

# Christianity

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## Introduction

- Religion
- Believers versus Peoplehood
- A Way of Life

## Christianity: Fundamental Facts

- Largest religion in the world with 2B followers
- Roman Catholicism 50%, Protestant 40%, Orthodox 10%
- Protestants include Pentecostals (500 MM), Baptist (100 MM), Anglican (77 MM), Lutheran (60 MM), Presbyterian (48 MM), Methodist (40 MM)

## Brief History of Christianity

### Brief Christian History 1

- Beginnings to 300s CE: little-known to persecuted minority
- 300-600 CE: persecuted and persecuting
- 600-1100 CE: endangered at the center, moving northwest and East

### Brief Christian History 2

- 1100-1500 CE: Crusades to the near extinction of Asian Christians
- 1500-1600 CE: Conquest, Reformation and indigenous growth
- 1600-1800 CE: Weakened Christendom and European Enlightenment

### Brief Christian History 3

- 1800-1920 CE: Western missionary expansion
- 1900-2000 CE: Post-Christendom West and Non-Western Christians

### Creeds, Canons, and Practice

#### Creeds

- Form the doctrinal center of the faith
- Articulate for the community the nature of God and God's intervention in human history
- Within the Christian tradition, MANY creeds

#### Canons

- Express and define the structure, organization, and administration of the denomination, including both the ritual practices and the governance of those practices
- Examples: Canons of the Episcopal Church USA and of the Diocese of Virginia
- Within the Christian tradition, MANY canons

#### Practice

- People within the Christian faith are to live in response to the teachings and traditions embodied in the creeds
- Within Christianity, multiple forms of practice, from traditional/orthodox to inventive/liberal
- Diverse—and divergent—ways in which Christians respond to the sacred texts and core teachings of the tradition within changing times and various cultural and ethnic landscapes

#### Christianity

- Both a historical *and* a contemporary belief system, expressed in community, and practiced in the lives of individuals and institutions
- Both an individual *and* collective attempt to fashion a loving and obedient response to the one true living God, creator of heaven and earth, and all that God has done for us

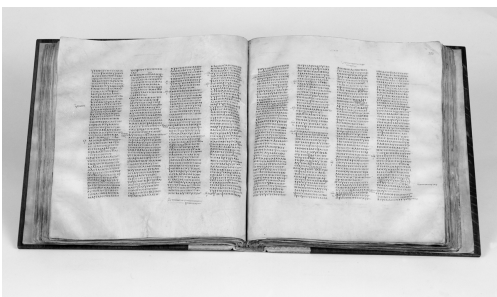
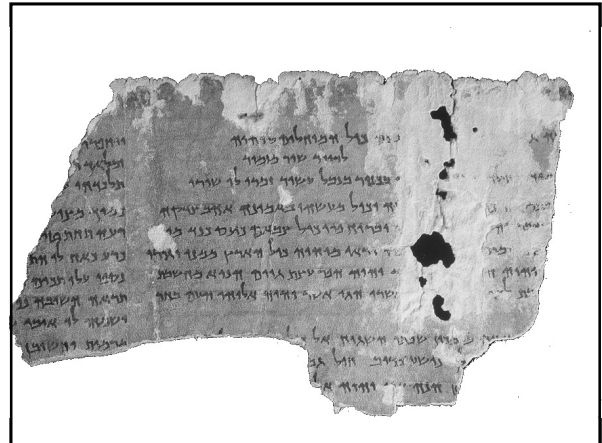
## Role of Christian Community

- Telling, retelling and listening to the Gospel story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Celebrating the history of the faith through rituals
- Providing necessary sacramental functions
- Maintaining centers of worship and instruction

## What do Christians Believe?

- We believe in one God who has acted throughout human history for the benefit of all creation, and draw this truth from the canon of sacred texts commonly called the Bible
- We believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ
- We believe in the Holy Spirit

## The Bible



## The Bible 1

- A compilation of sacred texts
- 66 books written by many authors over the course of many centuries
- Chosen from a vast selection of available texts
- Compiled by the early hierarchy of the tradition as the reliable word of God to God's people

## The Bible 2

- Texts both vast and diverse
- A reliable source for insight into the nature of God and the created world
- Different conclusions drawn about how human beings are to relate to God and all of creation

## The Bible 2

- Old Testament—a text written and compiled within the Jewish tradition
- New Testament—a collection of texts often defined as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, and intended to establish a new understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, made possible through Jesus

## The Story of Jesus

- The lifetime of Jesus, understood as specific and unique in human history, creates for Christians the center of all things, the point at which all time, space and creation were forever changed and from which all things draw meaning and purpose

## The Bible and The Story of Jesus

- Starts at the beginning of the New Testament
- Five books—the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and the Acts of the Apostles—offer five distinct narratives
- Each of the four Gospels provides a slightly different and complementary view of his life

## The Bible and Stories of Jesus

- Believers meet Jesus and his friends, followers, critics and colleagues
- Believers hear Jesus' teachings and observe his day-to-day interactions with the world
- All four Gospels offer narratives of his life, death and resurrection
- Two (Matthew and Luke) record events surrounding his birth
- The Acts of the Apostles begins after the death and resurrection of Jesus, records his ascension into heaven, and chronicles the first years of a new religious tradition that would eventually be called Christianity

## The Bible 3

- The four Gospels and Acts were written a number of years after the life of Jesus
- Each addresses a specific audience
- Gospels not the only texts worthy of consideration; every book from Genesis (literally, "beginnings") through Revelation is foundational
- Part historical document, part poetry, part love story, part adventure

## The Bible 4

- Following the Gospels, the New Testament includes a series of other books and letters (called the Epistles) written to the young Christian community to help them understand how to live, how to worship, how to be a new faith community
- Multiple authors with words of encouragement and direction, chief among them Paul, who was not one of the original followers of Jesus but a convert from Judaism

## Christian Practices

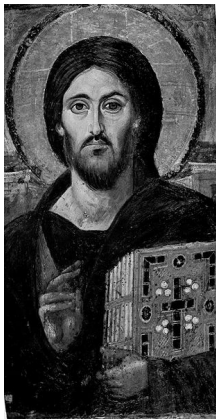
- Diverse
- The Nicene and Apostles' Creed, are central statements of faith in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity
- In liturgical practice, one or the other of these two creeds is spoken during most worship and prayer services

## We Believe in One God

- One God in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- One God, who is eternal, not made, active in history
- In human history, God's actions begin with the creation of everything that is, seen and unseen
- God is a being (not merely a force or a principle like gravity)
- God is fundamentally other than any created thing or being, without limitations

## We Believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ

- No separation between God the Creator/Father and Jesus the Redeemer/Son
- Jesus is part of the Father, cannot be separated from the Father, and cannot exist without the Father
- Jesus is God, not merely like God or a section of God, but fully and completely God



## Jesus: Fully Human and Fully Divine

- Incarnation a central Christian belief
- Jesus is God made uniquely and entirely temporal, individual, and human, while retaining all the eternal and spiritual qualities and attributes of God
- Jesus' life the fulfillment of all of God's promises to care for the Jewish people and the world as a whole
- Jesus will come into human history once more, to judge the living and the dead and establish his kingdom forever

## We Believe in the Holy Spirit

- The sustainer, the comforter, the giver of life
- Brings particular gifts to the people of God—prophetic utterance, knowledge, wisdom, and healing
- Produces certain spiritual fruits in their lives—love, peace, patience, gentleness and self-control

## The Lived Practice of these Beliefs

- 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
- These statements place individual believing within the context of a wider perspective and appreciation of the present, the history of the faith, and its future
- There is no such thing as a solitary Christian

## The Power of Sacraments

- Outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace
- Gifts of God in the person of Christ and demonstrations of God's mercy
- Holy Baptism and Holy Communion
- Sacramental rites of confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent, unction

## The Problem of Sin

- Sin is when human beings act in ways that deny or repudiate God's loving kindness
- When we actively disobey a specific commandment (Adam and Eve), or disobey the Ten Commandments
- When we disobey the two great commandments Jesus gave: to love God and one another

## Holy Baptism

- We acknowledge our dependence on God to forgive our sins and to participate in our lives, through the action of the Holy Spirit, and we are transformed into something previously unknown and unavailable to us
- In baptism we are united with Jesus Christ and all other believers forever
- In baptism we celebrate the unity of the whole Church in Christ and our connection to one another through him

## Holy Communion

- A remembrance of the last meal Jesus shared with his closest followers
- Jesus took a cup of wine and a loaf of bread, blessed them, broke the bread, and gave them to his friends
- Some Christians believe the bread and wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Jesus; others that they symbolically represent the sacrifice of Jesus' life and death

## The Liturgical Year

- Advent: anticipation of the coming of Jesus
- Christmas: the birth of Jesus
- Epiphany: the world's recognition of Jesus
- Lent: Jesus' preparation for his death
- Good Friday: Jesus' death on the cross
- Easter season: resurrection and ascension of Jesus
- Pentecost: the coming of the Holy Spirit
- Season after Pentecost/Ordinary time
- Feast Days

## Recommended Reading

- McGrath, Alistair E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001)
- Norris, Frederick W. *Christianity: A Short Global History* (Oxford: One World, 2002)
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures Through the Ages* (New York: Viking, 2005)
- Radcliffe, Timothy. *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Continuum, 2005)
- Wright, N.T. *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans, 1994)