

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

Andrei Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity (1411) is considered a masterpiece of Orthodox religious art. It depicts (from left to right) God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. On one level, the three figures are the "angels" through whom God appeared to Abraham in the Old Testament. On a higher level, they represent the Trinity in a way that uses color, light, and imagery to give the viewer a glimpse into its unfathomable mystery.



Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20). For Christians, the goodness, beauty, power, and design evident in the world are all expressions of God's nature. But it is God's goodness, and the consequent goodness of the world itself, that are emphasized in the biblical story of the world's beginnings. At the completion of each stage of creation, it says, "God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10, 18, 21, 25) and, ultimately, that it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Finally, Christianity teaches that the entire order of existing things, and especially human beings, is the deliberate and purposeful expression of a divine love that a grateful creation should return to God in praise. "Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them" (Psalms 69:34).

Christians believe that, despite its original perfection, the world as we know it today falls far short of God's intentions, plagued as it is by suffering, injustice, and death. These evils cannot be attributed to God, however, for they are completely opposed to God's perfection. Instead, Christianity points to creation itself—and, more specifically, to humanity.

The story of creation relates that "God created humankind in his image" (Genesis 1:27). For centuries, Christian thinkers have sought to understand all that is entailed by this assertion. Some have found the image of God in the human capacity for rational thought. Others have said it can be seen in the "dominion" God gave to human beings over all the earth (Genesis 1:26), which resembles God's rule over the entire universe. All Christian thought, however, acknowledges that human beings have a unique ability to love God, just as God loves them.

This idea is found in the biblical narrative that describes how God placed Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in a garden-like paradise called Eden. Whether we understand Adam and Eve as literal human beings or as symbols of original humanity—the Hebrew word *adam* means "humankind"—the point of the story remains the same. For as long as human beings related to God in loving obedience, they lived in joyous harmony with their Creator, but their eventual decision to disobey God brought an end to that harmony and, consequently, to the harmony of creation as a whole (Genesis 2:4–3:24). It was through sin that evil in all its forms became a reality in the world. Worst of all, sin separated humanity from God. In the Christian view, the salvation of creation from sin's destructive effects begins with the salvation of human beings. It is only through salvation from sin that they are restored to that original relationship with God in which they find their true place, purpose, and fulfillment. In the words of Augustine, the

great fifth-century saint, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."¹

God as Trinity

Like Judaism, Christianity is a monotheistic religion. But Christianity differs from its parent religion in defining the one God in terms of three aspects of divinity. For Christians, there is a single divine nature that expresses itself eternally in the "persons" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not put into precise language until 381 at the Council of Constantinople, one of the meetings at which early Christian leaders assembled to establish doctrine. Building on the work of the Council of Nicea (325), the **bishops** at Constantinople produced the **Nicene Creed**, a statement of the doctrine that many Christians continue to recite in public worship:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [*and from the Son*].
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic ["universal"] and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

As you can see, the Creed is divided into three parts corresponding to the three "persons" of the Trinity. It tells us about the relationships among the three persons as well as the functions of each.

How do Christian teachings about God compare with those of the related religions of Judaism and Islam and those of Hinduism and Buddhism?

Adam and Eve Banished from Paradise. In this fresco, the Renaissance painter Tommaso Masaccio (1401–1428) captured both the shame of Adam and Eve and the fear they felt as they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and separated from God.



The opening statement is about God the Father, the omnipotent (“almighty”) Creator of all reality, spiritual as well as material, visible as well as invisible. There is one God, upon whom all things depend for their existence.

The second part of the Creed focuses on God the Son, who is “one in Being with the Father”—that is, of the same divine substance or essence as the Father. For the sake of humanity, the Son became fully human as well as fully divine. As a revelation of divinity on earth, the Son enabled those who recognized him as such to come to a greater understanding of God: “If you know me, you will know my Father also” (John 14:7). Beyond revealing the Father, the Son has three other roles. First, recalling the Gospel of John (1:3), the Creed states that “through him all things were made.” Second, the suffering and death of the Son have made salvation possible. Third, the Son, as the risen Christ, will one day return to judge the world.

The final part of the Creed affirms that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father, implying the Spirit’s sameness in substance or essence with the Father. The addition of the Latin *filioque* (“and from the Son”) by the Western church, never accepted in the East, underscores the sameness of all three persons of the Trinity. Just as the Father represents God’s power in the creation of the world, and just as the Son both reveals the Father and redeems a sinful humanity, the Holy Spirit represents God’s continuing presence in the world. Since the beginning, when God breathed the “breath of life” into Adam (Hebrew *ruach* means both “breath” and “spirit”), the Spirit has given life to all of creation. Christians believe that since the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it has animated, empowered, and guided the Church. Finally, it is the Spirit within that helps believers as they reach out to God in prayer (Romans 8:26) and that nurtures virtues such as love, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

The Consequences of Sin

Christianity emphasizes the sinfulness of human nature. This may seem a harsh way of thinking about human beings. After all, there are good reasons to believe in their essential *goodness*. Of course, Christians do acknowledge the human capacity to do good things. But they are equally aware of the human capacity for evil and the fact that people are often destructive in their thought and behavior. Christianity teaches that sin is universal; everyone sins. It also insists that the tendency to sin is far more serious than an acquired habit one might overcome through greater self-control or moral effort. The inability of

human beings to rise above sin—to be as loving, humble, generous, and righteous as they should be—suggests that something has gone wrong in the perfect world God created and, perhaps, even within human nature. As we will see later in this chapter’s section on theology, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians, on the one hand, and Orthodox Christians, on the other, understand this issue in different ways, though they agree that, because human beings cannot overcome sin on their own, they stand in need of salvation from its power over them—a power that cuts them off from God, the source of all good things.

Grace and Salvation

For Christianity, sin is the fundamental problem of human existence. But it is a problem solved by the good news of God’s grace, the love God gives freely to human beings despite their sin. In the Christian view, it is only through reliance on divine grace that salvation from sin becomes possible.

Christianity explains *how* salvation is made possible by using the language of sacrifice, a common Jewish practice in Jesus’ time. In the sacrificial ritual, the sins of the people were ritually placed on animals sacrificed as innocent victims for the transgressions of others. For Christians, Jesus’ death on the cross was the fulfillment of this sacrificial practice. It is with his crucifixion that the significance of the Christian teaching that Jesus Christ was both human and divine becomes clear. Jesus’ divinity allowed him to do for human beings what they could not do for themselves. As the sinless “lamb of God” (John 1:29), he alone could make the perfect atonement for sin that would allow sinners to be restored to their original relationship with God. As a human being, he could suffer the consequences of sin on behalf of humanity. In doing so, Christians say, Jesus fulfilled the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who spoke of the “suffering servant” of God: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Christians see in Christ’s suffering for the salvation of humanity the supreme proof of God’s grace:

God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

—1 John 4:8

Grace makes salvation possible, but it requires a human response in the form of faith. For Christians, faith is more than intellectual acceptance of the fact that God has made salvation possible through Jesus Christ. Faith in God involves a wholehearted opening of oneself to God so that God’s love replaces sinfulness as the prevailing power in one’s life.

For Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, as well as for some Protestants, good works are an expression of faith, even a part of faith, for a faith that does not involve

action is not faith at all. As the New Testament letter of James (2:26) puts it, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” Most Protestants, in contrast, make a distinction between faith and good works. Because works, they believe, are not a part of faith, works do not contribute to salvation. In support of this view, Protestants cite New Testament passages such as Paul’s letter to the Romans (3:28), “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works.” For those who hold this view, good works are something one does *because* one has faith. The differences here are finely nuanced, but they have profound implications that are partly responsible for the separation of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions.

Christians admit that they are no closer to perfection than anyone else, yet they are confident that faith allows them to “walk in a newness of life” (Romans 6:4) on a path that leads toward rather than away from God.

The Church

Christians do not live the Christian life in isolation. Instead, their faith and baptism unite them with all other believers. In its most basic sense, the Church is the sum of all believers, but most Christians believe that the Church is far more than this. Following Paul, they understand the Church to be the “body of Christ,” a body whose diverse members are unified by the Holy Spirit: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

VOICES: An Interview with Terrie M. and Father Art

Terrie M. is a member of a Roman Catholic church in Sacramento. Father Art is one of three priests who serve its nearly 3,000 members.

How does the Roman Catholic Church stand in relation to other Christian churches?

Terrie: Some people mistakenly make a distinction between “Catholics” and “Christians,” so I want to begin by saying that to be a Catholic is to be a Christian. We share with other Christians our belief in Jesus as Lord. Like other Christians, we believe that salvation comes through faith. We Catholics also believe that God’s love and compassion are boundless and given to all, and so we cannot say that the Roman Catholic Church is the only path to salvation.

Father Art: We share with other Christians our reverence for Sacred Scripture, the inspired Word of God, but we have equal reverence for Sacred Tradition, the handing on to each new generation of the wider reality of all that the Church is and believes—that is, its doctrine, life, and worship. The Church’s teaching authority [*Magisterium*], guided by the Holy Spirit, is both the servant and the authentic

interpreter of the Word of God revealed in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. This authority, exercised in the name of Jesus Christ, has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Catholics grieve that not all Christians share this belief, but I know that all Christian churches recognize some form of tradition and teaching authority, as well as the authority of Sacred Scripture. Our sacred task is to pray and to work for that unity of all Christians desired by Jesus.

What is the great problem of human existence?

Terrie: The great problem we face as human beings is sin, which separates us from God and ultimately results in death. We come into this world, not evil, but certainly with the ability to sin as part of our human condition. Much suffering is caused when we make a choice to live for ourselves. But we are also born with God’s grace, an unmerited love that is given freely. Reconciliation is possible for all, and there is nothing that cannot be forgiven. Through the love of God through Christ Jesus, even death has been conquered and the original goodness of humanity is restored.

Father Art: Sin not only separates us from God, it prevents us from being all that God intends us to be. We are justified before God thanks to the gratuitous gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, given us by the Holy Spirit at baptism. By the gift of God’s grace, we are enabled to live lives of faith expressed in love.

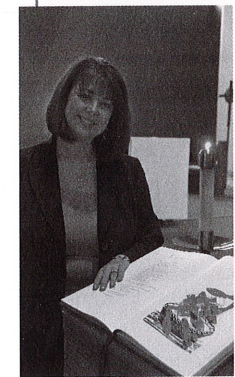
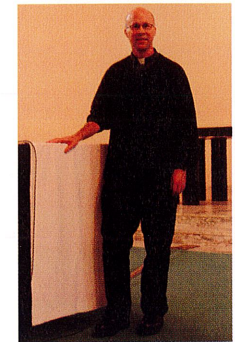
Does being a Roman Catholic give you a heightened awareness or a different way of looking at reality?

Terrie: My reality as a Catholic is grounded in Christ’s teaching that we must love and live for each other. We do not go it alone. It is this knowledge and awareness that helps me see that the joys and challenges of life are navigated together. It is perhaps in the celebration of the Eucharist that I am most aware of my union with others, for this ritual is not so much about eating as it is about sharing—our stories, all that we are, and all that we have.

Father Art: Yes, Christ is made manifest to us in the liturgy and the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. His presence there heightens our sensitivity to his presence throughout the world, in everyday life, in our work, and in our relationships, so that every moment and every situation becomes an opportunity for praise and worship and for sharing our joy with others. ▸

Scripture

When the first Christians spoke of scripture, they meant the Jewish Scriptures—the Hebrew Bible and its translation into Greek, the Septuagint. In Greek, these texts were called *ta biblia*, or “the books”—hence, our English “Bible.” It was not long, however, before certain Christian writings assumed an importance equal to that of the Jewish Scriptures. By the end of the fourth century, there was general agreement that twenty-seven of these texts had greater authority than all others. These came to be known collectively as the New Testament. Since then, the Christian Bible has consisted of the Old Testament (the Jewish Scriptures) and the New Testament.



Father Art and Terrie M.