

*Your plain-English guide to the essentials of faith  
and the differences between denominations*

# **Christianity**

## **FOR DUMMIES®**

**Richard Wagner**

*Author of Christian Prayer For Dummies*

*Foreword by Kurt Warner  
Super Bowl and NFL MVP*

**A Reference for the Rest of Us!®**



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# ***Christianity For Dummies***<sup>®</sup>

**by Richard Wagner**

**Foreword by Kurt  
Warner**

**Super Bowl and NFL  
MVP**



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# About the Author

**Richard Wagner** is author of numerous books, including *Christian Prayer For Dummies*, and is publisher of *Digitalwalk* ([www.digitalwalk.com](http://www.digitalwalk.com)), a Web-based Christian discipleship magazine. He has been a guest on Christian radio programs across the country discussing prayer and Christian discipleship issues. Rich has served in church leadership and teaching roles for more than a dozen years. He graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from Taylor University and pursued graduate studies at The American University in Washington, D.C. He lives in Princeton, Massachusetts, with his lovely, quirkless wife and three terrific, though zany boys. You can e-mail Rich at [rich@digitalwalk.net](mailto:rich@digitalwalk.net).

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fuel that the Lord used to help get it from page one to the back cover.

# **Dedication**

To Joe Wagner — my father, teacher, and friend

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# Foreword

I love a good road trip. It's a chance to jump into the car by myself with no particular destination, just enjoying the drive and whatever else comes my way. I've taken many of these rides during the course of my life, but they were all small-time compared to the one I'm on now — my *spiritual road trip*. This life-long excursion has just a single purpose: getting to know God through Jesus Christ.

My journey began in a small Iowa town over thirty years ago. I trekked all over Iowa, through most of the United States, and even across the Atlantic. I rose from the unknown valleys of Arena Football to play and win on the center stage of all American sports — the Super Bowl. Through my professional football and private life, I've experienced spectacular mountaintops, passed through low valleys, and narrowly escaped horrendous storms.

I'm not alone on this road trip; God's right there with me. Of course, being the control freak that I am, I started off by assuming control of the driver's wheel. I had my mind made up on where I was going to go and how I was going to get there. I didn't need God's help or want his company, so I quickly threw him into the trunk and started on my way. It didn't take long, however, before I hit a few snags, had a blowout in the rear tire, and heard a loud rattle under the hood.

During these times of crisis, I'd rush to the trunk, let God out, and ask him to bail me out. Like a spare tire, I saw God as my backup plan, on call 24/7 for whenever I had trouble. I let him fix everything and, after things were fine and dandy again, I'd quickly stuff him back into the trunk.

But after I'd been traveling down the road solo for a while, the scenery became less exciting and the radio tunes grew stale. I started to feel lonely and empty inside and longed for something more. I'd routinely ask God to take a seat in the back and keep me company for a while; we even got to know each other a little bit, sang a few songs, and shared advice. But when he started to tell me where to go and what to do, I'd shove him right back into the trunk and carry on alone.

Eventually, as surroundings became less and less familiar, I discovered that I wasn't able to rely on my instincts anymore. I kept getting lost and was unable to find my way to a life of meaning and peace. Realizing that I could use some navigation help after all, I invited God to join me in the front passenger seat as my copilot. I threw him the atlas, pointed to where I was going, and asked him to chart the way. I soon discovered that God had quite a knack for plotting a course. He always seemed to select the best route, even if it wasn't the fastest or most convenient. Many times I didn't agree with his routing, however, and simply chose to take off on my own. *I* was in the driver's seat, after all. Yet, time after time, my plans never worked out. In the end, after 26 years of detours, diversions, and dead-ends, I finally realized that I was better off in the hands of God and decided to let him take over the wheel. So, I got out of the car, tossed the keys to God, and slid into the backseat. Yes, I sometimes act like a backseat driver,

firing my thoughts and opinions at him, telling him what he should and shouldn't do. But he always seems to look back at me with a smile, responding with grace and love.

Regardless of your situation or background, you're at some point on your own spiritual road trip. Perhaps you're well into the drive, or maybe you haven't even started the engine. But wherever you are along the way, pull over at the next rest area and turn the page.

When you do, you'll discover that Richard Wagner is waiting for you there. Rich will lead you on a journey to discover Christianity and what it's all about. As you turn the pages, I promise you that there'll be times you'll laugh out loud at his offbeat approach, but the humor will never quench the truth and significance of his words.

So buckle up, grab the wheel, and set the cruise for the ride of your life. But I must warn you — by the time you're done discovering what the Christian faith is all about, you might find yourself sliding into the backseat and tossing your keys to a new driver just like I did.

**Kurt Warner**

Super Bowl and NFL MVP



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# Introduction

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When I start to rattle off the host of names ascribed to Christians, I begin to feel like Bubba, the Alabaman shrimp farmer from the Oscar-winning film *Forrest Gump*.

*Anyway, like I was sayin', there are born-again Christians, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, mainline denominational Christians, non-denominational Christians, charismatics, Pentecostals, and Calvinists. There are Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Free Methodist, Baptist, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, and African Independent. You've also got your Shakers, Quakers, Amish, Coptic, Plymouth Brethren, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Evangelical Free Christians. That — that's about it. . . .*

Although the taste differences between Bubba's shrimp burger and coconut shrimp are great, each dish has the same primary ingredient. Similarly, Christians have a multitude of names with as many shades of belief, but the centerpiece for each Christian, no matter the label, is

the same — Jesus Christ, a Jewish carpenter who lived some 2,000 years ago.

*Christianity For Dummies* is a friendly, approachable guide that introduces you to Jesus Christ, the Christian faith, and the Christian Church. This book is written for people who are curious about Christianity and wonder what exactly it means to be a “Christian.” It’s intended both for people who aren’t Christians and for Christians who are interested in discovering more about their faith.

Keep in mind that any author brings to a book his or her background, experiences, and a specific set of beliefs. From the outset, let me make it clear that I’m a born-again, evangelical and Protestant Christian. However, my overriding goal for *Christianity For Dummies* is to be unbiased, fair, and respectful toward all branches of the Christian Church, so that a Christian from any of these backgrounds can point to the book and claim, “Yeah, that’s my faith.”

## About This Book

If you want to know absolutely, positively all the nitty-gritty details of Christianity, I recommend getting a semi, driving to your local university library, and persuading some students to help you load up racks of books into the semi trailer. But if you want to discover what you *need* to know about the Christian faith, then you’ve come to the right book. *Christianity For Dummies* provides a hearty

exploration of the Christian faith, but does so without requiring a semi or a band of starving students. This book also approaches the subject matter in an easy-to-understand manner, without overloading you with a lot of theological mumbo-jumbo.

If you read *Christianity For Dummies* from cover to cover, you find the topics logically ordered, with each succeeding chapter building upon what you read about in earlier chapters. However, the book is a reference book, so don't feel like you must read it from start to finish. Instead, you may wish to open up the Table of Contents and find a topic that suits your fancy. Or flip through the pages 'til you find a section that jumps out at you. Or perhaps you want to peruse the index for the subject that you've been curious to explore.

## Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate through this book, I've set up a few conventions:

- ✓ *Italics* are used for emphasis and to highlight new words or terms that I define.
- ✓ **Boldfaced** text is used to indicate the keywords in explanatory bulleted lists and the action part of numbered steps.
- ✓ Monofont is used for Web addresses.

As you read, keep in mind the following additional conventions and definitions:

✓ **Capitalization:** Several Christian terms mean different ideas depending on capitalization:

- *Church* with a capital *C* refers to the worldwide body of Christians, while *church* with a small *c* means a local or individual church congregation, building, or parish. Another common name for the Church is the *Body of Christ* or simply the *Body*.
- *Orthodox* with a capital *O* refers to Eastern Orthodox Christians, a division of the Christian Church, whereas *orthodox* with a small *o* refers to traditional, historical Christian beliefs.
- *Catholic* with a capital *C* refers to the Roman Catholic Church, while lowercase *catholic* means “universal.”

✓ **Two global Churches:** Based on how the Christian Church developed through the centuries, people often draw a line of distinction between the Western and Eastern Churches. The *Western Church* refers to the Catholic and Protestant Churches, while the *Eastern Church* is another term for the Orthodox Church.

✓ **Referring to Christian groups:** In this book, I refer to Roman Catholics as *Catholics*. Likewise, I call Eastern Orthodox Christians simply *Orthodox Christians*.

✓ **Referring to God:** Christians refer to God with many names, but in this book, I generally use “God” and “Lord.” Also, in accordance with historical

Christian beliefs, I make use of the traditional masculine pronoun “he” to refer to God.

✓ **Referring to Christianity:** Christianity sounds like a generic enough word to define, but even this term can mean radically different ideas to different people both inside and outside of the Christian Church. Therefore, when I speak of *Christianity*, keep in mind that I use the term in three respects:

- **“Mere” Christianity:** Christian author C.S. Lewis used the term “mere Christianity” to describe the core essentials of the Christian faith that any believer, regardless of his or her background, agrees on. *Christianity For Dummies* focuses on this common ground across the Christian Church, be it Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. However, many important differences of belief that one can’t just sweep under the table exist among these branches of the Church. So when there is disagreement on a given topic, I point out these differences.
- **“Historical” Christianity:** When I claim an idea as a Christian belief, I speak of a belief that has historically been upheld by the Church for some 2,000 years, not by the latest fashionable flavor of Christian thinking that may be in vogue for the moment.
- **“Biblical” Christianity:** Christians have always believed that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, and reliable written Word of God. Following in this mold, this book treats the Bible as the legitimate “instruction manual” for Christians and the “bottom line” for matters pertaining to the Christian faith. (See Chapter 2

for more on why Christians believe the Bible is reliable.)

✓ **Bible references:** Because 1,001 different kinds of Bibles and translations are available at your local bookstore, I don't want to use a page number when I reference a Bible passage. Therefore, when I quote from the Bible, I use the standard way to cite passages. For example, John 3:16 refers to John as the book of the Bible, 3 as the chapter number, and 16 as the verse.

✓ **Bible translation:** Speaking of the Bible, each Bible passage in this book is from the World English Bible translation (on the Web at [www.worldenglishbible.com](http://www.worldenglishbible.com)). On occasion, I paraphrase the text to make it more readable.

## What You're Not to Read

Although this book focuses on what you need to know about Christianity, I do deal with some topics that, though useful, are less essential for you to know, at least during your first read-through. This “skippable” material is identified as follows:

✓ **Text in sidebars:** Sidebars are shaded boxes that pop up here and there in the chapters. They deal with subjects related to the chapter, but aren't necessary reading.

✓ **Anything with a Technical Stuff icon:** This information is technical or historical stuff that you