

The Difference

A Popular Guide to Denominational History and Doctrine

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Preface

What is the difference between the various Christian sects? The common answer is that there is no difference, that they all have the same Bible, that all are trying to reach the same place, etc. For the ignorant this is the easiest way to get away from this question. The lazy, indifferent, and the unbeliever will find the same answer the most convenient. But any one interested in truth and in Christianity will gladly accept information concerning the most important questions in life.

PART I.

0.1 Origin of Divided Protestantism

When Luther in Germany opposed Roman Catholicism and popery, it was because the Roman Church had perverted the Gospel of Christ, taught righteousness by works, and prohibited the circulation of the Bible among the people. Strive as he would, his troubled soul could find no consolation in following the precepts of the Church. It was only after years of fruitless toil, in and out of the cloister, that he had at last found peace and consolation in the precious promise of the Lord: “The just shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2, 4)

The Swiss Reformers, Calvin and Zwingli, on the other hand, do not seem to have been thus troubled. Though earnest in their reform work, they worked more in the direction of emancipating their Churches from the yoke of the Roman organization, in eradicating superstition, correcting outward, flagrant abuses, and instilling into the minds of the people a spirit of independence, political as well as religious.

Luther contended that an effectual reformation must come from within; for if the tree is made good, the fruit will also be good. The Swiss made the branches, instead of the root, their point of attack.

Luther’s weapon in the battle of the Reformation was the Word of God only. With this means, he said, the Savior repelled even Satan himself. With this means the apostles conquered the heathen world and laid it at the feet of Christ. To the Swiss this method was too slow; they were not content with letting the leaven of the Gospel work in its peculiar way; they must needs also use physical force and political power, a trait to this day characteristic of the Reformed Church.

Closely allied to this was the different views taken by the Reformers as to the value of the Scriptures. Luther contended that the Word of God was not merely a message to mankind, but the vehicle of the Holy Spirit through which He gives the proffered grace, a truth attested by the Apostle Paul, when he says that the Holy Spirit was given through the preaching of the Gospel (Gal. 3, 2), and faith through the Word of God (Rom. 10, 17).

Zwingli, on the other hand, believed that the Spirit needed no means, that He worked independently of the Scriptures. The preaching of the Word was to him only “an outward sound,” outside of which the Holy Spirit must work regeneration and salvation. Hence, he hoped “that good men in all ages, who had walked uprightly according to the light they had, were also saved.” (*Expos. Fidei*, 2, 559.)

But the real difference between the Reformers came to light in their discussion concerning the authority of the Scriptures. Luther contended with the Apostle Paul that the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2, 14) Hence, if he would not be adjudged wise in his own conceit (Rom. 12, 16), he must not think above that which is written (1 Cor. 4, 6), but bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10, 5). History as well as his own experience had taught him that it was futile to worship God, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (Matt. 15, 9), and therefore he set up this formula in the Smalcald Articles: “It is certain that the Word of God alone shall set up articles of faith, and none else, not even an angel.” (II, 15.)

No doubt, the Swiss would have said Yes and Amen to this, adding the rationalistic phrase: “rightly understood.” (John Calvin declared that he had signed the Augsburg Confession in this manner.) They did not deny the authenticity of any part of the canonical Scriptures, but ever and anon they would follow human reason, and assert that the language of the Holy Spirit must not be taken in a literal, but in a figurative sense, as, for instance, in the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Any other interpretation, they said, would be “absurd” and “unreasonable.” What becomes of the Scriptures under such treatment we shall observe as we enter more fully into our subject.

That such opposite views concerning the Scriptures should be followed by Different methods of church-work is not surprising.

To Luther only such changes seemed necessary as would promote true piety. Any ceremony, therefore, which had come down from antiquity, and was not connected with any idolatrous practice, or could be cleansed from such, was retained. Church interiors, with altars, pulpits, sacristies, organs, paintings, and statuary, were retained, also clerical vestments and the observance of many holidays; in short, anything and everything which could be used properly, and was not prohibited by the Word of God.

To the Swiss everything Catholic was “a heathenish abomination.” What the Scriptures did not directly command was to them unscriptural, and hence they not only countenanced the ruthless destruction of statuary and paintings in churches, but even counseled to do so. Church interiors were entirely remodeled, and ceremonies of the most simple kind instituted. This difference between the Reformed and the Lutheran position may best be illustrated by an anecdote. In discussing the retention or rejection of the old liturgies, Zwingli said, “Show me

a passage in the Scriptures wherein they are enjoined.” To which Luther replied, “Show me a passage wherein they are condemned.”

The different stand taken by the Reformers concerning Church and State must not be overlooked. The Lutheran Church soon became a State Church, it is true, but in spite of the teachings of Luther. “It is with the Word we must contend,” he observed, “and by the Word we must refute and expel what has gained a footing by violence. I would not resort to force against such as are superstitious, nor even against unbelievers! Whosoever believeth let him draw nigh, and whoso believeth not, stand afar off. Let there be no compulsion. Liberty is of the very essence of faith. God does more by the simple power of His Word than you and I and the whole world could effect by all our efforts put together! God arrests the heart, and that once taken, all is won.”

To the Swiss Reformers the Jewish Church of the Old Testament was the only correct model. Zwingli looked upon the Council as representative both of Church and State, and the theocratic State Church organized by Calvin at Geneva is a fact well known to all students of history. Even in America the Reformed Church commenced as a State Church, and the roots of it are still sprouting such shoots as Sunday-laws, chaplains for conventions, Congress, legislatures, and for the army and navy, and the fanatical activities of the National Reform Association.

The Reformed Church is split up into a multitude of sects. They have no confession to which they all subscribe; many of them have no confession at all, and others modify their beliefs as occasion demands. This is because a belief founded partly on “reason,” “views,” “science,” “feeling,” and the like, can have no stability. Views change; the rational way of one is irrational to another; the science of to-day is a fable to-morrow. In order, therefore, to gain recruits for this or that sect, innumerable schemes, methods, and measures are resorted to, — camp-meetings, revivals, the Y. M. C. A., and of late the Laymen’s Movements, Social Service, etc.

We shall now pass in review the principal denomination which have a following in the United States. Our next chapter briefly summarizes the history of these denominations, and succeeding chapters will take up, one at a time, the chief doctrines of Scripture, stating the agreement of our Lutheran Confessions with the same, and the differences which exist between us and the various denominations.

0.2 Historical Summaries

0.2.1 The Anglican Church

Many dignitaries of the Anglican Church do not, at the present time, like to date the beginning of their denomination from the time of the Reformation. And some would like to ignore the Reformation altogether. Says one: “England has never had but one religion; it has never changed that religion, and it has that religion still.”

0.3 Unchristian Cults

How many sects there are in this country alone no one knows, not even the Director of the Census. Catholics would fain tell us that this state of affairs dates back only to the time of the Reformation. There may, at the present time, be more sects than formerly, but divisions in the Church have always existed, and the Pope of Rome has not only had his hands full in pacifying and judging between warring factions of monks and their so-called “eminent teachers,” but he has constantly had on hand a war of extermination against dissenters, who would not acquiesce in his teachings. The attitude of the pope towards the Modernists of our own day is only the old story over again. But their silence after his condemnation is the silence of the dead, – and of the same value.

PART II. Doctrines of the Church

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