

## Week 31

# Biblical Christianity: The Differences

**TEACHERS NOTE:** This lesson is designed specifically as an informative and educational lesson. There are no overarching key verses for this lesson, but please feel free to develop this lesson as you are led to do so for the class in which you teach. If you have questions or concerns along the way, please contact your division pastor.

## + Introduction

Imagine a large extended family gathering for a family reunion. Parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, cousins, second cousins, and eighth cousins twice-removed all gather in one place to celebrate the fact that they are related. Some of the siblings might have scattered to opposite sides of the country. Some of the children might have moved to a different continent. Some of the cousins might have been hiding in the witness protection program due to a few unfortunate decisions on a trip to Vegas. Many people at this family gathering likely have different last names, many of them probably have conflicting political views, and many might not look anything alike. Despite this, all these people have gathered because they belong to the same family either by blood or by marriage. Much like a large family reunion, the Christian family has divided into different groups and denominations that look quite different from one another in many ways. But if we hold the same basic beliefs about Jesus, His death and resurrection, and other basics that constitute Christianity, then we belong to the same family.

In the previous lesson, we covered the basics of what 'Mere Christians' believe. In this lesson, we will talk about some of the important differences of belief and practice between different denominations of Christians. We will start by discussing the basics of what our church believes and then comparing it to some other denominations. This lesson will not be comprehensive, but it should be a good starting point for you to dive into these issues. Here is how this lesson will be divided:

### Outline:

- Distinctive Beliefs of Baptists and our Church
- Roman Catholics and our Differences
- Methodists and our Differences
- Lutherans and our Differences
- Presbyterians and our Differences

# + A Few Distinctives of What We Believe

## 1. The Bible is our primary authority for belief and practice. <sup>1</sup>

- a. We believe that the Bible is our primary authority to understand how God has revealed Himself to us and what He expects from us.
- b. Jesus is the Word that was with God in the beginning, and we come to know who Jesus is through the written revelation of God.
- c. The Bible faithfully reflects Jesus and what He has done in the world.
- d. All churches, leaders, and institutions must submit to the authority of God's Word.

## 2. Being a Christian requires the decision to follow Jesus. <sup>2</sup>

- a. You cannot be 'born into' being a Christian. The religiosity of our parents cannot make us a Christian. Each person must decide to follow Jesus and be 'born again' into God's Kingdom. (John 3)
- b. Grace and forgiveness of sin is a free gift of God available for all who believe in Jesus.
- c. We place a high emphasis on giving people the opportunity to decide to come to Christ. This is why we offer an invitation at essentially every worship service we have at our church. We place a high degree of emphasis on the need to decide to follow Jesus.

## 3. Baptism by full immersion is something that we do after someone becomes a Christian.

- a. Every model we see in the New Testament of baptism happens after someone has already come to Christ.
- b. The Greek word for baptism is *baptidzo* which literally means to 'dunk or immerse.'
- c. We baptize people after they come to Christ out of obedience to Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19-20 and in imitation of the fact that He was baptized.
- d. We believe that baptism is a powerful symbol of what God does when He saves us. We die to our old selves and are raised to a new life in Christ.

## 4. Priesthood of all believers

- a. In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter says that believers are '*a royal priesthood*' and '*a holy nation.*' Christians do not need a priestly class to connect us to God.
- b. There is a place for leaders in the church, but not a mediating class that connects the people to God. All believers have direct access to confess sins to God, spend time with Him, and come to know Him in deeper ways.

## 5. Autonomy of the Local Church

- a. As Baptists, we do not answer to any denominational leaders or magistrates.
- b. We believe that the individual church has the autonomy to make decisions about what we believe and what we practice. If we are connected to any other denomination, it is a connection of belief, but not authority.
- c. Our church ordains our own pastors, chooses our own leaders, and sets the path for our own initiatives, goals, and priorities.
- d. We do join with other Baptist churches to support missions and church plants.

## + Roman Catholics

Roman Catholics probably have the most significant differences from our church in belief and practice of the major Christian denominations.

### 1. Roman Catholics believe that their primary authority is the Bible along with the Tradition of the Church.

- a. Roman Catholics believe that Jesus gave the 'keys to the Kingdom of God' to Peter in Matthew 16 and John 20, setting up Peter as the first Pope of the Church.
- b. Roman Catholics believe that every Pope follows in the apostolic line of succession from Peter, giving them the authority to lead and instruct the church on faith and practice.
- c. Roman Catholics give primary authority to the Institution of the Church to interpret the Bible and dictate truth to Christians.
  - i. This is a key difference between Roman Catholics and our church: They default to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and we default to the authority of only the Bible.

### 2. Roman Catholics believe that grace is distributed by taking part in the Sacraments.

- a. Roman Catholics believe that God gives grace to sinners through what they call the seven Sacraments, these are 1) Baptism 2) The Eucharist (we call the Lord's Supper), 3) Confirmation, 4) Confession, 5) Anointing the Sick, 6) Marriage and 7) Ordination.
- b. Because Catholics believe that the Institution of the Roman Catholic Church is God's authoritative body on earth, it follows that one must take part in the church in order to receive God's grace.
- c. Roman Catholics believe that to receive God's grace, one must be baptized into the church, take part in the Eucharist and Confession, and participate in the other relevant Sacraments.

- d. Roman Catholics believe that in taking the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper), the body and blood of Christ literally become present in the bread and wine. This is called "transubstantiation," where the 'substance' of the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. At our church, we do not believe that the body or the blood of Christ becomes literally present in the elements of the Lord's Supper, but that it is a powerful symbol of Christ's sacrifice for us.
- e. Key Point: We believe the Bible teaches that God's grace is given freely through faith and belief in Jesus. We also participate in Baptism and the Lord's Supper (we call these Ordinances) out of obedience to Jesus, but we do not need them in order to receive God's grace! In Romans 10:9, Paul says that *"If you confess with your heart that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."*

### 3. Roman Catholics have a distinct class of priests, bishops, cardinals, and the Pope who have the authority to dictate God's truth to believers.

- a. Because Roman Catholics believe that the 'keys to the kingdom' were given to Peter and that the Roman Catholic Church finds itself in the Apostolic line of succession to Peter, the priests and other leaders serve as mediators between God and the people.
- b. In order to take the Sacraments of the church and receive God's grace, Christians must do so under the authority of priests. This is true of all the Sacraments, but especially Baptism, the Eucharist, Confession, and Marriage.
- c. Key Point: We believe that all believers are priests who can go directly to God. We do not need a priest to confess our sins and receive forgiveness and grace from the Father.

## + Methodists

In general, Methodists have a great deal in common with our church theologically. Not all Methodist churches and groups are exactly the same, but most of their distinctive theological convictions have much in common with Baptists. Methodism started as a movement when John Wesley began his ministry in the eighteenth century. There are a couple of differences to be highlighted between Methodists and Baptists.

### 1. Methodists practice infant baptism, where they baptize children and infants into the church.

- a. Methodists agree with Baptists that Christians do not have to be baptized in order to be saved.
- b. Methodists believe that the mode of baptism (sprinkling, pouring, or immersion) matters.<sup>3</sup>

- c. The key difference here is that Baptists are insistent that we follow the Biblical model of baptism; we baptize believers after conversion and by immersion. <sup>4</sup>

## 2. Methodists ordain pastors and make decisions at a denominational level.

- a. Pastors in the Methodist denominations are ordained by the institutional denomination and then placed in churches for specific periods of time at the discretion of the denomination and not the local church body.
- b. Baptist pastors are called and ordained by their individual churches.
- c. Baptist churches have more individual autonomy than Methodist churches for these reasons.

## 3. Questions and answers about God's Sovereignty in human decisions.

- a. John Wesley was firmly an Arminian theologically, meaning that he emphasized the freedom of humans to choose whether or not to follow God instead of other types of Reformed theology (Calvinists) that emphasize God's total sovereignty and control over human decisions and the universe as a whole.
- b. Baptists have a tradition of both groups, Calvinists, and Arminians, in our history. In fact, we have many in our church who disagree about the extent of God's sovereignty, and that's ok! Since this is not an essential issue, we allow for disagreement as long as we agree on the big things.
- c. Because Methodists tend to emphasize human freedom in interactions with God, it does lead to a couple of key differences with Baptists. Baptists emphasize the security of the believer, meaning that once we are saved, we are always saved based on the words of Jesus.

**JOHN 10:27-28** *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

Baptists take these words from Jesus very seriously and affirm that nothing can change that fact once you are saved. However, John Wesley and many Methodists believe that because God honors human freedom, that it is possible to renounce your faith and lose your salvation. This is a significant difference.

## + Lutherans

Lutherans take their name and their theology from the great reformer, Martin Luther. Just like with Methodists, our church has far more in common with Lutherans than we have differences. However, some differences need to be noted.

## 1. Like Methodists, Lutherans baptize infants and people of all ages.

- a. Methodists believe that the Lord's Supper and Baptism are Sacraments through which God dispenses some of His grace.
- b. Lutherans baptize infants because they believe that this reception of God's grace makes it more likely that the child will come to confess and repent of sins as an adult.
- c. Lutherans typically baptize by sprinkling or pouring water.
- d. Key Point: Baptists baptize adult believers as an act of obedience and as a symbol of what God has done in our hearts, while Lutherans baptize children and people of all ages in hopes that God's grace will be dispensed to them.

## 2. Lutherans also believe that the Lord's Supper is a Sacrament and that the body and blood of Christ are actually present when the Lord's Supper is taken.

- a. Lutherans believe that the body and blood of Christ come to coexist with the bread and wine when the Lord's Supper is taken. Their view differs from Roman Catholics because they do not believe that the substance of the bread and wine literally becomes the body and blood of Christ, but they do believe that Christ's body and blood are present in and alongside the bread and wine. This view is called "consubstantiation."
- b. Obviously, this view is different from what our church believes. As we believe that the Lord's Supper is a powerful symbol and remembrance of Christ's body and blood sacrificed for our sins, even though the bread and wine do not uniquely bring about His presence.

## + Presbyterians

Presbyterian's origins come from Great Britain and Scotland, and their name comes from their style of church government. They elect representative presbyters, or elders, who lead their denominations and churches and make decisions for the church.

### 1. Presbyterians traditionally have held firmly Calvinist views on God's Sovereignty and human freedom.

- a. As we mentioned with the Methodists, Baptists have a history of both Calvinists and Arminians (and everything in between) in our churches. This is a key difference between the two denominations.
- b. Roman Catholics give primary authority to the Institution of the Church to interpret the Bible and dictate truth to Christians.

## 2. Like the other denominations listed, Presbyterians also practice infant baptism.

- a. This is another key difference between Baptists and Presbyterians. Our church follows the Biblical model of baptism after conversion and by immersion in obedience to Jesus' command.
- b. We phrase it as having your baptism on the "right side" of salvation.

## 3. Church structure

- a. Presbyterians have elders who oversee their denominations and make decisions for individual churches.
- b. There are Baptist churches (*which are autonomous*) with elder-led boards who oversee the church, but we do not have this on a denominational level like Presbyterians do.

## + Conclusion

These are some of the basic differences, though there are others. It is also important to note that there are differences even within the Baptist denomination because each local church body is autonomous. Inside our own church, there are differences. We would consider the topics above to be "non-negotiable." They are foundational to our beliefs and core values as a church. However, there are many "negotiable" items that can be debated, such as End Times and the return of Jesus. There are three primary views, 1) Premillennialism, 2) Postmillennialism, 3) Amillennialism. No one knows exactly when Jesus will return and what it will look like, though we have glimpses throughout Scripture, especially in the books of Daniel and Revelation. *(If you want to pursue this a bit further in the lesson, there is some information below)*

Honestly, the style of worship music is vastly different in churches, even in our six campuses, though that is a style issue and not a theological issue.

We want to be informed of the differences between denominations. We want to be educated on what we believe. But let us put into practice the love of Christ in all things.

## + Addendum

Below are other important theological disagreements that you can choose to discuss in your lesson. You do not need to talk about these things unless you are interested. But if you do talk about them, make sure to stress that these are second-order issues where it is ok to disagree!

### 1. Free Will vs. Determinism

- a. Does God foreordain who He will save and who will be condemned?
- b. Do humans have actual free will to choose to follow God or not?

### c. The Calvinist Perspective

- i. The basic Calvinist position is that God does indeed predestine and foreordain who will be saved and who will be condemned on the basis of what will bring Him the most glory. The only ones who come to be saved are those who are elected (or chosen) by God, and their salvation comes purely as a result of God's decree, not as an act of their own free will to choose Him.

### d. The Arminian Perspective

- i. The basic Arminian position is that God foreknows who will freely choose to follow Him, and on the basis of His foreknowledge, He then elects those who will be His people. The primary difference between Arminians and Calvinists is the difference of perspective on human freedom.

## 2. The End Times: What do we believe about Jesus' return?

### a. Premillennialism

- i. Premillennialism is the belief that Jesus will return before the millennial reign described in Revelation 20. Premillennialists typically believe that the state of human culture and the world will become more and more wicked until the time that Jesus returns. This is the most popular perspective among evangelicals about the Second Coming of Jesus.

### b. Postmillennialism

- i. Postmillennialism is the belief that Jesus will return after a millennium in which Christian ethics lead the world to prosperity and love while living out God's kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Postmillennialism was very popular among evangelicals in the United States leading into the twentieth century. After the wars and the events of the twentieth century, not many evangelicals hold this view anymore.

### c. Amillennialism

- i. Amillennialism refers to the belief that there will not be a literal millennial reign of righteous believers surrounding the return of Christ. Amillennialists generally view the millennium described in Revelation 20 as symbolic. When Christ returns, He will set up His new, eternal reign in the new heavens and the new earth.

## Additional Resources

- Rose Publishing Topical Pamphlets: [www.rose-publishing.com](http://www.rose-publishing.com)
- Peter Kreft & Ronald K. Tacelli, Handbook of Christian Apologetics, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, Ill., 1994.

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<sup>1</sup> Baptist Faith and Message, Article I

<sup>2</sup> Baptist Faith and Message, Article IV

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-do-i-need-to-know-about-baptism-in-the-united-methodist-church>

<sup>4</sup> Baptist Faith and Message, Article VII

<sup>5</sup> David T. Steineker, *The Greatest Commandment: Matthew 22:37* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2010), 132.