

Christianity

A brief history of the world's most practiced religion.

Early Christians were Jews looking for a messiah, or savior and believed that they found him in the person of the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth. Proclaiming that his mother, Mary, was a virgin, and that he was the son of God, Jesus is called the Christ, which in Hebrew means messiah, or deliverer. Born during the time of Roman occupation in what is today Israel, Jesus was seen as the fulfillment of the promise of a heavenly deliverer found in the Jewish Torah.

Birth of Christ and Baptism

Jesus's immaculate conception and birth signifies to Christians that while divine by nature, God's son, took on an earthly form in order to save his followers from sin, or wrongdoing. The story of Jesus's birth relates that shepherds from nearby fields came to Bethlehem to pay homage to the young savior. This reminds Christians that Christ is like a shepherd constantly tending and caring for his flock of sheep or believers. This event is celebrated by Christians each December and is called Christmas.

As a young adult, Jesus asked his cousin, John, to baptize him in the River Jordan. Baptism, or washing away of sin, is done in the Christian church today with either a small sprinkle of water or total immersion.

Crucifixion and Resurrection

As Jesus's popularity grew the Jewish leadership became more hostile to him and his followers. They believed that Jesus may have come to overthrow the Roman government, threatening their power.

One Passover (Jewish holiday that commemorates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt), when Jesus and his followers arrived in the city of Jerusalem to celebrate the feast, a very large crowd gathered around Jesus. The crowd waved palm branches at his feet as Jesus rode into the city on a donkey. Christians believe that by doing so, Jesus was fulfilling his role as



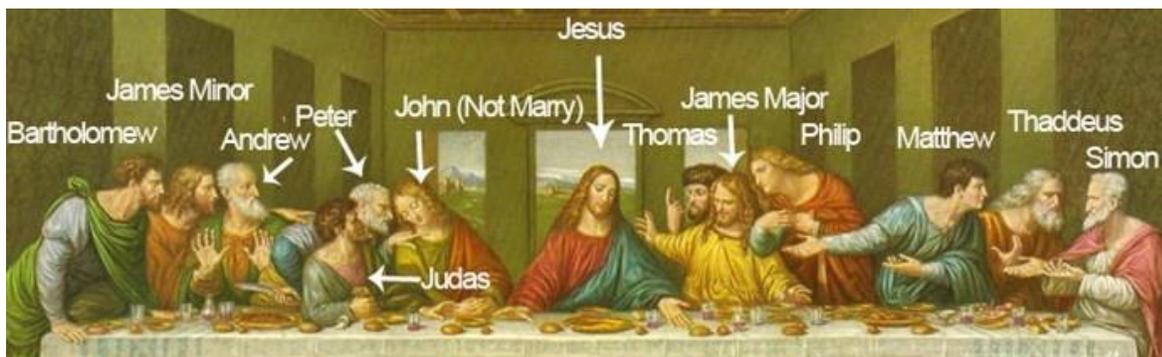
Messiah, as prophesied in the Torah, or Old Testament. Unable to tolerate such a blatant show of heresy, opinion or statement at odds with religious teachings, the Jewish leadership had Jesus charged with blasphemy, profaning the name of God.

Unable to calm the crowd or satisfy the accusers Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, sentenced Jesus to death on a cross. He was crucified with two criminals, as crucifixion was a common form of punishment at the time. However, Christians believe that this death was necessary for Jesus to suffer in order that he may experience and take on the sins of mankind and experience the consequences of such a life.

After his death, Jesus's followers were allowed to take his body to an empty tomb. There they lay his body and sealed the tomb. Because it was Passover, they are unable to return to the tomb for three days. At that time, they find that the tomb is empty and that Jesus, the Christ, has risen. Christians believe Jesus made several appearances to different individuals after his death. Following these he ascended, or rose, to heaven where Christians believe he sits at the right hand of God. Christians also believe that they too will rise, like Christ, and live eternally in heaven, or paradise.

Teachings

After his death, four of Jesus's followers wrote about the life of Christ and his teachings. Known as the Gospels, or good news, the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the first four books of the New Testament. In addition, epistles, letters, written by early Christian church leaders, and two other books complete the New Testament, or covenant. This New Testament combined with the Old Testament, the Jewish Torah, becomes the Christian Bible.



Spreading of the church

Not long after the death of Christ, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and scattered its people. This event helped to spread Christianity throughout the Mediterranean including the Roman and the Byzantium empires. Wherever they went they not only evangelized, or spread the "good news" of Christ, but also, were persecuted. Along with the Jews, Christians were seen as the cause of harm and misfortune and suffered the consequences of ignorance.

Despite persecution, Christianity slowly gained popularity over the next hundreds of years. By 313 CE, in a political move to win the favor of Christians, Constantine, the Roman emperor

converted to Christianity. He declared the faith to be a legal religion. Wanting to insure that the faith was consistent in its teachings, he assembled a council to write a statement of faith. Known as the Nicene Creed, it says that God is three persons or holy trinity. There is the creator, Father, the son, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that continues to be the conscious of God in the world.

Splitting of the Church

The church will follow the history of Roman Empire. When the Roman Empire split in the 5th and 6th centuries, so would the church. Known as the Great Schism, two branches of the church emerged. The Eastern Church will become the Orthodox Church and the Western Church remained the Roman Catholic Church. While steeped in the same philosophies the traditions and manner of worship will distinguish these two churches.

The church will further split when the Reformation arrived in Europe. As man began to think about his place in the universe, he also started to question his place and role in the church. Martin Luther, a German priest, was particularly outspoken about the church's practice of collecting indulgencies, money given by people to pay for their sins and the sins of the departed loved ones. Luther was also in favor of people being able to read for themselves the scriptures, so he translated the Bible into German. Another church reformer was Frenchman, John Calvin. Calvin believed that the scriptures taught predestination, the idea that God predetermined a man's salvation. The church would further split when King Henry VIII of England would establish himself as head of the church in England after the pope refused to allow him to divorce his wife. His granddaughter, Queen Elizabeth I, would establish the Church of England also known as the Anglican or Episcopal Church.

Christians wanting to flee the influences of the Catholic church and wishing for a more simple religion, free of harsh rules and laws found a new home in America as Puritans and Pilgrims.

Churches and rites

There are many types of churches. The church denomination or sect often dictates the type of church building. Many Roman Catholic Churches are built with elaborate decorations inside and out. Protestant, or non-Catholic churches tend to be more functional.

Inside the church you will find pews, or long benches for worshipers to sit upon. There is an altar at the front of the church from which the sermon, or lesson is given. There may also be a baptism font, a receptacle for holding water that is used during the rite, religious ceremony, of baptism.

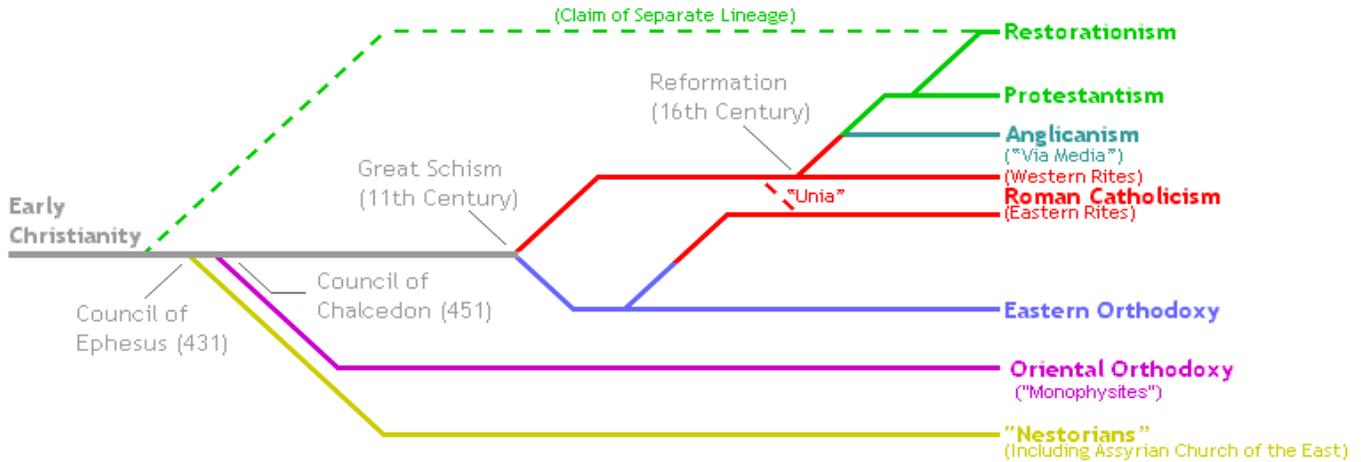
The church is also the place where other rites take place. Christians remember the last supper of Christ before his crucifixion and celebrate it as a time of thanksgiving. At this time, they say prayers and partaking of the Eucharist, a representation of the body and blood of Christ, by the drinking of wine and eating of bread.

Festivals

Besides Christmas, Christians celebrate other festivals throughout the year. Some churches celebrate the birth or death of brave Christians martyrs, people killed because of their faith.

Easter, which is celebrated each spring, commemorates the death and resurrection of Christ from the cross. This time of year is seen as a time of renewal of one's faith.

Major Branches of Christianity



Did You Know?

- 31.5 percent of the world population is Christian.
- There are over 2.2 billion Christians in the world.
- Islam is the second largest religion, with 1.6 billion adherents, or 23 percent of the global population.

Christianity Questions

1. Why is the place of Jesus's birth important to his becoming the Messiah?

2. Analyze why shepherds are important to the story of Christ's birth.

3. Describe three Christian rites or celebrations and recall why they are important to the faith.

4. Analyze why Jews today would be unable to accept Christianity.

5. Why do you think it was important to the Christian faith for Jesus to be seen after his death?

6. Provide Evidence in the form of a direct excerpt that supports the idea that some Christians like Martin Luther disagreed with the Catholic Church. Place your selection in quotation marks.

7. Explain what Pilgrims and Puritans were looking for in the New World.

8. What is the function of a church?

9. Why is the Eucharist so important to Christian believers?

10. Analyze why the celebration of Easter in the Spring is significant with the idea of renewal.
