

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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An interesting challenge

Recently a friend who teaches a high school humanities class asked me to do a favor. As one of a series of presentations about the world's main religions, she wanted me to give her class a summary of Christianity's history, beliefs, and practices. She wanted me to say a little about my own spiritual journey, too. I was to speak for twenty to thirty minutes, then answer questions for the rest of an hour. My presentation had to be informational and not aimed at converting anyone.



Preparing such a presentation was hard. It was helpful for me, however, because it made me re-think what I considered the real essentials of Christianity to be. It made me think, too, about how to explain them in a way that would make sense to the class members who weren't Christians. It also made me think how to describe Christianity in a way that would cover interpretations that differed from mine.



Telling our story gently and reverently

If you've never tried to summarize Christianity in that way, I urge you to try. To start you off, in this issue of *Connections* I'm offering a lot of what I included in my talk and in a handout I prepared for it. You may disagree with how I'm expressing some of what I'm saying, and you may feel I should have omitted some of what I've included and should have included some things I've left out. However, as I told the students I spoke to, probably no two Christians would agree on exactly how to state the essentials of Christianity. At a different time, I might even see it differently myself.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.
—1 Peter 3:15-16

Some scriptures important to Christians

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ... An angel of the Lord appeared ... and said, " ... She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Isaiah]: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and



bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

—Matthew 1:18-23

One of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray ..."



He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

—Luke 11: 1-4, "The Lord's Prayer"

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. —John 15:12, "The Great Commandment"

The Advocate [comforter, helper], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

—John 14:26



Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.



—Matthew 28:19, "The Great Commission"

When the day of Pentecost [a festival] had come, [Jesus' followers] were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.



—Acts 2:1-4, the beginning of the church

Jesus Christ—the center of Christianity

Christianity centers on Jesus, the Christ. Christ means savior. Christians believe Jesus to be fully divine and also fully human. This is often expressed by calling him the Son of God. Although they disagree about what hell is, most Christians believe that commitment to Jesus saves (redeems) people from going to hell as punishment for their sins.



Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the area that was then called Judea, a part of what is now Israel. He was probably born in the year that we now call 4 B.C. His mother, Mary, was a very young woman traditionally understood to have been a virgin made pregnant by God's spirit. She was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter, and soon married him.

Jesus was a Jew. His early life was spent in the town of Nazareth. The area was under oppressive Roman rule, administered by Herod, who saw Jesus as a threat and eventually condemned him to death.



Jesus' earthly ministry—mainly teaching and healing in order to show people what God was like—was done in about three years, beginning when he was thirty. At age thirty-three Jesus was killed by crucifixion—being nailed to a wooden cross, a common way of killing criminals at that time. Judas, one of his disciples, betrayed him to the Roman authorities. He died and was buried, but after three days he emerged from his tomb (resurrection) and rose to

heaven (ascension) after appearing several times to followers. Christians believe he still lives in spiritual form and will live forever. They believe he will return to earth at a future time, but they disagree about when and how this will happen.

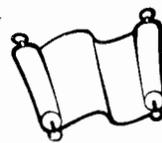


Christians celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas and his resurrection at Easter.

The Bible—God's word for Christians

The Bible is the book of writings (scriptures) that Christians believe is the word of God. The Bible's contents existed in oral form and as scattered writings for many years before they were put into the written form that is now called the Bible.

Researchers continue to find previously unknown early versions of these writings (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls), causing reconsideration of what the meaning of certain parts of the Bible might be.



In its present form the Bible is divided into books, with each book divided into chapters and each chapter divided into verses. These divisions are mainly for convenience; some have no relation to logical groupings of the contents. The books that are considered legitimate parts of the Bible are called the "canon." Not all Christian groups agree, however, on exactly which books belong in the canon or on the order they belong in.



The best-known translation of the Bible into English was authorized by King James I of England in 1611. Many English-speaking Christians consider it still to be the version with the greatest poetic and literary value. However, many believe that recent English translations more accurately reflect the original documents' meaning and communicate the Bible's message more effectively today.

Two testaments—two covenants

The Bible is divided into two main parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. "Testament" in this usage refers to "covenant," meaning an agreement or relationship that God established with God's followers.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. The first book, Genesis, includes stories of how God created the world. The Old Testament contains mainly laws, history, prophecy (messages that God instructs certain people to deliver), wise sayings, and poetry. It describes the religious life of ancient Israel.



The New Testament was originally written in Greek, with small parts in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. The New Testament is much smaller than the Old Testament. The New Testament tells mainly about Jesus' life and teachings, and about the beginning of the church. However, the earliest part of the New Testament was not written until about twenty years after Jesus' death.



Books about Jesus and the church

The first four books—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are accounts of Jesus' life. They are called the gospels. The first three contain similar material and are called "synoptic," meaning "having the same view," but they differ in their approach and in many details. All four gospels were written by people who were followers of Jesus during or soon after his lifetime. "Gospel" means "good news." Sometimes it refers to these four books, and sometimes it refers to the whole message of Christ.



The fifth book, The Acts of the Apostles (usually called "Acts") describes the beginning of the church. Many other New Testament books were written by Paul or his followers. Paul lived after Jesus and was originally an enemy of the early Christians. However, he was converted and called by God to spread the gospel to Gentiles (non-Jewish people). He started many churches, in areas that are now mostly in Greece, Italy, and Turkey. He continued to guide them by sending them letters that were copied and passed around among churches, and those letters came to be considered scripture.

The last book of the New Testament, The Revelation to John (usually called "Revelation") describes a time when God's rule will be complete. This book is in a style called "apocalyptic," which also appears in other parts of the Bible. It uses images and symbols to tell about a future time. Christians disagree about how it should be interpreted.



Some widely used Christian terms

▪ **Grace** means God's gifts or favor, given without our doing anything to earn or deserve them.

▪ **The Trinity** is the name for the three ways in which people experience God. They are usually called Father (creator, provider), Son (Jesus, savior), and Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost, Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, often symbolized by a dove, wind, or flame). "Trinity" is not in the Bible. Its use began in the early centuries of the church. The Trinity is often symbolized by three-part symmetrical figures.



▪ **Atonement** means making amends or restoring a broken relationship. Most Christians believe that Jesus was sinless but that he died to pay the penalty for the sin of all humankind. Jesus' death restored the broken relationship between God and human beings, and his resurrection showed his power over death. For this reason, the cross, representing Jesus' death and resurrection, is the main symbol of Christianity.



▪ **Sin** is behavior that opposes what God wants.

▪ **Conversion** (new birth, being "born again") means accepting Jesus Christ as one's savior and thus spiritually entering a new kind of life.

▪ **Repentance** means turning around—changing the direction of one's life as a result of becoming aware of one's sin and turning away from it.

▪ **Evangelism** comes from the Greek word for "good news." It means communicating the good news of Jesus Christ, often with the aim of persuading someone to become a Christian.



▪ **Disciples** are followers of a master, who are learning to be like him. Twelve men have traditionally been portrayed as Jesus' original disciples. However, his original disciples also included women, who traveled with him and financed his ministry. Also the first witnesses to his resurrection were women. The early church called one of them, Mary of Magdala, "the apostle to the apostles."

▪ **Apostles** often means "disciples." However, "apostles" can mean people to whom God gives special assignments like starting new churches.

▪ **Sacraments** are symbolic actions based on events in Jesus' life, through which God is revealed or acknowledged. One is baptism—being sprinkled with water or immersed in water. Baptism represents being cleansed of sin and spiritually born into new life. Another is Holy Communion, also called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. It consists of eating bread that represents Christ's body, and drinking

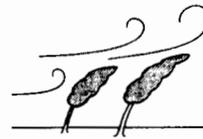


wine or juice that represents Christ's blood. Some church groups also consider other religious practices to be sacraments.

The church, the body of Christ

The church includes all Christians—those who have lived in earlier times and those who are alive today. However, Christians often use “church” to mean a particular group of Christians such as a denomination or local congregation, or the building in which they meet. Over the centuries the church has evolved into two main branches—eastern and western—and many other divisions, because of different interpretations of Christian beliefs and practices.

Christians consider the church to be the body of Christ—the human group in whom the Holy Spirit



now lives. They believe that God now calls the church to do the kinds of ministries that Jesus' earthly, human body did during his earthly lifetime—making disciples, teaching, healing, freeing people from all kinds of oppression, and doing other acts of love and justice that show the world what God is like and how God wants all people to live.



That's my description of Christianity. I hope it helps you to think about yours.

Barbara



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An interesting challenge— summarizing Christianity

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.



—John 13:34-35

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly



with your God.

—Micah 6:8

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” ... Then [Jesus] began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”



—Luke 4:18-19, 21

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