

The beginnings of Christianity

(and some thoughts about its future)

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How have we
come from this:



to this??



Most Christians assume that the kind of Christianity they know is the way that Christianity is, or should be. Very few know anything about how their version of Christianity came about or have ever questioned its validity. Christianity has evolved immensely over the years (with every version believing that somehow their version is how Christianity should be and that they are 'right'). And yet the kind of Christianity that Jesus introduced (as recorded in the Gospels) bears little resemblance to the kind of Christianity demonstrated in any of the versions that have developed over the last 2000 years (including our version!).

There is a great volume of written material for all eras and all aspects of Christian history, more than for any other historical situation. It is all written and interpreted through the eyes of those who recorded or wrote the documents. Most significant is that almost all recorded Christian history is seen through the filter of the organisational Church that developed from about 380AD on. Going back to the very earliest records can help us understand how Christianity started, and then analysis of later records can help explain how the Christianity we know today has developed and evolved. All of this can help us look to the future, in the hope that the kind of Christianity those who come after us experience lines up with that which Jesus described.

Down through history the beliefs of every version of Christianity have been derived from and then justified by reference to the Bible. Once the beliefs had developed into doctrines their teaching, implementation, and control was then taken over by the relevant organisational Church, thus creating a religion. Unquestionably, the Church has contributed positively to the development of civilization and to the well-being of mankind. At times though, the religion of Christianity has become immensely powerful which has led to much abuse, especially of those who have little power. This has happened even in our so-called enlightened times. Yet, through it all God has been at work, bringing about His plan of redemption. His Kingdom is still being built! No matter how much the Bible has been misused or how dark history has become, the light of the Gospel has still shone through, especially in times of revival.

Christian responses throughout history have been influenced by many factors: the leading of the Holy Spirit; persecution; understanding especially of the Church and the Bible; the prevailing culture, politics, economy, social environment, technology, laws, religions, We can never judge Christian responses from the past. One day our responses may seem just as strange as those of the ones who have gone before us! *Judge not or you too will be judged.* Matthew 7:1. We must learn from past responses as we seek to bring the Gospel to our generation, and to lay a foundation for future generations.

In this study we shall explore the early years of Christian history:

Periods of early Christian history

0-100 AD. The Apostolic Period – Major focus: Relationship with God

From the birth of Jesus through till the death of the last Apostle, John.

100-311 AD. The Ante-Nicene Period - through to the conversion of Constantine

Major focus: Correct beliefs

Christianity under Roman persecution.

311- 590 AD. Christianity in union with the Roman Empire – through to Pope Gregory 1.

Major focus: Church systems and structures

Christianity as the state religion of Rome.

After 590. Dark Ages – Middle Ages – Major focus: Church power and control

Decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Rise in power of the organised Church (Roman and Eastern).

The Apostolic Period – up to 100AD. Major focus: Relationship with God

Up to 33AD - Life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

This period is recorded primarily in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) written between 50 and 65AD, and in John's Gospel, written around 90AD. It includes the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and shows us that Jesus did not come to establish a new religion. His primary mission was to enable all people to come into a personal relationship with God.

Christianity according to Jesus

Becoming a Christian: Repent of your sins and put your trust in Jesus. When you believe in Him you become a child of God.

Living as a Christian: Live in relationship with God so that He is your Lord. Love God and love others as you love yourself. Share the Gospel with others. Build the Kingdom of God, which is God's purpose for the earth and its peoples. The Holy Spirit will live within you and will help you to live as a Christian and to fulfil God's purposes for your life.

The future of Christianity: When Jesus returns He will complete the establishment of the Kingdom of God. God will live in relationship with His people for eternity.

33 to 100 AD - through to the death of the last Apostle, John.

This period is recorded in many early documents, including the book of Acts and the Epistles in the New Testament. During this period the Gospel spread as the early Christians told the good news of Jesus, enhanced by intense persecution from Jews and Romans.

Forced out of Israel they travelled the major Roman roads and quickly spread throughout much of the Roman Empire. Initially most of the new believers were Jewish and they soon became known as "Christians". Acts 11:26. Christian communities (*ekklesia*) were established by roving Apostles. The *ekklesia* met in secret or in homes, and were supported by local leaders (who gradually took on the role of Bishops), and by roving teachers. Gospels and letters were written to help the new converts in their understanding of Jesus, and of how to live as a Christian. These were copied by hand and spread among the *ekklesia*. All of the Apostles were martyred for their faith.



100AD

In the early days Christianity grew and expanded due to:

- a strong missionary call, especially by the Apostles. Matthew 28:18-20.
- use of koiné (the common Greek language).
- intense persecution by Jews and Romans.
- freedom to travel during Pax Romana.
- insecurity within the Greek and Roman religions due to their impersonal nature and to leaders' moral failures.
- concentration of people in cities, which had an accepted culture of public preaching and debate.
- home-based fellowships.
- the ability to write down and copy manuscripts.

Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed His word by the signs that accompanied it. Mark 16:20.

The teaching of the Apostles (as recorded in the New Testament epistles) significantly enhanced the teaching of Jesus (as recorded in the Gospels):

Christianity according to the Apostles

Becoming a Christian: Anyone (Jew or Gentile) can accept Jesus as Saviour and be saved. Repent of your sins and put your trust in Jesus. When you believe in Him you become a child of God, your sins are forgiven and you are declared to be righteous in God's sight. This can happen because Jesus took the punishment for sin that we deserved on the Cross. The shedding of Jesus' blood satisfied God's righteous anger at sin, once for all. Because atonement for sin has been made we can live in relationship with God, now and in eternity.

Living as a Christian: Live in relationship with God so that He is your Lord. Love God and love others as you love yourself, and make sure your words and deeds match your beliefs. Share the Gospel with others, even though you will be persecuted for your faith. Build the Kingdom of God, which is God's purpose for the earth and its peoples. The Holy Spirit will live within you and will help you to live as a Christian, and to fulfil God's purposes for your life. You are not controlled by the Jewish law but can live by God's grace in freedom, led by the Holy Spirit.

The future of Christianity: When Jesus returns He will complete the establishment of the Kingdom of God. He will bring in new Heavens and a new Earth in which God will live in relationship with His people for eternity. In the end times, before this takes place there will be many troubles but God's purposes are sure.

Significant events during the Apostolic Period 0-100AD.

Writing of and copying of gospels and epistles

Gospels and epistles are early manuscripts that describe the life of Jesus, the spread of Christianity and the beliefs of the Apostles. They included revelations given to the Apostles, and the beginnings of doctrines, especially in relation to issues that were arising among the early Christians. The main issues addressed were:

- whether non-Jews could become Christians and whether Christians were required to comply with Jewish laws and practices
- how Christians should respond to practical issues in a foreign and anti-Christian culture
- dealing with moral issues
- clarifying Christian beliefs in response to the Hellenistic beliefs and practices which new believers brought into their Christianity (especially Gnosticism).
- supporting each other under intense persecution.

There were many different gospels and epistles – many more than those included in the New Testament. It took hundreds of years for the 26 books in the current New Testament to be collated and agreed (and its makeup is still being debated!). For a book to be accepted as canonical (inspired by God and included in the Bible) it had to be written by an apostle, and fit with apostolic writings and Church teaching of the time.

Living as a Christian during the Apostolic period – up to 100AD.

- The *ekklesia* (congregations of called out ones) began to be called “Christians” Acts 11:26. They met in homes or in secret places. During the meetings everyone contributed, as led by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes there was disorder but everyone was still encouraged to share their gifts for the common good. The meetings included shared meals which included celebration of the Lord’s supper. Acts 2:42-47.
- Initially some of the Jewish believers went to the synagogue to preach the gospel but were soon persecuted out. e.g. Acts 14:1; 17:1; 18:4.
- There was continual persecution from both Jews and Romans (which just helped spread the gospel!).
- False teachers spread Gnostic beliefs and encouraged pagan Hellenistic practices.
- “Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers” supported the believers in a town, city or area. Ephesians 4:11-13. This included sorting out of doctrinal errors. Letters were written to clarify doctrine and were copied and read in the *ekklesia* meetings.
- “Overseers”, “older people” and “servants” had responsibility for leadership within the groups of believers. 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1:5-9.
- The believers functioned with much *philoxenia* (hospitality), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *agape* (love) as they shared their lives and possessions, prayed together, evangelised, and provided support for the persecuted, the poor, widows, and other groups of believers.
- The main focus of the *ekklesia* was to share the gospel. This was done primarily by personal witness, and by public preaching and argument. Meetings of the *ekklesia* and support systems were all focused on this.

100-313 AD. The Ante-Nicene Period - through to the conversion of Constantine **Major focus: Correct beliefs**

Christianity was outlawed by the Romans and persecution became more intense. Many Christians were martyred in the “great persecution” especially under the Emperors Nero, Valerian and Diocletian. The *ekklesia* went underground and home meetings of believers became more clandestine.



200AD



300AD. Christianity grew under persecution!

- Leaders (Bishops) emerged and gradually exerted more and more power. Notable among them were Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Papias of Hierapolis, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen of Alexandria. These men are sometimes referred to as the “Church Fathers”.
- Doctrines gradually developed e.g. salvation by grace, not law; relationship with Judaism; reaction to Gnosticism; the trinity; the nature of Jesus as God and man. There was much discussion and debate as these doctrines developed. Most notable was the debate over whether Jesus was created by God and whether He was equal with God or was subordinate to God. Movements like Montanism,

Marcionism and Arianism developed around the different views. Councils of Bishops were held to decide “correct” doctrine and those not holding to accepted doctrine were labelled as heretics. Tertullian, sometimes called the Father of the Latin Church, coined the term ‘trinity’ in 223AD - *trinitas, tres Personae, una Substantia*: three persons, one in substance.

- Copying of gospels and letters on velum (animal skins) and parchment continued. Errors were inevitable. Various canons (lists of books that were considered divinely inspired) were suggested and debated. Later codices collated them as books (biblos).
 - Marcion’s canon 140AD included the Gospel of Marcion and 10 of Paul’s letters. Irenaus 180AD denounced Marcion and named the 4 gospels.
 - The Muratorian fragment 170AD listed most of the current NT books minus Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter.
 - The Codex Vaticanus 300-325AD listed all of the current NT books except 1,2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.
 - The Codex Sinaiticus 330-360AD listed all of the current NT books and the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas.
 - The Codex Alexandrinus 400-440AD listed all of the current NT books.



Codex Sinaiticus

313-590 AD. Christianity in union with the Roman Empire – through to Pope Gregory 1.

Major focus: Church systems and structures

In 312AD the Emperor Constantine had a vision of the Cross with the words “with this sign conquer”. He decriminalised Christianity in the Edict of Milan 313AD, and the “Great persecution” ended. Constantine called the First Council of Nicaea in 325AD in an attempt to unify Christianity. This resulted in the Nicene Creed.



Constantine the Great. 272-337AD

Nicene Creed

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Constantine had an enormous effect on how Christianity became integrated into the existing religions of the Rome. He influenced doctrines that had to be believed eg. meeting on Sunday (he was a sun-worshipper); promoted building of buildings for Christians to meet in, and guided the development of the developing religion. Constantine’s mother, Helena, went on a pilgrimage to Palestine in 326AD and “discovered the true Cross”. She initiated building of churches over many of the important sites in Jesus’ life.

Constantine came to be known as ‘the 13th Apostle’. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380AD. The institutional Church was born: the “Church of Rome”.

Important things that happened when Christianity became institutionalised.

- Christian content was added to or replaced the existing temple rituals.
- Meetings were held in specially consecrated buildings; initially the pagan temples but then purpose-built churches. Services were led by priests who were controlled by powerful Bishops, responsible to the Roman authorities and to the Pope, who was the Bishop of Rome, the supreme head of the Church.
- Official doctrine became established during a series of ecumenical Church councils. e.g. the Apostles creed was agreed in 390AD at the Council of Milan as a unified statement of faith. The Council of Laodicea decreed 'anathema' for Christians who rest on the Sabbath.
- The Roman Catholic canon of the Bible was established in 393 AD at the Council at Hippo. This canon had 73 books in it (compared to 66 in our Bible. The canon of the NT was the same as our NT but the OT included the Apocryphal books).
- Constantine commissioned Jerome to translate the Septuagint version of the OT (including the apocryphal books) and the NT into Latin. This produced the Vulgate version which became the accepted Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. It was ratified as being authentic (inerrant) at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).
- In the Vulgate the word *ekklēsia* (congregation of called out ones) was translated as *ecclesia*, a word that had little meaning and so was gradually replaced by *kyriakos doma*, meaning "the house of the Lord". The word *kyriakos* "of the Lord" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *circe*. In legend, Circe was the daughter of Sol and Perseus. She was a sorceress who could turn her victims into beasts through her great knowledge of magic and herbs. Circe was thwarted by Odysseus with a herb given by Hermes. In time *kyriakos* became the German "Kirken", the Scottish "Kirk", and the English "Church".

The Greek word *kyriakos* (church) is never used in the original New Testament. It suited the Roman institution to replace "congregation of called out ones" with "Church", because they controlled the Church institution with all of its buildings and wealth. Later, when the King James Bible was written (1611AD), the 3rd of its foundational decrees was that *ekklēsia* had to be translated as "church".

3. The Old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz. the word Church not to be translated Congregation &c.). This suited King James as he was then head of the Church of England!

- In 330AD Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium (later Constantinople, now Istanbul). This meant that the Church had centres in the west (Rome) and east (Byzantium). Centres also developed in other places, which lead to different streams of Christianity, each with their own beliefs, canons and Bible translations. eg. Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox ...

The institutional Church of Rome gradually developed its own systems and powers. As the Roman Empire fell to pieces the Church became more and more powerful and its systems and powers came to dominate western civilization, and have done so through to modern times. The Bishop of Rome was the Pope (*Pontifex maximus*), in line of apostolic succession from Peter. The Pope was the chief shepherd over the bishops, who exercised leadership over groups of churches in a *diocese* (an administrative area). Priests exercised leadership over individual churches. In Monastic orders the Abbot of a monastery had authority even over a Bishop. Later on orders were based around specific holy people; Jesuit, Marist, Franciscan, Dominican ...

- Initially pagan temples building were used for meetings and the pagan services and rituals were adjusted to include Christian content. Soon Churches were built in all major towns and cities and the services gradually developed an 'order of service' that became the Mass. Ultimately the Mass and Canon Law became part of Roman law.
- The Church of Rome came to believe that it was "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church founded by Jesus Christ in his Great Commission, that its bishops are the successors of Christ's

apostles, and that the Pope is the successor to Saint Peter, upon whom primacy was conferred by Jesus Christ". That's why it is called the "Roman Catholic Church".

- Catholic rituals and beliefs gradually developed and were authorised by Church Councils and ratified by the Pope. These included the seven sacraments (baptism, eucharist, confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, ordination); veneration of Mary; prayer through saints; confession; penance; indulgences; purgatory; transubstantiation; liturgy; roles and powers of the clergy, alterations to the calendar (Sunday, Easter, Christmas, holy days...); icons and symbols, services and Bibles in Latin
- As the Roman Empire declined the Church became more and more powerful, controlling the common people's behaviour, thinking, finances, property, education, health,

Meetings of the Roman Church

- Meetings in the Roman temples had their "own order of service" led by the pagan priests. The focus was on making sacrifices to appease the gods. When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christian and Jewish content and rituals were added to the pagan rituals. Over time, the resulting order of service became the "Roman Catholic Mass".
- The man most responsible for shaping the Mass was Pope Gregory the Great (540–604AD), the first monk to be made Pope. He was a very superstitious man strongly influenced by "magic, heathenism and Christianity". Gregory is sometimes called the "first completely medieval man". The Mass that Gregory developed has remained virtually unchanged over the centuries.

The liturgy of the Mass still contains many practices with origins in the old pagan temple services. These include:

- the architecture, layout and design of the building. The altar for the sacrifice is central in the service.
- leadership by priests, assisted by servers
- vestments worn by priests and servers
- processions
- use of signs e.g. the sign of the cross and sign of peace; use of icons and sacraments
- use of candles, incense and holy water
- liturgy, invocations, readings, antiphons (chants) led by priests
- a central sacrifice. (In the Eucharist the elements are believed to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ)
- a homily (short talk by the Priest)
- acts and prayers of penitence, absolution and consecration
- a sending out. "Mass" is based on the ending of the Mass in Latin: *Ite missa est* which means "be dismissed" or "go and share the mission".

After 590. Dark Ages – Middle Ages – through to the reformation in the 1500s **Major focus: Church power and control**

Constantine's power continued through two of his sons: one in western Rome and the other in eastern Byzantine. The two main branches of Christianity gradually grew apart politically and theologically and finally separated in the "great schism" in 1054. The main issues were the authority of the Pope; the use of Latin in Greek speaking countries and whether unleavened bread should be used in the Eucharist. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches have developed separately ever since (together with other smaller groups like Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian ...).

The growth of Christianity was a major contributor in the decline (between 376 and 476), and ultimate fall of the Roman Empire. The Church came to exercise power and authority in most parts of the world.

Colonisation of new countries was always accompanied by powerful religious control.

Significant events in later history were the rise of Islam in the 7th century and its ongoing attacks on Christianity; the Crusades (1000-1300) which sought to expel Islam from the Holy Land; Gutenberg's development of a printing press (1439) which made printed material available to ordinary people; the Reformation (1500s) which sought to bring Christianity back to a more Biblical basis; publication of the Bible in local languages (e.g. Wycliffe's translation into English in 1383); missions and revivals during the 18th and 19th centuries which spread Christianity throughout the world; Vatican 2 (1962) which sought to modernise Catholicism, and the Charismatic movement (1960s on) which revolutionised Church worship.



What of the future?

The institutional Church has little relevance or respect in modern western society. There is a world-wide move towards a simple Christianity that is more like how Jesus introduced it – based on a personal relationship with God and no institutional conformity. It is unlikely that the future of Christianity will be church-based.

When times have been spiritually dark God has always moved in revival, changing nations and cultures. The power of the Holy Spirit is unchanged and God still wants all people to come into relationship with Him in Christ Jesus. Somehow, God will break through indifference, antagonism, religion and media bias to reach the hearts of those that need Jesus.

God's purposes for Israel, and fulfilment of Matthew 24:4 "*this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come*" will be worked out in God's way and in God's time. The full revelation of the Kingdom of God has yet to take place and every Christian is still called to contribute towards its fulfilment. *Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in Heaven.*

We don't know when Jesus will return to bring in His "*new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness dwells*", but we pray "*Come, Lord Jesus*".

For further information

The history of Christianity (New Lion Handbook) - Jonathan Hill. (a clear introduction to Church history).

History of the Christian Church (8 volumes) – Philip Schaff. (the classic detailed study of Church history. Available cheaply on Kindle).

Wikipedia articles on: "History of Christianity", "Timeline of Christianity", "Biblical Canon", "Development of the New Testament Canon" etc.

'Church history in 10 minutes' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQjS6NGvIQ0> A short overview of Church history in cartoon style.

'Fragments of Truth' – a video showing the development of the canon of the Bible by exploring early manuscripts.