  
**CHRISTIANITY**  
*what it is*  
*why it matters*

# Christianity – What Is It and Why It Matters

We're doing a series here at CrossRoads about Christianity—what it is and why it matters. We are discussing a variety of topics and looking at the basics of Christianity so we can know more about what we believe and why we believe it. This helps us to be more confident in our faith, more sure of the claims of Christianity, and better able to share what we believe with others.

This booklet is a resource to help us go a little bit deeper into some of the topics we've been covering. Hopefully it will be a helpful tool to encourage us to dive in to our Christian faith. This booklet obviously doesn't cover all (or even most) of the aspects of Christian theology or church history. Make sure to check out the resource list at the end of the booklet for more great information!



# What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?

In the beginning of the Bible, everything is perfect. The relationship between God and people is pure and just as it was meant to be. But not very far into the story, people decide to turn away from God and disobey Him. Because of this choice—because of their sin—the relationship between God and people was broken. They became separated from Him, and since then, all of us have followed in their footsteps and chosen to sin. Our sin keeps us from God, separated from Him and without hope for eternity. The only hope, God says, is for Someone to right what has been made wrong.

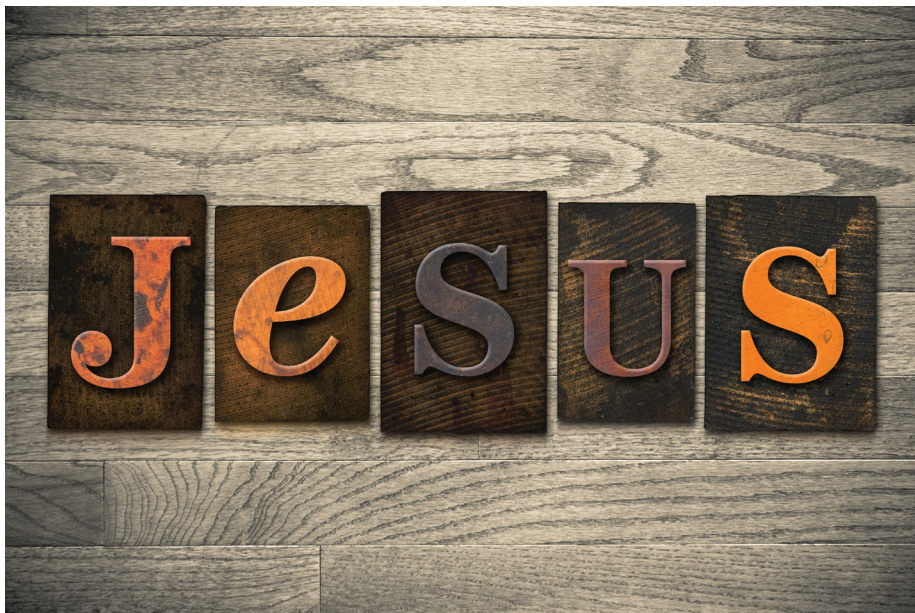
Although God is angry with our sin, the Bible tells us that He also loved us so much that He was willing to send His Son Jesus to die for us. Jesus was born as a little baby in the town of Bethlehem in Israel. He lived a sinless life. He showed people how to walk in God's way, and ultimately, He died for the sins of the world so that anyone who believes in Him and what He has done could have eternal life and a restored relationship with God.



When Jesus died on the cross, He opened up the way back to God. The Bible tells us that the price we have to pay for our sins is death. We die and are eternally separated from God in hell. But because of God's great love for us He

sent Jesus to die in our place. Although Jesus was sinless, He took all of our sins upon Himself and became the sacrifice in our place. He died so that we wouldn't have to. The Bible tells us that when we accept this free gift that Jesus offers us—when we turn from our sin, believe in Jesus' death and resurrection, we can be saved! Our relationship with God is restored and we are invited to live for Him right now, and live with Him in eternity.

Jesus has made the way to salvation simple. We must acknowledge Him—that He is God's Son, that He died for us, and that God raised Him to life. And we must act by turning away from our sin. This is called repentance—we stop walking toward disobedience and we start walking toward God. He helps us do this, and He teaches us more about Himself and His story through the Bible and prayer and His Holy Spirit. After we become Christians we grow as His disciples, conforming ourselves to Him and sharing His gospel with those around us.



## What Are the Claims of Christianity?

1. ***You can know God*** (1 John 5:20).
2. ***You can know God through Jesus Christ.***
3. ***You can know God only through Jesus Christ*** (John 14:6).

Pastor Dan introduced us to this series by discussing what Christianity is and what it means to be a Christian. I (Pastor Denise) loved how he started out by making the distinction of what kind of Christianity we hold to here at CrossRoads Church—biblical Christianity. This means that our authority comes from the Scripture, not solely from the leaders of the church or from our experiences.

I went to a university where the authority of the church was emphasized as equal or above the authority of the Bible. I had never been in an atmosphere like that, and it was challenging to me. I had a hard time with it because there were instances where the authority of the church changed its mind. So one thing that had been true before was no longer true, depending on who was in charge. And as Pastor Dan pointed out, in today's world, many people depend on mystical or experiential Christianity. So what we experience or feel becomes our authority. But again, the danger in this comes from the fact that our experiences and feelings change often. And, what's more, our feelings can often lead us astray because we are sinful people.

The only thing that is unchanging and reliable is the Word of God. And that's where our authority ultimately comes from.

Pastor Dan talked about three claims of Christianity. 1. We can know God. 2. We can know God through Jesus Christ. 3. We can know God only through Jesus Christ. Jesus said that He is the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him.

Much of this comes down to who we say Jesus is. Pastor Dan went through four claims about Jesus -- that He was simply a person, that he was a person exalted by God, that He was a divine being who inspired others to be divine, or that He was the unique God-man. The biblical view is the last one -- Jesus was and is fully God and fully human. He is God's Son, the only one who could save us from our sins.

My family and I were sick with a 24-hour bug the other day, so we spent a lot of time on the couch watching TV. The movie, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was on, and my husband and I found ourselves getting swept up in the story. C.S. Lewis, a Christian, wrote these books, and so much of the story in his novels point us toward Jesus. In one scene in the movie, there are two siblings who are struggling with their younger sister's story that she has found a magical world called Narnia. They don't believe her. They have a conversation with an old professor and he asks them why they don't believe her. He asks if she's a liar. They say "no." He asks if she's crazy. They say "no." And he says that if she's not a liar, and she's not crazy, then she probably should be believed.

This is what the argument for Jesus and His deity/humanity makes sense. Jesus died for His claims to be God. His disciples and hundreds of His other followers died and suffered for their claims about Jesus. Were they all liars? Were they all crazy? If not, maybe they should be believed!

Christianity claims that Jesus was fully God and fully human and came to save us from our sins so that we could know God.

Here's what's so amazing about this: the fact that we can truly know God. The fact that He invites us to know Him! He is the God of the universe, and we are sinful people who don't deserve His love, grace or company. But because of God's great love and compassion for us, He sent Jesus as the sacrifice for our sin.

What an amazing God! What an awesome faith that we have been invited into. What an amazing grace that saves us from hell and separation from God! These are the claims of Christianity. This is what we believe, and it is good news!

# How Did Christianity First Grow?

We see Christianity start to grow in the book of Acts. Jesus' disciples began sharing the good news of His salvation with their fellow Jews. The message began to spread and people were accepting Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. They realized that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for! In Acts 10, Peter receives a vision from God which shows him that salvation is available for the Gentiles (non-Jews) as well! The apostle Paul had a calling to the Gentiles, and through his travels, letters and unrelenting preaching of the gospel, the news about Jesus spread throughout the Roman empire.

After the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 AD, Christianity began to move north and west. Antioch in Syria became a major hub for the Christian church, and eventually Rome.



**Roman Colosseum**

Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman empire and, for awhile, Christianity was considered to be a sect of Judaism. However, when Judaism and Christianity began to separate from one another, Christians, with their constant evangelism, began to rub the empire the wrong way. They not only wanted to worship only their God, not the emperor, but they wanted everyone else to do the same.

This led to persecution of Christians, especially since their lifestyles were so different from the pagan Romans. Many Christians were killed for their faith. In the early 300s A.D., the emperor Diocletian ordered a terrible persecution against Christians, hoping for its complete extinction. However, the next emperor, Galerius, finally realized that he was unable to quench Christianity. Many Christians were willing to die for their faith in Jesus as the one true Saviour of the world.

Eventually a man named Constantine, who was struggling for power over the Roman empire had a conversion experience. He says he became a Christian, although many wondered at the sincerity of the conversion, since many of his pagan practices remained. However, he favored Christianity, made Sunday a public holiday, raised his children as Christians, and was baptized.

Either way, Constantine brought about a big change for Christianity. It went from being a persecuted religion to one that was legal and celebrated in the Roman empire. From the book, "Church History in Plain Language by Bruce L. Shelley:

"The Emperor Constantine is one of the major figures of Christian history. After his conversion Christianity moved swiftly from the seclusion of the catacombs to the prestige of palaces. The movement started the fourth century as a persecuted minority; it ended the century as the established religion of the empire. Thus the Christian church was joined to the power of the state and assumed a moral responsibility for the whole society. Initially under the instruction of Constantine, the church refined its doctrine and developed its structure. Some, such as the historian Eusebius, saw Constantine's embrace of Christianity as its victory over the empire. Others, such as the monks, believed the culture was capturing Christianity."

This was a turning point for Christianity and led to it being a dominant religion.



**Face of the Emperor Constantine**

## What Are the Creeds?

The creeds are early statements of belief by the church that affirmed important theological truths. Some churches still recite the creeds together today as reminders of what we believe. Note that the references to the “holy catholic church” in the creeds refer to the universal church of believers, not the Catholic denomination.

The origin of the Apostles’ Creed is unknown. It is thought to have been developed in the first or second century.

### ***Apostles’ Creed***

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.  
From there he will 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 body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.*





The Nicene Creed was formed during the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Christians were no longer being tortured, and it was legal to proclaim Jesus. To settle some theological disputes and to confirm the deity of Jesus and the trinity, the Nicene Creed was formed.

### **Nicene Creed**

*WE BELIEVE in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*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.*

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
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.*

*He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*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.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.  
Amen.*

# How Did We Get the Bible?

The Bible is a big book written over a very long period of time. There are lots of questions about how it was formed, how God inspired the writing of the Bible and if what we have today is reliable. Here's a bit more information on some of the basics of the Bible.

## ***What does it mean for the Bible to be inspired?***

- Christians believe that the message God gave us in the Bible is unique and incapable of error.
- It is the work of the Holy Spirit who so guided the writers of the Scripture that they gave us, in their unique manner, exactly the message God intended.
- God spoke in a way that could be recorded by human language.
- “Scripture is not only man’s word, but also, and equally God’s word, spoken through man’s lips or written with man’s pen.” (J.I. Packer, *The Origin of the Bible*, p. 31).

Here at CrossRoads Church we hold to the plenary verbal view on the inspiration of Scripture. But what does that mean?

- Plenary means “full” or “complete.”
- God inspired all the text of the Bible, and it is accurate both doctrinally and historically.
- Verbal means that God even inspired the wording.
- The Holy Spirit guided the writers, while allowing them to express things in their own way and through their personalities.
- Plenary verbal inspiration recognizes both human and divine element in Scripture.
- Author Christopher Wright puts it this way: “What Scripture says is what God wanted or allowed to be recorded.”

## ***How Was the Bible Canonized?***

“Canon” is a Greek term that originally meant a “measuring rod” or “ruler.” The canon of the Bible is the books of the Bible we have now. There are other books out there – the Apocrypha, the Gnostic Gospels, etc. Why weren’t they included in our Protestant Bibles? The early church went through a process, guided by the Holy Spirit, to canonize God’s Word in our current Scripture.

## ***Canonization of the Old Testament***

- The Old Testament (OT) discussion of the canon goes as far back as the second century BC. There was discussion about whether Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes should be included.
- The Old Testament canon was set by the time of Jesus.



- People accepted the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. These are the three major divisions of the Old Testament.
- By this time, the Apocryphal books existed as well, but are not quoted by Jesus. (The Apocryphal books include a variety of writings that either had doubtful authenticity or unknown authorship. They also include some history like the books of Maccabees, which talk about the first Hanukkah. The Apocrypha is included in the Catholic Bible, but not the Jewish or Protestant Bibles.)
- The 39 OT books we have now were the ones accepted by Jesus and the Apostles.

### ***Canonization of the New Testament***

- How did the 27 New Testament (NT) books become Scripture?
- Churches started reading the letters of Paul and others at their meetings.
- The first Gospels were written before 70 AD, but Luke says that many have begun recording the events of Jesus' life (Luke 1:1-2).
- The first Christians were Jews, so they were never without Scripture because they had the Old Testament.
- Marcion (140 AD) believed the God of the OT and the God of the NT were different gods.
- Marcion rejected the OT and any new books that he thought favored Jewish readers (Matthew, Mark, Acts, Hebrews).
- He only accepted a portion of Luke's gospel and 10 of Paul's letters.
- Marcion was excommunicated by the church in Rome in 144, but Marcionite churches begin to spring up. These churches basically worshipped Paul.
- Church Fathers addressed this problem: Keep Paul's letters and the

other epistles and bridge them to the Gospels through the book of Acts.

- Montanus: By the second half of second century, the church was becoming more secularized. Between 156-172 A.D., Montanus appeared to demand a higher standard and a separation from the church and world.
- He prophesied in the Spirit and spoke in a state of ecstasy.
- There was disorder and Montanus insisted that opposition to his new prophecies were blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
- Denied God's decisive revelation had occurred in Jesus.
- Church began to focus on keeping the gospel central.
- By the third century only a handful of books in the New Testament continued to create any question. Some opposed Hebrews and others Revelation.
- First complete list came in an Easter letter written in 367 by Bishop Athanasius from Alexandria. Councils at Hippo (393) and at Carthage (397) published the same list.
- The New Testament was primarily written in the first century. Start at about 50 A.D. and end at 100 A.D.
- Finalized by about the 4th century A.D.
- Pseudepigraphal—other extra canonical Christian writings into the 2nd, 3rd, 4th centuries AD. (Gnostic Gospels)

### ***What Was the Process for the Transmission of the Bible?***

- Since all the books found in the Old Testament and the New Testament predate the widespread adoption of the codex, it is probable that all the writings of any length (i.e., longer than a single page) were originally written on scrolls.
- The codex was a Roman invention, modeled on wooden writing tablets that consisted of two or more thin pieces of wood, often coated with wax, tied together along one edge with a cord. At some point during the first century, book dealers began offering certain works in codex form. Still, codices were used sparingly for the reproduction of literary material until they were adopted as the standard book-form for the sacred writings of Christianity.

### ***Transmission of the Old Testament***

- In the early 3rd century BC in Alexandria, there was the beginnings of a translation into Koine Greek. The Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament ) was probably translated by 200 B.C.
- Hebrew Bible textual tradition —Masoretic texts. The Masoretes were diligent scribes who copied the Bible in Hebrew. Comes from late in textual history in 7th, 8th, 9th century AD.

- Ketef Hinnom Amulet: Oldest biblical text that we have. Dates to around 600 B.C. Written in silver and in old Hebrew dating before the exile to Babylon. The amulet reads out a portion of the blessing of Aaron in Numbers 6.
- Texts in the OT period were either written on papyrus or vellum (animal skin). They disintegrate in moist atmosphere. They no longer exist. Papyrus is preserved around the Dead Sea and in Egypt (hence the Dead Sea Scrolls).
- Qumran: In 1946, shepherds discovered scrolls in a cave near the Dead Sea. These scrolls date to the 2nd century B.C. and 1st century B.C. Of the Dead Sea Scrolls, about 40 percent are in the Masoretic tradition. A small portion from the Septuagint tradition. Other unknown texts. They are very accurate and well-preserved.



**Cave in Qumran, where the dead sea scrolls were found.**

### ***Transmission of the New Testament***

- Codex Sinaiticus: Oldest complete copy of the New Testament. From the 4th century.
- John's Fragment: A small piece of the Gospel of John is the oldest New Testament text we have. Likely dates from 117-138 A.D.

### ***On the Reliability of the Gospels:***

It is important to remember that the Gospels were written during a very different time period than ours. When we read a newspaper article today, we expect

exact numbers and quotes and fact-checking (although even that seems to be disappearing in some of our “news” today!). In the Ancient Near East, the mindset was different, and it’s not our job to force our modern-day practices on the past. In his book, “Jesus and the Gospels,” Craig Blomberg makes the following points:

1. Memorization was a highly-cultivated tool for Jews during the 1st century. Memorizing was a practice, something people were excellent at during the time of Jesus. It was a skill that allowed people to commit the entire Old Testament to memory! So to acknowledge that many had memorized much of Jesus’ teaching, which was often conveyed through story, makes a lot of sense.
2. The presence of eyewitnesses to the words and acts of Jesus would have worked as a fact checker to the oral tradition of Jesus’ stories. (Keep in mind that many of these eyewitnesses were not believers in Jesus, so if people were saying untrue things, they would have put a stop to it.)
3. Much was handed down through oral tradition (word-of-mouth memorization), but many people also took private notes.

There are other reasons to trust the Gospels as well. We have just under 6,000 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament that usually date about 100 years after they were first written. Now let’s compare that to other ancient sources. Plato wrote around 400 B.C. The earliest manuscripts we have of his comes from 900 A.D. and there are 7 copies. Aristotle wrote in the 300s B.C. We have 49 copies of his manuscripts and the earliest one comes from 1100 A.D.

We don’t often question the reliability of these classical authors, although we have barely any manuscripts and there are about 1000 years in between their writing and their earliest copies. We have much more evidence for the New Testament Gospels and can have a great confidence in their reliability.



# How Do We Understand the Trinity?

The Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—can be a difficult concept to grasp. Ultimately, Christians believe that God is One, but also three persons. The following explanations of the Trinity is taken from Christian Theology by Millard J. Erickson (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 1983).

“In the doctrine of the Trinity, we encounter one of the truly distinctive doctrines of Christianity. Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God. Although it seems on the surface to be a self-contradictory doctrine and is not overtly or explicitly stated in Scripture, nevertheless, devout minds have been led to it as they sought to do justice to the witness of Scripture.

1. The unity of God is basic. Monotheism is deeply implanted within the Hebrew-Christian tradition. God is one, not several.
2. The deity of each of the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, must be affirmed. Each is qualitatively the same. The Son is divine in the same way and to the same extent as is the Father, and this is true of the Holy Spirit as well.
3. The threeness and the oneness of God are not in the same respect. Although the orthodox interpretation of the Trinity seems contradictory (God is one and yet three), the contradiction is not real, but only apparent.
4. The Trinity is eternal. There have always been three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all of them have always been divine.
5. The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any way inferior in essence.
6. In the final analysis, the Trinity is incomprehensible. We cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. When someday we see God, we shall see him as he is, and understand him better than we do now. Yet even then we will not totally comprehend Him. Because He is the unlimited God and we are limited in our capacity to know and understand, He will always exceed our knowledge and understanding. We will always be human beings, even though perfected human beings. We will never become God. Those aspects of God which we will never fully comprehend should be regarded as mysteries that go beyond our reason rather than as paradoxes that conflict with reason.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a crucial ingredient of our faith. Each of the three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is to be worshiped, as is the Triune God. And, keeping in mind their distinctive work it is appropriate to direct prayers of thanks and petition to each of the members of the Trinity, as well as to all of them collectively. Furthermore, the perfect love and unity within the Godhead model for us the oneness and affection that should characterize our relationships within the body of Christ.”

## Why Is Baptism Important?

All throughout the book of Acts we see that when people accept Jesus, they are then baptized. But what exactly is baptism and why is it important?

Baptism is the moment when a believer publicly confesses Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, identifying with Christ and His Church. The act of baptism by immersion is done by lowering a person completely into water, then raising him/her up out of the water again. There are many forms of baptism practiced by various churches, however, we practice immersion baptism—this was most likely the practice in first-century Judaism and the early church.

Baptism is not necessary for salvation. Only through repentance and belief/faith in Christ can we find favour with God and have assurance of salvation. However, we get baptized because Jesus commanded it (Matthew 28:19-20). If we are disciples of Christ, we should be baptized because we want to be obedient to Jesus and His commands.

At CrossRoads we believe baptism is the first step of obedience as a Christian,



not something to do when we become serious about our faith. Jesus asked people to “count the cost” of following Him, so baptism is a way to count that cost and publicly declare faith in Jesus.

We identify with Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection through baptism. As we are lowered into the water, we see a picture of dying to our old ways and being buried to our past life of sin. When we come up out of the water, we identify with Christ’s resurrection as we leave the past behind and begin a new life lived in the power of Christ.

The Bible tells us that those who have believed and are saved should be baptized. Here at CrossRoads we do not baptize infants, but we do celebrate child dedications as a way for parents to commit to raising their children in the knowledge of the Lord.

We do not believe that there is a need to be re-baptized in order to recommit to Christ. The way to restoration for someone who has fallen into sin is through confession of our sins as seen in John 1:9—“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”





## Why Is Communion Important?

Jesus instituted communion at the Last Supper with His disciples. While He was there, He took the bread and the cup from the table and said that it represented His blood shed for us, and His body, broken for us. He asked His disciples to continue this practice as a way to remember what He had done. Ever since, Christians have been celebrating communion as a way to honour and remember Jesus' sacrifice for us.

The significance of communion can be found in a study of Passover, the time where God's people remembered how He rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Jesus was at a Passover Seder meal when He took these elements, linking His sacrifice and the salvation He offered with what God had done so long ago at the Exodus. (For more on these amazing connections, consider attending a Christian Passover Seder if you can!)

Here at CrossRoads Church we celebrate communion once a month. Some churches celebrate it every week, and the Passover celebration where Jesus instituted communion was celebrated once a year. We have no specific instructions for how often we should do it, only that Jesus asked us to as a way to remember His sacrifice. Here at CrossRoads Church we do not believe that the juice and bread become the body and blood of Christ. This is belief called transubstantiation, which is practiced by the Roman Catholic Church. We believe that Christ died for sin once and for all (Romans 6:9-10). The juice and the bread we partake in are symbols of Christ's body and blood, and we celebrate this together in remembrance of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Again, communion is not something that brings about salvation, but we do it out of obedience to Jesus because He asked us to (Luke 22:19). For more on what the Bible says about communion, read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

# Resources

There is so much to discover about God, the Bible and Christian Theology. If you're interested in going deeper, check out some of the following resources!

## Website

[www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) – search mp3 Biographies – listen to these people of faith.

## Books

*Christianity – A very Short Introduction* – Linda Woodhead

*Jesus – A Very Short Introduction* – Richard Bauckham

*Basic Christianity* – John Stott

*Why I Am A Christian* – John Stott

*Knowing Christianity* – J.I. Packer

*How Christianity Changed the World* – Alvin J. Schmidt

*Christianity An Introduction (Third Edition)* – Alister E. McGrath

*Jesus and the Gospels* – Craig Blomberg

*Church History in Plain Language* – Bruce L. Shelley

*Mere Christianity* – C.S. Lewis

*The Biggest Story* – Kevin DeYoung (Great children's book)

*Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* – Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg

## Videos

*That the World May Know* DVD series – Ray VanderLaan (On understanding the culture of the Bible)





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