

## CHRISTIANITY

### Introduction

Christianity is the religion of the world with roots in Judaism that blossomed into the force it is through Jesus Christ, the divine central figure who is proclaimed and known by followers to be the prophesied Messiah of the Old Testament and the Savior of the world in the New Testament. The words Christianity and Christians are derived from the designation of Jesus as the **Christ**, coming from the Greek word *Christos*, meaning 'anointed one' or 'chosen one.' The equivalent Hebrew word to the Greek is *Mashiach* or Messiah.

Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah, God present on earth in human form. Christians base their faith in the scriptures known as the Bible, the anointed and inspired writings spanning many centuries that reveal God's will for humanity and all of creation, leading up to and focused in the life and teachings of Jesus. To be part of Christianity, i.e., to be a Christian, is to be a born again follower of Christ.

### Global Presence

Christianity is viewed by its followers as the extension of God's plan of salvation for the world that began in the Hebrew faith, Judaism, and found true life with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus initially chose twelve followers, known as the Apostles. The number of Christ followers grew substantially by the time of his death on the Cross.

After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, the number of Christians multiplied rapidly, with Christianity spreading throughout the known world when God's Spirit came on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2**) to empower followers of Christ. The work of God's Spirit and the spread of Christian faith have continued ever since. With 2.4 billion followers, there are more Christians in the world today than any other religion. Christians make up a majority of the population in 157 of 195 countries and territories in the world.

## Beliefs of Christianity

The Christian faith centers on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Though beliefs about Christianity vary, common held beliefs include:

Christianity is monotheistic, i.e., there is only one God who is revealed to humanity in three ways – Spirit (the true essence of God as stated by Jesus in **John 4:24**), Son (Jesus) and Father (what Jesus instructed his followers to call God as recorded in **Matthew 6:9-13**). This understanding of the triune (threefold) nature of God is known as the Trinity.

Christianity centers on the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah sent by God to redeem the world. His followers believe Jesus was crucified on a cross to offer forgiveness of sins and was resurrected three days after his death before ascending to heaven. Belief in the resurrection is a prerequisite to salvation (**Romans 10:9-10**).

The Bible is the sacred book of the faith, containing the written Word of God, recorded by many people of faith across many centuries. Containing an Old and New Testament, spanning the original covenant of the Law that governed the Hebrew people and the covenant of grace through faith in Jesus Christ, scriptural writings recognized as authoritative or “official” were debated from approximately 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., with most acceptance of the Bible (canonization) by the Church by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The Bible provides both the history of the faith and how to live as Christians. Here are some key beliefs as taught by Jesus and the apostles:

Love God (**Luke 10:27; John 14:23-24**).

Love your neighbor as yourself (**Leviticus 19:18; Luke 10:27**).

Repentance of your sins is necessary and essential (**Luke 1:77; Hebrews 9:22**).

God forgives your sins when you ask (**1 John 1:9**).

Forgive others who have wronged you if you want to be forgiven (**Matthew 6:14-15**).

Love your enemies (**Matthew 5:43-48**).

Do not be hypocritical (**Matthew 23:13-39**).

Do not judge others (**Matthew 7:1-5**).

The Kingdom of God is for everyone. It is not material things, doctrines, or rituals. It is “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (**Romans 14:17-18**).

The cross is the key symbol of Christianity.

The most important Christian holidays are **Christmas** (celebrating the birth of Jesus) and **Easter** (commemorating the resurrection of Jesus).

Most Christians believe that Jesus will return to earth in the future and be present with humanity, an event known as the Second Coming of Christ.

### History of Christianity

Though some historians would begin a history of Christianity around the time of the birth of Jesus, its roots can be traced to the Hebrew people, the Israelites, in the Old Testament. The articles in **Resources** on **Judaism**, **Abraham**, **Isaac**, and **Jacob** provide important background information detailing the life of the Hebrew people under the Old Covenant and the reasons Christ came into the world to bring a New Covenant, now called Christianity. Following are some of the key eras and milestones in the history of the Christian faith:

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|---------------------|--|
| 1800 BC –           | Origins of Israel, the nation, through the patriarchs <b>Abraham</b> , <b>Isaac</b> , c. 1670 BC and <b>Jacob</b> (Israel).  |
| 1670 BC –<br>922 BC | The Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt, their exodus to the Promised Land, governance by judges, then kings, in a tribal confederacy, split of the tribes into a Northern Kingdom (10 tribes named Israel) and a Southern Kingdom (2 tribes named Judah).   |
| 922 BC –<br>722 BC  | Rebellion and disobedience toward God, prophecy against their rebellion, especially Israel, and the obliteration of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrian Empire. Now called the 10 lost tribes of the Northern Kingdom, some of the Jewish people emigrated to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, while others were killed or taken captive. |
| 721 BC –<br>587 BC  | Continued disobedience to God by the Southern Kingdom (Judah), prophecies of impending judgment,   |

overthrow of their Kingdom and partial destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire, exile of the Hebrew people to Babylon.

- 539 BC The Persian Empire conquers the Babylonian Empire, and Cyrus of Persia declares the Hebrew people free, they return to Jerusalem and rebuild it, restore the land and life as it was prior to exile. Periods of faithfulness to God followed by increasing unfaithfulness.
- 200 BC –  
c. 2 BC Many prophets warn of further judgment in apocalyptic prophesy a coming Messiah King who would rule and reign over Israel. The Hebrew people come under the rule of the Roman Empire.
- c. 2 BC **Birth of Jesus Christ.** An approximate date can be reached by counting back from his death on Passover in 33 AD. Since Jesus was 30 when he began his three and half year ministry, his birth was around 2 BC. Others calculate differently and arrive at 4 BC. The true date remains unknown.
- c. 30–33 AD Ministry of Jesus on earth. During this time, the Hebrew people, especially their priestly leaders, rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Accordingly, Jesus indicated that the demographics of God’s household was about to change, and that Israel would be expanded to include others (Gentiles). Jesus said “I have *other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd*” (**John 10:16**) (*emphasis added*). Jesus also indicated that the Second Temple would soon be destroyed as well as all of Jerusalem (**Matthew 24**), bringing an end to the Jewish age and, by extension, the Old Covenant. **Hebrews 8** expands on this and compliments the words of Jesus.

- c. 33 Crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus into heaven. Just weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit falls on the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, empowering them and anointing them to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth as Jesus indicated they should do **(Acts 1:8)**.
- c. 34–62 Saul of Tarsus, a zealous persecutor of Christians, was called by God, became a loyal follower of Christ and an apostle, and was renamed Paul. He would lead key missionary journeys with other believers to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, bringing countless believers to the Christian faith.
- c. 38 The apostle Peter takes the gospel message to the household of Cornelius, Gentiles. They are converted to the faith, baptized, and filled with the Holy Spirit. The Gentiles were the other sheep to which Jesus referred **(John 10:16)**. When other Christian leaders heard about the Gentile experience with Peter, it is recorded, “**they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life”**” **(Acts 11:18)**.
- c. 50–60 Paul writes many epistles (letters) to Christian communities started during his ministry. These letters and others would later become a significant part of the New Testament.
- c. 60–69 During this time, Christians were severely persecuted by the Roman Empire, something Christians would regularly endure in the first and second centuries. Also, during this time, there was a bloody Jewish Revolt against Rome.
- 70 Rome utterly destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the second Jewish Temple. Over one million people were slaughtered in this event that was foretold by Jesus **(Matthew 24:1-2ff)**.

- c. 65–100 The life and ministry of Jesus are recorded and portions of all or some of them would become the gospels.
- c. 95 The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by a physician identified as Luke.
- 100–350 Christianity spreads to Armenia and many other places.
- 303 Christians faced the most severe persecutions to date under the co-emperors Diocletian and Galerius. This became known as The Great Persecution.
- 312 Roman emperor Constantine tolerates Christianity after having divine visions. Burdens previously placed on Christians are eased.
- 313 Constantine issues the Edict of Milan, granting to all in the Roman Empire the freedom to worship any god they chose. This was a dramatic shift in religious tolerance in the Roman Empire, leading to many positive outcomes for Christianity.
- 314 Christianity becomes the state religion of Armenia.
- 325 The Council of Nicea, a disputed and contentious gathering of church leaders, their first, produced few positive results:
- Jesus was declared to be of the same ‘substance’ as God, something already stated as fact by Jesus (**John 14:9-11**), and theorized by Tertullian as the Trinity in 215 AD. This concept was disputed by some scholars and leaders; one of note was Arius, an elder of Alexandria who doubted the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, a stance that got him excommunicated. Some believe this agreement of

the Council was more an imposition by the Emperor Constantine.

- At this time and following, friendships between the church and governing entities formed, leading to church-led government, and government exercising control in the life of the church, including the appointment of bishops. This was in contrast to the teaching of Jesus who seemed to urge respect, but separation of church and state (**Mark 12:13-17**). (for more details, go to [The Council of Nicea \(christian-history.org\)](http://christian-history.org))

380	Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius I.
397	Christianity come to Scotland.
c.400–500	General agreement by the church as to what scriptures should belong in the Bible, though certain writings were disputed for many centuries following.
608	The Pantheon in Rome is converted to a Christian church.
1095–1271	Crusades of the medieval period, a dark period of warring between some of the Christian faith and Islam regarding control of the Holy Land and sites considered sacred by both religions.
1378–1410	The Great Schism of the Roman Catholic Church over disagreements concerning papal succession.
1450s	Gutenberg Bible, first printed version of the Bible.

1517-1685 AD	Reformation period that began in the late 15 <sup>th</sup> century when practices in Western Catholicism were challenged by church leaders and others over indulgencies and other excesses. The recognized start of the Reformation was the posting of Martin Luther's 95 Theses (objections) to these excesses. But many others supported church reforms, with the result being the formation of Protestant church groups. In latter portions of this period and beyond, some, called Radical Reformers, sought return to the practices of the early church, specifically church life revealed in the book of Acts and the epistles of the New Testament. (for more details, go to <a href="#">Reformation - Wikipedia</a> )
1525	Translation of the Bible into English from Greek by William Tyndale.
1620	Christianity comes to America with the Pilgrims.
1730s–1740s	The Great Awakening, a strong move of the Holy Spirit among American colonial Protestants.
1780	The Sunday School movement is pioneered in England by Raikes.
1800-1840s	Second Great Awakening in America.
1906	Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, led by William J. Seymour, launched Pentecostalism as a worldwide movement.
1945	At the end of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor, and leader of the underground church of Germany, was martyred.
1947	Dead Sea Scrolls found in Qumran, Israel.

1949	First Billy Graham Crusade held in Los Angeles.
1970s	Jesus Movement.
1974	Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization.
1979	Mother Teresa wins the Nobel Peace Prize for work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress in the world.

### Demographics of Christianity

Today, Christianity is broadly split across three branches – Catholic, Protestant and (Eastern) Orthodox. Each of these main branches has split off many independent units called denominations or other general entities. Each of the denominations or other entities within the three branches have also split into numerous variations of their original organizations. The many denominations within Protestant Christianity, which differ in their interpretation of the Bible and understanding of the church, include:

- Anabaptists (Brethren, Mennonites, and Amish)
- Baptist
- Episcopalian
- Evangelist
- Methodist
- Presbyterian
- Pentecostal/Charismatic
- Lutheran
- Anglican
- Evangelical
- Assemblies of God
- Christian Reform/Dutch Reform
- Church of the Nazarene
- Disciples of Christ
- United Church of Christ
- Christian Science
- Seventh-Day Adventist

Although the many bodies of Christianity have differing views, uphold separate traditions, worship in distinct ways, and a few are regarded as less than faithful to

the early church and the teachings of Jesus, the core of their faith is centered around the life and teachings of Jesus.

### Places of Worship

Many call the place of Christian worship the 'church.' A stronger biblical understanding of the word 'church,' however, would be those who are 'called out' of worldly, sinful ways to follow Him. The Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning 'the called out,' is used in the New Testament in referring to the 'church' and described faithful Christian believers, not places of worship. **1 Peter 2:5** shares this sentiment when describing worshipping Christians, "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." In this understanding, the church of the New Covenant, is a new priesthood that offers a sacrifice of praise rather than a sacrifice of animals for the atonement of sins, as done by the priesthood of the Old Covenant. Sites of worship for followers of Jesus, regardless of their construction or settings in the outdoors, are the meeting places, not the church.

In the early centuries of Christianity, many groups of believers assembled and worshipped in homes or house churches. Later, other places of worship would be called meeting places, local churches, congregations, monasteries, cathedrals, chapels, conferences, concerts, communities and other names. The ruins of the structure believed by some archeologists to be the first known Christian place of worship, built specifically for that purpose in c. 300 AD, is located in Aqaba, Jordan.

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This is an introduction on the subject of **Christianity**. Here are a few other resources you may wish to explore:

[What is Christianity? Christianity is based on Jesus | carm.org](https://www.carm.org/what-is-christianity)

[What is Christianity and what do Christians believe? | GotQuestions.org](https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-christianity)

[World's largest religion by population is still Christianity | Pew Research Center](https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/14/worlds-largest-religion-by-population-is-still-christianity/)

[In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace | Pew Research Center \(pewforum.org\)](https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/14/in-u.s.-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/)

[The Council of Nicea \(christian-history.org\)](https://www.christian-history.org/council-of-nicea)

[Christianity Timeline - World History Encyclopedia](#)

[What does 'Christ' mean? | GotQuestions.org](#)

[Reformation - Wikipedia](#)