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RELEVANT LINKS

## FACT SHEET

# CHRISTIANITY FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST

Christianity evolved from the teachings of Jesus Christ– followers believe that Christ is the **son of God**, and his life is detailed in the first four books of the New Testament. Jesus was born a Jew in Roman occupied Palestine, an approximate date for his birth is 4 BCE. This occurred, according to Christian belief, after his mother Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel to announce that she would give birth to the son of God. Mary's conception was seen as a divine act and, therefore she is known as the '**Virgin**' and often referred to as the '**Madonna**'. (translated as our lady)

Jesus was born (celebrated by the Christmas festival) and brought up in Nazareth and at the age of 30 was baptised and began a life of teaching. He travelled throughout Palestine in the company of his 12 Disciples who recognised him as the **Messiah**, promised by God to Israel.

Jesus came into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman government also saw Jesus as a threat to their rule and refused to tolerate his presence. Eventually, Jesus came into direct conflict with the authorities. The Romans arrested Jesus and after a trial he was convicted and crucified. Christians believe that three days after his death Jesus was resurrected from the dead. (This is celebrated today as Easter)

### CENTRAL BELIEFS

That Jesus died for the salvation of all people and that his resurrection was not merely a symbol of a triumph of life over death but an actual event in history.

Christians believe in one God and yet their scriptures speak of:

- God the father and creator
- Jesus Christ the son of God
- The divine Holy Spirit

To express this mystery of God's nature Christians sometimes speak of the 'Holy Trinity', meaning one God, but yet three divine persons. Since the word Trinity is not found in the Scriptures, some Christians prefer not to use it in speaking of God.

Christians also believe in the concept of **sin**, which separates people from God. People who follow their own desires, for self gratification can be seen as sinning. In order to establish a true relationship with God they must adopt Christian beliefs, particularly that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, and place God first.

The Christian **Bible** includes the Jewish **Torah, Prophets and writings** (Old Testament) and a number of additional books written after the death of Jesus (New Testament). Different branches of the Church have differing numbers of books in the New Testament. Interpretation of the Bible varies from those who believe it should be taken literally to those who believe the scriptures can be adapted to modern life.




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**HOLY SITES**
**Church of Nativity, Bethlehem**

Some Christians believe that the church has been built at the site of Jesus' birth.

**Church of Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem**

The 'site' of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and subsequent ascent to heaven.

**CHURCH**

Christian worship is associated with the 'church'. Ecclesiastical architecture has changed over time but the layout of the church in the shape of the cross, orientated towards the east remains in many places. The main door of a church (west) leads into the **nave**, which is then bisected by the northern & southern **transepts**. The **altar** is sited at the eastern end of the church.

**BRANCHES OF CHRISTIANITY**

There are many branches within the Christian faith. The three major groups from which many sects have developed are Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox.

With the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 CE, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. However when political division within the Roman Empire occurred in the 5<sup>th</sup> C with two separate administrative regions based in Rome and Constantinople (Istanbul) it eventually led to religious division as well.

Disagreement began to occur between head of the church in Rome – the **Pope**, and the head of the church in Constantinople – the **Patriarch**. The split is known as the '**Great Schism**'. The Western Church became known as Roman Catholic while the Eastern Church became known as Orthodox.

**Roman Catholic**

Catholics trace their history back to the disciple Peter who settled in Rome and became the leader of the church. The Pope (who is the complete authority) is seen to direct authority from Peter and therefore from Jesus himself.

Approximately half the world's Christians are Catholic and membership of this church involves participating in the seven sacraments: **baptism**, taking **communion**, **confirmation**, marriage, confession, unction, & ordination.

The service is known as **mass** and is conducted by a priest.

**Orthodox**

Means 'true' or 'right' worship, orthodoxy is the established religion in Russia, Greece and Armenia and other Eastern European states.

The head of the Orthodox Church is the **Patriarch of Constantinople**. The church follows similar ceremonies to Rome but two significant differences are the worship and adoration of religious images known as icons, and the use of the Julian calendar.

**Protestants**

The second major schism within the Christian church occurred when calls for religious reform of the Catholic Church led to religious division in Western Europe. The Reformists demanded a halt to corrupt activities and acts of godlessness, such as the Sale of Indulgences. Reformists broke from Rome and viewed the Bible and not the Pope as the ultimate authority. A variety of Protestant sects developed, some such as Anglicans, follow similar practices to Catholics while many other groups have evolved over time with very different philosophies and practices.

Examples of Protestant groups: Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, Baptist.




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### CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

Many celebrations of Christian faith occur throughout the year

- **Easter:** The most important festival. It commemorates Jesus' death and resurrection
- **Christmas:** Celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ
- **Lent:** 40 days prior to Easter, a time when devout Christians observe penance and fasting and/or abstinence from some foodstuffs.
- **Annunciation:** Commemorates the conception of Jesus, when the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary.
- **All Saints:** Follows Halloween and celebrates all recognised saints.
- **Pentecost:** Commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Disciples (also known as Whitsunday).

### DIETARY LAWS

Christians are not bound by dietary laws but during Lent some abstain from certain foods such as meat and dairy products or other 'desirous' products/activities. The beginning of Lent is marked by Ash Wednesday and it concludes on Palm Sunday (when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem). Good Friday is a day of special observance, because this is the day on which Jesus died.

The day before Lent (Shrove Tuesday) people in some countries often use up surplus food, so as not to waste food which will not be consumed during Lent, and this is commemorated by 'pancake races'. This day is sometimes referred to as Pancake Tuesday.

### CHRISTIANITY IN NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand is a secular country with a predominantly Christian culture that has its foundation in the religious nature of its early European settlers. In the early 1800s Catholic and mainline protestant churches such as the Anglican and Presbyterian churches, sent missionaries to New Zealand. They had a profound influence on the early colonisation of New Zealand as they planted churches, founded schools and converted many indigenous Maori and other settlers. In the mid 1800s some 80% of the population adhered to the Christian faith. Today the influence of these early Catholic and Protestant religions can be seen by the church buildings that occupy the centre of many towns, the church schools and other social services provided for by these religious institutions, as well as the Christian public holidays and Christian rituals used in national institutions such as parliament.

By the 1920s the influence of Christianity in New Zealand had started to decline and by the 2001 census, only 58% of the general population claimed to be Christian. Over the past twenty years, there has been a growth in ethnic churches, international Catholicism, and other religious groups, but a steady decline in mainstream Protestantism, particularly in Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist churches. Today there is a revival in some sectors, notably in the Evangelical, Pentecostal and Orthodox Churches, and there has been a growth in 'megachurches' which are often found in the larger urban centres and attract many younger adherents with their contemporary style of worship. There is also a greater variety of denominations – perhaps reflecting the influence of immigrants, cultural diversity and the globalisation of religion.

A recent One News/Colmar Brunton Poll, taken in March 2005 showed that 24% of those surveyed attended a place of worship, not necessarily a Christian Church, at least once or twice a month, whilst 54% did not visit at all. This poll may be taken as a good indication of the loyal core of New Zealanders who will attend a church or some other place of worship reasonably often indicating that many New Zealanders remain attached to either Christianity or some other religion.