

Early History

Christianity is based on the teachings of a Jesus, who lived in the Roman provinces of Palestine. His disciples originally called themselves "Christian Jews," but soon this changed into just "Christians" or "little Christs". The number of Christians grew very quickly during the 50 years after the death of Jesus. St. Peter went to Rome and preached about Jesus there. St. Paul traveled widely and converted many people to the new religion. The other disciples also traveled all over the Middle East and beyond. Some people believe that one of the disciples reached even India. After the Roman Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity in 312 C.E., Roman soldiers took the new religion all over the Roman Empire as far as the borders of Scotland in the North, North Africa in the South, Wales in the West, and the lands of modern Russia in the East.

The spread of the new religion of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa challenged Christianity beginning from the seventh century on, but by the year 1000 the majority of Europeans were Christians. In 1054, the church in the East split away from the church in the West. This was known as the great Schism. Rome became the "capital" of the Western (or Roman Catholic) church, and Constantinople (now called Istanbul) the capital of the Eastern (or Orthodox Catholic) church.

In 1517 Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 "protests" on the door of a church in Wittenberg and this was the start of the Protestant movement. One of the main groups to split away from the Roman Catholic Church was the Church of England or the Anglican Church. Over the next 300 years many other groups split away from either the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of England.

In the 1700s and 1800s the major European nations were expanding and creating empires around the world. They took their religion with them. Soon Christianity was established and growing in Africa (mainly Protestant) and South America (mainly Roman Catholic). By the end of the 1800s Christianity was established all over the world. It continued to grow in Africa and South America in the 1900s and in South East Asia in the last few decades. Currently, the number of Christians is diminishing only in Europe.

Today, there are over two billion Christians in the world and all of this has its roots in a handful of disciples that followed a man called Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago.

Sacred Texts

While some of the associated sects have their own texts, the vast majority of Christians have only one sacred text known as the Bible (from Greek "Bibles" for book or record). The Bible is divided into two major and one minor sections.

- Old or Hebrew Scriptures*: These are shared with Jews and are used as the history of the world before the coming of Jesus.
- The New or Christian Scriptures*: These tell the story of the life of Jesus, the development and the writings of the Early Church, and the prophecies about the end of the world.
- The Apocrypha: A collection of the stories of prophets and writings, which are not commonly agreed upon by the major sects.

*These are the commonly agreed sections found in all Bibles.

Belief and Practice

There is an enormous range of belief systems among Christians, but the majority agrees on three main areas:

- God is a monotheistic deity revealed in the works of the creation, in the person of Jesus, and in the presence of the spirit. God is the judge of all and the supreme authority.
- Jesus: Most Christians give a place of authority to Jesus Christ. They acknowledge his special relationship with God as the son of God, and his teachings constitute the basis of the Christian belief and lifestyle.
- The Bible has an important place as the written authority on the commandments (laws) of God, on the life of Jesus, and on the life of the early church. Most Christians would regard the bible as an important part of their understanding of God and as a special part of their understanding of the way they should live.

The Christian year starts at Advent and runs through the year in a series of seasons. The seasons of Advent and Lent are seasons of preparation for the two most important festivals, both linked to events in the life of Jesus.

- Christmas - celebrating the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to Mary
- Easter - celebrating the death, resurrection and eventual rising of Jesus to heaven

Most Christians will have three elements at the centre of their worship:

- Eucharist: The recreation of the last supper when Jesus ate with his disciples before his crucifixion. The elements of bread and wine are used to represent Jesus' body and blood.
- Exposition: Using the message of the bible, the teachings of Jesus and those of other Christians to explain the workings of the world and to formulate responses to situations in the world today.
- Prayer: Communication with God in supplication, confession, adoration, and thanksgiving both corporate and private.

Sects and Divisions

It is possible to divide the world's Christians in 5 main groups

- Roman Catholics, based in Rome under the authority of the Pope
- Orthodox, split into two main groups Russian and Greek
- Protestants, split into many differing factions, but with a priestly / ministerial structure
- "Free Church" individual self governing church groups
- Associated sects - which have some common ground with mainstream Christianity

Holy Days in Christianity

1. Lent, a period of fasting and prayer begins on Ash Wednesday, 40 days before Easter Sunday.
2. Palm Sunday is recognized 7 days before Easter Sunday; it is the beginning of the Holy Week.
3. Holy Thursday, (also called Maundy Thursday), remembers the Last Supper. The term "Maundy" was derived from the old Latin name for the day, "Dies Mandatum," – "the day of the new commandment."
4. Good Friday, (also called Holy Friday), commemorates the execution of Jesus by the Roman army of occupation.
5. Easter Sunday celebrates the resurrection of Jesus.
6. Ascension Thursday, (also called Ascension Day), occurs 40 days after Easter Sunday; it commemorates the ascension of Jesus to heaven.
7. Pentecost, (also known as Whit Sunday), is the 7th Sunday after Easter, the day when the Holy Spirit is reported as having descended upon the Apostles.
8. The first day of Advent is the Sunday which is closest to November 30; it foretells the coming of Christmas.
9. Epiphany, on Jan-6 celebrates the visitation of the 3 wise men to Jesus after his birth.
10. Christmas is the day associated with Jesus' birth. It is celebrated on Dec-25 by Western churches and on Jan-7 the following year by Eastern Orthodox churches.
11. Advent Sunday (also called the First Sunday of Advent) is the first day of an approximately 40 day period of preparation for Christmas.