

A Side-by-Side Comparison

CHRISTIAN Denominations



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Catholic

When and how were they founded?

Catholics consider the apostle Peter (died c. AD 66) the first bishop of Rome, the pope. Gregory the Great (AD 540–604) was arguably the first such bishop viewed as ruling over the whole church.

How many adherents?

1.3 billion worldwide
62 million US

What are their major divisions or groups?

Small “Old Catholic” groups deny infallibility of the pope, which the Catholic Church declared as dogma at Vatican I (1870).

How do they view Scripture?

The Scriptures, which teach without error the truth needed for salvation, must be interpreted within Church Tradition. The canon includes 46 Old Testament books (7 are Apocrypha/deuterocanonical) and 27 New Testament books.

How do they view God and Jesus Christ?

The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as taught in the creeds.

What do they believe about salvation?

Christ died as a sacrifice for people’s sins. By grace, God infuses a gift of faith in Christ in those who are baptized, which they maintain as they mature by doing works of love and receiving the sacraments.

What do they believe happens after death?

Souls of the faithful go to heaven either immediately or, if imperfectly purified in this life, after purgatory. The wicked immediately go to eternal punishment in hell.

How do they view the church?

The church is the Mystical Body of Christ, established by Christ and led by its earthly head, the pope, who may infallibly pronounce dogma. It is united (one) in a sacred (holy) worldwide (catholic) community through the succession of bishops whose ordination goes back to the apostles. Christians not in the Catholic Church are “separated brethren.”

What about the sacraments?

Baptism removes original sin in infants and converts. In the Eucharist, the substances (not the properties) of bread and wine are changed into Jesus’s body and blood (transubstantiation). Other sacraments: Confession, Confirmation, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders (ordinations), Anointing the Sick (last rites).

What other things should we know?

Mary was conceived by her mother immaculately (free of original sin), remained a virgin perpetually, assumed bodily into heaven without dying. She is the Mother of the Church and an object of veneration (honor that stops short of worship). Priests must be celibate (unmarried) men.

Orthodox

Lutheran

Orthodox churches formed in the Greek-speaking cultures in the East (Constantinople), rather than the Latin-speaking West (Rome). 1054: East and West officially split in the Great Schism.

220 million worldwide
1.2 million US

Organized by nations (Greek, Coptic, Russian, Armenian, etc.), each with churches also in other countries. Roughly a third of Orthodox in the US are Greek Orthodox.

Scripture, without error in matters of faith, is to be interpreted by Sacred Tradition, especially the seven Ecumenical Councils (AD 325–787). The canon includes 49 Old Testament books (3 more than Catholic Bible) and 27 New Testament books.

The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as taught in the creeds.

In Christ, God became human so that humans might be deified (*theosis*), having the energy of God’s life. Through baptism and church participation, people receive the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection as they persevere.

Souls of the faithful are purified (process of growth, not punishment), then get a foretaste of eternal blessing in heaven. The wicked get a foretaste of eternal torment in hell.

The church is the Body of Christ in unbroken historical connection to the apostles, changelessly maintaining the faith of the undivided church as expressed in the Creeds. It is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Each national church has bishops under the leadership of Patriarchs; the Patriarch of Constantinople has primacy of honor.

Baptism initiates God’s life in infants and converts. In the Eucharist, bread and wine are changed into Jesus’s body and blood (a Mystery left unexplained). Other sacraments: Chrismation, Confession, Marriage, Holy Orders, Anointing the Sick.

Mary was cleansed of sin when Gabriel appeared to her, remained a virgin perpetually, and (in tradition, not dogma) was assumed bodily into heaven. Icons are objects of veneration through which Christ is to be worshiped.

Founded
1517: Martin Luther’s *95 Theses* usually mark the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.
1530: Augsburg Confession was the first formal Lutheran confession.

Numbers
80 million worldwide (half are in central and northern Europe)
6.5 million US

Divisions
Main US bodies: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, plus a dozen or more smaller denominations.

Scripture
Scripture alone is the authoritative witness to the gospel (some parts more directly or fully than others). The Protestant canon of 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books is accepted.

God
The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as taught in the creeds.

Salvation
People are saved by grace alone when God justifies them (imputes his gift of righteousness) through faith alone in Christ who died for their sins. Justification by faith alone is the heart of the gospel. Good works are the inevitable result of true faith but not the basis of right standing before God.

Death
Souls of believers go immediately to be with Christ; at Christ’s return, their bodies are raised to immortal eternal life. The wicked begin suffering immediately in hell.

Church
The church is the congregation of believers in which the gospel is preached and sacraments are rightly administered. Believers are “priests” in that they have direct access to God (“priesthood of all believers”). Ministers are pastors; some serve as bishops. Historically, Lutherans reject apostolic succession.

Sacraments
Baptism is necessary for salvation; in it, both infants and adult converts are given God’s grace. The Lord’s Supper remains truly bread and wine but also becomes truly Jesus’s body and blood (consubstantiation).

Other
Lutheran liturgy revised Catholic liturgy to put more emphasis on preaching of the Word. Lutherans emphasize local church governance, with congregations electing representatives who together form a synod.

Anabaptist

Anglican

1525: Protestants in Zürich, Switzerland, began practicing believer's baptism (not infant baptism); *anabaptist* means "baptizing again."

2 million or more worldwide
800,000 US

Mennonites founded by pacifist Menno Simons (1537); Friends ("Quakers") by George Fox (c. 1650); Amish by a Mennonite group led by Jakob Ammann (1693); Brethren (German Baptists) by Alexander Mack (1708). Today, Mennonite Church and Church of the Brethren are the largest bodies.

Most view Scripture as the inspired means for following Jesus, but not as infallible. Scripture is the written Word pointing to Jesus the living Word. The Protestant canon is accepted.

Most affirm the Trinity but are noncreedal. Jesus is viewed as a man in whom God's will was revealed by his life. His deity, virgin birth, and resurrection are traditionally affirmed.

Through faith in Jesus, believers experience peace with God, moving them to follow Jesus's example by living as peacemakers in the world. How believers live is emphasized over having correct doctrine.

No official view of what happens immediately after death. Traditional view: at Christ's return, God's people will be raised to eternal life and the unrepentant will be forever separated from God.

The church is the body of Christ, the society of Christ's followers, marked by holiness, love, service, a simple lifestyle, and peacemaking. No one system of church government is recognized. Leaders (who function mostly locally) are to be characterized by humble service.

Baptism is for believers only, a sign of commitment to follow Jesus. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of his death.

Emphasize equality of believers. Some practice foot washing. Most groups are "peace churches," teaching nonresistance and pacifism. Friends (Quakers) are not Anabaptists but have historically been included among the peace churches.

Founded
1534: King Henry VIII declared as head of the Church of England (Anglican Church) making it independent of the Catholic Church. 1789: Episcopal Church formed by American Anglicans seeking to distance themselves from England after the Revolutionary War.

Numbers
85 million worldwide (half live in Africa)
1.75 million US

Divisions
Anglican Communion is a worldwide union of national and provincial churches. Largest US body is the Episcopal Church. US conservatives formed the Anglican Church in North America and several smaller denominations.

Scripture
Scripture contains the truth necessary for salvation and is the primary norm for faith but must be interpreted in light of tradition and reason. The standard Protestant canon is accepted. Apocrypha is respected but not viewed as Scripture.

God
The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as taught in the creeds.

Salvation
Christ suffered and died as an offering for sin, freeing people from sin and reconciling them to God. People share in Christ's victory when in baptism they become living members of the church, believing in him, keeping his commandments.

Death
Souls of the faithful are purified to enjoy full communion with God; at Christ's return, they are raised to fullness of eternal life in heaven. Those who reject God face eternal death.

Church
The church is the Body of Christ. Its unity is based on apostolic succession of bishops. It is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Anglican Communion is traditionally led by the archbishop of Canterbury, a tradition now in question as a more conservative Anglicanism has grown outside of England.

Sacraments
Sacraments are outward visible signs of inward spiritual grace. Infants and converts are made part of the church in baptism. Christ's body and blood are really present in Communion. The other five Catholic sacraments are accepted but with lesser authority and status.

Other
Members are free to accept or reject Catholic doctrines of Mary. *The Book of Common Prayer* is the norm for liturgy, which is a modified version of Catholic liturgy.