

## CHAPTER 9

## CHRISTIANITY

"Jesus Christ is Lord"

## KEY TOPICS

- Historical evidence 302
- Evidence of the Bible 303
- The life and teachings of Jesus 305
- The early Church 321
- Church administration 327
- Intellectual revival and monasticism 331
- Medieval mysticism 332
- The Protestant Reformation 333
- The Roman Catholic Reformation 339
- Liberal trends 340
- The Second Vatican Council 341
- The Orthodox world today 342
- Central beliefs in contemporary Christianity 346
- Sacred practices 348
- Contemporary trends 357

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Christianity is a faith based on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He was born as a Jew about 2,000 years ago in Roman-occupied Palestine. He taught for fewer than three years and was executed by the Roman government on charges of sedition. Nothing was written about him at the time although some years after his death, attempts were made to record what he had said and done. Yet his birth is now celebrated around the world and since the sixth century has been used as the major point from which public time is measured, even by non-Christians. The religion centered around him has more followers than any other.

In studying Christianity we will first examine what is known or inferred about the life and teachings of Jesus. We will then follow the evolution of the religion as it spread to all continents and became theologically and liturgically more complex. This process continues in the present, in which there are not one but many different versions of Christianity.

## Historical evidence

There is very little historical proof of the life of Jesus, but extensive scholarly research has turned up some shreds of evidence. The Jewish historian Josephus (born in approximately 37 CE), who was captured by the Romans and then defected to their side, wrote extensively about other details of Jewish history that have been confirmed by archaeological discoveries. He made two brief references to Jesus that may have been given a positive slant by Christian copyists, but are nonetheless now regarded as proof that Jesus did exist. In addition, the *Baraita* and *Tosefta*, supplements to the Jewish Mishnah, contain a few references to "Yeshu the Nazarene" who was said to practice "sorcery" (healings) and was "hanged."

While historical evidence of the life of Jesus is very skimpy, more is known about the milieu into which he was born. He was born as a Jew in the land of Israel, which had been subject to various foreign influences for centuries, during which it had been exposed to Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Parthian cultures. Though influenced by these streams, Jews also maintained their allegiance to one God and worship in the temple of Jerusalem. They were experiencing a degree of political freedom since the Maccabean revolt of 167 BCE, although the king of the Judaeans, Herod "the Great," was a half-Jew who had been installed with Roman backing. Matters

of Torah interpretation were under dispute between the Sadducees and Pharisees, while a third party, the Essenes, seem to have rejected the priesthood as corrupt and engaged in ascetic practices while awaiting divine intervention and restoration of spiritual purity. Expectations of a messiah who would save the people from foreign oppression were running high. Many apocalyptic texts were circulating that announced the imminent end of the present age, with evil giving way to a reign of righteousness. Unrest over increased taxes and economic difficulties under Roman rule was also brewing, and would eventually spawn various urban terrorist movements and armed resistance in the countryside, such as the 66–70 CE revolt involving the Zealots and the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132–135 CE. By contrast, the Jesus movement did not advocate violence or political activism.



*We do not know what Jesus, the founder of the world's largest religion, looked like. Rembrandt used a young European Jewish man as his model for this sensitive "portrait" of Jesus.*

## Evidence of the Bible

Many Christians feel that the true story of Jesus can be found in the Bible. Traditionally, the holy scriptures have been reverently regarded as the divinely inspired Word of God. Furthermore, in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, "the Gospel is not just Holy Scripture but also a symbol of Divine Wisdom and an image of Christ Himself."<sup>1</sup> Bibles used by various Christian groups are not uniform. All use a version of the Hebrew Bible called the Old Testament, which is organized differently from the Bible of the Jews, plus the twenty-seven books of the New Testament written after Jesus' earthly mission. Some Bibles also include non-canonical Jewish texts called the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books, such as "Maccabees" (books that purport to give the history of the Maccabean revolt, interwoven with religious allusions) and "The Wisdom of Solomon," from the long-standing "wisdom tradition" in which a sage imparts wise teachings about life.

Given the textual complexity of the Bible, some Christians have attempted to clarify what Jesus taught and how he lived, so that people might truly follow him. The field of theological study that attempts to interpret scripture is called **hermeneutics**. In Jewish tradition, rabbis developed rules for interpretation. In the late second and early third centuries CE, Christian thinkers developed two highly different approaches to biblical hermeneutics. One of these stressed the literal meanings of the texts; the other looked for allegorical rather than literal meanings. Origen, an Egyptian theologian (c.185–254 CE) who was a major proponent of the allegorical method, gave this example from the Book of Genesis:

*When God is said to "walk in the paradise in the cool of the day" and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events (Gen. 3:8).<sup>2</sup>*

During medieval times, allowance was made for interpreting scriptural passages in at least four ways: literal, allegorical, moral (teaching ethical principles), and heavenly (divinely inspired and mystical, perhaps unintelligible to ordinary thinking). This fourfold approach was later followed by considerable debate on whether the Bible should be understood on the basis of its own internal evidence or whether it should be seen through the lens of Church tradition. During the eighteenth century, critical study of the Bible from a



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strictly historical point of view began in western Europe. This approach, now accepted by many Protestants, Catholics, and some Orthodox, is based on the literary method of interpreting ancient writings in their historical context, with their intended audience and desired effect taken into account. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emphasis shifted to the history of the biblical texts and to questions about the process of hermeneutics, such as how the biblical message is conveyed through the medium of language.

Christian beliefs about the life and teachings of Jesus are especially founded on biblical texts, particularly the first four books of the New Testament, which are called the **gospels** (good news). On the whole, they seem to have been originally written about forty to sixty years after Jesus' death. They are based on the oral transmission of the stories and discourses, which may have been influenced by the growing split between Christians and Jews. The documents, thought to be pseudonymous, are given the names of Jesus' followers Matthew and John, and of the apostle Paul's companions Mark and Luke. The gospels were first written down in Greek and perhaps Aramaic, the everyday language that Jesus spoke, and then copied and translated in many different ways over the centuries. They offer a composite picture of Jesus as seen through the eyes of the Christian community.

Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are so similar that they are called the **synoptic gospels**, referring to the fact that they can be "seen together" as presenting rather similar views of Jesus' career, though they are organized somewhat differently. Most historians think that Matthew and Luke are largely based on Mark and another source called "Q." This hypothesized source would probably be a compilation of oral and written traditions. According to historical-critical analysis, the author of Mark probably put together many fragments of oral tradition in order to develop a connected narrative about Jesus' life and ministry, for the sake of propagating the faith.

The other two synoptic gospels often parallel Mark quite closely but include additional material. The gospel according to Matthew (named after one of Jesus' original disciples, a tax collector) is sometimes called a Jewish Christian gospel. It represents Jesus as a second Moses as well as the Messiah ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven, with frequent references to the Old Testament. Matthew's stories emphasize that the **Gentiles** (non-Jews) accept Jesus, whereas the Jews reject him as savior.

Luke, to whom the third gospel is attributed, is traditionally thought to have been a physician who sometimes accompanied Paul the apostle. The gospel seems to have been written with a Gentile Christian audience in mind. Luke presents Jesus' mission in universal rather than exclusively Jewish terms and accentuates the importance of his ministry to the underprivileged and lower classes.

The Gospel of John, traditionally attributed to "the disciple Jesus loved," is of a very different nature from the other three. It concerns itself less with following the life of Jesus than with seeing Jesus as the eternal Son of God, the word of God made flesh. It is seen by many scholars as being later in origin than the synoptic gospels, perhaps having been written around the end of the first century CE. By this time, there was apparently a more critical conflict between Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah, and the majority of Jews, who did not recognize him as the Messiah they were awaiting. The Gospel of John seems to concentrate on confirming Jesus' Messiahship, and also to reflect Greek influences, such as a dualistic distinction between light and darkness. It is also more mystical and devotional in nature than the synoptic gospels.

*The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it.*  
*The Gospel of John 1:5*

Other gospels circulating in the early Christian Church were not included in the canon of the New Testament. They include magical stories of Jesus' infancy, such as an account of his making clay birds and then bringing them to life. The Gospel of Thomas, one of the long-hidden manuscripts discovered in 1945 in a grave near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, is of particular interest. Some scholars feel that its core may have been written even earlier than the canonical gospels. It contains many wise sayings of Jesus in common with the other gospels but also others which were unknown until the Nag Hammadi discovery, such as this mystical statement:

*Jesus said:*  
*I am the Light that is above them all.*  
*I am the All,*  
*The All came forth from me*  
*And the All attained to me.*  
*Cleave a (piece of) wood, I am there.*  
*Lift up the stone and you will find Me there.'*

## The life and teachings of Jesus

It is not possible to reconstruct from the gospels a single chronology of Jesus' life nor to account for much of what happened before he began his ministry. Nevertheless, the stories of the New Testament are important to Christians as the foundation of their faith. And after extensive analysis most scholars have concluded on grounds of linguistics and regional history that many of the sayings attributed to Jesus by the gospels may be authentic.

### Birth

According to the Christian doctrine of the **incarnation**, Jesus is the divine Son of God who "became flesh" by being conceived and born as a human being. The biblical Book of Colossians states, "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

Most historians think Jesus was probably born a few years before the first year of what is now called the **Common Era**. When sixth-century Christian monks began figuring time in relationship to the life of Jesus, they may have miscalculated slightly. Traditionally, Christians have believed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This detail fulfills the rabbinic interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the home of David the great king, and in the lineage of David. The Gospel of Matthew offers a genealogy tracing Jesus through David back to Abraham; the gospel of Luke traces his lineage all the way back to Adam, the son of God. However, some scholars suggest that Jesus was actually born in or near Nazareth, his own home town in Galilee. This region, whose name meant "Ring of the Gentiles," was not fully Jewish; it was also scorned as somewhat countrified by the rabbinic orthodoxy of Judaea.



*Jesus is often pictured as a divine child, born in a humble stable, and forced to flee on a donkey with his parents. (Monastère Bénédictin de Keur Moussa, Senegal, Fuite en Egypte.)*

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*"The Nativity," Jesus' humble birth depicted in a 14th-century fresco by Giotto. (Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy.)*

According to the gospels, Jesus' mother was Mary, who was a virgin when she conceived him by the Holy Spirit; her husband was Joseph, a carpenter from Bethlehem. Luke states that they had to go to Bethlehem to satisfy a Roman ruling that everyone should travel to their ancestral cities for a census. When they had made the difficult journey there was no room for them in the inn, so the baby was born in a stable among the animals. He was named Jesus, which means "God saves." This well-loved birth legend exemplifies the humility that Jesus taught. According to Luke, those who came to pay their respects were poor shepherds. Matthew tells instead of Magi, sages from "the east," who may have been Zoroastrians and who brought the Christ child symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, confirming his divine kingship and his adoration by Gentiles. Matthew also describes Joseph and Mary's taking the baby Jesus to Egypt for safety, returning to live in Nazareth only after King Herod died.

### Preparation

No other stories are told about Jesus' childhood in Nazareth until he was twelve years old, when, according to the Gospel of Luke, he accompanied his parents on their yearly trip to Jerusalem for Passover. Left behind by mistake, he was said to have been discovered by his parents in the temple discussing the Torah with the rabbis; "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." When scolded, he reportedly replied, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"<sup>4</sup> This story is used to demonstrate his sense of mission even as a boy, his knowledge of Jewish tradition, and the close personal connection between Jesus and God. In later accounts of his prayers, he spoke to God as "Abba," a very familiar Aramaic and Hebrew word for father.

The New Testament is also silent about the years of Jesus' young manhood. What is described, however, is the ministry of John the Baptist, a prophet citing Isaiah's apocalyptic prophecies of the coming Kingdom of God. He was conducting baptism in the Jordan River in preparation for the Kingdom of God.

According to all four gospels, at the age of about thirty Jesus appeared before John to be baptized. John was calling people to repent of their sins and then be spiritually purified and sanctified by immersion in the river. He felt it improper to perform this ceremony for Jesus, whom Christians consider sinless, but Jesus insisted. How can this be interpreted? One explanation is that, for Jesus, this became a ceremony of his consecration to God as the Messiah. The gospel writer reports:



*John the Baptist is said to have baptized Jesus only reluctantly, saying he was unworthy even to fasten Jesus' shoes. When he did so, the Spirit allegedly descended upon Jesus as a dove. (Painting by Esperanza Guevara, Solentiname, Nicaragua.)*

*When he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."*<sup>5</sup>

Another interpretation is that Jesus' baptism was the occasion for John to announce publicly that the Messiah had arrived, beginning his ministry. A third interpretation is that by requesting baptism Jesus identified himself with sinful humanity. Even though he had no need for repentance and purification, he accepted baptism on behalf of all humans.

After being baptized, Jesus reportedly undertook a forty-day retreat in the desert wilderness, fasting. During his retreat, the gospel writers say he was tempted by Satan to use his spiritual power for secular ends, but he refused.

## Ministry

In John's gospel, Jesus' baptism and wilderness sojourn were followed by his gathering of the first disciples, the fisherman Simon (called Peter), Andrew (Peter's brother), James, and John (brother of James), who recognized him as the Messiah. Jesus warned his disciples that they would have to leave all their possessions and human attachments to follow him—to pay more attention to the life of the spirit than to physical comfort and wealth. This call to discipleship continues to be experienced by Christians today. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), who, opposing the Nazis, ultimately gave his life for his beliefs, wrote that to follow Jesus one must leave worldly ties and self-centered thinking behind: "Only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus said that it was extremely difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven. God, the Protector, takes care of physical needs, which are relatively unimportant anyway:

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*Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?*<sup>7</sup>

Jesus taught that his followers should concentrate on laying up spiritual treasures in heaven, rather than material treasures on earth, which are short-lived. Because God is like a generous parent, those who love God and want to follow the path of righteousness should pray for help, in private: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."<sup>8</sup>

As Jesus traveled, speaking, he is said to have performed many miracles, such as turning water into wine, healing the sick, restoring the dead to life, walking on water, casting devils out of the possessed, and turning a few loaves and fish into enough food to feed a crowd of thousands, with copious leftovers. Jesus reportedly performed these miracles quietly and compassionately; the gospels interpreted them as signs of the coming Kingdom of God.

*From north to south, the area covered by Jesus during his ministry was no more than 100 miles. Yet his mission is now worldwide, with more followers than any other religion.*

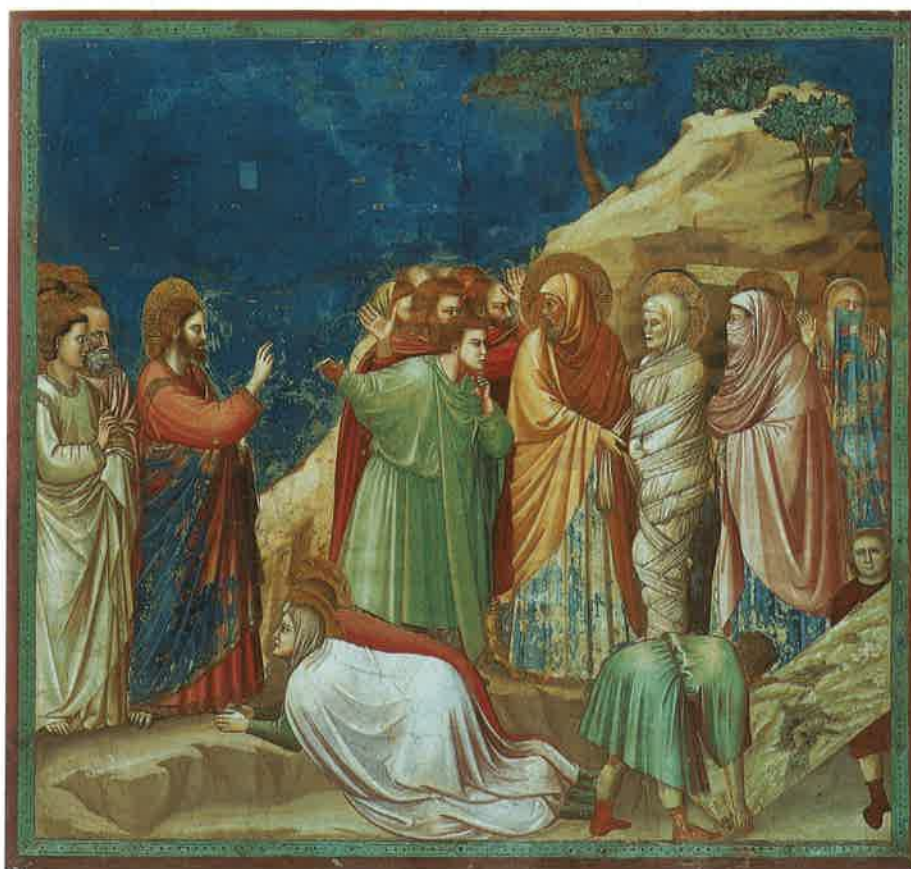




The stories of the miracles performed by Jesus have symbolic meanings taken from the entire Jewish and early Christian traditions. In the sharing of the loaves and fishes, for instance, it may have been more than physical bread that Luke was talking about when he said, "and all ate and were satisfied."<sup>9</sup> The people came to Jesus out of spiritual hunger, and he fed them all, profligate with his love. Bread often signified life-giving sustenance. Jesus was later to offer himself as "the bread of life."<sup>10</sup> On another level of interpretation, the story may prefigure the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, with both stories alluding to the Jewish tradition of the Great Banquet, the heavenly feast of God, as a symbol of the messianic age. The fish were a symbol of Christ to the early Christians; what he fed them was the indiscriminate gift of himself.

Theological interpretations of the biblical stories are based on the evidence of the Bible itself, but people also bring their own experiences to them. To William, a twentieth-century Nicaraguan peasant, the miracle was not the multiplication of the loaves but the sharing: "The miracle was to persuade the owners of the bread to share it, that it was absurd for them to keep it all while the people were going hungry."<sup>11</sup>

Jesus preached and lived by truly radical ethics. In contrast to the prevailing patriarchal society and extensive proscriptions against impurity, lepers and a bleeding woman touched him and were healed. In his inclusive "table fellowship," he ate with people of all sorts, including those designated as impure by Jewish law in order to preserve temple purity. These marginalized people



*Jesus is said to have brought Lazarus back to life four days after he died and was laid in a tomb. (Fresco by Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy.)*



included all women because of menstruation and childbirth; most poor and uneducated people because they could not understand or observe the laws of purity; as well as the sick, blind, deformed, and lame; people with skin diseases and secretions; people who earned their living in ways that were regarded as sinful or polluting; and Gentiles, for they were not worshipers of the God of Israel. Feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether explains, "All these would be collectively referred to by the Jesus movement simply as 'the poor,' a group whose deprivation was of many kinds, but united in their 'unholy' status vis-à-vis 'the righteous.'" <sup>12</sup>

In a culture in which the woman's role was strictly circumscribed, Jesus welcomed women as his disciples. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, Salome the mother of the disciples James and John, Mary of Bethany, Martha, Susanna, and Joanna are among those mentioned in the gospels. Some of them traveled with Jesus and even helped to support him and his disciples financially, a great departure from orthodox Jewish tradition. In addition, wives of some of the married men among Jesus' first disciples apparently accompanied them as they traveled with Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:5). His was a radically egalitarian vision.

He also extended the application of Jewish laws: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment."<sup>13</sup> Not only should a man not commit adultery; it is wrong even to look at a woman lustfully. Rather than taking revenge with an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, respond with love. If a person strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek to be struck also. If anyone tries to rob you of your coat, give him your cloak as well. And not only should you love your neighbor:

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*<sup>14</sup>

The extremely high ethical standards of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) may seem impossibly challenging. Who can fully follow them? And Jesus said these things to people who had been brought up with the understanding that to fulfill incompletely even one divine commandment is a violation of the Law. But when people recognize their helplessness to fulfill such commandments, they are ready to turn to the divine for help. Jesus pointed out, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."<sup>15</sup>

The main thing Jesus taught was love. He stated that to love God and to "love your neighbor as yourself"<sup>16</sup> were the two great commandments in Judaism, upon which everything else rested. To love God means placing God first in one's life, rather than concentrating on the things of the earth. To love one's neighbor means selfless service to everyone, even to those despised by the rest of society. Jesus often horrified the religious authorities by talking to sinful prostitutes and tax-collectors, and the poorest and lowliest of people. He set an example of loving service by washing his disciples' feet. This kind of love, he said, should be the mark of his followers, and at the Last Judgment, when the Son of Man judges the people of all time, he will grant eternal life in the kingdom to the humble "sheep" who loved and served him in all:

## LIVING CHRISTIANITY

## An Interview with David Vandiver



Born into a devout small-town Southern Baptist family, David Vandiver became the manager of a wilderness camp in the Appalachian Mountains near Washington, D.C., for inner-city African American children whose backgrounds were very different from his own. Now he and his wife and daughters are living in voluntary simplicity in rural Maine, trying to maximize their family time and minimize their impact on the environment. Here he describes the evolution of his understanding and practice of Christianity, and his hope for its future:

*The primary values as I grew up were ones of honesty, fairness, and caring for others. The great sins were the ones most affecting families—divorce, adultery, and irresponsible parenting. It was not until much later in my life that the vast scope of values held by Christians in differing places in the world came to my attention. I was not aware, for example, that there were Christians who believed God wanted them to influence politics for justice, work for equal rights for all people, protect the natural environment, or make peace with other nations and peoples of differing faiths. We had no cause to practice tolerance because we were all so similar, except for the African Americans in our town—about twenty percent of the population—who were already Christian and from whom we, as Anglo-Americans, wished to stay separated. I grew up with racism all around me.*

*Nonetheless, as a high school youth in the early 1970s, I joined my friends in dragging my church into the foray of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement because I couldn't see Jesus as one who would keep any group of people powerless and poor. Christianity was a voice for the downtrodden and oppressed of the world, and if I was to follow Jesus, I would have to take up their cause for justice in some way.*

*The most accessible way for me to take up this cause was to enter an educational path that would lead to a paid vocation as a Christian minister. In my studies I began to consider the teachings of Jesus the Christ more deeply. What did it mean to 'love my neighbor as myself'? In practical terms, it came to mean that I could not simply spend the rest of my life pursuing a comfortable living while ignoring the fact that millions are living in poverty and oppression.*

*I saw that following Jesus would take me out of the mainstream of the world in order to love it fully. On the other hand, I was painfully aware of the impossibility of loving others unconditionally.*

*Vocationally and geographically, I found a home as the manager of a wilderness camp for inner-city children from Washington. Many of the children who came to our camp had never been out of the city. As I watched and listened to them entering this environment that was foreign to them, they became my teachers, helping me to understand the fears with which they faced the wilderness, and the fears they confronted at home in the city. I was reminded of how I grew up, unaware of the larger world around me. I worked to help them find the tools that would assist them in loving their enemies, abusers, oppressors, and those who ignore them.*

*Now I have become a minister due to a growing sense of historical urgency. Evidence has accumulated that our planet is reaching carrying capacities for population, atmospheric carbon, and extraction of certain resources such as petroleum. As Rob McCall, our local Congregational minister says, "If we ignore the laws of Mother Nature, she will sweep up our species, hair and bone, with neither malice nor discrimination, and we will inhabit this world no more." The suffering resulting from our greed-based decision-making is already real, both for the rich and the poor.*

*I am turning my energies toward the contributions that could be made by a healthy faith. Since the Protestant Reformation, Western Christianity has become increasingly focused on the individual. We have an underdeveloped ability to make life-affirming decisions as a group. In the North American context of gross overconsumption, the time has come for a new Reformation that would recover—among other things—widespread respect for the laws of nature. Christianity can make a great contribution, but alone could never bring the changes necessary to change life. An unprecedented level of mutual understanding between all faiths, each one enriching respect for life, is being called forth.*

*As for my civil rights experiences, I now see them as an example of how the whole world needs to operate, judging all species as worthy of dignity and respect. My faith supports that.<sup>17</sup>*


*Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."<sup>18</sup>*

Jesus preached that God is forgiving to those who repent. He told a story likening God to the father who welcomed with gifts and celebration his "prodigal son" who had squandered his inheritance and then humbly returned home. He told story after story suggesting that those who considered themselves superior were more at odds with God than those who were aware of their sins. Those who sincerely repent—even if they are the hated toll-collectors, prostitutes, or ignorant common people—are more likely to receive God's forgiveness than are the learned and self-righteous. Indeed, Jesus said, it was only in childlikeness that people could enter the kingdom of heaven. In a famous series of statements about supreme happiness called the Beatitudes, Jesus is quoted as promising blessings for the "poor in spirit,"<sup>19</sup> the mourners, the meek, the seekers of righteousness, the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and of spreading the gospel.

Jesus' stories were typically presented as **parables**, in which earthly situations familiar to people of his time and place were used to make a spiritual point. He spoke of parents and children, of masters and servants, of sowing seeds, of fishing. But even though the subject matter was familiar, the outcomes often contained paradoxes that turned conventional thinking upside-down. For example:

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.<sup>20</sup>*

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## TEACHING STORY

### The Good Samaritan

On one occasion a lawyer came forward to put this test question to Jesus: "Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?" He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "That is the right answer," said Jesus; "do that and you will live."

But he wanted to vindicate himself, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell in with robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going down by the same road; but when he saw him, he went past on the other side. So too a Levite came to the place, and

when he saw him went past on the other side. But a Samaritan (a person from a region against whom the Jews of Judaea had developed religious and racial prejudice) who was making the journey came upon him, and when he saw him was moved to pity. He went up and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he lifted him on to his own beast, brought him to an inn, and looked after him there. Next day he produced two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Look after him; and if you spend any more, I will repay you on my way back.' Which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He answered, "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus said, "Go and do as he did."<sup>21</sup>



Such radical teachings about what is of true value were not easy for wealthy people to embrace. To give up everything for a life of surrender to God flies in the face of conventional value placed on earning and acquiring.

As we have seen, messianic expectations were running very high among Jews of that time, oppressed as they were by Roman rule. They looked to a time when the people of Israel would be freed and the authority of Israel's God would be recognized throughout the world. Jesus reportedly spoke to them again and again about the fulfillment of these expectations: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"<sup>22</sup>; "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose."<sup>23</sup> He taught them to pray for the advent of this kingdom: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>24</sup> However, in contrast to expectations of secular deliverance from the Romans, Jesus seems to refer to the kingdom as a manifestation of God's full glory, the consummation of the world.

*Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*

*Jesus, as quoted in the Gospel of John 4:13-14*

Jesus' references to the kingdom, as reported in the gospels, indicate two seemingly different emphases: one that the kingdom is expected in the future, and the other that the kingdom is already here. In his future references, as in the apocalyptic Jewish writings of the time, Jesus said that things would get much worse right before the end. He seemed to foretell the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans that began in 70 CE. But:

*then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.<sup>25</sup>*

It was his mission, he said, to gather together everyone who could be saved.

## Challenges to the authorities

As Jesus traveled through Galilee, many people gathered around him to be healed. Herod Antipas, a Jew who had been appointed by the Romans as ruler of Galilee, had already executed John the Baptist and may have been concerned that Jesus might be a troublemaker, perhaps one of the Zealots of Galilee who were stirring up support for a political uprising against the Romans. Jesus therefore moved outside Herod's jurisdiction for a while, to carry on his work in Tyre and Sidon (now in Lebanon).

According to the gospels, Jesus was also regarded with suspicion by prominent Jewish groups of his time—the emerging Pharisees (the shapers of rabbinic Judaism), Sadducees (the temple priests and upper class), and the scribes (specially trained laymen who copied the written law and formulated the oral law of Judaism). Jesus seems not to have challenged Mosaic law but,

rather, its interpretations in the evolving rabbinic traditions and the hypocrisy of some of those who claimed to be living by the law. It is written in the Gospel of Matthew that the Pharisees and scribes challenged Jesus' disciples for not washing their hands before eating. Jesus responded:

*"What goes into the mouth does not make a man unclean; it is what comes out of the mouth that makes him unclean. . . ."*<sup>26</sup>

*"Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You who are like whitewashed tombs that look handsome on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every kind of corruption. In the same way you appear to people from the outside like good honest men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."*<sup>27</sup>

Despite such critical remarks about the Pharisees appearing in the New Testament, scholars have noted many similarities between Pharisees and the beliefs of early Christians. For instance, the Pharisees did not see God as belonging only to Israel, but rather as the parent watching over, and taking care of, every individual. They addressed God by new names, such as *Abinu she-Bashamayim* (Our Father Who art in Heaven), the same form of address by which Jesus reportedly taught his followers to pray to God (Matthew 6:9).

Many seemingly anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament are suspected by some modern scholars to be additions or interpretations dating from the period after Jesus' death, when rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity were competing for followers. Nevertheless, more universal teachings are apparent in such stories attributed to Jesus. For instance, in all times and all religions there have been those who do not practice what they preach when claiming to speak with spiritual authority.

Jesus is said to have also confronted the commercial interests in the Temple of Jerusalem, those who were making a living by charging a profit when exchanging money for temple currency and selling animals for sacrificial offerings:

*So they reached Jerusalem and he went into the Temple and began driving out those who were selling and buying there; he upset the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those who were selling pigeons. Nor would he allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple. And he taught them and said, "Does not scripture say; 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples?'<sup>28</sup> But you have turned it into a robbers' den."<sup>29</sup> This came to the ears of the chief priests and the scribes, and they tried to find some way of doing away with him; they were afraid of him because the people were carried away by his teaching.<sup>30</sup>*

According to the gospel accounts, Jesus appropriated to himself the messianic prophecies of Second Isaiah. It is written that he privately asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ."<sup>31</sup> "Christ" is Greek for "anointed one," a translation of the Aramaic word *M'shekha* or *Messiah*, which also means "perfected" or "enlightened one." His disciples later spoke of him as the Messiah after he died and was resurrected. And his follower Martha, sister of Lazarus whom Jesus reportedly raised from the dead, is quoted as having said to Jesus, "I now believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world."<sup>32</sup> Some contemporary biblical scholars have concluded, however, that Jesus rejected the title of Messiah, for it might have been misunderstood.

According to the gospel tradition, a transcendental phenomenon, the

## TIMELINE

## Christianity

c.4 BCE–1 CE	Jesus born
c.27–33 CE	Jesus crucified
c.37–100	Josephus
c.50–60	St. Paul organizes early Christians
c.70–95	Gospels written down
c.150	Last of New Testament writings
c.185–254	Life of Origen, who supports allegorical interpretation of Bible
306–337	Constantine emperor of Roman Empire
325	Nicene Creed; Council of Nicaea affirms divinity of Jesus
354–430	Life of St. Augustine, influential formulator of Christian doctrines
379–395	Christianity becomes state religion under rule of Emperor Theodosius
c.480–542	Life of St. Benedict and creation of his monastic rule
800–1300	Middle Ages in Europe; centralization of papal power
1054	Split between Western and Eastern Orthodox Church
1182–1226	Life of St. Francis of Assisi
1225–1274	Thomas Aquinas
1232	The Inquisitions begin suppressing and punishing heretics
1300s	Proliferation of monastic orders
1412–1431	Joan of Arc
1453	Gutenberg Bible published
1478	Spanish Inquisition set up
1509–1564	Life of John Calvin
1517	Martin Luther posts ninety-five theses; Protestantism begins
1534	Church of England separates from Rome
1545–1563	The Council of Trent; Roman Catholic Reformation
1624–1691	Life of George Fox, English founder of Quakers
1703–1791	Life of John Wesley, founder of Methodist Church
c.1720–1780	The Enlightenment in Europe
1859	Charles Darwin's <i>On the Origin of Species</i> challenges beliefs in creation by God
1906–1909	Asuza Street Revival
1945	Discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts
1947	First Dead Sea Scrolls discovered
1948	World Council of Churches formed
1962–1965	The Second Vatican Council
1988	Churches reopened in Russian Federation
2000	Pope John Paul II asks forgiveness for sins of the Roman Catholic Church
2002	Boston's Roman Catholic bishop resigns in growing scandal over sexual abuse by priests
2005	Pope Benedict XVI's papacy inaugurated
2010	Some conservative Anglican bishops convert to Roman Catholicism



"Transfiguration," was witnessed by three disciples. Jesus had climbed a mountain to pray, and as he did:

*He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ... When lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."*<sup>33</sup>

The presence of Moses and Elijah (who in Jewish apocalyptic tradition were expected to return at the end of the world) placed Jewish law and prophecy behind the claim that Jesus is the Christ. They were representatives of the old covenant with God, by which the Jewish people agreed to obey the laws of God and to regard God as their sole ruler. Jesus brought a new dispensation of grace.

Jesus claimed that John the Baptist was Elijah come again. The authorities had killed John the Baptist, and, Jesus prophesied, they would attack him, too, not recognizing who he was. John quotes Jesus as saying things like "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me"; "I am the light of the world"; "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world"; and "Before Abraham was, I am."<sup>34</sup> Jesus characterized himself as a good shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Foreshadowing the **Crucifixion**, he said he would offer his own flesh and blood as a sacrifice for the sake of humanity. His coming death would mark a "new covenant" in which his blood would be "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>35</sup>

It is possible that such passages defining Jesus' role were later interpolations by the early Christians as they tried to explain the meaning of their Master's life and death in new terms during the decades when the New Testament was in the process of formation.

*Before the Last Supper, Jesus humbly served his disciples by washing their feet and told them to serve each other likewise.*



## Crucifixion

The anti-institutional tenor of Jesus' teachings did not endear him to those in power, who were wary of incipient revolts. Jesus knew that to return to Jerusalem would be politically dangerous. But eventually he did so, at Passover. He reportedly entered the town in a humble way, riding on a donkey and accompanied by supporters who waved palm branches and announced him as the Messiah, crying:

*"Hosanna! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!"*<sup>36</sup>

However, Jesus warned his disciples that his end was near. At the Last Supper, a Jewish Seder meal during the Passover season, he is said to have given them instructions for a ceremony with bread and wine to be performed thenceforth to maintain an ongoing communion with him. One of the disciples would betray him, he said. This one, Judas, had already done so, selling information leading to Jesus' arrest for thirty pieces of silver.



*Ancient olive trees—some thought to be at least a thousand years old—in the garden of Gethsemane.*

Jesus took three of his followers to a garden called Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives, where he is said to have prayed intensely that the cup of suffering would pass away from him, if it be God's will, "yet not what I will, but what thou wilt."<sup>37</sup> The gospels often speak of Jesus' spending long periods in spontaneous prayer addressing God very personally as "Abba." It is possible to interpret Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane as a confirmation of his great faith in God's mercy and power. In the words of New Testament theologian Joachim Jeremias:

*Jesus takes into account the possibility that God may rescind his own holy will ... The Father of Jesus is not the immovable, unchangeable God who in the end can only be described in negations. He is not a God to whom it is pointless to pray. He is a gracious God, who hears prayers and intercessions, and is capable in his mercy of rescinding his own holy will.<sup>38</sup>*

Nevertheless, after this period of prayer Jesus said, according to Mark's gospel, "It is all over. The hour has come."<sup>39</sup> A crowd including Judas approached with swords and clubs; they led Jesus away to be questioned by the chief priest, elders, and scribes.

All four gospels include "**passion narratives**" describing Jesus' sufferings during his betrayal, trial, and execution by crucifixion. Matthew and Mark report a hearing before the high priest, Joseph Caiaphas. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the high priest asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus reportedly answered:

*You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.<sup>40</sup>*

Caiaphas pronounced this statement blasphemy, meaning attributing divinity to oneself and thus showing a lack of reverence for God, a crime punishable by death according to Jewish law. However, under Roman occupation

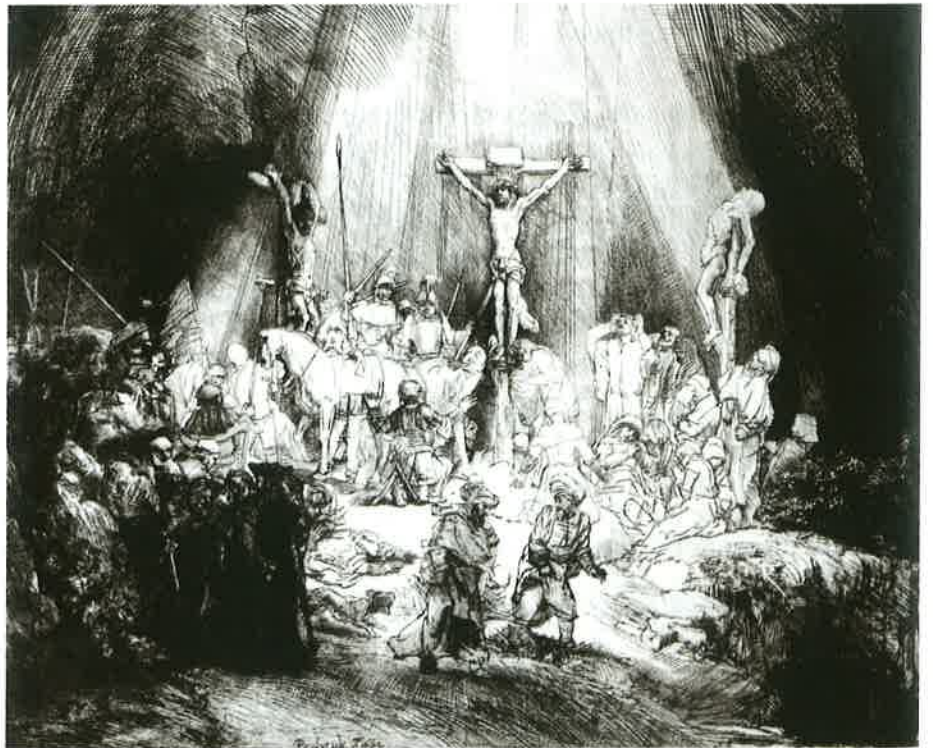


the Sanhedrin (supreme Jewish court made up of chief priests, elders, and law teachers) was forbidden to pass the death sentence. Therefore Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, for sentencing. To Pilate's leading question, "Are you King of the Jews?" Jesus is said to have replied, "You have said so."<sup>41</sup> According to the biblical accounts, Pilate seems to prefer to let Jesus off with a flogging, for he sees no reason to sentence him to death. Nevertheless, the crowd demands that he be killed on the grounds that he is a challenger to the earthly king, Caesar. The Gospel of John reports extraordinary dialogues between Pilate and Jesus as the crowd clamors for his execution. For instance, according to the Gospel of John, Pilate asks Jesus, "What have you done?" and Jesus reportedly replies:

*My kingdom does not belong to this world. My kingly authority comes from elsewhere.* "You are a king then?" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "King is your word. My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this was I born; for this I came into the world, and all who are not deaf to truth listen to my voice." Pilate said, "What is truth?" and with those words went out again to the Jews.<sup>42</sup>

At last, unable to pacify Jesus' critics, Pilate turns him over to his military guard for execution by crucifixion, a form of death by torture widely used within the Roman Empire. In this method, the victim was typically tortured or beaten brutally with whips and then hung or nailed onto a wooden cross to die as a hideous example to intimidate the public. The guards put a crown made of thorns on Jesus' head and paraded him and his cross to the hill called Golgotha (Place of the Skull). It was probably used frequently for such executions. The accusation—"This is Jesus, King of the Jews"—was set over his head, and two robbers were crucified alongside him. The authorities, the people, and even the robbers (one of them, at least, according to Luke)

*Jesus' crucifixion was interpreted by many later Christians as the sacrifice of an innocent lamb as atonement for the sins of humanity. Another interpretation was that God gave "himself or herself" in love, drawing the world into a loving relationship with the divine. (Rembrandt, The Three Crosses, 1653.)*





mocked him for saying that he could save others when he could not even save himself.

Jesus hung there for hours until, according to the gospels, he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"<sup>43</sup> This is the first line of Psalm 22, which is actually a great proclamation of the faith in God of one who is persecuted. Then Jesus died. This event is thought to have happened on a Friday sometime between 27 and 33 CE. A wealthy Jewish disciple named Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body, which Joseph wrapped in a linen shroud and placed in his own tomb, with a large stone against the door. A guard was placed at the tomb to make sure that no followers would steal the body and claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

## Resurrection and Ascension

That seemed to be the end of it. Jesus' disciples were terrified, so some of them hid, mourning and disheartened. The whole religious movement could have died out, as did other messianic cults. However, what is reported next in varying gospel accounts seemed to change everything. Some of the women who had been close to Jesus and had traveled with him from Galilee—Mary Magdalene, plus, according to different gospels, Mary mother of James, Joanna, Salome, and perhaps others—visited the tomb on Sunday to prepare the body for a proper burial, a rite that had been postponed because of the Sabbath. Instead, they found the tomb empty, with the stone rolled away. Angels then appeared and told them that Jesus had risen from death. The women ran and brought two of the male disciples, who witnessed the empty tomb with the shroud folded.

Then followed numerous reports of appearances of the risen Christ to various disciples. He dispelled their doubts about his **Resurrection**, having them touch his wounds and even eating a fish with them. He said to them, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew:



*The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem encompasses many rock slabs, each of which is revered as having possibly been part of the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid.*

## Books of the New Testament

### Gospels

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke  
John

### The Acts of the Apostles

### The Letters of Paul

Romans  
1 and 2 Corinthians  
Galatians  
Ephesians\*  
Philippians  
Colossians\*  
1 and 2\* Thessalonians  
1 and 2 Timothy\*  
Titus\*  
Philemon

### The General Epistles

Hebrew  
James  
1 and 2 Peter  
1, 2, and 3 John  
Jude

### Revelation

\*Scholars question whether these letters were written by Paul or by others using his name as a pseudonym, in the custom of the times.

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.<sup>41</sup>*

The details of the appearances of the resurrected Jesus differ considerably from gospel to gospel. However, some scholars think that to have women as the first witnesses to the empty tomb suggests that there must be some historical truth in the claims of Jesus' Resurrection, for no one trying to build a case would have rested it on the testimony of women, who had little status in a patriarchal society. Feminist scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza finds deep meaning in the presence of women disciples at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection:

*Whereas according to Mark the leading male disciples do not understand this suffering messiahship of Jesus, reject it, and finally abandon him, the women disciples who have followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem suddenly emerge as the true disciples in the passion narrative. They are Jesus' true followers who have understood that his ministry was not rule and kingly glory but diakonia, "service" (Mark 15:41). Thus the women emerge as the true Christian ministers and witnesses.<sup>42</sup>*

It was the Resurrection that turned defeat into victory for Jesus, and discouragement into hope for his followers. As the impact of all they had seen set in, the followers came to believe that Jesus had been God present in a human life, walking among them. According to the book of Acts of the Apostles, Peter later accused the Israelites of having Jesus killed, but pointed to the greater power of God, who raised him from the dead. Jesus was no longer seen as a victim but a victor. The Resurrection became the basis for the Christian hope of salvation through belief in Jesus. Peter proclaimed:

*This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; It has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, For there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.<sup>46</sup>*

According to two gospel accounts, after the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples, encouraging them to carry the gospel to the whole world, he ascended into heaven. The end of the gospel of Mark, which is thought to be a later addition to the chapter, adds, "and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). Some Christians believe that Jesus miraculously ascended bodily into the highest heaven, an invisible realm in the sky where God is sitting with Jesus beside him, as an advocate for his faithful followers. Whether

understood metaphorically or literally, the **Ascension** is an article of Christian faith. It is further extended in the Acts of the Apostles into belief that Jesus will return bodily to the earth in the future:

*As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."<sup>47</sup>*

Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension give rise to the Christian belief in life after death for those who believe in God. Greek Orthodox Professor Christos Yannaras explains:

*Many religions and philosophies proclaim the "immortality of the soul," but the Church is differentiated from all these, because she understands immortality, not as an uninterpreted form of "survival" after death, but as a transcendence of death by means of the relationship with God. Death is, for the Church, separation from God, the denial of the relationship with Him, the refusal of life as love and intimate communion. ... Faith in eternity is the trust that this love will not stop but will always constitute my life whether my psychosomatic capacities function or do not function."<sup>48</sup>*

## The early Church

Testing their faith, persecution at times became the lot of Jesus' followers. But by 380 CE, despite strong opposition, Christianity became the official religion of the vast Roman Empire. As it became the establishment, rather than a tiny, scattered band of dissidents within Judaism, Christianity continued to define and organize itself.

### From persecution to empire

The earliest years of what became the mainstream of Christianity are described in the New Testament books that follow the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. "The Acts of the Apostles" was presumably written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, and Acts refers back to the Gospel of Luke as an earlier part of a single history of the rise of Christianity. Acts is followed by letters to some of the early groups of Christians, most of them apparently written by Paul, a major organizer and **apostle** (missionary), in about 50 to 60 CE.

Like the gospel accounts, the stories in these biblical books are examined by many contemporary scholars as possibly romanticized, idealized documents, used to convert, to increase faith, to teach principles, and to establish Christian theology, rather than to accurately record historical facts.

According to Acts, an event called **Pentecost** galvanized the early Christians into action. At a meeting of the disciples, something that sounded like a great wind came down from the sky, and what looked like tongues of fire swirled around to touch each one's head. The narrative states that they all began speaking in different languages, so that all who listened could understand in their own language. Some mocked them, saying they were drunk, but Peter declared that they had been filled with the Spirit of God, as the Old Testament





Caravaggio's painting  
The Conversion of St.  
Paul focuses on the light  
falling on Paul, a spiritual  
experience that totally  
transformed his life.

 **Read the Document**  
Paul's Letters to New  
Christian Churches  
on [myreligionlab](http://myreligionlab.com)

prophet Joel had prophesied would happen in the last days before the onset of the kingdom of God. He testified that the Jesus whom the people had crucified had been raised up by God, who had made him "both Lord and Christ."<sup>49</sup> Reportedly, 3,000 people were so convinced that they were baptized that day.

One of the persecutors of Christians was Saul. He was a Pharisee tentmaker who lived during the time of Jesus but never met him. Instead, after Jesus died, he helped to throw many of his followers into prison. Acts relates that on the way to Damascus in search of more heretics, he saw a light brighter than the sun and heard the voice of Jesus asking why Saul was persecuting him. This resistance was useless, said the vision of Jesus, who then appointed him to do the opposite—to go to both Jews and Gentiles:

*to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*<sup>50</sup>

This meeting with the risen Christ, and through him, God, was an utterly transformational experience for Saul. He was baptized and immediately began promoting the Christian message under

his new name, Paul. His indefatigable work in traveling around the Mediterranean was of great importance in shaping and expanding the early Christian Church. He was shipwrecked, stoned, imprisoned, and beaten, and probably died as a martyr in Rome, but nothing short of death deterred him from his new mission.

As described in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul tried to convince Jews that Jesus' birth, death, and Resurrection had been predicted by the Old Testament prophets. This was the Messiah they had been waiting for, and now, risen from death, he presided as the cosmic Christ, offering God's forgiveness and grace to those who repented and trusted in God rather than in themselves. Some Jews were converted to this belief, and the Jewish authorities repeatedly accused Paul of leading people away from Jewish law and tradition. There was a major difference between Jews and Christians over the central importance given to Jesus. It is possible that Jesus himself may not have claimed that he was the Messiah, and that it was Paul who developed this claim. To this day, Jews tend to feel that to put heavy emphasis on the person of Jesus takes attention away from Jesus' message and from God.

The New Testament writings reflect the criticisms of the early Christians against the large Jewish majority who did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. Opposition in Israel led to Christians spreading out to carry the gospel elsewhere, thus helping to expand their mission, but Christian animosity toward Jews lingered, to resurface in virulent forms from time to time.

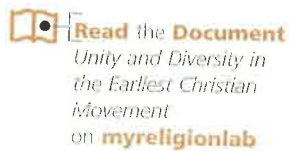
Paul also tried to sway Gentiles: worshipers of the old gods whose religion was in decline, supporters of the emperor as deity, ecstatic initiates of mystery cults, and followers of dualistic Greco-Roman philosophers who regarded

matter as evil and tried to emancipate the soul from its corrupting influence. He taught them that God did not reside in any idol but yet was not far from them, "For in him we live and move and have our being."<sup>51</sup> For Gentiles embracing Christianity, Paul and others argued that the Jewish tradition of circumcision should not be required of them. As Paul interpreted the gospel, salvation came by repentant faith in the grace of Christ, rather than by observance of a traditional law. In Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, he argued that even Abraham was **justified**, or accepted by God in spite of sin, because of his great faith in God rather than by his circumcision. Greco-Romans had idealized the male human body, with great athletic spectacles performed by nude men, so the necessity of altering the human form would have been a barrier to their acceptance of Paul's teachings. Shifting away from circumcision as a traditional requirement was a significant example of the enculturation of Christianity as it evolved in various contexts and began to distinguish itself from Judaism.

Christianity spread rapidly and soon became largely non-Jewish in membership. By 200 CE, it had spread throughout the Roman Empire and into Mesopotamia, despite fierce opposition. Many Christians were subjected to imprisonment, torture, and confiscation of property, because they rejected polytheistic beliefs, idols, and emperor worship in the Roman Empire. They were suspected of being revolutionaries, with their talk of a Messiah, and of

*Places visited by the apostle Paul during his far-reaching missionary journeys, 46–60 CE.*





strange cultic behaviors, such as their secret rituals of symbolically drinking Jesus' blood and eating his flesh. Persecution did not deter the most ardent of Christians; it united them intimately to the passion and death of Christ. In addition to martyrdom, many early Christians embraced a life of ascetic self-denial by fasting, wearing coarse clothes, renouncing sexuality, spending hours in prayer and contemplation, and serving others. They sought to be living sacrifices, giving up the pleasures of the material world for the sake of loving and serving God.

With the rise of Constantine to imperial rule early in the fourth century CE, opposition turned to the official embracing of Christianity. Constantine said that in 312 CE God showed him a vision of a cross to be used as a standard in battle. After he used it and won a major victory, he instituted tolerance of Christianity alongside the state cult, of which he was the chief priest. Just before his death, Constantine was baptized as a Christian.

By the end of the fourth century CE, people of other religions were stripped of all rights, and ordered into Christian churches to be baptized. Some paid outward service to Christianity but remained inwardly faithful to their old traditions. As Christianity became the favored religion, many converted for secular reasons.

By the end of the fifth century CE, Christianity was the faith claimed by the majority of people in the vast former Roman Empire. It also spread beyond the empire, from Ireland in the west to India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the east.

### Evolving organization and theology

During its phenomenal growth from persecuted sect to state religion throughout much of the ancient world, Christianity was developing organizationally and theologically. By the end of the first century CE, it had bureaucracies that carried on the rites of the Church and attempted to define mainstream Christianity, denigrating trends judged heretical.

One form that was judged to be outside the mainstream was Gnostic Christianity, which appeared as a movement in the second century CE. Gnosticism is based on the mystical perception of knowledge. The Nag Hammadi library found in Egypt presents Jesus as a great Gnostic teacher. His words are interpreted as the secret teachings given only to initiates. "He who is near to me is near to the fire," he says in the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>52</sup> The Gnostics held that only spiritually mature individuals could apprehend Jesus' real teaching: that the Kingdom of Heaven is a present reality experienced through personal realization of the Light.

When New Testament texts were translated into Latin in the fourth century, the Gnostic gospels were not included. Instead, the Church treated possession of Gnostic texts as a crime against Church law because the Christian faith community felt that Jesus had not taught an elitist view of salvation and had not discriminated against the material aspect of creation.

What became mainstream Christianity is based not only on the life and teachings of Jesus, as set forth in the gospels selected for the New Testament, but also on the ways that they have been interpreted over the centuries. One of the first and most important interpreters was Paul. His central contribution—which was as influential as the four gospels in shaping Christianity—was his interpretation of Jesus' death and Resurrection.

Paul spoke of agape—altruistic, self-giving love—as the center of Christian concern. He placed it above spiritual wisdom, asceticism, faith, and supernatural



"gifts of the Spirit," such as the ability to heal, prophecy, or spontaneously speak in unknown tongues. Love was applied not only to one's neighbors but also to one's relationship with the divine. It was love plus gnosis—knowledge of God, permeated with love—that became the basis of contemplative Christianity, as it was shaped by the "Fathers" of the first centuries.

*Let all that you do be done in love.*

*1 Corinthians 16:14*

The cross, with or without an image of Jesus crucified on it, became a central symbol of Christianity. It marked the path of suffering service, rather than political domination, as the way of conquering evil and experiencing union with a compassionate God. To participate in Jesus' sacrifice, people could repent of their sins, be baptized, and be reborn to new life in Christ.

The expectation of the coming of God's kingdom and final judgment of who would go to heaven and who to hell, so fervent in the earliest Christianity, began to wane as time went by and the anticipated events did not happen. The notion of the Kingdom of God began to shift to the indefinite future, with emphasis placed on a preliminary judgment at one's death. There was nevertheless the continuing expectation that Christ would return in glory to judge the living and the dead and bring to fulfillment the "new creation." This belief in the "Second Coming" of Christ is still a literal article of faith today for some Christians; others regard it as pointing to the certainty of God's coming rule of love and peace.

Reflecting on the life of Jesus and their experience of the risen Christ, Christians believed that the transcendent and invisible God had become immanent and visible in Jesus. This led to the early development of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which speaks of three equal "persons" within one divine being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is the one who sends the Son to become incarnate in Jesus with the mission to reveal God's love to the world. The Son or Word manifests God in the world in many ways, but the incarnation in Jesus is a culmination of that revelation. The Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost, who Jesus promises will be sent after his death, is the power and presence of God, actively guiding and sustaining the faithful.

Although Jesus had spoken in parables with several levels of meaning, the evolving Church found it necessary to articulate some of its beliefs more openly and systematically. A number of creeds, or professions of faith, were composed for use in religious instruction and baptism, to define who Jesus was and his relationship to God, and to provide clear stands in the face of various controversies. The emperor Constantine was particularly concerned to bring doctrinal unity among the Christian churches which he had legalized and whose beliefs he was promoting throughout his widespread empire. One major controversy concerned

*The Holy Trinity is a distinctively Christian view of God. God is One as a communal plurality, an endless circle sharing the love intrinsic to the Godhead, inviting all to be healed and saved by this love.*





the teachings of Arius, a leader of the congregation in Alexandria. The issue was the relationship between God and Jesus. The Christians worshiped Jesus, but at the same time came from monotheistic Jewish tradition, in which God alone is worshiped. Was Jesus therefore somehow the same as God? To Arius, God the Father pre-existed God the Son, whereas opponents of this belief insisted that the Son of God was equally eternal with God the Father.

Constantine convened a general council of the bishops of all area churches in Nicaea in 325 CE to settle this critical issue. Arius's beliefs were rejected at the Council of Nicaea and again at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. The **Nicene Creed**, as it is known today, is a compilation of the statements of faith from both of these councils (and is thus sometimes referred to as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed). It is still the basic profession of faith for many Christian denominations in both East and West, including all Orthodox churches, and has been proposed as a basis for unifying all Christians:

*We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and from the Son). With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

As we will see later, the small phrase "and from the Son" was added to the creed by the Western part of the Church in the early Middle Ages and became a major point of disagreement between the Western Church and the Eastern Christian churches, which did not add it.

**Christology**—the attempt to define the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God—received further official clarification during the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This council issued a statement that allows considerable leeway in Christological interpretations by declaring that Jesus is of "two natures"—perfectly divine and also perfectly human.

## Early monasticism

Alongside the development of doctrine and the consolidation of Church structure, another trend was developing. Some Christians were turning away from the world to live in solitary communion with God, as ascetics. There had been a certain amount of asceticism in Paul's writings. He himself was celibate, as he believed that avoiding family entanglements helped one to concentrate on the Lord.

By the fourth century CE, Christian monks—and apparently also some remarkable ascetic women referred to as *ammās* (mothers)—were living

simply in caves in the Egyptian desert with little regard for the things of the world. They had no central organization but tended to learn from the examples of other ascetics. Avoiding emphasis on the supernatural powers that often accompany the ascetic life, they told stories demonstrating the virtues they valued, such as submission, sharing of food, and humility. For example, an earnest young man was said to have visited one of the desert fathers and asked how he was faring. The old man sighed and said, "Very badly, my child." Asked why, he said, "I have been here forty years doing nothing other than cursing my own self each day, inasmuch as in the prayers I offer, I say to God, 'Accursed are those who deviate from Your commandments.'"<sup>53</sup> The young seeker was moved by such humility and made it his model.

The desert fathers and mothers were left to their own devices at first. In Christian humility, they avoided judging or trying to teach each other and attempted to be, at best, harmless. But by the fifth century CE, the monastic life shifted from solitary, unguided practice to formal spiritual supervision. Group monasteries and structures for encouraging obedience to God through an abbot or abbess were set up, and rules devised to help monks persevere in their calling. The Rule of St. Benedict became a model for all later monastic orders in the West, with its emphasis on poverty, chastity, and obedience to the abbot, and its insistence that each monastery be economically self-sufficient through the labor of the monastics. The Benedictines have been famous over the centuries for their practice of hospitality to pilgrims and travelers, and are today active participants in inter-religious monastic dialogue.

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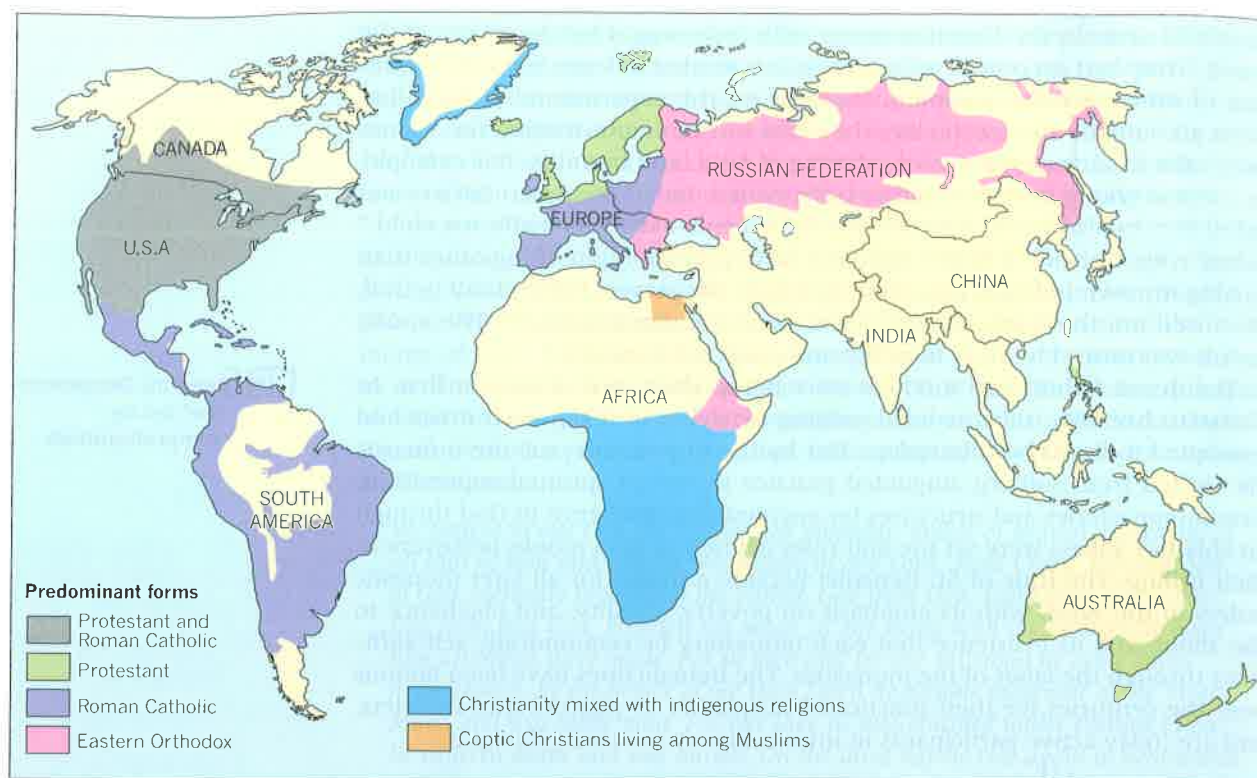
*The carefree man, who has tested the sweetness of having no personal possessions, feels that even the cassock which he wears and the jug of water in his cell are a useless burden, because these things, too, sometimes distract his mind.*

*A Desert Father<sup>54</sup>*

## Church administration

During the late first and early second centuries CE, some men and women had followed a charismatic Christian life, leaving home to preach, baptize, prophesy, and perhaps die as martyrs; others had moved toward an institutionalized patriarchal Church. By the beginning of the second century CE, a consolidation of spiritual power had begun with the designation of specific people to serve as clergy and bishops (superintendents) to administer the Church affairs of each city or region. While some women served as deacons ministering to women, the clergy and bishops had to be male, with wife and children. The bishops of the chief cities of the Roman Empire had the greatest responsibilities and authority, with the greatest prestige being held by the Bishop of Rome, eventually known as the **pope**.

Politically, late in the third century CE, the Roman Empire had been divided into two: an eastern section and a western section. In the fourth century CE, Constantine established a second imperial seat in the east, in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey). It was considered a "second Rome," especially after the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 CE. The two halves of the Christian world grew apart from each other, divided by language (Latin in the west, Greek in the east), culture, and religious differences.



*Map showing the approximate distribution of Christians in the world today.*

In terms of religious organization, the Christian world was divided into a number of sees. The five major sees were those of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. While religious power in the west became more and more centralized in the Roman pope, the eastern sees had no equivalent centralization, nor did they recognize the Roman pope's claim to universal authority over the Church.

By the fifth century CE, Pope Leo I argued that all popes were apostolic successors to Peter, the "rock" on which Jesus in Matthew's gospel said he would found his Church. The Roman emperor passed an edict that all Christians were to recognize the authority of the Bishop of Rome.

The strongest of Church administrators during these early centuries was Gregory I ("the Great"), who died in 604 CE. Wealthy by birth but ascetic by choice, he devoted his personal fortune to founding monasteries and feeding the poor. At a time of pestilence, floods, and military invasions, he promoted the discipline of the clergy, including the Western ideal that priests should be celibate in order to concentrate on piety and ministry without family obligations. He revamped the liturgy (Gregorian chanting is named after him), and re-established the Church as a decent, just institution carrying high spiritual values.

Pope Gregory also sent missionaries to convert England to Christianity. They were ultimately successful in gradually turning the people from worship of indigenous deities to worship of Jesus and the saints of the Church, partly because of the royal protection the missionaries and converts won and partly because rather than destroying the old religious shrines, Gregory instructed the missionaries to replace the old idols with relics of martyrs and saints, which they carried to England. Worship of goddesses of the area was thus



deflected to devotion to holy women from far away, whose deep spirituality was thought to be so strong that it was present in their relics.

The papacy began to wield tremendous secular power in the west. Beginning in the eighth century, the approval of the papacy was sought as conferring divine sanction on feudal kings. In the ninth century the Church produced documents old and new believed to legitimate the hierarchical authority of the papacy over the Church, and the Church over society, as the proper means of transmitting inspiration from the divine to humanity. Those who disagreed could be threatened with **excommunication**. This exclusion from participation in the sacraments was a dread ban, cutting a person off from the redemption of the Church (blocking one's entrance to heaven in the afterlife), as well as from the benefits of the Church's secular power.

Late in the eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII set forth unprecedented claims for the papacy. The pope, he asserted, was divinely appointed and therefore could be ruled by no human. The pope had the right to depose emperors; the princes of the world should kiss his feet.

### East-West division

The eastern part of Christendom did not accept the absolute claims of the papacy. By the early Middle Ages, there were also doctrinal disagreements. In its version of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, for example, the Western Church added the *filioque*, a formula professing that the Holy Spirit came from the Father *"and from the Son"*; the Eastern Church retained what is considered the more original text, professing that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father.

In 1054, leaders of the eastern and western factions excommunicated each other over the disagreement about the Holy Spirit, the papal claim, and whether the eucharistic bread should be leavened or unleavened. To the Eastern Church, the last straw was its treatment by crusaders.

From 1095 to about 1290, loosely organized waves of Christians poured out of Europe in what were presented as *"Holy crusades"* to recapture the holy land of Palestine from Muslims, and in general to wipe out the enemies of Christianity. When crusaders entered Constantinople in 1204, they destroyed the altar and sacred icons in Hagia Sophia, the awesome Church of the Holy Wisdom, and placed prostitutes on the throne reserved for the patriarch. Horrified by such profanity, the Orthodox Church ended its dialogue with Rome and proceeded on its own path, claiming to be the true descendant of the apostolic Church. Despite periodic attempts at reconciliation the Eastern and Western Churches are still separate.

The Eastern Church itself also became divided over doctrinal and political issues at the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. Bishops who refused to accept the dogma established by the council that Jesus is of two natures—one divine and

*After Jerusalem fell in 1077 to Turkish forces, who then denied Christian pilgrims access to the city, Western popes launched a series of crusades to recover what Christians considered their holy land, where Jesus had walked. These military expeditions were considered holy missions, and crusaders carried the cross and the Bible.*



*Priests chant and beat drums in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of St. George, carved out of rock in Lalibela, Ethiopia, in the 12th century.*



one human—were declared to be “out of communion” with the bishops both of Rome and of Constantinople, and were thus excommunicated. These Non-Chalcedonian Churches or Oriental Orthodox Churches remain distinct from the Eastern Orthodox Church in general. They include Syriac Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Eritrean Orthodox, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (India), and Armenian Apostolic Churches. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the largest of these.

### Social chaos and the papacy

In the Western Church, centralization of power under the pope became a major unifying element in the Europe of the Middle Ages. Kingdoms broke up between 800 and 1100 as Vikings invaded from the north and Magyars from the east, and feudal lords waged war against each other. In the midst of the ensuing chaos, people looked to the pope as an orderly wielder of power.

Church and states were at times locked in a mutual struggle for dominance, with popes alternately supporting, dominating, and being deposed by secular rulers. The power of the papacy was also somewhat limited by the requirement that the pope be elected by a council of cardinals. The position could not become hereditary. But it was nonetheless open to intrigue, scandal, and power-mongering.

The thirteenth century saw the power of the papacy placed behind the **Inquisition**, an ecclesiastical court set up during the 1230s to investigate and suppress heresy. This court was based on the concept that heretics should be controlled for the sake of their own eternal salvation. But whereas the highly influential fifth-century theologian Augustine had seen fines and imprisonment as reasonable coercion to help people change their minds, in some cases the medieval inquisitors had them tortured and burned to deter others from dangerous views. For example, in northern Italy and southern France a sect arose that was later called Cathari (the pure), for its members lived ascetically, emphasizing poverty and mutual aid. Though similar to established

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Christianity in organization and worship, the movement denied that Jesus was the incarnation of God, and saw spirit as good but matter as bad. Such beliefs were proclaimed heretical by the papacy; the Cathars, attacked by the Inquisition, disappeared.

Though strong, the papacy was often embroiled in its own political strife. During the fourteenth century, the popes left their traditional seat in turbulent Rome for the more peaceful climate of Avignon, France. There they built up an elaborate administrative structure, increasingly involved in worldly affairs. After the papacy was persuaded to return to Rome, a would-be reformer, Pope Urban VI, got so embroiled in power politics that at one point he had five cardinals tortured and killed. In the Great Western Schism that followed, starting in 1378, several rival lines of "anti-popes" began, including one sitting in Avignon, creating divisions that lasted for decades.

## Intellectual revival and monasticism

Although the papacy was subject to abuses, mirrored on a lesser scale by the clergy, Christian spirituality was vigorously revived in other quarters of medieval society. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries great universities developed in Europe, often from cathedral schools. Theology was considered the greatest of the sciences, with Church ideals permeating the study of all areas of life. Soaring Gothic cathedrals were built to uplift the soul to heavenly heights, for God was perceived as being enthroned in the heavens, far above the workaday world.

The yearning for spiritual purity was particularly pronounced in monasticism. It was largely through monks and nuns that Christian spirituality survived and spread. Monasteries also became bulwarks of Western civilization. In Ireland, particularly, they were the centers of larger communities of laypeople and places of learning within illiterate warring societies.

During the twelfth century many new monastic orders appeared in the midst of a massive popular reinvigoration of spiritual activity. A major influence was a community in Cluny, France. Its monks specialized in liturgical elaborations and prayer, leaving agricultural work to serfs. An alternative direction was taken by the Cistercians, Gregorians, and Carthusians. They returned to St. Benedict's rule of combining manual work and prayer; "to labor is to pray," said the monks. The Carthusians lived cloistered lives as hermits, meeting each other only for worship and business matters. Despite such austere practices, people of all classes flocked to monastic life as a pious refuge from decadent society.

*It is not only prayer that gives God glory but work. ... He is so great that all things give Him glory if you mean they should.*

*Gerard Manley Hopkins<sup>55</sup>*

In contrast to monks and nuns living cloistered lives, mendicant friars, or brothers, worked among the people. In 1215, the Dominican Order was instituted primarily to teach the faith and refute heresies. A famous Dominican scholar, Thomas Aquinas, created a monumental work, *Summa Theologiae*, in which rational sciences and spiritual revelations were joined in an immense,





*In memory of St. Francis, many churches, such as this one in Miami Beach, Florida, now hold ceremonies in which congregants bring all kinds of animals to be blessed.*

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consistent theological system. Aquinas was much influenced by the recovery of the classical writings of Aristotle that had been preserved by Muslims and returned to Europe through Spain.

Franciscans, following the lead of the beloved St. Francis of Assisi (see below), wandered about without personal property or established buildings, telling people about God's love and accepting charity for their meager needs. The mendicant Dominicans and Franciscans, still noted as missionaries today, became one of the major features of medieval Christianity.

In addition to organized orders of nuns, there was a grassroots movement among thirteenth-century German and Flemish women to take private vows of chastity and simplicity. These women, who were called "beguines," lived frugally by their own work. Because they were not organized into a religious order, they chose their own lifestyles, intending simply to live "religiously." At times persecuted because it did not fit into any traditionally sanctioned pattern, the movement persisted, drawing tens of thousands of women. Eventually they built small convents for themselves; by the end of the fourteenth century, there were 169 beguine convents in Cologne, the heart of the movement.

## Medieval mysticism

Mysticism also flowered during the Middle Ages, renewing the spiritual heart of the Church. Especially in cloistered settings, monks and nuns sat in contemplation of the meanings of the scriptures for the soul. Biblical stories of battles between heroes and their enemies were, for instance, interpreted as the struggle between the soul and one's baser desires. Beyond this rational thought, some engaged in quiet nonconceptual prayer, simply resting receptively in the presence of God.

One remarkable mystic was the German abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). Founder of two monasteries on the Rhine, from a young age she experienced frequent visions, which she recorded in several books of revelations. She wrote treatises on medical and scientific matters as well as much fine spiritual poetry, and achieved considerable fame as a composer. Corresponding with popes, emperors, and kings, she remained privately devoted to mystical thought and to prophecy.

In thirteenth-century Italy, there was the endearing figure of St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). The carefree, dashing son of a merchant, he underwent a radical spiritual transformation. He traded his fine clothes for simple garb and "left the world"<sup>56</sup> for a life of total poverty, caring for lepers and rebuilding dilapidated churches, since in a vision Jesus spoke to him from the cross, saying: "Repair my Church." Eventually Francis understood that his real mission was to rebuild the Church by re-emphasizing the gospel and its commands of love and poverty. A band of brothers, and then of sisters led by the saintly Clare, gathered around him. The friars preached, worked, begged, tended lepers, and lived a simple life of penance and prayer while wandering from town to town. This ascetic life was permeated with mystical joy, one of

St. Francis's hallmarks. He was also known for his rapport with wild animals and is often pictured with birds resting lovingly on his shoulders. Two years before his death, Francis received the "stigmata," replicas on his own body of the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. This miracle was interpreted as a sign of the saint's union with Christ by suffering, prayer, holiness, and love.

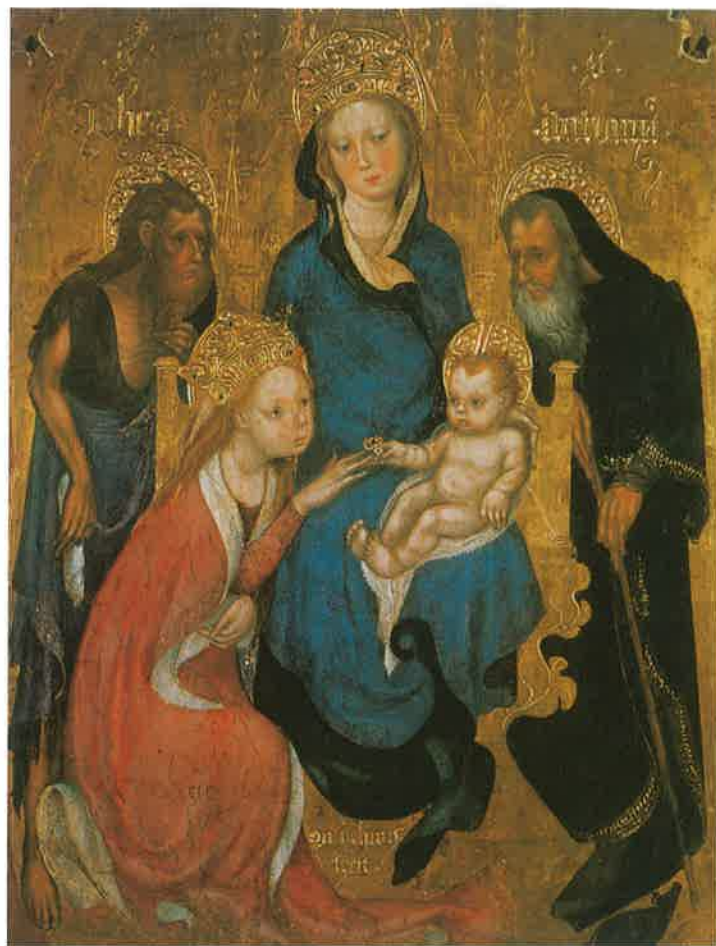
An anonymous fourteenth-century English writer contributed a volume entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Christianity then and now largely follows what is called the affirmative way, with art, liturgy, scriptures, and imagery to aid devotion. But the author of *The Cloud* spoke to those who were prepared to undertake the negative way of abiding in sheer love for God, with no thoughts. God cannot be known through ideas or physical images; "a naked intent toward God, a desire for him alone, is enough."<sup>57</sup> In the silence of wordless prayer, the light of God may pierce the cloud of human unknowing that obscures the divine from the seeker.

Fourteenth-century Italy witnessed a period of unprecedented degradation among the clergy, while the papacy occupied itself with organizational matters in Avignon. In this spiritual vacuum, laypeople gathered around saintly individuals to imbibe their atmosphere of genuine devotion. One of the most celebrated of these was the young Catherine of Siena. In her persistent efforts to restore spiritual purity and religious discipline to the Church, she gained the ear of Pope Gregory XI, helping to convince him to return to Rome. She was called "mother of thousands of souls," and people were said to be converted just by seeing her face.

## The Protestant Reformation

Despite the genuine piety of individuals within the Catholic Church, some who clashed with its authority claimed that those in power seemed often to have lost touch with their own spiritual tradition. With the rise of literacy and printing in the late fifteenth century, many Christians were rediscovering early Christianity and comparing it unfavorably with what the Roman Catholic Church had made of it. Roman Catholic fundraising or church-building financial activities were particularly criticized. These included **indulgences** (remission of the punishment for sin by the clergy in return for services or payments), the sale of relics, purchases of masses for the dead, spiritual pilgrimages, and the earning of spiritual "merit" by donating to the Church.

Salient among the reformists was Martin Luther (1483–1546). Luther was a



*The young Catherine of Siena, "mother of thousands of souls," had a vision in which Christ, in the company of the Virgin Mary and other saints, gave her a wedding ring, the sign of the mystical marriage.*



## RELIGION IN PRACTICE

## Russian Orthodox Kenoticism

A great mystical spiritual tradition emerged on Russian soil. The kenotic pattern of loving and world-directed monastic work was set by the eleventh-century saint Theodosius, who attempted to imitate the poverty and self-sacrificing humility of Jesus. He ate nothing but dry bread and herbs, spent his nights in prayer and his days in work. He dressed in the rough clothes of a peasant, patiently bore insults, worked with his own hands—chopping wood, spinning thread, baking bread, comforting the sick—and refused to present himself as an authority, even though he became the revered leader of this monastic community.

It is recorded that once, after Theodosius had visited a distant prince, the prince sent his own coach to take the saint home in comfort. The coachman, seeing Theodosius's crude clothing, assumed he was a beggar, and asked him to mount the horse so that the coachman could sleep. The saint humbly did so and thus drove the coach all night, with the coachman sleeping inside. When St. Theodosius became too sleepy to drive, he

dismounted and walked; when he became weary of walking, he rode again. As the morning sun rose, the noblemen of his area recognized him, dismounted, and bowed to him, whereupon the saint gently said to the coachman, "My child, it is light. Mount your horse." The coachman was amazed and terrified as he saw the great reverence paid to the saint as they proceeded. Rather than chastizing him, Theodosius led him by the hand to the refectory, ordered that he should be given all the food and drink that he wanted, and paid him for the journey.

In the thirteenth century, Russia suffered from Mongolian invasions. Even though the Tartar Mongol khans nominally protected the Christians' freedom of religious practice when they themselves adopted Islam, spiritual and social life were in disarray. Monasticism shifted from urban settlements to the wilderness of the great forests of northern Russia. Hermit monks lived there in silence and solitary prayer until so many of the faithful gathered that thriving communities developed around them.

One of the most celebrated of the forest monks was St. Sergius. As a boy, Sergius retreated to the forest and built a small chapel for his intense devotions. Despite his noble lineage, he dressed like a peasant and did manual work. Even when he was abbot of the community that grew up around him, he was asked by one of his monks to build a cell, for which labor he was given a bit of moldy bread. In his contemplations, Sergius was said to be graced with visions of Mary, Mother of Christ, and of angels, fire, and light. He was nonetheless socially engaged with the national effort to resist foreign rule, and his blessing of the first victorious battle of Russians against Tartars set the precedent for the future close links between church and state in Russia. The relics of St. Sergius's body still lie undecayed in the huge and ornate Holy Trinity Lavra near Moscow, in Zagorsk where once he had built his simple chapel. Among his followers were seventy famous saints of Russia.



*St. Sergius and the bear.*



monk, priest, and Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Wittenberg. He struggled personally with the question of how one could ever do enough good to merit eternal salvation. Luther was also disturbed by the moral corruption of his parishioners from the selling of indulgences, through which people could gain the merit accumulated in the church to decrease time in **Purgatory** (the intermediate place of purifying suffering for those who died in a state of grace but who were not yet sufficiently stainless to enter heaven). The Castle Church at Wittenberg housed an immense collection of relics, including what were believed to be hairs from the Virgin Mary and a thorn from the "crown" of thorns placed on Jesus' head before he was crucified. This relic collection was deemed so powerful that those who viewed them on the proper day and contributed sufficiently to the Church could receive indulgences from the pope freeing themselves or their loved ones from almost two million years in Purgatory.

By intense study of the Bible, Luther began to emphasize a different approach. Both Paul and Augustine could be interpreted as saying that God, through Jesus, offered salvation to sinners in spite of their sins. This salvation was offered by God's grace alone and received solely by repentant faith. The good works and created graces prescribed by Catholics to earn merit in heaven were not part of original Christianity, Luther argued. Salvation from sin comes from faith in God, which itself comes from God, by grace. This gift of faith brings justification (being found righteous in God's sight) and then flowers as unselfish good works, which characterize the true Christian:

*From faith flows love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. ... As our heavenly father has in Christ freely come to our help, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each should become as it were a Christ to the other.<sup>38</sup>*

In 1517 Luther invited the university community to debate this issue with him, by the established custom of nailing his theses to the door of the church. He apparently had no intention of splitting with the Church. Nevertheless, he refused to recant passages from his theses when threatened with excommunication. He was thence excommunicated by a papal bull (decree) in 1521.

Luther's evolving theology took him farther and farther from the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church. He did not think that the Bible supported the Catholic teaching on the importance of pope, bishops, priests, and monks to mediate between God and laypeople. Instead, he emphasized that there is "a priesthood of all believers." He also felt that the sacred rites, or **sacraments**, of the Church were ways of nourishing faith instituted by Jesus and that they included only **baptism** and the **Eucharist** (also known as the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, or Mass).

Another major reformer who eventually broke with Rome was the Swiss priest Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531). He rejected practices not mentioned in the Bible, such as abstaining from meat during Lent, veneration of relics and saints, religious pilgrimages, and celibacy for monks and priests. Zwingli asserted that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated only as a memorial of Jesus' sacrifice; he did not believe in the mysterious presence of Jesus' blood and body in the consecrated wine and bread. He even questioned the spiritual efficacy of rituals such as masses for the dead and confession of one's sins to a priest:



*Martin Luther's political influence and prolific writings led to a deep split in the Western Church, severing Protestant reformers from the Roman Catholic Church. (Lucas Cranach the Elder; Martin Luther, 1533.)*

*It is God alone who remits sins and puts the heart at rest, so to Him alone ought we to ascribe the healing of our wounds, to Him alone display them to be healed."*

The ideals of these reformists were adopted by many Christians. The freedom of scriptural interpretation opened numerous options. Protestantism, as the new branch of Christianity came to be called, was never as monolithic as the Roman Catholic Church had been. Reform movements branched out in many directions, leading over time to a great proliferation of Protestant **denominations** (organized groups of congregations).

A major seat of Protestantism developed in Geneva, under John Calvin (1509–1564). He shared the reform principles of salvation by faith alone, the exclusive authority of the Bible, and "the priesthood of all believers." But Calvin carried the doctrine of salvation by faith to a new conclusion. To him, the appropriate response to God is a zealous piety and awe-struck reverence in which one "dreads to offend him more than to die."<sup>60</sup> Human actions are of no eternal significance because God has already decided the destiny of each person. By grace, some are to be saved; for God's own reasons, others are predestined to be damned eternally.

Although only God absolutely knew who was saved, there are three signs which humans could recognize: profession of faith, an upright life, and participation in the sacraments. Calvin felt that the Church has the right to chastise and, in some extreme situations, excommunicate those who seemed to violate the sanctity of the Church. Calvin envisioned a holy commonwealth in which the Church, government, and citizens all cooperate to create a society dedicated to the glory and mission of God.

Calvin's version of Christianity made its followers feel that they should fear no one except God, so they were impervious to worldly obstacles to the spread of their faith. **Calvinism** became the state religion of Scotland and also had a following in England.

Concurrently, the Church of England separated from the Church of Rome when Henry VIII declared the English Church's independence from the Church of Rome. His daughter Elizabeth I finalized the breach with Rome in 1559. Now called **Anglicanism**, this form of Christianity is in communion with Old Catholics and also shares some similarities with the Protestant churches, but it is now generally considered a separate, independent Church. The Anglican Church retains many of the Roman Catholic rituals but rejects the authority of the Roman Catholic pope (referring instead to its Archbishop of Canterbury as its spiritual leader) and allows priests to marry. One of its thirty-seven autonomous churches is the Episcopal Church in the United States, a name referring to its being a Church with bishops.

Another offshoot of the Church of England is Methodism. It originated with the evangelist John Wesley (1703–1791), who emphasized personal holiness and methodical devotions. He traveled an average of 8,000 miles a year by horseback to urgently call people to wake up to a life of repentance and faith in Jesus' intercession:

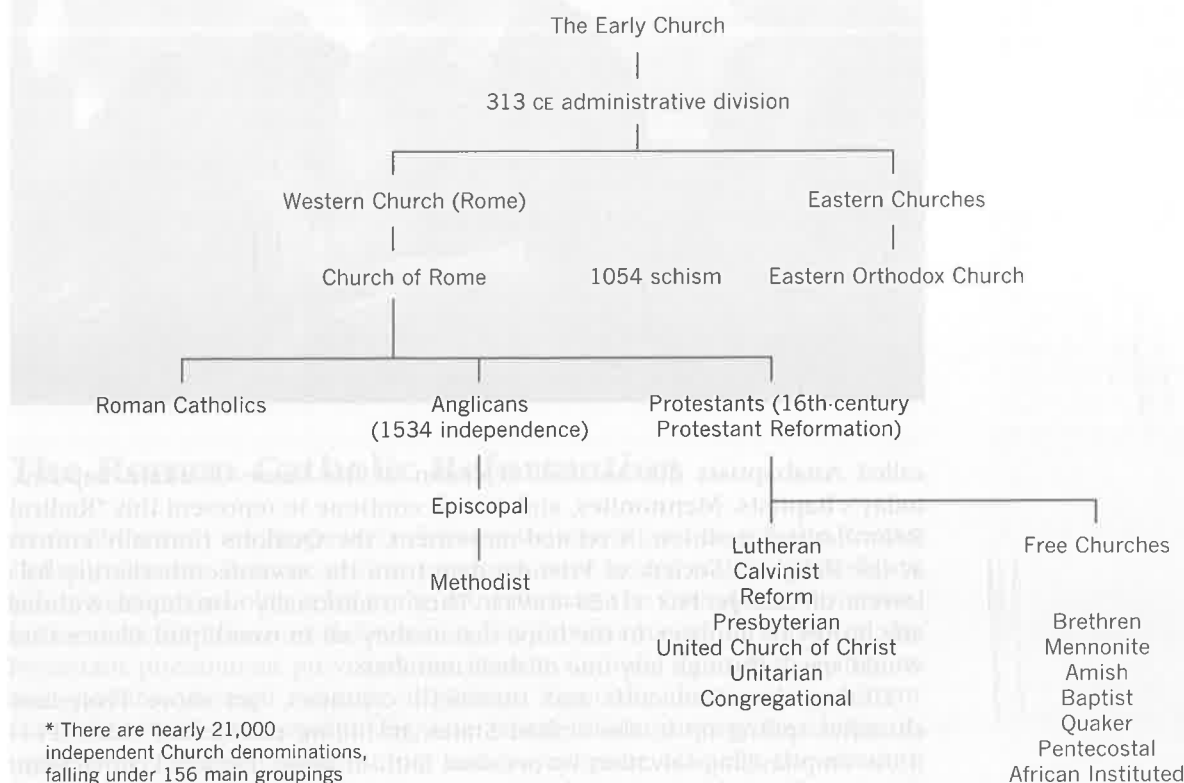
*Repentance frequently means an inward change, a change of mind from sin to holiness. But we now speak of it in a quite different sense, as it is one kind of self-knowledge, the knowing ourselves sinners, yea, guilty, helpless sinners, even though we know we are children of God. ... "I sin in every breath I draw, Nor do Thy will, nor keep Thy law on earth, as angels do above: But still the fountain open stands, Washes my feet, my heart, my hands, Till I am perfected in love."*<sup>61</sup>

 **View the Map**  
Religious Divisions  
of Europe c.1555  
on **myreligionlab**

*John Wesley, founder of Methodism, rode thousands of miles every year on horseback as an evangelist.*



## Major Divisions of Christianity Today\*



Martin Luther's reformation of the German Church led directly to present-day **Lutheranism**. It maintains a strong emphasis on liturgy and sacraments and is currently practiced mostly in Germany, Scandinavia, the Baltics, and the northeastern United States. As the Protestant Reformation progressed, political entities in Europe chose specific forms of Christianity as their official religions. Spain, France, and Italy remained largely Roman Catholic. Northern Germany was largely Lutheran.

The two major Reformed Churches that sprang from Calvinism were the Scottish movement called **Presbyterianism** (in which the congregations are ruled by presbyters, or elders, including ministerial elders, and councils of elders chosen from the affiliated congregations) and **Congregationalism** (which emphasizes the independence of each local church and the "priesthood" of all members). In Poland, Transylvania, England, and then North America, forms of **Unitarianism** developed, in which original sin, the Trinity, and Jesus' divinity are rejected in favor of a simple theism and imitation of Jesus.

Some major reformers rejected government endorsement of religion and insisted on the importance of adult commitment to Christianity. Often



*Quaker meeting in  
Leeds, England.*



called **Anabaptists** due to their rejection of the value of infant baptism, today's **Baptists**, **Mennonites**, and **Amish** continue to represent this "Radical Reformation" tradition. A related movement, the **Quakers** (formally known as the Religious Society of Friends) date from the seventeenth-century followers of George Fox (1624–1691). They traditionally worshiped without any liturgy or minister, in the hope that as they sat in worshipful silence God would speak through any one of their members.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet more Protestant churches sprang up in the United States, including evangelical churches—those emphasizing salvation by personal faith in Jesus, personal conversion, the importance of the Bible, and preaching instead of ritual. **Seventh-day Adventists** believe that the Second Coming of Christ will soon occur, and they regard the Bible as an absolute guide to faith and spiritual practice in anticipation of his return. **Jehovah's Witnesses** criticize other Christian Churches as having developed false doctrines from the second century onward, and they urge people to leave these "false religions" and prepare for a coming time when all who do not hold true belief will be destroyed.

Protestant missionary societies and evangelists were also active in carrying the gospel to Asia and Africa, where many independent denominations have evolved, and to South America, where Protestant groups are gaining strongholds in areas that had formerly been largely Roman Catholic since the Spanish conquests of these countries. This multiculturalism and contemporary evangelism will be examined in detail at the end of this chapter.

Despite the great diversity among Protestant denominations, most share several characteristics that distinguish them somewhat from Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, though the Catholic Church's positions are now much closer to those of Protestants as a result of the profound changes introduced in 1962 by the Second Vatican Council. Both take the Bible as their foundation, but differ on how it is to be interpreted. Protestants tend to follow Martin Luther in believing that the individual's conscience and reason are the ultimate guides to understanding the scripture. This is in contrast to Roman Catholics who assert the authority of Church tradition and the infallibility of

the Vatican's pronouncements about essentials of the faith. A second point that has divided Protestants and Roman Catholics is the Protestant belief that we can achieve salvation only by God's grace, through repentance and faith; Roman Catholics support the doctrine of salvation by God's grace, received through repentance, faith, and good works. A third divisive issue is that of spiritual authority. Protestantism asserts the "priesthood of all believers" and the individual's direct relationship to God and Jesus, in contrast to Roman Catholicism, which stands on mediation of God's grace through the officials of the Church. The officials themselves differ in many respects, such as the provision that Protestant ministers can be married, unlike Catholic priests, who are expected to remain celibate in the belief that restraint of physical desires enhances spirituality. Fourth, some Protestants have radically redefined the Roman Catholic and Orthodox concept of sacraments; Zwingli, for example, insisted that the only holy sacraments are those instituted by Jesus and regarded even those as instructive or commemorative rather than as mystical vehicles for God's grace. The sacraments and their meanings for Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox believers will be examined in depth later in this chapter.


## The Roman Catholic Reformation

As the Protestant reformers were defining their positions, so was the Roman Catholic Church. Because reform pressures were under way in Catholicism before Luther, Catholics refer to the movement as the Catholic Reformation, rather than the "Counter-Reformation," as Protestants call it. However, the Protestant phenomena provoked the Roman Catholic Church to clarify its own position through councils of bishops, especially the Council of Trent (1545–1563). It attempted to legislate moral reform among the clergy, to tighten the Church administration, and to recognize officially the absolute authority of the pope as the earthly vicar of God and Jesus Christ. The council also took historic stands on a number of issues, emphasizing that its positions were **dogmas**, or authoritative truths.

The Council of Trent reiterated that salvation requires "good works" as well as faith. These works include acts of mercy, veneration of the saints, relics, and sacred images, and participation in the sacraments. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Council reiterated the doctrine of **transubstantiation**: what appear to be ordinary bread and wine are mysteriously transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

In addition to the actions of the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church gradually chose popes who were more virtuous than some in the past, and several new monastic orders grew out of the desires for reform. The Jesuits offered themselves as an army for God at the service of the pope. The Society of Jesus, as the order was formally called, was begun by Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) in the sixteenth century. His *Spiritual Exercises* is still regarded as an excellent guide to meditation and spiritual discernment. However, it was as activists and educators in the everyday world that Jesuits were highly influential in the Reformation, and they were among the first to carry Roman Catholicism to Asia.

Roman Catholicism was also carried to the Western hemisphere and the Philippines by Spanish conquistadores. At home, Spain was host to a number of outstanding mystics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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Another Theresa, St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), the “Little Flower,” lived as a cloistered Carmelite nun for ten years of her short life. Her journal is full of small, secret sacrifices. Published posthumously as *Story of a Soul*, it brought so much fame to this “little one” that she was soon declared a saint.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), a Carmelite nun, became at mid-life a dynamo of spiritual activity, in an order of ascetic discalced (barefooted) Carmelite nuns and monks. The order continues its deep spiritual practices today, with two hours of silent prayer daily as well as observance of the full Liturgy of the Hours—daily prayer services of hymns and scriptural readings that punctuate the day and night. Despite her organizational activity, St. Teresa was able to maintain a calm sense of deep inner communion with God. In her masterpiece entitled *The Interior Castle*, she described the state of “spiritual marriage”:

*Here it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or a spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens.*<sup>62</sup>

St. Teresa’s great influence fell onto a young friend, now known as St. John of the Cross. He became a member of one of the Carmelite houses for men; when imprisoned by other Carmelites who opposed the reforms, he experienced visions and wrote profound spiritual poetry. For John, the most important step for the soul longing to be filled with God is to surrender all vestiges of the self. This state he called the “dark night of the soul,” a relinquishing of human reasoning into a state of not-knowing into which the pure light of God may enter without resistance. He is still considered one of the great masters of the spiritual life.

## Liberal trends

Major potential threats to Christianity arose during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe. Intellectual circles exalted human reason and on this basis rejected faith in biblical miracles and revelations. As discussed in Chapter 1, some people felt that nineteenth-century scientific advances undermined the biblical story of the creation of the world. However, many nineteenth-century scientists were devout Christians who viewed the truth of science as supporting the truth of faith. There emerged two opposing trends: a liberal one, trying to join faith with modern knowledge, and a conservative one, emphasizing the conflict between faith and science.

Undaunted, and in some cases invigorated, by rationalist challenges to traditional faith, Protestantism developed a strong missionary spirit, joining Roman Catholic efforts to spread Christianity to every country, along with colonialism. As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had explained:

*I looked upon all the world as my parish; ... that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.*<sup>63</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestant Churches came to the forefront of efforts at social and moral reform. Women, long excluded from important positions in the Church, played major roles in Church-related missionary and reform efforts, such as the abolition of slavery; they cited certain biblical passages as supporting equality of the sexes. When Sarah Grimke (1792–1873) and other women were criticized by their Congregational Church for speaking publicly against slavery, Grimke asserted, “All I ask of my brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God has designed us to occupy.”<sup>64</sup>



Liberal trends in Protestant theology led to efforts to analyze the Bible as literature. What, for instance, were the earliest texts? Who wrote them? How did they relate to each other? Who was the historical Jesus? Such questions were unthinkable in earlier generations. However, now in New Testament scholarship there is also an interest in studying the texts as they are, receiving them as a whole, and not only analyzing them in parts.

## The Second Vatican Council

In the meantime, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches had continued to defend tradition against the changes of modern life. A general council of the Roman Catholic hierarchs was held in 1869–1870. It found itself embroiled chiefly in the question of papal infallibility, a doctrine it ultimately upheld. The pope, proclaimed the bishops of the council, can never err when he speaks from the seat of his authority (*ex cathedra*), on matters of faith and morals.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII, known for his holiness and friendliness, convened the Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II) for the express purposes of updating and energizing the Church and making it serve the people better as a living force in the modern world rather than being an old, embattled citadel. When questioned about his intentions, he demonstrated them by opening a window to let in fresh air. With progressives and traditionalists often at odds, the majority nevertheless voted for major shifts in the Church's mission.

Many of the changes involved the liturgy of the mass, or the Eucharist. Rather than celebrate it in Latin, which most people did not understand, the liturgy was to be translated into the local languages. Rites were to be simplified. Greater use of sacred music was encouraged, and not just formal, traditional organ and choir offerings.

For the first time in centuries the laity were to be invited to participate actively. After Vatican II thus unleashed creativity and simplicity in public worship, entirely new forms appeared, such as informal folk masses—with spiritual folk songs sung to guitar accompaniment.

Another major change was the new emphasis on **ecumenism**, in the sense of rapprochement among all branches of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church acknowledged that the Holy Spirit is active in all Christian Churches, including Protestant denominations and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. It pressed for a restoration of unity among all Christians, proclaiming that each could preserve its traditions intact. It also extended the concept of revelation, increasing the hope of dialogue with Jews, with whom Christians share "spiritual patrimony,"<sup>65</sup> and with Muslims, upon whom the Church "looks with esteem," for they "adore one God" and honor Jesus as a prophet. Appreciative mention was also made of other world religions as ways of approaching the same One whom Christians call God.

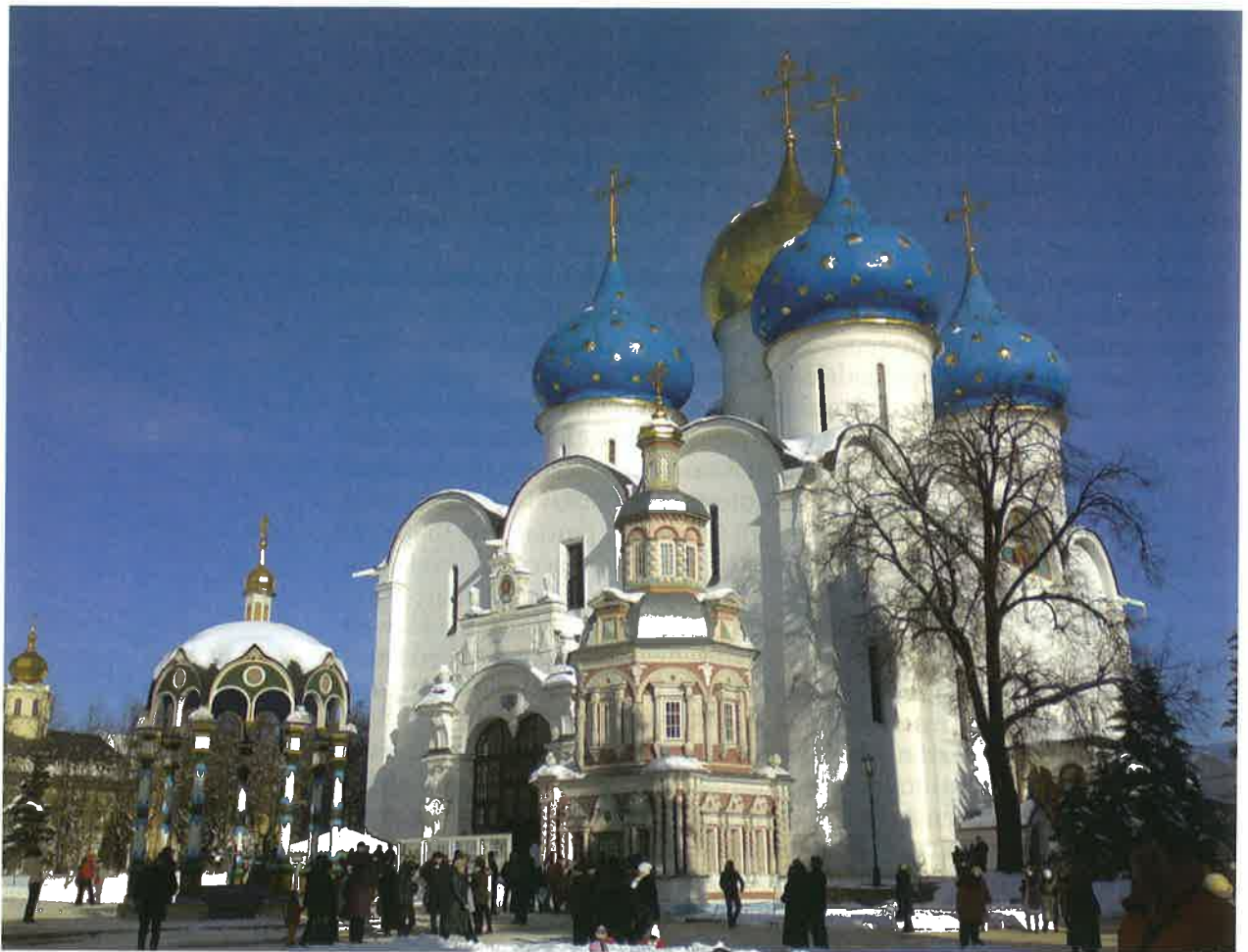
Vatican II clearly marked major new directions in Catholicism. Its relatively liberal, pacifist characteristics are still meeting with some opposition within the Church decades later. In the late twentieth century, conservative elements in the Vatican began to reverse the direction taken by Vatican II to some extent, to the dismay of liberal Catholics. In the final section of this chapter, concerning current trends in Christianity, we will note several ways in which the renewed conservatism in the Vatican is being expressed.

## The Orthodox world today

After its 1054 split with the Western Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church had spread throughout the Slavic and eastern Mediterranean countries. After the Muslim Ottoman Turks took Constantinople in the fifteenth century, Russia became prominent in the Orthodox Church, calling itself the "third Rome."

There are now fifteen self-governing Orthodox Churches worldwide, each having its own leader, known as patriarch, metropolitan, or archbishop. The majority of Orthodox Christians now live in Russia, the Balkan states, and eastern Europe, in formerly communist countries where the teaching and propagation of Christianity had been severely restricted. Autocephalous (independent) churches there include the large Church of Russia, which is dominated by the Patriarchate of Moscow, plus the Churches of Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The original and still central Patriarchate of Constantinople is based within Turkey, as a small minority within a Muslim country, which now has no Orthodox seminaries. The Patriarchate of Constantinople nonetheless tries to play a central role in maintaining Orthodox unity and the historical continuity of Orthodox sacred practices, dating back to the Desert Fathers.

*The Holy Trinity Lavra, one of the greatest monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church, grew up in Sergeyev Posad near Moscow, where St. Sergius used to live as an ascetic in the forest. It is now a popular tourist attraction.*



## Eastern Orthodox Church

- Patriarchate of Constantinople (Turkey, Mount Athos)
- Patriarchate of Alexandria (Egypt, Africa)
- Patriarchate of Antioch (Syria, Lebanon)
- Patriarchate of Jerusalem
- Self-governing local Churches (Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, Czech lands and Slovakia)
- Plus archbishops or metropolitans in the Americas, Australia, India, and European countries

This Patriarchate, honored as "the first among equals," has thus been known as the Ecumenical Patriarchate since the sixth century. Unity among the patriarchates is facilitated by the experiential approach to spirituality that characterizes the Orthodox Church. His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew extends this sense of oneness to encompass all creation: "For us at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the term ecumenical is more than a name; it is a worldview, and a way of life. The Lord intervenes and fills His creation with His divine presence in a continuous bond."<sup>66</sup>

The Patriarchate of Constantinople also includes islands in the Aegean and the precipitous Mount Athos peninsula. The latter was historically a great center of Orthodox monasticism, but its population of monks declined considerably in the twentieth century when emigration of monks was prohibited by communist regimes. Now declared a World Heritage site, Mount Athos encompasses twenty Eastern Orthodox monasteries, plus caves and hermitages. Entrance to the area is highly restricted, to allow the monks to concentrate on their spiritual practices in silence.

The Patriarchate of Alexandria is based in Egypt and includes all of Africa, where Orthodoxy arose independently in Uganda and has been embraced with considerable enthusiasm. The Patriarchate of Antioch consists mostly of Orthodox Christian Arabs in Syria and Lebanon. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem is charged with guarding the Holy Places of Christianity.

The Greek Orthodox Church dominates religious life in Greece and is assisting in the revival of interest in the classical books and arts of Orthodox spirituality. In the Church of Cyprus, the archbishop is also traditionally the political leader of the people.

Extensive emigration, particularly from Russia during the first few years of communist rule, also created large Orthodox populations in Western countries. Some retain direct ties to their home patriarchate, such as the New York-based Archdiocese of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America. Alongside that, the Orthodox Church in America was granted its independence in 1970, and now claims over four million members in a country where Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are the predominant forms of Christianity. Missionary activity by the Russian Orthodox Church also established Orthodoxy in China, Korea, Japan, and among the indigenous peoples in Alaska.



### Distinctive features of Orthodox spirituality

Over the centuries, the individual Orthodox Churches have probably changed less than have the many descendants of the early Western Church. There is a strong conservative tradition, attempting to preserve the pattern of early Christianity. Even though the religious leaders can make local adaptations suited to their region and people, they are united in doctrine and sacramental observances. Any change that will affect all churches is decided by a **synod**—a council of officials trying to reach common agreements, as did the early Church. Although women are important in local Church affairs, they cannot be ordained as priests or serve in hierarchical capacities.

In addition to the Bible, Orthodox Christians honor the writings of the saints of the Church. Particularly important is a collection called the *Philokalia*. It consists of texts written by Orthodox masters between the fourth and fifteenth centuries. "Philokalia" means "love of the exalted, excellent, and beautiful," in other words, the transcendent divine source of life and truth. The *Philokalia* is essentially a Christian guide to the contemplative life for monks, but it is also for laypeople. A central practice is called "unceasing prayer": the continual remembrance of Jesus or God, often through repetition of a verbal formula that gradually impresses itself on the heart. The most common petition is the "Jesus prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The repetition of the name of Jesus brings purification of heart and singularity of desire. To call upon Jesus is to experience his presence in oneself and in all things.

The Orthodox Church has affirmed that humans can approach God directly through faith, as opposed to intellectual knowledge. The seventh-century ascetic Isaac the Syrian said, "Faith requires a mode of thinking that is single, limpidly pure, and simple, far removed from any deviousness. ... The home of faith is a childlike thought and a simple heart."<sup>67</sup> Some may even see the light of God and be utterly transformed by it:

*Orthodox priests conduct Easter Mass in Moscow.*





Most icon painters, such as this monk at Mount Athos, Greece, use the ancient Byzantine style in creating sacred icons, which represent Christian stories and open windows to the divine.

*He who participates in the divine energy, himself becomes, to some extent, light: he is united to the light, and by that light he sees in full awareness all that remains hidden to those who have not this grace; ... for the pure in heart see God ... who, being Light, dwells in them and reveals Himself to those who love Him, to His beloved.<sup>68</sup>*

Another distinctive feature of Orthodox Christianity is its veneration of **icons**. These are stylized paintings of Jesus, his mother Mary, and the saints. They are created by artists who prepare for their work by prayer and ascetical training. There is no attempt at earthly realism, for icons are representations of the reality of the divine world. They are beloved as windows to the eternal. In addition to their devotional and instructional functions, some icons are reported to have great spiritual powers, heal illnesses, and transmit the holy presence. Believers enter into the grace of this power by kissing the icon reverently and praying before it.

Some of the major icons in an Orthodox church are placed on an **iconostasis**, a screen separating the floor area for the congregation from the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary that can be entered only by the clergy. On either side of the opening to the altar are icons of Jesus and the Virgin Mary ("Mother of God," often venerated as Protectress and Ruler of Russia).

Orthodox choirs sing the divine liturgy in many-part harmony, producing an ethereal and uplifting effect as the sounds echo and re-echo around each other. Everything strives toward that beauty to which the *Philokalia* refers. Archimandrite Nathaniel of the Russian Orthodox Pskova-Pechorsky Monastery, which has been a place of uninterrupted prayer for almost 600 years despite 800 attacks on its walls and numerous sieges, speaks of the ideal of beauty in Orthodox Christianity:

*The understanding of God is the understanding of beauty. Beauty is at the heart of our monastic life. The life of prayer is a constant well of beauty. We have the beauty of music in the Holy Liturgy. The great beauty of monastic life is communal life in Christ. Living together in love, living without enmity, as peaceful with each other as one dead body is peaceful with another dead body, we are dead to enmity.<sup>69</sup>*

## Central beliefs in contemporary Christianity

The history of Christianity is characterized more by divisions than by uniformity among Christian groups. The Church is vast and culturally diverse, and Christian theologies are complex and intricate. Nevertheless, there are a few basic motifs on which the majority of faithful Christians would probably agree today.

A central belief is the divine Sonship of Jesus—the assertion that Jesus is the incarnation of God. According to the Gospel of John, before Jesus' death he told his disciples that he would be going to "my Father's house ... to prepare a place for you." When they asked how they would find the way to that place, Jesus reportedly said:

*I am the way, I am the truth and I am life. No one comes to the Father except by me. ... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ... It is the Father who dwells in me doing his own work.<sup>70</sup>*

Throughout most of Christian history, there has been the belief that Jesus was the only incarnation of God. Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas argued that although God could become incarnate in multiple incarnations (as in Hindu belief), in fact he chose to do so only once, in Christ. Theologian Paul Knitter, co-editor of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, is one of the contemporary voices calling for a less exclusive approach that still honors the unique contribution of Jesus:

*What Christians do know, on the basis of their praxis of following Jesus, is that his message is a sure means for bringing about liberation from injustice and oppression, that it is an effective, hope-filled, universally meaningful way of realizing Soteria [human welfare and liberation of the poor and oppressed] and promoting God's kingdom. ... Not those who proclaim "only Lord, only Lord," but those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom (Matthew 7:21–23).<sup>71</sup>*

For Christians, Jesus is the Savior of the world, the one whom God sent to redeem people from their sins and reconcile them with God. Matthew reports that Jesus said he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give up his life as a ransom for many."<sup>72</sup> His own suffering and death are regarded as a substitute sacrifice on behalf of all those who follow and place their faith in him. According to the Gospel of John:

*God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not die but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.<sup>73</sup>*

According to traditional Christian belief, humanity is inclined to sin, illustrated metaphorically in the Old Testament by the fall of Adam and Eve. We have lost our original purity. Given free will by God, we have chosen disobedience rather than surrender to the will of God. We cannot save ourselves from our fallen condition; we can only be forgiven by the compassion of a loving God.

Through fully surrendered faith in Jesus, Christians hope to be washed of their egotistical sinfulness, regenerated, made righteous, adopted by God, sanctified, and glorified in the life to come. These are the blessings of salvation, which Christians feel Jesus won for them by his sacrifice.

Although Christians worship Jesus as Savior, as the incarnation of a merci-





*Christians lighting candles around a Christmas tree in Bucharest, Romania, 25 December, 1989, as communism collapsed.*

ful God, they also see him as a human being showing fellow human beings the way to God. His own life is seen as the perfect model for human behavior. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa emphasizes Jesus' identification with the human condition:

*God does not occupy an Olympian fastness, remote from us. He has this deep, deep solidarity with us. God became a human being, a baby. God was hungry. God was tired, God suffered and died. God is there with us.<sup>74</sup>*

This is the central mystery of Christianity: that God became human in order to lead people back to God.

The human virtue most often associated with Jesus is love. Many Christians say they experience Jesus' love even though he is no longer walking the earth in human form. And in turn, they have deep love for Jesus. Those who are experiencing problems are comforted to feel that Jesus is a living presence in their lives, supporting them spiritually, loving them even in the darkest of times. Reverend Larry Howard, the former pastor of Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Syracuse, New York, declared:

*We found a Jesus. A Jesus who came in the midnight hour. A Jesus that was able to rock babies to sleep. A Jesus that stood in the midst and walked the miles when the freedom train rode through the South all the way through Syracuse. Jesus brought us through the mighty trials and tribulations. Why did Jesus do that? Jesus loved us and through that love and because of that love we stand here today. Not because the world has been so good to us. Not because we have been treated fair. Not because we have been able to realize the dream that God has given every man, woman, and child. But we stand here because we love Jesus. We love him more and more and more each day.<sup>75</sup>*

*The basic thrust of Jesus' message is to invite us into divine union, which is the sole remedy for the human predicament.*

*Father Thomas Keating<sup>76</sup>*

In addition to being the paragon of love, Jesus also provides a model of sinlessness. To become like God, humans must constantly be purified of their lower tendencies. This belief has led some Christians to extremes of penance, such as the monks who flogged themselves and wore hairshirts so that their conscience might always be pricked. In a milder form, confession of one's sinfulness and imperfection is a significant part of Christian tradition. There is an emphasis on repentant examination of one's own faults, self-discipline and prayerful entreaty to guard against temptations, and rituals such as baptism that help to remove the contamination that is innate in humanity. Although one must make these efforts at purification, most Christians believe that it is only through the grace of God—as mediated by the saving sacrifice of Jesus—that one can be delivered from sin and rise above ordinary human nature toward a divine state of sinlessness.

Beyond doctrinal beliefs and model for behavior, Jesus is perceived by many Christians as their companion. Virgilio Elizondo explains his experience as a Mexican Christian:

*In our barrios, we never heard anything about the christological doctrines of the church, but we knew Jesus of Galilee very well. From the earliest days of my life, I have known him as a close friend and companion. He was very present in the tabernacle as Jesus Sacramentado, and we easily and frequently visited with him as our most trusted confidant. ... Simple songs, like the corridos of our people, kept him alive among us. Ritual celebrations from the posadas (Jesus and Mary seeking a place to stay where Jesus could be born), the acostada del niño Dios (the laying down of the "Baby God"), and the levantada (presentation of the Child Jesus) of February 2 or the vivid reenactments of Semana Santa (Holy Week) have kept the human Jesus very much present in our lives and communities. ... The Jesus who accompanies us throughout our lives and suffers with us in our afflictions has been a tremendous source of strength in our culture.<sup>77</sup>*

## Sacred practices

Imitation of the model set by Jesus in his own life is the primary practice of Christians. In the widely read fourteenth-century book *The Imitation of Christ*, people are encouraged to aspire to Jesus' own example as well as his teachings:

*O how powerful is the pure love of Jesus, which is mixed with no self-interest, nor self-love! ... Where shall one be found who is willing to serve God for naught?<sup>78</sup>*

In addition to the inner attempt to become more and more like Jesus, Christians have developed a variety of spiritual practices. Although forms and understandings of the practices vary among the branches of Christendom, they may include public worship services with sermons and offering of the sacraments, celebrations of the liturgical year, private contemplation and prayer, and devotions to the saints.

## Worship services and sacraments


Christian worship typically takes place in a church building, which may be revered as a sacred space. The late-nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox saint Ioann Kronshtadtsky (d. 1908) explained:

*Entering the church you enter some special realm which is not like the visible one. In the world you hear and see everything earthly, transient, fragile, liable to decay, sinful. In the church you see and hear the heavenly, the non-transient, the eternal, the holy. A temple is the threshold of heaven. It is like the heaven itself, because here is God's throne, the service of angels, the frequent descent of the Holy Spirit. ... Here everything from icons to censer and the priests' robes fills you with veneration and prayer; everything tells you that you are in God's shrine, face to face with God himself.<sup>79</sup>*

The word "sacrament" can be translated as "mystery." In Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the sacraments are the sacred rites that are thought capable of transmitting the mystery of Christ to worshipers. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches observe seven sacraments: baptism (initiation and symbolic purification from sin by water), confirmation (of membership in the Church), Eucharist (the ritual meal described below), penance (confession and absolution of sins), extreme unction (anointing of the sick with oil, especially before death), holy orders (consecration as a deacon, priest, or bishop), and matrimony. In general, Protestant churches recognize only baptism and the Eucharist as sacraments and have a somewhat less mystical understanding of their significance.

The ritual of public worship, or **liturgy**, usually follows a set pattern, though in some churches the actions of the Holy Spirit are thought to inspire spontaneous expressions of faith.

For many Christians, the **Eucharist** (also called Holy Communion, mass, or the Lord's Supper) is a central part of regular worship. It is a mystery through which the invisible Christ is thought to grant communion with himself. Believers are given a bit of bread to eat, which is received as the body of Christ, and a sip of wine or grape juice, understood as his blood. The priest or minister may consecrate the bread and wine in ritual fashion and share them among the people. While many Protestants consider the bread and wine to be simply reminders of Jesus' last supper, Roman Catholics and Orthodox

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*The sacrament of the Eucharist, celebrated here in Ghana, engages believers in a communal mystical encounter with the presence of Christ.*



hold that they are mystically transformed by the Holy Spirit into the blood and body of Christ. They are treated with profound reverence. In sharing the communion "meal" together, the people are united with each other as well as with Christ. The traditional ideal was to take communion every day and certainly every Sunday (the day set aside as the Sabbath).

Jesus is pictured in the Bible as having set the pattern for this sacrament at what is called the Last Supper, the meal he shared with his inner circle before his capture by the authorities in Jerusalem. The body and blood of Christ are seen as the spiritual nourishment of the faithful, that which gives them eternal life in the midst of earthly life.

Mother Julia Gatta, an Anglican priest in Connecticut, describes this sacred experience from the point of view of the clergy who preside at the liturgy:

*To be the celebrant of Eucharist is, I think, the most wonderful experience on earth. In a sense, you experience the energy flowing both ways. ... One experiences the Spirit in them offering their prayer through Christ to the Father. But at the same time, you experience God's love flowing back into them. When I give communion to people, I am aware that I am caught in that circle of love.<sup>80</sup>*

The partaking of sacred bread and wine is the climax of a longer liturgy of Holy Communion. The communion service begins with liturgical prayers, praise, and confession of sinfulness. A group confession chanted by some Protestant congregations enumerates these flaws:

*Most merciful God, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>81</sup>*

Catholics were traditionally encouraged to confess their sins privately to a priest before taking communion, in the sacrament of **penance**, meaning "reparation for guilt" (also called "reconciliation"). After hearing the confession, the priest pronounces forgiveness and blessing over the penitent, or perhaps prescribes a penance. Orthodox Christians were also traditionally expected to spend several days in contrition and fasting before receiving communion. The reason for the emphasis on purification is that during the service the church itself is perceived as the Kingdom of God, in which everything is holy. In Orthodox services, the clergy walk around the church, swinging an incense censer to set apart the area as a sacred space and to lift the prayers of the congregants to God.

In all Christian churches, passages from the Old and New Testaments may be read and the congregation may sing several hymns—songs of praise or thanksgiving to God. The congregation may be asked to recite a credal statement of Christian beliefs, and to make money offerings. There may be an address by the priest or minister (called a sermon or a homily) on the readings for the day. These parts of the liturgy constitute the Liturgy of the Word, in which Christ is thought to be present as the living Word, addressing the people through scripture and preaching. In Protestant churches, the Liturgy of the Word is often offered by itself, without the communion service.

In both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, there are now attempts at updating the liturgy to make it more meaningful and personally relevant for contemporary Christians. One innovation that seems to have taken hold everywhere is the "sharing of the peace." Partway through the worship service, congregants turn to everyone around them to hug or shake hands and say, "The Peace of Christ be with you"—"and also with you."

In addition to regular liturgies and the sacrament of the mass or communion, there are special events treated in sacred ways. The first to be administered is the sacrament of baptism. Externally, it involves either immersing the person in water or, more commonly, pouring sanctified water (representing purification) on the candidate's head, while invoking the Holy Trinity. The World Council of Churches has defined the general meaning of the practice:

*By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the "old Adam" is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken. ... They are raised here and now to a new life in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>82</sup>*

Aside from adult converts to Christianity, the rite is usually performed on infants, with parents taking vows on their behalf. There are arguments that infant baptism has little basis in the Bible and that a baby cannot make the conscious repentance of sin and "conversion of heart" implied in the ceremony. Baptists and several other Protestant groups therefore reserve baptism for adults.

A second ceremony—confirmation—is often offered in early adolescence in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. After a period of religious instruction, a group of young people are allowed to make a conscious and personal commitment to the Christian life.

Some Christians observe special days of fasting. Russian Orthodox Old Believer priest Father Appolinari explains fasting as a way of *soprichiastna*, of becoming part of something very large, the spiritual aura of the Lord. He says:

*More and more ordinary people are seeking a comfortable life. More and more we leave spirituality. We try to fill this vacuum with material things. I told my students that there was a fast coming up. They groaned, "Why?" I said that we fast for spiritual reasons. The rule is that you should fast not with a spirit of suffering but with such elevated spirit that your soul sings.*

*When we limit our physicality, as in limiting our food intake, then we grow in our spirituality. I advise my students to notice whether their brain works better when their stomach is full or when it is almost empty. Monks refuse physical things in order to get spiritual benefits. We look at them and see their lives as dark, but for them, it is light.<sup>83</sup>*

## The liturgical year

Just as Christians repeatedly enact their union with Christ through participation in the Eucharist sacrament, Christian churches celebrate a yearly cycle of festivals, leading the worshiper through the life of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. As the faithful repeat this cycle year after year, they hope to enter more deeply into the mystery of God in Christ, and the whole body of believers in Christ theoretically grows toward the kingdom of God.

**Christmas and Epiphany** First of the major periods in the Church calendar, each associated with a series of preparatory celebrations, is the season of light: Christmas and Epiphany. Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth on earth as the incarnation of God. "Epiphany" means "manifestation" or "showing forth." The festival celebrates the recognition of Jesus' spiritual kingship by the three Magi (in the Western Church), his acknowledgement as the Messiah and the beloved Son of God when he is baptized by John the

*In Mexico's Posada processions, people celebrate the nights before Christmas by going from house to house, re-enacting Joseph and Mary's search for an inn.*



Baptist, and his first recognized miracle, the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

In early Christianity, Epiphany was more important than the celebration of Jesus' birth. The actual birth date is unknown, but the setting of the date near the winter solstice allowed Christianity to take over the older "pagan" rites celebrating the return of longer periods of daylight at the darkest time of year. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is "the true light that enlightens every man,"<sup>64</sup> the light of the divine appearing amid the darkness of human ignorance.

**Advent**, the month preceding Christmas, is supposed to be a time of joyous anticipation. But in industrialized countries, it is more likely a time of frenzied marketing and buying of gifts, symbolizing God's gift of Jesus to the world.

In some countries churches stage pageants re-enacting the birth story, with people taking the parts of Mary, Joseph, the innkeeper who has no room, the shepherds, and the three Magi. Since the nineteenth century, it has been traditional to cut or buy an evergreen tree (a symbol of eternal life, perhaps borrowed from indigenous ceremonies) and erect it in one's house, decorated with lights and ornaments. On Christmas Eve some Christians gather for a candlelit "watch-night" service, welcoming the turn from midnight to a new day in which Christ has come into the world. Many Christians also celebrate Christmas with the exchange of gifts and feasting.

**Easter** In terms of religious significance, the most important event of the Christian liturgical year is Easter. This is the commemoration of Jesus' death (on "Good Friday") and Resurrection (on Easter Sunday, which falls in the spring but is celebrated at different times by the Eastern and Western Churches). Like Christmas, Easter is a continuation of earlier rites—those associated with the vernal (spring) equinox, celebrating the regeneration of plant life and the return of warm weather after the cold death of winter. It is also related to Pesach, the Hebrew Passover, the Jewish spring feast of deliverance.

Liturgically, Easter is preceded by a forty-day period of repentance and fasting, called **Lent**. Many Christians perform acts of asceticism, prayer, and



charity, to join in Jesus' greater sacrifice. In the Orthodox Church, the last Sunday before Lent is dedicated to asking forgiveness. People request forgiveness from each other, bowing deeply. In the West, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, when many Christians have ash smudges placed on their foreheads by a priest who says, "Remember, man, thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return." On the Sunday before Easter, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is honored by the waving of palm or willow branches in churches and the proclaiming of Hosannas. His death is mourned on Good Friday. The mourning is jubilantly ended on Easter Sunday, with shouts of "Christ is risen!"

In Russian Orthodox Churches, the Great Vigil welcoming Easter morning may last from midnight until dawn, with the people standing the entire time. Jim Forest describes such a service in a church in Kiev, with 2,000 people crowding into the building and as many more standing outside:


*The dean went out the royal doors into the congregation and sang out, "Christos Voskresye!" [Christ is risen!] Everyone responded in one voice, "Veyeastino voskresye!" [Truly he is risen!] It is impossible to put on paper how this sounds in the dead of night in a church overheated by crowds of people and hundreds of candles. It is like a shudder in the earth, the cracking open of the tomb. Then there was an explosion of ringing bells.<sup>85</sup>*

**Ascension** Ascension may also be celebrated as one of the major holy days in the Christian liturgical calendar, honoring the bodily Ascension of Jesus to heaven. It is celebrated on the Thursday that occurs forty days after Easter, or on the following Sunday. Apparently this event has been celebrated since the early centuries of Christianity. Solemn liturgical observances focus on readings from biblical accounts and credal statements regarding the religious significance of the Ascension. In medieval England, the Ascension was celebrated by a triumphal torchlight procession with a banner portraying a lion above a dragon, symbolizing the ascended Christ's triumph over Satan.

**Pentecost** Fifty days after the Jewish Passover (which Jesus is thought to have been celebrating with a Seder meal as the Last Supper with his disciples) comes the Jewish celebration Shavuot (which commemorates the giving of the Torah to Moses, as well as the first fruits of the harvest). Jews nicknamed it Pentecost, which is Greek for "fiftieth." Christians took over the holiday but gave it an entirely different meaning.

In Christianity, Pentecost commemorates the occasion described in Acts when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples after Jesus' death, Resurrection, and Ascension, filling them with the Spirit's own life and power and enabling them to speak in foreign tongues they had not known. In early Christianity, Pentecost was an occasion for baptisms of those who had been preparing for admission to the Church.

**The Transfiguration and Assumption** Some Christian Churches also emphasize two other special feast days. On 6 August, people honor the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, revealing his supernatural radiance. On 15 August, they celebrate the Assumption of Mary, known as "The Falling Asleep of the Mother of God," in which she was thought to ascend body and soul into heaven at the end of her physical life. These feasts are prominent in the Eastern Church, which generally places more emphasis on the ability of humanity to break out of its earthly bonds and rise into the light, than on the heaviness and darkness of sin.

 **Watch the Video**  
Sacred Memory:  
Orthodox Easter  
on [myreligionlab](http://myreligionlab.com)

## Contemplative prayer

The contemplative tradition within Christianity is beginning to re-emerge. The hectic pace and rapid change of modern life make periods of quietness essential, if only for stress relief. Many Christians, not aware of a contemplative way within their own Church, have turned to Eastern religions for instruction in meditation.

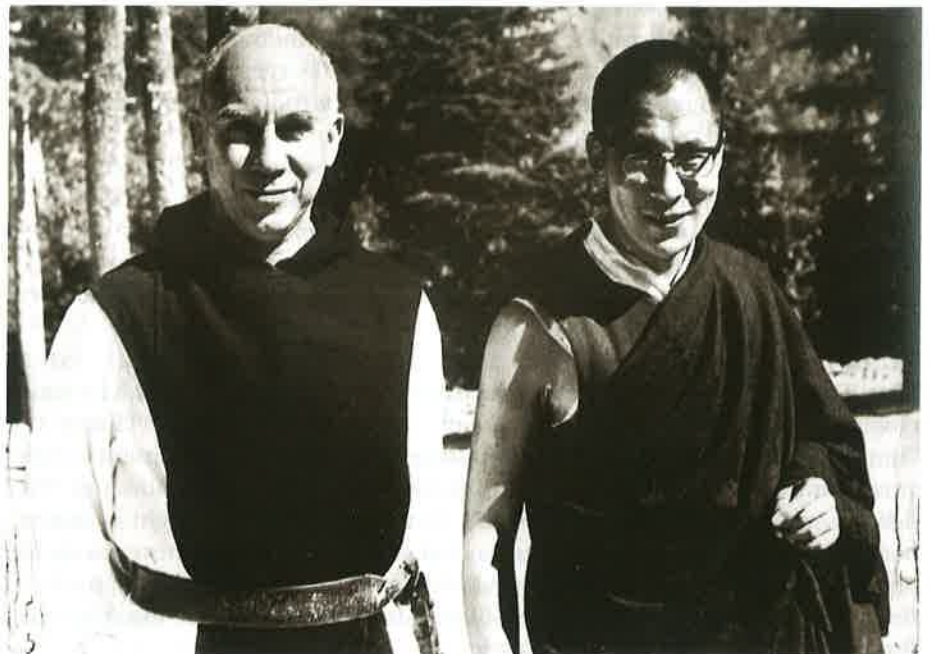
One of the most influential twentieth-century Christian contemplatives was the late Thomas Merton (1915–1968). He was a Trappist monk who received a special dispensation to live as a hermit in the woods near his abbey in Kentucky. Merton lived simply in nature, finding joy in the commonplace, experienced attentively in silence. He studied and tried to practice the great contemplative traditions of earlier Christianity and reintroduced them to a contemporary audience through his writings. In meditative “prayer of the heart,” or “contemplative prayer,” he wrote:

*We seek first of all the deepest ground of our identity in God. We do not reason about dogmas of faith, or “the mysteries.” We seek rather to gain a direct existential grasp, a personal experience of the deepest truths of life and faith, finding ourselves in God’s truths. ... Prayer then means yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for capacity to hear and obey him.<sup>86</sup>*

Before he became a Christian monk, Merton had studied Eastern mysticism, assuming that Christianity had no mystical tradition. He became friends with a Hindu monk who advised him to read St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*. These classic works led Merton toward a deep appreciation of the potential of the Christian inner life, aligned with a continuing openness to learn from Eastern monasticism. He died in an accident while in Asia visiting Buddhist and Hindu monastics.

Spiritual renewal through inner silence has become an important part of

*The Christian monk Thomas Merton and the Tibetan Buddhist Dalai Lama, two great ecumenical figures of the 20th century, met shortly before Merton died in 1968 during a trip to visit the monks of the Eastern traditions.*



some Christians' practice of their faith. Syrian Orthodox bishop Paulos Mar Gregorios of India, past President of the World Council of Churches, concluded from the Bible evidence that Jesus himself was a contemplative:

*Christ spent seventy percent of his whole life in meditation. He would sleep rarely. All day he gave himself to healing the sick. At night he would pray, sometimes all night. He was not seeking his own self-realization. His meditation and prayer were not for himself but for the world—for every human being. He held the world in his consciousness through prayer, not with attachment but with compassion. He groaned and he suffered with humanity. To follow Jesus in the way of the cross means to say, "I lay aside all personal ambition and dedicate myself to God: 'Here I am, God. I belong to you. I have no idea where to go. It matters not what I am, so long as You lead me.'"*<sup>87</sup>

In Orthodoxy, a traditional contemplative practice is centered in repetition of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Eventually its meaning embeds itself in the heart and one lives in a state of unceasing prayer. An unknown nineteenth-century Russian peasant who lived with continual repetition of the Jesus Prayer described its results:

*The sweetness of the heart, warmth and light, unspeakable rapture, joy, ease, profound peace, blessedness, and love of life are all the result of prayer of the heart.*<sup>88</sup>

## Veneration of saints and angels

Roman Catholics and Orthodox and Anglican Christians honor their spiritual heroes as saints. These are men and women who are recognized as so holy that the divine life of Christ is particularly evident in them.

Most venerated of all saints is Mary, mother of Jesus. Devotion to her and to martyrs began in the early years of the Church. Mary serves as a potent and much-loved spiritual symbol.

Some researchers feel that devotion to Mary is derived from earlier worship of the Mother Goddess. They see her as representing the feminine aspect of the Godhead. She is associated with the crescent moon, representing the receptive willingness to be filled with the Spirit. In the story of the **Annunciation**—the appearance of an angel who told her she would have a child conceived by the Holy Spirit—her reported response was "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."<sup>89</sup> This receptivity is not seen as utter powerlessness, however. Mary, like Christ, embodies the basic Christian paradox: that power is found in "weakness."

Whether or not devotion to Mary is linked to earlier Mother Goddess worship, oral Christian traditions have given her new symbolic roles. One links her with Israel, which is referred to as the daughter of Zion or daughter of Jerusalem in Old Testament passages. God comes to her as the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and from this love between YHWH and Israel, Jesus is born to save the people of Israel.

Mary is also called the New Eve. The legendary first Eve disobeyed God and was cast out of the Garden of Eden; Mary's willing submission to God allows birth of the new creation, in which Christ is in all.

Another symbolic role ascribed to Mary is that of the immaculate virgin. According to the gospels of Matthew and Luke, she conceived Jesus by heavenly intervention rather than human biology. Even in giving birth to Jesus,



*The lives of saints are considered inspiring models of devotion. Here Carmelite nuns in California view the relics of the beloved young 19th-century French nun, St. Thérèse of Lisieux ("The Little Flower"), which were taken on a worldwide tour.*



she remained a virgin. The emphasis on virginity is a spiritual sign of being dedicated to God alone, rather than to any temporal attachments.

In the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, Mary is referred to as the Mother of God. Before he died on the cross, Jesus is said to have told John, the beloved disciple, that thenceforth Mary was to be his Mother. The story is interpreted as meaning that thenceforth all humanity was adopted by Mary.

According to the faithful, Mary is not just a symbol but a living presence, like Christ. She is appealed to in prayer and is honored in countless paintings, statues, shrines, and churches dedicated to her name. Catholics are enjoined to repeat the "Hail Mary" prayer:

*Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*

*A procession of Orthodox nuns carry an icon of St. Elizabeth, a pious nun from the Russian royal family who was killed by the Bolsheviks in 1918 and glorified as a new martyr by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1992.*



Theologians point out that veneration of Mary is really directed toward God; Mary is not worshiped in herself but as the mother of Christ, reflecting his glory. If this were not so, Christians could be accused of idolatry.

Be this as it may, Mary has been said to appear to believers in many places around the world. At Lourdes, in France, it is claimed that she appeared repeatedly to a young peasant girl named Bernadette in the nineteenth century. A spring found where Mary indicated it would be has been the source of hundreds of medically authenticated healings from seemingly incurable diseases. In 1531, in what is now Mexico City, Mary appeared to a converted Aztec, Juan Diego. She asked him to have the bishop build a church on the spot. To convince

the sceptical bishop, Juan filled his cloak with the out-of-season roses to which she directed him. When he opened the cloak before the bishop, the petals fell away to reveal a large and vivid image of Mary, with Indian features. The picture is now enshrined in a large church with moving walkways to handle the crowds who come to see it, and the "Virgin of Guadalupe" has been declared Celestial Patroness of the New World.

Other famous apparitions of Mary have included sightings by a group of children in Medjugorje in western Herzegovina starting in 1981. They claimed she appeared, indescribably beautiful, amid brilliant flashes of light.

Other saints are also greatly venerated. Orthodox Christians are given the name of a saint when they are baptized. Each keeps an icon of this patron saint in his or her room and prays to the saint daily. Icons of many saints fill an Orthodox church, helping to make them familiar presences rather than names in history books. Saints are often known as having special areas of concern and power. For instance, in the Catholic tradition, St. Anthony of Padua is invoked for help in finding lost things. Relics, usually parts of the body or clothes of saints, are felt to radiate the holiness of the saints' communion with God. They are treasured and displayed for veneration in Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is said that saints' physical bodies were so transformed by divine light that they do not decay after death, and continue to emit a sweet fragrance.

Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians also pray to angels for protection. Angels are understood as spiritual beings who serve as messengers from, and adoring servants of, God. They are usually pictured as human figures or faces with wings. In popular piety, each person is thought to have a guardian angel for individual protection and spiritual help.

*Each saint is a unique event, a victory over the force of evil. So many blessings can pour from God into the world through one life.*

*Father Germann, Vladimir, Russia<sup>90</sup>*

## Contemporary trends

At this time, Christianity is gaining membership and enthusiastic participation in some quarters and losing ground in others.

The fall of communism in the former Soviet Union and its satellites brought reopening and renovation of many churches and a renewed interest in spirituality throughout that large area. Orthodox Christianity has also received a boost from the activist approach of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, whose position makes him the leading voice in Orthodoxy. He is known as the "Green Patriarch" for his environmental activism, and has also taken an active role in improving Orthodox relations with Roman Catholics and Protestants, and in conflict resolution in areas where people of different religions are at war with each other.



*The Virgin of Guadalupe, who reportedly appeared in the sixteenth century to an indigenous convert to Catholicism, speaking the native language Nahuatl, has been embraced as patron saint of the Americas.*



*The contemporary Coptic Cross. The circle symbolizes the eternal love of God, as manifested in the sacrificial offering of the Son of God.*



*In an historic gesture, Pope Benedict XVI stood facing Mecca as he prayed alongside Muslim clerics in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, November 2006.*

*There will be an effective, transformative change in our world only when we are prepared to make sacrifices that are radical, painful, and genuinely unselfish.*

*Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew<sup>91</sup>*

In Egypt, Orthodox Coptic Christians, heirs to the ancient tradition of the Desert Fathers, have long been submerged under Muslim rule, but monasteries have begun to flourish again. The sixteen million Coptic Christians have their own pope.

Roman Catholicism is experiencing divisions between conservatives and liberals. After the liberal tendencies of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), Pope John Paul II reaffirmed certain traditional stands and strengthened the position of the right wing of the Church. In 2000, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Vatican's highly conservative Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the successor to the Inquisition), delivered "*Dominus Iesus*," a thirty-six-page document proclaiming, "There exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church," which has been entrusted with "the fullness of grace and truth." Other Christian communities "are not churches in the proper sense" and non-Christians are in a "gravely deficient situation" regarding salvation.<sup>92</sup>

The conservative trend in the Vatican was continued with the election of Cardinal Ratzinger in 2005 as the new pope, Benedict XVI. He is known for his defense of traditional Catholic doctrines and values. Nevertheless, he has reached out to young people by setting up his own Facebook profile on the Internet; he has also made historic trips to Muslim and Jewish holy sites, and,





in contrast to earlier cautions against a focus on social justice, he has stated, "Is there anything more tragic, is there anything more opposed to belief in the existence of a good God and a Redeemer of mankind, than world hunger?"<sup>91</sup>

In spite of the public attention paid to the pope as a person, the priesthood is dwindling considerably in most Western countries, partly because of the requirement that Catholic priests be celibate. In recent years, revelations of sexual abuses have rocked people's confidence in the priesthood in the Americas and Europe, including Italy, the backyard of the Vatican. Traditions of secrecy protecting the priests and bishops involved are being challenged by public calls for greater transparency and accountability. Vatican guidelines now require bishops to report suspected sexual abusers to civil authorities. The required celibacy of priests has been named by some observers as a factor leading to illegal sexual conduct, but the Vatican has not altered this requirement.

There is increased interest in participation by women (who are not allowed by the Vatican to be priests), and widespread disregard of papal prohibitions on effective birth control, abortion, test-tube conception, surrogate motherhood, genetic experimentation, divorce, and homosexuality.

While cautioning against a recreational view of sexuality, Sean McDonagh of the Columban Fathers (SSC) emphasizes that the environmental and social consequences of unlimited population growth require a rethinking of the traditional Catholic ban on birth control:

*The pro-life argument needs to be seen within the widest context of the fragility of the living world. Is it really pro-life to ignore the warnings of demographers and ecologists who predict that unbridled population growth will lead to severe hardship and an increase in the infant mortality rate for succeeding generations? Is it pro-life to allow the extinction of hundreds of thousands of living species which will ultimately affect the well-being of all future generations on the planet?*<sup>92</sup>

Acting as a group, Roman Catholic bishops in the United States have issued statements deploring sexism as a "sin" (recommending that spiritual positions of responsibility and authority be opened to women and that non-sexist language be used in liturgy), supporting peace efforts, and insisting on the morality of economic social justice. However, the Vatican has responded to these trends by insisting on the value of tradition and authority. For instance, in its 2010 instructions, the Vatican defined the attempted ordination of women as priests as a "grave crime" equivalent to sexual abuse, heresy, apostasy, and schism.<sup>93</sup>

In Protestantism, traditional denominations in Europe and the United States are declining in membership. According to a Gallup poll, only a minority of the "unchurched" in these areas actually disagree with their denomination's teachings. They are more likely to drop away because of apathy, a lack of services, or a lack of welcome on the part of the minister.

On the other hand, "megachurches" have witnessed phenomenal growth, with congregations of over 2,000 attending friendly services by charismatic preachers with attractions such as video clips and lively "Christian rock" music, plus add-ons such as restaurants, job-training classes, fitness centers, schools, and support groups for parents, children, families, addicts, people living with HIV/AIDS, people suffering from depression, and so on. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church and his own dress and mannerisms are designed to be "seeker-sensitive" in order to attract the "unchurched."

*Approximately 20,000 people attend weekend services at Pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, one of the signature "megachurches" in North America.*



The Anglican Church is in the midst of lively discussions between traditionalists and modernizers. They threaten to split the global Anglican Communion, which encompasses seventy-nine million people. Conservative Anglican leaders are strongly opposed to liberals' support for the ordination of women and homosexuals as bishops. Approximately half of the provinces (a district under an archbishop) in the Anglican fold have declared a state of "impaired communion" with liberal Western churches, and minority Anglican groups in the West have declared that the actions of liberal Western churches are "unscriptural." In 2010, five Anglican bishops announced that they were resigning their positions and converting to Roman Catholicism, in a new structure being set up for disaffected Anglicans.

Although many traditional Christian churches are losing members, other groups and trends are taking vigorous root. These include evangelical and charismatic groups, non-Western Christian churches, commitment to social justice, Christian feminism, creation-centered Christianity, and the ecumenical movement.

## Evangelicalism

A highly active segment of contemporary Christianity falls under the umbrella term **evangelicalism**. This dynamic movement encompasses a large group of people who place the "born-again" experience as the central component in a Christian's life. The definition of Scotch historian David Bebbington is often used to define the movement. He proposed that its four defining characteristics are:

1. Biblicism (a particular and constant regard for the Bible).
2. Crucicentrism (a stress on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross).
3. Conversionism (conviction that lives need to be changed).
4. Activism (the expression of the gospel in effort).

Over time, this tradition has flowered into different groups, including fundamentalists, mainline Protestant evangelicals, the Holiness movement, and Pentecostals.

Contemporary manifestations of evangelicalism are related to the work of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelists, such as the itinerant Methodist preacher John Wesley (1703–1791); George Whitefield (1714–1770), who preached dramatically to large open-air crowds in England and the United States; and Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), whose preaching reportedly led hundreds of thousands of people to conversion experiences.

In the United States, dramatic preaching in the 1730s and 1740s by figures such as the Calvinist Jonathan Edwards brought a religious revival called “The First Great Awakening.” Edwards’ most famous sermon was “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741), in which he exhorted a Connecticut congregation to be wary of God’s power “to cast wicked men into hell at any moment.” He used vivid imagery to evoke anxiety in listeners about the state of their souls:

*The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.<sup>96</sup>*

Another influential factor was the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. As discussed earlier, the **fundamentalists** were reacting against the liberal or modern movement in Christianity that sought to reconcile science and religion and to use historical and archaeological data to understand the Bible. This movement had an optimistic view of human nature and stressed reason, free will, and self-determination. In response, a group of Christians called for a return to what they considered the “fundamentals” of Christian faith. In 1911, “fundamentalists” in the United States published as their uncompromising tenets the total inerrancy of the Bible, and Christ’s literal virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and anticipated second coming. The controversy between fundamentalism and modernism received its most famous public expression in the Scopes trial in 1925 when John Thomas Scopes, a high school teacher in Tennessee, challenged a state law forbidding the teaching of Darwin’s theory of evolution in schools.

During the twentieth century the fundamentalist movement in the United States developed into a powerful political and social force that now rejects much of what it considers secular: public education, big government, and social programs run by the government. An attitude of withdrawing from the negative influence of the modern world dominates this movement.

Many evangelicals and other conservative Protestants anticipate the **rapture**—a time when Christians will be transported up to heaven to live with Jesus in immortal bodies. Popular Christian media in the United States have fanned the belief that the end times are imminent and one should be ready, a belief that has serious ramifications in political decision-making.

Like all Protestants, evangelicals practice the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but they are much more concerned that the sacrament be personal and meaningful than that it be correctly done according to a book of worship. Evangelicals’ messages now enjoy widespread visibility through international electronic media. Television programs and websites offer enthusiastic preaching, video and audio material, books, prayers for



those in need, and the inevitable appeals for financial contributions to support these huge organizations.

On the ground, evangelicalism is also growing around the world. In South America, in areas that were largely Roman Catholic as a result of colonization by Spain centuries ago, in the early 1990s an average of five evangelical churches were being established each week in Rio de Janeiro. Most of them were in the slum areas, offering to the very poor food, job training, day care, and perhaps conversion.

### Spirit-oriented movements

Overlapping somewhat with the evangelical surge, there is a rising emphasis on **charismatic** experience—that is, divinely inspired powers—among Christians of all classes and nations. While Christian fundamentalists stress the historical Jesus, charismatics feel they have also been touched by the “third person” of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. These include members of Protestant Pentecostal churches but also Roman Catholics, members of main-line Protestant denominations, and Orthodox churches who are caught up in a widespread contemporary spiritual renewal that harks back to the biblical descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus, firing them with spiritual powers and faith.

This movement encompasses all those who look for the spiritual gifts mentioned numerous times in the letters attributed to Paul, suggesting that these were common manifestations in the early Church. In I Corinthians, Paul writes:

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.<sup>97</sup>*

There is no typical pattern to the charismatic experience of being endowed with divine powers. Vazhayil Babu is from South India, a Christian by birth, but a nominal Christian. He says he experienced a great void in his life, even as he married and became a successful businessman in the United States. He felt inwardly so desperate that he became sick. He prayed, asking, “What should I do?” Then he reportedly experienced a Power in the room and heard a voice say, “Get out from the house now!” He thus took his wife and got on a Caribbean cruise ship. He sat in the hold praying until, he says, “God told me, ‘Go to Bible college. Study the Word.’” Being over fifty years old, poor in English, and running a business to support his family, he struggled to obey that command, but at last finished his degree and began preaching. He reports:

*When I speak the word of God, the Bible, when I speak about Jesus, I tell them to come to the altar, and I pray for them. They’re blind—they are healed. There are lame and crippled—they walk. I see with my two eyes. Sometimes I speak before 20,000 people. I pray a lot and then speak the word of God. I see miracles after miracles.<sup>98</sup>*

One of the streams feeding the charismatic tradition was the nineteenth-century Holiness movement in the United States. It was an outgrowth of

John Wesley's concept of "Christian perfection" through a transformational conversion experience. This opened doors to religious empowerment of the poor, women, and minorities. It also brought the element of emotional involvement into worship, in contrast to more formal worship in mainstream Protestant churches.

A Holiness preacher in Kansas, Charles Parham (1873–1929), was healed of rheumatic fever and thence began a healing ministry and a school in which he proposed to train people for world evangelization, with the Bible as their only textbook. He challenged his students to wait in expectation for the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, as evidence of baptism by the Holy Spirit.

One who was influenced by Parham was an African American preacher, William Joseph Seymour (1870–1922), whose parents were freed slaves. Given the segregation of races in the South, Seymour was only allowed to listen to Parham's talks through a half-opened door. Seymour was invited to be the pastor of a small African American Holiness church in Los Angeles, but he was locked out of it when he preached that speaking in tongues was a sign of baptism by the Spirit. Several members of the church invited him to pray with them in one of their homes. When the host asked Seymour to lay his hands on him, the man fell to the floor, seemingly unconscious, and began speaking in unknown languages. Seymour and others then had the same experience. For three days and nights they kept praying and rejoicing loudly. As more people joined them, including white people, the house was too small, so they rented an unused church building at 312 Azusa Street. Sitting on planks for benches, they held spontaneous, emotional meetings from morning until late at night. There was no planned worship. People sang in tongues and fell to the ground as they were "slain in the Spirit." These inter-racial revival meetings on Azusa Street eventually drew people from all over the United States and abroad, and as new centers were opened, the movement became known as **Pentecostalism**. Seymour himself was a humble, gracious, prayerful person, and without racial or gender discrimination he developed a core team of leaders who were both male and female, black and white.

The Holiness/Pentecostal movement brought spiritual women to the foreground even in times when women were otherwise excluded from church leadership. For instance, Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944) was told by an inner voice, "Preach the Word!" and had several powerful experiences of the Holy Spirit. But how to preach? With no institutional framework, she simply stood on a chair in the street and prayed silently for an hour, with her arms held in the air. Curious people gathered around her. When she spoke to them afterward, her speech was so compelling that many followed her. This went on until crowds grew so huge that she had to set up an immense tent—her "canvas cathedral." Then she outfitted a large car as her "Gospel car" and traveled around the United States, calling people to Jesus. When she built the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, her services became so popular that they caused traffic jams. During the Great Depression, she organized a soup kitchen that fed 80,000 people a month, as well as giving blankets and shelter to thousands of homeless people. The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel that she founded has grown to encompass over five million people in eighty-three countries. It has not, however, emphasized gender equality; there are few women in its leadership roles.

Pentecostalism is now a rapidly growing world movement. Its adherents generally look for a second experience of the Holy Spirit after the initial



*William Joseph Seymour founded the Azusa Street Revival, one of the major sources of Pentecostalism.*

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Los Angeles  
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The Origins and Impact  
of Pentecostalism  
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experience of salvation by belief in Jesus as Savior for the forgiveness of their sins; they require speaking in tongues as a sign of this "second grace" of baptism by the Holy Spirit. Adherents to this tradition affirm that they are under the influence of the Spirit when they speak in tongues (a phenomenon known as glossolalia), stand and gesture as they lovingly sing praises of Jesus and God, pray and utter praises, spontaneously heal by the laying on of hands and prayer, and bear witness to spiritual miracles.

Speaking of the descent of the Holy Spirit, Roman Bilas, Moscow head of the Union of Pentecostal Christians of Evangelical Faith, says passionately:

*This moment when you really feel God's power in yourself brings so much peace and joy within you. It transforms you and society. There comes a sense of total forgiveness for your sins, and the ability in you to forgive others. At that moment, you start to speak in different languages, maybe such that no one can understand.*

*We may also receive the gift of prophecy. ... We check to see if the message is consistent with the Bible. If it is, then we will listen. Otherwise, the person is told not to speak publicly because he would create confusion in the Church.*

*The main thing is that the person should be filled with God's Power. A nice-looking car will not move unless it is fueled. God's Power will only fill those who are pure. That is why in the early Church people went into the wilderness to fast and repent. Then God could fill them with His Power. Each sermon should have this Power of God; then the people will really listen and repent of their sins.<sup>99</sup>*

The Pentecostal-Charismatic movement is now said to be the fastest-growing religious movement throughout the world. Asia, Africa, and Latin America are experiencing explosive growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Many of these churches are carrying on extensive social work, such as running relief services, feeding the poor, and building hospitals and schools. In Korea, Pastor David Yonggi Cho has developed the immense Yoido Full

*The Pentecostal-Charismatic movement has brought spontaneous spiritual expressiveness into previously restrained cultures, such as this congregation in Kent, England.*







Gospel Church, which with over 800,000 members and hundreds of pastors is the world's biggest Christian congregation. His "five-fold message of the Gospel" consists of renewal, experience of the Spirit, healing, belief in the Second Coming, and the blessings of salvation: "soul prosperity," "prosperity in all things," and "a healthy life."<sup>100</sup>

Some Pentecostal churches are linked to "classical Pentecostalism," with roots in the nineteenth-century revivals in the United States. Others are denominations colored by regional cultural traditions, such as the vibrant African Instituted Churches, which are usually oriented toward healing and protection from evil, the most prominent aspects of African indigenous religions. There are also independent "Neo-Pentecostal" churches whose leaders' business sense has helped to market Spirit-oriented traditions to young people and upwardly mobile professionals. Whatever the type, Pentecostals tend to follow a strict code of personal ethics. Because of their conversion experiences, having become "a new creature in Christ," they typically do not drink, gamble, indulge in sex outside of marriage, or spend money and time carelessly.

Mainstream Christian churches, which have often rejected emotional spiritual experience in favor of a more orderly piety, are gradually becoming more tolerant of it. Among Roman Catholics the movement is often called "Charismatic Renewal," for it claims to bring true life in the Spirit back to Christianity. By broad definition, one-fourth of all Christians today could be considered members of this Spirit-oriented movement,<sup>101</sup> and the percentage is growing.

*The Yoido Full Gospel Church in South Korea houses one of the largest Protestant Christian congregations in the world, with at least 830,000 members.*

## The Great Reversal

Although contemporary Christianity was largely shaped in Europe and its North American colonies, the largest percentage of the Christian Church now lies outside these areas. It has great numerical strength and vigor in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia and its strength in these areas is changing the face of Christianity. In 1970, Christianity was about forty-three percent non-Western, whereas today it is about sixty-five percent non-Western. In this short span of time, many independent, indigenous churches have arisen in the world. Tens of millions of Chinese Christians are now worshipping in their homes or non-church buildings, in addition to those under closer government supervision in churches registered with the government. There are probably more Christians worshipping in China on Sundays than in all of Europe,<sup>102</sup> many of them in congregations of hundreds or even thousands emphasizing charismatic experiences reminiscent of traditional popular culture.

Hundreds of millions of Africans are members of **African Instituted Churches**. As soon as the Western colonial supports were taken away, Christianity exploded in Africa as an indigenous religion. Africa was twenty-five percent Christian in 1950, whereas it is forty-eight percent Christian today. Some of the most active areas in terms of outreach are now Brazil, Korea, China, India, southern Africa, and the United States. Lamin Sanneh of Gambia, Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, describes the geographic shifts characterizing Christian resurgence:

*"World Christianity" is the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian, societies that had no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the gospel. In these societies Christianity was received and expressed through the cultures, customs, and traditions of the people affected. World Christianity is not one thing but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame.<sup>103</sup>*

*DJ Moz and two other Kenyan DJs bring young people to Jesus through an extremely popular TV program of gospel hip-hop and reggae.*



When Western missionaries spread Christianity to other regions, they often assumed that European ways were culturally superior to the indigenous ways and peoples. But some of these newer Christians have come to different conclusions. Theologians of the African Instituted Churches, for instance, reject the historical missionary efforts to divorce them from their traditions of honoring their ancestors. This effort tore apart their social structure, they feel, with no scriptural justification:

*As we became more acquainted with the Bible, we began to realise that there was nothing at all in the Bible about the European customs and Western traditions that we had been taught. What, then was so holy and sacred about this culture and this so-called civilisation that had been imposed upon us and was now destroying us? Why could we not maintain our African customs and be perfectly good Christians at the same time? ...*

*We have learnt to make a very clear distinction between culture and religion. ... [For instance], the natural customs of any particular nation or race must never be confused with the grace of Jesus Christ our Saviour, Redeemer and Liberator.<sup>104</sup>*

Contemporary perceptions of Jesus have been deeply enriched by those from the inhabitants of poor Third World countries who have brought personal understanding of Jesus' ministry to the outcasts and downtrodden. In Asia, where Christians are usually in the minority, there is an emphasis on a Christ who is present in the whole cosmos and who calls all people to sit at a common table to partake of his generous love. In Latin America, Jesus is viewed as the liberator of the people from political and social oppression, from dehumanization, and from sin. In Africa, the African Instituted Churches have brought indigenous traditions of drumming, dancing, and singing into community worship of a Jesus who is seen as the greatest of ancestors—a mediator carrying prayers and offerings between humans and the divine, and watchful caretaker of the people.

Instead of the old pattern in which the West sent missionaries to spread Christianity to Asia, Africa, and South America, congregations in those areas are now being asked to send volunteers to the West to help spread the gospel in new missionary efforts there. Catholic prayer requests are now being "outsourced" through the Vatican to India from the United States, Canada, and Europe, where there are not enough clergy to handle the requests. Churches in Europe are becoming empty of worshipers as the people become more and more secular in their approach to life.

The vigor of Christianity in the United States can be explained partly by the growth of evangelical and charismatic churches and a linking of fundamentalist Christianity with right-wing political claims to patriotism and a defense of traditional American values. An equally important contribution to the vigor of Christianity in the United States is immigration. Today, as in the past, the majority of those who migrate to the United States are Christians, and migrants tend to build vital churches. Contemporary Christian migrants include Roman Catholic or Pentecostal Latin Americans, Presbyterian or Methodist Koreans, plus Christians from Africa, China, India, and West Asia. By contrast, most of the contemporary immigrants to Europe are Muslims.

Some of the most active remnants of Christianity in Europe are involved in peace and reconciliation movements. Around the globe, many fundamentalists feel they are fighting a cultural war against liberalism, secularism, and materialism—within as well as beyond Christianity. Spiritually diverse, Christianity is also politically and culturally diverse.

### Christian faith and justice

Although many Christians make a distinction between the sacred and the secular, some have involved themselves deeply with social issues as an expression of their Christian faith. For instance, the Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), became a great civil rights leader, declaring: "It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love."<sup>105</sup> This trend is now called **liberation theology**, a faith that stresses the need for concrete political action to help the poor. Beginning in the 1960s with Vatican II and the conference of Latin American bishops in Colombia in 1968, Roman Catholic priests and nuns in Latin America began to make conscious, voluntary efforts to understand and side with the poor in their struggles for social justice.

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928), who coined the expression "theology of liberation," explains the choice of voluntary poverty as:





Maryknoll Sister Jocelyn Fenix assists farmers in a hothouse in Panama.

*a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice. ... It is not a question of idealizing poverty, but rather of taking it on as it is—an evil—to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it.*<sup>106</sup>

For their sympathetic siding with those who are oppressed, Catholic clergy have been murdered by political authorities in some countries. They have also been strongly criticized by conservatives within the Vatican. When Pope Benedict headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he decried liberation theology. He said that it inappropriately emphasizes liberation from material poverty rather than liberation from sin. The movement has nevertheless spread to all areas where there is social injustice. Bakole Wa Ilunga, Archbishop of Kananga, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), reminds Christians that Jesus warned the rich and powerful that it would be very difficult for them to enter the kingdom of heaven. By contrast, writes Ilunga:

*Jesus liberates the poor from the feeling that they are somehow less than fully human; he makes them aware of their dignity and gives them motives for struggling against their lot and for taking control of their own lives.*<sup>107</sup>

Taking control is not easy for those who are oppressed minorities. In the United States, the Church offers the large African American community of Christians a way of developing an alternative reality in the midst of poverty, urban violence, and discrimination. As theologian Dwight Hopkins observes:

*The black community has a long tradition of practicing faith as a total way of life. ... Within worship, especially, the church is noted for its uplifting preaching, singing, shouting, dancing, and recognition of individual achievements and pain. ... The rituals of individual healing and celebration serve to recharge the worshipers' energy to deal with the rigors and racism of a "cruel, cruel world" from Monday through Saturday.*<sup>108</sup>

The practical activities of the Black Church range from building shelters and arranging jobs to treatment for addiction, campaigns against police brutality, voter registration drives, and leadership training. Even without social empowerment, people often feel inwardly empowered and cherished by the presence of Jesus in their lives.

Other Christian denominations are also deeply engaged in social service ministries. For example, Kenyan Pentecostal Florence Muindi undertook training as a doctor because when she was praying she had a shocking vision of sick, starving, and deaf and dumb people. When she went to a very poor village in Ethiopia to serve in conjunction with the local Baptist church, she found health problems so endemic there that she trained a team of "health evangelists" to help eradicate the underlying causes: poor sanitation and hygiene. As they worked with families to improve sanitation in their environment, ministering to people's physical as well as spiritual needs, they also

## RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

## Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu



During the years of struggle against apartheid in South Africa, one voice that refused to be silenced was that of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Mpilo Tutu (b. 1931). Afterward, he served his country as Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "looking a beast in the eye" to investigate abuses from all sides that were perpetrated during the apartheid era. In this capacity, he still refused to mute his criticisms of those wielding power, no matter what their race and stature. In 1995 he proclaimed:

*The so-called ordinary people, God's favourites, are sick and tired of corruption, repression, injustice, poverty, disease and the violation of their human rights. They are crying out "enough is enough!" It is exhilarating when you are able to say to dictators everywhere: You have had it! You have had it! This is God's world and you will bite the dust! They think it will not happen but it does, and they bite the dust comprehensively and ignominiously.*

*We will want to continue to be the voice of the voiceless. It is the role of the church to be the conscience of society.<sup>109</sup>*

The "Arch's" fearless stance on behalf of truth and justice for the oppressed earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. He confronted not only those in power but also those who sought change through violence and those in the Church who witnessed the horrors of apartheid but kept silent. He explains, "Our task is to be agents of the Kingdom of God, and this sometimes requires us to say unpopular things."<sup>110</sup> He has continued to speak and act on many issues, including human rights, women's rights, AIDS, homophobia, poverty, racism, and climate change.

The former archbishop feels that faith requires one to be actively engaged in politics because government affects the people, but at the same time to remain independent of political factionalism in order to freely stand for truth. He says of the link between religion and politics:

*Faith is a highly political thing. At the centre of all that we believe as Christians is the incarnation—the participation of God in the affairs of this world. As followers of that God we too must be politically engaged. We need inner resources, however, in order to face the political demands of our time.<sup>111</sup>*

How has Archbishop Tutu developed his inner resources? Through meditation, prayer, and fasting. He observes the traditional daily devotions of the Anglican Church, always starts meetings with prayer, and annually takes a long spiritual retreat. He regularly prays for others, and many are also praying for him; he asserts that intercessory prayer has practical effects. His spiritual confessor, Francis Cull, describes Archbishop Tutu's inner life as rooted in the Benedictine monastic discipline that underlies Anglican spirituality. He explains:

*As I ponder on the prayer life of Desmond Tutu I see the three fundamental Benedictine demands that there shall be: rest, prayer, and work and in that order. It is a remarkable fact, and it is one reason at least why he has been able to sustain the burdens he has carried, that he has within him a stillness and a need for quiet solitude. ... The "rest" of which St. Benedict speaks is not a mere switching off; it is a positive attempt to fulfill the age-old command to rest in God. ... The pattern of Jesus which he follows here: "Come apart and rest awhile," is an urgent need for all those who are caught up in the busyness of church and world.<sup>112</sup>*

Desmond Tutu himself insists that spiritual practice is essential in order to know and follow the will of God:

*God's will has to do with what is right, just, decent and healing of the wounds of society. To know what this means we need to cleanse ourselves of ourselves—of our fears, greed, ambitions and personal desires. ... We must be vigilant in ensuring that the good that is within all people triumphs over the evil that is also there. ... We must commit ourselves to tell the truth. We must identify evil wherever we see it.<sup>113</sup>*



brought greater social cohesion in the community. Florence explains, "We are the hands of Jesus Christ. The church is the representative of Christ in a suffering world."<sup>14</sup> It is through serving the poor and disenfranchised that people feel connected to Jesus, as they try to carry on his mission.

## Feminist Christianity

The issue of taking control of one's life and defining one's identity has also been taken up by feminists within the Christian Church. The Church institution has historically been dominated by men, although there is strong evidence that Jesus had active women disciples and that there were women leaders in the early churches. Reconstructing their history in the early Christian movement and the effects of patriarchal domination is a task being addressed by considerable in-depth scholarship. The effect of the apostle Paul in shaping attitudes toward women as he guided the developing Christian communities is one area of particular concern. Some of the statements attributed to him in the biblical Epistles seem oppressive to women; some seem egalitarian. He argues, for example, that men should pray or prophesy with their head uncovered but that women should wear a veil:

*For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.*<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary scholars are trying to sort out the cultural and historical as well as the theological contexts of such statements. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that Paul was trying to preserve something of the status quo, and establish himself as a higher authority than other apostles who had apparently been teaching the Corinthians that, with Christian baptism, all the old separations between people had been erased:

*For these Corinthians the new life in Christ, begun in baptism, overcame the old world of sin and brought the believer into a present experience of resurrected life. This new life in Christ was experienced particularly in Spirit-filled assemblies in which all members, women and men, could participate in spontaneous testimonies of prayer and prophecy that combined "intelligible" and ecstatic forms of speech or "tongues." ... The Corinthian opponents of Paul practiced dissolution of gender and other status hierarchies within their community, and open boundaries between themselves and the world around them. These practices were not arbitrary but reflected a theological belief that the evil powers that lay behind a world divided by gender, social status, and clean and unclean spheres had already been overcome in the new life in Christ.*<sup>16</sup>

Another area of feminist scholarship is the role models for women offered by the Bible. A central female figure in the New Testament is Mary, mother of Jesus. Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer of Brazil look at Mary from the perspective of "the great masses of Latin America, the overwhelming majority of whom are poor, enjoy no adequate quality of life, and lack respect, bread, love, and justice." While acknowledging that the dogmas developed by the Catholic Church about Mary may be inflated, they nonetheless reveal a wellspring of hope for women and other oppressed humans:





*Reverend Catherine Rumen  
blesses the communion cup  
in London.*

*The exaltation that understandably comes out in dogma cannot ... hide what is essential in God's salvation, that is, making God's glory shine on what is regarded as insignificant, degrading or marginal. ... In exalting her they exalt precisely her poverty, her dispossession, and her simplicity. This is the only key for understanding the mystery of God's incarnation in human history, of which Jesus and Mary are the protagonists. This is, moreover, the only key for understanding the mystery of the church as a community of salvation, holy and sinful, striving amid the most diverse kinds of limitations and problems to be a sign of the Kingdom in the midst of the world.<sup>117</sup>*

A third major area of Christian feminist theology is the concept of God. The divine is commonly referred to as "He" or "Father," but scholarship reveals that this patriarchal usage is not absolute; there also existed other models of God as Mother, as Divine Wisdom, as Justice, as Friend, as Lover. Sally McFague points out that to envision God as Mother, for instance, totally changes our understanding of our relationship to the divine:

*What the father-God gives us is redemption from sins; what the mother-God gives is life itself, ... not primarily judging individuals but calling us back, wanting to be more fully united with us. ... All of us, female and male, have the womb as our first home, all of us are born from the bodies of our mothers, all of us are fed by our mothers. What better imagery could there be for expressing the most basic reality of existence: that we live and move and have our being in God?<sup>118</sup>*

### Creation-centered Christianity

Another current trend in Christianity is an attempt to develop and deepen its respect for nature. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans are thought to have been given dominion over all the things of the earth. Sometimes this



"dominion" was interpreted as the right to exploit, rather than the duty to care for, the earth. This view contrasts with indigenous beliefs that the divine resides everywhere, that everything is sacred, and that humans are only part of the great circle of life. Some Christians now feel that the notion of having a God-given right to control has allowed humans to nearly destroy the planet. Historian and passionate earth-advocate Father Thomas Berry (1914–2009) said, "We need to put the Bible on the shelf for twenty years until we learn to read the scripture of life."<sup>119</sup>

A Christianity that would accord greater honor to the created world would also tend to emphasize the miracle that is creation, thus helping to unite science and religion. Creation-centered Christians—such as the late Jesuit priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin—see the mind of God in the perfect, intricate balances of chemistry, biology, and physics that allow life as we know it to exist.

Not only is the earth threatened by our careless exploitation; our spiritual lives suffer as well, according to Father Berry:

*What happens to the outer world happens to the inner world. If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur, then the emotional, imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished. Without the soaring birds, the great forests, the sounds and coloration of the insects, the free-flowing streams, the flowering fields, the sight of the clouds by day and the stars at night, we become impoverished in all that makes us human.*<sup>120</sup>

Around the world, many Christian churches and leaders have taken up the cause of encouraging people and governments to limit environmental destruction. In the United States, a 2006 statement signed by presidents of evangelical colleges, pastors of popular "megachurches," and leaders of social-aid groups such as the Salvation Army urged the government to pass legislation to avert global warming, in accordance with Christian ethics, for "millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors."<sup>121</sup>

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has sponsored many international and interdisciplinary symposia concerning various aspects of humanity's destruction of its planetary home. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, known as the "Green Patriarch," urges: "We are to use its resources in moderation and frugality, to cultivate it in love and humility, and to preserve it in accordance with the scriptural command to serve and preserve (cf. Gen. 2:15). Within the unimpaired natural environment, humanity discovers deep spiritual peace and rest."<sup>122</sup>

## Ecumenical movement

Although the followers of Jesus have become split into thousands of denominations, with the explosion of charismatic and African Instituted churches adding yet more new groups, there is also a contemporary counter-attempt to unify all Christians around some point of agreement or at least fellowship with each other.

The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) asserted that the Roman Catholic Church is the one Church of Christ, but opened the way to dialogue with other branches of Christianity by declaring that the Holy Spirit was active in them as well. The Orthodox Church likewise believes that it is the "one, holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church." Although it desires reunion of all Christians

and denies any greed for organizational power, it insists on uniformity in matters of faith. Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches therefore do not share Holy Communion with those outside their respective disciplines. Some Protestant denominations have branches that also refuse to acknowledge each other's validity.

In the attempt to restore some bonds among all Christian churches, there are dozens of official ecumenical dialogues going on. The World Council of Churches, centered in Geneva, was founded in 1948 as an organizational body allowing Christian churches to cooperate on service projects even in the midst of their theological disagreements. Its Faith and Order Commission links 300 culturally, linguistically, and politically, not to mention theologically, different Christian churches in working out the problems of Christian unity. However, the Orthodox Church representatives are always in the minority within the council and therefore typically lose when decisions call for a majority vote. The consensus model for decision-making has been proposed as being closer to the original spirit of Christianity. As Father Denis G. Pereira explains:

*This model may be more difficult and involve more time. But it is inspired by a spirit of love, respect and generosity rather than suspicion and competition. The method supposes that the Church must be always open to the Spirit of God, and that the Spirit often speaks through the least and the last, at times even through a minority of one.<sup>123</sup>*

The historic doctrinal and organizational divisions between churches are not easily bridged. There is also a growing split between liberal and conservative denominations. Instead of doctrinal rapprochement, there are thus some efforts to forge strategic alliances between "churches of Tradition"—particularly Roman Catholics and Orthodox—to help preserve traditional family values. Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI has reached out to Protestants with pleas for greater Christian unity and mutual tolerance, including a 2011 appeal to German Lutherans to:

*keep in view just how much we have in common, not losing sight of it amid the pressure towards secularization—everything that makes us Christian in the first place and continues to be our gift and our task. ... God is increasingly being driven out of our society. ... Yet it is not by watering the faith down, but by living it today in its fullness that we achieve this. This is a key ecumenical task.<sup>124</sup>*

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew points out that increasing harmony even in the midst of diversity and differences is the mission of Christianity:

*The growing signs of a common commitment to work together for the well-being of humanity and the life of the world are encouraging. ... It is an involvement that highlights the supreme purpose and calling of humanity to transcend political or religious differences in order to transform the entire world for the glory of God.*

*There will be an effective, transformative change in our world only when we are prepared to make sacrifices that are radical, painful, and genuinely unselfish. ... Unselfishness implies generosity, rendering the world transparent and transforming it into the mystery of communion and sharing between created beings, between human beings, and between earth and heaven.<sup>125</sup>*