

20 Centuries in 20 Minutes: Catholics, Protestants, and why it all matters

By Dr. Jim Denison

A Baptist pastor was inviting people in his neighborhood to visit his church. An elderly lady said, "No thank you, young man, I'm a Methodist." "If you don't mind telling me," he asked, "why are you a Methodist?" "Well," she replied, "you see, my parents were Methodist, my grandparents were Methodist, and my great-grandparents were Methodist." The frustrated young pastor responded, "That's no reason, just because all your relatives are Methodists. What would you do if all your relatives were idiots?" "In that case," she smiled, "I'd probably be a member of your church."

If you are a member of a particular church, do you know why? Perhaps you joined your church because your family attended its services, or due to the influence of friends, or because the church met your needs. Or perhaps you are a member because of theological conviction--the belief that your church comes closest to the biblical pattern of God for his people. I hope the latter is more true for you when this short essay is done.

Church history used to be the subject seminary students dreaded most, because it seemed the least relevant to practical ministry. That was before the denominational era ended and people began visiting and joining churches from completely different faith traditions. Now more than ever, understanding where we come from is crucial to knowing where we're going together. Here's the shortest way I know to tell the story.

Catholic history in four paragraphs

During the "apostolic" era (AD 30-100), the Christian movement was confronted by three significant religious powers. Roman religion insisted on the worship of the emperor, embraced an eclectic, polytheistic theology, and emphasized form and ceremony over moral standards. Greek religion separated the spiritual from the material, with a strong rationalism and an impoverished morality. Judaism had been scattered out of Palestine for generations and especially after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, establishing synagogues as it spread. The expanding Church took advantage of these settlements and the universal peace, roads, language, and hunger for truth and morality which pervaded the Empire.

The "patristic" era (AD 100-451) witnessed severe persecution of the Church, as some three million believers lost their lives by AD 300. However, the faith grew rapidly despite these challenges, especially in urban centers; some seven million professed faith in Christ by AD 325. The "clergy" (meaning "called ones") grew to dominate Christian leadership by the mid-third century, as the Church worked to protect and preserve biblical doctrine in the midst of its expansion into the Gentile world.

Constantine's conversion in AD 312 led eventually to imperial protection for the Church. The emperor merged the Roman Empire with his new faith, believing that this action would unify and revive the state. His leadership at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) settled the theological language which would describe the divinity of Christ but also made him the de facto head of the church.

Over the first four centuries of Christian history, the Bishop of Rome rose to preeminence in the larger faith. Innocent I (AD 402-17) was the first to claim that he stood in succession from Peter (cf. Matthew 16:18-19); Leo I (AD 440-61) asserted scriptural authority for Innocent's claim, and is often considered the first "pope" (meaning "father") of the Church. At the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), the Roman bishop was recognized as the leader of the Roman Catholic (meaning "universal") Church. Innocent III (1215) affirmed the universal domination of the pope over the spiritual and secular worlds, and declared the pope to be the representative of Christ on earth.

The Reformation

Financial abuses arose within the papacy in the years following Innocent III. In the early 15th century, three popes claimed authority over the church. The Renaissance led to renewed interest in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, and awakened intellectual independence. Wycliffe and his followers began the work of translating the Bible into the common language of the people (ca. 1382). Secular leaders grew increasingly frustrated with papal authority.

And so the stage was set for Martin Luther, a young Catholic monk and biblical instructor, to question various abuses he documented within the Church. His "95 Theses," nailed to the door of the town church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, were not initially intended to spark a withdrawal from the Catholic Church. But when his writings were circulated by printing presses across Germany, and the pope excommunicated Luther in 1521, his personal "protest" (cf. "Protestant") became an organized and unstoppable movement. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) legalized the Lutheran religion within the German world, and made Protestants an enduring dimension of the Christian faith.

Theological comparison

To greatly oversimplify, theological differences between Catholics and Protestants can be summarized by two comparisons:

- Authority. Luther argued for "sola scriptura," claiming that the Bible is our only infallible authority, not subject to church tradition, pope, councils, or clergy. The Catholic tradition maintains that as God gave the Scriptures through the Church, so he uses the Church to interpret his word. Papal teachings, councils, and creeds are the means by which he means us to understand his revelation. And so Church and Scripture are the twin authorities of the Catholic Church.

- Salvation. Luther argued for "sola fidei," that salvation comes only through faith. The Catholic tradition maintains that God mediates salvation through the "sacraments": baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist (the "Lord's Supper" to Baptists), repentance, ordination, marriage, and healing of the sick. Some Protestants recognize some of these acts as "sacraments," while others (such as Baptists) do not; but Protestants do not typically believe that these actions help convey salvation.

While obvious differences exist, great commonalities between Catholics and Protestants can be celebrated as well. Both believe that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world, and that his atoning sacrifice makes possible our eternal salvation. While Christian denominations disagree regarding some of the practical implications of our faith, we share a common commitment to the most historic of all Christian confessions: Jesus is Lord.

Why are there Protestant denominations today? What do they believe?

Luther argued that we are saved by faith alone, without the mediation of the Church; and our authority is scripture alone, without the interpretation of the Church. John Calvin (1509-64), a former lawyer and Catholic, helped fashion these Protestant convictions in a more logical way. The "Reform" church ("Presbyterian" in America) follows his influence today.

Luther and Calvin agreed to reject anything they found within Catholic tradition which they did not consider to be biblical. They denied the authority of the pope and councils for this reason. But they kept whatever they found within Catholic teaching which was not expressly unbiblical, and chose to reinterpret it biblically. For instance, the Bible nowhere forbids the baptism of infants, but it does not teach that such baptism washes away inherited original sin. So Luther and Calvin kept the practice of infant baptism, but changed its meaning. For Luther, baptism is a means by which Christ confers his saving grace, but it stands on the faith commitment of the parents who are bringing their child to be dedicated to God.

By this approach, the Lord's Supper retains spiritual meaning but not Catholic significance. The elements are not changed into the body and blood of Christ ("transubstantiation, the Catholic position). Rather, Christ's presence is conveyed with or through the elements. Luther and (especially) Calvin emphasized the sovereignty of God as well.

The Anglican tradition likewise kept whatever Catholic teaching it could reinterpret biblically. Henry VIII broke with Pope Julius II in 1529 when Julius refused to annul Henry's marriage to Catherine. Henry then made himself the head of the newly constituted Church of England and confiscated monastic property.

During his reign the Six Articles were published, declaring the Church of England to be Catholic in doctrine but led by the sovereign of England. Under Queen Elizabeth (1558-

1603), the church's theology was made more clearly Protestant in nature. As with Luther and Calvin's movements, the Anglican Church has continued those practices which it inherited from the Catholic tradition but interpreted them according to its Protestant convictions.

Keeping only what is biblical

The reform movements we've discussed so far are usually called "magisterial," in that they were supported and defended by the magistrates or government leaders of the day. The other branch of Protestant tradition is called the "Radical" Reformation. Whereas magisterial Protestants kept whatever they found in Catholic tradition which was not unbiblical, radical reformers kept only that which is expressly taught in Scripture.

The Puritan movement sought to remove all Catholic elements from Anglican worship. The Separatists left the Church of England to institute similar reforms in their faith and practice. John Smyth, Thomas Helwys and John Murton led a significant part of this early Separatist movement; their followers were called "Baptist" after 1644.

Baptism is an example of the radical reform approach. Infant baptism, while not prohibited by the Bible, is not prescribed by God's word. So the radical reformers returned to the New Testament practice of baptizing by immersion those who made a personal commitment to Christ as Lord. Local church autonomy is another example. The radical reformers did not find denominational hierarchy in the New Testament. And so they typically insisted on local church autonomy, without bishops or outside governing authority. As they stood outside magisterial government support, these reformers usually argued for the separation of church and state as well.

Today the radical reform movement is continued by Baptists, Bible churches, Churches of Christ, and most nondenominational movements, as they seek to practice only that which they find expressly taught in the word of God.

Conclusion

The Protestant movement continues to adapt to changing cultural challenges and opportunities. Nondenominational churches, hardly noticed a generation ago, are among the largest congregations in America today. As our culture becomes increasingly post-Christian and postdenominational, the differences between the various Protestant traditions are becoming less divisive. People today often view denominational affiliation as an outdated requirement, something like "joining" a mall to shop there.

As important as our theological convictions may be, the unity of Christ's body is equally crucial to our effectiveness. Jesus prayed that his followers "may be one" so the world would believe the Father sent the Son (John 17:21). In his "last words" to the church, he promised us that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

So long as God's people fulfill God's purpose by God's power in God's place, the Kingdom will grow. And all the various parts of the body of Christ will function together to his glory and our good.

Richard Baxter's motto is therefore an appropriate way to relate to other members of the family of faith: "In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity."