Jesus’ commandment of love

Three factors are important in order to understand Jesus’ ethics:

- repentance as the basis of the ethical life
- the radical nature of God’s ethical demand on humanity
- the centrality of the love commandment (Mt 7:12).

Further insight into Jesus’ command to love is found in the first Letter of John:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God ... God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him ...

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us ...

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

1 Jn 4:7-12, 17

Importance of the ethical teachings in the lives of Christians

Jesus preaches a God who is the source and model of love for Jesus and his disciples (Mt 5:48). Jesus proclaims a love that is to bind and distinguish the Christian community (1 Cor 12-13) and compared to which the individual will ultimately be judged (Mt 25:31-46).

In the final analysis, Jesus’ command to love means that the Christian expresses their longing for God and constantly seeks the good of their neighbour. In the first three gospels in particular, ‘love’ is connected with the preaching of God’s Kingdom that arrives in the person of Jesus, and also with the greatest commandment (Mt 22:34-40). This type of love unavoidably involves suffering (Lk 6:22 ff.), and the Christian is asked to follow in Jesus’ footsteps to the cross (Mt 10:3-7 ff.) and beyond to the Risen Christ’s victory over sin and death.

Figure 3.4.1, Christ the Martyr, 2003, by Robert Lentz. The artist has deliberately placed Jesus ambiguously to show him neither inside nor outside the barbed wire.

| RESPOND | Describe important Christian ethical teachings that could be associated with this image. |

Review

1. In your own words, define the term ‘ethics’.
2. What is the Decalogue?
3. Identify two major guidelines for Christian ethics.
4. Outline the principal ethical teachings that underpin two of the following: the Ten Commandments, the Beatitude discourse and Jesus’ command to love.
5. Describe the importance of Christian ethics in the everyday life of believers, especially in relation to the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and Jesus’ commandment to love.
1. In pairs, discuss the statement: 'The Decalogue is like a set of ten boundary markers.' Write a paragraph to summarise your discussion.

2. Construct a table to compare the similarities and differences in the two accounts of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12 and Lk 6:20-26). Discuss why there are differences.

3. Compare and contrast the meanings of 'ethics' and 'morality'. Present your conclusions in the form of a Venn diagram.

4. Imagine two worlds—one where there are no ethical guidelines and another where there are many moral laws.
   a. Compare and contrast these two worlds.
   b. Organise a class discussion on how someone would think and act if they were living in each of the worlds.

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**Glossary**

- **devotion(s)**: Used in the singular, 'devotion' is the ready will to serve God. The plural term 'devotions' refers to religious observances and forms of prayer or worship.
- **meditation**: From the Greek word melete meaning 'care, study, exercise', implying preparation and practise in this form of prayer. Meditation in the Christian tradition is understood as a spiritual practice that serves as preparation for 'pure prayer' or 'prayer of the heart'.
- **prayer**: The act, action or practice of praying to entities beyond the world; as in petition, thanksgiving, adoration or confession. In the Christian context this can include God, Jesus, his mother Mary and the saints. Prayer is also the form of words used for praying such as the Lord's Prayer or Our Father.
- **saints**: Persons whose exceptional holiness of life is formally recognised by the Church and who are entitled to veneration.
- **worship**: Often used interchangeably with 'liturgy', although 'worship' is the preferred term in the Reformed Churches. Both refer in general to celebrations or gatherings of the faithful for prayer and sacraments.

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**Did you know?**

The English word 'prayer' literally means a 'petition' or 'request'. It derives from the Latin word *preкахi* meaning 'to entreat or beg'. For Christians, prayer is the most important and fundamental form of personal address to God.

Personal devotions refer to those various types of religious observances, whether public or private, that are usually separate from congregational worship. Many Christians see their 'personal devotions' as fostering true faith and spirituality.
Prayer as personal devotion

Prayer is an important way in which the Christian acknowledges the existence of a relationship between God and humanity and, more importantly, that God relates to each human being and all creation with ongoing compassion and goodness. In other words, a divine person interacts with human persons who in turn reach out to the One who sustains all creation. When Christians pray to the mother of Christ or to a saint, the one prayed to is viewed as linked with God and therefore having the power to answer prayers.

Prayer is encouraged in the Bible and there are many phrases from the scriptures used to describe prayer, including 'to call upon', 'intercede with', 'meditate upon', 'consult', 'cry out to', 'draw near to', 'rejoice in' and 'seek the face of [God]'. Each of these expressions is obviously linked to various situations that prompt people to pray personally to God.

The personal prayer life of Jesus

Jesus is described as praying privately, silently or in solitude at various times during his ministry:

- after his baptism by John the Baptist (Lk 3:21–22)
- during the temptations and fasting in the desert (Lk 4:1–13)
- when seeking relief from his busy ministry (Lk 5:16)
- as a matter of course early in the morning before dawn (Mk 1:35).

He often spent the whole night in prayer, particularly before important decisions (Lk 6:12; Mk 14:26–42); after key sermons (Jn 6:15); and in times of distress (Jn 12:27–28), including during the crucifixion (Mt 27:46).

Different types of personal prayer

There are many different prayer practices and styles that Christians use in their everyday lives. Practices such as vocal, mental and contemplative prayer, and meditation and going on retreat, focus the Christian for their involvement with the world. Each of these prayer practices strengthen and direct the Christian so that they can interact in a more Christ-like way with others in the world. The practices give them direction when they feel alone, a sense of community when they feel lost, and a sense of joy when they are successful in spreading 'the Good News'. Prayer infuses the life of the Christian because it is understood as an important way of experiencing 'life with the living God'.

Vocal prayer uses words that are recited, spoken or sung. It may draw on traditional prayers with a long history such as the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:9–13), the Hail Mary, liturgical texts and litanies. Some prayers follow a prescribed formula such as the Catholic Rosary. Vocal prayer can also be original, spontaneous and based on one’s personal experience, the Psalms, the gospels and other sources.

O Lord, when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established ... how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Ps 8:1–3

Figure 3.3: Christian meditation is a popular contemporary prayer style and has taken on many different forms.

Mental prayer refers to a process of reflection that involves the mind, the imagination and the will. During mental prayer, the Christian asks for God’s help to still the wandering mind and, eventually, to move the heart and convert it to the ways of God. Meditation is the most well-known form of mental prayer. Meditation is generally understood as the exercising of one’s spiritual memory based on repetition of words and phrases, usually pronounced aloud, and accompanied by vocal and bodily rhythm. A good example is the Orthodox Christian ‘Jesus Prayer’: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ Often icons are used as an aid to mental prayer.

Each of these different prayer practices and styles influence the everyday lives of believers by bringing them into contact with the mysteries of their faith, and by providing them with tangible ways in which these mysteries can be brought to life to provide individual and communal meaning. Prayer is a way of reaching out to others—praying for one’s family, the community or the world in general; seeking help for oneself—praying for guidance in coping with changes in one’s life; marking daily rituals—praying before a meal or setting out on a journey.
Review

1. What do Christians mean by 'prayer'?
2. The Lord's Prayer or Our Father is often called the model prayer. Read the Our Father and give three reasons for why it is called 'the model prayer'.
3. Describe the main characteristics of vocal and mental prayer and examine their importance in the life of a Christian.
4. What are the key features of Jesus' prayer life? Discuss possible ways his prayer life might influence the everyday practices of Christians.

id you know?

The oldest Christian prayer is found in 1 Cor 16:22
Rev 22:20)—'Maranatha'—Come, Lord [Jesus], Come.

Extension

1. Using the internet and/or other resources, investigate the Rosary—the events in the lives of Jesus and Mary that it commemorates, its history and how it is prayed.
2. Interview five Christians and ask them what their favourite prayers are. In class, collate the responses and make a 'Top of the Prayers' list.
3. Go to the web destinations for page 65 and investigate why meditation is linked almost exclusively to Eastern practices.
4. Outline points for discussion in a class debate on the topic: 'Meditation should be an important part of Christian prayer practices.'

Figure 3.5.2 Shining light
Anselm Knight, 2005, by Western Australian artist Michael Kane
Triptych on canvas panels, printed with archival inks, the work combines scanned, photographic and autographic material. The title is an Aramaic translation of 'bring you peace'.

The image attempts to portray the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ as an event that is constantly re-enacted through human conflict and indifference.

The three panels may be roughly divided into Suffering, Death and Renewal.

SPOND
What symbolism can you see in this image? How does this work relate to the material in this chapter?
Conclusion

Perhaps due to its long and complex history, it is easy to forget that Christianity is based on a simple belief—that human beings exist in a state of alienation in this world, from God and each other, and that this state has been healed through the life, death and resurrection of one person, Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Christianity has at its heart not an idea but a person. Christians gain access to this person through a combination of historical understanding of Christianity, and by incorporating its key features into their daily lives—principal beliefs, sacred texts and writings, core ethical teachings and personal devotion.

Today Christianity is experiencing resurgence in Eastern Europe, while in Western Europe church attendance has been eroded by the influence of secularism and materialism. Christianity is also demonstrating great growth and renewal in some regions of Africa, parts of India, and in other countries such as Indonesia.

Christian migrants to Australia from Latin America, the Middle East and some parts of Asia bring their own rituals and ‘portraits’ of Christ. Many Australians who saw Christianity as a Western European religion have had to adjust to Christianity as a truly universal tradition. Wherever they come from, the very beginnings of Jesus’ ministry continue to take all Christians back to two perennial questions: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Mk 8:29) and ‘What is truth?’ (Jn 14:6, cf. Jn 18:38). These two questions lead to an obvious third question: ‘Who then is Jesus and how should his followers respond to him and his teachings today?’

These are perhaps the most urgent questions to be addressed by all contemporary Christians. There are, however, many competing answers to these questions—answers that either cause divisions within the Christian Churches or unite them in a common cause.

Extension

1. Check your list of key terms, concepts and ideas from this chapter and ensure that it is clear and complete.

2. Check that your media file is up to date. Use this file to analyse how the media report on Christianity compared to what you have learnt about Christianity in this chapter. Prepare a summary of your analysis.

3. Review this chapter in order to construct a pamphlet with text and graphics that advertises the best features of Christianity (maximum length is both sides of an A4 page).

4. Synthesise the main features of Christianity evident from all topics in this chapter in the form of a flow chart or mind map.

Summarise

For each chapter outcome, build your own summary notes that draw from:
- work in class and at home
- this student book
- other print and media sources
- the internet
- additional resources at Pearson Places.
Protestantism

Protestantism is the system of Christian faith and practice based on acceptance of the principles of the Reformation. It derives from the 'protestation' of the reforming members of the Diet of Speyer (1529) who voted against the decisions of the Catholic majority.

The three founding branches of Protestantism are Lutheranism, Calvinism and Zwinglianism. It is from these that Methodism, Presbyterianism and the other Protestant denominations grew. None of these groups acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope and most minimise the liturgical and sacramental aspects of Catholic Christianity.

While the Protestant movement is diverse, its distinguishing features for most Protestants are:

- the Bible as the only source of revealed truth—doctrine should not be based upon church tradition
- the importance of faith alone—salvation is achieved individually through the merit of faith, and not faith plus the efforts of oneself and others
- baptism and the Eucharist (Holy Communion) are the central sacraments
- recognition of 'the priesthood of all believers' (1 Pet 2:9) in gaining access to God—no other earthly mediator is necessary
- the emphasis on the transcendence (total otherness) of God, and therefore the effects of the Fall and Original Sin
- the emphasis on preaching and hearing of the Word.

Clergy can generally marry and some but not all Protestant churches allow women to be leaders.

Extension

1. Organise a class debate on the topic: 'It was inevitable that divisions would arise within Christianity.'
2. Choose one variant of Christianity. Investigate its history and address these issues:
   a. the major figures in its history
   b. the major issues that caused the break from the Church of Rome
   c. the issues the variant is dealing with today.

3.2 Principal beliefs

Glossary

deacon
From the Greek word diákonos, which is often translated as 'servant'. The office of deacon originated in the selection of seven men to assist with the pastoral and administrative needs of the early Church (Acts 6:2–6).

revelation
From the Latin word reveleāre meaning 'to take away the veil'. In this context, it means the disclosure of something that could not have been revealed without the will of God. It is also the name given to the last book of the New Testament, 'The Revelation to John' (Book of Apocalypse).

Review

1. Recall the two key developments that resulted in division within Christianity.
2. Construct a timeline to show the significant events and people that relate to variants within Christianity.
3. Outline the major features of Anglicanism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Pentecostalism and Protestantism. Specify some major differences between these variants.

Over the centuries, Christianity has organised its beliefs into a systematic theology that draws from its sacred writings and traditions. While the major beliefs of Christianity are shared by all Christian variants, there are degrees of difference in the interpretation of these beliefs and how they are lived out in everyday life. The following sections take a general approach to the beliefs, devotions, and ethical and moral teachings of Christianity. Any major differences and emphases are noted.

Christianity is not just, or even primarily, a list of beliefs and practices. Being a Christian begins with a person's lived experiences. In this context, the principal beliefs of Christianity are examined here. How these beliefs are put
The divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ

In the centuries after Jesus’ death it became necessary to provide explanations for what was being said about Jesus and his relationship to God. Early Christian thinkers believed that Jesus Christ was divine, yet this in turn raised difficult questions about the nature of Jesus and the nature of God. In what sense was Jesus both truly divine and truly human? Most people understood that a man could become a god—Roman emperors sometimes did after death. But it was much more difficult to explain how and why a god ‘was made man’. Disputes arose over the many competing explanations, such as:

- **Jesus was co-equal but different**—Paul of Samosata became the bishop of Antioch in 260 CE, and his belief was that God remained the Logos or Word and Jesus had put that into flesh.

- **Jesus was created by God**—Arius, a Christian priest from Alexandria, began teaching in 319 CE that Jesus was created by God to put God’s plans into action on earth. He believed Jesus was not eternal and, therefore, less god-like than God.

- **Jesus was both human and divine**—Athanasius (296–323 CE) was a deacon in Alexandria when Arius began his teaching about the nature of Jesus. Athanasius responded that Jesus was both the same nature as God and fully human.

These and other questions came to a head at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. The teaching of Athanasius was adopted and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was formulated: God is understood as one God, yet within the Godhead there are three distinct persons—God the Father/Creator, God the Son/Jesus Christ and God the Holy Spirit.

Yet at the same time he was also mysteriously the divine Son of God, ‘one with the Father’, the second person of the Trinity. In other words, he was a human being who lived at a particular time and place with normal human limitations; yet he is also the divine Son of God whose life, death and resurrection has cosmic significance for the whole of humanity.

As the Gospel of John expresses it:

> And the Word [the divine Son of God] became flesh and dwelt among us [became human], full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father.

Jn 1:14

**Death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ**

From the gospels we know that Jesus was arrested, briefly examined, taken to Golgotha outside Jerusalem, and put to death by crucifixion alongside other criminals. Thus ended the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. But this was not the end—the gospels affirm that Jesus not only rose from the dead but also was seen by many of his followers (Mt 28:1–15; Mk 16:1–8; Lk 24:1–12; Jn 20:1–18).

As well as the resurrection narratives, there is the ascension of Jesus to heaven (Lk 24:50–53). The ascension of Jesus refers to the event where Jesus returns to heaven after his resurrection (Lk 24:51; Acts 1:9). The Christian feast of the ascension is celebrated forty days after Easter.
From the very beginning, Christians believed in the resurrection of the body—that each believer will one day be completely human but transformed—body and soul—for all eternity, and share in the glorious life of Jesus Christ (refer to 2 Cor 4:14 and 1 Cor 15:35-37, 42-44). This belief is based on the event that is the heart and foundation of all Christian beliefs. At his resurrection, Jesus Christ, after truly suffering and dying, was raised to new life and entered a transformed, victorious and glorified state.

Did you know?
In the Jewish Scriptures, both Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-14) ascend to heaven prior to death.

The nature of God and the Trinity

Christians believe that God is One and the Creator of all things. This same God is also known as three persons: Father or Creator of all; Jesus the Son of God; and the Holy Spirit or Sanctifier. This is known as 'the mystery of the Holy or Blessed Trinity'. The Holy or Blessed Trinity is the central dogma and mystery of the Christian faith. 'Mystery' is used here to mean 'deepest reality' or 'that which is always beyond anything we can fully know or experience'. In the Trinity, God exists as three persons—traditionally referred to as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—all existing in a relationship of 'intimate self-surrender' to each other. When one person in the Trinity acts, so too do the other two persons. Each person is distinct but does not act in isolation from the others.

Although the word 'Trinity' does not occur in the Bible, the origins of the trinitarian formula seem to be present in texts such as the following:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Cor 13:14

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Mt 28:19

Christian theologians have also seen early indications of the existence of the Trinity in such Hebrew Scripture passages as the apparition of the three 'angels' to Abraham (Gen 18:1-15).

Revelation

Revelation, put simply, is the transmission of knowledge from the divine to the human. It includes not only biblical revelation but revelation evident throughout the whole of human history. In other words, revelation is knowledge given by God to human beings about persons, events and things previously hidden or only partly known.

Christians believe that revelation is not only God's self-communication to human beings, but it is also a loving and utterly free invitation to join in friendship with God. Through this revelation, God calls human beings to respond in faith and action today, not just intellectually or by accepting certain doctrines or beliefs.
God's fullest revelation takes place through the words, deeds and events associated with the person of Jesus Christ. Revelation, too, is not simply a past event or proclamation from God. Revelation continues to 'happen' as God continues to speak throughout human history—through its historical events, through Christianity, through world religions, through all the joys, hopes and frustrations of the entire world.

**Salvation**

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.  

*Jn 3:16*

Salvation is the belief that human beings require deliverance by God from the power of sin and darkness. Yet it is also the process or way in which human beings are saved or brought to fullness of life in God. The New Testament speaks of salvation as the forgiveness of sin (Titus 3:5), living as a 'saved' person (Rom 1:17) and looking forward to a life in heaven (Mt 19:27–29).

For Christians, salvation has three main features:

- The initial fruits of salvation (of God's triumph through Christ over sin and death and the renewal of all creation) may be experienced now in this present life, but its full realisation is delayed until the next life or afterlife. Only in heaven, in the actual presence of God, will a person's deepest desires for love, peace and justice be completely fulfilled. Salvation is therefore 'here now' but 'not yet fully complete'.

- Because there are many obstacles in the present life that make salvation difficult, people cannot achieve salvation by themselves. It is only through the grace of God that humans can attain salvation.

- Jesus Christ is central to salvation, for it is through his life, death and resurrection that God has offered salvation to all humanity.

In this broad consensus among Christians, there are many different approaches and unresolved questions. For example:

- What precisely are the obstacles that prevent salvation or make it difficult, and what is the 'grace' that God offers us to overcome these obstacles? Is salvation only a personal concern or is it linked to the beliefs and practices of the faith community and the wider community?

- Is salvation possible apart from belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour?

- Is membership of a Christian Church necessary for salvation?

Some Christian Churches (for example, Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches) hold that those who strive to do God's will as it is made known to them in conscience can be saved, even if they are not members of that particular church. Other churches hold this belief partially or would be opposed to it. Whatever their viewpoint, the central question here is: Is there salvation apart from belief in Jesus Christ?

In the final analysis, however, salvation is more concerned with the all-powerful and all-knowing love of God who is Mystery and beyond all human understanding. Christians believe that to experience God's love is to experience the essence of salvation's meaning and mystery.

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**Figure 3.7.3** Christ and Mary Magdalene, 2000 by Michael Galovic. Mary Magdalene (Mary of Magdala) is the classic model of a disciple seeking salvation from Jesus.

**RESPOND** Who was Mary Magdalene? Explain what the icon's symbolism tells us about the type of salvation that Jesus offers.
Christian beliefs in the everyday life of the believer

For Christians, these principal beliefs are not just a doctrine but also a living relationship with Jesus Christ, and can be summarised as follows:

- The divine Christ became human so that humans might become more divine.
- God created the world, so everything within it is good.
- God saves us but we cannot be saved without our own cooperation.
- God is ever present as Creator (or Father), Son and Spirit, and God's Spirit and power make us new people.
- Mary followed God's will.
- The Church is necessary for salvation and is the body of Christ.
- Christian lives are to be based on God's love and forgiveness.
- Christians are called to live in accordance with the gospel in their own lives, acting justly and compassionately in the world.
- The whole of humanity is destined for eternal happiness, yet some may totally and deliberately reject God's gift of love and salvation.

Mary the mother of Jesus

The New Testament begins its account of Mary's life with the Annunciation, the appearance to her of the Archangel Gabriel heralding her divine selection to be the mother of Jesus. It records Mary's role in key events of the life of Jesus, from his virgin birth to his crucifixion. Other apocryphal writings (see page 59) tell of her subsequent death and bodily assumption into heaven.

Christians hold a number of important doctrines concerning Mary. Primary among these are that Mary lived a sinless life, and that as mother of Jesus she became Theotokos, literally the 'God-bearer' or 'Mother of God'.

Catholics, Orthodox, as well as some Anglicans and Lutherans venerate (honour) Mary as the mother of Jesus but they make a clear distinction between this and the worship due to God. Generally referred to as the Blessed Virgin Mary by Catholics, Mary is much depicted in Western art and the icons of Orthodoxy.

Review

1. Outline the principal Christian beliefs regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.
2. Outline the key Christian beliefs about the nature of God and of the Trinity.
3. Explain the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection for Christians.
4. Examine the Christian understanding of revelation. Provide at least two examples of ways in which God reveals God's self to humanity.
5. Describe the Christian understanding of salvation. Critically evaluate some of the difficult questions that it raises.

Extension

1. Construct a mind map or flow chart to summarise the principal beliefs of Christianity. Make reference to differences and similarities between the variants of Christianity.
2. Clarify what Christians mean when they say their beliefs are not 'just a doctrine but a living relationship with Jesus Christ'.
3. Do an internet search and download three different paintings of Mary the mother of Jesus. What aspects of Mary's life does each depict?

Did you know?

Evangelicals and those of the Modern Protestant traditions do not accept the deuterocanonical books as canonical, although Protestant Bibles included them in Apocrypha sections until around the 1820s.
The importance of the Bible

All variants of Christianity view the Bible as the basic source of belief and practice. Some Christian Churches, however, hold differing views on the relationship between the Bible and tradition, and the function of modern interpretation of the Bible.

The Bible is the central sacred text for Christians, especially because of its role in the everyday life of believers. The Bible is the basis for many major Christian beliefs; it is used in the liturgy of Christianity; it is the basis for prayer; and it provides the guidelines for the behaviour of Christians. It is particularly in the context of sacramental liturgy or worship that the Bible is viewed as important and sacred, for it is here that Christians at the same time read from the Bible and celebrate the Eucharist, Mass or Lord's Supper. The Bible teaches them about the nature of God and the ministry and teachings of Jesus.

During the Middle Ages, the Bible was also revered as the 'sacred page' (Latin, sacra pagina) since it was the basis on which theology (words and teachings about God) was developed.

Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.
St Jerome (c. 340–420 AD), the most famous biblical scholar in the history of Christianity

The Bible and beliefs

While the beliefs underpinning sacred texts and writings are shared by all Christians, there are degrees of difference in the interpretation of these beliefs and how they are lived out in everyday life. Most Christian beliefs are introduced in the Bible:

• Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9).
• Jesus is the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24).
• Jesus is the Son of Man (Mk 2:28; cf. Dan 7).
• Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (Rev 19:13).
• Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:34–35).
• Christ will judge both the living and the dead (Rom 14:9).
• At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out and the Church was born (Acts 2:33–36).

The following sections will demonstrate how the Bible underpins the ethics and devotions of Christianity.
Review

1. Describe the Christian Bible. Is it the same Bible for all Christians?
2. Recall what is meant by a 'closed canon'.
3. Examine extracts from the Bible in this section. Identify links between these extracts and key Christian beliefs (for example, scripture texts about Jesus linked to titles given to him and key beliefs about him).

Extension

1. Do an internet search to discover what books make up the apocrypha for Catholic and Orthodox Churches.
2. Construct a table to detail all the books of the Christian Bible. Include dates and authors where possible.
3. What was the original language of the New Testament? What was the first other language it was translated into and by whom?
4. The first translation of the Bible into the vernacular (the language of the people) was by Martin Luther in 1522. Investigate other early translations and hold a class discussion on why the Catholic Church was reluctant to accept translations into the vernacular.

The everyday life of believers

The Bible has a role in every aspect of the everyday life of believers. Various texts are used during the basic rituals and sacraments of the Christian life cycle from baptism through initiation, the Eucharist, marriage, ordination, sickness and death. The same range of texts is also used in the liturgical cycle of each Christian Church, especially during the Eucharist or Last Supper.

In addition, Christian sacred texts and writings are also central to the thought, morality and ethics of believers. For example, they help believers to better understand how to make decisions and how to act in certain situations. Finally, Christian sacred texts underpin their practices of prayer and meditation. Sacred and devotional texts are also used in domestic rituals such as grace before meals, prayers at bedtime and the blessing of homes.

Did you know?

The Bible continues to be the most translated book throughout the world. As of 2005, at least one book of the Bible had been translated into 2400 of the existing 6900 language communities.
3.4 Core ethical teachings

Christian ethics refers to the moral norms that are seen to be distinctive of Christianity. Moral norms are those guidelines that help the Christian to reflect on their moral life and on what actions they should take in certain situations. Christian ethical teachings are based on the belief that the human person is an image of God with intellect, free will and power of self-determination. Most Christian Churches stress the importance of both faith and works (good moral actions), along with the central place of community, prayer and sacraments.

The ethical teachings of Christianity are based on a range of sources including the Christian Bible. Some churches such as the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox also take heed of statements from Church Councils and Conferences, and the Pope and Bishops of the Church. Christian ethics pay particular attention to key passages from the Scriptures such as:

- the Decalogue or Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1–17 and Deut 5:6–21)
- the ‘Golden Rule’ (Mt 22:37–39)
- the Beatitudes (Mt 5–7)
- actions based on love (1 Cor 13:1)
- nature of the Final Judgement (Mt 25)
- living a life of service (Lk 22:26–27)
- ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (Jn 13:34)
- following ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2) as the basis of morality
- uniting our will to God’s, our spirit united with the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:15–17)
- ‘Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Rom 15:7).

The Ten Commandments (Decalogue)

The Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue ('ten words' from God), are the laws revealed by God to Moses (see Ex 20:1–17 and Deut 5:6–21). The first three commandments of the Decalogue refer to the worship of God, while the rest refer to obligations to one's neighbour and society.

The Decalogue is introduced by God's own words of freedom: 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:2). The Decalogue summed up the type of relationship that Israel should have with God.

Jesus and those to whom he was preaching were, of course, well versed in the commandments of the Decalogue. For Christians, observance of the Decalogue is based on love not fear. The commandments should be viewed as life principles to be internalised by the human heart—not avoided because of perceived punishment and damnation by God. The practice of virtue is understood as more important than the listing of sins.

In the final analysis, the Decalogue is like a set of ten 'boundary markers' beyond which are sin, alienation, unhappiness and death. The Decalogue is an important basis for structuring and living the Christian life. It calls Christians back to loving God alone and loving their neighbour as themselves.

The Beatitudes

In his most well-known teaching, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1–12), Jesus says that certain people will be 'blessed with happiness'. Some of the Beatitudes (Latin for 'blessed') also appear in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20–26). 'Beatitudes' have their origins in the Jewish Scriptures, where they were understood as declarations of praise or congratulations for an exercise of virtue.

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' main purpose is to instruct his hearers. He delivers nine Beatitudes that praise people for various virtues that could be cultivated—for example, poverty of spirit, meekness and hunger for righteousness. The final two praise people for being persecuted and promise future rewards.

In Luke's version, Jesus blesses his listeners for conditions of real poverty, hunger and desolation by promising them future rewards from God. The four consoling Beatitudes are then balanced by four threatening woes.