

COMPARATIVE CHRISTIANITY

COMPARATIVE CHRISTIANITY
A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO A RELIGION AND
ITS DIVERSE TRADITIONS

THOMAS A. RUSSELL



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Comparative Christianity: A Student's Guide to a Religion and its Diverse Traditions

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PREFACE



Christianity! Why in the world do we need yet another book on that subject anyway?

Christianity is the largest religion in the world. Christianity has over two billion members worldwide with many different expressions of beliefs, ways of living, ceremonies, and institutions: the Amish with horse and buggies, Pentecostals who speak in tongues, Ethiopian Orthodox who claim to have the original Ark of the Covenant, and Roman Catholics with the beautiful Sistine Chapel.

After teaching comparative Christianity in stand-alone courses or in comparative religion courses for over 20 years, I have come to the conclusion that students do not know much about Christianity. Either they are practicing believers who feel their own faith is the only version of Christianity or they have no connections with Christianity and know nothing at all about it.

As a result, a new basic introduction to Christianity was needed that could make up for this deficit.

This book attempts to remedy this situation by acquainting students with Christianity and its subgroups.

Choosing who to include is a difficult task in itself. Three approaches can be taken. First, pick 1 Christian group to represent the rest. Second, limit choices to those groups which are seen as legitimately Christian by the majority of Christian bodies in existence today. Third, possibly include any group that claims connections to Christianity, whether or not it adheres to commonly accepted beliefs of the tradition or whether it is recognized as Christian by the majority of existing Christian communities. This approach includes those groups which began in the Christian environment, but have moved to their own unique place outside the norms of the tradition. This book uses the third method.

To carry this out, the text first explores what Christians have in common and then works through the three major subdivisions of the faith, Eastern, Roman, and Protestant Christianity. Using categories common to many definitions of religion, each chapter employs the following categories: beliefs, individual and group moral codes, ceremonies, and associations.¹

¹ Many definitions of the term “religion” use these categories. For examples, see http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_defn.htm, http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_defn.htm and <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/religion>. Two authors have

Beliefs refer to the concepts or ideas of a religion, such as who is God or what happens at death. Individual or group moral codes explore how a religion impacts daily living. For example, does it dictate or suggest how a believer should relate to members of the opposite sex in clothing and activities? Ceremonies explore rituals, both individual and community, that are significant for each group. This discussion includes which ceremonies are performed and what meaning is ascribed to them by the faithful. Finally, associations refer to how a religious community is organized and deals with types of structures for running the group and leadership selection and roles.

Taken together, these four categories give a broadly conceived picture of a particular Christian community. If only one category is explored, little would be known about that community. For example, since students know I teach comparative religions, many will come up to me and ask, “Dr. Russell, what do the Mormons, Roman Catholics, or Jehovah’s Witnesses believe?” With great restraint I normally say something like, “You can’t really know a religion if you only know their beliefs!” I then add, “You need to know about how they live, what rituals they carry out, and how they are organized.”

Each chapter provides many details. Because over the years students have asked about particular groups, I have added more detail about some of these (i.e., the Amish, the Coptic, and the Ethiopian Orthodox churches). Each chapter also includes review questions.

I would like to thank those who have supported my efforts. First, I appreciate the support of several institutions: the University of Memphis, Western Kentucky University, and Belmont University. All have given me the opportunity to teach Comparative Christianity and each have colleagues who have supported me in the teaching and writing process. I owe a large debt of gratitude to Harvard University’s Pluralism Project and the Louisville Institute for the three grants given me that have supported my research. Armed with their money, I have had the time to observe religious services and meet community members of many of these faiths. A big thanks to all my students who have used earlier versions of this book (over 1,000 students in 10 years) and who have contributed their suggestions for added materials. I wish to offer my gratitude to members of many of these communities of faith who have willingly opened their hearts and shared their faith with me. I want to express my thanks to my mother, Elizabeth Russell Fullerton, who died just recently. Her constant question, “When will your book be published?” pushed me ever onward to completion. Finally, and most important, I offer special thanks to my wife, Anne, and my son and his wife, Thomas and

provided excellent examples of the use of these four categories when defining the term religion: Ronald L. Johnstone and Julia Corbett Hemeyer. See Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, 2007) and Julia Corbett Hemeyer, *Religion in America*, 6th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2009).

Stephanie, for their support. Stephanie deserves a special acknowledgement because as a professional graphic artist, she designed the cover for the book.

Hopefully, after using this book, students will understand their neighbors and co-workers a bit more and armed with that fresh understanding, they can foster better community relationships and a better world.

CHAPTER I
✠
INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY

Introduction

Christianity is the largest religion in the world with two billion plus followers found on every continent.¹ Three large movements comprise the Christian movement today: Eastern Christianity, Roman Catholic Christianity, and Protestant Christianity. Followers of Christianity are called Christians.²

Succinctly stated, Christians are men and women who place their trust (i.e., faith) in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Savior refers to the belief that Jesus saves people from their entrapment in sin and Lord means something akin to “boss.”

Christ, the title given to Jesus, is the basis for this religion’s label, Christianity. This term is derived from the Greek word “christos,” which means “anointed.” The Hebrew word for anointed is “mashiah,” hence the English word, “messiah.”

Beliefs: Religious Texts

Jesus wrote nothing of his own. Instead, the Christian community bases its beliefs and practices on the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis to Malachi), which they call the Old Testament and the New Testament (Matthew to Revelation). The Old Testament is written in Hebrew, except for bits of Aramaic.

¹ 33% of the world’s population is Christian, 22% Muslim, 15% Hindu, 14% non-religious, 6% Buddhist, and .5% Jewish.

Current Christian growth is fastest in developing nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For more details, see John Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Followers of Christ were first called Christians or “Christ-ones” at Antioch, Syria in the 40s CE in Acts 11:26.

The New Testament is primarily written in *Koiné Greek*, which means “common” or “street” Greek. This was the language of everyday life. Taken together these collections are called the Bible.

Some Christians add other books. A majority of this extra material comes from a collection called the *Apocrypha*. The Apocrypha was mostly written by anonymous Jews living outside of Palestine after the Hebrew Bible was completed, but before the New Testament was penned. Because of this, this collection is sometimes referred to as Intertestamental Literature. Apocryphal texts include:

1 and 2 Esdras, Additions to Esther, Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Prayer of Manasseh, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Letter to Jeremiah, Prayer of Azariah and the Song of Three Jews, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon and The Wisdom of Solomon.³

Jews used the Apocrypha in the distant past, but do not use it now. According to questionable tradition, it was dropped in 90 CE at a meeting at Yavneh (Jamnia). The Christian community has been split from its earliest years over the inclusion of the Apocrypha in Bibles. Early church leaders, such as Augustine, Cyprian, and Clement, had Bibles that contained the Apocrypha because they used the *Septuagint* as a basis for the Old Testament. The Septuagint was the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, 250 BCE, and it included the Apocrypha. However, other early church leaders followed the Jewish tradition and did not retain them (Origen, Cyril, and Jerome).

Today Catholics and Eastern Christians include the Apocrypha and consider them to be equal to Genesis to Revelation (Roman Catholics call them Deuterocanonical Literature). The former decided this in 1546 CE at the Council of Trent and the Eastern tradition uses a variety of extra books depending on the specific community.

Protestants have either retained the Roman Apocrypha or dropped the material altogether. Martin Luther incorporated these into his 1534 German translation of the Bible, but added that although they were not equal to the

³ Eastern Christianity adds different texts depending on which community is examined. For example, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has 81 books in its canon. For more information, see Chapter Three.

Intertestamental literature also includes another collection of Jewish books, which have never been part of canon and this is called the Pseudepigrapha. These were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek between 200 BCE and 200 CE. They are apocalypses, legendary histories, psalms, and wisdom literature. Some are ascribed to famous people, such as Enoch, Adam, Moses, and Isaiah. Some of these books include: 1 Enoch, The Book of Jubilees, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Psalms of Solomon, Assumption of Moses, the Letter of Aristeas, and 3rd and 4th Maccabees.

rest of the Bible, they were nevertheless “profitable and good to read.” Thanks to him, some Protestants use them for teaching, but do not see them as scripture. Other Protestants explicitly rejected the inspiration, authority, and spiritual usefulness of the Apocrypha.

Bible books were determined to be part of the official collection or canon for different reasons. According to questionable tradition, the Jewish portion was determined as a by-product of the Council of Jamnia in 90 CE when only books originally written in Hebrew and written before the “Silent Period” began were included.⁴ The Christian portion (or the New Testament) used three criteria for acceptance:

- Did an original apostle or Paul write the book? This gave the book a ring of authenticity and authority.
- Did the book have widespread use in the ancient Christian community? The more the book was used in the ancient Christian community, the more it was accepted.
- Did the content of the book agree with what was commonly held as orthodox? If it did, it was accepted. If not, the book was rejected for the New Testament.

What Christians call the Old Testament (in opposition to the New Covenant initiated by Jesus Christ) is the Hebrew *TANAK*. The *TANAK* includes three sections: the Pentateuch or first five books (Genesis through Deuteronomy), the Prophets (an extensive collection from Joshua to Malachi) and the Writings (books such as Proverbs and Psalms).

The New Testament can be divided into two sections: the four Gospels and Acts through Revelation. The most important sources about the life and mission of Jesus are the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The first three are called the Synoptics because they “have a common view.” The Gospels are selective histories of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. None intends to tell everything. Instead, the authors only include what they believe is important for their readers. Acts through Revelation contain three types of literature: history (Acts), letters, and an apocalypse (Revelation). Like the Gospels, the Book of Acts is a selective portrayal of the developments in the earliest years of the Christian faith as it spread from Palestine to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. The first part of the book deals with the Apostle Peter, while the second section focuses on the Apostle Paul. New Testament letters were written by several authors to a variety of churches and individuals. They were either responses to specific situations or problems in the church or they were general letters with wide-ranging content. These

⁴ The “Silent Period” refers to the end of the Jewish prophetic line, which occurred after 450 BCE.

letters were written to churches or individuals. Revelation is an apocalyptic work, filled with symbols (i.e., 666), climactic battles (i.e., Armageddon), and visions of heaven, earth, and judgment.

Beliefs: Religious Tradition

Religious tradition may be defined as anything a community of faith writes or pronounces outside of the foundational religious texts. This category includes hymns, prayers, sermons, theological and devotional writings, and canon or church law or organizational rules.

Christians maintain three distinct views on how to handle tradition in relation to the Bible. In other words, what is (are) the final authorities used to determine beliefs and practices?

Eastern Christians maintain that the Bible and the tradition of the church until 1054 CE when Eastern and Western Christianity went separate ways are equal authorities. Roman Catholicism teaches that the Bible and the tradition of the church until this very moment are equal authorities. Finally, Protestantism believes that the Bible is the sole authority with tradition playing a secondary, informative role.

To better understand these distinctions, it is advisable to examine a specific example: Purgatory. Purgatory is the belief that at death Christians may go to another destination rather than heaven or hell. Some believers may need to go to Purgatory for further cleansing and preparation prior to entering heaven.

If a person says, “Where is this doctrine found in the Bible and/or the first 1,000 years of Christian tradition?” they are thinking like an Eastern Christian. If they ask, “Where is this doctrine taught in the Bible and/or by church tradition up until this moment?” they are thinking like a Roman Catholic. If an individual says, “Where is this doctrine taught in the Bible?” they are thinking like a Protestant.

Beliefs: Other Foundations

Christianity begins with the life of Jesus, a Jew living in Roman times. There was a time when arguments against his existence were made with credibility.⁵ However, that position has little respect today.

⁵ Examples of scholars and historians who have argued against the existence of Jesus as an actual historical figure include: Constantin-Francois Volney, Charles Francois Dupuis, Bruno Bauer, George Albert Wells, Earl Doherty, and Robert M. Price. Specific arguments put forth have been: the lack of eyewitnesses, a lack of archaeological evidence, the absence of Jesus in ancient written materials, and the notion that Jesus is actually a mix of ancient mythologies. For a summary, see Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A. D. 337*, Volume 3 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944).

Instead, arguments about Jesus swirl around what he said and did. Did he claim divinity for himself and did he perform miracles? Were apparent claims to divinity or assertions that he performed miracles merely added by the early church to enhance the new faith's credibility?

This all goes back to a person's presuppositions about the veracity of the biblical text and assumptions about the viability of miraculous events (see later for the debate between traditionalists and modernists).

The biblical texts *say* or *suggest* the following about Jesus:

- He was born between 7 and 3 BCE in Bethlehem, Judea.
- He grew up in Nazareth as a Jew.
- He began his formal ministry when baptized by John the Baptist.
- He gathered disciples.
- He taught about the Kingdom of God, often using parables.
- His teachings put him in direct conflict with the Jewish establishment.
- He suffered and then died on the cross at the hands of the Romans, encouraged by Jewish leaders, probably for the crime of sedition.
- He claimed to be the Son of Man, the Son of God, and Messiah.
- He rose from the dead.
- He ascended into heaven.
- He promised to return one day.

From its beginning, the Christian community created statements of beliefs and practices for the devout called *Creeeds*. Not only do they serve as summaries of what early Christians thought, but also they are a helpful way of understanding Christianity. Today, certain Christian groups repeat these regularly in their services, while others never use them. In either case, the majority of Christians agree on what is being said.

For hundreds of years, Christians believed that the 12 original apostles penned the creed that bears their name, *The Apostles' Creed*. It was thought that each of the original 12 contributed one statement individually. Today, practically all scholars assume that this story is factitious. That being said, many consider the creed to have been influenced by these individuals because it is in fundamental agreement with their ideas. The fullest form of the Apostles' Creed seems to have appeared around 700 CE; however, sections of the creed come from earlier documents with the most significant being the Old Roman Creed. This probably originated in the second half of the second century and may have been used by those about to experience baptism. The Apostles' Creed states:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,

Born of the Virgin Mary,

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

Was crucified, died and buried.

He descended into hell.⁶

The third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven,

And sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.

From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead

I believe in the Holy Spirit;

The holy catholic church,

The communion of saints,

The forgiveness of sins,

The resurrection of the dead,

And the life everlasting.

The Apostles' Creed contains:

- Statements about God
- Statements about Jesus Christ
- Statements about the Holy Spirit
- Statements on miscellaneous topics

The Creed contains two short sections. First, there is one God, who is traditionally captured in the masculine term “Father.” This God is an all-powerful living spirit who created everything. In the second short section, the Apostles’ Creed simply affirms belief in the Holy Spirit.

In the lengthiest section of the Creed, several statements are made about Jesus. These fill out his resume in terms of his person (who he was), and his actions (his birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return). He is God the Father’s only Son and a believer’s Lord or boss. He was conceived and birthed in unique ways (the first by the Holy Spirit, not a human male, and the second, through a virgin mother). Jesus suffered mental and physical anguish during the rule of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, and died on a cross. He rose from the dead on the third day, went up to heaven to be God and will come again to judge all people, living and the dead.

⁶ The phrase “He descended into hell” refers to the belief that between his death and resurrection, Jesus went to the realm of the dead (see 1 Peter 3:19-20).

The creed's last section contains a set of miscellaneous statements. These say that there is one catholic or universal (not Roman Catholic) church. This church is holy (i.e., separated by God and demonstrating God's righteous character) and composed of believers, living and dead in community. There is forgiveness of sins and a future and final resurrection leading to eternal life. The creed makes no statements about the actual final destination of souls.

The Apostles' Creed points to several crucial Christian beliefs. First, whether the specific community uses the word *Trinity*, Christians believe in the concept. While hard to explain to non-Christians who accuse Christians of polytheism, the Trinity is the belief that God is one essence and yet three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

In trying to describe this term, analogy or simile is helpful. The Trinity is like an apple, which is one and yet has constituent parts (core, skin, and meat) or like water, which can be liquid, frozen, or steam.

A second important term is *Incarnation*, in which God became a human being. Third, the *Resurrection* is key to Christian faith. The faithful believe that after three days in the tomb, Jesus rose from the dead in a new spiritual, yet physical or bodily form.

A final idea stemming from the Apostles' Creed has to do with the concept of *Justification by Faith*, a belief that all Christian communities hold in varying forms.

Eastern Christians tend to deemphasize justification compared to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The term itself simply means to be pardoned for one's sins. It is intimately tied to a living, dynamic relationship of the sinner to God.

Roman Catholicism has its own view of justification by faith and this view is different than Eastern or Protestant views. The church teaches that justification is a process beginning with initial justification or "being cleansed from sin," continues with progressive justification or "being made righteous," and is consummated with final justification. The former begins with the work of infused grace at baptism and continues with the grace given by the Holy Spirit, through receiving the sacraments and via good works. During a person's lifetime, the faithful Roman Catholic's mind and heart are slowly made more righteous. Final justification occurs after the final judgment, when a righteous person's righteousness will be revealed.

Protestantism believes that justification occurs in a one-time event in which God declares an unrighteous person is righteous because of the work of Jesus. It is given to all who have faith and is seen as God's gift.⁷

⁷ Roman Catholics and a select group of Protestants have had some significant theological dialogue about the nature and meaning of justification by faith in recent years. A movement called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" or ECT was established in the 1990s. The group claims to have open, frank discussions of the essentials of Christian truth. According to one of the participants, Chuck Colson, these conversa-

Christian Ways of Life

Christians are also called *Disciples*, which comes from the same root word as discipline. Being a disciple means that a believer develops an ethical life based on their faith in Jesus Christ. Christians attempt to live by the motto WWJD or “What Would Jesus Do?” Ethics for these disciples use some combination of primary or revelatory sources (i.e., the Bible and tradition) and non-revelatory sources (i.e., the social sciences and philosophy).

Christian lifestyle varies with each Christian group. Some groups set clear guidelines for their members, which they feel best constitutes what the lives of Christians ought to be like. To be a member in good standing of these groups, a person must follow these clearly delineated rules. Some have to do with such issues as dress (i.e., women’s jewelry or men’s beards) and socialization (i.e., drinking or swimming with members of the opposite sex). Other Christian groups leave the determination of how to live to each member’s individual conscience that has been informed somewhat loosely by their interpretation of the Bible and their group’s tradition.

tions were “not ecumenism in the usual sense of reducing things to the lowest common denominator.” See Charles Colson, “Well Done Good and Faithful Servant,” *Catholic Exchange* (January 23, 2009), <http://catholicexchange.com/2009/01/23/115220/>

Colson claims that the Roman Catholic Church has adopted the Protestant view on justification by faith. He says this has been demonstrated by the affirmation of the Protestant view in the 1997 CE document, “The Gift of Salvation,” and by Pope Benedict XVI’s November 19, 2008 CE comments. In this November 19, 2008 statement, the Pope stated:

That is why Luther’s expression “sola fide” is true if faith is not opposed to charity, to love. Faith is to look at Christ, to entrust oneself to Christ, to be united to Christ, to be conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence, to believe is to be conformed to Christ and to enter into his love. That is why, in the *Letter to the Galatians*, St. Paul develops above all his doctrine on justification; he speaks of faith that operates through charity (cf. Galatians 5:14). (The Pope is the titular head of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church.) Pope Benedict XVI, “On St. Paul and Justification,” see <http://www.zenit.org/article-24302?l=english> (11/19/2008).

In this statement, Pope Benedict remarks that Luther’s “faith alone” for justification is true if that faith is linked to charity and love. Believers are justified by faith in Christ and by the actions that flow from one’s love for him.

The Pope’s statement appears to be simply a reiteration of Roman Catholic views articulated since the Council of Trent in the 1500s CE. However, his speech may also shed light on how differences between certain Protestants and some Roman Catholic theologians are being dealt with on the issue of justification by faith in the early 21st century CE.

Ceremonies

Christians celebrate rituals alone or in groups. They carry out these in a variety of locations: in homes, in fields, on mountain tops, by river banks, and in buildings commonly called churches.

Church architecture differs from group to group and even within the same group. Three common building styles exist: eastern, western liturgical, and western non-liturgical.⁸

Questions about Christian ceremonies include:

- How many ceremonies are there?
- What names are used for these?
- When are these ceremonies held?
- Who officiates at these ceremonies?
- How are these ceremonies carried out?
- Where are these ceremonies carried out?

Ceremonies: The Actual Rituals

Ninety-nine percent of Christians have at least two central rituals, that is, rituals that Christians believe Jesus commanded his followers to carry out. The two are some form of *Baptism* and some form of *Communion*. Baptism is a ceremony that marks a person's entrance into the Christian community. The communion ritual remembers Christ's death. Some Christian groups have up to seven ceremonies, but once one moves beyond the first two, there is little agreement about these others. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians add five: confirmation, penance, ordination, marriage, and last rites. Some add foot washing and/or a holy kiss on the cheek of a member of the same sex.

Christians vary on their notions about baptism and communion. While most believe that infants should be baptized, others believe that an individual has to be old enough to know what they believe before they are baptized. Added to this, some believe that baptism should occur during regular church services, while others believe it should occur only at special times. Christians differ on who should do the baptizing—a priest or minister or a friend or family member.

There are a variety of ways by which baptism is carried out. Is water sprinkled or poured on a person's forehead? Perhaps a person is thoroughly submerged in water. Christians differ on how many times a person should be immersed. Some say once, while others say three times to signify the Trinity.

⁸ See Hinnells, John R., *The New Penguin Handbook of Living Religions*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 127 for a drawing of these designs. For definitions of liturgical and non-liturgical, see later in this section of the chapter.

Christians differ on where baptism should take place—in a church in a tank or font or in a creek or a swimming pool.

The diversity in beliefs and practices involving communion is astoundingly wide.⁹ The name for the ritual itself varies from group to group. Is this ceremony the Eucharist (i.e., “Thanksgiving”), Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper?

Groups also disagree about who can take communion. Should it be available to anyone present during the service, members and visitors alike (open communion), to any baptized Christian (modified open communion), to members of a particular faith group no matter where that group is found in the world (closed communion), or to members of the local community only (closed communion)? In the last category, should communion be made available to anyone in the local community or only those in “good standing” (modified closed communion)?

Some Christians believe that anyone from infancy on up can take communion. Others teach that a person must be old enough to understand what they believe before taking communion or that they must have gone through some form of required instruction prior to participation.

Christians disagree over when communion should occur. Should it be at every service, once a month, only a few times a year, or never? Who should officiate at the communion service—the duly designated church official (i.e., the priest) or any member ordained or not? How communion is carried out varies from Christian group to Christian group. Some have members walk up to the front of the church and either kneel or stand to take communion. Others have participants sit in pews or chairs and wait for the communion food and drink to be passed around. Should communion come in one chalice that all share or in individual cups? Christians differ on what should be used. Should wine, grape juice, or water be used? Should unleavened or leavened bread be used or crackers be taken? Should Christians take both elements or just one? If they are taking both, should the elements be given separately or should the bread be mashed into the wine?

Ceremonies: Three Issues

Three final issues involving Christian ceremonies need to be discussed. First, Christians use two terms to describe their central rituals. These are *Sacrament* and *Ordinance*. Even though rituals may be the same, the terms employed mean two very different things. Of course, there are those groups that use one term when they actually mean the other.

The use of both terms reflects a theological belief about the timing of receiving God’s grace (i.e., God’s saving and transforming power). In a sacra-

⁹ Christians use the following Bible verses to teach about Communion: Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; John 6:48-59 and 13-17; and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

ment, a person receives a “zap” of God’s grace in the ritual itself. They are “infused” with grace while being baptized or taking communion. An ordinance is a ritual that celebrates grace already received. Grace has already been “imparted” by faith and the ceremony acknowledges that that transaction has already occurred. Thus, in sacramental churches, when a person is baptized they receive a squirt of God’s grace (whether or not this actually saves their soul divides sacramental people), while in ordinance churches a person goes through the ordinance of baptism in order to remember the grace that they have already received by being saved.

A second issue concerns the meaning of the ritual (i.e., what actually transpires during these sacraments or ordinances?). In communion, do the elements (i.e., the bread and wine, grape juice, and crackers. etc.) actually become the body and blood of Christ (i.e., Roman Catholicism)?

If they do not become the body and blood, do they have Christ’s presence in them? If so, is Christ “in, with, and under” the elements (the Sacramental Union of Lutheranism) or is Christ a “spiritual presence among the people of God” (the Pneumatic Presence of Presbyterianism)?

Finally, if they do not become the body and blood or have Christ’s presence in them, do the elements symbolize or represent Christ’s body and blood and are taken in remembrance of him (Baptists)?¹⁰

A final issue involves ceremonial style. Christian churches are either *Liturgical* or *Non-liturgical*. In the former, there is a formatted worship, which members contend has been practiced since the earliest Christian era. Minimal innovation occurs and this maintenance of tradition is highly honored by worshippers. What innovation that does occur normally comes through a group outside the local community. The layout is repeated anywhere in the world where that group worships, regardless of language differences. The precise pattern is often printed in a small book in the pew or in a prayer book. Members and regular attendees seem to know what to do and when to do it, while visitors fumble through the books to keep up. Those who practice liturgical worship find strength and solace in the repetition of style. They find non-liturgical churches too spontaneous and often lacking in things that appeal to them (i.e., “You never know what to expect. Something is lacking”). Roman Catholics, Eastern Christians, Lutheran, and Episcopal Churches are liturgical.

Non-liturgical communities of faith, represented by most Protestants, can pick and choose what elements they want to have in their worship and these selections do not have to be approved by committees outside the local church. These innovations may occur weekly. Non-liturgical Christians are concerned with adjusting worship to fit contemporary times rather than maintaining the style passed down for generations. Those who regularly par-

¹⁰ Anglicans can be high or Anglican-Catholic, broad and low or Evangelical church followers depending on their closeness to the Roman Catholic tradition.

ticipate in non-liturgical churches find liturgical churches monotonous and quite boring (i.e., “How can they do the same thing each week?”).

Even with the variety found in non-liturgical worship, there may be aspects of worship services that are repeated regularly. This makes many non-liturgical churches quite liturgical.

Institutions: History

Christian institutional history has had several segments each in intervals of 500 years and each division still exists. In the fifth and sixth centuries, what became the *Oriental Christianity* split off from the rest of the faith due to a disagreement over how the human and divine interplays in Jesus.¹¹ These Christians became the Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, Armenian, and Thomas Christians of India. A majority of the Christians found in present-day Iraq fit this category.¹²

¹¹ See Chapter Two, “Eastern Christianity.”

¹² Although present-day Iraq has a Muslim majority, there are still many Christians living there. However, the statistics on these groups are hard to ascertain and are only estimates. By tradition, the Apostle Thomas established Christianity in the region with the aid of another apostle Addai in the first century CE.

Today, an estimated 600,000 Christians live in Iraq out of 20–22 million total residents or about 3% of the total population. Iraqi Christians can be divided into 3 major groups with 12 subdivisions. Those associated with Rome are in the majority (457,000), non-Roman Catholic, but non-Protestant (152,000), and Protestants (58,000).

The largest group is the Chaldean Catholic Church. Approximately 390,000 members of this body are under the jurisdiction of the Roman Pope and are based in Baghdad. This group has seven bishops and a patriarch, the Patriarch of Babylon. A notable recent Chaldean was former Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz.

The Syrian Orthodox (37,200) and the Syrian Catholics (55,500, those associated with Rome) have traditionally lived around Mossul, but a majority now lives in Baghdad. The former has three dioceses (Mossul, Basra, Baghdad) and the second two (Mossul and Baghdad).

Other groups include the Armenian Orthodox (25,000), Armenian Catholic (5,000), Latin (5,200), Copt (1,800), Greek Orthodox (800), and Greek Catholic (700).

There are between 5,800 and 13,000 Protestants in Iraq, such as Arab Evangelicals (8,000 members), Presbyterians (3,000 members and 5 churches), and an Armenian Evangelical Church in Baghdad. The Assemblies of God, the Basra Assembly, the Evangelical Alliance of Mission, and the Seventh-day Adventists have churches in Baghdad also.

The Assyrian Church (100,000 members) was the main church of Iraq for centuries, but it has been weakened by persecution and is regarded with great suspicion in Iraq today because of its colonial links to the British. Its leader, the catholicos, lives in Chicago, Illinois.

For more information, see Ray J. Mouawad, “Syria and Iraq: Repression,” *The Middle East Quarterly Volume 8:1* (Winter 2001), p. 4.

Then, in 1054 CE, Eastern and Western Christianity split in two over several issues with the most important being structural—who would be the human leader of the Christian church on earth? Eastern Christians put stock in a group of equally authoritative bishops whereas western Christians claimed that one bishop, the Bishop of Rome, had primacy.

Representatives of both east and west excommunicated each other from the faith and for almost 1,000 years did not communicate with one another. From that point on, *Eastern Christianity* went down through history without any major splits and today includes both the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Christians. However, Western Christianity divided into *Roman* and *Protestant Christianity* between the 1300s and the 1600s CE. Thus, by the 1600s CE, there were, and still are, three major branches of the Christian faith.

Institutions: Issues

These three divisions of the Christian faith are also the result of beliefs about *Apostolic Succession*, a term employed by Eastern Christians, Roman Catholics, and some Protestants (Anglicans and Lutherans). These Christians believe that there has been an uninterrupted and traceable line of bishops starting with the first apostles. This line is crucial because through this line comes the apostolic authority to ordain valid bishops (and in turn, priests and deacons) and for current bishops (and in turn, priests and deacons) to lead and officiate the sacraments with the same authority of the first apostles. This being said, these Christians disagree about which bishops are in true apostolic succession.¹³

Other Protestants do not believe that apostolic succession lies with an unbroken line of bishops stemming from the apostles, even if these groups have bishops. Rather, representing the vast majority of Protestants (including some Anglicans and Lutherans), these believers teach that apostolic succession can be found in those communities of believers where apostolic faith and teaching is maintained.

As a result of different views of apostolic succession, the three branches of the Christian faith have their own views about each other. While all three branches recognize each other as Christians (except perhaps the most extreme forms of each), their understanding of each other's Christianities varies.

Lacking what is perceived to be true authority, Eastern Christianity labels non-Eastern churches as "communities" of faith, not official churches. Likewise, Roman Catholics call non-Catholic Christians, in particular Protestants, "separated brethren" only. Given the diverse nature of Protestantism, it is hard to pinpoint the Protestant view of members of the other two branches. However, Protestant positions range from full Christians to unsaved souls.

¹³ Eastern Churches, Roman Catholics, and Protestants do not recognize the apostolic succession of each other's churches.

For the former, non-Protestants are seen as members of another denomination similar to how they view other Protestants. The Protestant view is determined by how much any particular church maintains and teaches true apostolic beliefs and faith.

Today Christians organize in three ways, all having to do with whether the power lies locally, regionally, nationally or internationally. The three are:

- Congregational
- Connectional
- Hierarchical

In *Congregational* government, each local church is independent or “autonomous.” All important decisions are made on the local level with all members voting. An excellent example of this form of pure democracy is the totally independent Baptist church. It is not under the authority of any higher-level group, but it is totally on its own.

Previously, one of the best examples of this form of church governance was the Southern Baptist Convention. However, in recent years, local government has surrendered to higher governmental levels when a couple of churches married or ordained practicing homosexuals. These churches were not allowed to follow their own dictates as a local community and remain Southern Baptist. Instead, the Southern Baptist Convention severed ties with them when they refused to renounce their actions.

Connectional government is representative rule and functions not unlike the government of the United States. Local congregations (like localities and states) make decisions for themselves. But many major decisions are determined by higher level governing bodies. Presbyterianism has been represented connectional government since John Calvin and John Knox. In Switzerland and Scotland, there were several levels of government running local churches that sent delegates to these different levels of authority. In the United States, local churches send delegates to regional presbyteries, which, in turn, send delegates to national meetings.

In the *Hierarchical* form of church government, bishops hold power. They are either elected by local people or appointed by those higher up in a denomination. Roman Catholicism best represents this form of government with its central leader (i.e., the Pope) and a bureaucracy (the curia) leading the church and appointing local, national, and international leaders.

Christian communities differ on whether or not their pastors, priests, clergy, or ministers should be celibate or may be married. Some, like the Roman Catholic faith, say that their priests and nuns can never marry and must remain chaste. Others say that the choice to marry is up to the minister, which means that most Protestant pastors marry. A third group says that

clergy may marry, but this must occur prior to being officially sanctioned or ordained (i.e., Eastern Orthodoxy).

Christian communities differ over the role of women as officially sanctioned clergy and have adopted four approaches:

- Christian churches that have always had ordained women clergy.
- Christian churches that have never ordained women and probably never will.
- Christian churches that used to ordain women and now do not.
- Christian churches that didn't ordain women in the past, but now do.

From the beginning, certain Protestant communities have always ordained women as official clergy with full freedom to officiate the sacraments/ordinances of the church. Examples here include the Cumberland Presbyterians, the Free Will Baptists, the Salvation Army and the Church of the Nazarene. Other churches have done exactly the opposite: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, the Amish, and the Churches of Christ. Groups like the Southern Baptists and Mennonite Brethren used to have quite a few women pastors, but now do not because they have officially decided against the practice.¹⁴ With congregational government, however, a few Southern Baptist Churches have bucked the system and ordained women pastors anyway. Since the 1960s CE, some, like the mainline Protestant Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Northern or American Baptist, ordain women. In at least one of these groups, the United Methodist Church, more women than men are attending seminary. Groups in the final category tend to get most of the press for the recent inclusion of women. In reality, however, they have been the last to move in a feminist direction.

SEE WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

1. Identify and describe four beliefs.

¹⁴ The Southern Baptist church demonstrated its position on women pastors recently when its 100-plus Lifeway Christian bookstores pulled the September, 2008 edition of "Gospel Today" off its shelves because it featured five women pastors on its cover. See Christopher Quinn, "Gospel Today Magazine Pulled from Christian Bookstores' Shelves," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (9/18/2008).