

## What Does *Catholic* Mean? A History of the Word “Catholic”

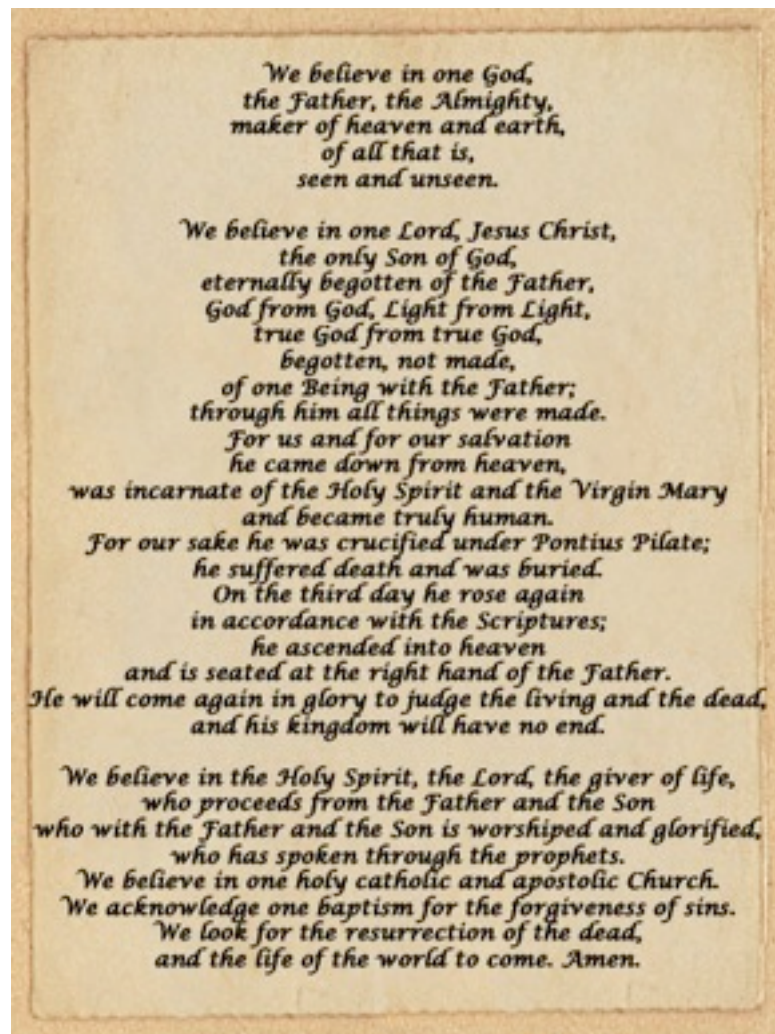
By Steve Ray

As a Protestant, I went to an Evangelical church that changed an important and historical word in the Apostles Creed. Instead of the “holy, *catholic* Church,” we were the “holy, *Christian* church.” At the time, I thought nothing of it. There was certainly no evil intent, just a loathing of the Catholic Church and a distinct desire to distance ourself from its heresy and man-made traditions.

I assumed that early on Catholics deviated from “biblical Christianity” so they simply invented a new word to describe their new society. Since we Evangelicals were supposedly the ones faithful to the Bible we had no interest in the word *catholic* since it was found nowhere between the covers of the Bible. It was a biased word loaded with negative baggage so we removed it from the Creed.

I should have asked myself “Where did the word *catholic* come from, and what does it mean?” Was I right to assume that Roman Catholics invented the word to set themselves apart from biblical Christianity?

A short and interesting investigation will turn up some valuable information. Let’s start with an understanding of doctrinal



development and the definition of *catholic*, then let's "interview" the very first Christians to see what *they* thought of the Church and the word *catholic* and then we will study the Bible itself.

### How Doctrines and Words Develop

The development of doctrine is not just a Catholic phenomenon. It is also a fact among Protestants and all religions or theological traditions. Over time, theological words develop to help explain the deeper understanding of the faith. As Christians ponder the revelation passed on by the apostles and deposited in his Church the Church mulls over God's Word, thinking deeper and deeper. It is not unlike peeling the layers away from an onion as one goes deeper to the heart.

Development of doctrine defines, sharpens, and interprets the deposit of faith. The Bible is not a theological textbook or a detailed church manual, such as say a catechism or study guide. The Bible's meaning is *not* always clear as St. Peter tells us (2 Pet 3:15–16). Thirty-three thousand competing Protestant denominations also make this fact apparent as they fail to agree on what the Bible says. It takes the authority of a universal Church and the successors of the apostles to formulate the doctrines of the faith. As an Evangelical, I was naïve enough to think I could recreate the "theological" wheel for myself.



To illustrate doctrinal development, let's look at the word *trinity*. The word *trinity* never appears in the Bible, nor does the Bible give explicit formulas for the nature of the Trinity as commonly used today, such as "one God is three persons," or "three persons, one nature." Yet, the word *Trinity*, as developed within the Catholic Church, is an essential belief for nearly every Protestant denomination. The first recorded use of the word *trinity* (*trias*) was in the writings of Theophilus of Antioch around the year A.D. 180. Although not found in the Bible, the early Church developed words such as *Trinity*, which are used to define and explain basic, essential Christian doctrines.

Interestingly, while many Protestants object to the idea of development of

doctrine within the Catholic Church, they seem to have no problem with developments in their own camp—even novelties and inventions. Take for example the *Rapture*, another word not found in the Bible and not used in any theological circles until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. After a prophetic utterance from two women at a Scottish revival meeting, the new doctrine of the *Rapture* spread like wildfire through England and America.

It was the Catholic Church that defined the Blessed Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Christ—the hypostatic union of two natures in the one divine person of Jesus—, salvation, baptism, the Blessed Eucharist, and all the other doctrines that have been the bedrock of the Christian faith. It is also the Catholic Church that gave birth to the New Testament—collecting, canonizing, preserving, distributing, and interpreting them.

As a Protestant I was quite willing to unknowingly accept the Catholic Church’s teaching on the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the closed canon of the New Testament, etc., but I wilfully rejected the *full* teaching of the Catholic Church. I now realize that it is in the Catholic Church that we find the fulness of the faith and the visible, universal body of Christ.

### **The Word “Catholic” Defined**

However, we have yet to define the word *catholic*. It comes from the Greek *katholikos*, the combination of two words: *kata-* concerning, and *holos-* whole. Thus, concerning the whole. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the word *catholic* comes from a Greek word meaning “regarding the whole,” or more simply, “universal” or “general.” *Universal* comes from two Greek words: *uni-* one, and *vertere-* turning. In other words, a “one turning”, “revolving around one,” or “turned into one”.<sup>1</sup> The word *church* comes from the Greek *ecclesia* which means “those called out,” as in those summoned out of the world at large to form a distinct society. So the Catholic Church is made up of those called out and gathered into the universal visible society founded by Christ.

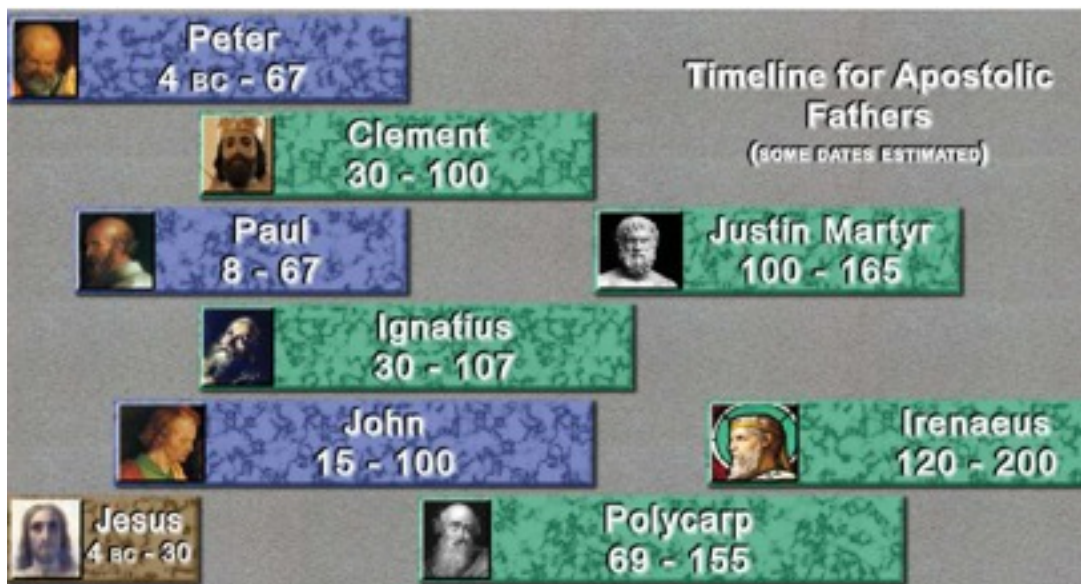
In its early years, the Church was small, both in geographically and numerically. For roughly the first decade the Church was made up exclusively of Jews in the area of Jerusalem. The word *catholic* hardly seemed to apply. But as the Church grew and spread across the Roman Empire, it incorporated Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, Romans, freemen, and even slaves—men and women from every

---

<sup>1</sup> Onions, C.T., ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983).

tribe and tongue. But by the third century, one out of ten people in the Roman Empire was a Catholic. Just as the word *Trinity* was appropriated to describe the nature of God, so the term *catholic* was appropriated to describe the nature of Christ's body, the Church.

But let's get back to the history of the word *catholic*. The first recorded use of the word is found very early in Christian literature. We find the first instance in the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch who was a young man during the time of the apostles and the second bishop of Antioch following Peter. Ignatius was immersed in the living tradition of the local church in Antioch where the believers in Christ were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). He was alive early enough to know the apostles and was taught and ordained directly by the apostles.



From the apostles St. Ignatius learned what the church was from the apostles themselves. From them he learned how it was to function, grow, and be governed. History informs us that St. Peter was the Bishop of Antioch at the time; in fact, Church Fathers claim that St. Ignatius was ordained by St. Peter himself.<sup>2</sup> Ignatius must have worshiped with Peter and Paul and John. He lived with or near them, and was an understudy of these special apostles. St. Ignatius of Antioch is known and revered as an authentic witness to the tradition and practice of the apostles.

<sup>2</sup> See Ray, Stephen, *Upon this Rock* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 119.

In the existing documents that have come down to us, St. Ignatius is the first to use the word *catholic* in reference to the Church. On his way to Rome, under military escort to the Coliseum where he would be devoured by lions for his faith, he wrote, “You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the



presbytery as you would the Apostles. Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (*Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8).

Another early instance of the word *catholic* is associated with St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who used the word many times. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John just as St. John was a disciple of Jesus. Like Ignatius, Polycarp also suffered the martyr’s death in a coliseum in A.D. 155. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written at the time of Polycarp’s death, we read, “The Church of God which sojourns in Smyrna, to the Church of God which sojourns in Philomelium, and to all the dioceses of the holy and Catholic Church in every place” (*Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrnam*, Preface)

Later in the same book it says, “When Polycarp had finished his prayer, in which he remembered everyone with whom he had ever been acquainted . . . and the whole Catholic Church throughout the world.” They then gave him up to wild beasts, fire and finally, the sword. The epistle then concludes, “Now with the Apostles and all the just [Polycarp] is glorifying God and the Father Almighty, and he is blessing our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world” (8).

So we clearly see that early in the second century Christians regularly use the word *catholic* as an established description of the Church. From the second

century on we see the term *catholic* being used consistently by the theologians and writers. One can easily conclude that *catholic* was a very early description of the Church, probably used by the apostles themselves

St. Augustine in the fourth century, relaying the tradition of the early Church, minces no words asserting the importance and widespread use of the term *catholic*. He writes, “We must hold to the Christian religion and to communication in her Church which is Catholic, and which is called Catholic not



only by her own members but even by all her enemies” (*The True Religion*, 7, 12). And again, “[T]he very name of Catholic, which, not without reason, belongs to this Church alone, in the face of so many heretics, so much so that, although all heretics want to be called Catholic, when a stranger inquires where the Catholic Church meets, none of the heretics would dare to point out his own basilica or house” (*Against the Letter of Mani called “The Foundation”*, 4, 5).

The early usage and importance of the word can also be seen by its use in both the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds. If you were a Christian in the first millenia you were a Catholic, and if you were a Catholic you recited the Creeds affirming the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” Unhappily, some people today try to make a distinction between *Catholic* with a capital “C” and *catholic* with a small “c”, but such a distinction is a recent development and unheard of in the early Church.

### **Biblical Understanding of the word “Catholic”**

Jesus commissioned his apostles with the words “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the

age” (Mt 28:19, 20). As Frank Sheed reminds us, “Notice first the threefold ‘all’—all nations, all things, all days. Catholic, we say, means ‘universal.’ Examining the word ‘universal,’ we see that it contains two ideas, the idea of all, the idea of one. But all what? All nations, all teachings, all times. So our Lord says. It is not an exaggerated description of the Catholic Church. Not by the wildest exaggeration could it be advanced as a description of any other” (*Theology and Sanity* [San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993], 284).

Jesus used the word *church* twice in the gospels, both in Matthew. He said, “I will build my Church” (Mt 16:18). He didn’t say *churches* as though he were building a subdivision; nor did he imply it would be an invisible church made up of competing groups. He was going to build a visible, recognizable church. And in Matthew 18:17 Jesus said that if one brother offends another they were to take it to “the Church”. Notice the article “the” referring to a specific entity. Not “churches” but one visible, recognizable church that can be expected to have a recognizable leadership with universal authority.

One can see the sad state of “Christendom” today by comparing Jesus’ words about “the Church” with the current situation. If a Methodist offends a Baptist, or a Presbyterian offends a Pentecostal, which “church” do they take it to for adjudication? This alone demonstrates the problem when 33,000 plus denominations exist outside the physical bounds of the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” Jesus expected there to be one universal, authoritative, visible and Catholic Church to represent him on earth until his return.

Just before he was crucified, Jesus prayed not only for the universality and catholicity of the Church, but for her visible unity:



“[T]hat they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me” Jn 17:21–23 NASB).

The early Church understood Jesus' words. What good was an invisible, theoretical, impractical unity? For the world to see a *catholic* unity, the oneness of the Church must be a visible, real, physical, and visible reality. All of this the Catholic Church is. Since the earliest centuries Christians have confessed that the Church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic." *One* because there is only one, visible, organic, and unified Church; *holy* because she is called out of the world to be the Bride of Christ, righteous and sanctified; *catholic* because she is universal, unified, and covers the whole world; *apostolic* because Christ founded her (Mt. 16:18) through his apostles, and the apostles' authority are carried on through the bishops. Through the centuries, this creed has been the statement of the Church.

In these last days, Christians need to stand confident and obedient in heart of the Catholic Church. She has been our faithful Mother, steadfastly carrying out the mandate of Jesus Christ for 2,000 years. As an Evangelical Protestant I thought I could ignore the creeds and councils of our Mother, the Church. *I was sadly mistaken.* I now understand that Jesus requires us to listen to His Church, the Church to which he gave the authority to bind and to loose (Mt 16:19; 18:17)—the *Catholic* Church, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).

Steve Ray is the author of *Crossing the Tiber*, *Upon this Rock*, and *St. John's Gospel*. You can contact him at his website at [www.CatholicConvert.com](http://www.CatholicConvert.com).