

5 minute guide

to

CHRISTIANITY

Des McCabe

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Introduction

There are over one billion Christians in the world today, making it the world's largest religion.

Christians believe that a man born about 2,000 years ago called Jesus Christ was the son of God.

Christians follow the teachings of Jesus Christ as well as the teaching of the various churches within Christianity.

History

The life of Christ is the foundation of Christianity.

Jesus was born about 5-4 B.C.E. The story of his life has come to us in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) which are contained in the New Testament (Holy Christian scripture). These accounts differ in some details, but all give us the same basic story, except that the events surrounding Jesus' birth are described only by Matthew and (rather differently) by Luke. What follows is based on the accounts in the Gospels.

Jesus was the son of Mary who was betrothed to Joseph (a carpenter). According to Luke, Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel before her marriage to Joseph and the Angel told Mary that she had been chosen to have the Son of God who was to be called Jesus. Matthew tells of a similar announcement by an angel to Joseph.

Luke relates that just before the birth of Jesus, Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor of the time, issued a decree for a census of the empire. Joseph took Mary to his native town of Bethlehem to register. They could find no suitable lodging and had to stay in a stable. There Mary gave birth to Jesus.

Jesus grew up in the town of Nazareth, in Galilee. When he was about 30, a man called John the Baptist was preaching that he had been called by God to tell the people of Israel that the Kingdom of Heaven was near, and was baptizing many people. Jesus met John the Baptist on the banks of the river Jordan, and asked to be baptized. The gospels tell us that when Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended to announce that Jesus was his son. Jesus then went into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. During this time, he is said to have been tempted by Satan. Jesus did not give into the temptations offered by Satan and left to begin his ministry to change the hearts of the Jews. After leaving the wilderness, he learned that John the Baptist had been arrested.

Jesus then began his own ministry. He began to travel, and gathered 12 disciples. He settled for a time in Capernaum. During this time, he began healing the sick which led to people hailing him as the Messiah (the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation). This period

also marks the time when the authorities and the Pharisees became jealous of his popularity and threatened by his influence.

Pressure became so great that Jesus left Capernaum and began to wander. He drew great crowds and was recognised everywhere.

After some three years of ministry, Jesus made a journey to Jerusalem, where he was welcomed by great crowds as he entered the city on a donkey. His teaching was causing a great stir, and the chief priests and elders were anxious to arrest him and put him to death. The disciple Judas Iscariot agreed to betray Jesus for money. Before the opportunity arrived for the betrayal, Jesus met with his disciples for the Passover meal and told them that one of them would betray him. He then broke bread with them, saying that this was his body and he passed around a cup of wine saying that it was his blood. Later on that night, Judas arrived with soldiers to arrest Jesus. While he was being arrested his disciples ran away.

Jesus was brought first before the High Priest and then before Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea, who yielded to the crowd's demand that he be put to death by crucifixion, even though there was no real evidence of any wrong-doing. He was immediately taken to the hill of Calvary and nailed to a cross.

It is said in the New Testament that Jesus died after six hours on the cross, and that darkness covered the land for the last three hours. His body was taken to a stone tomb and laid to rest. On the third day after his death, the stone tomb was empty, and an angel said that Jesus had been raised. On that evening, Jesus appeared to the remaining eleven apostles while they were seated for a meal. The New Testament recounts this meeting. Jesus is said to have spoken the following words: 'These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.....Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.' (Luke 24:44-48)

Growth

The apostles dispersed and spread the words of Jesus Christ. Spearheaded by St Paul, who had at first sought to persecute Christians, but was then converted, the church spread into the Roman Empire and then further into the Greco-Roman world, even though Christians were at times subjected to terrible persecution, and many were martyred for their faith. The writing of the New Testament took place during the first and second centuries C.E. – the earliest writings which we have, which are some of the letters of St Paul, probably date from about twenty years after the death of Jesus Christ.

In the fourth century C.E., under the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Meanwhile, doctrinal disputes within Christianity had begun. During the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries C.E., councils were called to debate certain aspects of the faith, and the essence of the faith was set out in the Nicene Creed (so called after the Council of Nicaea, held in 325 C.E.).

In 1054, after growing divisions, there occurred an open split between the Western Church, led by the Pope in Rome, and the Eastern Church, centred on Byzantium (Constantinople). During the Middle Ages, there were growing accusations that the Western Church had become corrupt, and had departed a long way from the actual teachings of Jesus Christ. This led to a movement to bring about a reformation of the doctrine and life of the Church from

within the Church.

Around 1521, a man called Martin Luther wanted to change the way in which the church of the time was presenting Christianity. He wanted to bring the concept of individual faith back and to stress that faith was paramount in the religion. He also wanted to reassert the authority of the Christian Bible as opposed to the authority of the Church or its tradition. Other reform movements began at around the same time, such as that of John Calvin. Initially, the reformers did not intend to divide the church, but this was what happened. This period in Christian history is called the Reformation. It resulted in new Christian churches, including the Church of England (Anglican Church), which was made independent of the Church of Rome through an Act of Parliament under King Henry VIII in 1534.

The 1500-1700s C.E. marked a time of great expansion for Christianity, with the European exploration of new lands. The explorers took their faith with them and missionaries spread out across the globe to spread their religion to new populations.

The nineteenth century has been called the greatest century in the history of Christian Missionaries by both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The twentieth century saw renewed efforts to unite Christians, through the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement began within Protestantism and Anglicanism, eventually included some of the Orthodox Eastern Churches, and was given increasing support from within the Roman Catholic Church, particularly from the time of Pope John XXIII onwards.

Denominations

The main denominations within Christianity are:

- **Roman Catholic:** The Roman Catholic Church is headed by the Pope, and its claim to authority in the Christian world rests upon the belief that the Pope is in a continuous line of succession from St Peter, on whom Jesus Christ bestowed authority in the Church. Clergy are not permitted to marry.
- Within the **Anglican Church**, there are many different strands of belief, but traditionally the Anglican Church sees itself as part of the universal catholic and apostolic church, while not accepting the authority of the Pope. The Scriptures and the Gospels, and writings of the early Church Fathers, provide the foundations for Anglican faith. Clergy are permitted to marry.
- **Protestantism:** Martin Luther may be regarded as the 'father' of Protestantism. It is difficult to accurately categorise all forms of Protestantism because there are so many and they are varied. Lutheranism is based on Martin Luther's teachings and it forms the second largest Protestant group. Reformed and Presbyterian churches are based on the teachings of John Calvin. Free – or independent – churches (like Baptist and Congregationalist) exercise congregational government. Each congregation within the groups is autonomous. Clergy are permitted to marry.
- **Eastern Orthodoxy:** Eastern Orthodoxy denies the authority of the Roman Catholic Pope to speak and act for the entire church by himself without a church council. Parish priests are expected to be married, but bishops are chosen from among monks, and are therefore not married.

Traditions/Beliefs

- A belief that there is only one God, Maker of Heaven and Earth, but that there are three Persons in one God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit)
- A belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who for the salvation of humankind became a human being, lived on earth, was crucified, died and was buried, but rose again from the dead.
- A belief that through the faith in Jesus, his death and resurrection it is possible to have a right relationship with the God.
- A belief in Life after Death.
- A belief that Prayer is the vehicle to communicate with God. Prayers can be formal or informal.
- A belief that Christians should receive a baptism for the remission of sins.
- A belief in the Eucharist (also called the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, The Mass, the Divine Liturgy and Blessed Sacrament). It consists in the ritual of repeating Christ's actions at his last supper with his disciples.

Worship

The most important Christian religious Christian practices are the sacraments, rites or ceremonies regarded as instruments or symbols of spiritual benefit from Christ to the worshipper. The Holy Scripture for Christians is called the Bible (which consists of an Old Testament (shared with Judaism) and the New Testament (which includes the life and teachings of Jesus).

The Holy day in the Christian Church is Sunday. On this day worshippers congregate in churches. In most, but not all churches, there is the singing of hymns, prayers, scripture reading and talks (most often by the clergy of the church).

Holy Days, Festivals and Rituals

The Roman Catholic church recognizes seven sacraments:

- Baptism
- Confirmation
- Penance
- The Eucharist
- Matrimony
- Holy Orders
- Extreme Unction (the sacrament of anointing of the sick, especially when administered to the dying)

The Protestant churches for the most part only recognise Baptism and the Eucharist because these alone can be proved from Scripture to have been instituted by Christ himself. Protestant churches do have formal ceremonies for matrimony, but it is not regarded as a sacrament.

Celebrations

Different forms of Christianity celebrate different festivals and observe different holy days, but all forms observe (though might not celebrate it in the same way) the following 6 holy days:

- **Christmas:** 25th December. Marks the birth of Jesus Christ.
- **Epiphany:** 6th January. Marks the Journey of Three Kings to worship Jesus in Bethlehem
- **Good Friday:** The Friday before Easter (March/April), it commemorates Jesus' passion (suffering) on the cross.
- **Easter:** (March/April) Marks the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb.
- **Ascension:** Forty days after Easter, the ascension of Christ to heaven is commemorated.
- **Pentecost:** The seventh Sunday after Easter. Marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, which began the work of the Church.

Timeline

5-4 B.C.E.	Birth of Jesus and John the Baptist.
7 C.E.	A young Jesus astounds the priest in the Temple with his wisdom.
27 C.E.	John the Baptist and Jesus begin their ministries
29 C.E.	John the Baptist beheaded by Herod.
30 C.E.	Jesus is Crucified and resurrected
44 C.E.	The term Christian is used for believers in Christ.
100 C.E.	John, the last of the Apostles dies.
107 C.E.	The first recorded use of the term "Catholic Church" by Ignatius.
180 C.E.	Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon becomes the first post-Apostolic church father to assert the primacy of the church in Rome over all churches.
201 C.E.	The first specific Christian church building erected in Syria.
321 C.E.	Constantine declares Sunday the official Christian Sabbath day.
395 C.E.	The Roman Empire divides into two portions, the Eastern side being Byzantium.
1054 C.E.	The Eastern and Roman church separate
1095 C.E.	The first of 7 crusades
1232 C.E.	Pope Gregory IX appoints the first inquisitors.
1272 C.E.	The last of the 7 crusades ends.
1456 C.E.	The Gutenberg Bible is Printed
1508	Martin Luther Writes and Publicises his 95 Theses. This is the beginning of the foundation of the Lutheran church.
1521	Martin Luther is excommunicated
1533	King Henry VIII breaks with the Catholic Church and founds the Anglican Church.
1535	John Calvin writes, The Institutes of the Christian Religion. Marks the beginnings of Calvinist Churches.
1562	Pope Gregory changes the calendar, making the New Year begin on 1 January instead of 1 April.
1609	The Baptist Church is founded.
1611	First appearance of the King James Bible, or Authorised Version, an official translation of the Bible into English.
1827	Joseph Smith founds the Mormon Church
1831	Pentecostal/Charismatic movement is begun by London Presbyterian Pastor Edward Irving.
1914	William Durham founds the Assemblies of God, which eventually becomes the largest Pentecostal Denomination in the world.

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Diversiton
8 Osborne Promenade
Warrenpoint
Co Down BT34 3NQ
Northern Ireland
Europe
Tel: 00 44 28417 54777
email: mail@diversiton.com
web: www.diversiton.com

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Best wishes
Des McCabe

Dedication

This book is dedicated 'To Ma and Da, with love.'