
UNIT 3 CHRISTIANITY

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of the study of the unit you are expected to:

- Comprehend the essentials of Christianity in a clear and systematic way;
- Introduce Christianity as it is to persons who have no knowledge of it; and
- Make an attempt to perfect the knowledge of those who desire so.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Founded in the first century of the Common Era by Jesus Christ, Christianity has become the largest of the world religions. Geographically it is the most widely diffused of all religions. Seen from the demographic point of view, it is also the universal religion, embracing people of every race, language, colour, culture and nationality who make up one third of the world population. This characteristic mark of Christianity is equally true when we look at its position in our country. Though the Christian population is only 2.34 per cent of the nation's population, it is the most widespread religion both geographically and demographically. We will study some essential features of Christianity in this unit arranged in sections.

3.2 CHRISTIANITY, A RELIGION CENTRED ON JESUS CHRIST

Christianity is centred on Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ – the one whom Christians believe to be both human and divine. Christianity is the religion of those who worship him as Son of God, the unique self-revelation of God for the salvation of the world. The Gospel of Mark begins his narrative with the following words: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

Christianity is a way of life. Being a Christian is not just about beliefs. It is about a definite way of living which involves everyday life being affected in some way by the

person of Jesus Christ. His spiritual presence is believed to abide in the church. A Christian can be described as an adopted child of God, someone who has entered into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

3.3 HISTORICITY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

Jesus was a Jew. He was born around the year 3 BCE in Bethlehem in the Judean territory of Palestine during the reign of the Emperor Augustus (23 BCE – 14 CE; see Luke 2:1-7). He was brought up in Nazareth, a village in the territory of Galilee. He carried out his public ministry during the reign of Emperor Tiberius (14 – 37 CE), when Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee (4 BCE – 39 CE; see Luke 3:1); and died on the cross around the year 30 CE under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Southern Palestine (Mark 15:1). This historical character of Christianity has been spelt out in the Creed (Christian manifesto of belief) that Jesus “was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died.”

The four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and the rest of the New Testament – are the primary sources for the life of Jesus Christ. There are few references to Jesus in the writings of Roman historians, who had little time for events which took place in a remote corner of their empire. The historian Tacitus, writing about CE 115, refers to the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero in CE 64, and says, “Christ, from whom the name [of Christian] was given, had been put to death in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate.” The correspondence of Pliny the Younger with the Emperor Trajan in CE 111 shows that Christians worshipped Christ “as if he were a god” and refused to worship the statues of the emperor and the Roman gods.

The name “Jesus Christ” needs some explanation. The name “Jesus”, derived from the Hebrew name “*Yeshua*”, literally means “God saves.” The word “Christ” is the anglicised version of the Greek word *Christos* which is the translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. These two words – *Chritos* and *Messiah* – mean “the anointed one” or *abhishikta*. Messiah or Christ is a confessional title of honour (title of faith proclamation) given to Jesus who was anointed by God for special divine purpose. The Jews hoped for centuries that God would send his Messiah (God’s anointed one) to restore the Kingdom of Israel to its ideal glory, and to change the hearts and minds of the people towards the path of God. Time and time again the prophets of Israel had spoken about the arrival of Messiah and the inauguration of God’s kingdom. Christians saw the fulfilment of this hope in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, especially after he was raised from the dead. So, they confessed him as the “Messiah of God” (Luke 9:20), which means the Christ of God, or simply Jesus Christ.

3.4 THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

Anyone beginning to study Christianity soon realises how central the Bible is. Almost all that is known about Jesus Christ is contained in the pages of the Bible. It is one of the most widely read books in the world and has had a far-reaching impact on society and culture across the world. Countless commentaries on the Bible are available in bookstores and libraries. If one attends a Christian service of worship, one will hear a passage from the Bible read and a sermon on the passage. Bible is an essential part of Christian worship. It is the primary source of Christian way of life and action in the world. Millions of Christians all over the world begin the day with a meditation on a biblical passage.

The term ‘the Bible,’ which is also known as ‘Sacred Scripture’ and ‘Holy Scripture’, comes from the Greek phrase ‘*ta biblia*’, meaning “the books.” The Greek phrase is plural, referring to a collection of books, or writings. So, true to its meaning, the Roman Catholic Bible has 72 books and Protestant version 66. These books are regarded as authoritative (canonical) books of Christianity. These are written over a period of more than 1,000 years, in widely-differing cultural and historical contexts, and in a rich variety of literary styles.

Check Your Progress I

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Describe why Christianity is centred on the person of Jesus Christ?

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2) What importance do you see given to the Bible in Christianity?

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The Old Testament and the New Testament

The Bible is divided into two major parts, the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. The term ‘testament’ comes from the Latin word ‘*testamentum*’ which means a ‘will’ or a ‘testimony’ made by a person especially before death. The first and by far the larger part, which Christians classify as the Old Testament, is basically the Scriptures of Judaism (also known as the Hebrew Scriptures). It is almost entirely written in Hebrew, the language of Israel, and some books written in Aramaic, an international language of the ancient Near-eastern world. The Old Testament narrates the history and the religious thought (or the faith testimony) of Judaism up to the time of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament

The specifically Christian books of the Bible are collectively known as the New Testament. It comprises 27 writings by Christians of the first century CE. These are mostly short in size. While most of the writers were of Jewish origin, the books are in Greek, which was the common language of the Roman Empire.

The New Testament begins with the *four gospels*. The gospels give an account of the life and teaching of Jesus as well as reflection on who Jesus is and what he means for

the world. This is followed by the *Acts of the Apostles* that tells the story of the first thirty years of the Christian church. There are then thirteen *letters of Paul*, the persecutor of Christians who became its great missionary leader after his dramatic encounter with the Risen Jesus on the way to Damascus. His letters are written to churches and individuals of the Mediterranean region. His first letter was written within 25 years of Jesus' death. This is followed by eight other letters known as *Catholic Letters* written by early Christian leaders to various churches. And then there is the *Book of Revelation* of John which is a visionary work cast in the literary style of Jewish visionary literature, known as the apocalyptic literature. It is a book of hope addressed to the seven young churches of Asia Minor which were under severe stress on account of persecution.

The Gospels

The first four books of the New Testament are known as 'gospels' or 'good news.' The word 'gospel' calls for an explanation. It comes from an old English word '*godspell*.' It is a combination of two words: '*good*,' and '*spell*.' *Godspell* means 'good news' which is the translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning 'good news.' *Euangelion* was the original word used for the gospels by four different authors who wrote the gospels. These authors are known as *evangelists*. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Mark wrote around the year 64 CE, Matthew and Luke 67 CE, and John 95 – 100 CE. Thus, these books are called gospels because they are focused on the events centred on the life and message of Jesus Christ which was seen as good news for the world in so far as they are intended for holistic flourishing of people as God's children.

The Gospels are faith documents

The starting point of the four gospels is the historical Jesus of Nazareth. His words and deeds were seen and heard by his apostles and immediate disciples. In the tradition of religious teachers of Judaism, Jesus taught them to remember his teaching, so that they might pass them with utmost loyalty. The contents of their preaching and teaching regarding Jesus were circulating in oral tradition in the early Christian communities.

One must be aware of the fact that Christians were proclaiming the words and actions of Jesus Christ shortly after his death and resurrection around the year 30 CE. Christian communities (churches) were being established in the Eastern Mediterranean region within a matter of years. The stories of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and his teaching were preserved in these churches by way of oral tradition. It was only around the year 65 CE onwards that these stories were collected and committed to writing as gospels by the evangelists.

The evangelists were not biographers, or even historians, by our modern standards. They were not interested in providing an account of everything that Jesus said and did. Each evangelist selected his material, arranged them in a particular way and edited them by giving a particular theological interpretation (an interpretation in the light of faith) to historical accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. The gospels contain a great deal of historical information about Jesus but always interpreted by evangelists to show how God's plan has been enacted in history for the salvation of humankind in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Bible, the Word of God

Christians revere the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) as the Word of God. They hold that it is a divinely inspired book written in human language, subject to all human limitations. ‘Inspired book’ means that the Bible is not merely a great literature that brings spiritual enlightenment but that it comes from God. Inspiration does not imply that the human authors are mere passive instruments for a divine action. But it does mean that what the human authors wrote in their own language, and in their own historical and cultural setting, was directed by God so that the written text of the Bible is really the word of God in human words. Any recognisable Christian faith must be based on the Bible. That is why Bible translation is a major concern of Christian churches. Today the whole of Bible is available in some 330 languages and the New Testament over 900 languages.

Check Your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Write a short note on New Testament.
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- 2) Explain the proposition “The Bible is the word of God in human words”
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3.5 THE KINGDOM OF GOD, THE CENTRAL
TEACHING OF JESUS

It is widely agreed among scholars that the theme of the ‘kingdom of God’ is central to the preaching of Jesus. This needs explanation. In the extraordinary wisdom of his teaching, in the holiness of his life, in the power he possessed to heal people from their ailments, both physical and spiritual, and to change people’s heart from a life opposed to God and oppressive towards people to lead a new form of life in communion with God and in fellowship with one’s neighbour, in the love that he showed for the humblest, the poorest and the downtrodden, the disciples of Jesus experienced that God’s reign (God’s Kingdom) had come among them. Jesus put the whole power of his personality and lived fully committed for the cause of God’s Kingdom which is for the holistic flourishing of human life.

The mission of Jesus Christ was to bring about a renewed humanity and to establish a new society based on fundamental humane values embedded in the heart of every person. To express this mission objective, Jesus used the concept of Kingdom of God which would be easily understood in the Jewish world of his time.

The idea of God as king was common in all ancient religions. But this idea of God's kingship was very much cherished by Jews. For them Yahweh, their God, was their king who created the universe and liberated them from their slavery (forced labour) in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Israel's earthly kings were only God's vice-regents who were appointed to bring about the ideal kingdom of God on earth. But shattered by the utter failure of monarchy, they hoped for God's Messiah to come and to overthrow their enemies like the Roman occupying army by mighty power and establish a kingdom of justice, peace and prosperity.

When Jesus announced the arrival of God's kingdom in and through his person and action, the people of Palestine knew what he was taking about. They needed no further explanation. But Jesus corrected the political overtones of people's expectation regarding God's kingdom and its crude and crass earthly glory. Their expectations were for political conquest, display of glamour and triumphalism of the powerful. On the contrary, the basic character of the messianic kingdom would be a change of heart. It begins from an interior conversion from one's selfishness, greed and hate and to commit oneself for a new quality of life in communion with God and in solidarity with one another in the society. This would be based on a new value system of love, compassion, justice, joy and self-sacrifice for the welfare of all, beginning with the least in the society, the powerless and the poor who need immediate support, care and protection more than others.

The *beatitudes* proposed by Jesus as given in the gospels of Matthew 5:3-12; and Luke 6:20-26, is the new charter of the kingdom values. Here is the Mathew's version of the *beatitudes*:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed for those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:3-11).

Poverty and suffering so far despised as curse from God are now highlighted for the challenge they pose for Jesus' vision of the new society. Love, meekness, justice, peace, compassion and human solidarity with the suffering humanity are proposed as

the most constructive values of the new order of the society modelled by Jesus in contrast to one's reliance on power, pride and inordinate dependence on wealth for one's happiness.

The kingdom theme pervades Jesus' mission

Jesus responded to the situation of Palestine by inaugurating the kingdom of God. It was the inauguration of a new way of life and a new order of society based on kingdom values of love, equality, health, happiness, peace, justice and compassion towards all by recognising the fundamental goodness of every person as a child of God and assurance of perfect happiness hereafter. This kind of social order would be the sign that God's rule (that is, kingdom of God has come) was at work in the hearts of people and in the midst of their society.

As the profound manifestation of God's compassionate presence and saving action among people, Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, freed those were tormented by demonic powers, forgave sinners and had fellowship meal with all, especially with the marginalised ones of the society. Thus he went about establishing communities of human solidarity cutting across social barriers.

It was precisely for this reason the concept of the kingdom of God occurs frequently in the gospels – 14 times in Mark, 31 times in Luke and 33 times in Matthew. All the 45 parables of Jesus spread all over the gospels such as the stories of Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, Lazarus and the rich man, the labourers in the vineyard, Parable of the Sower, etc, explain different aspects of the kingdom. Similarly, all the miracle stories of the gospels refer to the same: the power of God's rule at work in and through the person of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, the *Lord's Prayer* – the particular form of prayer Jesus taught to his disciples – repeats the same kingdom theme. This is the prayer every Christian remembers and recites every day all over the world. The Matthew's version of this prayer reads:

“Our Father who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy Kingdom come

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9-11).

God's kingdom at the cost of Jesus' death

Jesus' commitment for the cause of God's kingdom cost his life. How? The values of God's kingdom preached by Jesus attracted multitudes of people. Many became his disciples and friends and formed themselves into a community around him. He chose twelve among them to be his apostles. This has alarmed the religious and political authorities of Judaism and Roman colonial authorities in Palestine because his message of the new humanity based on the ethics of God's kingdom had the potential to subvert the socio-political and religious structures of domination and exploitation. This led them to condemn him to death on the cross, on which he died.

But on the third day his disciples and friends saw him and experienced him as raised from the dead. He empowered them with the gift of his Spirit and commanded them to go into all the world to be his witnesses, proclaim his good news and make disciples. Jesus also promised that he would be with them always to the end of the age (Matthew 28:16-20). So, at the centre of Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ – the one whom Christians believe and worship to be both truly human and truly God. The Roman cross of cruelty and death has become the universal symbol of faith, representing the sacrifice made by a loving God that the world through him might be saved. And so the heart of the Christian message is that Jesus rose from the dead having conquered sin and death. ‘The resurrection’ is the term used in the Bible to refer to a series of events that took place focusing on what happened to Jesus after his death.

With the mandate of the Risen Lord, his disciples went all over the Mediterranean world and even far beyond giving witness to the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the one who came to redeem us from the fear of sin and death. Some ancient traditions have it that one of the apostles of Jesus, Thomas by name, came to India, and preached the good news in some parts of South India, especially the Malabar region located in the present day Kerala where some people embraced the new faith. He was finally killed at St Thomas Mount, a hillock situated in Chennai.

3.6 CHRISTIANITY, A COMMUNITARIAN RELIGION

Christianity is essentially a community-based religion. In the New Testament the Greek term ‘*ekklesia*’ is used for the church. ‘*Ekklesia*’ denotes a group of people. It literally means ‘those who are called out,’ into a community of faith. The reason is that all Christians are made one in Christ, despite their multicultural backgrounds. The church, which is the body of Christian community, is the mother and teacher (*mater et magistra*) of Christian way of life and practice where Christians find the living memory of Jesus Christ alive.

Christianity sees human person as essentially a member of a community. Human being is a relational being, not an isolated island. One’s salvation and well-being cannot be found in pure isolation. Salvation in Christ must include commitment to promote true human solidarity and deep communion with all people because the church is the sign of new humanity Christ desired where the bonds of friendship and love are expressed in their deepest institutional form according to the kingdom ethics.

The church is at the service of the human family after the example of Jesus Christ who “did not come to be served but to serve” (Matthew 20:28). Therefore, Pope John Paul II used to say that human person is the way of the Church because salvation and human well-being brought by Jesus Christ is meant for all people as God’s children. Similarly, Pope Paul VI in his encyclical letter *Ecclesiam suam* stressed that the church was called upon to serve all people not alone but in dialogue and collaboration with all secular ideologies, faith-communities of all religious traditions and all Christian churches.

Further, the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) emphasises: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions... The Church, therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and love, to acknowledge, preserve

and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men as well as the values in their society and culture”(Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, n.2).

Divisions of Christianity

The communitarian nature of the church is not free from division. Right from the earliest centuries of its existence, Christianity has been a pluriform religion. Most of these divisions are perceived by the mainline churches as heterodox which means as straying away from the original meaning of the Christian faith.

The first major division arose in the year 1054, known as the Great Eastern Schism (schism means division). Out of this schism, Christianity has been divided into two, Eastern Church and Western Church. The Eastern Church named itself as *Eastern Orthodox Church*, and the Western Church retained its name as *Roman Catholic Church*. The former refused to accept the central authority of the Pope over Universal Christianity. It further divided itself into many sub-groups.

Similarly, in the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church and formed Lutheran and Calvinist Churches respectively. Further, the English Church separated itself from the authority of the Pope and formed the Anglican Church. These further split into hundreds of Christian denominational churches and sects. Today, Christianity in its denominational character is found all over the world. The Roman Catholic Church has continued to remain as the predominant Christian denomination in number as well as its far reaching influence. It constitutes one worldwide community united under one supreme leader, the Pope; and by a commonly held codes and beliefs on matters of faith and morals.

Basic Beliefs

The Christian faith, which is centred on Jesus Christ as the Divine Saviour of humankind, has radically changed the Christian understanding of God and human persons. The fundamental tenets of Christian beliefs are given in the ‘*Apostles’ Creed*.’ Apostles’ Creed contains the concise faith-statements of Christianity. It summarises the essential beliefs of the Christian faith tradition. They are the official faith-statements that preserves and transmits the doctrinal orthodoxy (which means the original doctrines) of Christianity to the future generations. It is called ‘Apostles’ Creed’ because it originated from the apostles who had immediate contact with Jesus Christ. It is the shorter form of the Christian Creed while the Nicene Creed is its enlarged version composed and promulgated by the undivided Christian Church in First General Council of Nicaea, held in the year 325 CE. Most churches in their Sunday services recite the Apostles’ Creed as given below:

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried,

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,

And is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again 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 Christian belief in God is classified as Trinitarian monotheism. This means that God is an eternal Communion of three Divine Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in such a way that they form one and only God, sharing one divine nature and one divine existence. This is the theological insight given through God’s self-manifestation in Jesus Christ. This implies that God is dynamism of eternal life and love. The outflow of this inner Trinitarian life and love is the cause of all creation, the apex of which is the human persons created in the very image and likeness of God who is a communion of three divine persons (Genesis 1:26). Therefore, human persons are endowed with capacity for communion with God and with one another.

Christianity and Sacraments

Christians listen to Christ when the gospels are read. They meet him in the poor and the needy. They celebrate his saving power when sacraments are celebrated. Sacraments are the symbolic actions instituted by Christ to enable his disciples to have deeper communion with him. All Christian churches accept two sacraments, namely Baptism and Eucharist. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox churches accept Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the sick, Marriage and Ordination to clerical ministry.

The word ‘Baptism’ comes from the Greek word ‘*baptizein*’. It means to wash or to cleanse. The sacrament of Baptism is the Christian initiation ceremony. It marks a person once for all as a member of Christ in his church.

The word ‘Eucharist’ comes from the Greek work ‘*eucharistia*’, which means thanksgiving. It is also known as the Holy Mass or Holy Communion or Lord’s Supper. The Eucharist is the central act of worship in all churches. Most churches celebrate it on Sundays. The Roman Catholic Church celebrates it daily.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Write an essay on the communitarian nature of the Church.

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2) Explain the meaning and the function of the Christian sacraments.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

Christianity is founded on the person and the teaching of a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. His disciples and friends who lived with him realised that he was more than any other religious leader. After witnessing to his service to God’s kingdom, and his death and resurrection, they were enabled to acclaim him as the incarnate Son of God, the Messiah sent by God to establish divine rule of love and compassion among people. They worshiped him as God the Son.

Next to the person of Jesus Christ, the Bible has an important place in Christianity as the ‘word of God.’ The church is the community of Jesus’ disciples where the gospel is preached and sacraments are celebrated. It is the continuation of the fellowship Jesus established with his disciples. His life giving presence in the church is celebrated especially through the sacraments. The church is not in competition with other faith-communities and secular ideologies. But Christians are called to live in dialogue and collaboration with all people of good will to establish authentic human communities, which Christians see as a sign of God’s rule in the world.

3.8 KEY WORDS

- Catholic

: Catholic is an adjective derived from the Greek adjective *katholikos*, meaning “universal.” For Roman Catholics, the term “Catholic Church” refers to the Church in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, including both the Western particular Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches. Protestants sometimes use the term “catholic church” to refer to the entire body of believers in Jesus Christ across the world, and across the ages.
- Pope

: The Pope (from Latin: “papa,” or “father” from Greek “*papas*”) is the Bishop of Rome and as such is the leader of the worldwide Catholic Church.
- Triumphalism

: Triumphalism is the attitude or belief that a particular doctrine, religion, culture, or social system is superior to and should triumph over all others.

3.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Christianity is centred on Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ – the one whom Christians believe to be both human and divine. Christianity is the religion of those who worship him as Son of God, the unique self-revelation of God for the salvation of the world. Mark, who seemed to have written the first gospel, begins his narrative with the following words: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).
- 2) Anyone beginning to study Christianity soon realises how central the Bible is. Almost all that is known about Jesus Christ is contained in the pages of the Bible. It is one of the most widely read books in the world and has had a far-reaching impact on society and culture across the world. Countless commentaries on the Bible are available in bookstores and libraries. If one attends a Christian service of worship, one will hear a passage from the Bible read and a sermon on the passage. Bible is an essential part of Christian worship. It is the primary source of Christian way of life and action in the world. Millions of Christians all over the world begin the day with a meditation on a biblical passage.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The New Testament begins with the *four gospels*. The gospels give an account of the life and teaching of Jesus as well as reflection on who Jesus is and what he means for the world. This is followed by the *Acts of the Apostles* that tells the story of the first thirty years of the Christian church. There are then thirteen *letters*

of *Paul*, the persecutor of Christians who became its great missionary leader after his dramatic encounter with the Risen Jesus on the way to Damascus. His letters are written to churches and individuals of the Mediterranean region. His first letter was written within 25 years of Jesus' death. This is followed by eight other letters known as *Catholic Letters* written by early Christian leaders to various churches. And then there is the *Book of Revelation* of John which is a visionary work cast in the literary style of Jewish visionary literature, known as the apocalyptic literature. It is a book of hope addressed to the seven young churches of Asia Minor which were under severe stress on account of persecution.

- 2) Christians revere the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) as the Word of God. They hold that it is a divinely inspired book written in human language, subject to all human limitations. 'Inspired book' means that the Bible is not merely a great literature that brings spiritual enlightenment but that it comes from God. Inspiration does not imply that the human authors are mere passive instruments for a divine action. But it does mean that what the human authors wrote in their own language, and in their own historical and cultural setting, as directed by God so that the written text of the Bible is really the word of God in human words.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) Christianity is essentially a community-based religion. In the New Testament the Greek term '*ekklesia*' is used for the church. '*Ekklesia*' denotes a group of people. It literally means 'those who are called out,' into a community of faith. The bond of unity among Christians is not based on racial bond of birth or caste, colour, common language or culture, nor even on a uniform way of worship. Christianity sees human person as essentially a member of a community.
- 2) Christians listen to Christ when the gospels are read. They meet him in the poor and the needy. They celebrate his saving power when sacraments are celebrated. Sacraments are the symbolic actions instituted by Christ to enable his disciples to have deeper communion with him. All Christian churches accept two sacraments, namely Baptism and Eucharist. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox churches accept Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the sick, Marriage and Ordination to clerical ministry.