



What is a Protestant?

THE UNITED STATES is sometimes called a "Protestant nation." It isn't, of course. It is a nation of 150,697,361 free people, free to choose whatever path to God they please. But it was settled largely by Protestants and today the majority of its people belong to Protestant denominations; it has, in fact, the largest Protestant population of any nation on earth.

By latest tally, 81,862,328 Americans belong to religious bodies. Of these, 59 per cent are Protestant. Roman Catholics account for 33 per cent, Jews for six per cent and other faiths for two per cent.

What about this American majority? What do the Protestants stand for? How do they differ from Catholics? And from Jews?

U.S. Protestants belong to 250,000 congregations, count more than 90,000 ministers, and own approximately 200,000 church buildings (from tiny, one-room churches rising out of wheat fields to New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which, when finished, will be the second largest cathedral in the world, second only to St. Peter's in Rome).

But still, you ask, "What is a Protestant?" For there are 222 Protestant denominations, ranging from the Methodists, with 8,792,569 members, to tiny sects like the Primitive Friends which, at a recent count, had a flock of 13.

Protestants

Some are separated by their ideas on liturgy: for example, the elaborate rites of the Protestant Episcopal Church as against the plain, anti-ceremonial doctrine of the Quakers.

Some are separated by geography: the oft-confused "Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." and the "Presbyterian Church in the U.S."—the former northern, the latter southern. Some are separated by a thread, as was almost literally the case when one sect of Mennonites separated from another over whether coats should have hooks and eyes, or buttons.

Between 1900 and 1936, 29 various denominations buried their differences and merged into 13 denominations. But then during the same period 76 *new* ones sprang up. Ministers tell the story of a sect calling itself the "Church of God," from which a dissenting group split off to call itself the "True Church of God," from which, in turn, a rebel fragment split to call itself the "Only True Church of God."

Despite this variety, Protestantism's main strength lies in its 12 top denominations. Each lists more than a million members and, combined, they total 77 per cent of all Protestants. These are, according to a *Christian Herald* tally:

Methodist, 8,792,569

Southern Baptist, 6,761,265

National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., 4,385,206

National Baptist Convention of America, 2,594,521

Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 2,401,849

Protestant Episcopal, 2,297,989

United Lutheran Church, 1,814,172

Disciples of Christ, 1,738,605

American Baptist Convention, 1,583,360

Lutheran Missouri Synod, 1,569,364

Congregational Christian, 1,184,661

African Methodist Episcopal, 1,066,301

Denominationalism was—in its early days—blood and bone of the Protestant religion. Protestantism was born out of revolt against the Pope of Rome, and its followers had no stomach for rearing up a Pope of their own.

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Protestants

WHAT DO PROTESTANTS stand for today?

Methodist Bishop Fred Pierce Corson feels a lot of Protestants themselves don't know the answer. He says, "If you ask a member what it means to be a Protestant, he is likely to answer that a Protestant does not have to go to church unless he wants to. Beyond that he sees no difference and recognizes no benefits."

To set the record straight, Rev. Clarence Seidenspinner, Minister of the First Methodist Church in Racine, Wisconsin, an authority on Protestantism, explains:

"Here is something which every Protestant ought to know when asked about the chief differences between Protestant Christianity and the Catholic position. He should not think of such things as going to confession, or votive lights in the sanctuary, or the celibate priesthood, or other outward practices which characterize Catholicism, but rather of that basic right of the Protestant which a Catholic does not possess—namely, the right to exercise his private judgment. Tolerance, liberty, freedom—these are the great words of Protestant Christianity."

This is, of course, a Protestant point of view. A Roman Catholic explanation was set down by Cardinal Mercier in his Lenten Pastoral for 1908. He declared, "Catholicism says that the Christian faith is communicated by an official organ of transmission—the Catholic Episcopate—and that it is based on the acceptance of the authority of that organ. Protestantism, on the contrary, says that faith is exclusively the faith of individual judgment applied to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures."

Salvation is a goal of life for both Protestants and Catholics. But how is one saved? Luther rejected the idea that man could work for his salvation through good deeds and acts of charity. Instead, for him, salvation could come only as a gift

Protestants

of God, made possible only through *faith*. This doctrine, known as “justification by faith” remains a cardinal principal of Protestantism.

The more one digs into Protestant theology, the more emphasis he finds upon the *individual* and his personal relationship to God, a doctrine sometimes called “the priesthood of believers.”

“Can you put the essence of Protestantism into a single sentence?” I asked Dr. David E. Roberts, Professor of the Philosophy of Religion, as we sat over a cafeteria lunch at Union Theological Seminary.

“Protestantism binds the individual to God himself—not to any human institution,” he replied.

But what, then, is the theological difference between Protestants and Jews? Dr. Samuel McCrea Cavert, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, explained it this way: “It is in how significantly they regard the personality of Jesus. Both Jews and Christians hold in common everything that is in the Old Testament. But the Christian, to give the very minimum concept, believes that in some unique measure and in some unique way God entered into human life in the person of Jesus.”

In short, while some Jews believe Jesus was a great teacher and a prophet, Judaism as a religion does not accept the concept of a divine Christ, son of God.

However, Dr. Cavert hastens to point out, there is much which all three great American religions have in common. He listed four pillars upon which Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism rest together:

“1. The Old Testament—through its revelations all three religions believe that the ultimate reality is more than mechanical and material life.

“2. God—all believe that an ultimate reality, revealing itself in intelligence, purpose, will, and not just matter, is the final determinant of life.

“3. Ethics—all have a common

Protestants

ethics, a common morality based upon the Ten Commandments. Love and righteousness are exalted in all three religions.

“4. The sovereignty of God—Protestants, Catholics and Jews alike believe in a power greater than ourselves, in the purposefulness of life, in the fact that man was created by God and is meant to serve God.”

Weigh these four propositions against Communist materialism and you come to the same conclusion Dr. Cavert did: *“Protestant, Catholic and Jew stand together in the fundamental cleavage in the world today.”*

Protestantism in America has been no ivory tower religion. It has struck out at economic ills and injustice, at prejudice and discrimination, at greed and ignorance, wherever it has found them—at the risk of rabid criticism.

The Home Missions Council, one of the inter-denominational agencies amalgamated into the new National Council of Churches, has done a tireless job of improving the lot of migrant farm workers, one of the most down-trodden groups in America. The Federal Council of Churches, predecessor to the National Council, has done pioneer work in mental health. It has educated pastors everywhere in modern psychology, so they could be more effective on sick calls, in bereavements, parent-child problems, marital crises.

The Council’s Department of the Church and Economic Life has worked unceasingly to keep our national economy spiritually healthy. Right now this department is engrossed in a huge research project, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, on “the role of ethics in economic life.”

Christianity in daily life seemed to be the hallmark of Protestantism in America today, as I found it. To love God and to love thy neighbor as thyself were the prime ideals.

Protestants

But the Protestant church is huge and sprawling. Where can you find it capsulated, summed up? Where is the *heart* of Protestantism?

I asked Dr. Roswell P. Barnes, head of the National Council's Division of Christian Life and Work.

He told me.

So I went there.

I was surprised at first, for the heart of Protestantism was not New York or Chicago or Los Angeles or any of the big places of America. It was a little valley, deep in the hinterland of Pennsylvania, with hemlock-sided mountains hovering over it and a hungry creek lapping its way through. I stayed for a time in three towns along the creek and two over the hills, and not one of them had as many people in it as the apartment house in which I formerly lived in New York.

"Go there," Barnes had said, "and you'll see the life force of Protestantism. Our strength is in the small towns. Most of our churches are country churches."

My first view of the valley was at twilight. I got off the train at Towanda, Pennsylvania. Rev. James M. Moffett met me there and drove me into the Valley of the Wyalusing Creek. As we rounded a bend five deer eyed us from the roadside, then bobbed away through the brush.

Reverend Moffett has three churches in the valley—the Stevensville Presbyterian Church, the Rushville Presbyterian Church and the Camptown Community Church. These towns have populations of around 200 each and cannot afford a minister's exclusive services. Camptown (believed to be the town of Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races") has brought Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists together in its Community Church. The pulpit is shared by Moffett and a young Methodist minister, Rev. William W. Reid. Reverend Reid also has churches in the tiny nearby towns of Standing Stone, Herrickville and

Protestants

Beaver Meadows.

Sunday is a busy day for these two preachers as they hurry through the valley and over the hills (Reid by jeep) to conduct three or four services. Reverend Reid, 27, is fresh out of Yale Divinity School, having made the decision to go into religion instead of botany during long, contemplative hours in a German prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. Reverend Moffett, 45, is the son of a famous missionary to Korea, Rev. Samuel Austin Moffett. His mother was a medical missionary and three of his four brothers are ministers. When he was offered a larger, better-paying pastorate, he replied, "No, I'll stay here in the valley. This is America."

To help feed his three growing youngsters on a rural minister's salary, Reverend Moffett raises gladiolas. This year he has the teenagers of the valley raising them, too. They're growing 10,000 plants on bits of land Reverend Moffett can "borrow" from the farmers and, with the proceeds, will send young folks to religious camp-conferences.

Lanky Jim Moffett is a familiar figure on the farms. When Miles "Mike" Haight's hen house burned down, the parson was on hand with the rest of the neighbors to cut timber for a new one. You might find him chatting with Ben Sumner in the barn at milking time, or on Lacey Van De Mark's farm at silo-filling.

On alternate Wednesday evenings he and Mrs. Moffett will be at the Rook game at Rushville Community Hall. The big talk at the Community Hall right now is how Wright Giffin carved a chunk out of the hillside with his bulldozer so farmers driving to church doings could have a place to park.

One afternoon I rode over the hills of Herrickville with Reverend Reid in his jeep. We called on Mrs. Eloise Welliver, a very religious woman. She told us how she happened to become religious. Here's

Protestants

what she said:

"I was very ambitious when I was younger. But I was thwarted at every turn and became embittered. Finally I got down on my knees one day and said, 'Here I am, Lord. I've made a mess of my life. Here are the pieces.' That was 18 years ago. I have had faith ever since. Whenever a doubt came, I simply remembered Jesus saying, 'Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.' I just took Him at His word."

Many people, in Mrs. Welliver's opinion, are "coming to the end of themselves" these days. That's why they're turning to God.

Next day, Sunday, at the church in Rushville a visiting minister, Rev. Robert R. Smyrl, said in his sermon, "We can worship our God any time, any place. We do not need to face any direction; we do not need to present ourselves to any special person to be an intermediary for us. We can worship in the fields or on a mountain top, in the quiet of our room or at busy noonday."

I thought of those lines as I went choring with farmer Benton Sumner in Stevensville. While his hired man was milking the 17 hornless Holsteins in the barn, Ben pulled ensilage down from the silo and carried a pail of it to each stall. He gave warm water to some young heifers and expertly eyed a new calf which had been born during the night and was still wet. He patted the hunting dogs, fed the hogs and the white leghorns, turned the sheep out of their shed, and tenderly tossed some grain and a forkful of hay to old Pete.

Pete is a horse well beyond his days of usefulness and expensive to feed, but Ben just won't get rid of him. "Might as well take care of him in his old age," Ben said.

Then he tenderly examined a ewe which had been hurt by a frisky heifer, and adjusted a bandage around its girth. Ben sent Pearl, his collie, scampering after some sheep which had strayed too far and

Protestants

called some back himself, shouting, "Hy nanny! H-y-y-y nanny!"

But Ben doesn't go to church very often. Of course, he loves all those living things he cares for. And his farmhouse is warm with hospitality. And the neighbors know that when anyone has trouble, Ben will turn up to help. Maybe that's what Reverend Smyrl meant when he said, "We can worship our God any time, any place"—even in a barn, or a manger.

"Religion is a way of life here," remarked 16-year-old Janet Bates, who was tending the general store in Stevensville. She's one teen-ager who isn't itching for any big city. Stevensville, which is just a turn in the road where a bridge crossed Wyalusing Creek—a post office, a general store and an abandoned old mill—is good enough for her. "I like it here," she said, "because in Stevensville people *like each other*."

It is said the heart of religion is love. "*A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another.*" Says Reverend Moffett: "It's love, when your neighbor has a hole in his shoe and *your* foot is cold."

The valley is full of that kind of feeling.

Bruce Dodge was sick once at harvest time, so sick he couldn't get in his potatoes. "First thing I knew," said he, "there was the sound of potatoes being dumped into my cellar." A dozen neighboring farmers had dug them for him—and also poured a concrete floor for one of his farm buildings that needed repair.

Last year, when Floyd Hitchcock's house burned down, the neighbors rounded up so much furniture and clothing that he ended up with more than he had before.

Prayer, throughout the valley, is a constant thing. I never sat down to a meal with those farm folk but what a prayer to God was offered. Young people's meetings began and closed with prayer. At a meeting at Mabel Van Guilder's house, teenagers stood up in a circle, holding

Protestants

hands, and each offered a prayer in rotation. When the Men's Fellowship Club of Camptown got together at Ed Kennedy's house, fathers and sons bowed their heads and said prayers together.

As I threaded my way back along the Wyalusing Creek, and over the hills in Reverend Reid's jeep, and finally boarded the Black Diamond Express for New York, I knew why Dr. Barnes had called this the "heart of Protestantism" in America.

But there was still another way in which the valley was a microcosm of the Protestant world. The Camptown Community Church was *one church with three denominations* in it. It signified the most vigorous movement in modern Protestantism—the pull toward unity.

Need Protestantism have 222 denominations? Or even the 31 major denominations in which 95 per cent of its members are concentrated? What about the duplication of effort, the inefficiency, the rivalry, the dissipation of strength resulting from such fragmentation?

Protestants have been aware of the problem for some time. Says Professor Harry C. Munro, of Texas Christian University, "The multiplication of denominations in America has sometimes been looked upon as a reflection upon Christianity. It is actually a tribute to American freedom and tolerance." For many of the denominations were set up by early settlers seeking religious freedom, bringing with them ideas of free worship not tolerated in Europe during that period.

The drive toward unity—not necessarily "organic" unity, but at least "cooperative" unity—has been gathering steam for over 100 years. Many mergers of denominations have occurred, and more are on the fire. But the biggest step toward unity in Protestantism's entire history was taken at Cleveland in November, 1950. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. was founded, bringing within its fold 25 major Protestant

Protestants

denominations (as well as four Eastern Orthodox churches). It incorporated the old Federal Council of Churches along with 11 other inter-denominational agencies. In its churches are more than 30,000,000 communicant members, more than 60 per cent of all the Protestants in the country.

Four thousand delegates founded the National Council in Cleveland's Public Auditorium during a blizzard-bound week when Sherman tanks were mobilized to pull the city out of a 21-inch snow.

"The miracle is not that we got here despite the snow," one delegate told me. "The miracle is that we got here despite our denominational differences!"

Actually none of the denominations gave up any of their spiritual or liturgical differences. Protestants never have wanted an authoritative church over them. As one delegate excitedly warned me, "Don't confuse this Council with a Pope and Hierarchy!" Indeed, the National Council itself carefully made clear that "what was achieved is, of course, not church union but it is church cooperation in a degree that we never had before." The resplendent ceremonies took place beneath a huge suspended sign—"This Nation Under God."

Out in the Wyalusing Valley they tell a story about a farmer who drove to town with a load of grain and met a preacher who asked, "What is your denomination?"

"Well sir," replied the farmer. "Thar's three roads leadin' to this town. Thar's the mountain road, and thar's the short cut, and thar's the swamp road. Now if you was goin' to buy my grain, would you ask which road I come by? Or would you want to know— How good is my grain!" ■ ■

PAGEANT

A P R I L , 1 9 5 2 : p . 1 0 9