

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn how Christianity shapes the lives of Christians around the world today. Christianity is the most **widespread** of the world's major faiths. Christian churches are found in most parts of the globe. With two billion followers, Christianity is the largest religion, as well. About a third of the world's people call themselves Christians. Christianity is a diverse religion. One scholar has counted over thirty thousand separate Christian denominations, or religious groups, worldwide. Each group has its own views on how the faith should be practiced. Some denominations are quite small. Others have many millions of members.



All Christians are bound by their belief in the teachings of Jesus. These are found in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. This Bible tells how, through his life and words, Jesus brought a message of love. He told followers of God's love for all people. He urged them to let that love flow through themselves to others, even enemies. In his most famous sermon Jesus said:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

—*The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 6, Verse 27*

In this chapter, you will learn more about Christian beliefs. You will see how the early Christian community became a religion with many branches. You will also examine the beliefs and practices that have given meaning to the lives of Christians for nearly two thousand years.

## 2. The Central Beliefs of Christianity

Although there are differences of [interpretation](#), most Christians today accept a set of central beliefs about God and his relationship with humankind. Let's examine some of these basic Christian beliefs, including the Holy Trinity, the Resurrection, and Salvation.

### The Holy Trinity

Christians believe in one God. They see God as three beings in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This union of three beings in one God is known as the [Trinity](#).

Christians believe that God the father is the creator of the universe. They believe that world and everything in it reveal his power and love. Christians believe that God the son is Jesus, known to his followers as Jesus Christ.

Most Christians believe that Jesus was both divine and human. He lived and died like a human being. Christians also believe that he is the son of God, who took a human form. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is God's power at work in the world today. They believe that when they feel God present in their lives, the Holy Spirit has touched them.

### The Resurrection and Salvation

Christians believe that, after his execution and burial, Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples before joining his father in heaven. To Christians, this is a miracle known as the Resurrection.

Christians believe that they, too, can look forward to life after death. After the end of this life, each person faces God's judgment. God decides who should be saved from sin and evil to enjoy eternal life in heaven, according to their beliefs.

The belief that God can save people from sin and grant them everlasting life is known as [salvation](#). Christians believe that salvation is a gift from God. This gift is open to all who have faith in Jesus and repent, or ask God to forgive their sins.

## 3. From One Church to Many

Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 C.E. As the religion spread across Europe, however, conflicts arose over differences of opinion about Christian beliefs.

### The Great Schism of 1054

One such conflict occurred between church leaders in eastern and western Europe. Church leaders in western Europe insisted that the Christian church had one leader—the pope. The pope lived in Rome. But he claimed authority over Christians everywhere.

Church leaders in eastern Europe rejected this claim by the pope. Their leaders were called the patriarchs. The patriarch of Constantinople claimed authority over all Christians in eastern Europe.



In 1054, a quarrel between these leaders split the church into two separate branches. The western branch became the [Roman Catholic Church](#). The eastern branch became the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#). This division of the Christian church is remembered as the Great Schism of 1054.

### **The Reformation**

Another conflict began in 1517. In that year, a German priest named Martin Luther called for reforms in the Roman Catholic Church. The pope demanded that Luther give up his reform efforts. Luther refused. Instead, he rejected the pope's authority over him. He and his followers formed their own church. They were called [Protestants](#) because their church began as a protest against the Roman Catholic Church.

Other religious reformers followed Luther's example. Today, the Protestant branch of Christianity includes thousands of denominations. Protestant churches differ from one another in their beliefs and practices. But they share a belief in the Trinity, the Resurrection of Jesus, and salvation as a gift from God.

## **4. Christian Sacraments**

By Luther's time, Christianity had spread across Europe. From there, Christian missionaries carried their faith around the world. Today, most people in North and South America are Christians. There are many Christians in Africa and Asia, as well. Wherever Christians live, sacred rituals called [sacraments](#) shape their lives. Let's learn about two of the most widely practiced sacraments.

### **Baptism**

[Baptism](#) involves the use of water to [symbolize](#) a new phase in a person's life. The New Testament tells how Jesus himself was



baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist before he began his preaching. The sacrament of baptism marks a person's entry into the Christian Church. Churches differ on when they baptize their members. Some baptize children while they are still infants. Others wait until a person is old enough to choose to be baptized.

Churches also differ on how they carry out this sacrament. Some churches sprinkle water on the person's head. Others immerse the person completely underwater. Either way, Christians see baptism as central to their identity as members of the Christian community.

### **Holy Communion**

The sacrament of [Holy Communion](#), known as the Eucharist, is central to Christian worship. The New Testament tells us that Jesus began this sacrament at the Last Supper. He gave bread to his disciples, saying, "This is my body." He poured them wine, saying, "This is my blood." He told them to practice this sacrament in remembrance of him. Almost all Christian churches celebrate Holy Communion in some way. Generally, this involves sharing bread and wine or grape juice that has been specially blessed. Christians differ in their vision of Holy Communion and its meaning. They perform the sacrament differently and at different [intervals](#) during the year. Some see the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. Others see both as symbolic. But all Christians believe that the presence and power of Christ is conveyed through the sacrament of Holy Communion.

## **5. Christian Worship**

For most Christians, going to church and worshipping with others is an important part of Christian life. Some Christians attend church regularly, while others do not. When Christians refer to "the church," they sometimes have in mind the world community of Christians. At other times, they have in mind a specific group of Christian believers. Such a group can gather anywhere—outdoors, at home, or in a building.



### **Places of Worship**

Most Christians gather in churches built as places of worship. Churches around the world range in size from simple huts to vast cathedrals. But

almost all display a cross, the universal symbol of Christianity.

Some churches are richly decorated with paintings and stained glass windows to celebrate the glory of God. Others are kept very plain so that nothing will distract worshippers from focusing on the word of God in the Bible.

### **Sunday Services**

Most churches hold their worship services on Sunday. That is the day Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. Christians worship in many different ways. But most Sunday services combine hymns and readings from the Bible. Hymns are songs of praise to God. Some churches celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday. Others do so only once or twice a year. Many services also include a sermon given by the church leader, such as a priest or a minister. A *sermon* is a speech intended for religious instruction.

Prayer is a part of every worship service. Prayers may be read or spoken aloud. Or worshippers may pray in silence. However Christians pray, they believe that God hears their prayers.

## **6. The Christian Year**

The Christian year is marked by events in the life of Jesus and his followers. Christmas and Easter are by far the most widely celebrated holidays. But over the centuries, Christians have found other people and events to celebrate, as well.

### **Christmas**

Christmas is the holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus. The story of Jesus's birth is told in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke. The story of the first Christmas is told in the Gospel of Luke. It begins with Mary and Joseph traveling to the town of Bethlehem for a Roman census. There, Mary gave birth to



Jesus in a humble stable. That same night, angels appeared in the sky saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, goodwill toward men."

Today, Christians gather with family and in churches to retell this story in songs and plays. They rejoice in the birth of Jesus and in his later message of God's love. And they strive to let peace and goodwill shine through their hearts to all people.



## **Easter**

Easter is the most important holiday in Christianity. It celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus. In the United States and Europe, Christians celebrate Easter in the spring. Prior to Easter, many Christians observe a season known as Lent.

Lent marks the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness before he began to preach. During that time, Jesus fasted, or went without food. In the past, Christians observed Lent by giving up favorite foods, such as sugar or meat. Today, during Lent, many Christians choose to give up other things they enjoy.

The last week of Lent is known as Holy Week. It begins with Palm Sunday. This holiday recalls Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Passover. According to the Gospels, cheering crowds welcomed him by lining his path with palm branches. On Palm Sunday, some Christians wear crosses made from palm leaves.

At the end of Holy Week, Good Friday marks the day Jesus was crucified. Many churches hold services on that day to remember and mourn Jesus's suffering and death.

In contrast, Easter Sunday is a day of rejoicing. On that day, Christians celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. Some Christians stay awake through the night to greet Easter morning at dawn with song and celebration. Others attend special Easter morning church services. However they celebrate, Easter is a time for Christians to renew their belief that, through his death and Resurrection, Jesus brings the promise of everlasting life.