
The Episcopal Church Is A Protestant Church

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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We hear claims from all parties about the most mistaken resolutions passed in recent Episcopal General Conventions. Was it the 2003 resolution consenting to the election of the Bishop of New Hampshire? Or was it the 2006 resolution calling for "restraint" in the consecration of "any candidate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church"?

My choice for most mistaken resolution might be the one of the year 1979 which removed "Protestant" from our formal name. It was mistaken on at least two levels. First, the removal denied a deep and critical piece of our historic identity. One might argue that the Anglican Church was probably "Protestant" even before the Reformation; here in the United States, we were at one point one of the proudest of Protestant churches.

Secondly, and more importantly now, the resolution which removed "Protestant" from our name was simply inaccurate. For, if we are learning anything in the last several years, it is that many of our leaders love to speak forth, to "pro-test," in the name of individual conscience and faithful liberty. These claims and Protestant actions come from both the liberal and conservative parties. Liberals claim to declare a new interpretation of orthodox faith for a new generation. Conservatives wander around the world looking for re-alignment and a more perfect church. Essentially, both these maneuvers are Protestant moves.

However, I do not begrudge these Protestant moves. Good Protestantism is always critical of institutions, especially centralized bureaucracies. Good Protestantism, I would claim, exists even in the Roman Catholic Church. That noble and honorable Church, looking solid and immovable, yet contains all manner of progressive thinkers and idiosyncratic reactionaries.

At the best moments of our past, the Protestant Episcopal Church was able to honor both the theological conscience of the individual believer and the classical orders of apostolic faith. We were both Protestant and Catholic, to the frustration of other Christians who always wanted to peg us one way or the other. But we were broader than that, and usually more attractive.

While the world turns its media magnifying lenses towards this week's Episcopal House of Bishops meeting in New Orleans, I advise us to look elsewhere for the broader life of the Episcopal Church. I have nothing against this House of Bishops meeting; I am among many who offer my prayers and support and love. It's just that I believe the breadth and grace of the Episcopal Church exists more specifically in the thousands of parishes and communities of faith which those bishops serve. Most of the bishops in New Orleans probably agree with me; the real "Church" is among our people, not in the ordained positions of leadership.

We are a Protestant Church. How else to explain the diffidence and exasperation which clamors even now right along with the rejoicing and singing? How else to explain that awkward style in which our House of Bishops and House of Deputies act together?

We are a Catholic Church, too. Not many of us want to abandon the historic Christian faith. In fact, our structures appear more Catholic than most of our other Protestant denominational colleagues. The fact that we appear so hierarchical is probably why the generally unknowing public media keeps speaking of schism and looking for authoritarian answers.

We are mistaken if we think that any meeting of the Episcopal House of Bishops, or, indeed, any meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion, or any Lambeth Conference of Bishops, can affect our relationship with the liberating grace and love of Jesus Christ. That's what makes us Protestant. No matter what occurs in Anglican hierarchies in upcoming months, our churches and communities of faith will continue in much the same manner-liberal or conservative-as we did before.

By the same token, we are also mistaken if we think that any meeting of those esteemed leaders can change our historic and universal faith. That's what makes us Catholic. Yes, councils can err; but councils also tend to correct themselves. They tend to correct themselves if we, the members, hold on to each other. They tend to correct themselves if we remain Catholic.

Finally, however, no authoritarian answer will lead us out of our present frustrations. Let us not surrender too easily our own gifts of God's grace to a legalistic and simplistic authoritarianism. Authoritarianism, whether liberal or conservative, is the enemy of healthy faith; it does legalistic and totalitarian harm in both Protestant and Catholic structures.

The name I most prefer for our dear and historic church is "Anglican." That word represents deep, broad, and graceful Christianity. But at the 2009 General Convention, I would vote for restoring the grand name "Protestant" to our name. I would vote for including "Catholic" too!

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