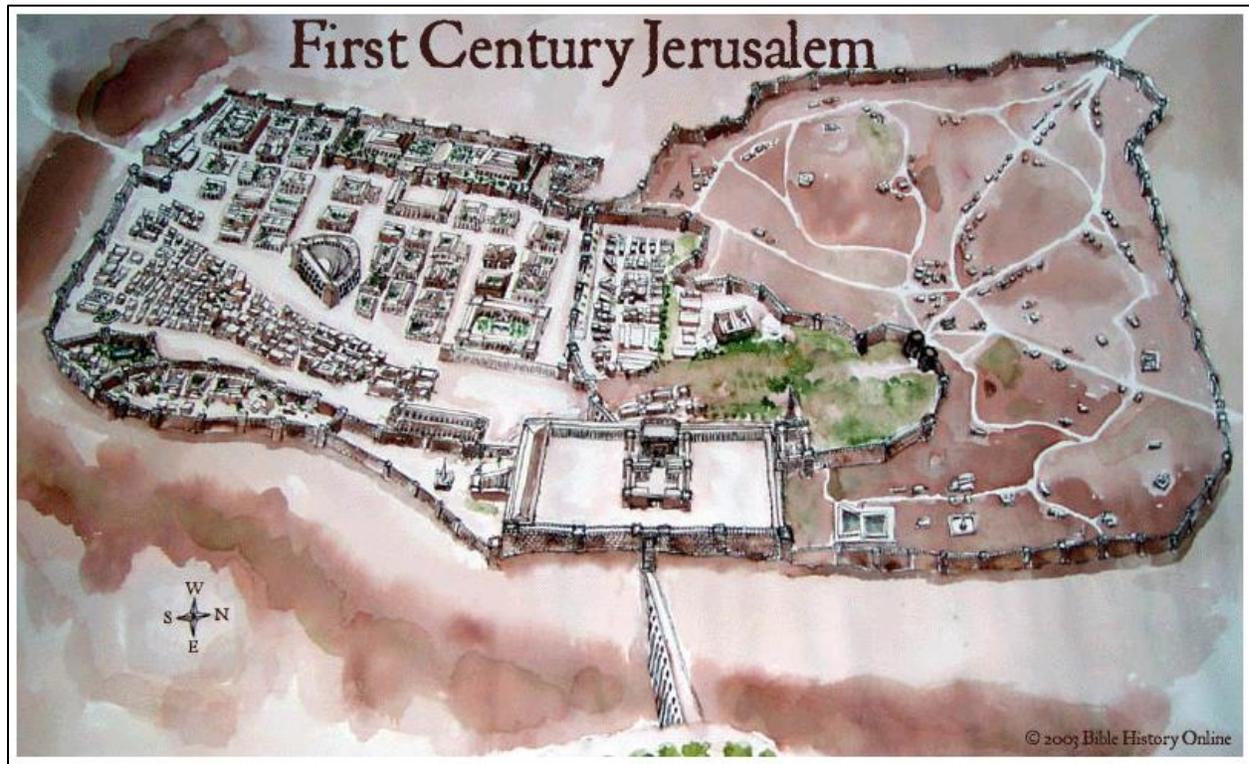


CHRISTIANITY: ORIGINS AND GROWTH

Christianity is now the largest religion in the world. Over two billion people are Christians and they live on every continent in the world. But the religion began as a small movement in and around of Jerusalem, a city near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Back then, Jerusalem was controlled by the Roman Empire and was in the province of Judea. The ruler of the Roman Empire at this time was Caesar Augustus.



Most of the people who lived in and around Jerusalem during the reign of Caesar Augustus were Jews. Their religion was very different than the religion of the Romans. Jews were monotheistic – believing in only one God. Most Romans were polytheistic – believing in many gods.

The Romans allowed the Jews to practice their faith and did not force the Jews to worship Roman gods. About 30 C.E. (A.D.), a religious teacher named Jesus began to attract a following in Jerusalem. Jesus' followers came to believe that Jesus was the son of the God and that he performed miracles. They also came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah (the one promised in the Old Testament to come to the Jewish people and lead them to freedom). Many expected him to become a political leader.

Roman leaders were used to random Jewish teachers popping up every few years and trying to stir up the Jews to revolt. So the Romans watched Jesus, fearing he might be a threat.

Jewish leaders were also worried. Jesus was a Jew, but he criticized Jewish leaders.



Jesus said they were too interested in religious laws and not interested enough in God. These Jewish leaders were also afraid of what the Romans might do about Jesus. They knew that the Romans would crack down on ALL Jews if they decided Jesus' followers were causing trouble. They knew this because this had happened in the past when the Romans had cracked down on other unusual Jewish teachers.



Some of the Jewish leaders worked with the Roman leaders to try to stop Jesus. The result was that Jesus was arrested and the Romans killed him. They did this by hanging him from a cross until he died. The Romans commonly used this form of public execution. It was used to kill criminals but also to scare others, making them afraid to rebel against the Romans.

Three days after Jesus' execution, his followers said they saw him again – no longer dead. They said that God had resurrected Jesus from the dead.

Jesus was eventually called "the Christ." This is a Greek word meaning "chosen one." This Greek word is why followers of Jesus were called "Christians."

Christians were still Jews at first. They upset other Jews by teaching that Jesus was the Messiah. They also upset other Jews by teaching that you had to believe in Jesus to have your sins forgiven. Almost all Jews ended up rejecting this small group and their new ideas. But many Greeks and eventually many Romans did accept the ideas of Christianity. In this process, Christianity was separated from Judaism and became a separate religion.

A Greek-speaking Jew named Saul of Tarsus was one of the most successful people in spreading Jesus' teachings. As a young man, Saul tried to stamp out Christianity by arresting and persecuting Christians. But that suddenly changed, which confused many Christians who thought he was trying to trick them. Saul explained that he had a vision and heard Jesus speaking to him. After that, he changed his name to Paul and was gradually accepted and trusted by Christians. He spent the rest of his life spreading Christianity. Many of the books of the New Testament were originally letters Paul wrote to different Christian churches.

The first Christians believed that Jesus would quickly return to earth, and so saw no need to create any written records of his life. Information about Jesus and his teachings was simply talked about, not written about.

About fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians started writing down the stories of the life and teachings of Jesus. These first writings were written by men who had known Jesus when he was alive. These earliest writings are called "the Gospels." The word "gospel" means "good news." Those are now the first four books of the New Testament: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.



Catholic Church – traditional Italian style building

The Bible is the holy book of Christianity. It includes the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written long before the time of Jesus. It contains the sacred writings of the Jewish people. The New Testament includes the Gospels, along with letters written by Paul and other Christian writers.

About 200 years after Jesus' death, Churches mostly agreed on which writings should be included in the New Testament. But it took about 150 years more for disagreements about whether or not to include the books Revelations, Jude, and a few others. About 350 years after Jesus was killed, the highest leaders of Christianity finally agreed on what should be included in the New Testament.

The Bible has been translated into more than 1,500 languages and has been read by more people than any other book in the world.

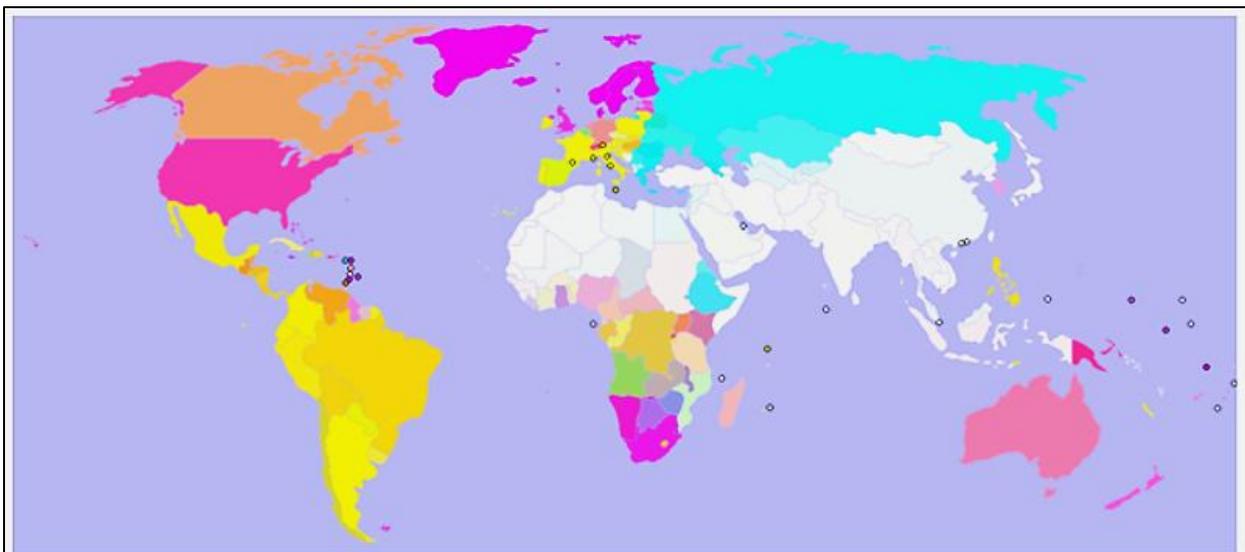
There are three main different types of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church are the oldest. They were originally one church (during the Roman Empire). But after the Roman split into two sections (Eastern and Western), the church also split.

The Roman Catholic Church started in Europe and is still a major church there. However, it is strongest in Latin America. It is also present on all other continents.



The Eastern Orthodox Church is in mainly in Greece, Russia, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel. They are also present in other countries, including the U.S.

The other main form of Christianity is Protestant. The term “protestant” comes from their history: They formed when Martin Luther “protested” against problems in the Catholic Church in 1517 C.E. (A.D.). Today, there are thousands of different Protestant denominations (Baptist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, Methodist, etc.).



This map shows where the different types of Christianity are most common. The colors are mixed where two or more types are very common. For example, the Catholic Church and Protestant churches are both very common in Canada, so it is not yellow but also not exactly pink.

Catholic 

Protestant 

Eastern Orthodox 