



Session 11

Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy – What's the difference?

Notes:

Questions

1. What new perspectives have you gained about each of the Christian traditions from a review of its history and beliefs?
2. Summarize the theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism about the following:
 - Scriptures
 - Mary
 - Salvation
 - Sacraments

Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism

Aspect	Roman Catholicism	Eastern Orthodoxy	Protestantism
Origins	Developed in Western Europe, centered in Rome. Fifth/sixth Century	Developed in Eastern Europe/Byzantine Empire; centered in Constantinople. Formally separated from Rome in 1054.	Began with the Reformation (1517) led by Martin Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc., protesting corruption and unbiblical traditions
Authority	Scripture + Sacred Tradition; final authority rests with the Pope.	Scripture + Holy Tradition; authority rests with Ecumenical Councils and Patriarchs (no single head).	<i>Sola Scriptura</i> — Scripture alone is the final authority.
Leadership	The Pope (Bishop of Rome) is the supreme leader.	Patriarchs (esp. Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople) hold honor but are equal among bishops.	No central leader. Authority varies by denomination (e.g., pastors, elders, synods).
Salvation	By grace through faith, expressed in sacraments and good works.	By grace through faith, worked out through <i>theosis</i> (union with God) and sacraments.	By grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone (<i>sola fide</i>). Good works are fruit, not the basis of salvation.
Sacraments	Seven sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing, Holy Orders, Matrimony).	Seven sacraments, similar to the Catholic list, but with emphasis on mystical participation.	Generally, there are two (Baptism and the Lord's Supper); some denominations recognize more as ordinances.
Eucharist (Communion)	Transubstantiation: bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ.	Real presence: mystery of Christ's body and blood, but not defined as transubstantiation.	Varies: symbolic (Memorial), real spiritual presence, or consubstantiation (Lutheran).
Scripture	The Latin Vulgate has historically included the Deuterocanonical (or Apocryphal) books.	The Greek Septuagint is used; it also contains the Deuterocanonical books.	Hebrew Bible (OT) + NT only; generally, excludes Apocrypha.
Worship & Liturgy	Highly structured, Latin Mass (now often	Ancient liturgy (e.g., Divine Liturgy of St. John	Wide variety: from highly liturgical (Anglican, Lutheran) to

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	vernacular); strong sacramental focus.	Chrysostom); heavy use of icons and chant.	free-form evangelical worship.
View of Mary	Venerated as Mother of God (Theotokos), sinless (Immaculate Conception), assumed into heaven.	Venerated as Theotokos, honored highly, but no Immaculate Conception dogma.	Honored as the mother of Jesus but not venerated; no doctrines of the Immaculate Conception or Assumption.
Church & State	Historically allied with Western monarchies, the Pope held political influence.	Traditionally linked with Eastern empires, close ties between church and state (Caesaropapism).	Varied: some state churches (Anglican, Lutheran); many emphasize the separation of church and state.
Icons/Images	Uses statues and images in worship.	Strong emphasis on icons (not statues) as windows to the divine.	Some allow images (Lutheran, Anglican); others forbid them (Reformed, Baptist).

A Biblical Response and Approach to ...

Roman Catholicism

- **Strengths to Acknowledge:** Strong emphasis on the historic faith, moral teaching, and the seriousness of sin.
- **Biblical Response:**
 - Point to **Ephesians 2:8–9**: salvation is by grace through faith, not by works or sacraments.
 - Highlight **Hebrews 7:25**: Christ is the only mediator—no need for saints or Mary as intercessors.
 - Emphasize **1 John 5:13**: assurance of salvation is found in Christ, not church authority.

Eastern Orthodoxy

- **Strengths to Acknowledge:** Rich appreciation of worship, reverence, and the mystery of God.
- **Biblical Response:**
 - Point to **John 14:6**: Jesus alone is the way to the Father—not church tradition.
 - Use **Acts 17:11**: encourage them, like the Bereans, to test tradition against Scripture.
 - Emphasize **Romans 3:23–24**: justification is by grace, not by participation in sacraments.

Protestantism

- **Strengths to Acknowledge:** Return to the Bible, focus on Christ's finished work.

- **Biblical Response:**

- Encourage unity around the gospel (**1 Corinthians 15:1–4**).
- Gently correct divisions and extremes (**John 17:20–21** – Christ prayed for unity).
- Keep Christ central (**Colossians 1:18**).

Summary

- **Roman Catholicism** grew from Rome’s central role; its main issue is elevating tradition and papal authority alongside Scripture.
- **Eastern Orthodoxy** developed from Constantinople; its main issue is tradition and works as part of salvation.
- **Protestantism** arose as a reform movement; its issue is sometimes fragmentation and doctrinal extremes.

With all, keep pointing back to the **sufficiency of Christ and His Word** (2 Timothy 3:16–17; John 5:39–40).

Case Study – An Example

A Catholic Case Study

A friend named Lauren is a devout Catholic. She reads her Bible, prays, and attends Mass every day. She often shares how close she feels to Christ when she takes Holy Communion and confesses her sins to her priest.

One day, you asked her if she knew that she could confess her sins directly to God. She replied, “Yes, I know that, and I often do. However, the priest has been ordained by the church as Christ’s representative. When I confess my sins to him, it feels as if I can hear Christ’s voice assuring me that I am forgiven. It really helps me.”

There was a moment when you were having a particularly bad day, and you remarked that you wished you could go to heaven to be with the Lord right then and there. She looked at you in surprise and said, “Wow, can you really be sure you’ll go straight to heaven when you die? As for me, I’m no super saint; I’ll probably spend some time in purgatory first!”

How would you respond to Lauren?

What are ways you might challenge her? What Scriptures might you use?
