

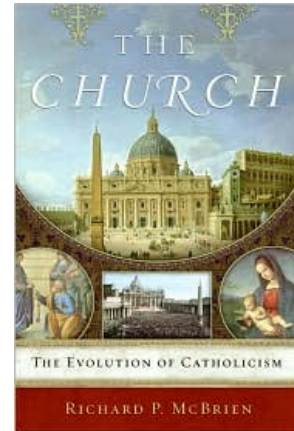
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# The Evolution of Catholicism

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One cannot understand the theology of the Reformers without first understanding the theology of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. Similarly, an understanding of contemporary Catholicism is necessary for any comprehensive understanding of evangelical identity. While Catholic identity is a contested issue among Roman Catholic theologians and historians (as is true also within evangelicalism), the issues and controversies of modern Catholicism are extremely instructive.

In *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* [HarperOne] Professor Richard McBrien of the University of Notre Dame offers a very helpful guide to these controversies and to the evolution of Catholicism in the modern era. He directs his primary attention to issues of ecclesiology with his church, and he offers a well-written guide that should be of interest to evangelicals seeking to understand what the Roman Catholic Church now teaches on a number of crucial issues.



McBrien is himself no stranger to controversy, and he is often criticized by more conservative Catholics. His more liberal reading of recent Catholic history (see especially his analysis of Vatican II) is most interesting. On several points of his analysis, I found him to be very insightful and helpful in summarizing. As is so often the case, understanding the Catholic arguments helps in the task of sharpening evangelical arguments. As in the sixteenth century, the issue of the Gospel remains central.

This excerpt serves to illustrate:

*Ecclesiology has already begun to respond to this new situation. There is a greater effort now to relate Christianity to the other great religions of the world and to develop new understandings of the availability of salvation, not only outside the Catholic Church, but outside the Body of Christ as a whole. Ecclesiology has begun to assume an interfaith as well as an ecumenical character. This development, of course, has not been without controversy thus far, as the many debates about Dominus Iesus, the document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in September 2000, dramatically illustrate. But this is the way the world and the Church are moving—in a global and multicultural direction—and so inevitably are the Church's ecclesiologies.*

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