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Distinct Differences

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I have been a member of a Protestant church for my entire life. While in the womb, I listened to my mother as she led the praise team and choir at New Mount Calvary Baptist Church. Thus, there were no truly surprising moments when I paid a visit to a local church called The Malibu Gathering. Protestant churches tend to have a vast number of similarities since every denomination has a similar foundation stretching back to the Reformation (Baptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, Nazarene, etc). However, because I have only ever had a church home in Compton, California, cultural differences were the prevalent distinctions that I recognized. These differences are to be expected when traveling from inner-city to beach city, where the racial demographics are 180 degree opposites. When analyzing Christianity, it is important to note the manifold changes in methods of worship that can be attributed to a racial demographic and its accompanying culture. Within these different methods of worship, between both denominations and cultures, adherence to the Bible should be the focal point of every church's preaching. With the mindset of "Sola Scriptura," this paper will not only be analyzing The Malibu Gathering but will also be touching on the overarching principles of the Protestant subset and determining whether today's Protestant churches are meeting this standard.

To be clear, Protestantism is not a distinct religion like Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Instead, the Protestant subset of Christianity is an amalgamation of lower-level subsets called denominations (even the "non-denominational" subset is considered a denomination of Protestantism: e.g. The Malibu Gathering). Being a subset comprised of subsets, the term Protestantism is often lost to the colloquial tongue and reserved for conversations in academia (here I speak from firsthand experience). From my personal time visiting many different Protestant churches, I have found that the differences between denominations are, for the most part, biblical. Denominations were formed by a Protestant group's collective and distinct interpretations of the Bible. Visible examples can be seen in the Churches of Christ's general lack of musical instruments and Pentecostalism's firm belief in the necessity of speaking tongues. Moreover, these distinctions between denominations are not restricted to any racial demographic at all. A predominantly black Church of Christ follows a very similar format as a predominantly white Church of Christ.

I personally applaud this aspect of Protestant Christianity, since the motives of their distinctions are Bible-based and are therefore in line with my personal belief of Sola Scriptura. Of course, problems do arise when these denominational differences create impenetrable barriers between Protestant churches. Such disconnections have breathed life into the Ecumenical Movement. From my visit to The Malibu Gathering, a non-denominational Protestant church, I could see that they held a lot of values

that the participants of the Ecumenical Movement hold close to their hearts as well. However, to reiterate, the denominational differences between Protestants are fine by me, due to their origins. My worry lies in the preaching of the Bible to God's people. That is where cultural differences take precedent in this discussion.

To start off this explanation of cultural differences, let a real-world example be the illustration of my argument: over one weekend, the Pepperdine a cappella group, "Won by One," sang at a church camp in the wilderness. The preacher was giving a sermon when he made this comment: *"Now let's be honest. We here at our church behave and speak quite differently than our darker-skinned brothers. Isn't that right, Rmani?"* Rmani Crawford is currently the only black member in Won by One. Understand that I do believe that this preacher's comment was completely out of line, and he should have known better than to stereotype an entire race after everything our country has been through. However, although not in good practice, was his comment all that outrageous? Is there truth behind the presented stereotype?

My friend Rmani Crawford is not the spokesman for all black people, but he can definitely attest to the unfortunate validity of the preacher's statement. Culturally, "Black" churches tend to be led by stereotypically emphatic preachers who scream and shout the word of God to their members. This is in addition to the denominational distinctions discussed earlier. As a Pepperdine student, I have attended Churches of Christ several times and had grown to associate them with a very passive style of preaching. I also attended a Church of Christ in Carson, California, that is led by Minister Fate Hagood; this was a "Black" Church of Christ. To my astonishment, Preacher Hagood began to shout and gyrate just as my former pastor had at New Mount Calvary Baptist Church. Is this necessarily a bad thing? Of course not. I only have a problem when cultural styles of preaching detract from the actual teaching.

In all honesty, I found my recent visit to The Malibu Gathering quite dull. The music was good, but the preacher's level of charisma was low. The sermon was so boring that I often found myself taking mental trips on tangents from his teaching. I will not be going back. While interviewing Nathaniel Tinner, an intern at the Malibu Gathering (though with a church background similar to my own), I questioned why he attended the Malibu Gathering every week. Nathaniel's response was phenomenal: *"I attend because the preacher stays true to the Gospel. He doesn't stray from the Word just to make people feel good."*

As he spoke those words of wisdom, I recognized the origin of his thoughts immediately. Just like me, Nathaniel has been to many churches where the preachers drift away from the Bible in order to pacify the people. This is extremely common in "Black" churches. While this paper

has too short a limit for me to thoroughly delve into the socioeconomic implications of culturally “Black” preaching, I will state that this Christian phenomenon is found more so in churches that minister to families with low- to lower middle-class economic standing. Therefore, I also recognize that this stereotype cannot be applied to all black preachers. Similarly, this style of preaching is not reserved to the black community (the movie entitled “The Apostle” is a good example of this). That said, under *no* circumstances should a preacher deviate from the Bible in order to make his members happy and hopeful. The Bible, being the ultimate truth, needs to be the focal point of all preaching. Preachers must preach the truth if they have any intentions of saving souls. If they do not, religion really does become the opium of the masses. In the same way that opium is detrimental to our physical bodies, faulty religion is disastrous to our spiritual ones.