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CHAPTER

CHRISTIANITY



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Nearly one-third of the world's population is Christian, making Christianity the world's largest religion. Christianity is the dominant tradition in the Americas, Europe, and Australia, and has significant followings in Asia and Africa as well.

What do the world's Christians, approximately two billion people, have in common? To put it simply, Christians share three things: Christ, creed, and Church.

To be a Christian is to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior. The basis for knowing Christ is the New Testament, which describes the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, his Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the significance of those events for the early Church and for Christians in general.

Christian creed, based on the New Testament, consists of the essential doctrines, or beliefs, of Christianity. In the centuries following the life of Jesus, Church leaders and theologians strove to express their beliefs with ever greater precision. Classic statements such as the Nicene Creed (see page 243), formulated in the fourth century, present

Incarnation

A core doctrine of Christianity, stating that in Jesus Christ, God became fully human while remaining fully divine.

Trinity

A core Christian doctrine stating that God consists of three Persons—God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit—who are at the same time one God.

Holy Spirit

One of the three Persons of the Trinity, along with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. The New Testament describes it as the active presence in the ministry of Jesus, and later in the work of Jesus' followers (beginning with the Pentecost, described in chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles).

Christianity's core doctrines. One core doctrine is the **Incarnation**, which asserts that Christ is both fully divine and fully human. A second core doctrine is the **Trinity**, which holds that God consists of three Persons—God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the **Holy Spirit**—who are at the same time one God. To be a Christian is to believe in such doctrines as the Incarnation and the Trinity, which are central elements of the Christian creed.

Finally, to be a Christian is to belong to the Church, the community of believers through which the creed is taught and Christ is celebrated. The New Testament decrees in various ways the essential role of the Church, founded by Christ and his disciples, and guided and nurtured by the Holy Spirit.

Some groups identify themselves as “Christian” although many other Christians would disagree that their beliefs and practices fall within the parameters that most Christian denominations have. For this reason, it is important not to make complete generalizations about Christians, even though the chapter focuses on what *most* Christians believe and practice.

CHRIST: SON OF GOD, SAVIOR

Early Christians, like some of their modern counterparts, used a concise and convenient symbol to express their understanding of who Christ was and what he meant for them. They drew a fish on their doors and elsewhere, indicating that they were Christians. In Greek the word for “fish” is *ixthus*, each letter of which begins a word (in Greek, that is) of the phrase “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

The New Testament develops this summary depiction of Christ, recounting the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth; explaining his identity as the Son of God; and describing his role as Christ the Savior, the Messiah who came to earth for the salvation of all.

Drawing from the New Testament, we will explore the life of Jesus and identify the significance of his life and teachings for the New Testament authors and for Christians.

The Life of Jesus

The New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are the primary sources of information about the life of Jesus. They focus almost entirely on his last few years, from his Baptism at around age thirty to his Crucifixion and Resurrection. One reason the Gospel authors provided little information about Jesus' early life is that they strove mainly to emphasize his teachings and to express the meaning of the events of his life, rather than to assemble a factual record. As a result, we are not clear on all the details about him. Contemporary scholars who strive to overcome this shortage of ready facts and to learn about the “historical Jesus” meet with only limited success.

With these circumstances in mind, let us sketch the life of Jesus as best we can.

Fish have been popular Christian symbols since the days of the early Church.





The Sea of Galilee, known to ancient Hebrews as Lake Chinnereth and to modern Israelis as Lake Kinneret.

Judaism at the Time of Jesus

Jesus was born a Jew, and he remained a practicing Jew his entire life. His disciples were all Jews. Paul, the apostle who spread Jesus' message to the Gentiles (non-Jews), also was a Jew. It is therefore essential that we begin by noting a few facts about Judaism in Jesus' time.

The area of Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Jews, was conquered by the Romans in 63 BC. When Jesus was a youth, most of Palestine, including Jerusalem, came under the direct rule of a prefect, who served as a regional governor and reported directly to the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate occupied this office from AD 26 to 36. The northern region of Galilee, where Jesus grew up and carried out most of his ministry, was ruled by Herod Antipas, a puppet king who himself was also ultimately under the rule of the Roman emperor. Being subject to the Romans placed the Jews in an extremely difficult situation. The Romans cared mainly about maintaining order and collecting taxes. The Jews, however, harbored long-standing

hopes of achieving political independence. Tensions ran high, sometimes leading to conflicts and executions.

Jews responded to these difficulties in various ways. As noted in chapter 12, the Sadducees, Essenes, and Pharisees all practiced different varieties of Judaism. The Sadducees, wealthy aristocrats who controlled the Jerusalem Temple, were conservative, generally remaining on friendly terms with the rulers. The Essenes fled from the troubles, leading lives of discipline and purity in desert communities. The Pharisees were moderate, obeying the traditional commandments of Judaism and developing the oral Torah. There was also a group known as the Zealots, who believed the only way to achieve Jewish independence was through armed rebellion.

Jesus fit none of these categories. He was not a conservative, like the Sadducees. Unlike the Essenes, he chose to remain within society. He was a peaceful rebel who did not share the violent methods of the Zealots. Jesus had much in common with the Pharisees, but they did not approve of his outreach to the

apocalypticism
(from Greek
apokalypsis:
“revelation”)

A common Jewish religious perspective of Jesus’ time, which held that the world had come under the control of evil forces and was heading toward the climactic End Time, at which point God would intervene to usher in a reign of perfect justice and goodness. Early Christianity was generally in keeping with apocalypticism.

parables

Stories that Jesus used to cast important moral lessons within the language and circumstances familiar to the common people.

lower strata of the Jewish community, or of his nontraditional ways of observing Torah.

Despite these differences, Jesus seems to have shared with many other Jews some aspects of a basic religious perspective of that time known by biblical scholars as **apocalypticism**. According to this perspective, the world had come under the control of evil forces that caused Jews to live in an unjust situation. However, God was still ultimately in control. The world’s woes would become greater and greater until God would usher in the End Time and conquer the forces of evil. Many Jews believed the End Time would involve the Messiah, a deliverer, who would end “this current age” and usher in “the age to come.” The dead would be resurrected, and all would be judged, and ultimately the righteous would be saved from destruction. Before the End Time, God would reveal the plan to the elect through a revelation, or apocalypse, contained in certain writings. The last book of the New Testament, the Revelation (or Apocalypse) to John, is a primary example of apocalyptic writing. Apocalypticism seems to have informed the religious outlook of Jesus, and was central to Paul and to early Christianity in general.



ACTIVITY

Apocalypticism continues to be an important perspective for many people. What are some ways that you have seen apocalypticism, as it is described here, manifested today?

Jesus’ Early Life and Ministry

Jesus was born sometime between 6 and 4 BC (our system of dating based on Christ’s birth was developed several centuries later, and scholars have now determined that it is off by at least four years). The Gospels of Matthew and Luke report that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, but he grew up in the town of Nazareth, in Galilee. Jesus likely became a carpenter, like his father, Joseph. Jesus also seems to have become well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, the sacred texts of the Jews of that time.

Jesus’ ministry lasted about two years and was carried out mainly in Galilee. It began shortly after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. John, clothed in animal skins and living off the land, preached the imminent coming of the judgment of God. The precise nature of Jesus and John’s relationship remains unclear, but scholars think it likely that Jesus was a disciple of John’s.

On beginning his ministry, Jesus attracted disciples, and eventually large crowds gathered around him. These facts alone are evidence of his charisma and of the relevance and effectiveness of his acts and teachings. The Gospels all portray Jesus as an exorcist (one who casts out demons) and a healer. He often taught in **parables**, stories cast in language and settings familiar to his listeners but proclaiming radical lessons intended to disrupt conventional ways of thinking. Parables such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are among the best-known Gospel passages.

Jesus primarily ministered to fellow Jews, but unlike the Pharisees and other religious figures of his day, he constantly reached out to the lower strata of Jewish society: prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and other “sinners” and “outcasts.”



ACTIVITY

The lower strata of Jewish society in Jesus' day included prostitutes, tax collectors, and others whom the Bible calls sinners and outcasts. What kinds of people make up the lower strata of society today?

Jesus' Message

Jesus' astounding wisdom fills the Gospels, and his teachings have enriched Christians and non-Christians alike, for centuries. In conveying his message, he focused on two interrelated themes: the imminent coming of the Kingdom, or Reign, of God, and the urgent need for ethical transformation rooted in a change of heart.

The first theme is summarized in Mark 1:15, in which Jesus proclaims: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he referred to God's intervention in history to right the wrongs of the world. The present age of injustice was rapidly coming to an end, and a new age was beginning, one in which God's Reign would prevail. Jesus' actions and teachings were directly linked to the coming of God's Reign. In Luke 11:20, for example, Jesus remarks on the significance of his role as exorcist: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you."

The second theme of Jesus' ministry, ethical transformation, is also linked with the coming of God's Reign, for God's Reign would be one of righteousness. The heart of Jesus' ethical teachings can be found in his striking Commandment on love:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

(Matthew 5:43–45)

The notion of loving one's enemies must have struck Jesus' listeners as radical, but parting from the norm is typical of his ethical teachings in general. Though Jesus did not reject the traditional commandments of Torah, he urged his listeners to go beyond the letter of the Law. The Reign of God demands more than legal obedience to Torah; it demands spiritual obedience as well. Love requires more than following the rules; it depends on the transformation of the individual.

Along with teaching ethical transformation through his words, Jesus also taught by his actions, focusing his ministry on the lower classes of society. Jesus consistently practiced what he preached.



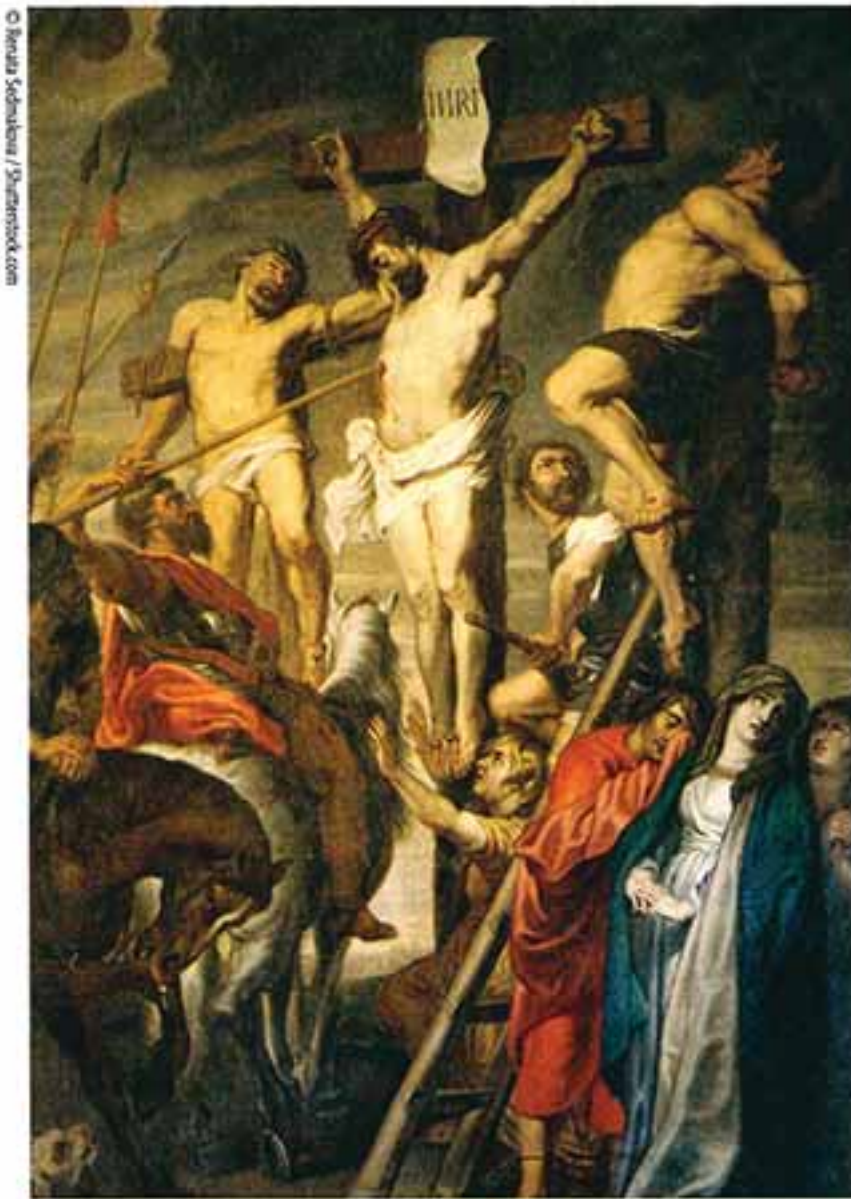
ACTIVITY

How could you apply Jesus' Commandment to love your enemies in your daily life?

Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection

Jesus was crucified by order of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, probably in AD 30. The radical nature of his teachings and ministry, and the agitated crowd of followers he attracted, got Jesus in trouble with the authorities. Teachings regarding a coming new "kingdom" would have struck the authorities as particularly troublesome. Some of those authorities were Jewish, though Jews may not have been as involved in Jesus' arrest and trial as the Gospels suggest. In any event,

Jesus suffered the slow and painful death of crucifixion, the method of execution reserved for those condemned as political threats to the Roman Empire.



gospel
(from Old English *godspel*: “good news”; in Greek, *euangelion*)

Referring generally to the saving power of the life, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

only the Roman prefect had the authority to pronounce a death sentence. Jesus died the slow and painful death of crucifixion, the manner of execution reserved for those condemned as political threats to the Roman Empire.

This was by no means the end of the story. Indeed, the religion of Christianity really began after the Resurrection, when Jesus’ followers first experienced him as the Risen Lord. The Gospels all describe the discovery of an empty tomb, from which the Risen Jesus is said to have departed. Although each Gospel gives its own account, they all point to an event of profound significance and meaning. The conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead by God moved Jesus’ followers to spread the news of his life and message far and wide. Some, such as Peter, were willing to die rather than deny their faith in the Resurrection.

The Good News of Christ

The Christian message is often called by the name *gospel* (in Greek, *euangelion*), which

means “good news” and refers specifically to the Good News regarding Jesus Christ.

Four New Testament authors have each provided a version of the Gospel that emphasizes certain aspects of the life and teachings of Jesus, and of his Crucifixion and Resurrection. This is a sampling of the “Good News” from Paul’s epistles and from three Gospels. (When capitalized the term usually refers to the New Testament books that recount the Good News of Jesus’ life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.)

The Epistles of Paul: Christ Crucified and Risen

Paul’s epistles, or letters, to the churches of Corinth, Rome, Galatia, and elsewhere are of paramount importance to Christian belief and theology. Paul refers specifically to the gospel, or “Good News,” in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news [*euangelion*] that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

(15:1–4)

Paul saw the power of Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection as the source of salvation. Christ, in his death on the cross, carried away the consequences of humanity’s sinfulness. With his Resurrection, Christ overcame death. Christians, having been forgiven their sins through Christ’s sacrificial death, will share in his Resurrection and experience

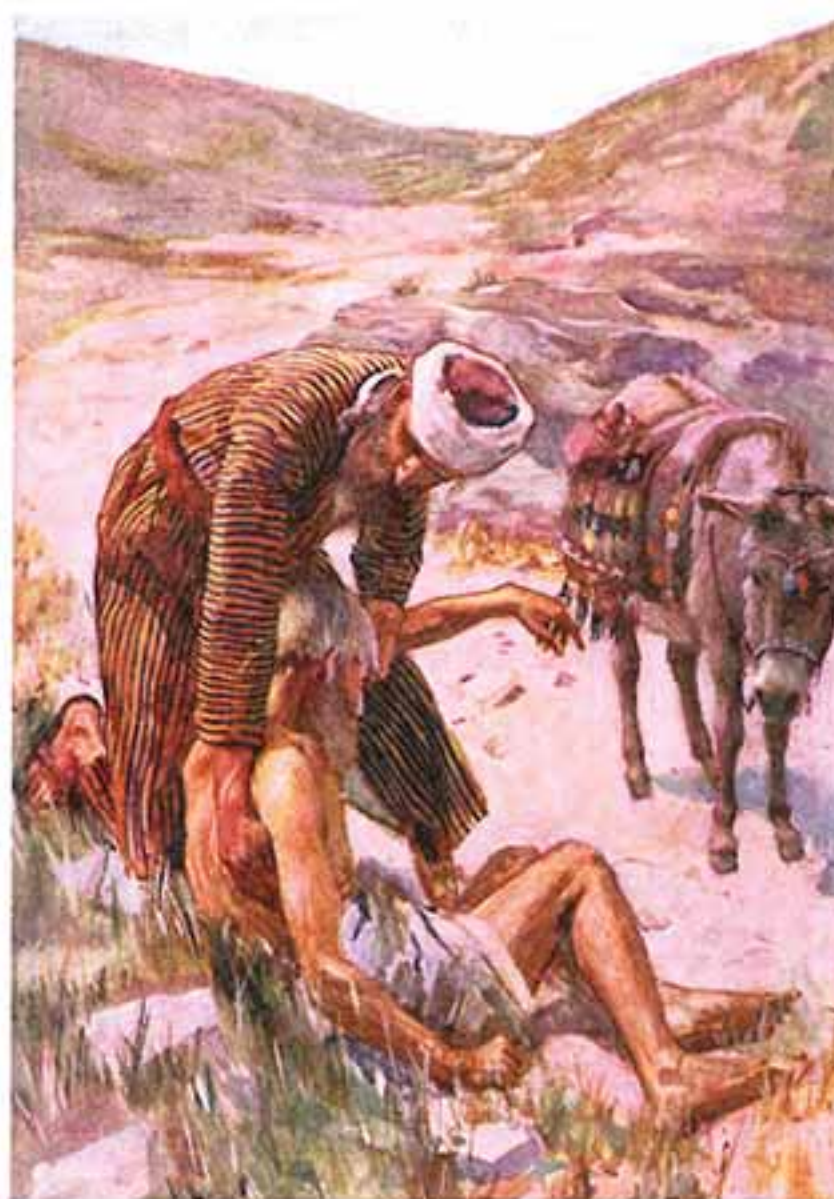
eternal life. Thus, for Paul, salvation was the overcoming of sin and death.

Paul's perspective on resurrection and eternal life remains prominent in Christian beliefs. In keeping with his apocalyptic view of the world, Paul understood Christ's death and Resurrection as climactic moments in God's plan for salvation. Finally, when Christ returns to the world at the **Second Coming**, which Paul equated with the End Time, the dead will be raised, and all people—living and dead—will be judged, and the righteous will be saved.

For Paul, salvation is not only the overcoming of death but also the restoration of friendship with God, freeing people from the bonds of sin and inspiring a newfound peace and joy. God's goodness and grace overcome the power of sin so that those freed might enjoy the "fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). Paul emphasizes that this salvation comes through God's **grace**—God's presence freely given.

For Paul, God's giving of Christ ushers in the fulfillment of the divine plan for humanity, ending the era of strict obedience to the Law, in which Jews strove to be saved through observance of the Law. Now all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, Paul did not teach the abandonment of ethical behavior. But that behavior now depends on faith in Christ, which transforms the believer, rather than on observance of the Law.

Despite his conviction that Christ signifies the end of the Law, Paul insists the Jews are still included in God's plan for salvation: "I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25–26). This remains an important statement about the relationship of Christians and Jews.



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Like many of Jesus' parables, the one about the Good Samaritan characterizes a social outcast in a positive light.



ACTIVITY

For Paul, God's giving of Christ marks the end of the era of the Torah. This gift in no way releases humans from ethical responsibility. Now, however, good behavior is to be rooted in faith and the spiritual transformation it brings, rather than in obedience to the letter of the Law. Think about two or three ethical decisions you have faced. In those cases, how might goodness rooted in the right spiritual perspective have differed from goodness based on rules of correct behavior?

Second Coming Also called Parousia (pah-oo-see'ah)

Greek for "presence." The anticipated return of Christ to the world, on which occasion the dead will be resurrected and all people will be judged.

grace

God's presence freely given; a key doctrine for Paul and for Christianity in general.

The Gospel of Matthew: A New Revelation of Divine Law

Recall that Jesus expanded traditional ethical standards, urging a spiritual obedience to the Law. This is the main focus of the Gospel of Matthew, which presents Christ as the new Moses who reveals the fulfillment of God's Law through spiritual obedience. But Jesus made clear that his mission in no way implies

that God's original Revelation to the Israelites is to be disregarded: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). However, Jesus requires a new, radical obedience as illustrated by his Commandment to love one's enemies, and by other statements he made, such as this: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The centerpiece of Matthew's presentation of Christ is the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7), from which the preceding passages are drawn. The Sermon on the Mount also contains the Beatitudes, the Commandment to love one's enemies, and many other specific examples of radical obedience to traditional ethical laws. It is noteworthy that in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reveals these teachings on a mountain, while in the Gospel of Luke, similar teachings are presented on a

plain. Matthew seems to intend for his readers to recall the original Revelation of Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai.



ACTIVITY

Read the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew, chapters 5–7). Find three teachings (besides those mentioned in the book) that you think clearly illustrate Jesus' ethical message.

The Gospel of Luke: Salvation for All People

All the Gospels portray Jesus as one whom every Christian should strive to imitate. The Gospel of Luke emphasizes this point, presenting Jesus as a role model for the perfect way to live and as offering salvation for all people. Jesus reaches out to help people in all segments of society. This Gospel gives

THE BEATITUDES

The Beatitudes comprise the opening statements of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and are named from the Latin term for the word with which they each open: blessed. They are contained in Matthew 5:3–12.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

women more attention than do the other Gospels, and many of its parables characterize outcasts in a favorable light. None does this more effectively than the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29–37). Samaritans were historically on bad terms with the Jews, and thus were not expected to be kind toward them. But in the parable, a Samaritan aids an injured Jew who had been ignored by a priest and a Levite, members of what was supposed to be the most upstanding level of Jewish society.



ACTIVITY

Read the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29–37). While keeping its basic message intact, how would you retell the parable to make it more relevant for modern society?

The Gospel of John: The Incarnation of God

The Incarnation is the focal point of the Gospel of John, in which Christ is presented as the Word, who from the beginning was with God and was God (see John 1:1). Christ, who was active in the creation of the world with his Father, is truly one with him as the Son of God, and will return to him.

In Jesus, “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Human salvation comes through knowing Christ and believing in the Father who sent him. This emphasis on the saving power of knowledge and belief is evident in the following passage, in which Jesus instructs his fellow Jews: “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

CREED: WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

The term *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, “I believe,” which begins the Latin version of the **Apostles’ Creed**. The Apostles’ Creed is one of Christianity’s most important statements of belief:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by
the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again
from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand
of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge
the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

(Roman Missal)

Already in use by the end of the second century, the Apostles’ Creed sets forth the foundations for two of Christianity’s central doctrines: the Incarnation and the Trinity. Affirming both the divinity and the humanity of Christ, God incarnate, the creed also refers to each of the three Persons of the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Today both doctrines are defined with greater precision, thanks to the work of theologians and Church councils through the centuries.

Apostles’ Creed

A short statement of Christian belief that sets forth the foundations of the central doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity; traditionally thought to have been composed by the Apostles.

Michelangelo's *Pietà*, in Saint Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, movingly expresses the humanity of the crucified Christ, and therefore the doctrine of the Incarnation.



The Incarnation: "The Word Became Flesh"

The Apostles' Creed asserts the divinity of Jesus while also insisting on his human nature. Like ordinary human beings, Jesus was born. But like no one else, he was born of a virgin. Mary's virginity reveals God's initiative in the Incarnation and the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' conception. The Creed returns to the emphasis on Jesus' humanity by asserting that he "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." The Gospel of John does the same, clearly asserting Jesus' divinity while also emphasizing more than the other Gospels Jesus' humanness, referring to such things as his hunger and thirst, and pointing out that he wept on occasion. This focus on Jesus' humanity is in keeping with John's focus on the Incarnation. The first chapter of John

establishes the foundation for the later formulations of the doctrine of the Incarnation. It identifies Christ as the Word (called *Logos* in Greek), who from the beginning was with God and was God (see John 1:1), active in the creation of the world. In the person of Jesus, "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), and because of this the salvation of humanity is possible.

For centuries the Church strove to elaborate on the words of the Gospel of John and the Apostles' Creed, in order to state precisely the doctrine of the Incarnation. It was crucial that it be made clear that the Word actually *became* flesh, rather than merely *appearing to become* flesh, and that this union of the divine and human natures in Jesus was permanent, affecting humanity for all time.

The **Nicene Creed**, formulated by Church leaders at the Council of Nicaea (*ni-see'uh*) in 325, states that Jesus Christ is

the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
consubstantial with the Father.

(Roman Missal)

This is obviously a much more elaborate, precise statement of the doctrine of the Incarnation than we see in the Apostles' Creed. Historically speaking, the most crucial point established at the Council of Nicaea is that Jesus the Son and God the Father are "one in Being" (*homoousios* in Greek). God became flesh in the person of Jesus, but in no way is Jesus a lesser being. Indeed, he is the same being.

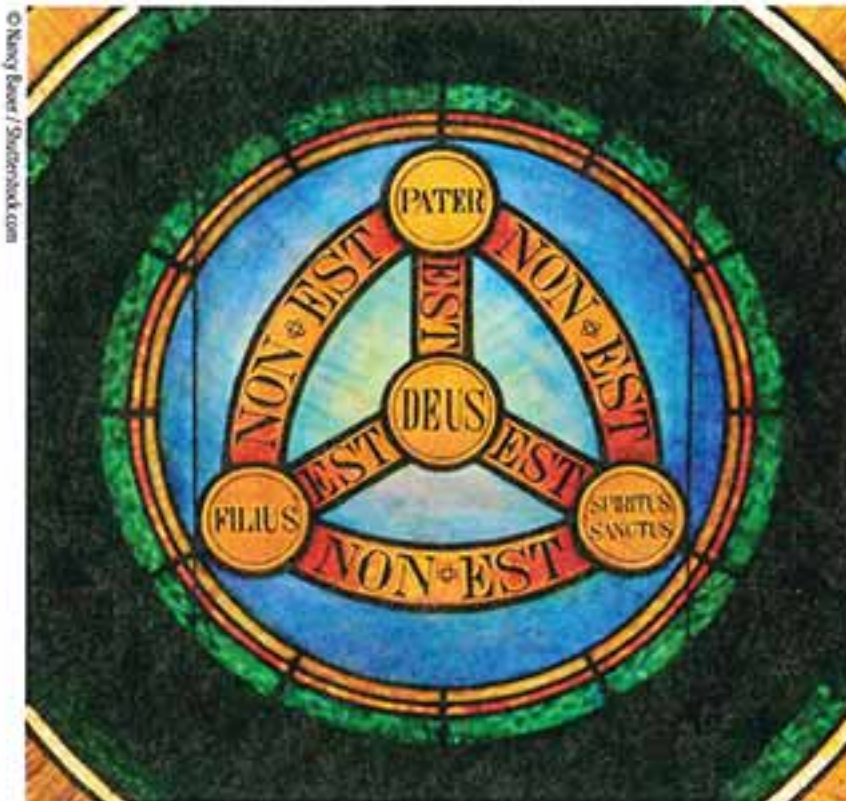
The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is the centerpiece of Christian belief and theology. By definition the Christian God is a triune God, three Persons—God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit—in one Godhead. To think about God is therefore to think about the Trinity. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian, expresses the centrality of the Trinity this way:

It is impossible to believe explicitly in the mystery of Christ without faith in the Trinity, since the mystery of Christ includes that the Son of God took flesh, that He renewed the world through the grace of the Holy [Spirit], and again, that He was conceived by the Holy [Spirit].

(Summa Theologiae, volume 2, part 2, question 2, article 8)

The doctrine of the Trinity states that the three Persons of God are distinct from one another and yet of the same essence or substance. The Nicene Creed describes each Person of the triune God:



The doctrine of the Trinity, symbolized in this stained-glass window, is the centerpiece of Christian belief and theology.

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life, who proceeds
from the Father and the Son.

(Roman Missal)

In the Nicene Creed and later formulations, the distinctive features of the three Persons of the Trinity are precisely stated. God the Father is creator and judge, who generates the Son, and with the Son sends forth the Holy Spirit. God the Son is redeemer, begotten by, yet coeternal with, the Father. It is through the Son as Word of the Father that the Father is expressed in human history. God the Holy Spirit is reconciler and sanctifier, proceeding from the Father and the Son.

The Trinity is three Persons with distinctive features, but only one God. This is difficult for the mind to comprehend, and indeed, Christians regard it as a mystery that cannot be fully grasped in this earthly life.

Nicene Creed

Christianity's most important creedal statement, formulated by Church leaders at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and setting forth in precise language the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity.

Church
(from Greek *ekklesia*
[ek-klay-see'ah]:
"assembly")

The community of all
Christian believers.

heresies

Opinions or doctrines at
variance with accepted
doctrine.

CHURCH: THE "ONE BODY" OF CHRIST

Along with belief in the Trinity and other Christian doctrines, being a Christian means belonging to the Church, the community of believers.

As Paul makes clear in his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Church is meant to be a unified body of people:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.

(12:12–13)

This ideal of unity is embraced by Christians, and today ecumenism, the promotion of worldwide Christian unity, is seen as a vital task. Nevertheless, differences exist among the world's Christians. We can begin to explore what it means to be One Body in Christ as ecumenism itself begins, with striving to understand the differences among

Christians, as well as the historical circumstances that have fueled those differences.

The Early Church

In the years following the Resurrection, an organized Church (whose name comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* [ek-klay-see'ah], meaning "assembly") gradually took shape. The Church embodied a form of Christianity that was equipped to thrive within the wider society of the Mediterranean world and to endure through time.

In discussions about the early Church, the word **Church** commonly refers to all Christians, not just to single congregations. Even while forming one cohesive Church, however, the early Christians did not necessarily agree on everything. Some Christian communities considered the beliefs of others to be **heresies**, opinions or doctrines at variance with accepted doctrine. Occasional Church councils made important decisions that eventually led to a version of the Church

Paul's mission to the Gentiles led him to preach to the people of Athens, as depicted in this fifteenth-century tapestry.



Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK / Bridgeman Images

that most regarded as **orthodox**, having “right doctrine.”

Among the capable and courageous people who were responsible for establishing the early Church, none was more influential than the Apostle Paul.

Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul was a Pharisaic Jew from the city of Tarsus. He was passionately devoted to the study of Torah, and, by his own account, he was an adept and zealous student. Synagogues had the authority to discipline local Jews who were judged to be violating Torah, something that Paul considered the early Jewish followers of Christ to be doing. Paul, by his own account, persecuted Christians (see Philippians 3:6).

Then something happened that changed Paul’s life—and the history of Christianity. While traveling on a road to Damascus, Paul experienced the Risen Christ. He became an **apostle** (a messenger proclaiming the Gospel of Christ), preaching primarily to Gentiles.

Paul’s conversion, or call to be an apostle, occurred a few years after the Crucifixion of Jesus, perhaps as early as AD 32. Over the next three decades, Paul traveled great distances to cities with Christian communities, such as Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. In some places, Paul himself established Christian communities. He would stay for months at a time, caring for the early churches and working to gain new converts. Meanwhile he wrote letters, or epistles, to churches elsewhere. The churches preserved some of the letters, eventually regarding them as Sacred Scripture. The New Testament includes several of Paul’s epistles, which are the earliest New Testament books, written about ten to twenty years before the earliest Gospel.

Just as he had been a zealous Pharisee, the Apostle Paul proved to be a zealous Christian. He was also self-assured, speaking out on a variety of issues, some of them highly controversial. Eventually Paul’s missionary zeal landed him in trouble with the Jewish authorities, who took his case to the Roman authorities. Because, as a Roman citizen,

orthodox (from Greek *orthodoxos*: “right doctrine”)

With respect to Christianity in general, the emerging version of Christianity that was deemed true by those with authority, and therefore accepted by the majority. When the word is capitalized, it refers to the major division of Christianity dominant in the eastern regions of Europe and the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

apostle (from Greek *apostolos*: “messenger”)

An early follower of Jesus’ recognized as one with authority to preach the Gospel; the Apostles included the twelve original disciples (with Matthias replacing Judas after the latter’s death; see Acts of the Apostles 1:15–26) and Paul.

ONE YOUNG CATHOLIC’S EXPERIENCE

Meggan L. Novotny, a college student, describes what Catholicism means to her:

To me, the most important part of being a Catholic is the personal experience of Christ at Mass. Listening to the readings and to the homily provides me with a deeper understanding of what I am called to do as a Catholic. Granted, the message may not be one that I want to hear, but it allows me to reflect personally on my strengths and weaknesses. I am always excited when the homily is finished, not because we are entering the last half of the Mass, but because the Eucharist is about to be celebrated. For me, Communion is the most serious and humbling activity. Before receiving

Communion, I always try to recollect how I have sinned, so that I can ask for forgiveness and proceed to the altar ready to receive Christ with a sense of renewed beginning. Some people watch others go up to receive Communion, but I am usually in such deep prayer and reflection that most trivial things go unnoticed. To think that Christ is present and available to me is astonishing! To know that I can do wrong and still be loved unconditionally and invited to his table sets a standard I try to achieve but can fall short of. Mass allows me to take an hour out of my day so I can examine what I have done and what I need to do to be a true follower of Christ.

Eucharist

Also the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, a central Sacrament and ritual of Christianity, a memorial of the Last Supper, which was shared by Jesus and his twelve disciples.

bishops

Officials within the early Church who were regarded as successors to the Apostles. Bishops were responsible for overseeing the Church and administering the Eucharist.

presbyters (from Greek *presbyteros*: "elders")

Officials within the early Church who assisted the bishops.

Paul wanted to appeal his case to Rome, he was transported there from Jerusalem. After serving two years in prison, where he continued to preach the Gospel, he was beheaded, around AD 62.

Jews and Gentiles

One decision facing Paul and other leaders of the early Church involved the relation of Christianity to Judaism. Should Gentile Christians be required, like Jews, to observe Torah, to be circumcised, to eat kosher food, and to celebrate the Sabbath and the annual Jewish holy days? Many Jews who had become Christians thought so, and Jewish Christianity flourished throughout the first century.

Paul was firmly convinced that Gentiles should be granted freedom from most requirements of Torah. His deep conviction

on this matter seems to have prevailed at the Council of Jerusalem, a meeting of apostles and elders held about five to eight years after the Crucifixion. The apostles and elders decided Gentile Christians were virtually free from the requirements of the Jewish Law. It was a momentous decision, distinguishing the Christian Church from its parent, Judaism. In terms of worship, however, the Christian Church drew much from the practices of the Jewish synagogues.

Worship, Leadership, and Scripture of the First Christians

Like the Jews, early Christians gathered for weekly worship meetings. Eventually these were held on Sundays, to commemorate Christ's Resurrection and to distinguish the Church from Judaism, which celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday. Many aspects of the Christian meetings were patterned after the synagogue services: chanting psalms, singing hymns, reading from Scripture, and praying. Worship also included teachings on the Gospel. The central ritual of the meetings, though, was the Sacrament of the **Eucharist**, or Communion meal, a memorial of the Last Supper, which had been shared by Jesus and his Apostles the night before he was crucified. With this ritual, Christians remembered the sacred mystery of Jesus' death and Resurrection as the source of all Christian life and meaning.

Baptism was also a central ritual of the early Church, functioning (as it does today) as the foundational Sacrament of Christian Initiation. Its symbols illustrated the spiritual purity new Christians attained through accepting Christ. Immersion in water represented the death of their former life of sinfulness, and the emergence of new life in Christ. In addition, Baptism, like the shared meal of the Eucharist, symbolized the unity and equality of Christians, who represented a



Pope Francis, elected March 13, 2013, is the 266th Pope of the Catholic Church.

cross section of Roman society. Some were rich, many were poor, and some were even slaves, but all were brothers and sisters in Christ.

The early Church also developed a structure of leadership. By early in the second century, three distinct offices were in place: **bishops**, **presbyters**, and **deacons**. Bishops were seen as successors to Jesus' Apostles, and therefore were highly esteemed. Each bishop was the overseer of his church, and the bishop performed the chief task of administering the Eucharist. From early times, Rome was generally regarded as the central location of the Church, and the bishop of Rome was given a special degree of authority. Eventually the bishop of Rome came to have the title **Pope**. Because the Apostle Peter is traditionally thought to have been the bishop of Rome, the Pope is his direct successor.

The presbyters (named after the Greek word for "elders") assisted the bishop, administering the Eucharist in the bishop's absence and taking charge of financial and disciplinary matters. Also assisting the bishop were deacons (whose name comes from the Greek word for "servants"), some of whom were women. (The Catholic Church does not regard the ancient role of deaconesses to be the same as the current ordained ministry of deacons.) The deacons helped with a variety of tasks and also linked the congregation and its bishop.

Christian Scripture originally consisted of the Hebrew Scriptures. By the beginning of the second century, Paul's epistles were also widely circulated and regarded as sacred or authoritative documents. Soon other writings, Gospels about the life of Jesus and various accounts of the Apostles, became known throughout the Christian communities.

deacons (from Greek *diakonos*: "servants")

Officials within the early Church who were like the presbyters in that they assisted the bishops, but were on closer terms with the congregation at large.

Pope

The title conferred on the bishop of Rome, the leader of Catholicism, who is considered by Catholics to be the direct successor of the Apostle Peter.

THE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts of the Apostles (the second volume of Luke's two-volume work)

Paul's Epistles

Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians, Philemon

"Deutero-Pauline" Epistles

(Attributed to Paul, but likely written by followers of Paul's)
Ephesians, Colossians, Second Thessalonians

Pastoral Epistles

First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus

Letter to the Hebrews

Hebrews

Catholic Epistles

James, First Peter, Second Peter, First John, Second John, Third John, Jude

Book of Revelation

Revelation

canon
(from Greek
kanon: “rule” or
“standard”)

An authoritative set of sacred writings, such as Christianity’s New Testament.

New Testament

A collection of twenty-seven writings that, by the late fourth century AD, had been adopted by orthodox Christians as their primary sacred text.

martyrs (from
Greek *martys* /
martyr: “witness”)

Those who chose to die rather than violate their religious convictions.

In the fourth century, the Church settled on a **canon** (“rule” or “standard”) of twenty-seven writings. This collection is known as the **New Testament**, or New Covenant. As we have observed in the theology of Paul, Christians believed that the Gospel of Christ had fulfilled the covenant with Israel in God’s plan for the salvation of humanity.

Christ and Caesar: Christians in the Roman World

From the origins of Christianity through its first centuries of growth, its adherents lived within the political, economic, and social structures of the Roman Empire. To a large extent, Christians carried on their spiritual lives independently of Roman constraints. However, some degree of conflict between Rome and Christianity was inevitable.

In the Roman Empire, worship of pagan gods and of the emperor’s genius, or guardian spirit, was primarily a display of loyalty toward the Roman state. Because Christians were monotheistic, they refused to participate in such worship, which made them seem unpatriotic to the Romans. This perception is one of the reasons Romans persecuted Christians, who often died painfully as **martyrs** (named after the Greek word for “witness”), rather than violate their Christian convictions. A generally negative attitude about Christians by the Romans is chief among other reasons for persecution.

Roman attitudes and policies toward Christians changed markedly during the fourth century. As the century began, Christians were enduring the Great Persecution, begun by the emperor Diocletian. At that time, only about 5 percent of the empire was Christian. But by the end of the fourth century, Christianity was the empire’s only legitimate religion, and a large majority of Roman citizens had converted. The key figure in this

dramatic reversal of fortune was the emperor Constantine.

In 312 Constantine won a crucial victory that enabled him to become the uncontested emperor. He credited the victory to the intervention of Christ, and eventually he was baptized a Christian.

Constantine took significant steps that promoted Christianity in the empire. In 313 he issued a policy traditionally known as the Edict of Milan, declaring Christianity a legitimate religion and ending persecution of Christians. In 325 he convened Christian leaders to the Council of Nicaea, where they formulated the Nicene Creed to help unify the Church. The theological arguments at the Council were mainly taken up by the bishops, but Constantine’s presence significantly strengthened the distinction between orthodox Christianity and heresies.



ACTIVITY

Before Emperor Constantine legitimized Christianity in the fourth century, many Christians died as martyrs for their faith. Do you think Christian martyrdom is still possible in today’s society? If so, can you think of any modern Christian martyrs?

The Fall of Rome and *The City of God*

Among the many events leading to the fall of the Roman Empire, the sack of the city of Rome in 410 by the Visigoths was the most dramatic and alarming. Some Romans blamed Christianity, asserting that the gods were now punishing Rome for abandoning traditional pagan religion.

In response to this accusation, Bishop Augustine of Hippo, in North Africa, wrote a masterpiece of Christian theology: *The City of God*. In this work, he argues that all

governments and nations are corrupt and have fallen to sin. Therefore the fall of the earthly city is of little consequence. Only the heavenly city, the Kingdom of God, truly matters.

Augustine and his theology set the stage for the great Catholic theologians of the Middle Ages, and also inspired Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation.

Medieval Christianity and the Protestant Reformation

Christianity emerged in the fourth century as the premier religion of the Roman Empire. At this time the tradition of the orthodox, or **Catholic** (named from the Greek word for “universal”), Church was well established. Theological debates still raged, and occasionally those whose views varied too greatly from the orthodox position were denounced as heretics. For the most part, though, the Church was a united institution.

During the next seven centuries, however, Christian unity encountered many challenges, and a gradual divide took place in the Church. By 1054 Eastern Orthodoxy, one of the three great limbs of modern Christianity, had officially become independent from the Roman Church.

The Schism between East and West

As early as the reign of Emperor Constantine, the foundation for a schism, or split, between the Church in the East and the Church in the West was already in place. Constantine established an eastern capital, Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey), which quickly became a second center of the Church, along with Rome. A number of problems arose. The distance between Constantinople and Rome caused communication difficulties, which were compounded by a language barrier: the Eastern Church used Greek, and the Church in Rome used Latin.

Further strife resulted from a gradual loss of political unity when the western part of the Roman Empire fell and the eastern part survived in the form of the Byzantine Empire.

Along with these divisive elements was the Eastern Christians’ refusal, starting in the late fourth century, to accept the authority of the Pope in Rome. The final break occurred in 1054, when Pope Leo IX excommunicated the leader of the Greek Church, the patriarch of Constantinople, who in turn excommunicated the Pope. Attempts were made to reconcile the Churches, but they failed. Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism have been independent of each other ever since.

Catholicism in the Middle Ages

Roman Catholic Christianity was established as the dominant culture of medieval Europe. For the most part, the late Middle Ages was a period of triumph for Catholicism, though not without exceptions. Some popes and other members of the Church hierarchy engaged in corrupt practices. From 1096 to 1270, the Roman Catholic Church launched the Crusades, a series of military expeditions

Catholic (from Greek *katholikos*: “universal”)

The largest of the three major divisions of Christianity. When it is not capitalized, *catholic* is used generally to denote the universal nature of the Christian Church.



A modern Franciscan monk lights candles.

Protestant Reformation

A widespread phenomenon in sixteenth-century Europe that resulted in the emergence of Protestantism from Catholicism.

indulgences

Reductions in, or pardons of, the punishment due for sins committed. The buying and selling of indulgences was a common practice in medieval Catholicism.

Original Sin

Humanity's state of moral and spiritual corruption, inherited from Adam and Eve.

predestination

The doctrine, especially prevalent in Calvin's form of Protestantism, stating that God has already chosen those who will be saved from sin.

intended to take control of the Holy Land from the Muslims. Jerusalem was held for a time by Christians, but it soon fell back into Muslim hands. The Crusades, which were often senselessly violent, sometimes even involved Christians fighting Christians.

But medieval Catholicism also brought about much that has had lasting significance. The Church continued to fortify itself as an organized institution with spiritual authority beyond that of any monarchs or other rulers. Great cathedrals were constructed, sometimes over the course of centuries. Monasticism, a lifestyle emphasizing community, simplicity, celibacy, and prayer, reached a new height of influence. Established communities of monks and nuns were re-formed, and new ones, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, were founded.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182 to 1226), founder of the Franciscan order, remains one of the most revered Christians of all time. As one who loved nature and cared for poor people, Francis for the most part shunned the organizational constraints that were so much a part of the Church. He and his loose-knit band of followers traveled the countryside in simple, coarse garments, preaching the Gospel in the streets and marketplaces. Having put aside material possessions, they worked for food, and begged when work was not available. Their rewards were being close to nature and to God, and caring for those who were less fortunate. For many people, Saint Francis is the perfect example of someone living in imitation of Christ.



ACTIVITY

Saint Francis of Assisi lived a Christian existence that has been admired through the ages. Imagine a modern Saint Francis. What sort of lifestyle, goals, and virtues would such a person have?

Medieval theology culminated in the work of the great Dominican thinker, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 to 1274). Drawing from the philosophy of Aristotle, Aquinas explained the relation between reason and faith, arguing that the two complement and need each other. For example, Aquinas taught that reason can prove the existence of God, but faith remains essential for full understanding of the truth, as it is revealed in the Bible and the teachings of the Church. Aquinas's final and greatest work, the *Summa Theologiae*, was controversial at first but became the standard work of Catholic theology. It remains important to the present day.

The Protestant Reformation

The **Protestant Reformation** brought widespread change. It swept across much of sixteenth-century Europe, most notably in Germany, Switzerland, and England. Many Christians were frustrated with certain aspects of Catholicism and were ready for change. In Germany one man set in motion a movement that would radically change Christianity as well as European society.

Martin Luther (1483 to 1546) was born to a peasant family. He originally set out to study law, but in response to his deep religious feelings, he became a monk of the Augustinian order. He was a highly devoted monk but was unable to find freedom from his overwhelming sense of sinfulness. On a trip to Rome, Luther personally observed corruption within the hierarchy of the Church.

Gradually Luther's feelings and experiences culminated in the birth of the Reformation. Luther discovered the foundation of his Christian faith in Paul's epistles: that humans are justified (made worthy of salvation) through faith in Christ, and not through external practices, or "works." One external practice that Luther rejected was the buying and selling of **indulgences**, reductions

in or pardons of the punishment due for sins committed. People believed that by giving money to the Church, they could reduce the time they would spend in the period of final purification after death, known as Purgatory. Luther felt this practice completely missed the point of Christianity.

In protest against the selling of indulgences, Luther wrote the Ninety-five Theses in 1517. According to the traditional account, he nailed them to the door of the church he served, an action that at the time was considered a polite way of inviting discourse. He did not intentionally incite a major controversy, but the theses did in fact draw an enthusiastic—and highly controversial—response.

Luther defended his views with the Bible. According to him, much of what the Church was doing did not conform to biblical Christianity. (Later, to help make the Bible more accessible to all Christians, including the common people, Luther translated it into German. Because the printing press had recently been invented, Luther's German Bible was widely distributed.)

The controversy Luther stirred up got him into trouble with the Church. He was eventually excommunicated but managed to evade punishment. Meanwhile local rulers chose between Protestantism (which the new movement was called, because it began as a “protest”) and Catholicism. Most rulers in central and northern Germany and in the Scandinavian countries chose Protestantism. In those lands, former priests, monks, and nuns could now marry. Luther himself married a former nun, and they had five children.

Elsewhere in Europe, other reform movements were taking place. In England a new English translation of the Bible appeared in 1526. Its release was considered such a drastic step that its translator was condemned for heresy and burned at the stake. King Henry VIII, who reigned



Martin Luther initiated events that led to the Protestant Reformation. This portrait of Martin Luther, from 1533, is by the German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder.

from 1509 to 1547, broke with the Pope, who condemned his desire to remarry after divorcing his wife. King Henry declared himself head of the Church of England. Thomas More, the highest ranking government official in England other than the king, refused to renounce the Pope and was beheaded. The momentum of the Reformation in England was unstoppable.

In Geneva, Switzerland, John Calvin (1509 to 1564) played a role in the Reformation that was second in importance only to Luther's. Calvin emphasized humanity's **Original Sin**, inherited from Adam and Eve. He believed that some would be saved from sin, but only if God had already chosen them for salvation. The rest would be damned, regardless of how they lived. This doctrine of **predestination** was coupled with the idea that one's status among the saved is shown through good works and piety. For the Calvinist, therefore, a religious life is essential, even though the issue of salvation has already been determined by predestination.

Catholic Reformation

An effort begun in 1545, initiated partly by the Protestant Reformation, to clarify Church doctrines and clean up corrupt practices.

Tradition

A primary means for God's Revelation of Christ, beginning with the Apostles and continuing in the present day through the Church.

Second Vatican Council

Also called Vatican II. A worldwide council of Catholic bishops convened by Pope John XXIII, occurring from 1962 through 1965. The Council aimed to reflect on Church teaching so that the Church would respond appropriately to the needs of the modern world, and to promote Christian unity.

The Protestant Reformation, begun unintentionally by Martin Luther, sparked other events. For one thing, it led to the **Catholic Reformation** in 1545, an effort to clarify Roman Catholic Church doctrine on a number of fundamental issues, and to clean up many of the corrupt practices Luther had protested against. Another effect, and a tragic one, was the Thirty Years' War (1618 to 1648), between Catholics and Protestants. In this war, over half of Germany's population was killed, but nothing of real consequence was settled. Within Protestantism the motivating spirit of the Reformation itself—to protest any authority perceived to impede the Christian's relationship with God—continued to separate believers into new organized branches commonly known as denominations.



ACTIVITY

Luther translated the Bible into German at about the same time the printing press was invented. Together these events greatly energized the Protestant Reformation by helping to make the Bible widely available in the language of the common people. List other technological innovations that have had a large impact on a religious tradition or traditions.

Christian Divisions, Christian Unity

Today Christianity remains divided primarily into Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Despite differences between these and other denominations, many beliefs and practices link Christians together and form the basis of ecumenism, a movement that attempts to foster Christian unity.

Roman Catholicism

Most prevalent in central and southern Europe, Ireland, and Central and South America, and growing rapidly in Africa and Asia, Roman Catholicism today accounts for more than half of the world's Christians—slightly more than one billion people. One distinctive characteristic of Catholicism is its reliance on both the Bible and **Tradition** as the means of handing on God's Revelation of Christ—means that form a single deposit of divine revelation. Tradition began with the Apostles, who handed it down to their successors, the bishops and the popes. The bishops and the popes, in turn, are responsible for carrying on and clarifying anew in every age the Tradition passed on to them. The Pope, as Peter's successor, is the highest authority in the Church.

The Catholic Church understands itself to be the Body of Christ on earth. It recognizes the common Baptism of all Christian churches, but does not believe a church community can possess the fullness of the faith without the Seven Sacraments, the adherence to Tradition as well as Scripture, or the recognition of the Pope as the successor of Peter the Apostle. Other forms of Christianity are thought to exist in varying degrees of communion with the Catholic Church. For example, Eastern Orthodoxy is doctrinally closer to Catholicism than are most forms of Protestantism.

Catholicism recognizes Seven Sacraments, while most forms of Protestantism recognize only two. Each of the Sacraments is an outward, physical sign of an inward, spiritual reality. The Seven Sacraments are Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist (or Holy Communion), Holy Orders (ordination of deacons, priests, and bishops), Matrimony, Anointing of the Sick, and Penance and Reconciliation. Through the Sacraments—especially Baptism and the Eucharist—grace, the transforming presence of God freely given, flows forth into the person. The celebration of the Eucharist (or the Mass) is the summit of Catholic

worship, and Catholics are expected to participate in the ceremony each Sunday morning or its vigil on Saturday evening.

Modern Catholicism has been strongly affected by the teaching of the **Second Vatican Council**, also called Vatican Council II or simply Vatican II. This worldwide council of bishops was convened by Pope John XXIII, and occurred from 1962 through 1965. The general aims of the Second Vatican Council were to reflect on Church teaching so the Church would respond appropriately to the needs of the modern world, and to promote Christian unity. Many landmark documents were produced out of this council, including one, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965) that acknowledges the holiness and truth that exists in non-Christian religions, and encourages dialogue with members of other religions. Other documents brought about changes in Church liturgy and encouraged Catholics to become engaged in life-giving, humanitarian struggles all over the world.

As the Catholic Church attempts to respond to the needs of the present day, it continues to take a stand on various issues, some of them quite controversial. But controversy is not new to the ancient tradition of Catholicism. Indeed, the Church's strength to engage in controversy has always been a source of revitalization.

Eastern Orthodoxy

Numbering about 225 million adherents altogether, the various Churches of Eastern Orthodoxy are located mainly in eastern Europe, in Russia, and along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Each of these Churches (the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and so on) has its own leader, but all acknowledge the patriarch of Constantinople as the one head of Eastern Orthodoxy. Unlike Roman Catholicism's Pope, the patriarch of



This seventeenth-century Russian icon shows Jesus holding the Bible.

Constantinople has no special doctrinal authority. This authority is held instead by the entire Church body. In contrast with Catholicism, which regards Tradition as the ongoing revelation of Christ, Eastern Orthodoxy limits its set of doctrines to those reached by seven ecumenical councils, the last held in the year 787.

Eastern Orthodoxy observes the same Seven Sacraments as Catholicism, although it celebrates the Sacraments somewhat differently. A distinctive practice is the great emphasis on icons, which are artistic representations of the New Testament and early Christian saints. Theologically Eastern Orthodoxy tends to focus on the Incarnation, encouraging a mystical union with God through faith in Christ. The Gospel of John is especially popular in the Eastern Church.

Recently great changes have been taking place in the world and within the Eastern Church itself. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 threatened the stability of the entire Church. In North America, the ethnic makeup of the various Orthodox Churches is changing,

with membership among traditional groups eroding and membership among other groups building. Such changes could revitalize Eastern Orthodoxy, even as they challenge its deeply traditional ways.



ACTIVITY

Most of the Sacraments of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy function in part as rites of passage, marking divisions between one stage of life and the next. Given the nature of each Sacrament, identify as many such divisions as you can. How might the Sacraments celebrate the passage from one life stage to the next?

Protestantism

As its name suggests, Protestantism originated as a protest. Early Protestants protested specifically against any form of authority they perceived as false—anything that stood in the way of the Christian's relationship with God through Christ. In general, Protestants focus on the Bible as the primary means of knowing Christ,

though different denominations vary considerably as to how they regard Scripture. For some Protestants, called fundamentalists, the Bible is the direct Word of God, and it must be read literally. For most Protestants, however, the Bible is a human product that conveys God's truth, as long as it is read in proper context.

A second basic principle of Protestantism is justification by faith, as understood by Martin Luther. This principle states that salvation is achieved solely through the grace of God, not by works of love; as long as one has faith, good works will naturally follow. Sacraments are important too, but only as accompaniments of faith. Many Protestant Churches celebrate the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, while others also celebrate Confirmation.

Protestantism is the predominant form of Christianity in northern Europe, England, Scotland, Australia, the United States, and Canada. It has four main branches, stemming from the days of the Reformation: Lutheran, Calvinist, Baptist, and Anglican (from which Methodism emerged). Today there are thousands of separate Protestant denominations, many of them derived from one of those four branches.

The shape of Protestantism continues to change. New denominations are forming, and some that were divided at one time have now reunified. Three main branches of North American Lutheranism, for example, merged in 1987 to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Changes are also occurring within the denominations. For example, the number of women in the clergy is clearly on the rise. In some denominations, the majority of ministers will soon be women.

Seeking Unity amid Diversity

Some people who believe in Jesus Christ are members of religious denominations, some of which challenge the very definition of what it is to be Christian. In fact, groups identifying themselves as Christian are not always regarded as such by other Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons)



Barbara Harris was ordained in 1989 as the first female bishop in the Episcopal Church.

and the Jehovah's Witnesses are two prevalent examples of such groups. We will study each in some detail in chapter 15.

Amid this diversity within Christianity are ongoing calls for unity. Many mainline Christian denominations advocate ecumenism—the promotion of worldwide Christian unity. Catholicism's Second Vatican Council called for **ecumenism** in a paper that begins as follows:

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to [people] as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided.

(*Decree on Ecumenism*, number 1)

UNITED IN CHRIST

The movement toward Christian unity is generally a cause for celebration, and it seems to be gaining momentum. In 2006, for example, Pope Benedict XVI and Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew I, the respective leaders of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, met in Istanbul, Turkey, and issued a “Common Declaration,” expressing their commitment to moving toward full union. The ideal of unity has a logical appeal, even as the many forms of Christianity exhibit a wide range of diversity. All those forms look to Christ and to the Christian creed as their common cornerstones. The Gospel of John sets forth Jesus’ own prayer for Christian unity:

I ask not only on behalf of [the disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

(John 17:20–21)

ecumenism

The promotion of worldwide Christian unity.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1. How much of the world's population is Christian? Where is Christianity the dominant religious tradition?
2. Define Christianity's two core doctrines.
3. What are the literal and symbolic meanings of the Greek word *ixthus*?
4. What are the primary sources of information about the life of Jesus?
5. Briefly describe the political situation in Palestine during Jesus' lifetime.
6. Name and briefly describe the varieties of Judaism at the time of Jesus, including their responses to Roman rule.
7. Explain the meaning of apocalypticism.
8. Who was John the Baptist, and how was he important in Jesus' life?
9. What are parables? Name two well-known parables.
10. To what was Jesus likely referring when he spoke of the Kingdom of God?
11. What is Jesus' radical Commandment on love?
12. Why was Jesus crucified? Who ordered his execution?
13. What does the term *gospel* mean?
14. What is the primary focus of the Gospel of Matthew?
15. In what ways does the Gospel of Luke portray Jesus as reaching out to a diversity of people?
16. What is the doctrine of the Incarnation?

17. What is the focal point of the Gospel of John?
18. According to his first epistle to the Corinthians, what is Paul's Gospel message?
19. What does Paul say will happen at the Second Coming?
20. What does Paul emphasize about salvation?
21. What is the origin of the term *creed*?
22. How does the Gospel of John emphasize both Jesus' divinity and humanity?
23. What is Christ called in the first chapter of John's Gospel?
24. What two creeds were formulated by the year 325?
25. Historically speaking, what was the most crucial point established at the Council of Nicaea?
26. What is the doctrine of the Trinity?
27. What did Paul say the Church is meant to be?
28. What are heresies?
29. Describe how Paul came to be an Apostle of Christ.
30. What was decided at the Council of Jerusalem?
31. Why did the early Christians settle on Sunday as their primary day of worship?
32. What were the central rituals of the early Church?
33. What were the three distinct offices in the Church by the early second century? Briefly describe the role of bishop in the early Church.
34. Why did worship on behalf of the Roman emperor bring Christians into conflict with the empire?
35. Who was Augustine, and what great theological masterpiece did he write after the fall of Rome?
36. What is the meaning of the Greek word from which we get the English word *catholic*?
37. Identify the elements leading to the schism in the Church that divided the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire.
38. What significant event occurred in the year 1054?
39. Identify some achievements of Catholicism in the Middle Ages.
40. Where, and in what century, did the Protestant Reformation take place?
41. What did Luther's Ninety-five Theses protest against?
42. What role did King Henry VIII play in the Protestant Reformation?
43. Other than the establishment of Protestantism, what were two major effects of the Protestant Reformation?
44. What is one distinctive characteristic of Roman Catholicism?
45. Identify the Seven Sacraments of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.
46. When was the Second Vatican Council held, and what were its general aims?
47. Name a distinctive practice of Eastern Orthodoxy and identify the tradition's theological focal point.
48. What challenges does Eastern Orthodoxy face as a result of recent changes in the world and in the Church?
49. What has Protestantism historically tended to protest against?
50. What are the four main branches of Protestantism?
51. What is ecumenism?