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Christian Disunity: Tracing Scriptural Discords of the Last Two Millenniums

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Introduction

How is it that “In God We Trust” is printed on American currency and engraved in the U.S. House and Senate Chambers, yet the Bible is not a part of the United States public-school system? Laws that have been passed within the last 50 years suggest America is distancing itself from the Holy Scripture’s standard of morality. For instance, the Scriptures support marriage preservation avowing, “marriage is to be held in honor among all” (Heb. 13:4a, NASB). Yet, the 1970s accommodated easy marital divorce with the passing of the no-fault divorce reform.¹ Another example pertains to the sanctity of human life. The Bible exhibits how God told the prophet Jeremiah, “before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5). Also, conveyed in the book of Psalms, a reader finds that God formed the psalmist’s inward parts and wove him in his mother’s womb (Psa. 139:13). In the book of Proverbs, a reader learns the shedding of innocent blood is an abomination to God, and is something He hates (Pro. 6:16-17). Still, surgical abortions were legalized in America in 1973.²

The apostle Paul affirmed all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteous (2 Tim. 3:16). In other words, every verse in the Bible is given by the inspiration of God, and is therefore beneficial as a guide for man to do every good work.³ How did America arrive at its indifference toward the Bible; not considering the Bible as the infallible source of authority in which to live by? Religious divisions concerning the Holy Scriptures have transpired throughout human history. A historical overview can fill in gaps promoting a greater understanding; however, religious influences and happenings over the span of 2000 years are exceptionally vast. Therefore, the full scope of this paper is limited as it focuses on three major splits that occurred during the first 1500 years. Then, it examines specific occurrences during the 400 years following.

Attaining a fuller picture through historical research is helpful in five ways: 1) it is helpful in areas of apologetics—defending the Christian faith and the authority of God’s Word; 2) it is helpful for edification—the equipping and building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16); 3) recognizing the continuity of biblically obedient Christ followers as observed throughout history can help Christians understand they are not alone in their obedience of faith and long-suffering; 4) an overview of the historical cultural rifts that occurred regarding Scripture, since the time of the early church, can build faith; 5) historical knowledge of the disputes over the Holy Scriptures adds to understanding about humanity and can promote humility and patience required of godly character. Tracing religious discords that have occurred over the last 2000 years reveals the roots of disunity preceding America’s apathy toward the Bible as the infallible authority and standard to live by.

¹ Stephane Mechoulan, “Divorce Laws and the Structure of the American Family,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 35, no. 1 (January 2006): 144.

² Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., “Abortion,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* (Washington: CQ Press, 2010).

³ J. W. Roberts, “Every Scripture Inspired of God,” *Restoration Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1961): 35.

Divisions Among the Early Church and Through to the Middle Ages

Judaism-Christianity Separation

Judaism, Christianity, and Catholicism experienced significant divisions pertaining to the Holy Scriptures during the time of Christ and subsequent 1500 years following. Religious disharmony first transpired among the Jewish people. Though Jesus was born a Jew, as were His chosen apostles, the Christian movement brought division between the Jews.⁴ The movement, led by Jesus, was not one that was trying to establish a new religion, as Jesus was deeply devoted to the Old Testament Scriptures. The movement sought to *renew* the old religion and *fulfill* it. Jesus was cultivating an expanded interpretation of the ancient Scripture in view of His fulfillment of it.⁵

The Christian movement required a pursuit and following of Jesus and included *all* people, which was different from Judaism.⁶ Jesus wanted the Jewish people, who had studied and lived by the ancient Scripture, to understand that He was the fulfillment of what the Scriptures foretold. However, the Jew's partial spiritual hardening and desire to hold fast to tradition, as revealed in the book of Mark and Romans, influenced major discord between Christianity and Judaism. Paul, in his letter to the early church in Rome, exposed the mystery that facilitated the discord among the Jews. He wrote, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25b). Paul affirmed that some Jews received understanding, but the rest of the Jews were unable to perceive truth (Rom. 11:5-8). The partial hardening among the Jews was allowed by God, because of their history of disobedience and to elicit Israel's repentance.⁷ Also, an exemplary narrative pertaining to the core of the Christian-Jewish dissonance is found in the book of Mark. Directing His comment to the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus asserted, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:9). Jesus was affronting the heart of Jewish tradition. Though the Scriptures prophesied about the Messiah to come, some of the Jews did not accept that their Messiah had arrived. Without the revelation of who Jesus truly is, a statement such as that was heretical to the devoted Jew.

Jesus held a high view of Scripture as evidenced throughout the New Testament. For example, in the book of Matthew, Jesus asked religious leaders at least six times whether they had read the Scriptures. Also, though Jesus fulfilled what the Old Testament prophesied, after His resurrection, He continued to point to the Scriptures for understanding. An example of this is observed in the last chapter of Luke. As two disciples walked along on the road to Emmaus, they were talking, and the resurrected Jesus joined them on the road. They were unaware that it was

⁴ *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, s.vv., "Judaism and Christianity," accessed November 16, 2017, http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/content/entry/cupdct/judaism_and_christianity/0.

⁵ F. Scott Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 64, no. 4 (October 2010): 368.

⁶ *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, s.vv., "Christianity and Judaism: Partings of the Ways," accessed November 16, 2017, http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/content/entry/ivplater/christianity_and_judaism.

⁷ Craig S. Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth, 2009), 140.

Jesus that had joined them. Jesus asked them about what they were saying (Luke 24:17). The two disciples were speaking with doubt and unbelief about the death of Jesus (Luke 24:14-24). Referring to what the Scriptures had prophesied of Him, Jesus questioned them asking, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:25). Then, Luke described how Jesus, “explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27b). From the very beginnings of the early Christian church, Jesus made it clear that Scripture is essential for understanding.

Christianity-Catholicism Dissent

The next religious division associated with Scripture happened among Christianity. Catholicism had derived from a split that occurred amid Christians in the Roman Empire. The Christian discord stemmed from differences regarding interpretations of Scripture. The apostle Paul wrote about the importance of unity in harmony with Christ that believers are to maintain (Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 1:10). Disagreements over the Scriptures had been handled by bishops in a series of councils since the time of the early church. Their goal was, “to protect the true faith from being overridden by human opinions and speculations.”⁸ Heading into the second millennium, the challenges facing the Roman church pertained to opposing convictions regarding Scripture.

By 1054, a split had officially transpired between the Eastern Orthodox believers and the Western Roman church. The word orthodox comes from the Greek language and means “right opinion.”⁹ The Eastern Orthodox church considered itself the continuation from the original Christ followers during the time of Jesus.¹⁰ Catholicism believed similarly, yet it had developed into a very different church as evidenced by their biblical handling and religious practices. A contributing factor for the Christian East-West division was a rise in power experienced in the West. The West’s power was partially influenced by an interpretation and application of a biblical passage. The verse played a major role in the popery and apostolic succession ideals for the Western Roman church, and is found in the gospel of Matthew.¹¹ The Matthew passage shows Jesus telling Simon that he is Peter. Peter means rock, and Jesus said that upon this rock He will build His church (Mat. 16:18).

The Western Roman church believed the Church was literally founded upon the apostle Peter. They believed that the same powers Christ possessed were given especially to Peter, and therefore, by divine sequence, the pope and all popes that followed, “inherited the totality of Peter’s powers.”¹² Also, this belief influenced the Catholic’s conviction that, “the church is the

⁸ Avery Cardinal Dulles, “The Orthodox Imperative,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 165, no. 1 (2006): 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *The Encyclopedia of religion in America*, 2nd ed., s.vv. “Eastern Orthodox Tradition and Heritage,” accessed November 16, 2017, http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/content/entry/cqreligionam/eastern_orthodox_tra.

¹¹ David L Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 406.

¹² Walter Ullmann, *A Short History of the Papacy in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 13.

guarantor of the correct interpretation of Scripture.”¹³ The Eastern church did not deny Peter’s significance, but the dissonance stemmed from the West’s ideals of supremacy.¹⁴ The conversation that occurred between Jesus and Peter did not translate to an attestable apostolic succession for the East. They considered Christians apostolic by their attainment of sound biblical doctrine from legitimate teachers.¹⁵

Though the Catholics recognized the Bible’s authority as the divinely inspired text, they feared ill-treatment and deviation would occur with the use of the Scriptures among the public.¹⁶ The growing theological differences proved to substantially contribute to dividing the Christian East and West churches definitively.

Catholicism-Protestant Conflict

The third religious division concerning the Holy Scriptures occurred amid the believers of the Catholic church. Protestantism developed from disagreements among Catholicism. Although Latin was not the common language of the Christians in Rome, a Latin translation of the Bible was the standard version used during this period.¹⁷ Furthermore, the leaders of the church were educated; whereas, the general assembly of believers largely lacked even the ability to read. Therefore, the Christian congregation was dependent upon priests and patricians for sharing what the Holy Scriptures revealed.¹⁸ Catholic practices and beliefs regarding, “the papacy, the worship of saints and relics, transubstantiation, the sacrifice of the mass, prayers and masses for the dead, works of supererogation, purgatory, indulgences, the system of monasticism with its perpetual vows and ascetic practices, besides many superstitious rites and ceremonies,”¹⁹ became matters of conflict among the Catholics.

¹³ *The Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, s.vv. “Bible, Interpretation Of,” accessed November 4, 2017, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781608712427.n50>.

¹⁴ *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 1st ed., s.vv. “Rome, Ancient Patriarchate Of,” accessed November 30, 2017, http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/content/entry/wileyeneac/rome_ancient_patriarchate_of/0.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume VII. Modern Christianity. The German Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: The Electronic Bible Society, 1998), under “The Authority of the Scriptures,” accessed November 4, 2017, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc7.ii.i.vi.html>.

¹⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, s.vv. “Bible, As Sacred Text, Translations, Cultural Role,” accessed November 4, 2017, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781608712427.n49>.

¹⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume VII. Modern Christianity. The German Reformation*, under “Necessity of a Reformation.”

¹⁹ Ibid., “Protestantism and Romanism.”

Martin Luther was a Catholic who headed this dissonance. He was a biblical theology professor. He held high positions in the monastery, and he preached in the local church.²⁰ After becoming a professor of theology, Luther began his pursuit of true Christianity.²¹ From his own personal quest and need for clarity, Luther could see the Catholic's doctrines and rituals were conflicting with the Holy Scriptures. By the early 16th century, the disagreements led to a need for reform. Luther led the reformation in his fight for religious freedom. He spoke out against what he perceived to be Christian depravity regarding the Scriptures and a corrupted papacy. His principle teachings declared,

Salvation comes through faith in the gospel, not through works of the law. All persons stand directly before God; they are not dependent upon clerics for divine mediation. All believers are priests to their peers; they are not divided into a higher clergy and lower laity. All persons are called by God to serve in vocations; clerics are not the only ones with a Christian calling. The Church is a communion of saints, not a corporation of law. The consciences of its members are guided by the Bible, not governed by traditions. The Church is called to serve society in love, not to rule it by law. Law is the province of the magistrate, not the prerogative of the cleric.²²

Luther's amendment opposed the structure and function of the Catholic religion.²³ Like Judaism, Luther's proposal conflicted too much with Catholic tradition. The Roman Catholic church resisted the call to reform.²⁴ Still, believers taking Luther's lead were reconnecting with the Bible. The original roots of Christianity were revived for Protestants as the Holy Scriptures made it into the hands of believers in their own language.²⁵ The distinction that Luther made for the Protestants was a Scriptural basis for the right to have direct access to God and His word.²⁶

Divisions in the Modern Church Period

Removing the Bible from Public Schools

The first century through the middle ages experienced three major schisms that eventually brought religious migration to the shores of North America. As Catholics held firm to their

²⁰ C. Scott Dixon, *Protestants: A History from Wittenberg to Pennsylvania 1517 - 1740* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² John Witte, Robert Woodruff, and McDonald, "From Gospel to Law: The Lutheran Reformation and Its Impact on Legal Culture," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 19, no. 1 (September 2017): 273.

²³ Dixon, *Protestant*, 12.

²⁴ Schaff, "Necessity of a Reformation," in *History of the Christian Church, Volume VII*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, "The Authority of the Scriptures."

²⁶ Nicholas P. Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

traditions of power and practice, Protestants, motivated through the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, were pushed out of Europe by the seventeenth century.²⁷ Though the establishment of America was intended for freedom to worship and honor God, eventually, opposition ensued. The intense Catholic-Protestant discord had made its way in America. By the early 1800s, migrant Catholics opposed the reading of the King James Bible in the American public-school system. They argued that the King James version was the *Protestant* translation.²⁸ The Catholic-Protestant debate was concerned with more than an inclusion or removal of a given version of the Holy Scripture. It criticized the foundation of the American establishment.

The Catholics deemed it a sectarian bias to use the Protestant Bible in the public schools.²⁹ However, the Protestants tried to remind the American believers that the country's original beginnings were founded upon the establishment of the Protestant religion. They insisted republican values came from the truth found in Scripture, and "the Declaration of Independence is but a transcript of the Bible, which is the original fountain of human liberty and the rights of man."³⁰ After violent protests and deliberation, the Ohio Supreme Court decided to remove the Bible from the public schools. In 1875, public schools in Cincinnati implemented a moral curriculum they called "Memory Gem" as a response to removing the Bible.³¹ However, Protestants continued to prove the necessity for the Bible as the guide for morality, and several states passed laws to keep the Bible in the public-school system at least into the twentieth century.³²

Adding the Motto "In God We Trust"

American leaders deemed it valuable to honor God, and to remind the public that America was great because of God. One way this was accomplished was by using a motto that paid homage to God. In 1864, the motto "In God We Trust" was first inscribed on an American two-cent bronze coin. Other coins were later inscribed with this motto in 1865 and beyond.³³ Reverend Watkinson of Ridley, Pennsylvania wrote to then "President Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury," and suggested, "that the lack of a reference to the deity on American coins was a national disgrace." Furthermore, Watkinson urged the image of the "'goddess of liberty'" be replaced with "thirteen stars, the words 'Perpetual Union,' an 'all-seeing eye, crowned with a

²⁷ Schaff, "Protestantism and Romanism."

²⁸ Tracy Fessenden, "The Nineteenth-Century Bible Wars and the Separation of Church and State," *The American Society of Church History* 74, no. 4 (December 2005): 791.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 792.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 794.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 806.

³² *Ibid.*, 807.

³³ Louis Fisher and Nada Mourtada-Sabbah, "Adopting 'In God We Trust' As the U.S. National Motto," *Journal of Church and State* 44, no. 4 (2002): 674.

halo,' and an image of the American flag inscribed with the words 'God, liberty, law.'"³⁴ Soon, a coin design was planned that was to "declare the people's collective trust in God."³⁵

However, in the early 1900s, during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, the usage of "In God We Trust" on currency was challenged. Roosevelt proposed it was disrespectful to use the motto in that manner. Roosevelt, and five others in the House of Representatives, disagreed with the motto being used on America's money. Most congressmen disagreed with Roosevelt. One representative, who argued against the removal, explained how placing "In God We Trust" on American currency also had a missionary purpose. By having the motto inscribed on the currency, other countries could know that the money from the greatest nation in the world was a country that placed their trust in God. Majority won in the Senate. The motto's usage was fully reinstated after Roosevelt's challenge to remove it had failed.³⁶

Almost fifty years later, the United States government passed a variety of bills pertaining to its founding as a nation which was under God. After having gone through World War II, the government was attempting to promote spiritualism and theism in America.³⁷ In 1955, during Dwight Eisenhower's presidency, the motto "In God We Trust" was officially and unanimously passed by lawmakers to be used on all United States currency.³⁸ Members of the undivided Congress believed America had spiritual rooting that was grounded in a trust in God.³⁹ Furthermore, they considered the motto's inclusion a spiritual warfare tactic against materialistic communism.⁴⁰

Removing Prayer from Public Schools

Madalyn O'Hair, born in 1919, was a girl from a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She had a comfortable early childhood, and was raised by two Christian parents who took her to church and Sunday school regularly. Madalyn's parents baptized her when she was four years old. However, when Madalyn was almost a teen, she claims to have read the whole Bible in one weekend and was appalled and repulsed by what she had read.⁴¹ Madalyn remained closed off from the Bible, and later, after having two sons, she fought against prayer in public school. One of Madalyn's sons, William J. Murray, began attending a local public school that required the children to

³⁴ Justin Latterell, "In God We Trust: Abraham Lincoln and America's Deathbed Repentance," *Political Theology* 12, no. 4 (August 2011): 597.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 604.

³⁷ Fisher and Mourtada-Sabbah, "Adopting 'In God We Trust' As the U.S. National Motto," 680.

³⁸ Ibid., 681.

³⁹ Ibid., 682.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 681.

⁴¹ Bryan F. Le Beau, "Becoming the Most Hated Woman in America: Madalyn Murray O'Hair," *The Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 2 (June 2003): 157.

participate in prayer.⁴² Upon Madalyn asking the school to excuse her son from prayer, and the school refusing to allow his pardon, the issue grew larger and eventually reaped national attention.⁴³ By 1962, the dispute was accepted by the Supreme court.⁴⁴ Madalyn argued that her son's "First Amendment rights were being violated."⁴⁵ Madalyn was successful in her fight to remove prayer, and she became a spokesperson for atheism through her public objections to any allegiance to God.⁴⁶

Biblical Opinion in America

Modern America introduced a variety of religious groups. Protestants may have desired to establish a Christian society in America, but soon diversity proved to rule the land. Several religious factions had settled in America, and Protestantism branched into several denominations. Also, modern movements, such as the Shakers from Pennsylvania and John Humphrey Noyes's group established in Oneida, contributed to other new religious ideals such as New Age religion and Christian Science. Though Christians, of some of the modern movements, believed they were going back to the foundations of Christian traditions, divisions were created as never seen before. Also, Americans influenced by new religious thought welcomed the religious practices of reincarnation and yoga, characteristic of the Eastern Buddhist and Hindu religions. Unlike the Christians of the early church, the movements in modern America were swayed to segregation rather than to unity.⁴⁷ As diversity increased and so many Americans became open to new religious ideas, the authority of the Bible became questionable even among the Protestants in America.⁴⁸ Without a general grounding in the Scriptures, "there is no so-called universal truth valid for all kinds of people."⁴⁹ Truth then becomes the, "social construction of the human mind."⁵⁰ The diversity in religious thought led Americans further from the Holy Scriptures. Decision making had shifted from the authority of God's word to human reasoning alone. This shift laid the foundation for laws to be passed

⁴² S. T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers: The Evolution of Modern Atheism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 160.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁵ Le Beau, "Becoming the Most Hated Woman in America: Madalyn Murray O'Hair," 153.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, s.vv. "New Religious Movements."

⁴⁸ Mary M Juzwik, "American Evangelical Biblicism as Literate Practice: A Critical Review," *Reading Research Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2014): 339.

⁴⁹ Billy Kristanto, "The Bible and our Postmodern World," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37, no. 2 (April 2013): 158.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

pertaining to marriage, human life, and sexuality, fitting to American culture, yet contradictory to the Holy Scriptures.

Conclusion

America's apathy toward the Bible traces patterns of discord observable over the past couple of millennia. The patterns, persuaded largely by tradition and by power, within the first fifteen-hundred years, came before a shift in Modern America that seemed to move away from tradition altogether. Jewish tradition, coupled with a partial hardening, stood out as a major contributor to division in the early church. In the middle ages, tradition also played a divisive role as Orthodox Christians held fast to their "right opinions," and Catholics to their apostolic succession ideals and power. Again, tradition and power influenced Catholic resistance toward the Bible as the source of authority during the time of the Reformation. The religious divides among Modern America were driven by desires for individualism and free thinking. The Early church modeled a motivation to come together in unity of Spirit—headed by Jesus Christ. Whereas, the Modern church exhibits a striving to unite in diversity of spirit—headed by individualism. Maybe ideals of freedom birthed out of the Reformation were taken too far. Or, maybe the point is, man simply cannot get it right without God.

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