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**CHRISTIANITY**

By Harry Jivenmukta

## INTRODUCTION AND MAP

**Christianity** started in about 35AD and it slowly spread until today there are Christians in every country in the world and it is probably the most popular religion in the world. Christianity derives its name from the name of Jesus Christ who spent only a few years preaching the message of God before he was arrested and crucified by the authorities who saw him as a threat.

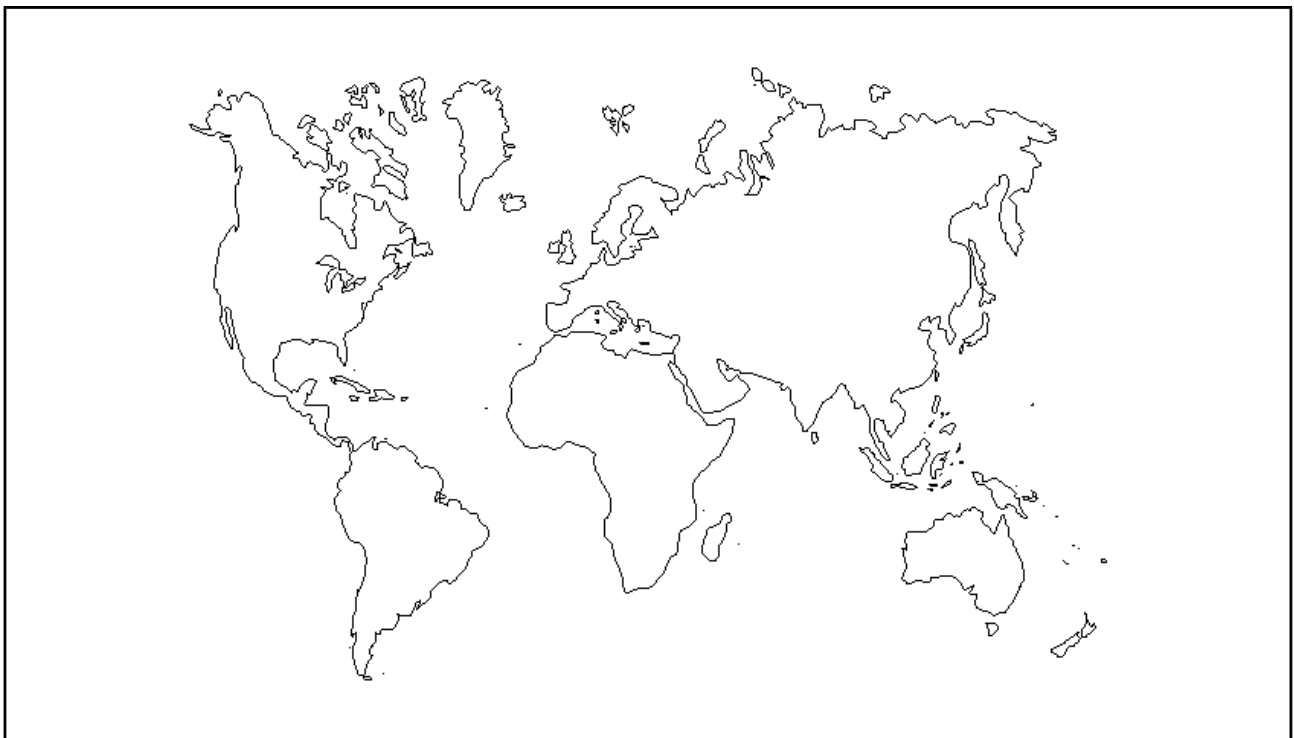
As Christianity has spread it has developed in different ways and today there are three main branches of Christianity and literally hundreds of off-shoots. The three main branches are:

**Roman Catholic,**

**Orthodox, (e.g. Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox etc.),**

**Reformed, (e.g. Protestant, Baptist, Methodist etc.).**

Many of the new religions of the twentieth century also come from the roots of Christianity because they follow the Christian teachings of the Bible. An example of the new faiths include Scientology. The Bible (as with many other religious texts) has been interpreted in many different ways which is one reason why there are so many different Christian off-shoots.



On the map above, mark the areas of the world where Christianity is the dominant religion. How did Christianity spread throughout the world, and how popular is it today?

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### THE LIFE OF JESUS

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When a new Calendar was developed about 500 years after the death of Jesus, (it was supposed to start when Jesus had been born), the scholars who worked out the dates of his birth calculated slightly wrong. Jesus was born in about 5 AD, four years after the start of the new calendar, but it makes little difference because it was so long ago. The new calendar is the same one we use today and splits history into **BC**, (**Before Christ**), and **AD**, (**Anno Domini**, which means 'in the year of our lord').

Joseph and Mary, his parents, had been told (by God) that they would have a child who would be the '**Messiah**' (anointed one). Jesus was born in Bethlehem where Joseph and Mary had to go to register themselves in a Census. Because it was so crowded they could not get a room in an Inn and so they stayed in a stable where Mary gave birth to Jesus.

The times when Jesus was born were very dangerous. Mary and Joseph felt threatened by the authorities after some people, including three wise men had predicted that one day Jesus would be 'king'. For two years Joseph and Mary lived in Egypt and then returned to Palestine.

Very little is known about Jesus until he was about thirty. Some people were predicting that a Messiah would come to save the people from the Romans. One of these was **John The Baptist** who started baptising people after convincing them to repent for their misdeeds and begin to live a more true and honest life. Jesus himself went to John The Baptist and was baptised.

Jesus realised it was time for him to begin to spread his message. He went into the desert to think and prepare himself. Then he chose **12 Disciples** and began his teachings. The authorities did not like him because he questioned everything and did not just accept things as they were. The Jews decided to get rid of him.

Just a few years after he had started preaching he was arrested tried and crucified. His message was too revolutionary for the Jews or the Romans to accept. He rose from the dead after three days and for a period of several weeks he appeared to some of his followers and disciples.

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### QUESTIONS

Make a chart showing the main events in Jesus's life.

Why was Jesus crucified? What was it about his teachings that people could not accept? (See sheet on the teachings of Jesus before answering this question.)

What similarities are there between the beliefs of the Jews and the beliefs of Christians?

**THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS**

Jesus was concerned with teaching people to always live according to God's laws. At the time of Jesus the social conditions of many people were very bad, with many poor people, many diseases, outcasts, and laws which were barbaric. Jesus wanted people to live with more caring attitudes, to help each other and not to discriminate against other groups.

Jesus taught people to trust in God and not worry about the bad things in their lives. Even if their life was very bad or they were diseased, he taught that if they believed in God, they would realise the **Kingdom of Heaven** when they died and left this world behind. He told people not to be concerned with material things, not to waste their lives just gathering wealth and objects but to reach for higher things like loving each other and helping others as they would help themselves.

This new way of thinking was very different from the way people lived at the time. The Roman belief was in strength and physical power to achieve things and other people were seen as fair game to be overcome and dominated.

The teachings of Jesus went directly against the way people lived at that time. For this reason the authorities did not like Jesus and especially as his followers increased, they disliked him even more. Jesus told his followers to repent and ask God for forgiveness for their past bad deeds. They were told to live differently in future and always think of God and act in the way God would want them to act. This meant that in many cases people would not be able to obey the laws or rules set down by the authorities.

The **Sermon on the Mount** was one of the most important speeches that Jesus made.

**THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit

for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the humble for the Earth will belong to them.

Blessed are those who seek to do what is right

for they will be given what they want.

Blessed are those who are merciful for they will be treated with mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are treated badly for doing right

for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them.

**QUESTIONS**

- Summarise in less than 100 words what the main message of Jesus was.
- Why did some people dislike Jesus's message?
- How did Jesus's message differ from the way the Romans wanted people to live?

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**THE BIBLE**

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**The Bible** is divided into two main sections. The **Old Testament** is the book which shows how God told the Jews the correct way of living. It is divided into 39 different 'books', and starts with Genesis: the "**earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.**"

The **New Testament** is all about the time of Jesus and shows people how to live through the life and actions of Jesus Christ. The new Testament is divided into 27 'books'. None of the books are actually written by Jesus. All the accounts are written either by his disciples or other religious people of the time.

Christians see in the New Testament the fulfilment of the promise of the Old Testament. It relates and interprets the new covenant, (agreement), represented in the life and death of Jesus, between God and the followers of Christ. Like the Old Testament it contains a variety of writing. Among its 27 books are recollections of the life and acts and sayings of Jesus in the four **Gospels**; a historical narrative of the first years of the Christian Church in **Acts of the Apostles**; **Epistles** or letters of advice, and an apocalyptic description of the intervention of God in history, the **Book of Revelation**.

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**QUESTIONS**

Is the New Testament more relevant to people today than the Old Testament? Why?

Why do you think Jesus did not write part of the Bible himself?

How important is the Bible to people today?

Why do some people interpret what the Bible says so differently from other people?

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### PLACE OF WORSHIP

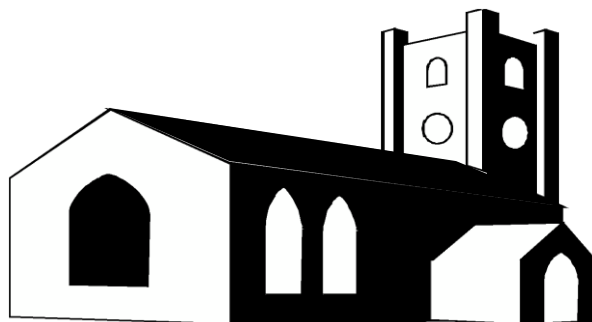
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Christians worship in a **Church**. The word Church comes from the Greek language. There are mainly two types of Church in Britain; **The Parish Church** which is organised through the Church of England and associated bodies, and the **Free Church** which are mainly Roman Catholic but also Methodist and Baptist among others.

In the parish church the emphasis of design is on the cross shape which represents the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Churches have an **Altar** which is usually at the eastern end of the building. At the other end of the church there is usually a tower with a bell in it which can be rung on special occasions. Churches have **Pews** which are rows of benches or seats for the congregation to sit. This area is called the **Nave**. There are bays at either side and the rest of the church is called the **Chancel**. On either side of the chancel is the organ, and the choir seats. The chancel is separated from the nave by an open screen. At one side of the screen is the **Pulpit** from which the sermon is given and at the other side is the **Lectern** on which the Bible is placed during services and readings.

The free church includes most of the features of the parish church but the layout can be different. Many modern churches have rectangular buildings rather than cross shaped.

Very large churches are called **Cathedrals**. Britain is divided up into **Dioceses** and the Cathedral is the main church in each Diocese. Much of the organisation and administration is done from the cathedral and the person in charge is called a **Bishop**.



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### QUESTIONS

Draw a plan of a parish church and label the different areas.

Why are many churches designed in the shape of a cross?

Find out about the churches in your area. How many are traditional in style? How many are 'free' churches?

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**BELIEFS**

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Christian beliefs can be divided into three. This is called the **Holy Trinity**.

**THE FATHER**

Christians believe that there is one God, who is the supreme being. God created the world and everything in it. He is like a father who looks over and takes care of his children, (people).

**THE SON**

The son of God is Jesus Christ who came from heaven in human form to teach people about God. Jesus died on the cross and made the ultimate sacrifice. He now lives in heaven and will return someday to judge mankind.

**THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The Holy Spirit is the word of God. It is the power which drives the world and everything in it. The Holy Spirit is in everyone and everything, but some people have not let it influence their lives. People should live according to the word of God.

Christians believe that Jesus came to Earth to renew the contract between people and God. The original covenant had been made with Abraham. **'God loved the world so much that He gave His only son so that everyone who believes in Him may not die but have eternal life.'**

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**QUESTIONS**

Outline the different aspects of Christianity which are highlighted in the Holy Trinity.

What is the Holy Spirit?

How do Christians explain Jesus as being both divine and human?

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## WORSHIP

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Christians hold Sunday as a special day. Most Christians try to think of God every Sunday and attend church. There are variations in worship in different churches but all have some features in common:

**Singing Hymns And Psalms,  
Reading From The Bible,  
Saying Prayers,  
Preaching Stories And Sermons.**

Mass is an important service and it celebrates the **Last Supper** which Jesus had with his disciples before he was arrested and crucified. Different churches have slightly varying Mass. Hymns, preaching, and prayers are followed by the consecration of bread and wine. The congregation is reminded about how Jesus told his disciples to spread the word of God and then broke the bread and blessed the wine. The bread is actually a thin wafer which is dropped into the wine whilst a hymn is sung. People take communion by going up to the altar and receiving a small piece of the wafer whilst kneeling. When all the congregation has received communion, the priest drinks the wine.

There are other types of services which take place as well, including some morning and evening services.

Prayer is a very important part of worship for Christians. Through prayer people can 'talk' to God and remember their duties as Christians. There are four type of prayer remembered in the word **ACTS**.

- A** Adoration; praising God.
- C** Confession of sin and asking forgiveness.
- T** Thanksgiving; thanking God for His gifts.
- S** Supplication; asking God for guidance.

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## QUESTIONS

Find out about services other than Mass which are conducted in the Christian church.

How does the Christian church service differ from the services held in other religions?

Do you pray? Do you think it makes any difference if you pray or not?



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### **BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION**

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When a baby is about two or three months old it is **Baptised**. Some Christians do not baptise their children because they think that if their child is religious when it grows up then the baptism will be more relevant. The baby is taken to the church and the ceremony is held at the **Font** which is a basin containing water. The parents are present as well as **God-parents**. God-parents are people who agree to take part in the proper upbringing of the child, although today it is often just a technical part of the service. After a prayer the priest blesses the child and its parents. The God-parents make special promises to make sure that the child will know the difference between good and evil and learn about Jesus. Then the priest takes the baby and names it. The priest puts water on the baby's head making the sign of the cross and kisses the baby's head.

When a child is grown up the ceremony of **Confirmation** takes place. Confirmation is when the person stands in front of the congregation and confirms the intention to follow the teachings of Christianity and to live as a Christian. The priest asks the person three questions:

**Do you turn to Christ? Are  
you sorry for your sins? Do  
you turn away from sin?**

If the person answers 'yes' to all three questions the priest lays on his or her hands and symbolically passes the **Holy Spirit** into the person. The ceremony ends with Holy Communion.

N.B. The services may vary in different churches.

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### **QUESTIONS**

Why is baptism important to Christians?

What is the difference between baptism and confirmation?

Do other religions have similar ceremonies?

## FESTIVALS

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The Christian festivals are based around the events of Jesus's life and the main ones are:

**ADVENT** This is the preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ; it is celebrated on the fourth Sunday before Christmas.

**CHRISTMAS** The birth of Jesus 25th December.

**EPIPHANY** The visit of the three wise men to Jesus, January 6th.

**LENT** The forty days before Easter, ending at midnight before Easter Day.

**SHROVE TUESDAY** The last day before Lent, also known as Pancake Day.

**ASH WEDNESDAY** The first day of Lent.

**PALM SUNDAY** The day Jesus entered Jerusalem, is held the Sunday before Easter.

**MAUNDY THURSDAY** The day of the Last Supper.

**GOOD FRIDAY** The crucifixion of Jesus.

**ASCENSION DAY** Held forty days after Easter, this celebrates Jesus's ascension into Heaven.

**WHITSUN, (PENTECOST)** Held on the seventh Sunday after Easter this celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles.

**TRINITY SUNDAY** Held on the Sunday after Whitsun, this celebrates a remembrance of the Holy Trinity.

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## QUESTIONS

Pick one of the festivals listed above. Write a letter to a friend describing how you celebrated it.

Why are festivals important?

How do people who follow other religions celebrate festivals?

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## MARRIAGE

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**Marriage** has traditionally been a very important institution for many Christians. In most countries, marriage is a legal rather than religious contract so many people today do not get married in church. Where a church service is entered into the occasion is usually quite solemn. The **Bridegroom** arrives before the **Bride** and sits at the front with the **'Best Man'**. The best man helps the bridegroom. The bride enters the church with her father or other male relative or friend.

The priest starts by telling everyone that they are gathered before God and that the ceremony is to take place to join two people. Both people have to make promises to each other before God and the congregation. The marriage ends with prayers and the hope that the couple will live according to their promises both to each other and before God.

The couple have to sign the marriage register, which is a legal requirement. When they go out of the church confetti or rice are thrown over them.

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## DEATH

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Christians do not believe that death is the end of everything and so, although there is sadness at the death of a loved one, there is also hope. Christians do not believe in re-births or reincarnation. They believe that the soul lives on in peace with God, or if the person has done great evil in life, their soul will go to hell.

The Christian burial is a solemn occasion. The coffin is taken to the church where hymns and prayers are said. Some people prefer burials whilst others are cremated. The family then returns to the home of the bereaved or to a hotel or restaurant where they comfort each other and share a meal together.

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## QUESTIONS

Why is marriage an important institution for Christians?

Is marriage an outdated institution?

Do you believe in life after death, in the form of a soul going to join God?

What is Hell?