

U.S. Catholics and Protestants agree: they have more in common than not

Pew Research Center data show that many U.S. Protestants seem unaware of traditional positions.

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue

The theological differences that led to the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago have since dwindled in both the United States and Western Europe.

That's the finding of a Pew Research Center survey released in anticipation of the October commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the schism in western Christianity.

Among U.S. Protestants, many today seem unaware of the differences, voicing beliefs that are more traditionally Catholic than Protestant.

"I think it's fair to say the differences between the two groups have diminished to a degree that might have shocked Christians of earlier centuries," said Greg Smith, associate director of research at the Pew Research Center. "Maybe it's not a huge surprise in the context of modern-day United States, but if you look back at the longer term—at the 500th anniversary of the Reformation—that would be quite surprising to a Christian of 300, 400, 500 years ago."

Of course, Smith noted, no survey data exists to measure responses to the same questions in the 1500s.

According to the survey, more Protestants reported they believe salvation comes through a mix of faith and good works (52 percent)—the traditionally Catholic position—than through "faith alone" (46 percent). That belief—*sola fide* in Latin—is one of five *solas* that form the backbone of Protestant Reformers' beliefs.

The same shares of Protestants also reported they believe Christians should look to the Bible, church teachings, and tradition for guidance—the Catholic position—rather

than the “Bible alone,” or the Protestant belief in *sola scriptura*.

Only 30 percent of U.S. Protestants affirmed both *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. Belief in both doctrines was higher among white evangelical Protestants (44 percent) than white mainline Protestants (20 percent) or black Protestants (19 percent) and jumped even higher (59 percent) among white evangelicals who reported they attend church at least once a week.

U.S. Catholics, in contrast to Protestants, voiced beliefs more in line with the teachings of their church: 81 percent reported both good deeds and faith were needed to get into heaven, and 75 percent reported Christians should look to the Bible, church teaching, and tradition for guidance.

Differences between Catholics and Protestants once led to wars and persecution, but now most U.S. Catholics (65 percent) and Protestants (59 percent) agree they have more in common than not.

The U.S. survey of more than 2,500 adults, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, was conducted online from May 30 to August 9. The margin of error for results based on each sample in that survey is plus or minus 2.9 percentage points. —Religion News Service

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