


UNITED WISDOM

# Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant thought: questions for comparison

Traditions and Worldviews

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W-24-N03 · EN

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> *“One holy Church must remain forever.”*

Augsburg Confession, 1530, article VII, a historical confession in English translation. Quotations here are editorial English renderings through the approved Russian version, translated by the authors from the cited English text; they do not claim to reproduce its published wording.

## About this article

In one Christian church a child is baptized before professing faith; another community connects baptism with a believer’s conscious decision. One congregation worships among icons, another in an almost bare room. Differences are immediately visible. Understanding what participants believe is happening and how convictions shape actions is harder. An interior cannot reconstruct theology.

We will compare Orthodox, Catholic, and several Protestant lines through questions about faith’s sources, church authority, salvation, sacraments, and spiritual life. Internal differences change the answers. Specific documents are therefore necessary: Hopko’s catechetical exposition, conciliar constitutions, Lutheran and Reformed confessions, Wesley, and a Southern Baptist statement. We will also examine agreement concerning justification and its limits. Comparisons beyond Christianity help test comparison itself. The aim is no ranking of communities or three psychological characters, but the ability to name a shared foundation, a real disagreement, and a question not yet understood.

## I. Establish whom we are comparing

“Orthodoxy,” “Catholicism,” and “Protestantism” do not designate three similarly organized institutions. The Catholic Church understands unity through communion with Rome’s bishop, while Catholic life exceeds the Latin rite. Orthodox churches possess their own structures and shared historical inheritance; their relations cannot be explained as one centralized administration. Protestantism includes church families and movements arising at different times. No single document represents them all.

These unequal units affect every subsequent step. Setting a Catholic catechism beside one Orthodox author and an acquaintance’s Baptist opinion gives three genres of evidence. One expresses official teaching, another may be theological investigation, the third personal



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conviction. Disagreement among these witnesses does not always mean disagreement between traditions. Sometimes we asked people with different kinds of authority, addressing different tasks. The official document, theological study, and personal conversation can all matter, but recognizing their different standing belongs to comparison rather than being an inconvenience to set aside.

Define the scale beforehand. This article mainly concerns Byzantine Orthodoxy, Catholic teaching, and Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, and Baptist examples. It is no complete map of Christianity. Oriental Orthodox churches need separate consideration of their history and Christological language, rather than automatic inclusion under Byzantine Orthodoxy. Our examples also leave Anglican and Pentecostal variety incompletely explored.

Limited scope permits substantive comparison by guarding against overgeneralization. Name a document's answer to baptism precisely. Mark conclusions applying to only some Protestant churches. Honest incompleteness is more useful than a formula confidently speaking for millions while accurately representing none.

## II. Shared assertions and different implications

Starting immediately with disagreement may hide common language about God, Christ, Scripture, grace, and resurrection. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession affirms Nicene Trinitarian teaching; contemporary Southern Baptists also profess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is substantial common ground with Orthodoxy and Catholicism without settling subsequent questions. Augsburg Confession, I, Baptist Faith and Message, II.

Shared doctrinal vocabulary does not produce identical ways of life. The same Gospel narrative can accompany different accounts of church authority to interpret it. Speaking of one Church does not determine its unity's visible expression. Professing divine grace does not ensure identical accounts of justification and sanctification. Moving from shared assertions to their consequences occupies much theological dispute.

Conversely, different words may partly describe a similar subject. One author emphasizes forgiveness, another healing, another participation in divine life. Before declaring incompatibility, determine what each includes in salvation. Yet resemblance does not prove complete identity. Terminological difference sometimes conceals a substantive dispute over order, faith, or sacramental action.

Attend twice: first find the common assertion, then where different answers begin. Concentrating only on the first turns comparison into an exhortation to forget disagreements. Concentrating only on the second catalogs mutual accusations. Neither task should silently replace the other: a shared initial assertion can lead to different answers when its

consequences are examined. Neither approach alone explains why people may recognize each other as Christians while judging particular church positions mistaken.

## III. Scripture and Tradition: who reads, and how

“Scripture against Tradition” crudely describes many actual positions. In Thomas Hopko’s Orthodox account, the Bible stands centrally within Tradition as the Church’s transmitted life. He distinguishes Holy Tradition from temporary human customs and mistaken church actions. Catholic Dei Verbum connects Scripture and Tradition within one inheritance of faith, with teaching authority serving God’s word. Hopko, Tradition, Dei Verbum, 9–10.

The Southern Baptist confession names Scripture the supreme standard of religious opinions and confessions. This does not mean a community lacks historical inheritance: the document itself publicly formulates a confession. The difference concerns that inheritance’s status relative to Scripture. Baptist Faith and Message, I.

Separate frequently confused questions. What is the final norm? How is textual meaning established? Who may resolve a dispute? How is misinterpretation recognized? Scripture’s normative status alone does not settle translation, historical context, or competing readings. The Church’s preservation of Tradition likewise requires further clarification to distinguish fidelity from habit.

Imagine disputing a short biblical passage. One reader invokes grammar, another liturgical use, another an accepted confessional formula. Their answers may connect, but these are different kinds of argument. Grammar establishes possible meaning; liturgy shows a passage’s place in prayer; confession determines an agreed understanding of faith. Comparison improves when evidence and the task assigned to it are visible.

Scriptural inquiry therefore does not end with counting quotations. Someone may quote frequently while treating a text arbitrarily. Another may read slowly and carefully without using lengthy quotations in every conversation. Examine how the interpretation is grounded: does the speaker recognize context, explain disputed passages, and allow their reading to be checked? The number of references cannot replace these qualities of reading.

## IV. Church authority: structure and grounds

The Catholic catechism assigns Rome’s bishop particular authority concerning the whole Church; bishops are also successors of the apostles and pastors of their churches. The Southern Baptist document instead describes a local congregation as autonomous, making decisions democratically. These answer visible church governance differently. Catechism, 936–939, Baptist Faith and Message, VI.

This does not establish identical organization for all Protestant congregations. The Lutheran and Baptist documents already belong to different church histories. Protestant settings contain different ministries and forms of governance. A particular church requires its own rules and confession. “Protestant” alone tells us neither who appoints a pastor nor how a decision is challenged.

Orthodox conciliar language likewise exceeds an administrative slogan. Conciliarity is a theological account of church life; a synod’s procedure is a concrete form of governance; relations among local churches are historical and contemporary realities. These levels connect without being identical. Assessing a decision requires knowing competence and grounds, rather than merely calling it conciliar.

Separate three questions: who may decide, why is that authority recognized, and how is error or abuse corrected? The first answer may be bishop, assembly, or synod. The second requires theology and history; the third, responsibility and actual procedures. Respect for an ideal must not displace inquiry into practice. One person’s negative experience, conversely, cannot declare the whole ideal meaningless.

Suppose a member asks to change a voluntary work schedule and a leader invokes church authority. What is being discussed: binding teaching, an accepted ministry arrangement, or one individual’s decision? Where is the assignment recorded, who sets its conditions, and how can change be discussed? These questions neither resolve doctrinal disagreement nor inherently deny authority. They examine an instruction within its claimed competence. If the leader misstates a rule, record the mismatch. If the rule exists, examine its content and grounds. Preserve the discussion rather than immediately make an uncomfortable exchange evidence for an entire denomination’s organization. Record the demand, the stated foundation, and the reply, beyond the visitor’s impression.

Comparing authority has intellectual and human sides. Members need to know where to ask and how to obtain a reasoned answer. Researchers need the logic making authority binding. These interests are compatible. Sacred grounds can be studied seriously while clarity is required about a particular human instruction.

## V. Infallibility, norms, and human conduct

Another boundary concerns Catholic infallibility. The catechism describes particular definitive teaching acts concerning faith and morals and corresponding episcopal teaching authority. It does not say the pope correctly resolves every everyday, historical, or administrative question. Catechism, 890–892. Readers may reject the teaching, but objections must concern its actual content. A mistaken assessment of earthly circumstances does not automatically refute a claim with other conditions and another subject.

Limiting the claim precisely does not trivialize the dispute. Who determines binding teaching, and what counts as definitive, matter to other Christians. Their differences cannot become merely unfortunate wording. Avoid attributing unlimited personal infallibility to Catholics and dismissing the specific doctrine as insignificant. Precision identifies the actual subject of disagreement rather than eliminating it beforehand. Other Christians can still dispute how binding teaching is established, while ensuring that their objection concerns the position actually asserted, rather than the imagined claim that one individual can never make any mistake.

Distinguish doctrine, disciplinary norm, and actual conduct. Doctrine concerns confession; a norm regulates action; conduct concerns what someone actually did. A cleric breaking a rule does not create church doctrine. Changed rules require examining their grounds and field. Changed rites do not establish changed belief in God without further inquiry. Such transitions are possible, but each requires argument.

Historical documents require similar care. Augsburg belongs to the sixteenth century; the contemporary Baptist statement has its own revision history. They express a particular tradition’s public position in a particular form. Assessing a present congregation requires knowing how it receives the document and applies rules. Age does not automatically invalidate a text; a title cannot guarantee every affiliated person accepts each point.

The gap between ideal and practice itself deserves serious study. It should be neither an occasion only for mockery nor hidden by reverence. Asking what is proclaimed, how accountability works, and what happened permits discussion without judging all teaching through one incident. Comparison remains critical and proportionate to evidence.

## VI. Salvation: three slogans are insufficient

A popular scheme says Orthodoxy saves through deification, Catholicism through works, Protestantism through faith. It poorly explains even these terms. Orthodox deification concerns grace; Catholic teaching does not reward initial justification for independently accumulated merit; Protestant traditions differ on freedom and sanctification. The convenient trio costs substantial content.

Actual comparison must identify the question. Where does salvation begin? What is justification? How is transformed life understood? What participation belongs to humans? What hope concerns salvation’s completion? Agreement on the first can accompany disagreement on the second. Similar participation language may involve different conditions. Each answer needs separate examination.

The Reformed Westminster Confession connects the saved person’s freedom with grace’s liberating action. Wesleyan prevenient grace particularly emphasizes assistance enabling

response. Do not merge these as “the Protestant’s personal choice.” Westminster Confession, IX, Wesley, Sermon 85.

“Faith or works” may conceal different meanings of works. Actions as the price of divine acceptance differ from their necessity as living faith’s expression, and from their moral consequences for others. Denying purchased salvation does not cancel responsibility for harm; responsibility alone is not a theory of justification.

A better question asks what place human action occupies and what error the tradition seeks to prevent. This reveals why apparently abstract words mattered to disputants. They discussed trust, hope, repentance, and limits of self-sufficiency, though answering differently.

## VII. Sacraments: concrete actions reveal differences

Return to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. “Symbol” is insufficient: it can mean a conventional sign, remembrance, participation, or action in which God truly gives what is promised. Without clarification, identical words can concern different subjects.

Augsburg affirms Christ’s body and blood truly present in the Supper, alongside infant baptism. The Southern Baptist statement concerns immersion of a believer and describes the Supper as symbolic remembrance and anticipation. These reveal differences within Protestantism as well as between Protestants and others. Augsburg, IX–X, Baptist Faith and Message, VII.

For Orthodox–Catholic comparison, matching sacramental numbers or gestures also fails. God’s action, unity, ministry, and participation’s conditions matter. The Catholic ecumenical decree recognizes sacramental life’s reality in Eastern churches outside full communion with Rome; that recognition does not settle communion. Unitatis redintegratio, 15.

Aesthetic judgment cannot replace understanding. Quiet worship need not express less belief in God’s action; elaborate rites need not mean deeper participation. Music, language, and architecture merit comparison, but the theological question remains: what do participants believe occurs, and why? Impressions belong to experience without providing its full explanation.

Respect a community’s boundaries too. Sacramental participation need not be general politeness; it may express a particular confession and belonging. Research interest does not remove participation’s conditions. Observation, reading, and conversation teach how a tradition works; visitors need not personally repeat every action.

## VIII. Internal variety has different foundations

Variety is no universal proof of absent common positions. Orientalium Ecclesiarum recognizes Eastern Catholic churches' dignity and liturgical and spiritual traditions in communion with Rome's bishop. "Catholic" and "Latin" therefore differ. Diverse rites exist within recognized church unity. Orientalium Ecclesiarum, 2–6.

Orthodox local custom must not become binding theology. Hopko explicitly distinguishes Holy Tradition from much that exists in church life. Unfamiliar singing or clothing does not establish another faith. Yet basic doctrinal questions cannot beforehand become matters of taste. Determine disagreement's level. Hopko, Tradition.

Protestant examples already vary independently on baptism, the Supper, grace and freedom, and governance. Calling Scripture supreme authority does not align answers elsewhere. Resemblance along one axis coexists with difference along another. "Closer" becomes useful only when followed by "in what respect?"

Alongside doctrine and rite, historical circumstances also matter. Language, political experience, relations to the state, and minority status influence community life. These circumstances help explain the conditions in which people think, but influence does not sufficiently explain theology itself. Doctrine cannot be derived from national character, nor personal faith exclusively from background. Historical context helps us understand the conditions of thought; it does not free us from reading that thought and considering its actual assertions.

Different varieties require different methods. Rites need description and observation; teaching, documents and arguments; administrative conflict, facts and competence; personal spirituality, respectful conversation. Confusing tasks produces loud generalizations and little understanding. Separating them reveals unity, permitted variation, and real internal disputes.

## IX. Dialogue need not hide differences

The Catholic–Lutheran Joint Declaration on justification of 1999 exemplifies agreement through clarified language. It expresses a common understanding of basic truths of justification while discussing different explanations. Faith, acceptance through grace, and the call to good works connect; this does not declare full church unity. Joint Declaration, 14–18, 25–30.

Distinguish seeking compatible assertions through precise interpretation from achieving common church organization. The first sometimes advances without completing the second. Agreement on one doctrine does not automatically resolve ministry, authority, or Eucharistic communion. Stating a result's limits preserves its real significance.

Respect for another tradition does not require considering every assertion true. Dignity, accurate representation, and disagreement can coexist. Rejecting caricature does not reject conviction. Caricature weakens argument: it defeats a deliberately simplified opponent while avoiding the actual question.

A useful criterion asks whether a representative would recognize their position in our account despite rejecting our conclusion. This grants no right to prohibit criticism; it tests descriptive honesty. If we cannot state another's argument without a mocking label, perhaps we do not yet understand enough to assess it.

Dialogue need not aim at readers choosing a denomination. Historians, believers, and people outside religious practice can benefit. Distinguishing questions clarifies cultural inheritance and real differences. The knowledge acquired does not oblige an immediate decision about joining a community. It may instead clarify a historical disagreement or help someone understand another Christian's position. Personal affiliation remains a different task from accurately understanding what a tradition teaches.

## X. Comparison as disciplined attention

Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant thought become clearer through particular questions rather than three characters. Unity, Scripture's authority, governance, salvation, and sacraments no longer replace each other. Differences become precise, similarities survive without exaggeration, and internal variety becomes part of the picture rather than an inconvenient exception.

This needs more patience than ranking traditions. It produces checkable knowledge: open a document, clarify a term, ask a participant. Agreement on everything is unnecessary. Stop assigning positions others do not hold, and understand where agreement or disagreement actually begins.

Comparison also has a moral dimension. Tradition names stand for people whose assertions involve hope, prayer, memory, and choice. Respect can accompany critical reading. Their combination makes conversation serious: it neither erases distinctions nor uses them to stop listening.

## What this means in practice

Choose one question rather than attempting to compare "all Christianity": why people are baptized, how human participation in salvation is understood, or who resolves a doctrinal dispute. Then find one document from each tradition that interests you, identifying its genre and authority. A catechism, confession, sermon, and personal interview can all be useful, but answer differently. They can be compared as long as that difference remains explicit.

Record three things: what is asserted, on what grounds, and which opposing position the author disputes. The last often clarifies a formulation's sharpness. A historical confession may reject a particular idea of its own period. A contemporary reader should not automatically attribute that idea to every present representative of another tradition. Both the criticism and its intended target have histories that need to remain visible.

After reading, formulate a question without an accusation already built into it. Instead of "Why have you no freedom?" ask what freedom means and how decisions are made. Instead of "Why so many rites?" ask what meaning the community connects with a particular action. Such a question promises no agreement. It gives someone an opportunity to explain their position instead of defending against a label selected before the conversation began.

If you visit a community, observe what happens and ask about the conditions of participation. Unfamiliarity can prompt inquiry; it is not evidence that an action is meaningless. At the same time, do not treat your personal impression as a binding norm for the entire tradition. One parish can reveal a great deal, but is not an encyclopedia of a thousand years of history. What you observed there needs to remain identified as that particular observation.

Finally, leave room for an unresolved question. After careful comparison, it is entirely possible to write: here I see a shared foundation, here a substantial disagreement, and this point I have not yet understood. Such a record is more precise than a hurried conclusion that every difference is imaginary or that no common language exists. It keeps space open for the next reading and an honest conversation, rather than requiring the inquiry to finish with a complete answer today.

## Key quotation

> *"Not above God's word, but serving it."*

Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum, §10, concerning church teaching authority. Editorial English rendering through the authors' approved Russian translation from the official English text. It shows Catholic grounding of authority without implying identical understandings of scriptural interpretation among all Christians.

## Connections across traditions

These analytical comparisons identify a shared question and a boundary between answers; they do not themselves establish historical influence.

| Question | Positions and sources | Actual similarity | Boundary of comparison |
|---|---|---|---|
| Scripture and transmitted life | Hopko, Tradition and Dei Verbum, 9–10 | Scripture is read within living church transmission. | Rejecting “book against community” does not erase Orthodox–Catholic differences over teaching authority. |
| Symbol and sacrament | Augsburg, IX–X and Baptist Faith and Message, VII | Both discuss baptism and the Supper as church actions. | Infant baptism and real presence differ from professing believers’ baptism and symbolic remembrance; “Protestant” gives no single answer. |
| Variety within unity | Orientalium Ecclesiarum, 2–6 and Augsburg, VII | Identical rites are not a condition of every church unity. | Communion with Rome and Lutheran unity through Gospel and sacraments ground the distinction differently. |
| Text and interpretation’s history | Dei Verbum, 9–10 and I Ching layers, IEP overview | A familiar book may have a history of reading that inquiry cannot remove. | I Ching commentaries do not share Christian revelation’s theological status; the comparison concerns reading, not canonical authority. |
| Shared words about a path | Joint Declaration, 14–18 and SN 56.11 | Our comparison attends to conviction’s relation to changed life. | Justification for Christ’s sake and suffering’s cessation through Buddhist tasks are not one “salvation.” A shared Russian term creates no doctrinal agreement. |

## Sources

1. Augsburg Confession, 1530: I, VII, IX–X. Lutheran confession in published English translation.

2. Baptist Faith and Message 2000: I–II, VI–VII. Southern Baptist Convention document; VI includes a 2023 amendment. It does not represent all Baptists.

3. Thomas Hopko. The Orthodox Faith: Tradition. Orthodox catechetical exposition on the Orthodox Church in America website.

4. Second Vatican Council. Dei Verbum, 9–10. Scripture, Tradition, and teaching authority.

5. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 890–892, 936–939. Conditions of infallibility, ministry, and authority.

6. Westminster Confession, IX. Reformed document on free will.

7. John Wesley. On Working Out Our Own Salvation, Sermon 85. Prevenient grace and human action.

8. Second Vatican Council. Unitatis redintegratio, 15. Catholic understanding of relations with Eastern churches.

9. Second Vatican Council. Orientalium Ecclesiarum, 2–6. Eastern Catholic churches.

10. Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, 1999, in the official 2019 anniversary edition. Paragraphs 14–18 and 25–30 read; the edition also contains later dialogue documents.

• Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, SN 56.11, translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: early Buddhist text on different tasks, not Christian grace.

• Ronnie Littlejohn. Chinese Philosophy: Overview of History, IEP, §1.a: I Ching layers as an external example, not equivalence with revelation.

## Tags

Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, Christianity, comparative theology, Scripture, Tradition, teaching authority, church authority, conciliarity, papacy, infallibility, baptism, Eucharist, Lord’s Supper, sacraments, Lutheranism, Reformed tradition, Wesleyanism, Baptists, justification, grace, sanctification, rite, Eastern Catholic churches, ecumenism, Augsburg Confession, Dei Verbum, interreligious dialogue, responsibility

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