

A Glossary of Christian Terms

Unlike the other five world faiths included in this glossary, most of the terms given below are in English and will be familiar to many people. The historic languages of the Christian scriptures are Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The Old Testament was written largely in Hebrew, with some texts in Aramaic and Greek (Apocrypha). The whole of the Old Testament was translated into Greek, although many words and passages have their origin in Aramaic. Latin became increasingly the language of the Western Church from the 5th century AD when the Bible was translated into Latin.

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Absolution	Forgiveness	The pronouncement by a priest of the forgiveness of sins.
AD	Anno Domini or In the Christian Era	In the Year of our Lord. The Christian calendar dates from the estimated date of the birth of Jesus Christ.
Advent		Coming. The period beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas (40 days before Christmas in the Eastern Orthodox tradition). A time of spiritual preparation for Christmas.
Agape	Love	The love of God. New Testament word used for the common meal of Christians; a Love Feast.
Altar	Communion Table Holy Table	Table used for Eucharist, Mass, Lord's Supper. Some denominations refer to it as Holy Table or Communion Table.
Anglican	Church of England	Churches in full communion with the See of Canterbury. Their origins and traditions are linked to the Church of England, and are part of the Anglican Communion.
Apocalyptic		(i) Revealing or 'unveiling' of things which are normally hidden (ii) Used of a literary genre, eg the Books of Daniel and Revelation.
Apocrypha	Pseudepigrapha	Books of the Old Testament that are in the Greek Canon but are not part of the Hebrew Bible. Some churches recognise the Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament canon.
Apocryphal New Testament		A modern title for various early Christian books which are not part of the canon of the New Testament.
Apostle	Messenger	One who was sent out by Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel.
Ascension		The event, 40 days after the Resurrection, when Jesus 'ascended into heaven' (see Luke 24 and Acts 1).
Ash Wednesday		The first day of Lent. In some Churches, worshippers receive the sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads.

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Atonement		Reconciliation, (coming together, at-one-ment) between God and humanity; restoring a relationship broken by sin.
Baptism	Christening	Rite of initiation involving immersion in, or sprinkling or pouring of, water.
Baptist		(i) A member of the Baptist Church, which grew out of the Anabaptist movement during the 16th century Reformation. (ii) A Christian who practises 'Believer's Baptism'.
Baptistry	Font	(i) Building or pool used for baptism, particularly by immersion. (ii) Part of a church, where baptism takes place.
BC	Before Christ	Period of history before the estimated birth of Jesus Christ.
Believer's Baptism		The baptism of people who are old enough to understand the meaning of the rite.
Benediction	Blessing	The prayer of blessing at the end of worship. It is also a special service culminating in the blessing of the congregation with the consecrated host used in Holy Communion (usually in a Roman Catholic context).
Blessed Sacrament		Bread and wine which have been consecrated and set aside for Holy Communion.
Canon	Scripture	The accepted books of the Bible. The list varies between denominations.
Catholic		(i) <i>Universal</i> . (ii) Often used as an abbreviation for Roman Catholic.
Charismatic	Pentecostal	A modern movement within the Church, emphasising spiritual gifts, such as healing or speaking with tongues.
Chrismation	Anointing	(i) The Orthodox second Sacrament of Initiation by anointing with chrism (a special oil), performed at the same time as Baptism (ii) Anointing with oil, eg healing or coronation.
Christ	Messiah	<i>The anointed one</i> . Messiah is used in the Jewish tradition to refer to the expected leader sent by God, who will bring salvation to God's people. Jesus' followers applied this title to him, and its Greek equivalent, <i>Christos</i> is the source of the words Christian and Christianity.

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Christmas	Nativity	Festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ (25 December, in most Churches).
Church	<i>Ecclesia</i>	(i) The whole community of Christians. (ii) The building in which Christians worship. (iii) A particular denomination.
Confession		Contrition; penance. (i) One of Seven Sacraments observed by some Churches whose priest confidentially hears a person's confession. (ii) An admission, by a Christian, of wrong-doing. (iii) A particular official statement (or profession) of faith.
Congregationalist		Member of a Christian body which believes that each local church is independent and self-governing under the authority of Christ.
Consubstantiation		Doctrine of the Eucharist associated with Luther, which holds that after the consecration, the substances of the body and blood of Jesus Christ and of the bread and wine co-exist in union with each other.
Creed		Summary statement of religious beliefs, often recited in worship, especially the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.
Crucifixion		Roman method of executing criminals and traitors by fastening them to a cross until they died of asphyxiation; used in the case of Jesus Christ and many who opposed the Romans.
Easter	<i>Pasch</i>	Central Christian festival which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.
Ecumenism	<i>Oikoumene</i>	Movement within the Church towards co-operation and eventual unity.
Episcopacy		System of Church government by Bishops.
Epistle	Letter	From the Greek word for letter. Several such letters or epistles, from Christian leaders to Christian Churches or individuals, are included in the New Testament.
Eucharist	Liturgy, Lord's Supper	Thanksgiving. A service celebrating the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, using elements of bread and wine.
Evangelical		Group, or church, placing particular emphasis on the Gospel and the scriptures as the sole authority in all matters of faith and conduct.
Evangelist		A writer of one of the four New Testament Gospels; a preacher of the Gospel.

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Font Free Churches	Non-Conformist Protestants	Receptacle to hold water used in Baptism. Non-conformist denominations, free from state control (used of 20 Churches).
Good Friday Gospel Grace	Evangel	The Friday in Holy Week. Commemorates the day Jesus died on the cross. (i) <i>Good news</i> (of salvation in Jesus Christ). (ii) An account of Jesus' life and work. (i) The freely-given and unmerited favour of God's love for humanity. (ii) Blessing. (iii) Prayer of thanks before or after meals.
Heaven Hell Holy Communion Holy Spirit Holy Week	Lord's Supper Mass, Eucharist	The place, or state, in which souls are united with God. The place, or state, in which souls are separated from God. See Eucharist, Lord's Supper. One of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Active as divine presence and power in the world, and dwelling in believers to make them like Christ and empower them to do God's will. The week before Easter, when Christians recall the last week of Jesus' life on Earth.
Icon/Ikon Iconostasis Incarnation		Painting or mosaic of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, a Saint, or a Church feast. Used as an aid to devotion, originally in the Orthodox tradition but becoming more popular among many Christians. Screen, covered with icons, used in Eastern Orthodox churches to separate the sanctuary from the nave. The doctrine that God took human form in Jesus Christ. It is also the belief that God in Christ is active in the Church and in the world.
Jesus Christ Justification by Faith		The central figure of Christian history and devotion. One of the persons of the Trinity. The doctrine that God forgives (treats as just) those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Kerygma Kyrie (Greek)	Good News	The central message about Jesus proclaimed by the Early Christians. O Lord. Addressed to Jesus, as in 'Kyrie Eleison' (Lord have mercy).
Lectern Lectionary Lent Liturgy Logos Lord Lord's Supper Lutheran	<i>Legilium</i> or <i>Ambo</i> Readings Service Word Master Holy Communion Mass or Eucharist	Stand, often in the shape of an eagle, to hold up the Bible for reading in Church. List of scriptural passages for systematic reading throughout the year. The 40 days leading up to Easter. Penitential season. (i) Service of worship according to a prescribed ritual such as Evensong or Eucharist. (ii) Term used in the Orthodox Church for the Eucharist. Pre-existent Word of God incarnate as Jesus Christ. Title used for Jesus to express his divine lordship over people, time and space. Alternative term for Eucharist in some Churches (predominantly Non-conformist). A major Protestant Church that receives its name from the 16th century German reformer, Martin Luther.
Mass Maundy Thursday Methodist Missal Mother of God	Eucharist Holy Thursday Altar Book <i>Theotokos</i> Mary	Term for the Eucharist, used by the Roman Catholic and other Churches. The Thursday in Holy Week. Commemorates the Last Supper. A Christian who belongs to the Methodist Church, which came into existence through the work of John Wesley in the 18th century. Book containing prayers, readings and ceremonial directions for the liturgy of the Mass or Eucharist. The title given to the Virgin Mary, mainly in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, to underline the Trinitarian belief that Jesus was truly God (in this context, God refers to God incarnate seen in Jesus Christ).

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
New Testament		Collection of 27 books forming the second section of the canon of Christian Scriptures.
Non-conformist	Protestant	Those Christian bodies who refused to conform to the doctrine and practices of the established Church of England in the 17th century.
Old Testament	Hebrew Bible	That part of the canon of Christian Scriptures which the Church shares with Judaism, comprising 39 books covering the Hebrew canon, and in the case of certain denominations, some books of the Apocrypha.
Ordination	Holy Orders	In episcopal Churches, the 'laying on of hands' on priests and deacons by a bishop. In non-episcopal Churches, the 'laying on of hands' on ministers by other representatives of the Church.
Orthodox		(i) The Eastern Orthodox Church consisting of national Churches (mainly Greek or Slav), including the ancient Eastern Patriarchates. They hold the common Orthodox faith, and are in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. (ii) Conforming to the creeds sanctioned by the ecumenical councils, eg Nicea, Chalcedon.
Palm Sunday		The Sunday before Easter, commemorating the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem when he was acknowledged by crowds waving palm branches.
Paraclete	Comforter	Advocate. Term used for the Holy Spirit.
Parousia		Presence. The Second Coming or return of Jesus Christ.
Passion	Suffering	The sufferings of Jesus Christ, especially in the time leading up to his execution.
Patriarch		The word used for early Israelite leaders such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Also the title for principal Eastern Orthodox bishops.
Pentecost	Whitsun	The Greek name for the Jewish Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot, which comes seven weeks (fifty days) after Passover. On the day of this feast, the followers of Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit.
Pentecostalist	Charismatic	A Christian who belongs to a church that emphasises certain gifts which were granted to the first believers on the Day of Pentecost (such as the power to heal the sick and speak in tongues).

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Pope	Holy Father ('Papa')	The Bishop of Rome, head of the Roman Catholic Church.
Presbyterian		A member of a Church that is governed by elders or 'presbyters'; the national Church of Scotland.
Protestant		That part of the Church which became distinct from the Roman Catholic Church when its members professed (or 'protested' - hence Protestant) the centrality of the Bible and other beliefs. Members affirm that the Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the ultimate authority for Christian teaching.
Pulpit		An elevated platform from which sermons are preached.
Purgatory	Cleansing	In some traditions, a condition or state in which good souls receive spiritual cleansing after death, in preparation for heaven.
Quaker	'Shaker'	A member of the Religious Society of Friends, established through the work of George Fox in the 17th century.
Reconciliation	Confession	(i) Sacrament of the (Roman) Catholic Church, consisting of contrition, confession of sins, and absolution. (ii) The human process of reconciling Christians with one another.
Redemption		Derived from the practice of paying the price of a slave's freedom; and so, the work of Jesus Christ in setting people free through his death.
Reformation		A 16th century reform movement that led to the formation of Protestant Churches. It emphasised the need to recover the initial beliefs and practices of the Church.
Resurrection		(i) The rising from the dead of Jesus Christ on the third day after the crucifixion. (ii) The rising from the dead of believers at the Last Day. (ii) The new, or risen, life of Christians.
Roman Catholic		That part of the Church owing loyalty to the Bishop of Rome, as distinct from Orthodox and Protestant Churches.
Sacrament		An outward sign of an inward blessing, as in Baptism or the Eucharist.
Salvationist		A member of the Salvation Army founded by William and Catherine Booth in the 19th century.

Preferred Form	Main Variants	Explanation
Sanctification Sin Synoptic	Making Holy Falling short Missing the mark	The process by which a believer is made holy, to become like Jesus Christ. (i) Act of rebellion or disobedience against the known will of God. (ii) An assessment of the human condition as disordered and in need of transformation. Having a common viewpoint. It is applied to the presentation of Jesus' life in the first three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke in contrast with that given in the Gospel of John.
Tabernacle Transubstantiation Trinity		(i) A receptacle for the Blessed Sacrament, if not immediately consumed but set aside or 'reserved' (mainly in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches). The presence of the consecrated elements is usually signalled by a continuously burning light. (ii) Term used by some denominations of their building. Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the Mass, defined at the Lateran Council of 1215, and confirmed at the Council of Trent in 1551. This states that in the Eucharist, at the words of consecration, the substance of the bread and wine becomes the substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and that he is thus present on the altar. Three persons in one God; doctrine of the threefold nature of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Unction United Reformed Church	Anointing- (especially of the Sick)	The anointing with oil of a sick or dying person. A Church formed by the union of English Congregationalists with the Presbyterian Church of England, and subsequently the Reformed Association of the Churches of Christ.
Vatican Virgin Birth		The residence of the Pope on the Vatican Hill in Rome, and the administrative centre of the Roman Catholic Church. The chief building of the Vatican is St Peter's Basilica, built on the traditional site of St Peter's tomb. The doctrine of the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ by the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit and without the agency of a human father.