

What does the Roman Catholic Church Teach about Salvation?

*** I will abbreviate “Roman Catholic Church” as RCC and “Roman Catholics” as RC in these notes**

Why is this something you should know?

- 1) The RCC is probably the largest religious group in our area
- 2) To better equip you to witness to RC's
 - Anticipate and be prepared for objections
 - Be especially clear on those points of the gospel that the RCC has twisted and garbled
- 3) To equip you to understand why Orwell Bible Church should not participate in ecumenical efforts with the RCC and why we cannot fellowship with churches and ministries that do join forces with the RCC
 - Cf. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (1994), an effort by Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus to encourage unity in proclaiming the gospel and renewing the culture morally and spiritually. “Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ” (p. xviii; cf. p. 178 where Neuhaus calls this “the most important affirmation of ECT”).
- 4) The RCC does have a certain amount of correct Christian doctrine and it can be easy to be fooled into thinking that it is merely a different branch of Christianity.

The following is adapted from James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome: Comparing Catholic Tradition and the Word of God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995).

1. Infant Justification

The Catholic Position

Summary: “Infants receive grace through the sacrament of baptism” (p. 20)

- 1) Original Sin through Adam

The RCC correctly teaches that every child is born a sinner and that salvation from such is through Christ, but not everyone is saved. In order to be made right with God, there must be...

2) Justification through **Baptism**

In order for an infant to be freed from sin and become a child of God he must be baptized. In the RCC baptism is the **door** that gives access to the other sacraments.

Through baptism a child is

- (1) Rescued from the power of Satan
- (2) Freed from original sin**
- (3) Made innocent and stainless before God
- (4) Born again
- (5) Given the gift of divine life**

This is called *sanctifying grace* or *deifying grace*. In addition to removing original sin, baptism **infuses** God's righteousness into the individual. This is the RCC understanding of **justification**.

- (6) Made a partaker of eternal life
- (7) Made a temple of the Holy Spirit
- (8) Made a member of Christ's body
- (9) Welcomed into the church
- (10) Committed to being raised in the Roman Catholic faith

Baptism is the instrument that brings about justification. While it removes original sin and infuses God's righteousness, it does not guarantee eternal life. Baptism merely "gets the ball rolling." It is up to the individual to work out the infused righteousness throughout the rest of his life, especially through the sacraments.

The RCC says that baptism "works" regardless of who administers it or to whom it is administered.

The RCC annually baptizes about 16 million children.

A Biblical Evaluation

- 1) Biblical Justification is by **Faith** Alone
 - a. Justification is not the infusion of righteousness into one's life, it is the **declaration** that one is righteous because Christ's righteousness is imputed/credited to one's account (see pp. 32-33 in these notes)
 - b. Justification is not by baptism alone but by faith alone. The RCC says that the child is justified by the faith of the priest, parents, and godparents, and that saving faith is not a single decision but a process.
 - c. Infants cannot exercise saving faith.

2) Infant Baptism is a **False** Hope

- a. The Bible says that one must repent and believe the gospel in order to be saved (see pp. 33-38 in these notes)

John 1:12-13 “¹²But *as many as received Him*, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to *those who believe in His name*,¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

- b. Catholics grow up believing they have a chance at heaven because of what was done for them and what they are doing to preserve it. Their faith is not in Jesus Christ but in the Roman Catholic Church.

2. Adult Justification

The Catholic Position

Summary: “Adult converts to Catholicism receive grace through the sacrament of baptism after proper preparation” (p. 20)

Adults can't just get baptized like infants; instead they must follow these steps:

1) **First Actual Grace**

God works in the person's heart and he must respond by preparing himself to be baptized (justified).

2) **Faith**

The first response of one who has received “actual grace” is assent to the major doctrines of the Church. In order for this to happen the person must be taught these doctrines.

3) **Good Works**

The second response of “actual grace” is good works. Good works are necessarily *in addition* to faith in order to be saved.

4) **Baptism**

As baptism is the instrument that brings about justification—removing original sin and infusing sanctifying grace—the individual must be baptized.

A Biblical Evaluation

Instead of leading people to trust Christ alone for salvation, the RCC leads them away from Christ and depend instead on the Church and their own good works.

1) God Justifies by **Grace**, Not by **Works**

The Bible clearly teaches that justification is a gift received not a reward earned. See pp. 23-24 of these notes.

At the Council of Trent (1545-1563, in response to the Reformation), the RCC clearly said that justification by faith alone apart from works is **heresy**—

“If anyone says that *the faith which justifies is nothing else but trust in the divine mercy, which pardons sins because of Christ*; or that *it is that trust alone by which we are justified*: let him be anathema.”

“If anyone says that *the sinner is justified by faith alone*, meaning thereby that *no other cooperation is required* for him to obtain the grace of justification, and that in no sense is it necessary for him to make preparation and be disposed by a movement of his own will: let him be anathema.”

2) God Justifies the **Ungodly**, Not the Righteous

God does not require sinners to make themselves worthy, ready, or prepared for justification. The only response required is repentant faith.

The RCC leads people astray “by pointing them to a *program* rather than *directly to Christ*” (McCarthy, 51). Instead of leading sinners to Christ it leads them away from Christ.

3. Increasing and Preserving Justification

The Catholic Position

Summary: “sacraments and good works increase grace in the soul; cooperation with grace preserves grace in the soul” (p. 20)

Remember, the RCC says that salvation is not something that happens at once; it is a **process** beginning with baptism that must continue through the person’s life. The Catholic must faithfully receive the sacraments and cooperate with grace. No Catholic can ever say he is “saved” in this life.

1) Sanctifying Grace

Mentioned above, sanctifying grace is received at baptism but it is not permanent—it can be lost through “serious, conscious, and deliberate sin.” Penance is then needed to restore sanctifying grace (this will be covered in the next point on “Rejustification”).

Throughout his life the Catholic must cooperate with sanctifying grace by observing the sacraments.

2) The Sacraments

Sacraments “contain” grace—they are the necessary channels and instruments that grace is received. In each of these, grace is received by the very act of its performance.

“Baptism...is necessary for initial justification. Penance is necessary for restoration to the life of grace should a Catholic forfeit grace through serious sin. confirmation, anointing of the sick, and especially Holy Eucharist provide grace needed to avoid sin and do good” (McCarthy, p. 57).

- a. Baptism
- b. Penance
- c. Eucharist
- d. Confirmation
- e. Matrimony
- f. Holy orders
- g. Anointing of the sick

3) Merit

In order for a Catholic to continue the process of salvation, he has to do good works that earn a **reward** from God—merit. As the Catholic does his part, he cooperates with God and earns grace and eternal life.

4) Sanctification

No Catholic can say he is *saved*, but he can say that he is *being saved*. Throughout his life he must increase or perfect the grace of justification—he must become **more** justified through the process of sanctification.

A Biblical Evaluation

1) Biblical Grace is **Undeserved** Favor

The Bible says that no amount of good works can earn salvation, and that grace is the unearned, undeserved, unrecompensed, and unwanted favor of God toward sinners (see pp. 23-25 of these notes).

Unlike God’s grace, the RCC’s concept of grace is not free. One does not depend on God, he must depend on the Church’s sacraments and rituals. Indeed, the RCC officially says that “the Church is necessary for salvation” (Second Vatican Council, §57).

2) Biblical Justification is **Complete** in Christ

While the RCC teaches that justification can and must increase, the Bible teaches that it is complete in Christ (Rom 3:22; 2 Cor 5:21), that the believer is justified (Rom 8:33) and that his salvation is secure (Rom 5:9).

The RCC confuses justification (a declaration by God) and sanctification (a lifelong process of growing more like Christ).

3) The Work of a Lifetime

The RC believes that eternal salvation depends on doing good works and receiving the sacraments. It views justification as incomplete and fragile.

The Bible says that biblical salvation is characterized by rest because Christ finished the work of salvation on the cross.

“Roman Catholicism knows nothing of resting in Christ. To the contrary, the truest Catholics are the ones who work the hardest” (McCarthy, 69).

4. Rejustification

The Catholic Position

Summary: “Grace is lost through mortal sin, but can be regained through the sacrament of penance” (p. 20)

1) Mortal and Venial Sin

The RCC teaches that there are two categories of sin.

Mortal sin ends the life of God in the soul—it kills the soul and brings eternal punishment. It is committed when the Catholic knowingly and deliberately commits a “big” sin. (“Murder is graver than theft...violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1858.)

Venial sin are minor sins that only weaken the Catholic spiritually; they do not kill the soul or bring eternal punishment.

If a Catholic commits mortal sin he loses the grace of justification received at baptism and becomes *dejustified*. In order for him to be *rejustified* he must turn to the Church and the sacrament of penance.

2) The Sacrament of Penance

Penance is how a wayward Catholic makes things right with God. The only way a Catholic who has committed mortal sin can get back on the road to salvation is through penance.

a. **Confession of Sin** – to a Catholic priest

b. **Contrition of the Sinner** – the sinner shows he is sorry

- c. **Judgment by the Priest** – the priest determines whether he is truly sorry and decides whether or not to pardon the sinner
- d. **Absolution by the Priest** – free the guilty person of eternal punishment
- e. **Penance by the Sinner** – the sinner makes things right with God by doing something to remove his sin

A Biblical Evaluation

- 1) Biblical Confession is to **God** Alone

Ps 32:5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.”

Mark 2:7 “who can forgive sins but God alone?”

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

See also Nehemiah 1:4-11; Daniel 9:3-19; Ezra 9:5-10; 10:11; Acts 10:43.

- 2) Biblical Satisfaction for Sin is in Christ’s Blood **Alone**

The only way sin can be forgiven is through the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22). Recall the four areas of need that sin produces (notes, pp. 20-23) and that only Jesus Christ can effectively deal with them (notes, pp. 30-33).

If a Catholic believes that he can take care of sin by saying a few *Hail Marys* or *Our Fathers* he will not see sin as that serious.

- 3) **All** Sin is Mortal

See notes, pp. 16-18. The consequences of all sin are spiritual, physical, and eternal death.

5. Final Destiny

The Catholic Position

Summary: “Eternal life is attained by dying in a state of grace” (p. 20)

- 1) Final Perseverance and the Particular Judgment

The RCC teaches that when a Catholic dies he finds out whether or not he has gained eternal life at *the particular judgment*. This is when God decides the person’s fate.

In order to pass this judgment, the RCC teaches that the Catholic must die in a state of grace and have not committed a mortal sin at the last moment before death.

Thus, no Catholic can say he *is saved* as his salvation depends ultimately on himself.

2) Purgatory

At the particular judgment, God may decide that a Catholic is deserving of eternal life but before enjoying such he must make atonement for his sins. This payment for sins occurs in purgatory where the Catholic is punished for a period of time determined by God until his sins have been fully paid for. Living Catholics can do good works on behalf of the deceased thus shortening their time in purgatory. These “good works” are called *indulgences*.

3) Indulgences

Indulgences are special credits given by the Church that cancels out the punishment of sin either wholly or in part. It is up to the individual who earns the indulgence how he will use it (apply to his own sin or to a deceased Catholic).

A Biblical Evaluation

If you talk to a Catholic about how they hope to get to heaven, few will use the above terms. A typical answer goes something like this:

“I hope to get to heaven because I believe in God and try to be a good Catholic. I try to be nice to everyone and keep the commandments. I go to Mass and pray. If I sin, I say the *Act of Contrition*—though I’ve never really done anything all *that* bad. When I die, I think I’ll go to heaven. I might have to go to purgatory first, though, if there is a purgatory” (McCarthy, 100).

1) Eternal Life is a **Free Gift**

Salvation is not a reward but the free gift of God (John 10:28; Rom 6:23b; Rev 21:6).

2) Biblical Salvation is Completely **Secure**

It is secure because it does not depend upon man but upon God (John 10:28 “*I give eternal life to them*”). See p. 39 of these notes on “eternal security.”

3) Payment for Sin is through the **Cross** Alone

Jesus “released us from our sins by His blood” (Rev 1:5). There is no mention in the Bible of acts of penance, indulgences, or a place called purgatory.

4) Purgatory is a **False** Doctrine

Purgatory is necessary in RC theology for when a Catholic dies there are still sins that he has not taken care of.

The Bible, however says that salvation rests entirely on Christ who made “purification of sins” on the cross (Heb 1:3), whose blood can “cleanse your conscience from dead works”

(9:14). Jesus “is the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2)—no mention is made of leftover punishment!

Additionally, God does not look at a believer as a defiled sinner; rather, he sees him as *in Christ* (Eph 1:1-14).