman dignitaries assembled at Speier by the princes of Germany hoping for a final victory. Much had changed from Luther's protest in 1517 as a single monk. This was now *"the protest of princes and representatives of leading cities of the empire, who now for the first time appeared as an organised party. It was a protest of conscience bound in the Word of God against tyrannical authority."*<sup>vii</sup> From this protest at the Diet of Speier the Lutherans were first called Protestants. It is an appellation that has since taken on political connotations; others see it as a negative disapproval of all that is associated with Rome and would try to neutralise it as though to disarm it and make it safe for a broader audience. Protestantism however cannot be neutralised. It cannot be silenced because it is a return to the primitive purity of the New Testament. It is "Revived Christianity."<sup>viii</sup> It is simply the principle of

truth as revealed in the word of God and the freedom to express that truth which is established in the heart and conscience.

## 1. THE PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE

The Protestant movement was not planned or orchestrated as a policy or a line of attack on the Church of Rome. Its influences penetrate into the heart of the individual, regenerate the heart and revive society. It is not a political force, or an ecclesiastical power. No single denomination, or one form of Protestantism can identify itself as essentially or exclusively Protestant.<sup>ix</sup> It is the principle of truth that runs through Protestantism that unifies the entire movement. The reality of this became clear just months after the united front at the Protest of Speier when Luther and Melancthon disagreed and then a further disagreement between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians.

The Gospel that the new movement preached was no new gospel. It was the old gospel rediscovered and brought out from under the oppressive tyranny of Rome. Rome had built her kingdom on the principle of darkness and obscurity. The Bible was a hidden treasure; the Pope and his cardinals determined truth. Salvation was handed out at a price to the poor millions of Europe while Rome built her cathedrals and castles. Final authority lay with the Pope and salvation in the arms of the Church.

Protestantism however, was not an organisation or under the leadership of any one man. It was based on the objective truth of God's word and the right for every individual to exercise his own conscience in light of that Word. It cannot be understood, therefore, as an isolated movement of reform in the sixteenth-century. The protest of Luther is perhaps the clearest display but the reformers were conscious of other reform movements within the Church long before Luther nailed his thesis to the church door at Wittenburg, or presented his protest to the Diet of Speier. The Pope condemned **John Wycliffe**, an Oxford philosopher in 1377. **John Huss** of Prague was condemned at the council of Constance and burned at the stake on July 6<sup>th</sup> 1415. **The Waldensians** had for three centuries protested the demise of biblical truth within Romanism, separated from it, and

were living in little communities hidden in the French and Italian Alps. In September 1532 when the Reformation was gaining momentum, a delegation from Geneva traveled to Val Angrogna to a spot hidden in the Italian Alps called Chanforan. William Farel, and Antoine Saulnier were able to persuade the Waldensians that the new movement of religious excitement sweeping across Europe was the fulfillment of the long struggle against an unfaithful Church, a struggle in which the Waldensians had been engaged for centuries.<sup>x</sup> The Waldensians are the earliest continuing Protestant Church.

**The Protestant principle is one that calls for freedom** and as such rejects every human claim to absolutism and tyranny. For centuries Rome had bound the conscience of the people in matters both social and religious. Roman Catholicism claimed that the Church had the authority to interpret Scripture and from 1870 at the Vatican Council the Pope spoke dogmatically and finally *ex cathedra*, claiming that as the Pope he spoke infallibly. Such 'infallible' declarations are logically in no need of reform. Against such a claim to absolutism and infallibility, truth must protest.

The Roman system left no room for individual thought or expression. There was no room for the individual to decide for himself between right and wrong according to the claims of Scripture. Rome had produced a monster with one mind and one voice, claiming a monopoly on truth as she interpreted it. All who ventured to think or speak individually did so at the risk of death.

The call for freedom was not only from the tyranny of the Church in social, economic and religious matters but also from the tyranny of sin that held the individual heart. Luther found in his early struggles with sin that his heart was bound by a will that is wholly incapable of pleasing God and could not "overcome its motions to evil."<sup>xi</sup> The Church could give no answer to the questions of his heart and as he went to Scripture he found that the traditions and interpretations of men only compounded the problem. Protestantism therefore called for the breaking of the yoke of bondage that was placed on the nations, the rejection of the commandments of men, and the search for truth in the Word of God from the Spirit of God as He reveals Christ (John 16:13).

**The Protestant Principle is one that is inherently critical.** It is analytical and investigative, not only of other religions but also of itself, and primarily of itself. This is what the reformers meant when they said that the Church is "reformed and always to be reformed" (*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!*). The principle of self-criticism and self-examination inherent in Protestantism springs from the Protestant understanding of the gospel<sup>xii</sup> and the absolute invariable nature of a sovereign God. It is a declaration of what the church is and what it intends to be by the grace of God. Furthermore, it is a recognition that good theology does not always produce good results, and an admission that in a world of change and spiritual decline there must be a continual examination according to the command, and subject to, the truth of Scripture.

The principle of truth that runs through the Protestant ethos is vibrant and vehement. It is this principle that cuts itself away from cancerous error and begins afresh, resulting in fresh new and sound denominations. Take for instance the history of Presbyterianism and see how truth departed and raised itself again in a new and vibrant denomination, thus keeping Protestantism alive.

## 2. THE PROTESTANT PROPOSITION

Protestantism is accused of being a negative approach to religion, always against the establishment, and never any fruitful contribution to make to the ecumenical growth of Christianity. Contrary to these indictments Protestantism is a very positive force. As the gospel spread throughout Europe it became clear what kind of a movement this was and what sort of reform it called for. It was not a call merely for moral and ethical reform; it was a call for spiritual reform. Luther learned that Christ was the foundation on which the sinner rests and that the Scripture is the foundation on which the Church must rest. To Christ he pointed the individual and to the authority of Scripture he pointed the Church.

Martin Luther discovered this simple Protestant proposition of the authority of Scripture and all that flowed from it but it was John Calvin who unwrapped the package for future generations. Calvin systematised this rediscovered theology in the "*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*," the earliest theological publication of the

Reformation. It is from this document that the confessional statements of Reformed Churches came: Westminster Confession of Faith of Presbyterianism, the Thirty Nine Articles of the Anglican Church, the London Confession of the Baptists.

The one over-arching theme that characterised the writings of Calvin and therefore the entire Protestant proposition was the sovereignty of God. Teaching tenaciously the sovereignty of God was simply recognition of God in every area of life and as such undermined the entire Roman Catholic system. Protestantism did not reinvent Christianity or begin some novel religion. Sixteenth century Protestantism as a continuum of reform movements throughout history brought back into focus the authority of God and His Word.

For the Reformers there were five main areas which expressed and highlighted this theme of the absolute sovereignty of God; *Sola Scriptura*, *Soli Deo Gloria*, *Solo Christo*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*.

Luther made his initial stand against the Diet of Worms on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1521 by emphasising **Sola Scriptura**, the sole authority of Scripture as it alone can bind the conscience; *“Since your most Serene Majesty and your High Mightiness, require from me a direct and precise answer, I will give you one, and this is it. I cannot submit my faith either to the Pope or to the councils, because it is clear as day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless, therefore, I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or on clear and plain grounds of reason, so that conscience shall bind me to make acknowledgement or error, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to go against conscience... Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me.”* <sup>xiii</sup> This is the testimony of Scripture concerning itself; Psalm 138:2 *“Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.”* II Timothy 3:16-17 *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”*

In contrast to the many distortions of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice the reformers maintained that all of life was to be lived **Soli Deo Gloria**, (for the glory of God alone). Monasticism made a distinction between ascetic Christian living and normal mundane life, and celibacy set the clergy apart from their people inferring

dishonour on the marriage institution. The Reformation however called for all of life to be sanctified to the glory of God according to the clear testimony of Scripture; I Corinthians 10:31 *“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”*

When Staupitz, Luther’s supervisor told Luther to *“look to Christ”* it was this view of Christ that Luther realised that salvation was not in the Roman priesthood but that it is **Solo Christo** (by Christ alone). Rome had hidden Christ behind the elaborate tapestry of external ritual and doctrinal deceit. The Roman priesthood as sacrificing mediator placed itself between the people and God, while the church received payment for escape from hell in the practice of indulgences. The reformers called attention to the fact that Christ is the only mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2:5-6) and that his work alone is necessary for salvation from sin. They highlighted the priesthood of all believers <sup>xiv</sup> and saw the work of the Christian ministry as purely functional, rejecting any form of sacerdotalism.

The reformers furthermore taught that salvation was **Sola Gratia**. This claim was a recognition of the inadequacy of all human claims to righteousness and also the prior action of God in anything to do with our salvation, and that all faith and obedience on our part is only in response to God’s gracious dealings with us. As one hymn-writer would later write: *“I sought the Lord and afterward I knew, He moved my soul to seek him seeking me; It was not I that found my Saviour true; No I was found of thee.”*

The doctrine of **Sola Fide** (faith alone without works) was central to sixteenth century Protestant theology. Rome taught that faith and good works produce justification whereas the reformers pointed to the Scriptural teaching that faith produces justification and then good works. Salvation, as the reformers saw it, was a *declaration of legal righteousness* before God by faith rather than being *made righteous* by good works. Ephesians 2:8-9 *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”*

It was on this positive Protestant proposition of the sovereignty of God in all areas of salvation and life that the reformers stood. For them it was not a question of finding differences for debate and

discussion; this was not a return to twelfth century Protestant Scholasticism. Rather it was a matter of truth against error; it was a matter of fact against fiction. The only way forward for the Church was a return to truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures without the addition of ecclesiastical tradition or supposed apostolic succession.

### 3. THE PROTESTANT PROGRESSION

Biblical Christianity cannot die because it is a dynamic movement; it is built on the basic principle and re-examination of truth and an intrinsic missionary spirit to disseminate truth. It is a movement, moreover, that is kept alive by protest. The word protest today is a negative and dirty word. The modern sense in most dictionaries has the words 'objection' or 'against' prominent in the definition. The original sense of the word however is very different. It is a Latin word, 'protestari,' and you can see the compound, which make up this word, 'pro-testari' or "to testify for."

The Christian is always to be against theological error in the church and moral evil in society. <sup>xv</sup> Negativity is not necessarily wrong. Indeed it is proper in its place. Protestantism however is a positive thing and standing against error must always mean standing for truth. As already noted to protest is to testify *for* something, and this is exactly how Luther and the early reformers saw the issue. When Luther was corresponding with Erasmus on the subject of the "Enslaved Will" (*The Bondage of the Will*) Erasmus censured him for, in Luther's words, "being over-bold in making assertions." In his reply to this censure Luther writes: <sup>xvi</sup>

*"Away now with sceptics and academics from the company of us Christians; let us have men who will assert, men twice as inflexible as very stoics! Take the Apostle Paul – how often does he call for that 'full assurance' (Col. 2:2; I Thess. 1:5; Hebrews 6:11, 10; 22) which is, simply, an assertion of conscience, of the highest degree of certainty and conviction...Peter commands us to give a reason of the hope that is in us (I Peter 3:15)...Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertion and you take away Christianity."*

This was the spirit of the Protestant Reformation. It was this God-given grace and confidence in the truth that launched the Reformation. It is that same spirit under which it has progressed, and will progress in the future.

Since Protestantism took root and spread through Europe and across the western world it is difficult to imagine that is ever was in a worse state than it presently finds itself. In many respects Protestant Christendom is on the road back to Medieval Romanism. The Charismatic Movement has abandoned the protestant principle of Sola Scriptura for the less than satisfactory 'personal experience.' Rome provided through the centuries in her art, incense and eucharist for that which appeals to the senses. For the Scriptures to be read and accepted as truth was not enough. The modern charismatic worshipper similarly is searching for more than the Scripture promises or permits. They will admit that there is shallowness about such a form of worship but the quest for experience over Scripture is magnetic to the carnal mind. Erasmus, the Dutch humanist and theologian during the time of the Reformation, was equally critical of the excesses of Romanism, but he remained faithful to it.

Modern evangelicalism has forsaken the Protestant principle of Solo Christo for a psychological conversion <sup>xvii</sup> in place of the sound evangelical conversion called for in the Protestant Reformation. The "New Measures" of Charles Finney in the early to mid 1800's and the subsequent easy-believism has left the evangelical church with a Christless gospel and the only support available is a glut of pseudo-Christian self-help books. <sup>xviii</sup>

The current barrenness of evangelicalism has resulted in an insatiable desire for an external and tangible Christianity and lust for novelty in worship. There is a return to unbelieving Judaism in many areas and elements that are best described as pagan superstition. Jewish Shofars, prayer shawls and anointing oils are selling in Christian bookstores. It would be bad enough to excuse this as commercialised Christianity but it is much more sinister, much worse. There is a strange significance attached to many of these items for personal devotion and spiritual security.

The ecumenical movement has encouraged a unity within Christendom that is a reversal of the Reformation. Liberalism has fostered such a freedom of theology as to invite the same destructive syncretism that crippled the early Church. There is the same secularisation of the Church that was known in Constantine's day, making it a fashionable institution, while leaving the heart of man undisturbed in his sin. In case some think that this is excessive, over-simplification or outright exaggeration consider the fact that in 1826 Thomas Chalmers saw the mutual toleration for the pagan deities in the Roman Empire as analogous of the respectability and toleration of modern nominal Christianity, he writes: <sup>xix</sup>

*"There may be among us the most complacent toleration for a mitigated and misconceived Christianity, while there is no toleration whatever for the real Christianity of the New Testament. So long as it only claims an assigned place in the history of man, while it leaves the heart of man in the undisturbed possession of all its native and inborn propensities – so long as it confines itself to the demand of a little room for its Sabbaths and its decencies, while it leaves the general system of human life to move as before, at the impulse of those old principles which have characterised the mind of man throughout all the generations of the world – so long as it exacts no more than an occasional act of devotion, while it suffers the objects of wealth and fame, and temporal enjoyments, to be prosecuted with as intense and habitual a devotion as ever – above all, so long as the services which it imposes are not other than the services which would have been rendered at all events to the idol of interest, or the idol of reputation; then Christianity, so far from being the object of any painful recoil on the part of man, is looked upon, by very many in society, as a seemingly and most desirable appendage to the whole mass of their other concerns."*

Where does this leave the Protestant Church today? The principle of truth as it is turned to examine Protestantism finds as Isaiah found in his day that *"judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter."* (Isaiah 59:14).

As Jeremiah found a century later *"truth is perished, and is cut off from their mouth."* Jeremiah 7:28.

There was nothing new in sixteenth century Protestantism. It was simply a return to biblical Christianity. Twentieth century Protestantism however is quite different. There is nothing old in it and its basic assumption is that newer is better. The word of choice today in Christendom is 'toleration' which calls for at best a mushy ecumenism or at worst, an anaemic interfaith fellowship. Both of which call for different degrees of syncretism like the Philistines who set the Ark of the Covenant beside Dagon or like the ancient Israelites under Jeroboam *"who made Israel to sin"* when he set up idols and ordained priests who were not of the house of Levi, and set feasts days *"which he had devised of his own heart"* (See I Kings 12). Truth is not neutral, and God is not neutral. The Bible clearly portrays God as one who *"cannot coexist peacefully in the temple of Dagon – either Dagon will wind up in pieces or God will leave, or both."* <sup>xx</sup>

Protestantism calls for a fresh and vibrant re-examination, for a return to the absolute authority of the Word of God and a belief in salvation by grace alone through faith alone by the work of Christ alone. The progress of biblical Christianity calls on the church of Christ to *Rise up, O men of God! Have done with lesser things. Give heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the King of Kings.* It calls for discrimination of error, discernment to know truth, grace to live truth, courage to assert truth, or 'to testify for truth' – protest.

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, (n.d.; reprint, N. Ireland: Mourne Missionary Trust, 1986), 1:2.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, 3

<sup>iii</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. (1858; reprint, 8 Vols. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002). 3:91

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid*, 3:125

<sup>v</sup> J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, (n.d.; reprint, N. Ireland: Mourne Missionary Trust, 1986), 1:8

<sup>vi</sup> For a sample of these abuses notice;

- The worship of the Saints appeared at the beginning of the fourth century
- The doctrine of Mariolatry was adopted at the Council of Ephesus in 431.<sup>vi</sup>

- Monasticism by the fifth century is a growing movement bring with it all the associated evils of celibacy and debauchery.
- The crucifix was developed as an ornament in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century and image worship continued to wax and wane it was well established in 842 AD.
- The first canonisation of Saints in 993
- In 1229 at the Synod of Toulouse the reading of the Bible by laymen was forbidden

vii Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. (1858; reprint, 8 Vols. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002). 7:692

viii J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, (n.d.; reprint, N. Ireland: Mourne Missionary Trust, 1986), 1:2.

ix John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through Its Development*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 302ff.

x Giorgio Tourn, *You Are My Witnesses: The Waldensians Across 800 Years*, (Torino, Italy: Claudiana, 1989), 70.

xi Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (1957; reprint, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1973), 156.

xii John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through Its Development*, (new York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 314.

xiii J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, (n.d.; reprint, N. Ireland: Mourne Missionary Trust, 1986), 1:344

xiv This Doctrine simply affirms the common calling and privileges of all believers before God. See for example I Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6.

xv Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of A Troubled Protestant*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), Authors Preface.

xvi Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (1957; reprint, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1973), 67.

xvii See *Conversion: Psychological and Spiritual*; Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 61-89.

xviii See John McArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 81ff.

xix Thomas Chalmers, "Introductory Essay," *The Christians Daily Walk*, Henry Scudder. (Glasgow: William Collins, 1826), vii-vii.

xx Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of A Troubled Protestant*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 31.