

Teachers' Guide to Christianity

Christianity - Teachers' Guide

A key to great RE lessons about Christianity is the teacher's understanding of the Christian faith. Ofsted observed that lessons often do not reflect what is most important to Christians - what they believe and how this is lived out. This document is an attempt at a short summary of the beliefs of the majority. As with all faiths, you are sure to find someone who will disagree! There are, for instance, a number of groups with Christian origins who do not subscribe to all of the beliefs and practices in this account - examples include The Society of Friends (Quakers), Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons). Bible quotations used here are from the New International Version (NIV) translation.

What is a Christian?

A Christian is simply a person who is a follower of Jesus Christ, someone who believes in him and seeks to obey his teachings. But what do they believe? For the majority of the Christian Church their beliefs are summed up in the words of the Nicene Creed. This was the statement of belief drawn up in 325 by the Council of Nicaea. It is accepted - in slightly different forms - across the main Christian churches - that is the (Roman) Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Church of the East, Oriental Orthodox Churches, Anglican Communion and Protestant denominations.

God

"We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." (Nicene Creed)

Christians believe that there is one God who created all things. They believe that, while God is one, he exists in three persons called Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the Trinity. Christians are baptised *"In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28.19).

Who is Jesus?

"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, of one 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 became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man." (Nicene Creed)

Christians believe that Jesus is "God's one and only Son" and their Saviour (the name means 'He saves'). *"You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* (Matthew 1.21) They believe that he left heaven to be born and live on earth - fully human yet also fully God. The name 'Christ' comes from the Greek 'Christos' which is a translation of the Hebrew 'Mashiach', that is, the 'Anointed' believed to be the 'Saviour' promised by God.

Jesus' Death

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried." (Nicene Creed)

Knowing what Christians believe about Jesus' death on the cross is key to understanding the Christian faith. Christians believe that *"Christ died for our sins."* (1 Corinthians 15.3) The cross is the most

important symbol, remembered at Easter, the most important festival, and in communion, the most important act of worship. It is the central theme of most liturgy, hymns and prayers. It is the reason for baptism and the Christian's hope at the graveside ... the list goes on.

Christians believe that people are in danger of God's judgement because of their sin (disobedience to God's commands). They believe that Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice, in which he took God's punishment for everyone's sin. Through faith in Jesus they believe that they can know God's forgiveness.

Jesus Resurrection

"On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." (Nicene Creed)

For Christians the resurrection shows the power of God to overcome the power of death and sin. The Bible states that after dying on the cross and being laid in a tomb Jesus was raised from the dead, met with his disciples and ascended to heaven.

Holy Spirit

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified." (Nicene Creed)

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. Christians believe that God the Holy Spirit comes to live within them as counsellor, comforter, help and guide (John 14.26).

The Church

"We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church." (Nicene Creed)

The word "catholic" here means universal and is not referring to just one Christian denomination. The word "church" means the Christian community (not a building). Christians believe that there is a worldwide Christian community.

The Bible

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Psalm 119.105)

For Christians the Bible is "God's word" - their ultimate authority and guide for life. (Roman) Catholic Christians also acknowledge the authority of the (Roman) Catholic Church.

Love

"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4.8)

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5.44)

Christians believe that their lives must reflect the love and compassion of God - and that this must be shown to all - even their enemies.

Revenge and Reconciliation

"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." (Luke 11.4)

Christians believe that it is wrong for them to personally seek revenge - they are to forgive and, where

possible, seek reconciliation.

Giving and Making a Difference

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink ...I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25.35-40)

Christians believe that all their charitable gifts and actions are done for God Himself.

Prayer

Jesus taught his followers this prayer - the "Lord's prayer"

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6.9-16)

"Pra continually." (1 Thessalonians 5.17)

Christians will pray privately or together, in church, at home, or as they go about their day. Praying is a conversation with God. It can include thanksgiving (saying thank you), petition (asking), confession (owning up), adoration (telling God 'I love You.') and contemplation (quiet reflection).

Faith

"Believe in God; believe also in me." (John 14.1)

Belief, faith and trust are related terms. A Christian is someone believes in - trusts - Jesus Christ. This faith is a personal trust and commitment based on a response to evidence and experience.

Life After Death

"He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." (Nicene Creed).

"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne ... The dead were judged according to what they had done ... Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20.12-15)

Christians believe we have a soul - that part of a human which belongs to God. It does not die with the body. They have historically believed that on Jesus Christ's return to earth (the Second Advent) there will be a resurrection of all who have ever lived and a final day of judgement for those who have not been forgiven by God. They believe in heaven (an eternal place of blessing and reward with God) and Hell (a place of punishment). Catholic Christians also believe in Purgatory - where good people who have not confessed all their sins are cleansed before entry into heaven.

Rites of Passage

Baptism

"We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." (Nicene Creed).

Baptism shows that someone is entering (joining) the world wide Christian family - the Christian church.

In some churches this will normally follow soon after birth. The child's parents and godparents make the Christian promises on behalf of the child. In other churches it will happen later following a personal decision to follow Christ and involving full immersion (believers' baptism).

Confirmation - in churches that usually baptise infants, this is an opportunity for a Christian to make their own promise to live as a Christian, and receive the 'laying on of hands' from the Bishop.

Wedding - Christians marry in church because they believe that they make their wedding vows "in the presence of God". To break them would be a sin.

Funeral - *"Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.'" (John 11.25)*

Grief is a natural part of any funeral because we miss the person who has died. However, funerals of Christians can also be times of joyful celebration, because of the belief that the person is with God in heaven. This may be reflected in the words of the Scriptures, songs and prayers. Some Christians will wear joyful bright colours rather than black for this reason.

Key Words:-

Atonement - (at-one-ment) - being 'at one' with God because of Jesus' death on the cross.

Born again - a phrase used by Jesus to describe the new beginning that follows personal faith in him.

Communion - Jesus commanded Christians to remember his death and resurrection in the sharing of bread and wine. This has many names - Communion, Eucharist, Mass, Breaking of Bread.

Confession/reconciliation - the act of "owning up" to God (confessing our sins) and declaring a determination to change. This is something that Christians do regularly in their private prayers, in church, or (particularly in the Catholic Church) with the help of a Priest.

Grace - God's undeserved forgiveness, reconciliation and favour. God's gift of grace strengthens a Christian's ability to continue in the Christian life.

Redemption - debt to God being paid through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.

Repentance - being sorry enough to want to change.

Sacrament - an outward visible sign of an inner spiritual grace. Protestant Christians have two sacraments, Baptism and Communion (Eucharist). Catholic Christians have seven - Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Ordination, and Anointing of the Sick.

Salvation - being saved, rescued from God's judgement.

Worship - (worth-ship, giving God what he is worth). More than just praying and singing, this is everything that a Christian does for God, e.g. giving and acts of kindness.