

Christianity

STEVE AND RENEE WALKER have had a lot to look forward to during the past two years. First, there was the long-awaited arrival of little Simone, who brings gladness to her parents and her brother, Brent. Today there will be another exciting event as the Walkers present Simone for **baptism** into a spiritual family that Christians call the Church.

Whereas some Christians prefer to baptize adult believers who understand and accept the essential teachings of Christianity, others such as the Walkers believe that baptism is a special means by which God's love begins to grow even within small children. Wanting Simone to be touched by God in this way, they have arranged for her baptism to take place at St. James's Episcopal Church, where they have found friendship and fellowship with others.

Now the church is filled with worshipers whispering quietly in rows of pews while waiting for the service to begin. When it does, the organist fills the building with resplendent strains of music that seem to shake its foundations, the congregation launches into a favorite hymn, and a procession of clergy makes its way to the front of the church. After welcoming everyone, the priest, Father Robert, pronounces a blessing upon them. Then all eyes turn toward the baptismal font, an elevated basin of water. Steve, Renee, and Brent are waiting there, with Renee holding Simone in her arms.

A priest baptizes a baby girl as her family looks on.

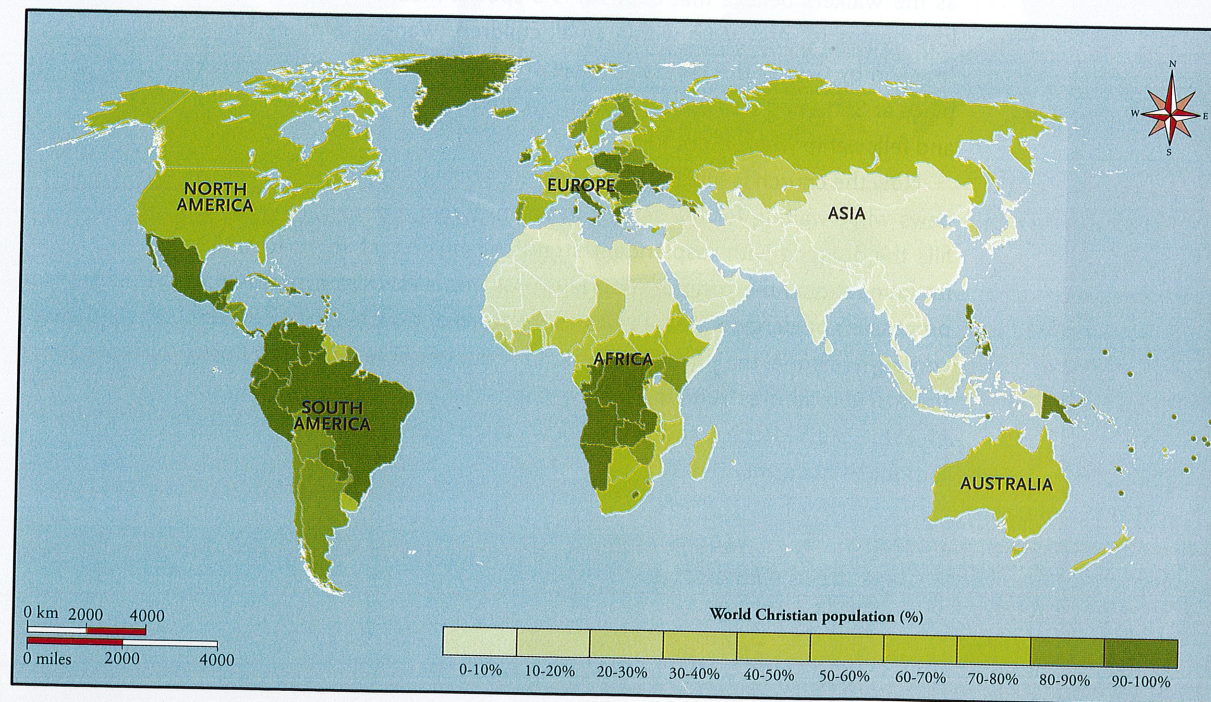


Father Robert now enters into a formal dialogue with Steve and Renee, asking if they will bring up Simone in the Christian faith, if they renounce evil in all its forms, and if they put their trust in the grace and love of Jesus Christ. Answering for themselves and on behalf of Simone, they respond affirmatively. Then, dipping a small silver cup into the water of the baptismal font, Father Robert pours a bit of it three times on Simone's forehead. As he does so, he says, "Simone, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Then, placing his hand on Simone's forehead, he marks the sign of the cross and adds, "Simone, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Amen."

Now that the baptismal ritual is complete, Simone's family returns to their seats to await the end of the service. Soon they will be on their way home to join friends and relatives for a festive dinner and celebration of the new life that Simone will live, not just with the Walker family but in communion with more than 2 billion Christians worldwide. ☀

There are three great traditions within Christianity. Historically, the **Roman Catholic Church** has been the dominant church in the West. In the East (for the purposes of this chapter, the region extending from the Adriatic to Middle East), most Christians have belonged to the **Orthodox Church** (also known as the Eastern Orthodox Church). **Protestant Christianity**, which consists of thousands of "denominations," grew out of the Roman Catholic tradition in the sixteenth century. Although these churches have been shaped in different ways by complex historical and

World Christian population.



cultural forces, they are united by shared beliefs that lie at the heart of Christianity. Christians acknowledge a personal and transcendent God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. The Christian doctrine of the **Trinity** describes God as one in essence but consisting in three "persons": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians believe that communion with God, in this life and in eternity, is the ultimate purpose of human existence. But there is an obstacle to be overcome: sin. The violation of God's will in thought or action, **sin** is common to all humanity. Worse, sin separates the individual from God. What is needed is the forgiveness that God gives to all who believe that the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, atoned for all sin. For Christians, the sacrifice of Christ is the supreme expression of divine love. Similarly, they see in his resurrection and ascension into heaven a sign that not even death can separate from God those who respond to God's love. Although they remain imperfect, Christians believe that the destructive power of sin is no longer the primary force in their lives, for they have been baptized into a new "life in Christ."

We begin our investigation of Christianity with a survey of its teachings. We then trace the history of Christianity from the earliest days after the death of Jesus to the present time. Finally, we explore the practices by which Christians give outward expression to their beliefs in their daily lives.

THE TEACHINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

By the first century (as was discussed in Chapter 11), Palestinian Jews had endured centuries of oppression under foreign conquerors, always struggling to preserve their unique religion and culture. Their situation became especially dangerous with the arrival of the Romans (63 B.C.E.), whose brutality fueled a bitter resentment that ultimately led to a Jewish rebellion. Tragically, the revolt ended with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the center of Jewish religious life, in 70 C.E.

TIMELINE Christianity

c. 30 C.E.	Crucifixion of Jesus.
c. 46–60	Paul's missionary journeys.
70–100	Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John written.
313	Constantine decrees religious freedom for Christians.
325	Council of Nicea declares God the Son to be "of the same substance as God the Father."
354–430	Augustine of Hippo, first great theologian of the West and author of the <i>Confessions</i> and <i>City of God</i> .
367	Contents of New Testament established.
529	Benedict of Nursia writes the <i>Benedictine Rule</i> .
949–1022	Simeon the New Theologian and the beginning of Hesychasm.
c. 1000	Conversion of Russia to Orthodox Christianity begins.
1054	The Great Schism divides the churches of East and West.
1095–1272	Western Crusaders repeatedly attempt to free the Holy Land from Muslim rule.
1184	Pope Lucius III inaugurates the Inquisition.
1198–1216	Height of papal power under Innocent III.
1265–1274	Thomas Aquinas writes the <i>Summa Theologica</i> .
1453	Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, falls to the Ottoman Turks.
1517	The Protestant Reformation begins when Martin Luther posts his Ninety-Five Theses.
1534	King Henry VIII establishes Church of England.
1545–1563	Council of Trent, at which the Roman Catholic Church responds to the Protestant movement.
1647	George Fox founds the Society of Friends (Quakers).
1703–1791	John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement.
1804–1814	Napoleon, Emperor of the French, acts to strip the Roman Catholic Church of its influence.
1834	The Spanish Inquisition, the last stage of the Inquisition, is formally abolished.
1869–1870	First Vatican Council declares doctrine of papal infallibility.
1948	Founding of the World Council of Churches
1962–1965	Second Vatican Council.

Jewish groups responded to these pressures in different ways. Pharisees defended Jewish tradition through strict observance of the Torah. Sadducees cooperated with the Romans in the hope of preserving social stability. Zealots advocated anti-Roman violence. Essenes withdrew to the desert lands outside Jerusalem to wait for divine deliverance.

Believing that God would soon bring an end to unrighteousness, many Jews looked for the coming of a **Messiah** who would inaugurate a new era of justice and peace. Originally, messiah (“anointed one”) was a title given to Israel’s kings, who were anointed with oil as a sign of God’s favor. Later, it came to mean the deliverer God would “anoint” to save the Jewish people from oppression. Some looked for a supernatural Messiah. Others watched for a descendant of David, ancient Israel’s greatest king. Most believed the Messiah would rule as king and judge the wicked and the righteous.

The first Christians were Palestinian Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah—in Greek, the *Christos*, or “Christ.” They proclaimed him as a deliverer not from earthly oppression but from the power of sin. In Jesus, they saw the beginning of a new era of righteousness and peace evident in his teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection.

The Life of Jesus

Our most important sources for the life and teachings of Jesus are the **gospels** of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Written between approximately 70 and 100 C.E., the gospels are early Christian proclamations of the “good news” (“gospel,” from Middle English *godspel*, translates the Greek *evangelion*, “good news”) about Jesus’ teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection. Because their interests are more theological than biographical, the gospels leave much unsaid about the life of Jesus. Still, their essential agreement on many points does allow us to establish the general outlines of his career and teachings.

The gospels report that Jesus was born in the Judean city of Bethlehem. We cannot be certain of the date; Matthew suggests that Jesus’ birth occurred before 4 B.C.E., Luke by 1 B.C.E. Jesus spent his youth in the Galilean village of Nazareth. At about the age of thirty, he made his way south to the Judean wilderness, where he was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. A prophetic figure who warned of God’s imminent judgment, John called on sinners to repent and be baptized in water as a sign of spiritual cleansing.

After his baptism, Jesus began a ministry that lasted no more than three years. The gospels say that as he traveled throughout Galilee he performed healings and

Mass baptism of Christians at Yardenit, the site on the Jordan River in northern Israel where Christian tradition says Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.



miracles that testified to God’s presence within him. The gospel accounts also describe Jesus as a charismatic teacher who spoke with authority on the scriptures and urged repentance and baptism in anticipation of the coming **kingdom of God**, a new era of peace and holiness. He was accompanied by an inner group of disciples, sometimes called “the twelve,” led by three Galilean fishermen (Peter, James, and John), as well as by people from towns, villages, and the countryside. There were also Galilean women among Jesus’ disciples who supported his ministry with their own resources. Indeed, women figure prominently in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry. Rejecting the social norms of his time, he befriended women and spoke and ate with them both in public and in private. When even the twelve abandoned Jesus in his final days, it was only the faithful women among his followers who remained with him.

As enthusiasm for his teachings and miracles grew, Jesus’ popularity aroused resentment and opposition among members of the religious establishment. Jesus himself appears to have understood that dark days lay ahead. As he prepared to leave Galilee for Jerusalem, he warned his disciples that rejection, suffering, and death awaited him there.

Jesus arrived in the holy city just before Passover in or around 30 C.E. The gospels describe a triumphal entry in which crowds greeted him as the Messiah. Entering the Temple, he caused a great stir by driving out those who did business there, accusing them of making the sacred place a “den of robbers.” For several days Jesus taught in the Temple, but then events took an ominous turn. After celebrating a “Last Supper” (perhaps a Passover Seder meal) with his disciples, Jesus was brought before a council of Jewish leaders and then handed over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Fearing that Jesus was a threat to public order, Pilate ordered his execution. Jesus was crucified less than a week after he had entered Jerusalem.

The gospels add theological reflections to this historical outline. Matthew and Luke assert that Jesus’ mother, Mary, was a virgin who conceived miraculously in fulfillment of prophecy (Isaiah 7:14). All four of the gospels say that the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit, descended upon Jesus at the time of his baptism. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a voice from heaven then declared: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well

Palestine during the time of Jesus.



pleased" (Matthew 3:17). In this way, the gospels link Jesus to King David, who is described in Psalms 2:1–7 as God's "anointed" and "son." The gospels also identify Jesus as the "servant" of God who would suffer for the sake of humanity, as foretold by one of Israel's prophets (Isaiah 42:1–4; 53:10–12). Finally, the gospels report that women who had followed Jesus found his tomb empty at dawn on the Sunday following his crucifixion. They and the other disciples were overjoyed when Jesus appeared to them and they remembered what he had once told them: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise again" (Luke 9:22). Convinced that he was indeed God's Messiah, they began to proclaim the good news that God had acted through Jesus for the salvation of the world.

According to the Acts of the Apostles (found in the Christian scriptures), Jesus remained with his disciples for forty days after his resurrection. Then, having sent them out as **apostles** (Greek *apostolos*, "one who is sent out") to preach to Jews and Gentiles alike, he ascended into heaven. Several days later, as they celebrated the Jewish holiday of **Pentecost**, Jesus' followers were suddenly "filled with the Holy Spirit," the same Spirit of God that had descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Acts 2:2–4). Empowered by the Spirit to carry out the mission Jesus had given them, they found themselves able to speak in languages they had not known before, to prophesy, and to perform miraculous healings. According to Acts, the number of believers grew rapidly, for "many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43). Acts also reports that the first Christians spent "much time together in the temple" (Acts 2:46), reminding us that they were Jews who continued to live and worship as Jews. It did not occur to them that their belief that Jesus was the Messiah had given them a new religious identity outside of Judaism.

The Teachings of Jesus

The gospels describe Jesus as a great teacher who astounded the crowds who gathered to hear him, "for he taught them as one having authority" (Matthew 7:29). Although he engaged in debate with learned Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus also took great interest in ordinary people. He often taught them in **parables**, stories that employed vivid images from everyday life to illustrate spiritual truths.

The central theme in Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God (in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven). For Jesus, the kingdom of God was not an ordinary realm but the state of affairs that exists when human beings recognize God's sovereignty over the world and respond in love and obedience to God's will. To put it another way, the kingdom of God means the world as it ought to be, a world in which God's love and righteous rule are fully realized. In the gospels, Jesus sometimes speaks of the kingdom as a future event to be heralded by dramatic signs such as a darkening sun and stars falling from heaven. In the midst of these cataclysmic events, the present age would pass away and the kingdom would be revealed in all its glory. But Jesus also spoke

of the kingdom as already present within himself and his followers. Asked when it would come, he replied that it was already present: "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). Though it was still small, Jesus expected the kingdom to grow into something great and wondrous. In one of his parables, he compared it to a tiny mustard seed that "grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade" (Mark 4:30). Whether speaking of the kingdom of God as present or future, Jesus emphasized its all-surpassing importance. Nothing can compare to the kingdom, he said, and so it is worth any price: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44).

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is open to all who repent. By repentance, he meant something more than a mere expression of regret for some wrong one has done. The Greek *metanoia* ("a change of mind") found in the gospels suggests a turning away from anything that might prevent one from doing God's will. Like other Jews, Jesus found God's will expressed in the Torah and its commandments. In his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), however, he gave the commandments his own interpretation, emphasizing that what God requires is obedience in thought as well as in deed. For Jesus, it was this absolute obedience to the will of God that constituted the true righteousness of the kingdom of God.

Jesus also taught that true obedience to God's commandments was an expression of love. When pressed by a Pharisee to identify the greatest of the commandments, he cited two (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18), explaining that they embody the essence of scripture: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37–40).

The nature of love lies at the heart of Jesus' teachings. The gospels use the Greek word *agape*, which denotes the love one has for one's family as well as God's love for humanity. Jesus taught that genuine love knows no limits and is offered freely to everyone: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44–45). Understood in this way, love leaves no room for the condemnation of others: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1). Instead, love requires forgiveness: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matthew 6:14). These principles are richly illustrated in Jesus' parables. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), for example, demonstrates that even enemies deserve love and compassion. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), a father greets a dissolute and disrespectful son who has returned home— not with any thought of reproach, but with love and forgiveness gladly given.

The gospels describe Jesus as embodying these principles of repentance, obedience, and love. They also depict Jesus as living in the expectation of his crucifixion. In Mark, he tells his disciples that his death will be “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus spoke of God as Father, sometimes using the Aramaic *abba* (“papa”) to suggest a relationship of special intimacy, as well as obedience. He urged his followers to draw close to God as well. They were God’s children, he told them. As such, they should approach God in prayer with the words “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9) and with confidence that, like a loving parent, he would provide for their needs (Luke 12:22–31).

As we discuss later in this section, these fundamental teachings of Jesus lie at the heart of what Christians believe about sin, divine love, and salvation. But we first turn our attention to Paul of Tarsus, the first great interpreter of the life and teachings of Jesus, to see how Christian beliefs began to take shape in the years immediately following Jesus’ crucifixion.

Paul and the Mission to the Gentiles

The most famous of the Jewish Christians who took the gospel and its teachings to Gentile lands was **Paul of Tarsus**. A Pharisee devoted to Judaism, Paul had been a persecutor of Christians, but after a dramatic experience of the risen Christ (Acts 9:1–19), he dedicated himself to preaching Christianity in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Greece, and Macedonia. In his letters to young churches in Corinth, Thessalonica, Rome, and other cities, we can see Paul breaking with traditional Jewish thought in emphasizing God’s love for Gentiles and disputing the necessity of observing the commandments in the Torah. Because Paul was the first to describe the role of Jesus in the salvation of humanity from sin, some have described him as the second founder—and even the *true* founder—of Christianity. It was due in part to his influence that Christianity was transformed in the middle of the first century from a Jewish sect into a largely Gentile movement.

At the heart of Paul’s teaching was his belief that in Jesus Christ God had acted to bring salvation from sin to the world. Paul saw sin as a condition affecting all humanity: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Controlling human beings and separating them from God, sin corrupts and ultimately destroys human life (Romans 6:23). For Paul, the good news of the gospel was that God’s promise of salvation from sin, anticipated in the Jewish Scriptures, had been fulfilled in Jesus’ death on the cross. Though sinless and undeserving of death, Jesus had offered himself as a perfect sacrifice in atonement for all sin. Although Paul’s language of “sin,” “sacrifice,” and “atonement” may sound strange today, it is really quite similar to what we might mean when we say we have done some “wrong” to someone and that we must do something to “make up for it.” In Paul’s time, Jews and Gentiles alike understood that sacrifice was the means of “making up for” an offense against God, or the gods.

Paul was always emphatic in maintaining that salvation cannot be earned by “works,” whether human efforts to obey the commandments in the Torah (Galatians 3:10) or good works in general. Instead, he taught that the salvation made possible by Christ’s sacrifice is a gift, the ultimate expression of God’s love, or **grace**. Salvation is given to those who respond to God’s grace in faith, the conviction that God has acted through Jesus Christ to atone for human sin. Although Paul was very clear in teaching that salvation depends on God’s grace and the individual’s turning to God in faith, he did not dismiss the importance of works. In Romans 2:5–10, for example, he says that people will be held responsible for the good and evil they do. Paul’s letters are not always precise about the relationship between faith and works, but they leave no doubt about the priority of faith. In his letter to the Galatians (2:16), Paul wrote that individuals are brought into a right relationship with God “not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

For Paul, faith does more than bring salvation; it unites the believer with Christ in a “newness of life” (Romans 6:4) so real that Paul could say, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Like the apostles who had been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Paul believed that the Spirit lives in believers and brings them into union with God. To the Christians at Rome he wrote: “You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:9). As a divine presence within, the Spirit encourages the growth of spiritual virtues, the greatest of which is love (1 Corinthians 12:27–14:1). Paul also believed that the Spirit makes all Christians one in the Church, which he often called the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

Like other early Christians, Paul looked forward to a time when Christ would return in glory to bring an end to evil, sin, and suffering (1 Corinthians 15:20–28). But he also believed that the transformation of the world, signaled by the resurrection of Christ, had already begun. Signs of change were especially evident in the lives of believers, who had been renewed, even re-created, through the action of God’s grace: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

God, Creation, and Original Humanity

Christian thought about God, the world, and humanity begins with the first verse in the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Here, and in the story of creation that follows, the Bible makes a clear distinction between created things and their Creator. God is transcendent, existing outside space, time, and the other limiting factors that give the world its order and finitude. And yet God is also immanent, or present in the world, sustaining and caring for all things with a loving benevolence that touches even the least of creatures.

Much as a work of art tells us something about the artist, Christians believe that creation tells us something about God. Paul made this point in his letter to the