



This lesson provides a brief overview of the Catholic Church and its differences from Baptist and most Reformed Churches.

The Catholic Church came into existence during the first centuries of Christianity. It was a time of increasing doctrinal error, notably regarding justification before God. As some pastors began to exercise authority over regions, the Bishop of Rome gained power and ultimately became the Pope of what would be called the Catholic (Universal) Church. By the late fourth century Catholicism was the state religion of the Roman Empire by decree of the emperor.

Differences that existed and have grown through the centuries include:

### **The Canon of Scripture**

The Catholic Bible includes a section called “The Apocrypha.” The Apocrypha was not an original part of the Hebrew Scriptures (The Old Testament; the Bible used by Jesus). These “hidden writings” were included in the early third century when a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was produced called the Septuagint. Later in the fourth century, the Vulgate (a Latin translation of Scripture) was being produced by Jerome with the intention to treat only the Hebrew Scriptures as canonical. Augustine, a bishop and prominent figure in the Catholic Church, however urged Jerome to include the Apocrypha, which he did. As the Vulgate became the Bible of the Catholic Church, the Apocrypha was increasingly viewed as part of canonical Scripture.

We accept only the Hebrew writings that were part of the original Jewish Bible. These are the Scriptures used by Jesus and affirmed by Jesus (Luke 24:44).

### **The Interpretation of Scripture**

The Catholic Church insists that interpretation of Scripture belongs solely with its magisterium (teaching office consisting of the pope and bishops). In 1546 it was declared at the Council of Trent “that no one relying on his own judgment shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation, has held and holds.” Indeed the use of the Latin Vulgate as the Church’s Bible left many without even the ability to read the Bible for themselves.

We encourage people to read and meditate upon the Bible for themselves under the leadership of the Holy Spirit convinced that Scripture is understandable and necessary for a productive Christian life.

## **The Sufficiency and Authority of Scripture**

In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church named other sources in addition to Scripture as authoritative on matters of truth including: *church tradition* (oral teachings given by Jesus to his apostles and subsequently to their successors, the bishops of the Catholic Church) and *the magisterium* (the teaching office of the pope and bishops; e.g. the pope speaking “*ex cathedra*”, or from the throne as Christ’s vicar on earth.)

We have consistently and historically declared that Scripture alone is authoritative and sufficient to make people wise unto salvation, for the teaching of the church in all areas and for the equipping of the saints for the work of the church’s ministry. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

## **The Doctrine of Salvation**

The Catholic Church teaches that the justification of a man before God is a process rather than a proclamation. “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man” (Council of Trent, *Decree of Justification* 6) Thus, justification is never a settled issue, but rather increases and decreases with one’s level of inward spirituality. Thus, there is no assurance of salvation in this life. Justification is further taught to be conferred through the sacraments of the church.

We teach that justification is by faith alone. The person who believes in Jesus Christ is declared just not based on any inherent goodness or achieved righteousness, but upon the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of their sins. (Romans 3:21-4:8, 5:15-19; Ephesians 2:8-9)

## **The Doctrine of Eschatology**

The Catholic Church teaches that there is a third destiny after death: heaven, hell and *purgatory*. “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1030). This doctrine is based on an Apocryphal writing (2 Macc. 12:45) and misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:15.

We teach that one’s holiness to enter heaven is due solely to the work of Christ on the cross and that believers are not now or ever penally liable, but righteous in Christ. (Romans 8:1) The only two options life after death are eternal life through faith in Jesus (John 3:16; Romans 8:1, 33-34) or eternal condemnation for those who reject his salvation (John 3:18; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).

## **The Role of Mary**

The Catholic Church espouses the doctrine of Mary’s “immaculate conception.” Mary, they believe, was “preserved from all stain of original sin” from the moment of her conception, completely sinless in life, perpetually a virgin and was received bodily into heaven immediately after her death. Because of this, “the Blessed Virgin is invoked (prayed to) in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix” (*Lumen Gentium* 62). She is honored with 17 annual festival days and the “Hail Mary” prayers of the rosary. (“**HAIL, HOLY QUEEN**, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope!”)

While we recognize and are grateful for the role Mary played in the bearing of God into our world, we repudiate Catholic beliefs concerning her as Biblically unfounded, seeing her as our sister, a sinner in need of the Savior to whom she gave birth.

### **The Role of the Church**

The Catholic Church presents itself as a means of grace essential for salvation. ““The Church Thus Teaches: There are seven sacraments. They were instituted by Christ and given to the Church to administer. They are necessary for salvation. The sacraments are the vehicles of grace which they convey.” (catholic.org) The 7 sacraments are: baptism (the regenerative act), confirmation (conference of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment), Eucharist (the Catholic Mass in which the bread and wine are said to be changed into the very body and blood of Jesus and received by faith), penance (reconciliation for post-baptismal sins), marriage, holy orders (for men ordained to the priesthood) and the anointing of the sick. According to their doctrine, salvation is only accessible through the Holy Roman Catholic Church as it dispenses the grace of God through the sacraments.

We teach that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit regenerates, seals and sanctifies the believer. The church is used by Jesus in this process to herald the Gospel, teach the Word of God and edify the saints. The church is given two ordinances ordained by Christ: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both ordinances are pictorial, the first of a believer’s new life and the second of Christ’s death.

### **Conclusion**

As a part of his answer to how to respond to Evangelicals converting to Catholicism, R.C. Sproul said:

“I typically direct these folks to the sixth session of the Council of Trent. Trent was convened to deal with issues arising out of the Reformation. It is, as even Vatican II and the current Roman Catechism affirm, unchangeable dogma not just for the church, but for all within its pale. And it, the sixth session, says that those who affirm that a man is justified apart from the works of the law should be damned. I have yet to meet a potential or actual convert to Rome who is willing to agree with this bald damning of the Biblical doctrine of how we have peace with God. And yet, by joining Rome they formally confess the truth of this damnable doctrine. In short, even if Rome beats the evangelical church hands down in principled activism, in intellectual and aesthetic fruitfulness, in unity of mind and purpose, so do the Shriners. The evangelical church is that place where the good news of Jesus Christ is not damned, but preached. With Rome it is exactly the opposite.” (<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/converting-catholicism/>)