

At the Hot Topics event Andrew Heard argues that there are significant differences between the Catholic and Protestant views on the Lord's Supper, the Priesthood, the Authority of Scripture, and Salvation. There were many questions after the night to dig into these topics further and so we have written some responses to the frequently asked questions and also provided some further recommended resources.

Frequently Asked Questions

[If the Bible alone is the final authority what's to stop endless different interpretations?](#)

[Is Papal authority and succession taught in Scripture?](#)

[Why do Catholics and Protestants have different Bibles, how can we decide which one is right without an authority to determine what is God's Word?](#)

[Hasn't the Church always believed in transubstantiation, & what do Protestants believe about the Lord's Supper?](#)

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If the Bible alone is the final authority what's to stop endless different interpretations?

Despite what many think, the problem of different interpretations exists within Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholics admit that even Popes have taught error. The key difference between the two groups is the way they answer the question, 'what is the final authority to establish the true interpretation?'. Catholics say the final authority in Scripture + Tradition + the teaching authority of the Church, believing that the Church can make infallible judgments to settle doctrinal disputes. Protestants argue that this effectively places the Church above Scripture, since Scripture's meaning ultimately depends on ecclesiastical decisions. There is a danger in personal interpretations but "another danger is far worse: erroneous ecclesiastical judgments" because it's "one thing to be able to err; it is another to be yoked to error" (Ortlund, *What It Means to Be Protestant*, p. 100). Protestants maintain that all teachings, including those of Church leaders and councils, must be tested by Scripture itself. Following the example of Jesus and the apostles, they believe Scripture is the final authority and that the most authoritative interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself.

[Read more below](#)

Clarifying what Catholics believe about Papal Infallibility

Interestingly, the Catholic understanding of the authority of the Church has not solved the doctrinal disagreements within Catholicism. Popes have disagreed throughout history and different Popes have taught errors in their preaching. One example is Pope John XXII, whose preaching on the beatific vision was later corrected. Catholics respond that he was not speaking under the strict conditions required for an infallible statement, but it's important to note that these conditions were not formally defined until the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). This occurred after centuries of disagreements and multiple interpretations within Catholicism. Catholics would reply that limits to Papal Infallibility were not invented but merely clarified in Vatican I. Protestants remain unconvinced even immediately prior to Vatican I, Catholic bishops and theologians debated the extent and nature of Papal Infallibility.¹

What we've seen is that Catholics do not claim their system eliminates disagreement. Many Protestants can be misinformed on this point because it *appears* that Catholicism is free from the issue of multiple interpretation. But as we've seen, this is not the case. The real difference is not the existence of disagreements but what is the final authority to decide these matters. Catholics answer: in Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church. Protestants answer: in Scripture alone. This takes us to the heart of the issue, what is the ultimate authority in matters of faith?

The final authority

To say Scripture is authoritatively interpreted by the Church means that the Church really has the final say. What Scripture teaches is authoritatively determined by the Church. So, Scripture is at the mercy of the Church. Though Catholics maintain that infallible teachings are tested by Scripture before they are definitively defined, however, once a teaching has been defined, no appeal beyond the Church is possible. Therefore, in Catholicism the Church itself functions as the final authority in determining the meaning of Scripture. Is this how God expects his Word to exercise his authority?

No, the Bible provides numerous examples of Scripture being the final authority in establishing the legitimacy of claims. Jesus constantly appeals to the Scriptures and says "it is written," and warns us not to let go of the word of God by holding onto human traditions that nullify it (Mark 7:8-13). The Apostles quote the Old Testament to ground their gospel message. They even hold themselves accountable to the gospel message

¹ This is seen in the debate between 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' on Papal Infallibility. Protestant see another ongoing issue of disagreement among Catholicism in the tension between the Council of Trent and Vatican II on significant issues (you can read more on this [here](#)). Most Catholics strongly deny that the councils contradict one another and argue that their teachings can be harmonised. Nevertheless, Vatican II and its interpretation have been the subject of extensive debate within Catholicism. Whatever conclusion one reaches, the existence of an authoritative magisterium or Papal Infallibility has not removed the challenge of competing interpretations.

(Galatians 1:8, 2:11-14) and we the hearers of the gospel commended for testing even the Apostles words by the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Now these teachers were given special authority. Christ spoke the very words given to him by his Father (e.g. John 12:49-50), the prophets and the Apostles wrote the very words of God (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Peter 1:21). Yet in Scripture we see them all appealed to the authority of Scripture as the way to test if what they were saying was true. Likewise, we see non-authoritative people, like the Bereans commended for testing their words by Scripture (Acts 17:11). God's Word does not encourage us to appeal to an authoritative body to make binding judgements but to Scripture. The Roman Catholic position on authority discourages what the Bible encourages, determining the truth by Scripture.

How we test everything by Scripture

But how can we test things by Scripture without someone to tell us authoritatively what Scripture says? Notice, Jesus expects his listeners to understand the plain meaning of Scripture, the Bereans also testify to this. The Bible does not expect the necessity of an authoritative interpreting body. But to say that Scripture is the final authority, it's not that tradition cannot help us understand it, but simply that the most authoritative interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself.² For example today, Creeds are helpful for resolving disagreements as much as they hold us accountable to all that Scripture teaches. But it is critical that we recognise that the Creeds themselves used the same principle we are to use today, Scripture authoritatively interprets Scripture. The Anglican Thirty Nine Articles puts this well, on the one hand it recognises the place of Church authority, "And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another" (Article XX).

So the difference isn't that Protestants have disagreements and Catholics do not. The way of settling disagreements is different. For Protestants, it is *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone is the final authority. It's not that the Church's teaching has no place, but that Church's teaching must be measured against Scripture. The real problem is not so much multiple interpretations, but how these will be resolved. A far greater danger than the existence of multiple interpretations is the invention of a system that, when wrong, yokes Christians to error.

Further Resources:

[▶ How Do We Know Scripture Is God's Word? Response to Trent Horn](#)

[▶ Is Private Judgment a Problem for Protestantism?](#)

² When the early Church heresies began, the way to resolve them was not by turning to a limited Church tradition (it was so early on). Instead, the authority was the Scriptures. But of course, heretics knew the Bible. So aren't we stuck? No, what emerges in heresy is that some Scriptures are so prioritised that they reject other clear claims in Scripture. For example, take the Arian controversy on Jesus' divine nature. The Arians denied that Jesus was God in the same way that the Father was God. After all, Scripture teaches that he got hungry, tired, he even died. But God the Father could not experience these things as God so Jesus must be a lesser God, like Him but not the same substance as Him. But Scripture clearly teaches Jesus' divinity (e.g. John 1:1, 18; 20:28 & Romans 9:5). In order to make Jesus less divine than the Father, the Arians had to re-interpret the clear passages on Jesus' full divinity. When Church leaders got together to address this heresy, they submitted to all that the Scriptures taught: not just the full humanity of Christ but also the full divinity of Christ.

Why do Catholics and Protestants have different Bibles, how can we decide which one is right without an authority to determine what is God's Word?

Catholics and Protestants agree that the Church did not "invent" the list of books but *recognised* the canon of Scripture. The local councils at Hippo (393AD) and Carthage (397AD) were the first formal lists but they did not appear out of thin air. Rather, they formally recognised what had already come to be widely received by the Churches. The difference between the Catholic and Protestant positions concerns the authority of that recognition.

Catholics regard the Church's definitive recognition of the canon as infallible because they believe Christ gave the Church authority to teach infallibly in such matters. Protestants, by contrast, believe that councils may make true and authoritative decisions without being infallible. Thus Protestants agree that these councils correctly recognised the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. However, Protestants are free to disagree with those same councils regarding the inclusion of the Apocrypha among the Old Testament books.

It is also worth noting that the status of the Apocrypha continued to be debated within the Western Church. Roman Catholics were free to disagree on this issue (and they did) until it was treated as a dogma requiring universal assent until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. This was the first time the Apocrypha was formally defined as authoritative like the books. Protestant view this as a necessary step in order to defend other views like purgatory that have no evidence in Scripture but have some evidence in the Apocrypha.

Ultimately, this disagreement reflects different views of Scripture itself. Protestants believe that Scripture is self-authenticating. That is, the authority of Scripture rests in God's own powerful speech and is ultimately attested by the Holy Spirit. This protects Protestants from saying that there could be a higher human authority over God's word itself. Catholics agree that Scripture is God's word but maintain that the Church serves as the authentic and infallible interpreter and witness to Scripture's authority. Protestants argue that this gives the Church a role beyond what Scripture itself states.

This does not mean Protestants reject historical or rational evidence. The testimony of the early Church, fulfilled prophecy, historical and archaeological discoveries, the coherence of Scripture, and the evidence for the resurrection all provide valuable confirmation of Scripture's divine origin. Paul appeals to eyewitness evidence for Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15), and throughout Acts the apostles reason from the Scriptures to persuade others that Jesus is the Messiah.

Nevertheless, these evidences remain secondary. The ultimate ground of certainty is the work of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures themselves. Paul describes the gospel as coming "not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5), and he teaches "Spirit-taught words" that can only be accepted by "the person with the Spirit" because they "are revealed by God" himself "by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). The same Spirit who inspired Scripture bears witness through Scripture, enabling people to recognise God's voice in his word. Jesus said "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they will follow me" (John 10:27). For Protestants, then, historical evidence may help, but the key mark of God's people is that they hear the voice of Jesus and follow. This happened a long time before any councils, and for a long time, many sheep did not recognise *his* voice in the Apocrypha.

Further Resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/dFB47U-tnPY?si=bKEI0SGJXtZ7gisI&t=238> (Digging Deeper - How the Bible Came Together)

▶ Why do Catholics and Protestants have different books in their Bibles?

Hasn't the Church always believed in transubstantiation, & what do Protestants believe about the Lord's Supper?

For many issues throughout Church history, it is regularly the case that clarity on a significant topic is only achieved *after* significant disagreement arises over the issue. Disagreement sparks careful (re)consideration of what Scripture teaches; clarity then follows when we have to consider what *is* and *is not* true about any given subject, according to Scripture. Such was the case with the debates over the Lord's Supper during the Reformation.

In the early Church, Christian thinkers and writers did not discuss whether the bread and the wine had literally undergone a change of substance (into the literal, physical body of Christ). They simply spoke of the bread and wine using the language of the New Testament. They did so *without clarifying in what sense* Christ was present in the meal. The mystery of Christ's presence was often emphasized, like later Reformers would do. It was during the 9th century, when some debate rose to the surface: A theologian named Radbertus presented a 'literal' understanding of the meal, similar to the contemporary Roman Catholic view, while another theologian, Ratramnus, offered a counter, more 'spiritual' interpretation of the sacrament, similar to the teaching of the Protestant Reformers. As you can see, there was not simply one, universally held view.

(For more on this, see [▶ Response to Francis Chan on the Eucharist](#))

It was not until the 12th century when the language of 'transubstantiation' was first used, and this understanding was then formalised as Rome's official teaching in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Thomas Aquinas then further explained the *process* of transubstantiation using the Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents later in the 13th century. This view was reaffirmed by Rome in the Council of Trent in the 16th century, in response to the Protestants *protesting* this teaching as unbiblical, beyond the teaching of the early Church, and pastorally unhelpful.

Perhaps most concerning for the Protestants was Rome's teaching about the re-presenting of Christ's sacrifice on the altar. The book of Hebrews makes clear that Jesus' sacrifice was a once-for-all event, and that he is now physically present in Heaven, not to be sacrificed again (e.g. Hebrews 10:11-14). (For more on this, see the recording of the Hot Topics event). Further, Reformed Protestants were concerned that transubstantiation undermined the clear biblical teaching of Jesus' present-day bodily experience. Jesus presently exists in a *resurrected, physical, human body* (1 Corinthians 15). To say that the bread becomes his literal body would be to undermine this reality - making his human body present in heaven, and, at the same time, somehow dispelled across the globe. The clear promise of Scripture is rather that the way Christ is present with us now is *spiritually* - by his Holy Spirit (John 16:7, Luke 24:49-51, Romans 8:9-10), and only at his return will he once again be physically with us (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Why? Because Jesus has a literal human body - just like you and I.

A pastoral concern of the Reformers was the very great danger of idolatry. If it is the case that the bread and wine have not literally become the body and blood of Christ, it is an inescapable conclusion that, during the Mass, people are kneeling before and worshipping *food*, rather than God Himself; creation rather than the Creator. Another Protestant argument against transubstantiation was one based on Church history: Reformers like Thomas Cranmer argued that it was a progression beyond the traditional teaching of the early Christian Church fathers, who did not give such a detailed and philosophical explanation of *how* Christ was present in the bread and wine.³

So what do Protestants believe about the Lord's Supper?

Most Protestants do not deny a genuine presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but insist that Christ is with us *spiritually* by faith, rather than *physically* by sight. The bread is still bread; the wine, still wine. But they are powerful signs to us of Jesus' body and blood, given for our salvation. It is a 'physical word' to us from God of his saving love toward us in Christ. So when we take and eat, we are spiritually nourished by faith,

³ You can access Cranmer's book *The True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (1550) here: <https://newwhitChurch.press/cranmer/supper#1>

remembering in our hearts that Christ died for us and that the saving benefits of his death are ours (1 Corinthians 10:16). We celebrate the Lord's Supper because Jesus instructed us to "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24). As we do this, we are proclaiming the Lord's death for us (1 Corinthians 11:26), and we are also expressing thanks to God for his gifts to us through Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16).

The Lord's Supper is a profound gift to us, for our spiritual edification, teaching us powerfully of the saving work of Jesus, achieved once for all by his sacrifice on the cross.

Did Protestants invent justification by faith alone? Why is this doctrine so important to Protestants?

The short answer is no, it was not invented, and it matters because it is the very heart of the good news: "how can I be right with God?"

Not an invention.

Protestants argue that justification by faith alone was not invented in the sixteenth century but recovered from Scripture and evidenced in the early Church. However, Protestants acknowledge that the doctrine was not always expressed with the same precision throughout Church history. This is the same for many issues in Christian thought; clarity often comes after controversy. However, if Scripture is authoritative, the real question is not whether someone before Luther used the exact phrase "faith alone," but whether the teaching of justification by faith alone is in line with what Scripture teaches. Before we turn to Scripture, here are some examples of the early Church view resonating with Protestant claims.

Clement distinguishes between justification by our own works and justification by faith.

"And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are **not justified by ourselves**, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, **or works which we have wrought** in holiness of heart; **but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men**; to whom be glory for ever and ever." (1 Clement 32)

See how Chrysostom also highlights faith in justification, it's by Abraham's faith, not his work.

"For a person who had no works, to be justified by faith, was nothing unlikely. But for a person richly adorned with good deeds, not to be made just from hence, but from faith, this is the thing to cause wonder, and to set the power of faith in a strong light" (*Homilies on Romans*).

He shows how faith excludes boasting in self because it boasts in God.

"... he that glorieth in his works has his own labors to put forward: but he that finds his honor in having faith in God, has a much greater ground for glorying to show, in that it is God that he glorifieth and magnifieth" (*Homilies on Romans*).

Jaroslav Pelikan, a Church historian, suggests there is lots of evidence for the Reformed view in the early Church.

"Every major tenet of the Reformation had considerable support in the catholic tradition. That was eminently true of the central Reformation teaching of justification by faith alone... The Council of Trent *selected* and *elevated* to official status the notion of justification by faith plus works... What had previously been permitted also (justification by faith alone), now became forbidden" (*The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*).

Why isn't "justification by faith alone" more obviously taught in history?

Lots of confusion arises because Protestants and Roman Catholics use the word "justification" differently. Much of this stems from the major translation used in the early Church. The Vulgate was a Latin translation of

the original biblical languages. The Latin word used to translate the Greek word for justify means 'to make righteous', it is progressive, but the Protestant claim is that the Greek word means 'to declare righteous', it's declarative. The Latin term makes it possible to increase in justification, while the Protestant argument is that the Greek word does not.

The Biblical case for justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

According to Protestants, justification is God's act of declaring a sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness, received through faith alone. The key difference is that Catholicism teaches that justification includes an ongoing element, but this does not make sense of the way the term is used.

Firstly, notice the way Paul regularly describes justification in judicial and declarative terms. For example, Romans 8:33-34 uses language drawn from a law court.

"Who will bring any **charge** against those whom God has chosen? It is God who **justifies**. Who then is the one who **condemns**?"

Romans 8 helps us see that justification is a declaration. God's justifying is in contrast to those who are charged or condemned. Just like a charge or condemnation comes once in a law court, justification is a declaration of having no charge. If Romans 8:33-34 was referring to a declaration of God upon people who need to ongoingly merit God's declaration of righteousness, how could we take any comfort that we are already "conquerors", and how could we say with Paul, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Earlier in Romans, justification is a judicial statement of those who were enemies and it is apart from any works. Romans 3:20 says,

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

But that declaration of righteousness can be given by faith. Romans 3:21-24 states,

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.... and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

And in Romans 3:28 we see that this is by faith, which means that it is not by works.

For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Finally, Romans 4:4-5 shows that these works are not limited to specific 'works of the law' but are about works in general.

"Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness." (see also Ephesians 2:8-9).

How can sinners be declared right? The New Testament clearly teaches that it is Christ's righteousness that is counted to us. We have been united with him and given his righteous standing.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Philippians 3:9).

Justification is God's declaration like a judge declaring those who are righteous in his sight. But this declaration does not come to those who are godly but to the ungodly. It's not by their works but it is Christ's righteousness counted as theirs. Justification always leads to ongoing obedience, but Paul does not collapse the two - justification is the declaration, not the ongoing transformation.

Why Is This Doctrine So Central?

Protestants regard justification by faith alone as central because it answers the question: "how can God accept me?" If justification includes our own moral transformation, then our acceptance before God is always partly tied to us and not solely to Christ's righteousness counted as ours. If justification is God's declaration based entirely on Christ's righteousness, then our acceptance rests entirely on Christ. Justification by faith alone protects that salvation is through Christ alone, his righteousness counted as mine. This is why the Reformers repeatedly called justification by faith alone the article by which the Church stands or falls.

Further Resources:

[▶ Justified by Faith and Works? Defending Sola Fide with Gavin Ortlund and Jordan B. Cooper](#)

[▶ Does the Apostle James Disprove Luther's Doctrine of Justification?](#)

Do Protestants reject Church tradition and the Church's interpretation of Scripture?

Classic Protestantism is not anti-tradition (though some modern 'Protestants' are anti-tradition). At our Church, we recognise four ecumenical creeds (the Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, and Chalcedonian) as true summaries of the Christian faith and these guide our interpretations of Scripture. We also are helped by classic Reformed statements like in the Three Forms of Unity (the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism), as well as the *Thirty Nine Articles*, and the *Westminster Confession*. Though we do not think these statements have the same weight as the creeds, and neither hold the same authority as Scripture, the sole final authority. Of course we will find some of the statements in some of these classic statements more or less in line with Scripture. Because the creeds and the other helpful summaries of the Christian faith are not Scripture, they need to submit to Scripture as the final authority and ought not contradict its clear teachings.

This Protestant understanding of the final authority of Scripture and the Church's secondary authority is seen in *The Thirty Nine Articles*:

XX — OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.

What does Catholicism teach about Mary, does it matter?

▶ Are the Marian Dogmas Historically Credible?

Here's some Catholic statements on Mary:

Pope John Paul II writes, "Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and suffering. She puts herself 'in the middle'-that is to say, she acts as a Mediatrix, not as an outsider but in her position as mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of Mankind, and in fact she 'has the right' to do so. Her meditation is thus in the nature of intercession."

The Encyclical by Pope John Paul II 'Redemptoris Mater' [25.3.87].

A prayer... "Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn, then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary".

'Hail Holy Queen', Marian prayer from the 11th Century.

So does this matter? This mediatorial role of Mary is never taught in Scripture and it is a significantly later development within Church history. But it isn't just absent from Scripture, it goes against the clear teaching of Scripture, that Christ is the *sole* mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) and he is *uniquely* our High Priest, interceding for his people (Hebrews 2:14-18, 4:14-16; 7:23-25). But the issue has deeper theological issues. Karl Barth puts these issues this way: "In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest. The 'mother of God' of Roman Catholic Marian dogma is quite simply the principle, type and essence of the human creature participating servant-like in its own redemption on the basis of prevenient grace..."⁴ To put that quote a bit more simply, Barth saw Catholic devotion to Mary as a window to seeing the deeper theological difference between Catholicism and Protestantism: Catholics teach that people cooperate with God's grace in salvation, whereas Protestants believe salvation is God's work alone. Check out the Hot Topics recording, where Andrew Heard speaks more about the Catholic tendency to keep bringing humans into the centre (in the mass, the priesthood, in the Church's authority, and in salvation).

⁴ Karl Barth quoted in David Wells, *Revolution in Rome*, p.118.

Other Resources

- ▶ How Do We Know Scripture Is God's Word? Response to Trent Horn
- ▶ 6 reasons why I'm not Roman Catholic
- ▶ Why do Catholics and Protestants have different books in their Bibles?
- ▶ A Fallible List of Infallible Books?
- ▶ Is Private Judgment a Problem for Protestantism?
- ▶ Justified by Faith and Works? Defending Sola Fide with Gavin Ortlund and Jordan B. Cooper

[What Still Divides Us - Sola Media](#)