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How Protestants and Catholics Differ

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Recently there has been a huge uptick in overt expressions of the Christian faith in lots of places. One of the places that has become quite noticeable is on certain TV networks. Whereas in the past it was quite rare for TV personalities to talk about their personal faith, it has now become quite common on certain networks. Personally, I think that is a fantastic thing.

Something else I have noticed is that there is a mixture of both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Interestingly, it is also noticeable that the Roman Catholics tend to be much more outspoken about the practices of their faith and the fact that they are Catholic. Protestants, on the other hand, tend to focus more on their relationship with Jesus without promoting their particular church or church doctrine. I believe that the reason for this is that in Roman Catholicism the expression of faith is more tied to the church as an institution, where as in Protestantism, there is more of an emphasis on a persons individual relationship with God.

Obviously, both Protestants and Catholics consider themselves Christian. But looking more closely, we can see that there are also certain differences between their beliefs – some of them rather large differences. So how can this be sorted out? The easiest way is to use a worldview paradigm to get at the essential core of both.

The essential core of every belief, Christian or not, is based on its authority source, and expressed by how they answer the three essential worldview questions:

- 1) Who is God?
- 2) What is man?
- 3) What is salvation?

If asked, both Protestants and Catholics would claim the Bible as their authority source, and, at a basic level would answer the three questions somewhat similarly:

- 1) Who is God? - The God who is revealed in the Bible.
- 2) What is man? - Person's made in the image of God, but fallen.
- 3) What is salvation? - Having one's sins forgiven and being restored to friendship and communion with God through Jesus Christ.

However, if we scratch just a little below the surface, we find that there are actually some pretty significant differences, as well. So let's have a look at those differences.

Authority Source

Catholic

Based on Roman Catholic beliefs, God's revelation comes in two forms – Scripture plus Church Tradition. Regarding Scripture, it is noteworthy that while most of the Bible is common to both Catholics and Protestants, it is not 100%. Catholics also recognize extra apocryphal books that Protestants do not.

Additionally, when it comes to biblical interpretation, the Catholic Church has an official teaching authority, called the Magisterium. It's role is to authentically interpret, preserve, and safeguard the Word of God found in sacred Scripture and in sacred Tradition. This group is comprised of the Pope and the Church's bishops – who are considered to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Rejecting the Magisterium's teachings constitutes heresy.

As for church Tradition, that includes apostolic teachings not explicitly written in the Bible, but which are consis-

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tent with the teachings of the Church throughout history. These are considered to be as authoritative as the Bible.

Protestant

The authority source of Protestants is Scripture alone – specifically the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is understood to be the ultimate and sole infallible source of God's revealed truth. While various traditions (creeds, confessions, historical interpretations) are valued and respected, they are always subordinate to and tested by Scripture. There is no “official” body that is considered the official interpreter of Scripture. Rather, the individual believer, guided by the Holy Spirit, is encouraged to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. This does not mean that every person's interpretation is correct, as there are proper and improper interpretive methodologies. It only means that there is no sanctioned Protestant interpretation made by an official church body.

Who is God?

Shared Beliefs

Both Catholics and Protestants affirm the Trinity – one God existing in three co-equal, co-eternal persons comprised of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both believe God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, loving, just, and holy. When it comes to the actual nature of God, there can be nuance differences based on various approaches to theology, but the beliefs of both groups on this point are substantially the same.

Who is Man?

Shared Beliefs

Both Catholics and Protestants acknowledge that man was created as persons made in the image of God, but fallen.

As persons, human beings have the personhood characteristics of God (though not to the full extent He has them). This includes such characteristics as knowl-

edge, creativity, personality, free will, gender, eternalness, dominion, and self-consciousness.

Both also believe that man is fallen and corrupted by sin. The Fall was ultimately the result of the sin of Adam's disobedience which allowed sin into the world to cause its corruption. As a result, man is in need of redemption. There are some key differences, however.

Catholic

- In Roman Catholicism, original sin is understood as a loss of original holiness that has been inherited from Adam. It wounds human nature and inclines people to sin, but does not totally corrupt human free will. Catholics believe that the sacrament of baptism is able to remove original sin from an individual. (See concerning sacraments below under salvation.)
- Additionally, humans are acknowledged to possess genuine free will and are, thus, capable of cooperating with God's grace to perform meritorious good works. Meritorious good works are understood as a collaborative effort where God's grace empowers individuals to perform good deeds, which God then freely chooses to reward. This doctrine emphasizes human responsibility for actions, but always within the framework of God's prior grace. To be able to perform meritorious works, a person must be in a “state of grace” (not in a state of mortal sin). These good works, then, contribute to an individual's growth in holiness (sanctification). Meritorious works are enabled by participation in various sacraments which allows God's grace to empower human effort. (See concerning sacraments below under salvation.)

Protestant

- While all Protestants affirm the reality of original sin and its perva-

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sive effects on humanity, there is a spectrum of belief about what that means. Some groups of Calvinists emphasize a deeper corruption of human nature than Catholicism – one that totally renders humanity incapable of saving itself. To them, even the will to believe must be supernaturally generated. Most Protestant traditions, however, affirm that God offers salvation to all, and humans have the free will ability to accept or reject that offer.

- Good works are seen, in Protestantism, as the result and evidence of a life transformed by their personal relationship with God, not an end in themselves. They are a response to salvation, rather than a means of earning or maintaining it.

What is Salvation?

While there are some differences in beliefs in the categories above, the real differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are centered in their views of salvation.

Shared Beliefs

Both groups believe salvation is by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ who died for the sins of mankind and rose again. Jesus' sacrifice is considered the unique and sufficient atonement for sin.

Catholic

- Roman Catholic salvation is based on a system of sacraments. A Catholic sacrament is a visible, physical sign believed to have been instituted by Jesus Christ that objectively gives invisible grace to a person's soul. Sacraments are activated by a cooperative act between God and human beings. When validly administered, they are considered to be acts where God works through the mediation of a human (usually a priest) to impart His grace to individuals. With only a couple of exceptions, sacra-

ments must be administered by ordained bishops, priests, or deacons. The Roman Church recognizes seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance / reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony.

- Justification in Roman Catholicism is understood as a process of being made righteous by God's grace. It begins with the sacrament of baptism, which washes away original sin, and continues through a life of faith, hope, charity, and good works. All of these are empowered by God's grace which is received by individuals through the act of the person administering the sacraments. It involves both the forgiveness of sins and inner sanctification (being made holy) of the person. Justification can be lost through the commission of a mortal sin, but can be regained through the sacrament of penance.
- Assurance of salvation, for Roman Catholics, is generally understood as the hope that a person will persevere in grace until the end. That said, belief in its full assurance of salvation is often not encouraged. That kind of certainty is sometimes seen as presumptuous, or as neglecting the ongoing need for repentance and reliance on God's grace through the sacraments (emphasis on assurance de-emphasizes the need for the sacraments). Instead, emphasis is placed on continually striving to live a holy life.
- The Catholic Church believes that it is the original Church that Jesus Christ established, and is meant to be "one, holy, worldwide, and passed down from the apostles." This means they see themselves as directly connected to Jesus' first followers, with leaders like the Pope, bishops, and priests carrying on their authority. They consider that there is no salvation outside of

the Church. (**Note:** They do believe that people who are genuinely unaware of the fullness of the Catholic faith may possibly receive salvation provided they sincerely seek God in their ignorance (referred to as invincible ignorance). They also apply this principle to Protestant Christians who genuinely seek God but are unaware that the Catholic Church is the true Church.)

Protestant

- Salvation in Protestantism is viewed as a process that begins with justification, continues throughout the rest of one's life on earth (sanctification), and consummated in eternity (glorification).
- Justification is a legal declaration by God that a sinner is righteous in His sight (their sin has been forgiven). It occurs the moment a person receives Christ into their life by faith alone through God's grace.
- Sanctification begins at the moment of justification and is the lifelong process of becoming more like Christ. While it results in an individual doing good works, it is the fruit of justification, not its cause or a prerequisite.
- Glorification is the completion of a person's salvation and occurs when a believer physically dies and enters eternity to live with God. At that point, the sin nature is removed so that there is no longer a sin obstruction between the individual and God.
- Protestants do not have sacraments. They generally recognize two ordinances – baptism and the Lord's supper. These are viewed as symbolic acts of obedience, remembrance, and communal affirmation of faith, rather than the use of human means to impart saving grace to an individual as it is understood in Catholicism.
- When it comes to the topic of perseverance, Protestantism has various traditions. Those that put a strong emphasis on a personal conversion experience generally affirm the concept of assurance of salvation for true believers. Those who follow some measure of Calvinism consider that this assurance is based on God's promises, the finished work of Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They typically consider that once a person is saved, they cannot lose their salvation (though there are variations within this belief). This does not give a person a license to sin, but is, rather, a confident trust in God's faithfulness that motivates further holiness. Those who adhere to Arminian theology believe that a person can lose their salvation after having been saved, but only by an intentional act of rejecting God. (There are some variations within this viewpoint, as well.)
- In Protestantism, the Church is understood to be comprised of the "invisible" universal body of all true believers in Christ, as well as the "visible" local congregations where believers gather. While local churches have leadership structures, there is no single, centralized human authority deemed infallible as in Catholicism. The concept of the "priesthood of all believers" means individual believers have direct access to God through Christ, without needing a priestly intermediary.

Are Both Protestants and Catholics Saved?

The answer to this question is yes and no. There are saved and lost Protestants and Catholics. Generally speaking, however, the reasons are different.

Roman Catholic theology is simply not correct when it comes to sacramentalism. The sacraments are not necessary channels through which God confers grace and salvation to believers. In order to come to that conclusion, Catholics must reach into their extra biblical authority sources, and are simply wrong when it comes to that. The Bible is quite clear that salvation is completely by faith in Jesus Christ based on God's grace. In spite of believing also in sacramentalism, Roman Catholics who look specifically to Christ's atoning sacrifice for their salvation are saved. Those, on the other hand who put their trust in the mediation of a priest for their salvation are not looking to Christ and are quite possibly not saved. It is important to note here that only God is able to distinguish who are the true believers.

On the Protestant side, those who genuinely receive Christ by faith through God's grace are saved. However, there are many Protestants who claim Christianity but who never actually received Christ into their lives. It is not at all unusual for some people to claim to be Christians based on the fact that they have been baptized, were raised in a Christian home, were born in a Christian country, or affiliated with a church that is considered "Christian." None of these are evidence

of genuine salvation. Christian salvation is based on an individual decision to enter into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ – nothing else.

Just because a person self-identifies as a Christian doesn't make them one – Protestant or Catholic. It requires a personal decision to enter into a personal relationship with God by inviting Christ into their life.

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