Christianity is the world's biggest religion, with about 2.1 billion followers worldwide. It is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ who lived in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago.

* Christians believe that [**Jesus**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/jesus_1.shtml) was the Messiah promised in the [**Old Testament**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/texts/bible.shtml).
* Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
* Christians believe that God sent his Son to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its [**sins**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/originalsin_1.shtml).
* One of the most important concepts in Christianity is that of Jesus giving his life on the Cross (the [**Crucifixion**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/passionofchrist_1.shtml)) and rising from the dead on the third day (the Resurrection).
* Christians believe that there is only one God, but that there are [**three elements to this one God**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/trinity_1.shtml):
  + God the Father
  + God the Son
  + The Holy Spirit
* Christians worship in churches.
* Their spiritual leaders are called priests or ministers.
* The Christian holy book is the [**Bible**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/texts/bible.shtml), and consists of the Old and New Testaments.
* Christian [**holy days**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/) such as [**Easter**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/easter.shtml) and [**Christmas**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/christmas_1.shtml) are important milestones in the Western secular calendar

**God**

Christians believe that there is only one God, whom they call Father as Jesus Christ taught them.

**Jesus -** Christians recognise [**Jesus**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/jesus_1.shtml) as the Son of God who was sent to save mankind from death and sin.

Jesus Christ taught that he was Son of God. His teachings can be summarised, briefly as the love of God and love of one's neighbour. Jesus said that he had come to fulfil God's law rather than teach it.

**Justification by faith**

Christians believe in justification by faith - that through their belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and in his death and resurrection, they can have a right relationship with God whose forgiveness was made once and for all through the death of Jesus Christ.

**The Trinity**

Christians believe in the [**Trinity**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/trinity_1.shtml) - that is, in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some confuse this and think that Christians believe in three separate gods, which they don't. Christians believe that God took human form as Jesus Christ and that God is present today through the work of the Holy Spirit and evident in the actions of believers.

**Life after death**

Christians believe that there is a life after earthly death. While the actual nature of this life is not known, Christians believe that many spiritual experiences in this life help to give them some idea of what eternal life will be like.

**The Saints**

These days, the word [**saint**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/saints/) is most commonly used to refer to a Christian who has lived a particularly good and holy life on earth, and with whom miracles are claimed to have been associated after their death. The formal title of Saint is conferred by the [**Roman Catholic**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/catholic/) and [**Orthodox**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/easternorthodox_1.shtml) Churches through a process called *canonisation*. Members of these Churches also believe that Saints created in this way can intercede with God on behalf of people who are alive today. This is not accepted by most Protestants.

In the [**Bible**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/texts/bible.shtml), however, the word saint is used as a description of anyone who is a committed believer, particularly by [**St. Paul**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/paul_1.shtml) in the New Testament (e.g. Ephesians 1.1. and 1.15).

**Protestantism**

**Quick Facts**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Formed** | **early 16th century** |
| **Origin** | **Germany** |
| **Followers** | **500,000,000** |
| **Deity** | **God (Trinity)** |
| **Sacred Texts** | **Bible** |
| **Headquarters** | **None** |

Protestantism is one of the three major branches of Christianity, along with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. It shares with all other Christians core beliefs in the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, the necessity of grace to save humans from the consequences of sin, and the centrality of Jesus' death and resurrection for salvation. Composed of hundreds of denominations with an expansive variety of doctrines, rituals, and religious practices, Protestantism formed from the split with Roman Catholicism during the Reformation in the 16th century. Led by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others, the reformers broke from the Roman Catholic Church due to abusive ecclesiological structures and theological differences. Protestants share an adherence to the centrality of scripture (both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament) as well as a doctrine of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Different Protestant denominations have to varying degrees maintained or rejected Roman Catholic forms of worship. Anglican and Lutheran churches have maintained liturgies and rituals similar to those of the Roman Catholic Church, whereas other denominations, such as Baptists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and United Church of Christ, have developed less liturgical forms of worship. Most Protestants practice baptism and communion as key rites of Christian initiation and ongoing devotion. Though originating in Europe, Protestant Christianity has spread across the globe through missionary activity and now has members from nearly every country, race, and ethnicity.

**Quick Fact Details:**

* *Formed*: The date often cited as the beginning of the Protestant movement is 1517, based on the date of Martin Luther's first act of dissent: the public posting of his 95 Theses, criticizing Roman Catholic practices and teachings. At the time, however, Luther had no intention of starting a new Christian tradition called "Protestantism," but hoped to reform the Catholic Church. Protestantism as a movement evolved in the decades following this act as Luther's ideas and theological arguments took root and the Catholic Church resisted and rejected them.
* *Origin*: Though Martin Luther and his immediate followers were residents of various Germanic states (Germany not becoming a nation-state until the 19th century), they were also subjects of the Holy Roman Emperor.
* *Sacred Texts*: Martin Luther considered certain books contained in the Catholic version of the Bible (based on the Septuagint) to be of lesser value as he used the Hebrew Masoretic Text, which also excluded these books from the canon. Therefore the Protestant Old Testament contains 39 books whereas the Roman Catholic Old Testament contains 46 books and includes sections of common books not included by Protestants. The New Testament is the same in both traditions.

The three major founders of Protestantism are Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin. Luther and Zwingli began their reform movements almost simultaneously—Luther in Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland. Both had been Roman Catholic priests; both began to criticize Catholic doctrine and practice based on their reading of the Bible in its original languages.

Luther was a law student returning to school after a semester break when he was caught in a thunderstorm, feared for his life, and realized that he was not sure of his salvation. This convinced him to become a monk, and he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. Though he was apparently a very conscientious monk, his strenuous efforts in the monastery did not reduce his anxiety about God's wrath. Trained as a biblical theologian, he was preparing a lecture on Paul's Letter to the Romans for his university students when he realized that the Greek of Romans 1:17 could mean either "the righteous shall live by faith" or "those who are righteous by faith shall live." The first had been taught by the Catholic Church, and implies that as one strives for righteousness (sinlessness), one is endowed with faith. The second implies that faith is a gift that one does not strive for, but that brings righteousness with it (i.e., made righteous by means of faith). Luther believed this to be the intent of Paul, and indeed of the entire Bible. This insight formed the core of his reform.

Zwingli was a priest trained as a humanist. This training led him to the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) in the same ways and at about the same time as Luther. When Erasmus published a Greek edition of the best Greek manuscripts of the New Testament available, Zwingli quickly bought it and then taught himself Greek so he could read it. When he was appointed priest at Zurich's Grossmünster (the most prominent cathedral in the German-speaking part of Switzerland), he announced that he would not preach from the lectionary but would preach the Book of Matthew straight through "from A to Z." In taking up this controversial practice he was in effect announcing that he would rely on the word of God found in scripture as the foundation of his teachings and practice.

John Calvin was trained in France as a humanist and as a lawyer. His first love, though, was theology, and as a student he decided that the Protestant beliefs and biblical interpretations were correct. He was forced to flee France, which was far from hospitable to Protestants. His intention was to pass through Switzerland to the city of Strasbourg, which was a Protestant city, and live the quiet life of a scholar. Spending the night on his trip in Geneva, he was met by William Farel (1489-1565), the leader of the Reform movement that had recently taken control of Geneva. Farel convinced Calvin that his duty was to stay and put God's reform into practice in Geneva, rather than to pursue his own desire to lead a quiet life.

All three—Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin—agreed on the main Protestant principles: justification by faith alone, the priesthood of all believers, and scripture alone as the final authority. They all felt it was important that the Bible, which had been available only in Latin, be translated into languages that Christians could read for themselves. All three expected the same Holy Spirit who inspired scripture as the word of God, and who changed the hearts of sinners to believe that their sins had been forgiven, to lead pious, saved Christians to a correct understanding of scripture. On this last point they were disappointed.

The fact that separate Protestant churches—Lutheran and Reformed—developed was troubling, and Zwingli and Luther met at the Colloquy of Marburg (1529) to try to reach a common understanding that would unify the two churches. They agreed on twelve points of doctrine, but could not agree on the thirteenth: what happened at the [Lord's Supper](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Protestantism/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Rites-and-Ceremonies.html). Luther argued that the body and blood of Christ became associated with the bread and wine, following a literal interpretation of the scripture passage, "This is my body, broken for you" (Matthew 22:19). Zwingli argued that Jesus was surely using a figure of speech, and that the bread and wine symbolized the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. He based his doctrine on John 6:63—"It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." This failure to unify the Church in belief and practice regarding the Lord's Supper, based on differing interpretations of scripture, set something of a pattern for the division and diversification that has characterized Protestantism throughout its history. Particularly in America, where the government did not establish and defend a particular denomination as it did most places in Europe, the profusion of denominations and sects has been rapid and constant.

**Sacred Space:**

The beginning of the Protestant [Reformation](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Protestantism/Origins/Beginnings.html) was attended by an outburst of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm is the removal of statues and images from churches. It was often the occasion in the 16th century of a good deal of religious violence as Protestants frequently broke into churches to smash images, and Catholics tended to defend their churches and purge cities and towns of what they saw as heretics.

Huldrych Zwingli went so far as to have the walls of the Grossmünster in Zurich, which had been a Roman Catholic cathedral, whitewashed. The reason for this iconoclasm was the belief that the promise of salvation through God's gracious forgiveness is most directly and clearly communicated through the scripture—preached, taught, studied, and memorized. Protestants, believing that Roman Catholics had largely wandered from the centrality of the Bible, removed what they saw as distracting and superstitious paintings, statues, and other images that had been substituted for God's word.

Protestant worship space, as a result, is in general characterized by a plainer aesthetic than the space of Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox Christians. There is, however, diversity among Protestants. Reformed Christians have more closely followed Zwingli's principle for trying to move church practice back to the model of the early Church found in scripture. Zwingli's principle was that only those things explicitly authorized by scripture were allowed. Though he was himself quite a talented musician, he had pipe organs removed from the former Catholic churches in his synod because pipe organs are not mentioned in scripture. Instead of hymns, Reformed worshippers in Zurich chanted psalms.

Lutherans, in contrast, followed Martin Luther's principle for reforming church practice: anything not forbidden by scripture was allowed. Anglicans, too, because of the [Elizabethan settlement](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Anglican/Origins/Founders.html), which forged a compromise between Catholics and Calvinists by adopting a largely Calvinist theology while maintaining a more Catholic worship, have churches that more closely resemble Catholic churches than do those of other Protestants.

Protestants, who view the sacraments differently than Catholics, reflect their beliefs in their sanctuaries. Most Protestants have two sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper—rather than seven. (Some Protestants—like the Society of Friends, or Quakers—do not practice any sacraments at all.) Some Protestants, in particular Baptists, some independent churches, and some non-denominational churches, do not call baptism and the Lord's Supper sacraments. They refer to them instead as ordinances.

These differences are visible in many Protestant sanctuaries. The worship space of Protestants is organized to emphasize the centrality of hearing the word of God. Most conservative Protestant groups have the pulpit in the center of the platform facing the people, thus indicating the centrality of the preaching of the scripture. The altar is often referred to as the Lord's Table, thus eliminating the idea of sacrifice associated with the Roman Catholic liturgy and emphasizing the memorial aspect of much Reformed thinking. For many Protestant churches outside of Lutheran or Anglican traditions, the Lord's Table is below the elevated pulpit or even off to the side of the sanctuary. In any case, it is viewed as another opportunity to experience and trust God's promise of forgiveness, and it requires the congregation's active understanding and participation.

Church buildings have often reflected the architectural trends of the day. Churches have been built in Romanesque, Gothic, and neo-classical styles. In the 19th century there was a trend to build churches on the model of round theaters with a stage front and center to facilitate revival preaching. Many contemporary churches continue to follow this model, especially larger ones. Sanctuaries built in recent years often resemble an amphitheater with a stage in front, and frequently have room for rock bands and screens for PowerPoint presentations. Many churches today get their start as "house churches," small gatherings in private homes that are modeled on the practice of early Christians. Other small churches rent storefronts in cities as a relatively inexpensive and accessible venue.

<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Protestantism.html>