



Christianity

Key concepts:

Christians do not all agree about the details of these key concepts, and there is real diversity within and between denominations. These descriptions below do, however, represent a broad, mainstream view of Christian belief. Taken together, they tell the 'big story' of the Bible – from Creation to the kingdom of God:

God: Fundamental to Christian belief is the existence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Creation: Christians believe the Universe and human life are God's good creation. Humans are made in the image of God.

Fall: Christians believe humans have a tendency to go their own way rather than keep their place in relation to their Creator. This attitude is called 'sin', and Genesis 3 gives an account of this rebellion, popularly called 'the Fall'. This describes a catastrophic separation between God and humans, between humans and each other, and between humans and the environment. This idea that humans are 'fallen' and in need of rescue (or salvation) sets out the root cause of many problems for humanity.

People of God: Many Christians say that the Old Testament tells the story of God's plan to reverse the impact of the Fall, to save humanity. It involves choosing a people who will model a restored relationship with God, who will attract all other people back to God. The Bible narrative includes the ups and downs of this plan, including the message of the prophets, who tried to persuade people to stick with God. For Christians, the plan appears to end in failure with the people of God exiled, and then returning, awaiting a 'messiah' – a rescuer.

Incarnation: For Christians, the New Testament presents Jesus as the answer – the Messiah and Saviour, who will repair the effects of sin and the Fall and offer a way for humans to be at one with God again. Incarnation means that Jesus is God in the flesh, and that, in Jesus, God came to live amongst humans.

Gospel: Christians believe that Jesus' incarnation is 'good news' for all people. ('Gospel' means 'good news'.) His life, teaching and ministry embody what it is like to be one of the people of God, what it means to live in relationship with God. Jesus' example and teaching emphasise loving one's neighbour – particularly the weak and vulnerable – as part of loving God.

Salvation: For Christians, Jesus' death and resurrection bring about the rescue or salvation of humans. He opens the way back to God. Through Jesus, sin is dealt with, forgiveness offered, and the relationship between God and humans is restored.

Kingdom of God: Christians accept that this does not mean that no one sins any more! The Bible talks in terms of God's 'kingdom' having begun in human hearts through Jesus. The idea of the 'kingdom of God' reflects God's ideal for human life in the world – a vision of life lived in the way God intended for human beings. Christians look forward to a time when God's rule is fulfilled at some future point, in a restored, transformed heaven and Earth. Meanwhile, they seek to live this attractive life as in God's kingdom, following Jesus' example, inspired and empowered by God's Spirit.

Note:

Not all Christians understand or emphasise these concepts in the same way. For example, some Christians do not place such an emphasis on 'the Fall'. However, this account of these concepts presents a mainstream understanding of the 'big story' of the Bible. If pupils grasp this account of these concepts and this relationship between them, it serves as a good foundation for exploring some of the wider diversity of Christian views.



Sources of authority:

One of the main sources of authority for Christians is the Bible.

- *For Roman Catholic Christians*, the Bible's authority is balanced alongside the teachings and traditions of the Church – the Church indicates how to interpret the Bible, for example.
- *For most Protestant Christians* (e.g. Church of England, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, etc.), the Bible is the key source of authority. Churches do guide their members in how to read, understand and apply the Bible's teachings, but the Bible is more authoritative than the church guidance. In general, Protestants believe that 'ordinary' Christians should have access to it and be able to interpret it for themselves, rather than be told what it means.

The Bible is a collection of 66 different books (39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament). These encompass all kinds of different types of text, including legal codes, historical reports, poetry, prayers, fictional stories such as parables, letters and prophetic texts containing warnings from God about what might happen if people carry on disobeying God, for example. These different types of texts all need to be interpreted appropriately (you don't look for historical accuracy in a poem, for example).

Christians read the Bible differently:

- *Conservative readings*: Some Christians regard the Bible as the inspired Word of God, containing ultimate truth communicated from the Creator to all people. Christians who have this view are more likely to regard the Gospels as presenting what Jesus actually said, and describing events that actually happened as they are depicted in the text. They are likely to believe that Jesus did perform miracles and did rise from the dead. Globally, the majority of Christians have a view like this, although this does not mean that they read all the texts literally – they recognise that different types of text require different ways of reading.
- *Liberal readings*: Other Christians see the Bible more as a collection of human writings, containing great wisdom about how people respond to life. This means that they may question the historical claims of some of the texts, and instead look for general truths and teachings about human experience. For example, they may question whether the Gospels give historical accounts of what Jesus actually said or did; they might argue that the Gospels reflect the teachings of the early Christian Church many years after Jesus. Some Christians with this liberal viewpoint

might say that Jesus did not rise from the dead – the idea of resurrection is a metaphor for a transformed life rather than a historical or future reality.

Globally, this liberal approach is a minority view among Christians, although it is more prevalent among Christians in the UK and Europe than it is in North and South America, for example.

These are not the extreme ends of a continuum, but they do represent something of the variety of views.