

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. I'd like to get right into the Bible today:
 - 1. *"These Jews were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the Word with all willingness and examined the scriptures daily to determine whether these things were so."* (Acts 17:11 NAB)
- B. Welcome to part 2 of our new series for the summer. The series is called: **What's the Difference?**
- C. I want to begin where the Bible begins — with a call to honest examination.
- D. In Acts 17:11, the Bereans were called noble because they received the Word eagerly and searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were true.
- E. That is the spirit of this series. We are not here to mock anyone, win arguments, or tear people down. We are here to ask a serious question: what is the difference between the Christian faith we preach here at Pathway and the systems around us?
- F. Today is part 2 of our series, What's the Difference?
 - 1. **What's a Nice Italian Boy Like You Doing in a Non-Catholic Church? Part 1**
- G. Before I get into it, we have these cards for you, as a thank you for coming to church this summer. 2 cards... as a catch up.
 - 1. I want you to know that you are looking at a pastor who was baptized as an infant in the Catholic Church. I didn't grow up Catholic, but I did get that start.
 - 2. You are also looking at a pastor who has stood alongside Catholic Priests in Catholic Churches. I've done weddings with Catholic priests in Catholic Churches. I've done funerals. I've been part of last rites.
 - 3. All my Italian family are Catholics, and I love them. And I always say, if you are going to be Catholic, be a saved Catholic.
 - 4. And if you are Catholic, I respect you for being here. My heart today is that you will feel loved, respected, heard.
 - 5. So today's question is not whether Catholics are sincere. Many are.
- H. The question is whether the Catholic system and the evangelical gospel are the same thing.
- I. And because this matters forever, we need to say it carefully and honestly.
- J. I want to start with... things I admire and respect in the Roman Catholic Church.

II. Things I Admire and Respect

- A. **1. Catholicism has always taken history seriously.**
 - 1. In a world that erases its memory every 24 hours, the Catholic Church offers an anchor to a 2,000-year-old story. In a culture with amnesia, Catholicism reminds people that the faith did not begin yesterday. It has roots, memory, continuity, and a sense of sacred inheritance. When everything feels disposable, ancient feels trustworthy.
- B. **2. Catholicism has always taken beauty seriously.**
 - 1. Let's be honest. Many evangelical churches look like a warehouse or a concert venue. A Catholic cathedral on the other hand, looks like heaven tried to break through the ceiling. Too many churches look functional but forgetful. Catholic cathedrals preach with art, architecture, and reverence. They communicate that God is not common.
- C. **3. Catholicism has always taken community seriously.**
 - 1. Catholicism understands that humans are not isolated spiritual freelancers. We need belonging, identity, and shared worship.
- D. Finally, and most importantly of all, let's be absolutely clear on the massive, essential, doctrinal ground that evangelicals and Roman Catholics stand on together.
 - 1. We both affirm the Trinity—that there is one God, eternally existent in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - 2. We both affirm that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, the divine Son who became flesh for our salvation.
 - 3. We stand together on the historic facts of the Virgin Birth, the crucifixion and physical Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and his promised Second Coming.
 - 4. We both believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God.
 - 5. And in a world that is losing its way, we stand together on the sanctity of human life, from conception to natural death, because every person is made in the image of God.
- E. These are not small things. These are legitimate human longings that the Catholic tradition has honored for centuries. Honesty, and the Bible, requires us to start right there.
- F. So, in some ways, we agree on more than we disagree on. So this means there are a lot of things where we can work together.
- G. That being said, the places where we disagree are real and they are major. So, with respect and love, let's look at three questions.

III. 1. Authority: Whose word is final when it comes to Truth?

- A. The Catholic Claim
 - 1. In the Roman Catholic system, divine truth flows through what is often called a **"three-legged stool"**: Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Teaching Magisterium, which is the official teaching office of the Church.
 - 2. The key is that these three are so interconnected that, in the words of the official Catholic Catechism, "one of them cannot stand without the others." (CCC ¶95)
 - 3. In other words, when it comes to truth, the Catholic Church, the traditional teachings of the Church, and the Bible are all equals.
 - 4. This view raises a question of interpretation—when a passage is unclear or a tradition is debated—who holds the tie-breaking vote? Who has the final authority?
 - 5. The Catholic answer is unambiguous. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states it plainly:
 - a) "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone." (CCC ¶85)
 - 6. I know Catholic people who have been told they must not read the Bible for themselves, because only the Church can accurately interpret it.
- B. The Evangelical Response

1. Now, as evangelicals, we value tradition, but honestly not enough. The creeds, the councils, the great thinkers of church history—these are precious gifts that keep us from reinventing a new Christianity for every generation.
 2. **But we believe that the Church and its teachings are servants of Scripture, not its equal.**
 3. And this brings us right back to the verse where we started. The apostle, named Paul, was journeying to Athens, which we talked about last time.
 4. One of the towns he went to on his journey is called Berea.
 5. In Berea, Paul taught about Jesus in the synagogues. Then this happened.
 - a) *“These Jews were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all willingness and examined the scriptures daily to determine whether these things were so.”* (Acts 17:11 NAB)
 - (1) That NAB is the New American Bible which is an authorized Catholic version of the Bible. All my Scripture readings today are from the NAB.
 6. Notice 3 crucial observations:
 - a) 1. The people who were searching the Scriptures were not priests, but ordinary people like you.
 - (1) This puts to rest the Catholic claim that only the hierarchy of the church can make sense of the Bible.
 - b) 2. The authority for truth was the Scriptures themselves... It is the written word of God that is determinative.
 - (1) Whether “these things were so” or not depended on what the Bible says — it says so right here — because the Bible always has the final say.
 - (2) And this is most important:
 - c) 3. The teaching they were evaluating came from Paul who was an Apostle.
 - (1) This is super important because in the Catholic Church, the highest authority is the Pope and the pope is considered a successor to the Apostles..
 - (2) Paul the Apostle taught them, and then, with the Apostle’s encouragement, they opened their Bibles and searched the Scriptures to judge whether or not Paul got it right!
 - (3) So, who had the greater authority, the Apostle or the Scriptures? The Scriptures! If even an apostle couldn’t prove his teachings from Scripture, then the people could call him on it and say, We stand on Scripture alone.
 - (4) That’s what Paul knew. That’s what the Bereans knew. That’s what St. Luke knew when he wrote Acts 17:11. That’s what God’s people have always known.
 - (5) Against this, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC para 80 says:
 - (a) “The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone.”
 - (6) This contradicts St. Paul, St. Luke, the Bible itself, and ultimately Jesus.
 - C. In 1519, during a massive debate with the Catholic Church’s top experts, a Catholic priest named Martin Luther dropped a bombshell that shook the world. He said: “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.”
 1. He was the first to translate the Bible into the German language so everyone could read it.
 - D. A few years later in England, a scholar named William Tyndale made it his life’s mission to translate the Bible from Greek & Hebrew into English so that ordinary people could read it.
 1. The Catholic authorities were furious. During a debate with a highly educated, high-ranking Catholic scholar, Tyndale said:
 2. “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that drives the plow to know more of the Scripture than you do.”
 - E. Tyndale was eventually strangled and burned at the stake for doing this.
 - F. Why does this history matter for you today?
 - G. Because of the psychological weight it lifts off your shoulders.
 1. When an institution holds the final authority, your access to God is always indirect. You are dependent on a hierarchy.
 2. But the Berean standard—the standard of Luther and Tyndale—gives you direct access. You don’t need a priest or a pope to tell you what God sounds like.
 - a) You have His Word, and you have His Spirit living inside you.
 - b) You have a new nature to give you a new mind.
 - c) Even if the leaders fail, even if the institution crumbles, your foundation is perfectly secure because the Word of the Lord stands forever.
 - H. The first reason this little Italian boy isn’t Catholic is because I believe the Bible has the final say.
 - I. The second reason has to do with how people like us can actually experience the grace of God.
- IV. 2. SACRAMENTS: How Does Grace Reach Us?**
- A. The Catholic Claim
 1. In the Catholic tradition, God’s grace is distributed to the believer through the rituals they call sacraments—things like baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist (or communion), and penance (confession).
 2. In evangelical churches, we don’t use the word sacraments, we use the word “ordinances.” And there’s a reason why.
 3. The word *sacramentum* came to mean mystery. And to the Catholic Church, these are not just symbols. **They are actual, physical pipelines of grace.**
 - a) If the question is how are you saved, the answer is, by Grace.
 - b) If the next question is how do you personally obtain that Grace, the answer is by faith.
 - c) If the next question is what is faith, then the answer is sharply different between evangelicals and Catholics.
 4. For Catholics, faith means “adherence to the teachings of the Catholic Church” and that means sacraments... you are saved by participating in baptism, confirmation, confession, communion, and last rites, and even then you can’t be sure.

- a) On one side, here's God's Grace through the finished work of Christ. On the other side, here's you. In between you have the Priesthood and the Sacraments.
- 5. But Evangelicals say, No. You receive saving grace through simple faith. Faith isn't sacraments. Faith means trust,. Trusting in the finished work of Christ as your only Hope....
- 6. So that when you put your faith in Jesus as your Savior you are saved once for all.
 - a) Only then, after that, baptism and the Lord's supper symbolize the salvation you already have courtesy the saving work of Jesus on the Cross.
- 7. But Catholics say, no way. In fact, the Catholic Council of Trent (AD 1547) declared that anybody who says what I just said to be damned:
 - a) Canon 12: If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than trust in divine mercy... let him be anathema [damned].
 - b) Canon 4 : If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation... let him be anathema.
 - c) Canon 8: If anyone says that the sacraments do not confer grace... let him be anathema.
 - d) In the sacramental system...
 - (1) Baptism actually washes away original sin.
 - (2) The Eucharist actually drops spiritual life into your soul.
 - (3) Penance actually restores the grace you lost when you sinned.
 - e) What do we say to this?
- B. The Evangelical Response
 - 1. The Bible consistently locates the mechanism of salvation not in a ritual, but in simple faith.
 - a) Ephesians 2:8 is clear: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God" (NAB).
 - 2. The danger of a sacramental system is what it does to the human heart. If grace is infused only bit by bit, in increments, and if it can be lost through a "mortal sin" and restored only through the sacrament of penance, it creates a religious treadmill.
 - 3. You are left with a quiet, perpetual guilt. Am I in a state of grace right now? Have I done enough? Do I need to go back to the priest?
 - 4. **PRODIGAL SON:** Think back to the story of the Prodigal Son we looked at last week. When the broken son turns toward home, Jesus says the Father is already running down the road, arms wide open, robe flying, ready to embrace him.
- C. **PRODIGAL SON STOPPED:** But that can't happen in Catholic theology. The sacramental system gets in the way at the end of the driveway saying, "Hold on. We need to process your paperwork first. Have you been properly cleansed through the required rituals of the Church?"
- D. But the gospel of grace says nothing gets in the way. The Father is running. Christ paid the toll.
 - 1. Through faith alone, you have direct, immediate, unhindered access to the embrace of God.
- E. And if you want proof, remember the man crucified on a cross next to Jesus, who put his faith in Jesus, was never baptized, never told communion, and never knew what a Sacrament was, and even so to him, Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise."
- F. And I want you to notice he talked to Jesus directly without any intermediaries. Which brings me to my last section for today: where I want to ask the question of Mary.

V. 3. MARY: Who Is Mary?

- A. The Catholic Claim
 - 1. In the Catholic tradition, an elaborate and beautiful theology surrounds Mary. Early on, she was rightly called *theotokos*—the God-bearer. But over the centuries, the Church officially expanded her role far beyond the pages of Scripture.
 - 2. First, to make her a pure vessel for Christ, the Church instituted the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The Immaculate Conception doctrine in the Catholic Church is not about Jesus. It's about Mary. This teaching says Mary was born sinless and stayed sinless.
 - a) "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God... preserved immune from all stain of original sin." (CCC 491)
 - 3. Second, the Church decreed the teaching called the Assumption. Every year, on August 15, Catholics celebrate what they call the Assumption.
 - a) This feast celebrates the belief that Mary never died. Instead, she was taken up straight into heaven when the time was right.
 - b) The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that Mary, "when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory." (CCC ¶966)
 - 4. Third, Mary is seen as part of our Salvation. Jesus is our redeemer, Mary is our co-redeemer. Jesus is our Mediator (go-between). Mary is our co-mediator (mediatrix).
 - a) "Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix." (CCC ¶969)
 - 5. IN other words, Jesus alone doesn't save you. His death, his suffering was not enough. Mary's suffering helps save you too.
 - 6. In late breaking news (Nov 4, 2025), the Church declared that Mary is to no longer be publicly called Mediator, though she still retains the title.
 - 7. This is good news, because the teachers of the Catholic Church did not want to confuse people that only Jesus can save you. That's a great development. I pray it takes root.
- B. The Evangelical Response

1. As evangelicals, we deeply honor Mary. The Bible calls her "blessed among women," and her courageous obedience is a model for every believer.
2. But as Bereans, we must bring these doctrines to the Scriptures.
 - a) Against the teaching that Mary was sinless, we point out: Romans 3:23 says "all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God" (NAB). All is a short word that does not bend.
 - b) Against the teaching that Mary never died, we point out: "Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27, NAB).
 - (1) Even Catholic theologians acknowledge these teachings are built on inference, from inference, from inference. Like climbing way out on a limb.
 - c) But the most critical issue is the title of Mediator.
 - (1) We point out I Timothy 2:5 is crystal clear: "For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human" (NAB).
3. **150 years ago, Charles Spurgeon wrote,**
 - a) "The bridge of grace will bear your weight. Thousands of big sinners have gone across that bridge, yea, tens of thousands have gone over it. Some have been the chief of sinners and some have come at the very last of their days, but the arch has never yielded beneath their weight. I will go with them trusting to the same support. It will bear me over as it has for them."

VI. The Healing Truth

- A. So let me land this plane clearly.
 1. The gospel is not: try harder, clean yourself up, get religious enough, and maybe God will tolerate you someday.
- B. The gospel is this: Jesus Christ has done what you could never do.
 1. He lived the perfect life you did not live.
 2. He died the death you deserved.
 3. He rose again in victory over sin, death, and the grave.
- C. And if you have trusted in Him, then this is not up for grabs, not up for debate, not up for a vote in heaven.
- D. Your sins are forgiven.
 1. Not partially forgiven. Not temporarily forgiven. Forgiven.
 2. Your guilt is removed.
 3. Your record is clean.
 4. Your standing with God is secure.
- E. You do not have to crawl to God through layers of religious machinery.
 1. You do not have to wonder whether you've done enough.
 2. You do not have to live on a treadmill of fear, guilt, and spiritual uncertainty.
- F. Because Jesus did not come to make bad people a little better.
He came to save sinners completely.
 1. And for the person who says, "But how do I know I'm really saved?" — God answers that plainly in His Word.
 - a) *"I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God."* (1 John 5:13, NAB)
 2. Not guess. Not keep your fingers cross.
 3. That you might know.
- G. That means if you are in Christ today, then heaven is not your uncertainty — it is your destination.
 1. You are not drifting toward judgment hoping God changes His mind.
 2. You are being carried home by grace.
- H. So here's the question: Have you trusted in Jesus Christ alone?
 1. Not Mary.
 2. Not a priest.
 3. Not a sacrament.
 4. Not your own goodness.
 5. Jesus alone.
- I. That is the gospel. That is our hope. That is our joy.
- J. **What's the difference?**
 1. **Faith alone in Christ alone. That is enough and more than enough.**
 2. And that makes all the difference in the world.