

# Everything you wanted to know about Christianity

by Dennis Colby

**S**ome people in America are scared silly of Christianity, but many of the most frightened know very little about it. They throw around terms like fundamentalist and evangelical with very little knowledge of their meaning, and this is before they enter the dark thicket of Preterists, Amillennialists, Prelapsarian Arminian Claims Adjusters, etc. Here, then, is a handy reference guide to some of the key terms, concepts and groups.

**Premillennialism:** This is the belief among some Christians that ever since January 1, 2000, it has no longer been possible, in the words of the Prince song, “to party like it’s 1999.”

Postmillennialists are those Christians who believe that it will always be possible to do so, while amillennialists believe that in this context “1999” cannot be understood literally, but must be read as an allegorical term roughly meaning “a time at which it is especially appropriate to party.”

**Rapture:** This was a No. 1 hit in 1980 for Blondie (No. 5 in the UK), from the otherwise underwhelming *Autoamerican* album. Many Christians now concede that the then-pioneering use of rap in the song sounds a little lame in retrospect. In their best-selling series of books about the song, *Left Behind (Parallel Lines)*, Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye defend the rap verse’s hip references to Grandmaster Flash and Fab Five Freddy, and maintain that when Jesus returns, all believers will be united in accepting that Blondie’s cover of “The Tide Is High” is better than the original.

**Pope:** The pope is the president of Christianity. He is elected every four years by the Congress of Cardinals, which is divided into the Senate and the Holy House of Representatives. As president, the pope can veto important pieces of legislation, which he tends to do. The pope is also magical and cannot be seen with the naked eye except for one hour on Christmas Eve every year.

**Bible:** The Bible was written by God as a merchandising tie-in to his blockbuster film *The Ten Commandments*. Each book of the Bible is named after a person who features prominently in it – for example, the book of Numbers is named after Herschel Numbers, who invented numerals. The Bible was so successful that God wrote a sequel, *Bible II: On to Rome*, now generally called the New Testament. Protestants believe that the Bible is literally true in every detail except the description of the Eucharist, while Catholics are not allowed to read the Bible.

**Catholics:** Catholics are the New York Yankees of Christianity. They are the biggest and wealthiest team, and their owner is intensely controversial (this makes St. Francis of Assisi the Derek Jeter of Catholicism: discuss). Catholics all wear matching uniforms and are divided into “parishes” or “squadrons” to make choosing softball teams easier. Catholics are rigidly controlled by a hidebound hierarchy that starts with priests on the bottom and priests’ housekeepers on the top. Catholics are not allowed to read the Bible, eat meat or refrain from worshipping statues.

**Orthodox:** For many years, American scholars believed that the Orthodox were – like leprechauns, unicorns and liberal Republicans – purely the product of the fanciful imaginations

of medieval writers. Recent evidence leads us to tentatively conclude, however, that Eastern Orthodoxy may have somewhere in the neighborhood of 250 million adherents. Protestants tend to see the Orthodox as “Catholics with beards,” while Catholics confess to a haunting sense that they themselves are simply “Orthodox without beards.”

**Protestant Reformation:** This is the name historians give to a major labor dispute that erupted in Germany in 1517 when a group of monks hammered a proposed union contract to the door of the pope’s house, requesting a 95 percent pay raise. The pope refused to negotiate with the monks union until it agreed to pay to have the door fixed, and the result was the world’s longest-running strike. For nearly 500 years, a huge number of Christians have been on strike from being Catholic, saying they are “justified” in their work stoppage because the pope won’t expand the number of indulgences they get per year. Currently, the matter is in arbitration.

**Calvinism:** This theory was worked out by the French theologian and fashion designer John Calvin Klein, who argued that some people are predestined to be glamorous while others are doomed to be plain. America was founded by Calvinists, who sought to establish a country where they could pursue their belief that buckled hats were fashionable.

**Fundamentalism:** The belief that basic elements of play – like passing, ball handling and defense – are the essential building blocks of a winning basketball team. The fundamentalists formulated their doctrine in the 1980s against the showy, heretical play of Magic Johnson’s Los Angeles Lakers. Leading fundamentalist institutions include Bob Jones University and Syracuse. Larry Brown’s failure to get the Knicks into the playoffs has been seen as a major setback for the cause of fundamentalism.

**Baptism and Baptists:** Baptists are Christians who believe that God can be accessed only by means of a swimming pool or, in some cases, a shallow stream. The first Baptist was John the Baptist, who was said to eat locusts and honey, although contemporary Baptists generally prefer barbecue. *Baptism* is also the term used to describe a key Christian ceremony in which prospective members of the church are initiated either actually (Catholics, Orthodox, confused Protestants) or symbolically (Protestants, confused Catholics, religious studies professors). Catholics believe that anyone can perform a valid baptism. Baptists believe that only they can.

**The Emerging Church:** A term that refers to churches attended exclusively by white people in their 20s and 30s who have at least one tattoo or body piercing. Their distinguishing characteristics are a refreshing, up-to-date interpretation of Christianity and a reluctance to directly answer questions.

**Nicene Creed:** This statement of faith is the Christian Pledge of Allegiance, recited every Sunday in squadron meetings by Christians all over the globe. Adopted in the fourth century at the behest of Emperor Constantinople, it was designed to counter the influence of the Aryans, who argued that Jesus was German.

**Trinity:** This is the Christian understanding of God, who Christians say is personified by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses and some Pentecostals reject trinitarianism, as do Muslims. Interestingly, while this does not mean that Pentecostals are Muslims, it does mean that Muslims are Jehovah's Witnesses. St. Augustine famously summed up the difficulty of comprehending the Trinity when he recounted a dream in which a small boy told him he would need a bigger bucket if he wanted to bail out the ocean.

**Jesus:** Jesus H. Christ (1-33 CE) invented Christianity during a spring break road trip to Jerusalem in the company of his friends. Jerusalem had been the site of severe spring break disturbances during the previous year, and the local authorities took a dim view of anyone starting a new religion. Beyond the fact that Christians really, really like him, scholars, historians and professional athletes can agree on little else about Jesus. Some maintain that he was a secular revolutionary who never intended to found a religion; others argue that he was perfectly conscious of his mission and that the Bible is a reliable guide to his earthly ministry. Others go very far in their rejection of traditional Christian interpretations of Jesus, to the point of suggesting that he never existed; still others insist that he did exist, we're just not aware of it yet. And finally others say his name wasn't Jesus at all, but rather Josh.

**Touchdown Jesus:** When professional athletes thank Jesus for helping them win a game, this is the Jesus they're referring to.

**Sex:** Christians are not permitted to have sex. This unpopular doctrine was formulated by Pope Lactose LX at the Council of Disney in 1439. Despite this restriction, Christians have managed to increase their ranks to the point where there are roughly 2 billion of them. Scholars attribute this to the competitive health benefits and generous "flex time" arrangements offered by Christianity.

**Heaven:** This term refers to the ultimate destiny of a certain number of souls. Depending on who you listen to, heaven is either: where all of us will end up (Origen); where many of us will end up (St. Gregory of Nyssa); where some of us will end up (John Calvin); where a small portion of us have, in some sense, already ended up (John of Leyden); where precisely 144,000 of us will end up (Charles Taze Russell); or where Jack Chick will end up (Jack Chick). Theologian Belinda Carlisle once posited that "Ooh, baby, heaven is a place on earth," but explorers combing the globe have yet to confirm this.

**Devil:** Although the devil, also known as Satan, Lucifer, the Father of Lies and, to his friends, Hef, is mentioned numerous times in *Bible II*, most Christians today are uncomfortable with belief in a literal, personal demonic entity. Instead, they prefer to think of the devil primarily as the potential for wickedness that exists within all human beings or, in some cases, as an especially unreasonable landlord.

**"The devil has all the good music":** This commonplace phrase is actually a spin point put forward by the devil and his representatives, primarily in commercial radio. In fact, painstaking research has shown that the devil's own musical tastes are startlingly pedestrian: an avid Barry

Manilow fan, the devil has also been known to weep at the works of Andrew Lloyd Webber, although the Author of Sin has described *Jesus Christ Superstar* as “one-sided.” The Saxon monk Everwach posited in the 11th century that the devil rearranges his schedule so as not to miss a single episode of American Idol, but the Council of Trent later clarified that he TiVos some episodes.

**Unitarians** believe that Jesus was a dedicated social worker, the first feminist, the first environmentalist and the first advocate of tolerance between all human beings, who nonetheless managed to enrage the Roman government to the point where it killed him by nailing him to a tree.

**Fundamentalists** believe that everything God wanted us to do is spelled out in easy-to-understand detail in the book he wrote, except the part about the Eucharist, which was obviously a case of God’s being a bit fanciful.

**Methodists** believe that the Wesley brothers wrote such awesome songs that it was necessary to secede from the Church of England.

**Puritans** believe that you’re going to hell, and they’re kind of happy about it.

**Quakers** are a sect that began in Philadelphia in the mid-1990s as a fan club devoted to the NBC sitcom *Friends*, hence the group’s official name, “The Society of ‘Friends’ Fans.” However, a bitter schism developed when Monica and Chandler began dating, and the Quakers broke into several factions, including the Proud Quakers, the Shakers and Velvet Revolver. Known for their obstinate refusal to remove their hats except when in the presence of Wilford Brimley, the Quakers are also known for being the only people at antiwar demonstrations who are well dressed. Their accomplishments include oatmeal and the state of Rhode Island.

**Mormons** or, as they prefer to be known, “The Church of Saturday Saints,” were founded by Vermont native Karl Malone, who argued that God had such a hit on his hands with *Bible II* that he eventually wrote a third installment, *Bible III: Once Upon a Time in America*. This has remained tremendously controversial with Christians who say only the first two Bibles count, and who in particular are unhappy with Sofia Coppola’s acting in the third installment. The Mormons were notorious for their controversial stance against caffeine and, in fact, were driven west by angry mobs of jittery espresso addicts. Ultimately settling in Utah, a place where they could drink Sanka in peace, the Mormons later invented jazz.