

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is a worldwide faith comprised of many branches with a common source. This common source is within the birth, life, teachings, acts, death and resurrection of Jesus, whom Christians call the Christ (Messiah).

Jesus was born in Roman-occupied Palestine about 2,000 years ago. He was a Jew living in a Jewish land later renamed Palestine by the Romans after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. Jesus began teaching and healing in a ministry that lasted about three years, with a message of justice and love, and of turning toward God. He taught that the Kingdom of God was one in which there would be no barriers between humans: no Jews or Greeks, no male or female, no slaves or free. Because the Romans feared that as his following grew he might lead a revolt against them, the Romans arrested and crucified Jesus. At that time, various sects within Judaism competed for believers. Jewish leaders who disagreed with Jesus' approach probably cooperated with the Romans in bringing charges against Jesus. After his death, his Christian followers claimed that he had been resurrected from the dead and had appeared to some of them.

Though the earliest Christians were Jews, the apostle Paul, and other followers began to spread the teachings of Jesus to the non-Jewish population of the Greco-Roman world. The small band of followers was sufficiently inspired by their spiritual experience that Christianity quickly created many communities of faith in the Mediterranean world, and eventually the entire world. Christianity spread throughout the Hellenistic world and to India in the first three centuries, and from the fourth to seventh centuries throughout continental Europe, south in Africa into Ethiopia and Nubia. In the seventh century it was planted in China, and in the tenth century Russia became Christian.

Today one third of the world's people call themselves Christian, the largest of the world's religions. Christianity is characterized by extraordinary diversity and is now growing most rapidly in Africa and Latin America, where we find the majority of the world's Christians.

BELIEFS

Christianity's chief proclamation is that Jesus is the Messiah first foretold in Judaism. He is seen as God's son who was sent to redeem humankind from its sinful condition. Jesus' teachings were based upon love, not law. Humans can be redeemed by faith in Jesus Christ, loving one another and living a life exemplifying the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness.

Jesus is at once fully divine and fully human. In his divinity, he is one in essence with God the Father, the God of the Jewish people. God is almighty and the creator of heaven and earth.

When Jesus ascended to heaven after his resurrection, he left the Holy Spirit to be with his followers. The Holy Spirit is said to be co-equal with Jesus and God the Father, sharing the divine essence. This triune relationship within the Godhead is called the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Just as in other faith traditions, great diversity exists in what is deemed central to the Christian gospel. There are Christians who hold a more traditional belief that at some point Jesus will return to judge

all humankind. Those who are redeemed will live eternally in heaven, and those who are not will be condemned to hell. Many Christians today have reinterpreted those traditional views of judgement, heaven and hell, placing the emphasis on Christ's life-giving redemptive work.

SACRED BOOKS/ SCRIPTURE

The earliest Christians were Jews; the Hebrew Scriptures were their sacred writings. Modern Christians still so regard them, calling them the Old Testament or First Testament, including them in the Christian Bible.

The scriptures were known in the days of the early church both in the Hebrew language, in a shorter canon of writings, and in the Greek language, in a version called the Septuagint, used by Jews in the Hellenistic world. The Septuagint included an additional group of writings, produced not long before Christ or around his lifetime, which have become known as the Apocrypha. Christians mostly used the Septuagint version. When Western Christians translated the Bible into Latin, (a version called the Vulgate, which is still the authoritative version of the Bible for Catholics) they included the Apocrypha. Today Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and other non-Protestants still include most of the Apocrypha in their sacred scriptures, and the Orthodox churches include somewhat fewer writings from the Apocrypha. At the time of the 16th century Reformation, however, Protestants made a sharp distinction between the authoritative writings in a shorter Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha, which they saw as useful but not canonical, not part of the sacred scriptures.

For the first four centuries of the Christian church's life, a New Testament canon of Christian writings came to be generally accepted and was added to the Hebrew scriptures to form the Christian Bible. The New Testament consists of 27 books: four Gospels ("good news" - accounts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and teachings), one historical book called the Acts of the Apostles; one "apocalyptic" writing called Revelation; and 21 letters to churches, more than half attributed to the apostle Paul. There are no writings by Jesus himself.

PRACTICES and CELEBRATIONS

The vast majority of Christians celebrate two rituals or sacraments: baptism with water (the rite marking entry into the religious community), and the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion/Eucharist (consuming bread and wine, which are understood in various ways to represent the presence of Jesus Christ), as a rite of communion with God and with all believers.

With the exception of Seventh Day Adventists, Christians hold their weekly principal worship services on Sunday, which is the day of Christ's resurrection.

The dates of the principal Christian holidays, with the exception of Advent and Christmas, are determined by a lunar calendar, so their dates vary from year to year. Orthodox Christians use a different calendar, so they observe these lunar holidays on different dates than those of Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Advent. Beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30, this is a four-week period of spiritual preparation for the advent (coming birth) of Jesus Christ.

Christmas. Celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25. Orthodox Christians celebrate Jesus' birth on January 7.

Lent. Beginning with Ash Wednesday for Roman Catholics and Protestants, this is a 40-day period of penitence in February or March in preparation for Easter.

Good Friday (Holy Friday for Orthodox Christians). This is a commemoration of the day Jesus died by crucifixion, and it occurs two days before Easter. Many Christians attend religious services on this afternoon at about the time he is thought to have hung on the cross and died.

Easter Sunday. A celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Based on a lunar calendar, its date varies year to year.

Ascension Day. Occurring 40 days after Easter, this is a commemoration of Jesus' ascent into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father.

Pentecost Sunday. This celebration marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers after his ascension. It occurs on the seventh Sunday after Easter.

MAIN SUBGROUPS

While this entire overview is meant to explain what is common to Christianity, many branches exist within the Christian community that are identified by specific interpretations, practices and additional revered texts. These include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists. Excellent general information on these denominations can be obtained from *America's Religions: An Educator's Guide to Beliefs and Practices*, available from Teacher Ideas Press (1-800-237-6124, or www.lu.com/tip)

(Eastern) Orthodox. Originating in the Middle East, North Africa and later Eastern Europe, this traditional form of Christianity is organized along national lines (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.). It sees itself as the one true, visible church (a belief also held by Roman Catholicism). Developing in the early centuries, the Orthodox church participated in the first seven ecumenical councils assembled to discuss matters of belief and practice within the entire Christian community. A schism with the Roman church developed in 1054 over several complex issues, although chief among them was the Roman Pope's claim to be head of the entire Christian church.

Roman Catholic. Beginning in Rome, claiming Peter, the disciple of Jesus, as the first Bishop of Rome, this largest branch of Christianity accepts the authority of the later Roman popes as Peter's successors. Roman Catholics share with Orthodox and Protestant Christians the basic Christian beliefs, but differ on matters of authority and governance. The Pope is revered as Christ's representative on earth, and it is believed that when he speaks *ex cathedra* (by virtue of his office) on a matter of faith or moral teaching he cannot err (papal infallibility). Among the specific practices which distinguish Roman Catholicism are that it generally requires all its priests/ministers to remain celibate, ordains no women into the priesthood, and forbids divorce under any circumstance, although annulments (declarations that no marriage ever existed) have become widespread in recent years.

Protestant. The most recent major branch of Christianity began in western Europe in the sixteenth century as a protest against perceived abuses of Roman Catholicism. It has many subdivisions, including Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans,

Presbyterians, Baptists. Protestants share the basic Christian beliefs of Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, but are distinguished by such classically Protestant beliefs as:

- Salvation is received by the grace of God alone and is not dependent on human effort.
- The Bible is the sole authority for faith – not tradition or rituals.
- God is sovereign and decides who will be saved.
- All believers can have direct access to God without the mediation of priests. Though governance varies, lay people have a strong role in governance of their churches. A new Pentecostal movement has arisen within Protestantism in the 20th century which emphasizes the immediate experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

ROLES OF WOMEN

Women have been a part of the Christian community from its beginning. In fact, it was women who reported Jesus' resurrection to his other followers. It seems that Jesus dealt more openly with women than was customary at the time, and his teachings, although not explicitly rejecting hierarchical family structures, suggest a spiritual equality between men and women, which was reflected in the life of the earliest Christian community.

The great example of womanhood throughout medieval Christianity was the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, an intercessor with Christ and God the Father. Women throughout Christian history have played important roles in the spiritual life of the faith.

Christian feminism since the 19th century has opened ordination as ministers to women in several Protestant denominations, Episcopalians finally approving the practice in 1976. Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, most Lutherans, and American (Northern) Baptists all ordain women, while Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians and most Southern Baptists (as well as some other Protestants) do not. ☞

CHRISTIANITY – Did you know?

- While some evangelical and fundamentalist Christians use the term "Christian" to define themselves after their "born again" experience, the term Christian applies to anyone who accepts some form of the religion in any of its Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or other expressions.
- Orthodox Christians who use "icons" in their worship, see them as symbolic representations meant to inspire their devotion to Christ, Mary and the saints. They do not worship the icons themselves.
- Of Christians living in California, 56.1%, are Roman Catholic.
- Although Roman Catholics venerate Mary as the most important of the saints, and pray to God through her, she is not considered divine herself.
- The most common symbol for Christianity is the Cross upon which Christ was crucified.