

A Glossary of Christian Terms and Symbols

As we express our faith and describe it to others, there is often a tendency to use words and phrases that are unfamiliar. Songs writers too will use symbols and pictures that may not be readily understood. These few pages are an attempt to define some of the more common and unusual terms that you may run across in Christian circles.

Abba

This is the Aramaic word for “Father.” In fact it is a more intimate term somewhat similar to “Daddy” or “Da Da” The Bible makes it clear that as we become a Christian, we are considered adopted children of God and we have the privilege of an intimate relationship with the heavenly Father and we can call him “Abba”. (See Galatians 4:6)

Amen

This is an expression of agreement that is commonly used at the close of a prayer or song. It literally means “so be it”. It can be used as an expression of agreement with someone’s prayer. By saying it you are affirming your agreement with their prayer or statement.

Apostle

Literally means “one who is sent.” This term has also come to represent the first twelve followers of Jesus and Paul. The apostles (mainly Peter, Paul and John) are responsible for writing most of the New Testament.

Asking Jesus into your Heart.

This is a common description of what a person must do to receive salvation. Asking Jesus to come into your heart means turning away from sin and trusting Jesus for your forgiveness. When we do this, God comes to live within us by his Holy Spirit. The heart is often used metaphorically to represent the center of a persons life. (See notes on Salvation, Repentance and Faith for more details)

Atonement

To make atonement is to make amends or to make compensation. It is similar to paying a debt. An atonement cancels a debt or offense. The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ’s death on the cross was an atonement for the sins of the world. His death was adequate compensation for God’s justice, which demanded that sin be punished. (See Romans 3:23-25) Instead of demanding us to be punished for our sin, God allows Jesus to be punished for us as our substitute, thus resulting in our forgiveness.

Baptism

The word baptize is developed from the Greek word meaning “to immerse”. The physical act of baptism is therefore the immersion of a person in water. Baptism is a symbolic act representing one’s identification with Jesus Christ. When someone is baptized, they are saying that they believe in Jesus and are desiring to follow him. The symbolic act of immersion represents death and resurrection. As one goes under the water it is a picture of their death to sin and as one comes up out of the water it is a picture of their new life in Christ.

Baptist

Baptist churches are protestant churches. As a Baptist church, we have a strong belief in the need for personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the autonomy of the local church to govern its affairs under the authority of the Bible and the proper form of baptism is for those who believe in Jesus Christ. (See note on Baptism for more details)

Blood

When Christians talk about blood, they are usually referring to the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus is symbolic of his atoning death. (See note on Atonement) In the Bible, blood represents life. In the spilling out of his blood, Jesus gave his life in order that we might have life. In the Old Testament sacrifices, animal blood was used to make things ceremonially pure. In the same way the blood of Jesus purifies us from our sin. (1 John 1:7)

Born Again

This is another way of saying that a person has received salvation. The Bible teaches that before we come to believe in Jesus we are spiritually dead and that we need to receive spiritual life from God. To be born again is to be born spiritually. We are born again when we place our faith in Jesus Christ and become a child of God. (See John 1:12 and John 3:3)

Christ

The word Christ is Greek for Hebrew term “Messiah.” The word literally means “the anointed one” or “God’s anointed”. The Old Testament Prophets predicted the coming of a ruler, who would reign over God’s people and fulfill God’s promises. This messiah was understood to be a descendent of David, Israel’s greatest king. (See Jeremiah 33:14-17 as an example of a prophecy about the messiah) Jesus is the Messiah, that is why he is called Jesus Christ.

Confession

To confess is to acknowledge one's sin before God. It means humbly admitting that you have fallen short of God's standards and that you need God. Confession can be done directly to God through prayer. God promises that if we confess our sins, he will forgive us. (See 1 John 1:9)

Communion

Communion is a special form of worship, whereby believers in Jesus gather together to remember the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. Communion includes the eating of bread and the drinking of wine or juice. The bread represents the broken body of Jesus and the juice, the poured out blood of Jesus. Person's taking communion should be believers in Jesus and should examine themselves and confess their sins to God. The act of eating and drinking represents a person's faith in the saving power of Jesus' death.

Covenant

A covenant is a solemn relationship that is often accompanied with an oath or a vow. The marriage relationship is often described as a covenant. The Bible teaches that God enters into covenant relationship with people. He promises to be faithful to us, and calls us to be faithful to him.

Deacon / Deaconess

The words are derived from the Greek word meaning "servant". In a broad sense, it includes all people who serve in a church. These terms, however, have come to describe specific positions in the church. In our church, Deaconess, are a group of ladies who work together to meet specific need in the church. In our church, the governing board of the church is called the Deacons Board. The Deacons serve the church by governing and leading the church.

Disciple

A Disciple is anyone who is a follower of Jesus. The first 12 men to follow Jesus were also called the disciples. Discipleship, is the process by which we help people come to know Jesus and grow in their faith. Discipleship is the primary function of the church (See Matthew 28:19-20)

Elohim

This is the most common Hebrew word for God. It is not a proper name, but is sometimes used in this way. This is not commonly used, although may be found in some of the songs we sing/

Epistle

This is a fancy term for a letter or writing. Many of the books of the New Testament are called epistle, because they were letters written to individuals or churches. For instance the book Philippians was a letter written by Paul to the church in the city of Philippi.

Evangelism / Evangelical

This word is derived from the Greek word meaning “proclaim or preach” Evangelism refers to telling people about God’s love and the forgiveness available through faith in Jesus. In other words it means telling people about the gospel. The term evangelical is usually applied to churches that make a strong priority in preaching the gospel, believing that each person must individually have faith in Jesus.

Faith

Faith means trusting and believing. It is more than mere intellectual belief in God, but is rather a full dependence on God. (See James 2:19) Faith is closer to love than knowledge. Faith is required in order to receive salvation (See Ephesians 2:8-9) Faith means recognizing your need for God and trusting that Jesus’ death was payment for your sin. (See note on Atonement for more detail)

Fellowship

This is a big word that simply means gathering together. The word fellowship is part of our church name because we desire to gather together in order to encourage one another to love God and grow in the faith.

Filled with the Spirit

This expression means to allow the Holy Spirit to work in you in order to resist temptation, live in obedience to God and to serve God in various ways. This idea recognizes that in order for a person to please God and obey his will, he must be empowered by God’s Spirit. Practically speaking, to be filled with the Spirit, one must first be a Christian, confess all known sin and in faith ask God to fill you. (See Ephesians 5:18)

Fish (the fish symbol)

Sometimes you will see the symbol of a fish on the back of a persons vehicle. This symbol identifies the person as a Christian. In early times of persecution, Christians used this symbol as a covert method to identify themselves. The use of the symbol finds its origin in the Greek word for fish, which serves as an acronym for Jesus. The Greek word for fish is *ijcquv*", (ixthus) and each of the letters in that word stand for the Greek words for Jesus, Christ, God, Son and Savior.

Grace

Grace is described as the undeserved favor of God. It is the expression of God's love for us. Although we have sinned and reject God, he loves us and has provided a way for our forgiveness and salvation. God's grace is primarily expressed towards us through the death of Jesus. (See note on Atonement for more detail)

Gospel

Gospel means "good news". Essentially it is the message that God loves us and has provided for our forgiveness and salvation through the death of Jesus Christ. The gospel calls all people to turn away from sin and trust in Jesus as the only way to enter a right relationship with God. (See the notes on Salvation, Atonement, Grace and Faith for more detail)

The first four books of the New Testament, (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are called the gospels, because they tell the story of Jesus' life death and resurrection.

Hallelujah

The word means "Praise be to Yahweh" or "Praise be to God". (See note on the word "Yahweh" for more detail) It is an expression of thanksgiving and worship. It is commonly used in worship songs.

Holy

Holiness is associated with perfect goodness, but at its root, to be Holy is to be set apart. Ultimately only God is Holy. He is set apart from all creation. Only God is perfectly good, perfectly just and perfectly loving. When used in reference to things and people, being holy means being set apart for God's use and for his worship.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the personal presence of God, who comes to live within the life of every believer. The Holy Spirit guides us into the truth of Jesus and the Bible. He gives us the ability to live a life pleasing to God and equips us to serve God.

Hosanna

This is an expression that is often used in worship songs. It means simply "Praise God" or "Lord Save us" This term is used when Jesus entered Jerusalem before his crucifixion on what has come to be called palm Sunday. (See Matthew 21:9,15)

I am

This is another name for God. This is the name that God gave to Moses when he spoke to him from the burning bush. In Exodus 3:14 “God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”” The name “I AM” means that God is unique and self sufficient. God is self existent and does not need to justify himself to anyone. Jesus used this name of himself in a veiled way when in John 8:58 “Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” Jesus was not merely claiming to have existed before Abraham, but was claiming to be God.

Immanuel / Emmanuel

The word literally means “God with us”. It speaks about the presence of God among his people. This is another name given to Jesus Christ. Jesus was God taking on human form and so as the God-Man, he is Immanuel. (See Matthew 1:23)

Jehovah / Yahweh

This is the Latinized personal name of God. The Hebrew version is Yahweh. In fact, in Hebrew the name is unpronounceable, because it was written without vowels (YHWH). This was done because it was believed to be too holy to pronounce. Many English translations of the Bible will translate it as LORD. Sometimes it is abbreviated Jah or Yah. This abbreviation will sometimes be part of another word such as Hallelu**jah**, which means Yahweh be praised.

Jubilee

The word finds its meaning from the horn of ram made into a trumpet, which was to be sounded every fiftieth year to proclaim the year of jubilee. The jubilee year was a year of freedom where people trusted God, rested from work and freed people from slavery. (See Leviticus 25)

Justification

Justification is another term for salvation. It means to be declared innocent. To be justified is to be pardoned or forgiven. The Bible teaches that justification is made possible by the death of Jesus and cannot be earned, but must be received by faith alone. (See Romans 3:23-26)

Kingdom of God

This is a term that was often used by Jesus in his preaching (see Mark 1:15) The basic idea is that the kingdom of God represents the reign or rule of God. God's rule has begun with Jesus. He has begun to conquer evil, set people free from sin and allow people to have a right relationship with God. God's kingdom, however, will not be complete until Jesus comes again and defeats evil once and for all.

Lamb of God

This is another description for Jesus Christ. In Old Testament times the priests would often sacrifice a lamb to pay for the sins of the people. Because Jesus died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world, he is called the Lamb of God.

Lord's Supper

The Lord's supper is another term for communion (See note on Communion for more detail) This term is reflective of the fact that communion was first celebrated by the Lord Jesus the night before he was betrayed and crucified. In fact the first communion took place as part of a Passover supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples (See Luke 22:7-20) (See note on Passover)

Messiah

The word literally means "the anointed one" or "God's anointed". The word Christ, is Greek for Messiah. The Old Testament Prophets predicted the coming of a ruler, who would reign over God's people and fulfill God's promises. This messiah was understood to be a descendent of David, Israel's greatest king. (See Jeremiah 33:14-17 as an example of a prophecy about the messiah) Jesus is the Messiah, that is why he is called Jesus Christ.

New Testament

The final 27 books of the Bible from Matthew to Revelation make up the New Testament. These books were written after Jesus' death and tell about his life death and resurrection. They were originally written in Greek.

Old Testament

The first 39 books of the Bible from Genesis to Malachi make up the Old Testament. These books were written several hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They were originally written in Hebrew.

Omnipotence

The prefix omni means “infinite” or “in all ways”. Omnipotence is an attribute of God which means that God has infinite power. God can do all things that can be done.

Omniscience

The prefix omni means “infinite” or “in all ways”. Omniscience is an attribute of God which means that he has infinite knowledge. God knows all things that can be known.

Omnipresence

The prefix omni means “infinite” or “in all ways”. Omnipresence is an attribute of God which means that God has infinite presence. All of God is everywhere always.

Passover

As an event in history, the first Passover occurred while the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt. One of the plagues that the Lord brought against Egypt was the killing of the firstborn. The Hebrews were commanded to sacrifice a lamb and put the blood on their door frames so that the angel of death would see the blood and pass over the Hebrew homes and not harm them. As a result of this event, the Egyptians gave the Hebrew people their freedom. This event is celebrated each year with a special Passover meal. Symbolically, Jesus is our Passover lamb, because through his death, we find forgiveness and escape the wrath of God. (See Exodus 12)

Pastor

Derived from the word shepherd, it refers to person who exercises spiritual guidance, care and leadership. The term has come to refer to a specific position of leadership in the church, however, one does not need to hold a position in order to exercise pastoral gifts.

Redemption

To redeem something is to pay a ransom in order to secure its freedom. This is often used in reference Jesus Christ paying for our freedom and delivering us from our enslavement to sin. It is very similar to the idea of atonement. The price of our redemption was the perfect and innocent life of Jesus. (See 1 Peter 1:18-19) Connected to this idea is that when something is redeemed it belongs to the redeemer. Therefore, as we are freed from sin, we now belong to God.

Repentance

Repentance means having a heartfelt sorrow for our sin and the deliberate turning away from evil. It is more than feeling sorry, and entails the intent to change one's ways. Repentance literally means "a changing of the mind". This changed mind leads to changed actions. Repentance means we are willing to admit that we are sinners and need God's help. Repentance is necessary for salvation.

Righteousness

This means being declared innocent before God and having a right relationship with God. The Bible teaches that we are not righteous because of the good deeds we do, but must receive righteousness as God's free gift to us. We receive this righteousness through faith in Jesus. (See Romans 3:22-24)

Salvation

Salvation means having a right relationship with God. It means being forgiven for all our sin. Salvation is made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (See note on "Atonement" for more detail) It is the free gift of God which is received by faith and cannot be earned by being good. (See Ephesians 2:8-9) Salvation results in a person having eternal life with God in heaven.

Sanctification

Sanctification is the process by which God works in our life to purify us. Sanctification is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit within us. It is God's work, but we are called to participate with God in the process by allowing God to work in our lives and participating in things that strengthen our faith (such as Bible reading, prayer, church attendance)

Second Coming

Christians look forward to a time when Jesus Christ will return to earth in glory to judge the world and set up his eternal kingdom.

Sin

Sin is a large concept that essentially means anything done contrary to God's will. Sin involves evil thoughts, words, deeds, or good deeds left undone. Sin, however, is more than merely a thing we do, it is also a condition we suffer from. (like a disease) We do specific sinful things, because our human condition has an innate disposition towards evil. The Bible makes it clear that all people suffer from sin and therefore have done sinful things. (See Romans 3:23) Sin can also be described as the rejection of God or devotion to something other than God.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is an attribute of God which speaks of the fact that God is the supreme ruler of the universe and that all creatures owe him honor and allegiance. God is sovereign because he is creator of all things. Sovereignty also implies that God is in ultimate control of the universe and that no sinful act of rebellion can thwart God's plan.

Trinity

Christians believe that God has one substance but is made up of three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are not three separate Gods but only one God. There are not three separate parts of God that when added together make up God. Rather the one divine essence is fully expressed in three personal realities. The Father, Son and Spirit are all equally eternal, uncreated and infinite. All three are equally worthy of worship and praise. This concept is very difficult. We believe in a tri-personal being.

Yahweh

This is the personal name of God. The Latinized version is Jehovah. (See note on Jehovah)

Zion

This is an alternate name for the city of Jerusalem or more specifically the temple mountain in Jerusalem. The term is strongly connected with the presence of God, for the temple was the center of worship and the dwelling place of God among his people. Symbolically, the term can also be used to denote the people of God.