

Text: Various

Title: Differences between Protestant and Catholic Doctrine

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered, “What’s the difference between Protestants and Catholics? Is it really all that significant?” We will look at that question in these notes.

I. Catholic Teaching Magisterium vs. Protestant Scripture Alone

The Catholic church teaches that the Pope and cardinals can set official teaching about things not addressed in Scripture. This teaching is authoritative, binding, must be believed, and must be followed. It is as authoritative as the Word of Christ.

Protestants take Scripture alone as their guide and rule.

II. Catholic Scripture + Tradition vs. Protestant Scripture Alone

The past teachings of the Catholic church are held in such high regard that they become as authoritative as Scripture. The Catholic church “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. **Both Scripture and tradition** must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.” [1]

With the point above, we have a very clear division between the beliefs of Catholics and Protestants. The reformed view of the Bible is that it and it alone is the Word of God. It is the only authoritative rule of faith and practice for the believer. There is no peer. To the Catholic officials, however, tradition and the teaching ministry of the church are peer authorities with the Bible. This is why the Bible has not been the center focus of teaching or of religious services in the Catholic church or education.

III. Catholic Justification vs. Protestant Justification – How it is Obtained

A. The Catholic doctrine of justification says this: “If any one saith, that by **faith alone** the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.” [2]

B. The Protestant doctrine of justification is that

a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law (Rom. 3:28)

All Scripture is from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

we are justified by faith (Rom. 5:1)

we are saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9)

we are “justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law” (Gal. 2:16)

no one is justified by the law in the sight of God (Gal. 3:11)

- C. The text in James 2:24 that a person is justified by works, and not by faith only is thought to undermine the above clear teaching of Scripture. The resolution of this tension is that works demonstrate the reality of faith. Paul was addressing the error of legalism—attempting to be saved by works. James was addressing a different error, that of antinomianism and dead orthodoxy. Paul speaks of justification as of the initial act of God where God imputes righteousness to the believer. James speaks of a subsequent declaration of God whereby He declares the sinner righteous in view of the evidence of his works. Paul teaches that justification comes apart from works that might be done before salvation. James teaches that works are necessary to justification in the sense that they follow and validate the initial justification. Paul asks about how a person can be justified, and answers that it is by faith alone. James asks how can we know that our faith is real, and he answers that the kind of faith that is genuinely saving faith is the faith that works. [3]

IV. Catholic Justification vs. Protestant Justification – Point or Process?

- A. Catholic teaching is that justification is a point event *and* a process. This lends uncertainty to the believer as to whether he is finally or truly saved. In fact, Catholics teach that someone who feels he can be assured of his state of grace is to be accursed (anathema).
- B. Protestant teaching is that justification happens at a point in time, and that **sanctification** is a process. Philippians 2:12-13 says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

V. Catholic Eucharist vs. Protestant Lord’s Table

- A. The Catholics teach **transubstantiation**. It teaches that the bread and cup transform somehow into the actual body and blood of the Lord Jesus. Partaking is an act which conveys special grace. “At the moment that the priest says, ‘This is my body,’ the invisible, unperceivable essence that...you couldn’t see (with) an electron microscope, (is) there in a miracle. It contains the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ. And that

becomes the spiritual and physical nourishment. As you partake of it, it becomes part of you, transforms you, and makes you more and more righteous.” [1]

- B. Protestants teach quite differently. I will focus here only on the view to which I and many Baptists and Bible church believers hold, the view of the **memorial** or **symbolic** significance of the Table. The table is a remembrance of the Lord’s death. The elements remind us of, but do not become, the broken body and shed blood of Christ. Like baptism, in which is not a sacrament that conveys grace, so the Lord’s Table does not convey grace. There is no miracle in either ordinance. Remember Luke 22:19 “This is My body which is given for you; do this in **remembrance** of Me.”

VI. Catholic Priests vs. Protestant Priests

- A. Catholics have a highly structured priesthood, like that which is found in the Old Testament law. These stand in the place of Christ so that people offer confession to them instead of directly to God.
- B. Protestants believe that every believer is a priest. This is called the “priesthood of the believer.” Each believer is privileged and responsible to worship God according to the dictates of the Word of God and how his conscience understands that Word. Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 says that Christ made us kings and priests. 1 Peter 2:5 says that believers are a holy priesthood. Of course, we are not a priest like Jesus is a Priest, an intermediary for all men to God (Heb. 7:24). We are privileged to offer confession directly to God with no human intermediary other than Christ Jesus himself.

VII. Catholic Veneration of Saints and Worship of Mary

- A. Catholics place dead super-Christians on a pedestal. And the treatment they give Mary is basically worship as well. Mary is called by some the co-mediatrix, the co-redeemer with Christ. Mary is claimed to be sinless by virtue of the immaculate conception—which has to do with how Mary was brought into the world, *not* with how Jesus was brought into the world. Mary is claimed to be the mother of God, or at least the mother of Christ, and thus of the church and all believers. Mary has special persuasive powers and as such can be the recipient of prayers of Christians.
- B. Protestants such as ourselves do not speak about “saints” other than when speaking of believers in Christ. All true Christians are saints (Romans 1:7, 8:27, 12:13, 15:25-26, 31, 16:2, 15). See also 1 Cor. 1:2 for a

bunch of Christians who were saints but didn't always act like it. We do not have anything like prayer to Mary or dead Christians. Christ instructed us to ask the Father in His name (John 14:13, 15:16, 16:23, 26).

VIII. View of Sacraments in General

- A. Protestants such as ourselves have only two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Table. They are memorial and symbolic of saving truths of the gospel, and look forward to great gospel truths that will occur in the lives of believers. They are no less important to obey because of their nature.
- B. Catholics believe in seven or more sacraments. These are religious rituals in which supernatural divine grace works in the participant. These ordinances are Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Ordination or holy orders, Marriage, Extreme Unction (anointing the sick), and Penance.

Conclusion

The differences between the Catholic religion and the Protestant faith are significant. They cannot be swept under the rug.

MAP

Sources

- [1] <https://voice.dts.edu/article/7-key-differences-between-protestant-and-catholic-doctrine-del-rosario-mikel/>
- [2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_excommunicable_offences_from_the_Council_of_Trent
- [3] Bruce Compton, "James 2:21–24 and the Justification of Abraham." Available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Z7ZhsDyt6BjO90zfPEHm_J3PeynTOfpU/view