Four main principles divide Protestants, Catholics

So what, exactly, do Protestants believe? Today, Protestantism encompasses literally thousands of different groups or “denominations.” But they all trace their roots back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. At that time, some Christians came to understand their faith differently. Those differences became so severe that they eventually broke from the Catholic Church.

Centuries of animosity and even bloodshed followed, with Catholics and Protestants fighting spiritual battles that sometimes gave rise to political and military conflicts as well. Though relations between the two religious traditions are much more civil today, Christians are still dealing with the tragic consequences of what happened nearly 500 years ago.

Essential differences

Probably the most famous Protestant figure was Martin Luther, a German monk who started the Reformation in 1517, when he nailed his famous “95 Theses” to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany. But Luther is only part of the story.

In fact, the Protestant Reformation actually developed four branches. First was a Lutheran branch in Germany and Scandinavia under Luther’s leadership. Second was a branch known as “Reformed,” under the influence of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin in Switzerland, which also spread to France, the Netherlands and Scotland.

Third was the Anglican branch, led by King Henry VIII of England for political and personal reasons more than theological ones.

Finally, a branch known as the “Radical” Reformation awakened
in small pockets throughout Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Though different in interpretations and focus, the Reformation movements broke from the Catholic Church over these four essential principles:

Scripture. The first and most important break involved the role of Scripture in Christian life. While they sometimes differed in how they interpreted Scripture, all of the Reformers emphasized its authority in the life of the church.

Catholics believe that Scripture is part of a wider Tradition, handed down by the Church, which is authoritative for Christian faith and practice. The Church thus plays an essential role in interpreting the meaning of this Tradition, including Scripture.

Most Protestants, however, insist that “Scripture alone” (sola scriptura) should be the source of faith and practice, rejecting the authority of both Tradition and Church. They view the Church as an outgrowth of the Bible and are suspicious of any teaching or practice that they can’t find explicitly stated in the biblical text.

Justification by “faith,” not “works.” The Catholic Church teaches that our justification—that is, the saving process through which we are made just before God—is a gift of grace that must be received through our response of faith and works. Luther and other Protestant Reformers, however, insisted that our good works have no role in our justification; that comes through “faith alone” (sola fide).

Some good works practiced by Catholics are actually viewed by many Protestants as detrimental to the life of faith, such as Marian devotions, veneration of the saints, the use of religious images and prayers and Masses for the dead. They believe such practices lack explicit scriptural warrant and should be avoided. Instead, they tend to emphasize preaching
and Bible study, in accordance with their focus on faith and Scripture.

The sacraments. Protestants differ considerably in their teaching about the sacraments, which Catholics hold to be seven signs of God’s grace conferring the grace they signify. Some Protestants believe in sacraments, but say there are fewer than seven. Others have practices similar to Catholic sacraments that they believe are simply symbolic rituals or acts performed in obedience to Christ’s command (called “ordinances”). Still others reject altogether the notion of sacraments or anything like them.

Most, but not all, Protestant denominations practice baptism; some have confirmation as well. Most also observe rites of matrimony and ordination, though their understanding of what these mean varies widely. Instead of the Eucharist, most Protestants observe what they call “Communion” or “the Lord’s Supper”; here too their beliefs and practices are diverse. (See “Bread and wine — or the Real Presence?” on this page.)

Priesthood of all believers. Both Catholics and Protestants affirm the biblical teaching that all Christians exercise a “royal priesthood” (1 Pt 2:9) as Christ’s representatives in the world. At the same time, the Catholic Church has always ordained certain men to a separate, sacramental priesthood with special authority to celebrate the Eucharist and perform other sacraments.

Luther ordained men for ministry, but he insisted that they did not form a separate, sacramental priesthood. Most Protestants (Anglicans are the primary exception) have followed his lead in this regard, teaching that the only Christian priesthood is the “priesthood of all believers.” Though nearly every Protestant group has retained an educated, professional ministry, Protestant laypeople wield considerable power and responsibility in the work and governance of their denominations, even at the highest levels.
Protestant divisions

Yet these basic principles don’t tell the whole story. As history shows, Protestants have argued among themselves and split into the countless denominations we know today.

Essentially, the differences that continue to separate Protestants began in how the various movements chose to interpret and emphasize those common Reformation principles. For instance, while they rejected the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, Lutherans still affirmed the risen Christ’s sacramental presence in the bread and wine of communion. In contrast, most Reformed Christians spoke of Christ’s “spiritual” presence, while others saw the bread and wine as mere symbols or memorials of Christ’s sacrifice and nothing more.

Early in the Reformation, Lutherans and Reformed believers failed in their attempts to come to an agreement about the nature of the Eucharist. So the Lutherans went their own way, retaining a more Catholic sensibility, and eventually splitting among themselves into various denominations. Meanwhile, the Reformed Christians were far more aggressive in their rejection of sacramental life; their spiritual descendants also include a number of denominations, including the Reformed and the Presbyterian bodies.

As their name suggests, the Radical Reformers were far more sweeping in their approach. They believed that being a Christian meant being part of a pure community that lived radically apart from society. Because they believed that this community could only be entered by choice, and because they believed they could find no biblical support for infant baptism, Radical Reformers baptized adult believers only. In a time when religious life and political life were closely related, such ideas meant anarchy, and the Radical Reformers suffered the most violent persecution of all the Reformation movements.
The Radical Reformation’s closest descendants are the Mennonites and the Amish, though the Amish are far more rigorous in their separation from society. The Radical emphases on believer’s baptism and the pure, holy community of believers have influenced many other Christians as well, including Baptists, fundamentalists, Pentecostals and the majority of nondenominational evangelicals.

**Revival movements**

Because many Protestants see themselves as “always reforming” and renewing the church, Protestants have produced numerous revival movements that continue to shape their spirituality. Throughout its history, the United States has experienced four sustained periods of Protestant revival, called “Great Awakenings”: one in the 1730s and 40s, a second that began in the 1820s and lasted for several decades, a third at the turn of the century, and a fourth beginning in the 1960s and 1970s.

The current phenomenon of Protestant evangelicalism has firm roots in those earlier Great Awakenings and is largely the fruit of the fourth. Though all branches of Christianity are evangelical to some degree, many Protestants now call themselves “evangelicals” first and foremost. Though they represent more a movement than a single denomination, evangelicals emphasize personal conversion, active witnessing to non-Christians, the sacrifice of Christ in atonement for human sin and deep scriptural devotion.

In older Protestant denominations, evangelicals see themselves as representing a renewal of classic Reformation theology. In the conflicts that now plague many denominations, most of the defenders of traditional values are evangelicals.

Increasingly, though, many evangelical congregations have refused to align themselves with particular denominations, either because they see their faith as transcending any individual denomination, or because they have grown frustrated
with denominational conflicts. Though some have other influences, these “nondenominational” congregations have adopted traits similar to Baptist or Pentecostal congregations. In fact, many are simply Baptist or Pentecostal congregations that have dropped their denominational affiliation and softened some of their fundamentalist leanings to appeal to a broader Christian audience.

Nondenominational evangelical churches offer a powerful mix of heartfelt religious experience, no-nonsense scriptural preaching and charismatic “Gifts of the Spirit” that many Protestant Americans find appealing. In the last few decades, nondenominational “megachurches” with thousands and even tens of thousands of members have emerged.

Many of the most popular Protestant preachers and much Protestant television programming have their roots in nondenominational evangelicalism. Nondenominational evangelicals have almost single-handedly created the genre of popular Christian music, and books like the “Left Behind” series have shaped the popular imagination.

In the coming years, nondenominational evangelicalism will remain a cultural and media force, influencing not only how Protestants understand themselves but also how secular society understands Christianity.

Bread and wine — or the Real Presence?

How do Protestants view Communion? Here is an excerpt from “Separated Brethren,” by William J. Whalen (OSV, $13.95), that explains their various outlooks on the Eucharist: “Protestants deny the doctrine of transubstantiation (the change of the substance of bread and wine into the substance of the body and blood of Christ) but differ among themselves on belief in the Real Presence.

“Lutherans, for example, believe in the Real Presence but propose that the bread and wine and the body and blood of
Christ co-exist in the elements. Calvinists speak of receiving Christ in a spiritual and heavenly manner. Even after the consecration, the bread and wine remain the bread and wine. The Methodists, Baptists, Disciples and Mennonites consider the Lord’s Supper a simple memorial service. Anglicans encompass a variety of views from transubstantiation to memorial services, and the Quakers and Salvationists have no Communion service.”

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