

Unsettled issues: The Protestant-Catholic impasse

by [David C. Steinmetz](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue



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Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians recently celebrated Easter, the most important festival of the Christian year. But they did not celebrate it together—at least not at the level of shared communion.

Protestant Christians who show up at a Catholic Easter mass would be welcomed, invited to sing the praises of a common Lord and expected to share in a common ecumenical prayer life. They would even be offered a special blessing by the parish priest at the altar rail. What they would not be offered is the same consecrated host offered to the Catholic faithful.

The broken communion evident at any eucharistic service, Catholic or Protestant, is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible state of affairs. As we draw near the 500th anniversary of the Reformation—generally regarded to have begun in 1517—it's clear that while Catholic and Protestant churches have made enormous progress toward unity and have forged agreements over vexing issues once regarded as church-dividing, they still have much unfinished business to transact. And some of the unresolved issues that stand in the way of full communion are likely to be uncommonly difficult to resolve.

When I was a child, no one was terribly worried about the divisions between Catholics and Protestants or wondered—as some people do today—whether the issues of the Reformation were still relevant. Indeed, when Protestants and Catholics thought of each other (which happened infrequently), they regarded each other as permanent religious rivals.

Not that each could not, from time to time, think generously of the other. Protestants conceded that Catholics had got some things right about genuine Christianity (Trinity, Jesus as mediator, disciplined prayer, hospitals, social services to the poor). But this positive judgment was moderated by a fear that Catholics had got other things terribly wrong (the sacred heart of Jesus, the bodily assumption of Mary, legions of interceding saints, images in church, flickering votive candles and a reserved host). A similar list of things presumed right and wrong about Protestants could have been drawn up by Catholic laity, whose task was complicated by dissimilarities among the various Protestant denominations—differences all too often imperfectly understood by Protestants themselves.

In the mid-20th century old barriers to mutual understanding began to crumble. Catholic theological education, which had been dominated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the antimodernist spirit of Pius IX, shifted from reliance on a curriculum grounded in neoscholasticism and biblical literalism to an approach to theology no longer frightened by the specter of modernism.

The so-called new theology stressed instead the use of many of the critical tools first developed by Protestants for biblical exegesis. Encouraged by Pius XII, Catholic theologians immersed themselves in the critical study of the Bible and the church fathers. In their view, such study of scripture and the fathers offered the best hope for the renewal of the intellectual life and spiritual depth of the Roman Catholic Church.

One result of this renewed study of scripture and the fathers was that Catholics and Protestants began to read each other's exegetical writings and historical interpretations with interest and pleasure. The focus of these writings was not in any way apologetic, as if each communion were using texts solely to persuade the other of the truth of its own dogmatic positions. That had been tried in the 16th century. The focus now was scholarly in the best and broadest sense of the term—a search for reliable information from the past and, beyond that, for truth and the wisdom God promises to disciples who love him with their minds.

It was in this collegial atmosphere created in part by the new Catholic theology that Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). The council invited observers from Protestant and Orthodox churches and established far-reaching ecumenical initiatives. Thus began a long series of intense discussions between Catholic theologians and their counterparts in the various Protestant and Orthodox confessional families—discussions that have continued to the present time.

Among the unsettled issues troubling Catholics and Protestants alike were many set by the Reformation itself. Take, for example, questions of church order. The Reformation had rejected the primacy of Peter (at least as it was understood at the time), insisted on the right of congregations to call their own pastors, denied that the Catholic hierarchy was essential to the continued life of the church, and regarded bishops as differing in jurisdiction but not in order from presbyters or priests (this Protestant approach was ultimately not followed by the Anglican Church).

As a result, the second generation of Protestant ministers were ordained by presbyters or priests rather than bishops, much less bishops in full communion with Rome. From a Catholic point of view, a presbyter with executive authority, even if called a bishop, was only a priest with an expanded administrative jurisdiction. The power to ordain was a power limited to the order of bishop, not a power given to priests, however many in number or impressive in influence.

Would a reconciliation with Rome therefore require the re-ordination of all Protestant ministers? It is difficult, from the Catholic perspective, to see how it would not. But such a requirement would present enormous difficulties for Protestant churches. What Protestant leaders could affirm with a clear conscience that John Wesley and Isaac Watts and Jonathan Edwards were self-authorized rather than called? Or that they went on mission but were not sent? Or that the fruits of the Spirit could appear in their ministries without the authorizing presence of the Holy Spirit?

Some Roman Catholic theologians at the time of Vatican II suggested a different approach to questions of church order. They argued that there were two biblical and therefore legitimate models of ministry in the New Testament: the Petrine and the Pauline. The Petrine ministry with its fixed offices hierarchically structured was best exemplified in the ministry of the Catholic Church, while the Pauline ministry was equally well modeled by the more loosely structured and charismatic ministry of the Protestant churches. The starting point for discussion between the two communions

therefore should be the differences between Peter and Paul in a common apostolic mission, not the disagreements between John Calvin and Ignatius Loyola in a divided Christendom.

Whatever the status of that charitable suggestion, it points to the fact that we are now in a position to reexamine old issues in light of the church's current understanding of scripture and tradition and are therefore able to suggest new solutions to ancient problems. We may find that some issues, once thought insurmountable, have simply melted away. Others may have been reduced over time to differences of opinion that can easily coexist in a reconciled church. The rest, however stubbornly entrenched, can and should be dealt with in a continued atmosphere of mutual honesty and trust.

However, dealing with the Reformation in its positive and negative aspects means understanding what the Reformation was as a theological event. The Protestant church historian Adolf von Harnack once shrewdly suggested that the study of the Christian past gives the church the ability to "overcome history with history." In his view, any Christian (or worse yet, any theologian) who does not know the past puts himself or herself unreservedly in its power. Even if the Reformation were wrong on every issue it raised (a standard of imperfection few human beings can ever hope to achieve), its errors will never be reformed without understanding exactly what was proposed and what was thereby intended.

The quarrel between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th century was not a row over every possible theological issue conceived by the human mind. The issues dividing the churches were very specific and limited. At the beginning of the Schmalkald Articles (1537), Martin Luther stipulated that Protestants had no quarrel with Catholics over the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. That the Christian God is one essence eternally subsisting in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—or that Jesus Christ is both divine and human were not issues that Protestants were prepared to debate (though there were some antitrinitarians at the extreme margins). As far as Luther was concerned, the two fundamental dogmas of ancient Christianity were off the table.

What Protestant Reformers did challenge were such matters as the Catholic understanding of authority in the church (including the relative authority of scripture and tradition); the role, number and place of sacraments; the role of faith and works in the justification of sinners (including the confession of sins to a presbyter or

priest); the place of Mary in the history of salvation; the importance of saints and images in the worship and intercessions of the church; and the definition of orders and offices in the nurture and governance of the people of God.

Most of these Reformation-era issues can still be classified as unfinished or only partially finished business—with some happy exceptions. No agreement was more surprising or gratifying than the agreement of Lutherans and Catholics in 1999 on a common declaration concerning justification by faith.

Complicating Catholic-Protestant discussions is the theological disarray of Protestants on some issues. The Eucharist or Lord's Supper is a case in point. Lutheran and Reformed theologians agreed at a colloquy held in 1529 in Marburg, Germany, that the Catholic use of the term *transubstantiation* to describe Christ's presence in the Eucharist was dangerously misleading. They rejected the term and the related notion that the Eucharist was a sacrifice offered to God by the parish priest.

Unfortunately, they were able to agree about little else. They debated among themselves whether Christ was present in the elements of bread and wine or in the congregation gathered around the elements, asked whether the Eucharist was a means of grace or an expression of gratitude for grace already received apart from the sacrament and worried whether the presence of Christ at the right hand of God precluded his presence at the Lord's table. While the churches of the Reformation (with notable exceptions) have grown closer to each other in their sacramental theology, there are still Protestant Christians who regard the Eucharist as little more than a memorial service and who are genuinely puzzled why Luther and Calvin cared so deeply about what appears to them a peripheral issue.

Perhaps it is time for all the ecumenical discussion groups to change course and tackle the same issue at the same time. The procedure up to now has been for Catholics and Protestants to discuss separate, often unrelated theological issues with representatives of each Protestant theological family in turn. Catholics discuss justification with Lutherans, baptism with Baptists, holiness with Methodists, Mary with Anglicans and charismatic gifts with Pentecostals. While the current groups could remain intact, their papers would be circulated among all the groups before discussion by any group.

The renewed study of scripture among Catholics and the increasing appetite for Christian tradition among Protestants has made "Scripture and Tradition" an especially timely subject for fresh ecumenical discussion. The question of how scripture and church tradition are related and what authority each has is as old as the Reformation itself, but Protestants and Catholics approach these issues today rather differently than they did in the 16th century. That makes careful rethinking of the topic a pressing matter for Catholics and Protestants alike.

Even the prospect of a potentially rewarding topic does not change the fact that ecumenical discussions will be long and tough. They proceed in hope, without any guarantee of success. When Cardinal Walter Kasper stated to reporters that the Catholic Church is committed to discussions with Protestants for the long haul, he might have been speaking for Protestants as well. Jesus Christ left his broken church no alternative. Charles Wesley, anticipating the stance of Cardinal Kasper, taught Methodists in the 18th century to sing, "And fellowship with all we hold who hold it with our Head."

No one knows how many agreements are necessary for reconciliation between divided churches, how many apparently church-dividing issues can be downgraded to differences of opinion, or how many different ways to be Christian in the world can be tolerated in one church. We can only find out by continually renewing and deepening the discussion.