

Church History

From Pentecost to Constantine

January 2010

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Overview

January 03, 2010

Last summer Jon Schwartz asked me what I would like to study in a Sunday school class. I thought about this for awhile and decided that I would like to know more about the early history of Christianity, a subject I knew almost nothing about. I knew that the church started on Pentecost in Jerusalem and that with the conversion of emperor Constantine Christianity became the religion of the empire. But what happened during the 300 years in between? There are so many questions; How did Christianity spread? Who started the churches and where? Who lead the churches? What about the persecutions? Who decided what to believe and teach? I was interested in knowing from a historical point of view what happened.

I began by talking to people at church. Nell Schwartz recommended I read "A History of Christianity," revised edition, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, a book she studied in seminary. Pastor Kent Landry suggested I read "A History of The Christian Church," forth edition, by Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz and Robert T. Handy. I went online and found "The Early Church," revised edition, by Henry Chadwick. As I read "A History of Christianity" and "A History of The Christian Church" I found references to Josephus and Eusebius, so I got those books too. These books plus the Bible form the basis of my research.

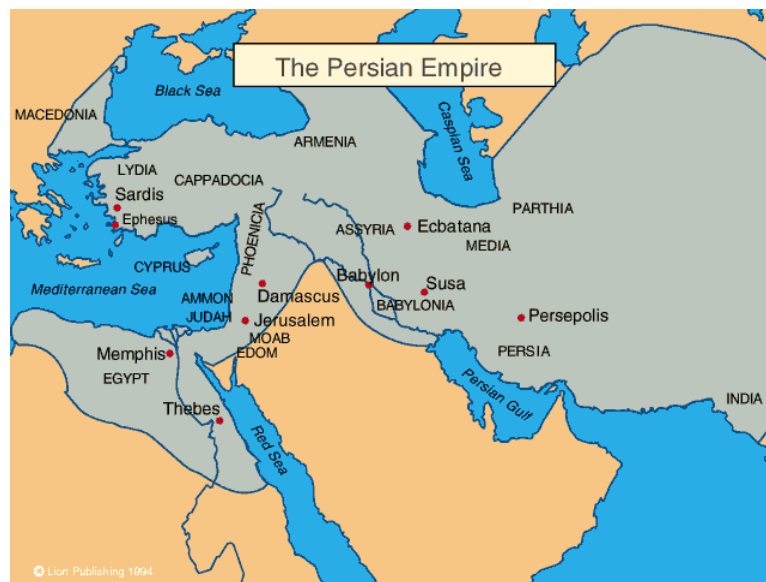
I have not read all of the information contained in these books concerning the time period I am interested in. I think it would take me more than a year to read and digest just what is there. However, I have decided on a division of the time period into sections that seem significant, to me, in the early history of the church. So, what you end up with is my understanding of what I have read broken into sections that make sense to me. I hope they also make sense to you. I welcome ideas, suggestions and questions from all of you. I do not pretend to have all the answers or to have a complete understanding of what happened. For me this is a journey of discovery and learning in which I encourage the participation of everyone.

Wayne Fluke

The first section I call "Background." To understand the spread of Christianity it is important to understand something about the history of the region around Judea. First came the Babylonian Empire which conquered Judea and scattered the Jews over a large region.



Then came the Persian Empire which allowed the Jews to go home.



Then the Greek Empire brought in the Greek language and Greek philosophy.



And finally the Roman Empire brought peace and easy travel.



The second section I call "The Beginnings." Christ has died, risen and ascended into heaven. He is no longer here on earth and his disciples need to know what to do next. They receive the Holy Spirit, establish the church and Christianity begins to spread.



The third section is "Paul And The Gentiles." Until the conversion of Paul, Christianity was a Jewish thing. Paul brought in the idea that Gentiles could be Christian too and this brought in controversy.



In the fourth section, "The Gnostics," we see the influence of Greek and other foreign ideas creeping into Christian groups. This posed a threat to the early church that had to be met and defeated.



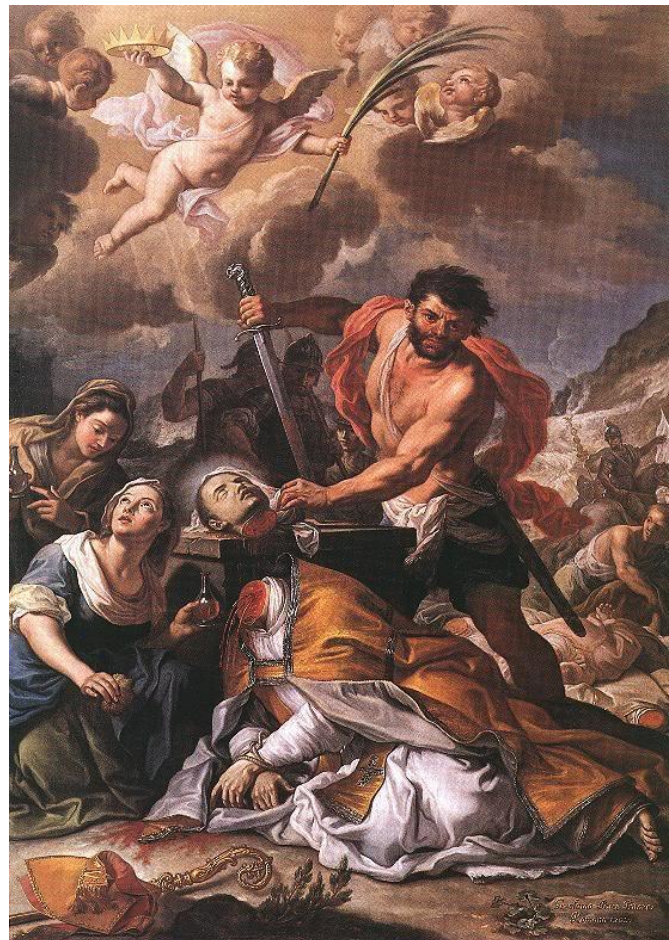
This threat by the Gnostics and other beliefs brings us to the fifth section, "Defining What We Believe." It became necessary for the churches to get together and define what was, and what was not, Christian belief.



As the church grew it also became necessary to decide how churches were to be governed. I made this the sixth section which I call "Church Structure."



During the first few decades of the church there had been some persecution of Christians, but it was local and not Empire wide. With the assent of Diocletian to emperor in 284 AD persecution became an empire wide law. So, section seven I call "Persecution."



My eighth and last section is "Constantine." Constantine became a Christian, stopped the persecutions, and made Christianity the state religion. Christians could now freely travel without fear. This turned out to be both a good thing and a bad thing. As we all know from history, when government gets involved in anything it can have serious negative consequences.



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Early Church History

Section 1: Background

January 10, 2010

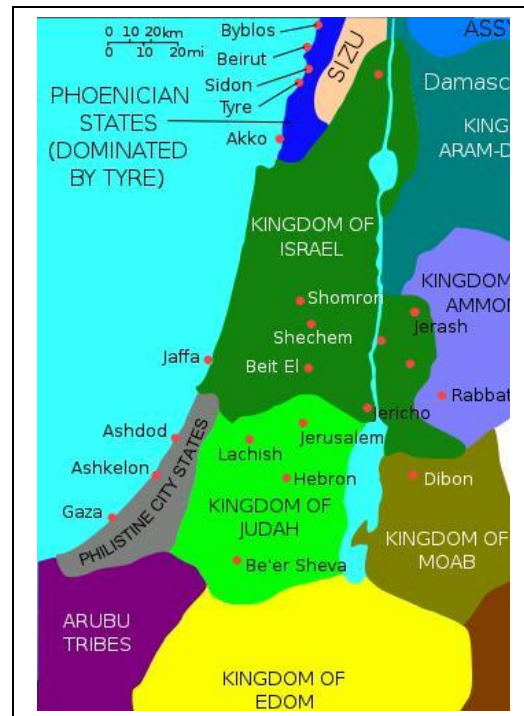
To understand Christianity and its spread we need to have some understanding of the history and culture of the region around the Mediterranean. The empires that ruled Palestine for 1000 years before Christ played a crucial role in setting the stage for Christianity just as Jewish and other religious beliefs of the time did.

The land around Jerusalem changed hands several times during the 1300 years before Christ. In about 1300 B.C. the Jews and Philistines moved into Canaan defeating the people who lived there. By about 1000 B.C. David had become King of Israel, had solidified the tribes into one nation. David's son Solomon then built the Temple in Jerusalem.

Israel was at the height of its power (but was small compared to other empires of the time). After the death of King David's son, Solomon, the kingdom split into two separate nations; Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

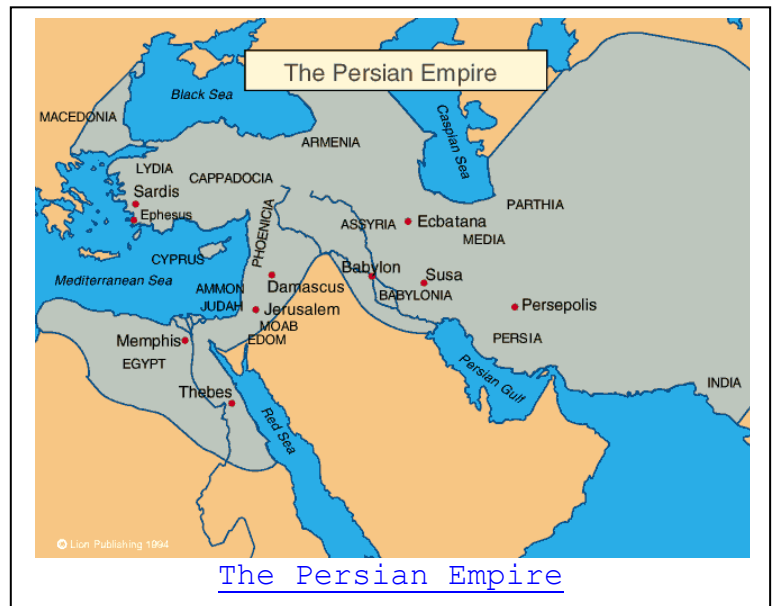
In 721 B.C. the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and in 612 B.C. the Assyrians were conquered by the Babylonians under King Nabopolassar. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia captures Jerusalem in 587 B.C.

The conquest of Israel and Judah by the Babylonians is what I believe is the first of several significant events that eventually affected the spread of Christianity. Up until this time the Jews were centered in Palestine and represented a small percentage of the people living in Israel. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians carried many Jews off into captivity and many Jews fled to Egypt. Now the Jewish population was spread over a wide area from Egypt to Babylon.



Next came the Persians. In 539 B.C. "Cyrus the Great of Persia conquers Babylonia absorbing Babylon into the Persian empire."¹

Under Cyrus the Great the Jews were allowed to go home and were encouraged to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Having been in captivity for so many years, however, many of the Jews had developed strong ties in the lands where they had been in exile and they chose to remain. The Jews were once again free but they were scattered over a large area of the eastern Mediterranean. This fact is important to the spread of Christianity.



The Persians brought with them some religious ideas that were different from the mainstream beliefs in Judaism. Many people of the time did not believe in an afterlife and the ideas of spirits and afterlife came from Persia. These ideas flourished in the two centuries before Christ. The Persians also enforced Aramaic as the language of the empire.

The Jews returning to Jerusalem did rebuild the temple and that plus the common religion held the Jews all over the world together. So, no matter where Jews lived, Jerusalem was the center of their religion.

In 334 B.C. Alexander the Great started his conquest of the known world. By 332 B.C. all of the eastern Mediterranean was under his control. Then the Greek Empire brought in the Greek language and Greek philosophy. The whole of the eastern Mediterranean now had a common language that was spoken by all educated people. There were other languages that were still spoken locally, but Greek was the language of commerce and culture. Greek became so pervasive that the Jewish bible was translated into Greek, the Septuagint, because many Jews had lost their Hebrew language.



¹ <http://meta-religion.com/World Religions/Ancient religions/Mesopotamia/timeline of babylonia.htm>

This also allowed many non Jews to read the Jewish texts which resulted in a group of Greeks (Gentiles) who followed the teachings of the Jewish religion. It should be noted that Jewish Synagogues were open to all who wanted to come.

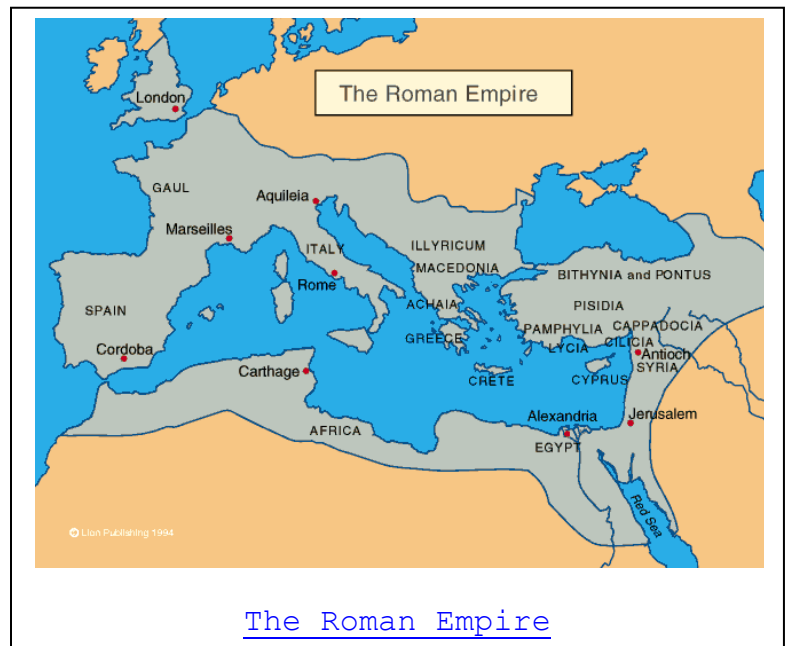
In addition to their language, the Greeks brought their philosophy. As we all know there were several great Greek philosophers among whom are Pythagoras of Samos, Heraclitus, Democritus of Abdera, Socrates, Antisthenes, Plato, and Aristotle. (I did not do any exhaustive research into Greek philosophy, so I do not know the total extent of its influence.) Some of the Jews, the Sadducees, tried to bring Hellenistic thought into Judaism and to change from being governed by Mosaic law to being governed by government law. These Jews were the wealthy class and wanted to fit in with the ruling society. On the other side were the Pharisees who believed in a strict interpretation of the bible as handed down by the Scribes. The government and the high priest of the temple tried to force this on the Jews which ended up causing a revolt by the common Jew against the Seleucid rule under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (ēpif'unēz), 175 BC to 164 BC. Antiochus banned the practice of Judaism as a result and tried to destroy Judaism by force, a policy that instigated the rebellion of the Maccabees. He did not understand what he was dealing with and was not able to end the practice of Judaism.

In 63 BC the Romans took control of Jerusalem. I think that the major thing the Romans added was relative peace and excellent roads. Travel could be a very dangerous thing 2000 years ago. There were robbers on land and pirates

at sea. The roads were nothing more than trails created by the passage of many people and wagons over time. In addition to pirates, travel by sea was subject to whatever weather might happen upon the traveler. The Romans halted piracy, stopped wars inside the empire, handed out swift and cruel punishment to law breakers and made a great paved road system. They also allowed freedom of movement by their subjects, including the Jews, which caused an even wider spread of the Jewish people. The worship places in the cities and towns in the empire were the Synagogues, but there was only one temple and it was in Jerusalem. No matter how far away a Jew lived from Jerusalem, they still

considered it the center of Judaism and travelled there for certain religious events. They also paid a tax to the temple for its upkeep.

At the time of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem there were several major religions. The Romans and Greeks believed that there were many gods. There was one supreme god and then various lesser gods who looked after common aspects of life such as rain, crop yields, battle outcomes and so on. They did not believe in an afterlife for common mortals. They did believe that in order to do well while on earth the gods must be pleased. This required



prayers, sacrifices, amulets, and temples and statues built to honor the gods. The Romans required all Roman citizens to participate in religious rituals so as to please the gods, but Jews refused to do this. Jews refrained from becoming Roman citizens so that they would not be forced to worship pagan gods and the Roman government generally gave them a pass. This of course caused some problems for the Jews with the Roman citizens since they were seen as not supporting the good fortune of the empire.

In Persia there was a religion called Zoroastrianism (zawr-oh-as-tree-uh-niz-uhm) that may have influenced the thinking of many people in the eastern Mediterranean. "The religion was founded by Zarathushtra in Persia -- modern-day Iran. It may have been the world's first monotheistic faith. It was once the religion of the Persian empire, but has since been reduced in numbers to fewer than 200,000 today (it still exists today). Most religious historians believe the Jewish, Christian and Muslim beliefs concerning God and Satan, the soul, heaven and hell, the virgin birth of the savior, slaughter of the innocents, resurrection, the final judgment, etc. were all derived from Zoroastrianism. Historians and religious scholars generally date his life sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE on the basis of his style of writing."²

In addition to Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism had both been in existence for centuries before the time of Christ, but apparently had no influence on the thinking of people in the Roman empire.

Judaism had many different sects by the time of Christ. The ones we hear about most in the bible are the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. From historical records we also know some about the Essences. The Scribes were the interpreters and keepers of the law. They were the leaders of the Synagogues, enforced the law and handed out punishment. The Pharisees were the conservatives who studied the bible and the oral traditions and tried to follow the laws to the letter. The Sadducees were the wealthy class and were the liberals. They wanted to blend in with the Greek society. They did not believe in following the oral traditions handed down by the Scribes and did not believe in an afterlife. The Essences did not play a major role in the spread of Christianity as far as I can tell. They believed in an austere life isolated from the evils of society. They also generally believed in celibacy, even for married couples.

And now we come to the time of Christ. Jews were dispersed over a wide area around the Mediterranean. Travel was relatively easy and safe. Greek was spoken by most educated people, including those in Rome, so there was a universal language to communicate in. There was a general belief in a coming messiah and a belief in a resurrection after death to an immortal afterlife. The time was ripe for the messiah. It amazes me how God used all of these people and nations to set the stage for His coming.

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² <http://www.religioustolerance.org/zoroastr.htm>

Early Church History

Section 2 - The Beginnings

January 17, 2010

Very little information survives from the first century to give us insight into the beginnings of Christianity. Considering how little survives about some very prominent people of the time it is amazing that any records of the church survived at all. Reading from the New Testament and from historians of the time, scholars have put together a picture for us.

The way for Jesus was prepared by an apocalyptic messianic movement started by John the Baptist. John told his followers that he was not the messiah, but his movement continued to have a life of its own for a period of time.

It was surprising that Christianity grew like it did having come out of Judaism which was a small exclusive religion that was intolerant of other religions. Jesus came from humble beginnings, his public life was for a very short time, he never held political office, he did not associate with powerful people, he never traveled far from where he was born, his chosen 12 apostles were not rich or powerful, he wrote no books, he did great miracles but did not advertise them, yet his words still live today. Jesus taught radical things for the time. He taught that membership in God's kingdom was not hereditary, you had to seek it. He taught that accumulation of material possessions should not be your goal. You should be willing and ready to give it all up to follow him. He was very aware of evil, but he never asked why God allowed it to exist. He saw that the rain falling on the just and the unjust was proof of God's love for all his people.

Before his ascension into heaven Jesus had instructed his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus ascension the disciples gathered in the upper room of the place where they were staying to pray. There were about 120 people in the room including the eleven Apostles chosen by Jesus (Judas had committed suicide after his betrayal of Jesus), several women, Mary the mother of Jesus and the brothers of Jesus.³ Peter stood up and told the group that they needed to replace Judas with someone who had been with them from the beginning, someone who was there from the baptism of John to the resurrection and ascension into heaven. There were two who met these requirements that were put forward for consideration; Barsabbas and Matthias. The Apostles prayed for guidance from God and cast lots⁴ and chose Matthias.⁵

The day of Pentecost, which is the Jewish festival of Shavu'ot, or the Festival of Weeks, arrived. Pentecost is seven weeks and one day (fifty days) after Passover and is the celebration of the giving of the Ten

³ Acts 1:14-15

⁴ There are no historical records I found that describe what "casting lots" entailed, but it was frequently used in this time period to choose between things. It was like drawing straws.

⁵ Acts:15-26

Commandments. It also is a celebration of the first harvests. There was no work done that day, so all Jewish businesses were closed.⁶ Due to conquests and economic situations Jews had been scattered all over the empire from Cadiz in Spain to Egypt (called the Diaspora) and they made frequent trips to Jerusalem for religious festivals, such as Pentecost, and sent an annual contribution for the upkeep of the temple. On Pentecost there were people from all over the empire in Jerusalem to witness the events that occurred.

In Acts 2 it says, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." I assume that when it says they were "all" together it means the 120 people mentioned earlier. If so, a whole bunch of people received these special gifts, not just the twelve Apostles chosen by Christ.

As I read the resources I have I sometimes get sidetracked on an issue of interest to me. One is "speaking in tongues." There is a controversy over what "speaking in tongues" really means and the authors of A History of the Christian Church apparently do not believe that it means speaking the language of some country that the speaker did not know. In Acts 2 it says, "⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?



⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" It seems pretty clear to me that those who were "speaking in tongues" were speaking a known language that they had never spoken before. Then verse 13 says, "¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" Drunk or not it would still have been a miracle for these disciples of Christ to be speaking languages they did not know.

However, the authors of A History of the Christian Church point to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 14 where he is talking about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, "²For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. ... ¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret." The authors go on to warn of reading Acts because they say it was written in the "creative style normal for Hellenistic

⁶ <http://www.jewfaq.org/holidayc.htm>

histories." In effect they are saying that Luke embellished the stories, or more plainly, he lied.

So which is it? I do not know, but I have been to several Pentecostal churches and have heard people "speaking in tongues." To me it sounded like gibberish, but many real languages sound like gibberish to me. In these Pentecostal churches there was always some other person who got up and gave an interpretation. Did Luke exaggerate in his account in Acts? For me personally I believe that if God can create the universe, plants and animals, heal the sick and raise the dead, He would have no problem giving some people the ability to speak a foreign tongue that other people could understand. As for speaking in a tongue that no one understands, I do not see a purpose for it even though it may be real.

The really important thing is that many other miracles were performed, including healing of the sick, and there were Jews from all over the Greco-

Roman world gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavu'ot who saw and heard these things. And the Jewish populations were scattered across the empire from Cadiz, Spain to Alexandria, Egypt. Acts says that 3000 people welcomed the message and were baptized that day and I am sure that many of them were from the far-flung regions of the empire. The ease of travel and the common language of Greek would have allowed the stories of these events to spread quickly over the whole



empire. Surely after seeing and hearing these things the people went back to their homes with amazing tales.

The very first converts, then, were the Jews in Jerusalem. Peter, John and James the brother of Jesus seem to have been the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. (There is no record of what happened to the other apostles after Pentecost.) The Palestinian Jews who lived in and around Jerusalem and spoke Hebrew and Aramaic were heavily influenced by the Pharisees who believed in a strict interpretation of the scriptures and also believed in following the oral traditions handed down by the Scribes. To these people Jesus teachings were just an extension of Judaism and they believed that they must continue to follow all Mosaic Laws. As long as Jesus followers continued to follow all the Jewish Laws, they appeared to be just another Jewish sect and posed no threat to the religious leaders. Generally there was peace in the church in

Jerusalem, but the Jewish leaders did not like Peter and John preaching that in Jesus there was resurrection of the dead, so they were arrested and put in prison but were released a few days later. There was also a brief period of persecution from 41-44 AD under Herod Agrippa, son of Herod the Great, during the reign of Claudius. James, the brother of John was executed and Peter was thrown into prison. After Peter was released he left on missionary trips and James the brother of Jesus along with a group of elders oversaw the Jerusalem church.

The Greek speaking Christians in Jerusalem complained to the Aramaic speaking Palestinian Christians that their widows and orphans were not being taken care of when the daily distribution of food took place. The twelve gathered the people together and told them to pick seven men who were good Christians to take care of the distribution to Hellenist believers. These were the first deacons.

The converts in Jerusalem did not believe in private ownership and everything was owned in common. Things were sold and the proceeds given to the apostles who then distributed to each as was needed. There was a man and his wife, Ananias and Sapphira, who told Peter that they had sold a piece of property and had given the proceeds to the group. However, they had kept some of the money for themselves and they were both struck dead for lying to God.

When some of the Jews from the rest of the empire began to teach things that did not agree with the Pharisaic teachings, the situation changed. The Diaspora Jews spoke Greek and had little or no understanding of Hebrew. The bible they read was the Greek translation of the Hebrew, the Septuagint, and they were influenced by Hellenistic thought. Some of them did not share the Pharisaic view of obedience to Mosaic Law when viewed from their understanding of the teachings of Christ.

Even though Jews kept themselves separated from Greco-Roman society, a large number of Gentiles attended synagogue and studied the Septuagint. The idea of circumcision seemed barbaric to them, but they were drawn to the teachings of monotheism, Jewish morality, the antiquity of their sacred books, chastity, stable family life, works of charity, visiting the sick, caring for the dead, showing hospitality to strangers, and giving alms to the poor. Some of the more liberal Jews accepted these uncircumcised believers into the faith even though the religious leaders disapproved. These Gentile believers were some of the first non-Jewish converts.

Stephen, a Hellenistic believer, was in Jerusalem and got into arguments with the Jewish leaders concerning the need to strictly follow the Pharisaic interpretation of Mosaic Law. He was accused of blasphemy and brought before the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. He refused to recant his beliefs and accused the elders, Scribes and Pharisees of hypocrisy. This really angered the court and Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. The stoning of Stephen was witnessed by Saul (who's Greek name was Paul) according to Luke's account in Acts. This was followed by a persecution of Christians that caused many of the Hellenistic Jews to be so frightened that they fled Jerusalem. With them they took their message of Christ and started churches in Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. It sounds like there were some non-Jewish

converts in these churches from among the Gentiles who attended the synagogues and were schooled in the Jewish bible.

So, the Palestinian believers in Jerusalem held to their belief that to be a Christian you must also be a Jew and follow all of the Mosaic Laws while the believers in the Diaspora began to believe that Christianity was for everyone.

In the first century AD there were 11 or 12 synagogues in Rome and one million (1,000,000) Jews in Alexandria. The spread of Christianity was inexorable.

A Word About Spiritual Gifts

Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:8-13,

“⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly,⁺ but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Christians today disagree on what this means and when the gifts will disappear. Some Christian groups believe that the gifts will remain until the second coming of Christ. Other Christian groups believe that the gifts ended with the death of the twelve apostles.

What are the gifts? Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Lutherans list seven gifts: wisdom, understanding, right judgment, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Some list spiritual gifts as discernment of spirits, healing, exorcism, and prophecy. Still others list nine spiritual gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of Spirits and divers kinds of tongues.

The web site <http://www.jimfeeney.org/giftsofholyspirit.html> has this to say about I Corinthians 13:8-13:

“This portion of Scripture has been used by some allegedly to prove that the gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased at some arbitrary time long ago. In fact, these verses prove exactly the opposite! They are among the New Testament’s strongest references to the continuing validity of the spiritual gifts.

Will prophecies, tongues and knowledge “cease ... be stilled ... [and] pass away”? Certainly. These verses clearly declare that. But the relevant question is WHEN and in what sense? The answers are clear from



[Receiving the Holy Spirit](#)

the very text itself — that is, in the perfected state that occurs upon the Second Coming of Jesus, not before.”

As for me, I do not know the answer.

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Early Church History

Section 3: Paul And The Gentiles

January 24, 2010

Paul was arguably the most important person in the spread of Christianity. As I studied I wondered if we believe this because we know so much about Paul when compared to the other early disciples. Was he really that important? There were churches in various cities of the Diaspora before his conversion and evidence exists that Gentiles were already being accepted into the faith in some of those churches. The trial and stoning of Stephen for his belief that a person did not have to strictly follow Jewish Law to be saved shows us that there was already a belief that Gentiles should be brought into the fold. We see in Acts that Peter had a vision that told him to kill and eat unclean animals and he was then sent to the house of Cornelius, a non Jewish believer, where he baptized his family and they received the Holy Spirit. Would Christianity have become universal without Paul? We will never know for sure, but there is no doubt that Paul was a staunch advocate for acceptance of all who believed and pushed for the church to be universal rather than just another sect of Judaism. Paul argued with the Jewish Christians, including Peter, about this and was very persuasive. I have no doubt that Paul's work had a major impact on the growth and ideology of the church.

Sometime in the early part of the first century A.D., Paul (In Greek it his name was Paul but in Hebrew it

was Saul) was born in the Hellenistic city of Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia in what is now southern Turkey. Tarsus was an intellectual and cultural center of some note and a center of Stoic⁷ teaching. Paul's father was Jewish and a follower of Pharisaic teaching, but he was also a Roman citizen and was obviously well off. Paul was raised in the Pharisaic



tradition and would have received intensive training in Hebrew culture, history and law. Since Paul's father was a Roman citizen Paul was a Roman citizen too and this would play a role in his life as a Christian missionary. Paul was a master of the Greek language, though not necessarily of Greek culture, and was well read in the Septuagint. He also spoke Aramaic and Hebrew and possibly other languages. He was a well off, well educated man.

⁷ Stoics held that emotions like fear or envy either were, or arose from, false judgements and that a person who had attained moral and intellectual perfection would not undergo them.

While young, Paul travelled to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, a Pharisee and a well-known and respected teacher. Apparently while there Paul witnessed the stoning of Stephen, a Christian Jew from the Diaspora, who came under the scrutiny of the Jewish leaders and was brought before the Sanhedrin for trial. He was accused of blasphemy because he was teaching that Christians did not have to strictly follow Jewish Law. Acts 5 places Gamaliel at Stephen's trial and coming to his defense saying, "³⁵Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. ³⁶For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. ³⁷After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" Acts 7 also places Saul in Jerusalem at the time, "⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." And it goes on to say that Saul approved of this. One of the books I read did not believe that Paul studied under Gamaliel, but Acts puts them together in Jerusalem at the same time.

Eventually Paul actively pursued and persecuted Christians. He may not have gone after them for their belief in Jesus, for there were many such Christians in Jerusalem who escaped persecution, but for their laxness in following Jewish Law. Being a devout follower of Pharisaic teachings he believed that every Jew should strictly follow both the written Law and the oral traditions handed down by the Scribes. The Christian Jews in the Diaspora were not only being loose in their practice of Judaism, they were beginning to accept Gentiles who did not convert to Judaism. This behavior had to be stopped. Paul went to the high priest in Jerusalem and got letters to the leaders of the synagogues in Damascus authorizing him to arrest these heretic Christians and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. He then set out for Damascus where there was apparently a large number of these Hellenistic Jewish Christians.

But on the way to Damascus a bright light appeared around Paul and Jesus asked Paul why he was persecuting Him. During this encounter Christ revealed himself and his plan to Paul and instructed Paul to go to Damascus and wait for instructions. When the light went away Paul was had been blinded and had to be led to Damascus by the hand.

In Damascus there was a Christian named Ananias. After Paul had been in Damascus for three days the Lord came to Ananias and told him to go find Saul of Tarsus and lay his hands on him and cure his blindness. I can only imagine Ananias reaction to this. He knew who Saul was and what he had been doing. I assume Ananias thought, "You have got to be kidding me! This guy goes around arresting Christians and You want me to go looking for him?" Ananias protested but the Lord basically said yes, I have chosen him to work for me and I want you to go cure his blindness. Ananias' faith was obviously very strong because he did what the Lord had instructed him to do.

After Paul's conversion he immediately began to preach in Damascus and Arabia. It must have really angered the leaders in the synagogues to have Paul change from the man coming to take away some of the Christians to the man recruiting people to become Christians. As we have seen, the Jewish answer to this kind of problem was to kill the guy. And so, they set out to kill Paul and he had to flee Damascus by

being let down in a basket outside the city walls during the night. This was the first of many attempts to stop Paul from his mission.

Paul believed his mission was to take the gospel to everyone in the empire. And he tried. He said that the gospel and salvation were for Jew and Gentile alike. This, however, brought him into conflict with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, including Peter, who believed that converts must follow Jewish Law. There were heated debates between Paul and some of the Palestinian Christians about this. After much debate it was agreed that it was ok to baptize Gentiles, they did not have to be circumcised, but they could not eat anything sacrificed to idols or anything strangled. I get fuzzy on the time line, but sometime after the conversion of Paul, I think, Peter had a vision and was told to kill and eat any animal, clean or unclean. He then was told to go with some men who were seeking him to Caesarea and preach to the family of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile. After Peter had baptized Cornelius and his family, he was astonished to see that all these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. When he got back to Jerusalem the people chastised him for bringing the word to Gentiles, but Peter told them of his vision and they agreed that it was ok.⁸

But there was still a problem because Jews were forbidden to eat with Gentiles. Peter met with Paul in Antioch, again I am not sure of the time line here, and they had a big fight. Paul told Peter he was being a hypocrite because he had been eating with Gentiles until he came under pressure from some of the "circumcision faction."⁹ In the end, Paul's vision of Christ's message prevailed and all who confessed their belief and were baptized were welcomed into fellowship. Paul was adamant about his beliefs and told his followers that he did not receive the gospel from any man, but directly from Christ.

Paul went on several trips to spread the gospel, but never made it to the western part of the empire. He did, however, establish many churches throughout Arabia, Asia and Greece. We do not know who established the other churches, including the church in Rome, because there are no records in existence to tell us. It is pretty clear that the church in Rome existed before Peter or Paul went there.

Paul made three missionary journeys before being arrested and sent to Rome for trial before Caesar. The church in Antioch sent Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, on his first journey to Cyprus. He established churches in Cyprus and went on to Asia and Galatia establishing churches there before returning to Antioch. On his second journey he went all the way to Macedonia and Greece. On the way there he visited churches he had started on his first journey and established new churches in the areas he had not visited before. On his third and final journey he again visited churches he had established in Asia, Galatia, Macedonia and Greece.

At the end of his third journey Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem to bring the money he had collected at the Gentile churches he had started, to show their solidarity with the church in Jerusalem. Because of the anger he stirred up with the Jewish Christians, he was advised not to go, but he was determined. Sure enough, while in Jerusalem he was arrested, but being a Roman citizen he appealed to Rome and ended up there in house arrest. It is assumed that he was martyred there, but there is no record of what happened.

⁸ Acts 10 and Acts 11.

⁹ Galatians 2:11-14



Paul's impact on Christianity was dramatic. If Christianity had remained a Jewish sect, it might not have survived. The Jews were always a small minority who kept to themselves. By bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, Christianity became a universal, and worldwide, religion. Christianity may have slowly accepted Gentiles anyway, but without Paul's pushing the issue it might have never happened.

Early Church History

Section 4: Gnostic and Other Beliefs

January 31, 2010

As Christian churches were formed around the eastern Mediterranean in the last part of the first century and the first part of the second century, there developed variations in beliefs and teachings. One of the prominent schools of thought that crept into Christianity was Gnosticism.

The word Gnostic is derived from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge. There is no single definition of what Gnostics believed, but in general they believed they had special knowledge, not known or available to everyone, concerning the spiritual world. This was a Hellenistic philosophy that showed up as Gentile (Greek) converts brought their beliefs to Christianity with them. This philosophy was seen in some Christian writings of the second century and its spread threatened the mainstream thinking.

Gnostics believed that there were two worlds; the spiritual world and the physical world. The spiritual world was the real world from which the Gnostics came and to which they would return. They called this world “the Fulness.”¹⁰ The physical world came into being through some tragic error and was the false world which they called “the Void.” Their teachings were always secret and revealed to few. Not everyone was capable of understanding this knowledge which concerns things which are not apparent and are beyond ordinary thought. Their teachings were riddle like and couched in mythology. The creation story figured heavily in their teachings as did pagan mythology, astrology and magic. They saw themselves as displaced persons cruelly trapped in the material world but destined inevitable to be restored to their true home.



[Gnostic View of The World](#)

They saw a duality of worlds, one of light and one of darkness, existing in parallel. The real world of light was duplicated in the world of darkness. The world of light was made of spirit while the world of darkness consisted of soul and matter. These two worlds were headed by two different deities. The Jewish Creator-God was the God of the physical world and falsely claimed to be the creator of all things. The real creator of all things was the God of the spiritual world. The God of Jewish scripture was not of the spirit world, but just a copy of the God of the spirit world. The Gnostics believed they were saved by a revelation that once received freed them from the bondage of the material world and its rules.

¹⁰ I did not misspell this. It is really Fulness.

What made Christian Gnostics different from other Gnostics was their belief that Christ was the bearer of the revelation of salvation. They envisioned two parallel Christs. One was the Messiah promised to the Jews in their scriptures by the Creator-God of the physical world. The other was the true Savior who descended on the physical Christ at the moment of His baptism. The true Christ did not operate in the physical world and only had the appearance of a body. He, therefore, did not suffer on the cross and die. When he appeared to his disciples after the death of the body, Gnostics received the revelation of salvation.

Christian Gnostics of the second century recognized three levels of humans. First there were the pagans living in the material world of matter who had no hope of salvation and were destined for destruction. Next were the ordinary Christian believers who, along with the God of the Jews, lived in the world of the soul. These people would attain the spirit world but only as second class citizens. Finally there were the Gnostics who received the knowledge through revelation and would return to the Fulness. This made the Gnostics troubling neighbors in the life of the church.

Gnostics were sincere in their beliefs and studied the gospels and the writings of Paul. They wrote the first known commentary on John's gospel. Their understanding of the three levels of being came from their interpretation of Paul's writings.

The "mainstream" Christians were outraged by these beliefs. They saw in them a distortion of the meaning of the teaching tradition and a deliberate avoidance of the plain sense of the words written by Paul. They were shocked at the suggestion that the ultimate God was not one and the same as the Creator-God of the cosmos. They were offended by the implications of the Gnostic dogma of two worlds, and on this issue battle was joined.¹¹

Marcionism

Another belief that arose in the second century as a challenge to Christianity was Marcionism. Marcion (mahr'-shuh n, -shee-uh n, -see-uh n) was a wealthy ship builder from the sea port town of Sinope (suh-noh'-pee) on the southern coast of the Black Sea in Asia Minor. He was already a Christian and was something of a trouble maker in the churches of his native land when he moved to Rome about 139 A.D. He joined the church there and donated 200,000 sesterces (ses'-turs). A day's wages was about one denarius (di-nair'-ee-uhs), or four sesterces, equivalent to about \$50 US.¹² That would make 200,000 sesterces equal to about \$2,500,000. However, it is difficult to come up with exact values since the value of things was so different back then. Labor was very cheap but some goods were very expensive since everything was handmade.

Marcion was not a Gnostic, but came to believe in a dualism similar to the Gnostic beliefs. Based on his interpretation of Paul's letters he saw the God of Christ as a loving and gracious God while the God of the Jews was a God of harsh justice – arbitrary, inconsistent, even tyrannical. He read the Jewish scriptures literally, not allegorically, and did not view the Hebrew writings as a foreshadowing of a Messiah. He concluded that the God of the Jews and the God of the Christians were not the same and that the gospel writings had been purposely distorted by the Judaisers, whom Paul complained about in

¹¹ All this material heavily pilfered from "A History of the Christian Church."

¹² <http://ancienthistory.about.com/b/2004/08/19/social-class-in-ancient-rome.htm>

his epistle to the Galatians, to fit in with the Jewish writings. Even though he saw this dualism, Marcion differed from the Gnostics in that he did not believe that he had some special revelation or knowledge.

Marcion wrote a book, the *Antitheses* (an-tith'-uh-sis), in which he systematically wrote down the inconsistencies he saw between the Jewish Bible and Christian beliefs. "The God of the Jews, Marcion argued, was vacillating: after forbidding the making of images, he told Moses to set up a brazen serpent. He was ignorant: he had to ask Adam where he was and descended to Sodom and Gomorrah to discover what was going on."¹³ "He also noted that the God of the Old Testament commanded bloody sacrifices to him, and, was a God of battles, rejoiced in bloodshed and was vindictive."¹⁴ Marcion believed that the world of suffering and pain we live in was created by the Jewish God, the Demiurge (dem'-ee-urj), and that the Christian God took pity on us, creatures which he had no part in creating, and sent Christ to save us. Jesus was then killed by the followers of the Demiurge. Marcion did not believe in the birth story of Jesus but instead believed that Jesus just appeared one day and started teaching about the Christian God. Paul was Marcion's hero and from reading Paul's letters Marcion believed that all the God of Christ required for salvation was faith in response to his love and that Christ released us from the bondage of following the rules of the Demiurge set out in the Jewish bible. The majority of the Christians in Rome did not accept Marcion's beliefs and in 144 A.D. he was excommunicated and his money was returned.

Marcion left Rome and took his followers with him to create his own church. Members of his church, Marcionites, were required to be strict celibates and refrained from eating meat. Because the members were celibate the church had to recruit new members to continue its existence. Marcion created the first known canon of authoritative Christian writings (which was a wakeup call for mainstream Christianity). His canon consisted of part of the Gospel of Luke - he did not believe there was a need for more than one gospel - and ten of the letters of Paul. However, Marcion edited the texts in his canon to remove any "errors" introduced by the Judaizers. Marcionism spread and continued to exist until the fifth century.

Montanism

A third belief that swept into early Christianity and threatened the existing churches was Montanism. Montanus was from Phrygia (frij'-ee-uh) in Asia Minor and around 170 began to proclaim he was a prophet and the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit as promised in John 14:26, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." At his baptism he spoke in tongues and said the Paraclete (par'-uh-kleet) was speaking through him. There were two women who joined him, Maximillia and Priscilla, speaking in tongues and claiming the same gift. Eusebius (yoo-see'-bee-uhs), in *The History of the Church*, reported that Apolinarius went to Phrygia to argue against Montanists and reported that Montanus "was filled with spiritual excitement and suddenly fell into a kind of trance and unnatural ecstasy. He raved, and began to chatter and talk nonsense, prophesying in a way that conflicted with the practice of the Church handed down generation by generation from the beginning." Apolinarius then writes, "Then he secretly stirred up and inflamed minds close to the true Faith, raising up in this way two others – women who he

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church History* (revised edition)

¹⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1* (revised edition)

filled with the sham spirit, so that they chattered crazily, inopportunistly, and wildly, like Montanus himself.”

Montanus believed the second coming was very soon, that Christ would come to earth, set up his kingdom, the New Jerusalem, in Phrygia and rule for 1000 years. He insisted on a literal resurrection of the flesh. Celibacy and fasting were encouraged (Maximillia and Priscilla left their husbands) and martyrdom was held in high honor. Stricter Christian living was called for. He taught that the Holy Spirit continued to speak through prophets and he required fellow Christians to acknowledge the supernatural nature of the utterances of the Paraclete through his three prophets. To reject them was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Christian leaders quickly saw this as a threat to their authority. They saw this as a brand new kind of prophecy that did not match prophecies of the past. Instead of the prophet being the spokesperson for the Spirit, Montanus claimed that the Spirit spoke directly through him and his two prophetesses. He “...delivered portentous and occasionally obscure oracles in a state of ecstasy.”¹⁵ The orthodox reply from Hippolytus (hi-pol’-i-tuh s) of Rome was that Montanism was divisive. “The quest for miraculous gifts is well (he thought), but the supreme miracle is conversion and therefore every believer alike has the gifts of the Spirit: the supernatural is discerned in the normal ministry of word and sacrament, not in irrational ecstasies which lead to pride and censoriousness.”¹⁶ “The chief effect of Montanism on the Catholic Church was greatly to reinforce the conviction that revelation had come to an end with the apostolic age, and so to foster the creation of a closed canon of the New Testament.”¹⁶

One interesting affect was that the prominence of women in Montanism revived the relatively high participation of women in the early church.

Montanism spread rapidly in Asia Minor and existed to the fifth century. It caused churches to split - every person in the church in Thyatira (tahy-uh-tahy’-ruh) remained Montanist for nearly a century – but was eventually pushed out.

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¹⁵ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (fourth edition)

¹⁶ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church History* (revised edition)

Early Church History

Section 5: Defining What We Believe

February 14, 2010

In the beginning of Christianity the Bible was the Jewish Bible, probably the Greek translation, the Septuagint, which was sometimes read at Christian services. To supplement this there was the oral tradition which together with the Septuagint represented Christian belief. As time passed, various Christian writings appeared in the form of letters to churches, accounts of the life of Christ, and prophecies. These Christian writings circulated among the churches throughout the empire and were used for teaching both new believers and those who were already baptized, but the oral stories remained important and were considered authoritative well into the second century.

The only requirements for admission to the Christian community were repentance, acknowledgement that Jesus was Lord, baptism, and receipt of the Holy Spirit. The earliest statements of faith by believers were something very simple such as “Jesus is Lord.” Baptism was administered to those who confessed belief and was done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, with the rise of divergent beliefs such as Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism, something more was needed to differentiate between “true” Christianity and the heretical beliefs. Authority for the writings and beliefs and stricter admittance requirements were to be established.

Marcion made the first known collection of Christian writings into canon. (We looked at the beliefs of Marcion in the previous section and mentioned his “Bible.”) The Marcion Bible, consisting of the Gospel of Luke and several of Paul’s letters, probably gave impetus to leaders of other Christian churches to make their own collections. The oral stories that were being used in Christian services were considered authoritative, but they did not carry the same authority as written works. By the early part of the second century there were many documents by Christian writers, 27 of which made it into the New Testament we know today. However, in addition to the 27 books of our New Testament canon there were a host of other documents that were read in the churches but were eventually excluded from the canon for various reasons. Each church leader decided for himself which documents to include in his teachings and it would be many centuries before a general, but not total, agreement was reached on what to include and what to exclude. Even today there exists more than one New Testament collection. (One example is the [Ethiopian Bible](#).)

From the second century until much later there was no common collection of books or for that matter agreement on what the collection should be. There were books that seemed to be common to most churches; the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke along with most of the letters of Paul. But the Gospel of John was very suspect because it was different from the other three gospels and was used by the Gnostics. The three letters of John and the Revelation of John, the only prophetic book to be included in the New Testament canon, were also suspected of not being authoritative. The books of Hebrews, James, II Peter, and II and III John were in some collections but not others. Some collections included the

Didache (DID-uh-kee)¹⁷, The Shepherd of Hermas¹⁸, the Apocalypse of Peter¹⁹, and the Epistle of Barnabas²⁰. (A list of many early Christian writings can be found at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com>.)

There was a question about the need for four gospels. Irenaeus ingeniously vindicated the fourfold gospel on numerological principles. (This seems really weird to me using numerology to explain something, but it was done a lot in the Bible.) He argued that 4 “was a sacred number corresponding to the 4 winds, or the 4 faces of the cherubim in Ezekiel and the Johannine Apocalypse with faces resembling a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle.”

Something about the organization of the church needs to be mentioned in order to more clearly understand the events that shaped the stated beliefs of the early church. The orthodox church was called the Catholic Church early on. The earliest known use of this term was in a letter to Smyrna from Ignatius (probably in the later part of the first century). It is next seen in a letter from the church in Smyrna about 155 A.D. By the end of the second century the word Catholic was increasingly applied to the Church and in a technical manner, meaning both universal and orthodox.

There were 3 motives in the development of the Catholic Church. 1) To unite all Christians. 2) To keep the gospel message pure. 3) To bring Christians together in a visible “body of Christ.” One element in the fulfillment of these objectives was to put together a body of documents that could be pointed to as the true and only Christian beliefs in order to refute what the Gnostics and Marcionists taught. The criteria for inclusion in the canon was authorship by an apostle or by a close associate of an apostle. This would then exclude many of the Gnostic and Marcionist writings. The Epistle to the Hebrews was not included at first in the west because no one knew who wrote it (and we still don’t know) so it did not fit the strict criteria of apostolic origin. (It was accepted 200 years later on the authority of the eastern church.) This strict criteria also led to the exclusion of The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians. By the end of the second century there were a group of documents considered to be the New Testament by the Catholic Church which were read along with the Old Testament. But, different teachers used different groups of these writings. In the end it was not just apostolic authorship that was required for inclusion into the canon, it was also the test of experience and the quality of the writing

¹⁷ The Didache is also called the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." It was possibly written around 65 - 80 A.D. and is supposed to be what the twelve apostles taught to the Gentiles concerning life and death, church order, fasting, baptism, prayer, etc. <http://www.carm.org/christianity/miscellaneous-topics/didache>

¹⁸ The Shepherd of Hermas was one of the most popular books produced in the early Church, and for a time it was frequently quoted and regarded as inspired. The book is a picturesque religious allegory, in most of which a rugged figure dressed like a shepherd is Hermas' guide. From this the book took its name, 'The Shepherd'. Comprising a rambling mélange of 5 Visions, 12 Mandates, and 10 Similitudes, the book is characterized by strong moral earnestness. It is primarily a call to repentance and adherence to a life of strict morality, addressed to Christians among whom the memory of persecution is still fresh, and over whom now hangs the shadow of another great tribulation. http://www.ntcanon.org/Shepherd_of_Hermas.shtml

¹⁹ The Apocalypse of Peter is quoted by several early Christian writers, including Clement of Alexandria, and is best known for its lurid descriptions of the punishments of hell. It is an outstanding ancient example of that type of writing by means of which the pictorial ideas of Heaven and Hell were taken over into the Christian Church. http://www.ntcanon.org/Apocalypse_of_Peter.shtml

²⁰ The Epistle of Barnabas is a theological tract (not an epistle) that discusses questions that have confronted the followers of Jesus since the earliest days of his ministry: How ought Christians to interpret the Jewish Scriptures? What is the nature of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism? http://www.ntcanon.org/Epistle_of_Barnabas.shtml.

that determined which were accepted and which were rejected. In other words, if the document had been around for awhile and fit into the beliefs held by the Catholic Church, it was included. My opinion is that despite the human element in this, it seems to have worked out pretty well.

An interesting twist on the four gospels came from Justin Martyr. He used Matthew, Mark and Luke to make a gospel harmony. A harmony was taking the gospels and combining them together to form one text where conflicts between the texts were resolved. His pupil Tatian then added John to compile the four New Testament Gospels into a single narrative about 150 A.D. Tatian's work is called the Diatessaron (from four parts). It was the standard Gospel text in the Syrian Middle East until about 400 A.D., when it was replaced by the four separated Gospels.

The first list which has come down to us of the twenty-seven books which appear in our New Testament is in a letter written by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in the year 367.

Another thing needed to satisfy the goals of the Catholic Church was a simple statement of belief that could be understood by literate and illiterate people alike. The church in Rome used what became known as the "Roman Symbol" which may have come from a baptismal formula as given in the last chapter of Matthew, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The "Roman Symbol" was in use as far back as the fourth century and was known to Irenaeus and Tertullian. The term "symbol" is a translation of a word that could mean watchword or password. Assent to the symbol, or creed, was required before baptism.

" I believe in God the Father almighty;
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of the Father, whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;
and in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Church,
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh" http://en.allexperts.com/e/o/ol/old_roman_symbol.htm

The "Roman Symbol" was worded in such a way as to exclude those who held Marcionist beliefs. The word "almighty" was the translation from a word meaning "all governing" or "all controlling." This refuted the Marcion belief that the world was created by the Demiurge. It also refuted the Marcion belief that Christ was not flesh and not the son of God. It repudiates the idea that the Demiurge is the judge by stating that the Son of the God of all creation is the judge. The Apostles Creed as we know it today is a longer version of the "Roman Symbol" and probably did not exist until the 6th century.

The concept of apostolic origin for a documents inclusion in the New Testament canon and a statement of belief that specifically excluded Marcion and Gnostic beliefs were two of the three things done to fight the heresies of Gnosticism, Marcionism and Monastisism. The final thing would be the idea of the succession of the episcopate from the apostles which we will look at in the next section.

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Early Church History

Section 6: Church Structure

February 21, 2010

The church started in Jerusalem on Pentecost and grew very quickly. In Acts Luke tells us that 3000 were baptized on the first day. The believers met on the first day of the week to read scripture from the Jewish Bible, to hear stories about Jesus and his teachings, to share a meal and to celebrate the eucharist. Members of the church viewed each other as equals in Christ and shared everything. Those who had property of value would sell it and the proceeds would be distributed to those in need. As the church continued to grow it quickly became necessary to develop some sort of organization to take care of tasks such as collection and distribution of assets, organizing meetings, reading scripture, taking care of meals, celebration of the eucharist and so on. There is no record of Jesus giving any instruction to the twelve concerning organizing a church, so the structure of the church evolved over time in a “learn as you go” fashion.

To start with, the twelve were in charge of the church in Jerusalem and they made decisions as a group. Then members from the Diaspora complained about their widows being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The twelve, believing that they should spend their time preaching the word of God and not waiting tables, brought the congregation together and told them to select seven good men to take care of this task. This was the first record of the creation of church offices and these men are considered the first deacons.

The apostles went out from Jerusalem as missionaries and formed churches in cities around the empire while Peter remained in Jerusalem as the leader of the church there. The churches “established by the travelling missionaries soon came to have local, stationary clergy, subordinate to the general oversight of mobile apostolic authority.”²¹ Each church elected leaders, called presbyters (from Greek *presbus*, old man) or bishops (from Greek *episkopos*, overseer), and deacons from among their members. It is important to note that the documents from this period used the word for presbyter and the word for bishop interchangeably to refer to the same person.²² This situation existed for more than a generation with missionaries coexisting with the local leaders. As congregations grew the role of the itinerate missionary and prophet diminished and were replaced by the presbyters and deacons.

Most churches had more than one presbyter and all presbyters, whether from the local church or from other churches, were viewed as equals. We can see that even the apostles saw each other as peers as Paul and Peter had some very public disagreements over Gentile converts. When there were disagreements between churches or if there were issues that needed to be discussed and resolved, leaders of the churches involved would call a synod (from Greek *sunodos*, meeting, assembly). In the province of Africa councils, or synods, were held annually.

Major changes came about when divergent beliefs began to threaten the orthodox beliefs. By this time all of the apostles were gone and questions arose about who had the authority to speak for them and

²¹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church History* (revised edition)

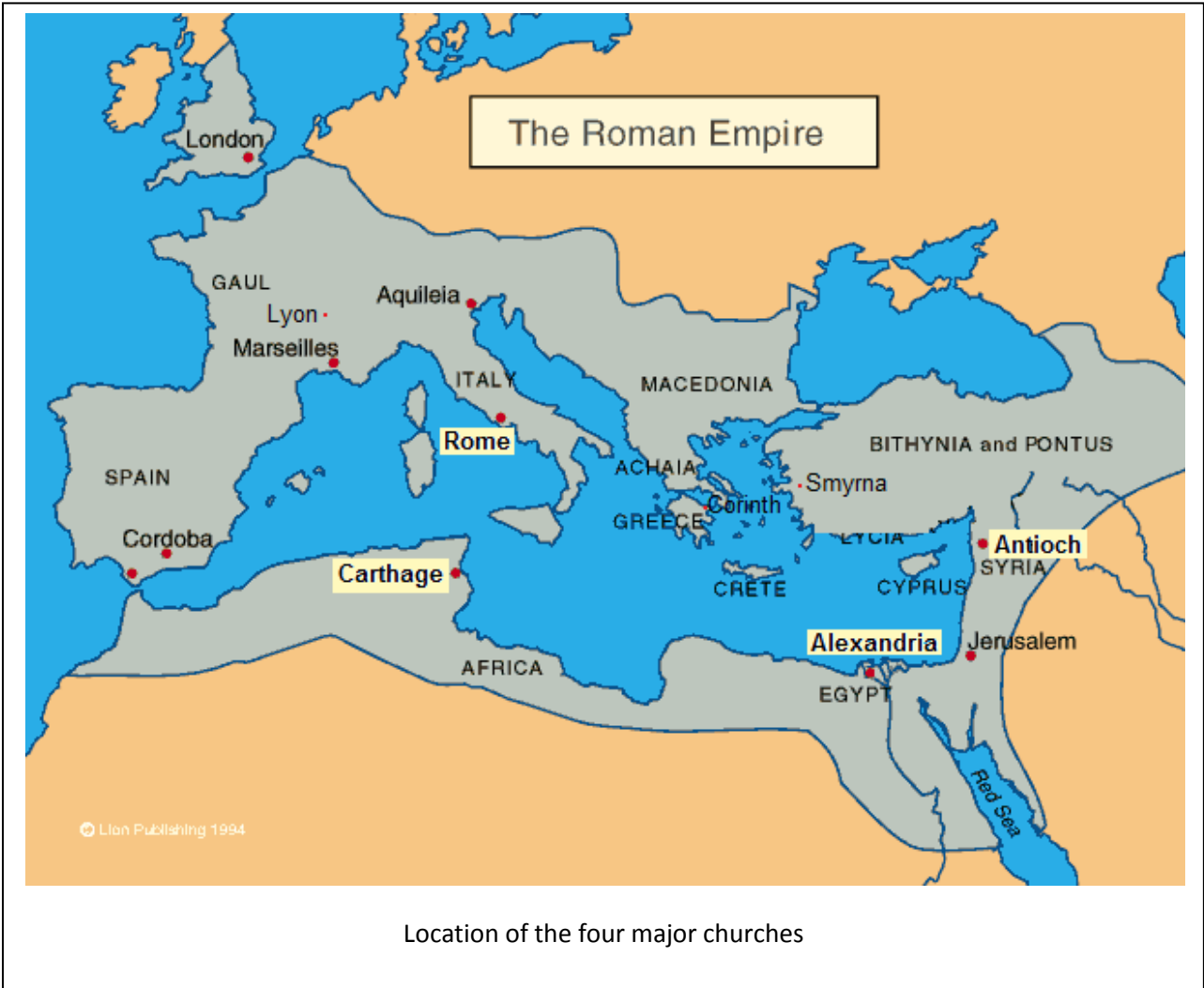
²² Titus 1:5-7

teach the gospel message. Iraneaus, the Bishop of Lyon in Gaul, wrote a treatise in the late first or early second century, "against heresies," condemning heretical beliefs and asserting that only bishops who could trace their succession to an apostle had the authority to teach. He went on to say that the apostles who started the churches passed on all the knowledge required to those they chose. Therefore the bishops had the responsibility of passing on the true message of the Gospel. Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, insisted that the bishop of each church was God's representative on earth and the sacraments could not be administered without him. The orthodox church, in its apostolic succession argument, said that the apostles established the churches and named bishops for each. These bishops then selected other bishops which then created the apostolic succession that gave authority to the bishops. These views served to refute the teachings of the unorthodox beliefs, but they also increased the status and power of the clergy in the church. However, early documents from the various churches seem to dispute this claim since they talk of churches having more than one presbyter/bishop, and that all presbyters/bishops were equal and all were elected by the congregation. To me it looks a little like Gnostic teaching where some people, the bishops in the line of apostolic succession, had special knowledge not available to the common people.

The office of bishop evolved as leadership was needed. For many years churches had more than one bishop and also had deacons and deaconesses. The bishop consecrated the elements and the deacons helped serving. According to Justin Martyr, in Rome in 150 the deacons took the consecrated elements to the sick and those in prison. As the office of bishop elevated it became separate from that of presbyter where in the beginning they were the same. Very slowly the churches changed from having several bishops to having just one bishop per church and eventually there was one bishop for an area. Another change that occurred was that as the concept of apostolic succession of the episcopate developed, the ordination of bishops could only be done by bishops from surrounding congregations. The bishops were still voted on by the whole congregation though and these elections were sometimes a hotly contested affair. Moniscopacy (only one bishop at the head of each church) was established more slowly in Rome than in other cities.

The church continued to grow and the structure continued to change. Churches met in private homes, but in large cities the size of the congregations grew too large to meet in one home which then necessitated meeting in more than one place. (Being an illegal religion the church was not allowed to own property, so they could not build buildings.) One bishop was not able to take care of so many groups so he delegated some responsibilities to the presbyters who had the authority to perform the sacraments. An interesting point is that since seven men were chosen to be the first deacons in Jerusalem, it became customary in many churches to have seven deacons. In Rome the territory was split into seven smaller areas with one deacon over each responsible for the care giving needs.

Eventually a two tiered bishop organization appeared. The bishop of the capital of the province was over the bishops of the individual churches within the province. In the fourth century the churches in Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Carthage ruled over areas larger than a province. Leaders of these churches came to be known as papas (pope) although not exclusively just them at first. Still, the bishop in Rome was not seen as a superior, but as first among equals.





The role of presbyter and deacon changed over time. Deacons became assistants to the bishop and presbyters were the clergy reporting to the bishop. The deacon as an assistant is first formally seen in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus written about 215 A.D.: “8 When one ordains a deacon, he is chosen according to what has been said above, with only the bishop laying on his hand in the same manner. In the ordination of a deacon, only the bishop lays on his hand,² because the deacon is not ordained to the priesthood, but to the service of the bishop, to do that which he commands.” So a deacon basically became a servant to the bishop. Also in the *Apostolic Tradition* Hippolytus describes the ordination of a bishop: “2 He who is ordained as a bishop, being chosen by all the people, must be irreproachable.² When his name is announced and approved, the people will gather on the Lord’s day with the council of elders and the bishops who are present.³ With the assent of all, the bishops will place their hands upon him, with the council of elders standing by, quietly.⁴ Everyone will keep silent, praying in their hearts for the descent of the Spirit.” The ordination of bishops changed from a ritual done at the local level by the presbyters to something done only by other bishops. The bishop became first among equals, but he still called the others “fellow presbyters” for centuries. The presbyters had the power to celebrate the eucharist and to discipline, but they inherited the lower role of “teacher” while the bishop inherited the role of “apostle” and “prophet.”

The church in Rome gained a prominent role very early. When Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. many Christians fled and the church there never regained its place of prominence, probably because when the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem they changed the worship services so as to exclude Christian Jews.

Therefore, the church in Rome, being at the crossroads of the empire, became the dominant church and also became the crossroads of the church. By the beginning of the second century the church in Rome was the largest and richest and was very generous with its money in helping other churches. People from all over the empire passed through and lived in Rome and since the church in Rome had people from every province it became involved in the issues of the churches in every province. An example of this occurred when the church in Corinth dismissed their clergy and replaced them. Clement of Rome sent them a letter, somewhere between 80 and 140 A.D., telling them that the clergy were successors of the apostles and that they could not just dismiss them even though Clement pointed out no doctrinal deviation at Corinth in his letter. The church in Rome could not force the church in Corinth to do anything since the bishops in Rome were not superiors but first among equals, but the letter was worded like it came from a big brother and was expected to be obeyed. The church in Corinth did obey. These things combined to increase the power of the church in Rome.

The church in Rome at first claimed prominence because it was located in the capital of the empire, because of its size and wealth, and because Peter and Paul had founded it. Over time the claim of pre-eminence came only from association with Peter. Because they had the tombs of Peter and Paul and Emperor Constantine built monuments to them on Vatican hill, their claim was bolstered. All of southern Italy acknowledged this and some in the east did too. "When Pope Damasus (366-384) began the custom of describing the Roman church simply as 'the apostolic see,' he was no doubt in a certain sense innovating and, at the same time, trying to make a point. He wanted, on the one hand, to insist on the pre-eminence of Rome even among patriarchal churches and, on the other, to protest the elevation of Constantinople, which had no claims to apostolic foundation, above Alexandria and Antioch, which had."²³ However, the church in Rome existed before Peter or Paul went there. I assume that both met with the church leaders when they were there, but someone else started the church. It was simply a power struggle between the bishops of the churches around the empire.

As an aside, growing up I was taught that the statement of Christ in Matthew 16:18, "¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." did not refer to Peter himself but to what Peter said just before that, "¹⁶Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'" I did a little Googleing on "upon this rock" and found several ideas on what this means. Of course the Roman Catholic Church uses this to support their claim that Peter is the rock on which the church is built and he was therefore the first Pope. A lot of Protestants disagree with this. In my Harper Study Bible it says that two different words were used for rock in Matthew 18:8. When Christ referred to Peter he used "Greek, petros, which means rock or 'rock-man'." When Christ said "on this rock" he used "Greek, petra, which also means rock but is morphologically feminine." I don't understand what difference this makes, but I am, of course, biased by the teachings I received growing up.

One tool used by the bishops of different churches to fight bishops of other churches who held different views was excommunication. A fight took place between Anicetus, bishop of Rome, and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, in 154 or 155 A.D. The churches in the east celebrated Easter in line with the Jewish Passover which meant that the celebration of the resurrection took place on various days of the week. The west,

²³ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (fourth edition)

for the most part, celebrated Easter on the Sunday following Passover so that it always occurred on Sunday, the first day of the week. Anicetus and Polycarp met to resolve this issue, but did not and so agreed to disagree. But this became such a big issue by the time of Victor, bishop of Rome (189-198), that Victor excommunicated all those who refused to celebrate Easter when the church in Rome did. "The churches of Asia Minor, however, led by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, refused to conform. Thereupon Victor excommunicated the recalcitrant congregations."²⁴

The church saw amazing expansion in the third century which caused changes in the organization of churches and to their relationship to one another and to the ministry. In the beginning all members in a city met in one place to celebrate the eucharist, but as numbers grew in the large cities like Rome, Antioch and Alexandria, they had to split up into more than one meeting place. Unity was maintained because the local bishop was the leader of all the groups. This growth saw the creation of other church offices. In addition to bishop, presbyter and deacon, sometimes there were lectors, widows, subdeacons, virgins, deaconesses, catechists, acolytes, exorcists, and doorkeepers. In some places presbyters grew in importance and acted as the bishop's representative in surrounding areas. The tendency, though, was to have one bishop for each gathering. In the province of Africa there were bishops in about 200 cities by the end of the third century.

Even though it was illegal for the church to own property, the church in Rome seems to have acquired its own cemeteries in the time of Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome from 199 to 217. The acquisition of property afforded a steady income for the work of the church. It also presented additional temptation and made some bishops rich.

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²⁴ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (fourth edition)

Early Church History

Section 7: Persecution

March 7, 2010

That Christians suffered persecution is well documented, but the persecutions could not have been too severe or the church would not have grown the way it did in the first 300 years. Since Rome viewed Christianity as just another Jewish sect in the beginning, most of the early persecution came from the Jews. By the time Christianity was seen as a separate religion it had grown to be a significant percentage of the population which made it difficult to eradicate.

The first persecutions came from the Jews. Not long after Pentecost a Hellenist Christian named Stephen was proclaiming things that the leaders of the Synagogue saw as blasphemy, so they brought him before the Sanhedrin charging him with this crime. However, the story as recorded in Acts does not say that he was found guilty of anything. It says that the members of the court got so upset with him that they drug him out of the city and stoned him to death. (I wonder how the Roman government felt about the Jews killing people that had not been tried in a Roman court?) We then see in Acts that the Jewish persecution of Christians continued in Jerusalem where it tells us that Saul was dragging people out of their homes and putting them in jail (Acts 8:1-13). It seems that this persecution by the Jews was against the Hellenistic Christians who believed that they no longer had to obey all of the Mosaic laws and not against the Palestinian Christians who continued following all the laws. The problem was not so much about this guy Jesus as it was about following Mosaic Law as interpreted by the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Jewish persecutions spread to other cities, we are told, when Saul of Tarsus got letters from the priests in Jerusalem that gave him permission to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. This was Jews punishing Jews.

As Rome set about conquering the world they realized that each city and country had their own special gods and religious practices. Not wanting to stir up more trouble than necessary, Rome allowed each area to continue worship in their own way as long as they also paid homage to the gods of Rome. When Christianity began, the Roman government did not care about and did not want to be bothered with any new religion. New religions were popping up all the time. The government was interested in maintaining peace and collecting taxes in conquered territories, not in forcing the people to change their religious beliefs. The emperors of the first century and later did not seem to be too concerned or interested in Christianity even though they believed it to be undesirable and punishable. Prosecution and punishment were left to local populations and governors and early persecutions were caused by local hostility rather than imperial edict.

The first we know of persecution by the imperial government in Roman was during the reign of Emperor Nero. There was a great fire in Rome in 64 AD that destroyed, or heavily damaged, ten of the fourteen districts in the city. Some in Rome thought that Nero had started the fires himself so he could rebuild the city the way he wanted it. This, of course, presented Nero with a problem he needed to solve. By the time of the fire the Christian population in Rome had grown quite large and therefore noticeable, and it was by now seen as a separate religion from Judaism. This presented Nero with a convenient scapegoat to use as a distraction from the devastation of the fire. Christians were different from everyone else and

they did not participate in the normal public gatherings and religious rituals. They had secret meetings and took special oaths. It was assumed by the majority of the population that because of this strange behavior they must be guilty of some crime. Whether Nero specifically blamed Christians, or just used them as a distraction, the end result was the same. He had them rounded up and put to death in gruesome ways to provide entertainment for the populace. The Roman historian Tacitus said, "those whom the populace called Christians, who were detested because of their shameful deeds" were put to death because of their "hatred of the human race." This persecution was local to the city of Rome, but was a harbinger of things to come.

To the Romans some religious practices seemed immoral and they felt that this upset their gods on whose good will the empire relied. They were suspicious of voluntary religious groups that practiced their rites in private, thinking that they took blood oaths pledged to crime. Any religion that offended the Roman gods or appeared to encourage conspiracy was considered illicit even though the government might not be actively suppressing it. Christians were a natural candidate for these suspicions because they met in private homes and would not worship the pagan gods or allow those who did worship pagan gods to be members.

Pliny the Younger, when governor of Bithynia (109-111 AD), wrote to Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD) asking what to do about these Christians who met before daylight, recited words to Christ as god and took an oath. He saw this as suspicious and tortured two servant girls who were deaconesses to find out what the truth was. In the end he reported, "I discovered nothing else than a perverse and extravagant superstition." He was certain they were guilty of some crime, but did not know whether to punish them for this crime or just for being called Christians. Trajan's response was that he also believed that the Christians were guilty of some crime, but they were not to be sought out. If one was caught he could be punished.

Trajan's successor, Hadrian (A.D. 117-138), had the same approach. He issued a rescript about 125 AD to the proconsul of Asia affirming that Christianity was an unauthorized religion, but his primary concern was that proper judicial procedures were followed in any trial so as to avoid punishment on false accusations or from anonymous accusers. Hadrian's rescript indicates that the Christian problem wasn't so much the threat the religion posed to the empire, it was the commotion it caused in local communities.

There was a persecution in Gaul in the towns of Lyons and Vienne in 177 AD that started with what Eusebius calls "an infuriated populace against its supposed enemies and foes." General consensus among modern historians is that the persecution in Lyons took place under Marcus Aurelius (161-180). It was under Marcus Aurelius that it was made legal to hunt Christians on account of them being a danger to the security of the state.²⁵ So, again, early persecution was not from the emperors who gave little thought to the "Christian problem," but from the local populace who mistrusted Christians, thought them to be atheists since they would not worship the gods, and believed them to be guilty of unspeakable crimes. However, the Christians did not blame the government or the emperors for the persecution, but Satan. They saw themselves as suffering as Christ did and the government as keeping things from being worse than they could have been. This was basically the case since the emperors

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septimius_Severus

ordered that trials be fair and by the law. It was the local people who caused the trouble and the local governors who gave in to them to keep the peace.

Also during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD in Carthage there were 12 believers from the town of Scillium in the province of Africa who were martyred.

The next Christian persecutions came during the reign of Septimius Severus (192-211). Severus allowed the enforcement of policies already long-established, which meant that Roman authorities did not intentionally seek out Christians, but when people were accused of being Christians they could either curse Jesus and make an offering to Roman gods, or be executed. Furthermore, wishing to strengthen the peace by encouraging religious harmony through syncretism, Severus tried to limit the spread of the two quarrelsome groups who refused to yield to syncretism by outlawing conversion to Christianity or Judaism. Individual officials availed themselves of the laws to proceed with rigor against the Christians. Naturally the emperor, with his strict conception of law, did not hinder such partial persecution, which took place in Egypt and the Thebaid, as well as in Africa Proconsularis and the East. Christian martyrs were numerous in Alexandria. No less severe were the persecutions in Africa, which seem to have begun in 197 or 198. Persecution again raged for a short time under the proconsul Scapula in 211, especially in Numidia and Mauritania. Later accounts of a Gallic persecution, especially at Lyon, are legendary. In general it may thus be said that the position of the Christians under Septimius Severus was the same as under the Antonines (138-161); but the law of this Emperor at least shows clearly that the rescript of Trajan had failed to execute its purpose. Under Septimius Severus persecution is evident and sometimes violent but always local and not on the scale that we see earlier and especially later.²⁶

During the greater part of the third century the church enjoyed peace despite some persecutions. Emperor Caracalla (211-217) let believers alone although Scapula, the proconsul of Africa (211-212), proceeded against Christians. Alexander Severus (222-235) practiced conscious tolerance and even employed a Christian scholar, Julius Africanus, to supervise construction of a library near the Pantheon. Emperor Philip the Arab (244-249) was known for his sympathy toward Christians, even though in 247 there was a celebration of the Roman gods which the Christians refused to take part in and the populace saw this as not supporting Rome and the gods that had watched over it.

Emperor Decius (249-251) overthrew Philip the Arab and instituted the first universal persecution of the church. His aim was restoration of Roman glory through a return to the virtues and the gods that had made Rome great in the past. By the time of Decius, the Christian community was no longer a small association of uneducated lower class citizens but had become a cross-section of Roman society including members on all levels of the social scale. Because of this, Christianity posed a much greater threat than in earlier years.

In early AD 250 Decius began by arresting leaders of the churches. Fabian, bishop of Rome, was executed; Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria went into hiding. In June he commanded that all citizens of the empire demonstrate their loyalty to the state gods and his divine reign through public sacrifice. He then set up sacrificial commissions in all cities and villages to supervise the execution of the sacrifices and to deliver written certificates to all citizens who performed the sacrifices. A citizen's refusal was regarded as a threat to the religious unity of the Roman Empire and a denial of the general

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septimius_Severus

goodwill to the sovereign. Consequently, any citizen who refused to perform the sacrifices was subject to arrest, imprisonment, and execution. Although it is debated whether or not this was a strategic attack against the Christian community, Decius' enforcement of the edict initiated the first general persecution of Christians in the empire's history. The persecution was brief because Decius was killed in battle in 251, but the effect of his persecution was catastrophic. Great masses of Christians sacrificed or bought certificates. The bishop of Smyrna, successor to the martyred Polycarp, apostatized, as did two North African bishops.

Decius was succeeded by Valerian (253-260), who in the last two years of his reign, renewed persecutions. Eusebius discusses the policy of Valerian toward the Christians and says that after initially treating them most positively, Valerian was persuaded by Macrianus, his military tribune, to lead another persecution against them. This time the decree specifically went after church leaders. First the clergy and then prominent laypersons were threatened with loss of property and privilege if they did not recant.

The persecution did not, however, significantly reduce the number of Christians. It did cause a rethinking of the understanding of the church. Many Christians were terrified and to avoid trial, punishment and possible death either sacrificed to the pagan gods or bought certificates saying they had. It seems that most of those who sacrificed to pagan gods and those who bought certificates sought readmission to the church later. This created a bit of a crisis for the church in what to do with these people. Bishops who followed Tertullian's belief did not readmit apostates to the church. However, many bishops in Africa did allow those who purchased certificates to rejoin if they performed a "long protracted" penance. This then brought into question the purity of the church. If you allowed those who lapsed to rejoin the church, did it dilute the purity of the church? This caused splits between churches that thought apostates should not be readmitted and those that thought that the confessors (bishops etc.) had the power to forgive.

Valerian was taken captive in a battle with the Persians in 260 and his son Gallienus (253-268), who had shared power with his father, became sole emperor. He revoked his father's edict of persecution, and for the next forty-four years the Christian churches enjoyed a period of respite from official persecution. Eusebius also credits Gallienus with reversing his father's policy and establishing peace with the Church, citing imperial edicts which established freedom of worship and even restored some lost property. This period of respite was not so much by a fundamental change of the attitude on the part of the imperial authorities as by the fact that they had little time to address the religious issue directly. The empire was in crisis and its survival was in doubt.

Emperor Diocletian (284-305) prosecuted the last major persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. Diocletian held the real power in Rome, but he had co-rulers to help him. Augustus (senior Roman Emperor) Maximianus (285-310) ruled over the western part of the empire aided by Caesar (junior Roman Emperor) Constantius, the father of Constantine I, while Augustus (senior Roman Emperor) Diocletian ruled over the eastern part of the empire aided by Caesar (junior Roman Emperor) Galerius. Diocletian had Christians in his household and his wife and his daughter were Christians, but in his late fifties, probably under the influence of Galerius, he issued an edict in 303 against Christianity which caused the most severe persecution since its beginnings.

Galerius' headquarters were at Nicomedia where he was influenced by Hierocles, governor of Bithynia and a Neoplatonist bitterly hostile to Christianity. Diocletian and Maximianus attended a solemn sacrifice in Nicomedia where the augers (prophet) found that they could not discern the usual signs on the livers of the sacrificial animals. Diocletian consulted the Oracle of Apollo and was told that false oracles were being caused by the Christians. On February 23, 303 the Christian cathedral opposite the imperial palace at Nicomedia was destroyed. The next day an edict was issued "to tear down the churches to the foundations and to destroy the Sacred Scriptures by fire; and commanding also that those who were in honorable stations should be degraded if they persevered in their adherence to Christianity."²⁷ Three further edicts (303-304) marked successive stages in the severity of the persecution: the first ordering that the bishops, presbyters, and deacons should be imprisoned; the second that they should be tortured and compelled by every means to sacrifice; the third included the laity as well as the clergy. The atrocious cruelty with which these edicts were enforced, and the vast numbers of those who suffered for the Faith, are attested by Eusebius and the Acts of the Martyrs.²⁸ It was not until 304 that all citizens were required to sacrifice on pain of death. This persecution was empire wide but was especially bad in the east where the greatest numbers of Christians were. The death penalty was used as a last resort but torture was used freely to get people to recant and thus caused the death of many. It was reported that in Asia Minor a Christian town was surrounded by soldiers and burned, together with its inhabitants. The first edict was carried out empire wide, but the rest were mostly in the east. In Gaul, Britain and Spain Constantius did not execute anyone and only destroyed a few churches. When Constantius died at York on 25 July 306, the soldiers proclaimed his son, Constantine, emperor.

Diocletian did not want a blood bath, but in 304 he retired from public life and the fanatics took over. Now Galerius and Maximianus went after Christians with a vengeance and a blood bath took place and continued for seven more years. On his death bed, and in terrible pain, Galerius issued an edict on 30 April 311 stating that he had tried to persuade the Christians to return to the religion of their forefathers, but 'very many had persisted in their determination,' and he now granted them toleration and the right to assemble in return for prayer for his health and for the defense of the state.

Galerius death did not end the persecution, though, and it continued until Constantine, emperor of the west, and Licinius, emperor of the east, signed a proclamation in February 313 giving religious freedom to all.

An interesting thing I found in my reading was that Christians were also persecuted by the Persians at times. In Mesopotamia, on the debated border between the Roman and Persian Empires, Christianity had its chief hold among the Syriac-using population. Christianity made some headway among the Persians, but the state cult of Zoroastrianism did not show the weakness of Roman paganism and proved more resistant. In the first half of the third century a dynastic revolution brought the Sassanids to the throne which was accompanied by a revival of nationalism and Zoroastrianism and some persecution of Christians. Under the rule of Sapor II (310-379) persecution was especially severe. However, the persecution by the Persians more or less followed the political relations between Rome and Persia.

²⁷ Eusebius, op. cit., VIII, ii.

²⁸ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05007b.htm>

Persecution of Christians was sporadic and mostly local until the reign of Diocletian. Otherwise it may have been difficult for Christianity to grow the way it did. By the time Diocletian began his persecutions the church had grown so large it may not have been possible to destroy it. Also, the rulers in the western part of the empire did not participate like those in the east did. With the conversion of Constantine I and his subsequent acquisition of control over the entire empire, persecution by the Roman Empire came to an end.



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Early Church History

Section 8: Constantine

March 14, 2010

By the time Constantine I gained power over the Roman Empire, Christianity, even though still a minority, had grown into a large, empire wide, well organized body that had penetrated into all levels of society. Even though the church was already well established, Constantine's influence had a major and lasting impact.

During the middle of the third century the Roman Empire faced many problems and its very existence was in danger. In the east the Persians were determined to retake the territory they lost, first to the Greeks and then to the Romans and in the west the Goths were changing from small groups of barbarians raiding villages to a well organized force requiring the deployment of the Roman armies to keep them under control. This forced the emperor to fight battles on two fronts at the same time which proved to be too large a task for one man. When Diocletian came to power he divided the empire into four areas, each ruled by an emperor. The eastern and western parts of the empire each had an Augustus with a Caesar reporting them. Each of the four emperors then had his own army and was responsible for defense of his territory.

After Diocletian had Rome's enemies under control, he was persuaded in 303 to issue an edict of persecution against Christianity. However, the Caesar in charge of Britain, Spain and Gaul was Constantius, the father of Constantine I, who had always had a policy of tolerance toward Christians and did not vigorously enforce Diocletian's edict. While the Christians in the east were being devastated by persecution under Diocletian, Christians in the west enjoyed relative peace due to the attitude of Constantius.

Diocletian decided, because of bad health, to abdicate in 305 and forced the abdication of Maximian, the Augustus in the west, Constantius then became Augustus of the west and Galerius, an ardent pagan and hater of Christians, became Augustus of the east.

Constantius did not reign for long and in 306 he died in York. His troops declared his son Constantine to be the new Augustus, but Galerius did not like this and appointed his friend Severus as Augustus of the west. There were, of course, power struggles and by the time the dust settled there were six emperors ruling various parts of the empire. This was a situation which was obviously not going to last. By 311 Maxentius was in control of Italy and North Africa, Galerius was Augustus of the east and Constantine was Caesar in control of Britain, Spain and Gaul. Maxentius declared himself Augustus of the west and Galerius attempted to overthrow him but failed to do so. This forced Constantine to move against Maxentius. Constantine in a surprise move brought one quarter of his army over the Alps and won two battles against the forces of Maxentius before approaching Rome. Maxentius had the larger force and fortified himself and his troops inside the city, but the population was against him and he was forced to move his troops to the Milvian Bridge across

the Tiber. Constantine knew that Maxentius was relying on the magic of the pagan gods to win the battle and Constantine needed his own supernatural help. On the eve of the battle Constantine had a vision which years later he told to his friend Eusebius the bishop of Caesarea. He said that at noon on the eve of the battle he was praying and had a vision in which he saw a cross of light inscribed with the words, "Conquer by this." That night he saw a vision from God telling him to make a likeness of this and use it as a safeguard against his enemies. Constantine took a spear, overlaid it with gold and put a cross on it with a monogram of the letters Chi and Rho, the first two Greek letters in Christ, "Χριστός." He then had this symbol painted on the shields of his soldiers. On October 28, 312 the battle took place and even though outnumbered Constantine's troops won the battle. Constantine was now the sole emperor of the western empire and he gave the credit to the Christian God. When he triumphantly entered the city of Rome he did not perform the usual tribute to the pagan gods.



In the east the power struggle was between Licinius and Maximinus Daia. When Constantine gained control of all of the west the pressure was on for someone to become the sole ruler of the east to offset Constantine's power. Licinius set out to make a pact with Constantine so they met in Milan in February 313 where both signed an agreement of toleration of Christians (although it did not establish it as a state religion), called the Edict of Milan, and Licinius married Constantine's half sister to cement the relationship between the two Augusti. Licinius then moved against Maximinus and despite their highly superior numbers, Maximinus troops were defeated at Campus Serenus, near Hadrianopolis, on 30 April 313. What is worth noting is that, on this occasion, Licinius' forces fought under a Christian banner just as Constantine's had done at the Milvian Bridge. This was due to his acceptance of Constantine as the senior Augustus and his subsequent acceptance of Constantine's championship of Christianity.

Constantine did not really become a devout Christian and retained the title as head of the Roman pagan religion. He did issue coins with the Chi-Rho symbol on them, but he also had coins with the likeness of "Sol Invictus" the sun god. He also did not issue any edicts to discourage pagan worship. It seems that he saw Christianity as being similar to the worship of the sun god since both worshiped a single deity who was the sole creator and ruler of the cosmos. He did, however, get involved in the politics of the church early on.



A church schism in the west occurred when a bishop, Caecilian, was ordained in Carthage in 311. Some clergy had a problem with the ordination because one of the bishops who participated had given up sacred books during the persecution under Diocletian and was seen as an apostate. They agreed with the view of Cyprian that the Holy Spirit could not be given in a church whose bishop was not worthy of the office because of apostasy or some great sin, so the dissenters ordained their own bishop. This was condemned by the church in general, but the protestors persisted. The rebels ended up appealing to Constantine for a hearing and they chose Donatus to plead their case. In response to the Donatist problem Constantine began a procedure that became imperial policy for ecclesiastical matters. He set up a council headed by the bishop of Rome who was to sit with 3 other bishops at court. If this did not resolve the conflict, a second and larger council was to be held. For the Donatist problem, a council was held in 314 in Arles in Gaul and the council found against the Donatists saying that the purity of the ordaining bishop did not matter. This did not really resolve the problem but the procedure became the standard for handling these things.

As time passed tension grew between Licinius in the east and Constantine in the west. There were battles between them over the years and in 324 Constantine defeated Licinius to become ruler of the entire empire.

What all emperors wanted was peace and for people to pay their taxes, but what Constantine found when he took control in the east was that the churches of the entire realm were split over the theological issue of the Logos-theology. This was a schism of greater magnitude than the Donatist problem he had dealt with in the west. Constantine was not a great theologian or philosopher, but that is exactly the kind of problem he was faced with.

A presbyter named Arius who oversaw Baucalis, a suburban parish of Alexandria, believed that Christ did not exist from the beginning with God,

but was created by God. He saw Christ as separate from God the Father and called into being by God "out of nonexistence." Christ was then capable of either virtue or vice, just as human beings were. Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria heard Arius's views in a debate and said he was wrong and told him to quit saying these things. Bishop Alexander said that Christ was not created from nothingness but had always existed from the beginning with God. Arius said that Alexander was teaching two coequal gods, two unbegottens. Arius had supporters and did not stop, but in about 320 Alexander had him deposed by a council of 100 or so Egyptian bishops. Arius fled to Palestine where he found sympathetic ears including those of Eusebius of Nicomedia, and he published a book, *Thalia*, explaining his views. By the time Constantine got involved in 324 things had deteriorated to open hostility and churches had taken sides.

Constantine had spent a long and arduous time bringing the empire under his control and he did not want a disruption of the empire or the Catholic Church which by now was the strongest institution in the Mediterranean world. He wrote to Arius and Alexander and asked them to solve their differences, but it did not work. In his letter to the two warring parties he said that having made "careful inquiry into the origin and foundation of these differences" he found "the cause to be of truly insignificant character and quite unworthy of such fierce contention," and that discussions should be "intended merely as an intellectual exercise ... and not hastily produced in the popular assemblies, nor unadvisedly entrusted to the general ear." Constantine just did not see this as such a big deal. This was probably the feeling of the average church member as reflected in a letter from one who had suffered persecution. He "bluntly told the debaters that Christ did not 'teach us dialectics, art, or vain subtitles, but simple-mindedness, which is preserved by faith and good works.'"

Constantine called for a council, over which he presided, of the entire Catholic Church and had the government pay for travel expenses. The council was held in May of 325 and of the 200-300 bishops who attended only 6 were from the west. There were also hundreds of other clergy and lay people in attendance. (It was reported that there was also a bishop from Persia and one from the Goths.) Most of those in attendance were conservative and were not predisposed to one argument or the other, but the two opposing sides each had a small group of ardent and vocal supporters.

Constantine opened the council and allowed both sides to present their arguments. The council rejected the Arian confession. In an effort to bring the two sides together Eusebius of Caesarea suggested that they adopt the creed which was used in Caesarea for new converts before baptism.

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ the word [Logos] of God, God from God, light from light, life from life, the only-begotten Son, first-born of all creatures, begotten of the Father before all ages, by whom also all things were made; who for our salvation was made flesh and dwelt among men; and who suffered and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the Father and shall come again

in glory to judge the living and the dead. We believe also in one Holy Spirit."

The council, and Constantine, agreed that it was orthodox even though it did not specifically reject the Arian philosophy. The creed was modified to add the word homoousion and to specifically exclude Arian thought. They excluded the idea of the Logos as creature and asserted him as truly the eternally generated "Son" of God.

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance [ousias²⁹] of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousion³⁰] with the Father, through whom all things came to be, those things that are in heaven and those things that are on earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down and made flesh, and was made man, suffered, rose the third day, ascended into the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead."

Eusebius of Caesarea doubted the use of the word homoousios because it could take on a wide variety of meanings. It could mean either exact sameness or it could mean significant degree of similarity. It was not a biblical term. He was assured that it meant "the Son bears no likeness to generated creatures, but is likened in every respect solely to the Father who begat him, and that he is not from some other reality and substance, but from the Father."

The result of the council was a very clear repudiation of Arius' view. They made it clear that Christ was here from the beginning and was the same as God. After the council Constantine ordered the burning of all books composed by Arius and banished him and his followers on punishment of death for disobedience. All the bishops except two signed the new creed including Eusebius of Nicomedia, a staunch supporter of the Arian school of thought. In the end, though, Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia were restored to communion with the church. Eusebius even attained a position of power as Constantine's principle ecclesiastical councilor and exacted revenge on those who opposed him at Nicaea. This creed is the basis for what today we know as the Nicene Creed and which is the confession of faith that defined the Christian faith.

The council dealt with other issues too. They defined a formal church structure where the bishop of the provincial capital had veto power over provincial synods of bishops. It also recognized an exceptional jurisdiction, more extensive than the territory of a province, for the bishops of Alexandria, Rome and Antioch - a first step toward the acknowledgment of patriarchal sees. They also agreed on the date to celebrate Easter.

²⁹ ousias : Greek, substance, entity, being, essence, nature

³⁰ Homoousion (Gk., 'of one substance'). The word in the Nicene Creed to express the relation in the one Godhead of the Father and Son. It was accepted as an anti-Arian formula at the Council of Nicaea at the urging of the emperor, although many bishops preferred the looser term homoiousion, 'of like substance'. Thus its sense may have been broadly 'of the same nature', rather than 'of the identical substance' as later theology took it.

This council set a precedent where the civil authorities were involved in church councils. It also set the precedent of having councils of the whole church to resolve issues where before there had been only local or regional councils.

Constantine built churches and issued edicts in favor of Christians.

- He legislated against gladiatorial combats
- against immorality
- against the separation by sale of a slave and his wife
- against infanticide
- against the selling of children into slavery
- against prostitution
- against immoral religious rites
- against the ancient right of a father to kill his child
- He issued edicts on behalf of widows, orphans, and the poor.

Constantine ordered the governor of the province of Africa to exempt the clergy of the "catholic church" from civic obligations in order that they might devote their full time to the service of God and thus "confer incalculable benefit on public affairs." This caused a flood of people to join the Christian clergy to avoid the heavy taxes, so Constantine had to modify this exemption to limit the number of clergy.

Constantine gave gifts of money to the church and constructed basilicas at his own expense. In 321 he issued a decree allowing churches to receive legacies, thus giving them the legal status of corporations. He also legislated Sunday, the Christian first day, as a day free from work. He allowed parties in civil suits to take their case before the court of the bishop, if they both agreed to do so, and the bishop's judgment had the force of law.

Constantine died in 337 and was baptized on his death bed by Eusebius of Nicomedia. His actions have had a dramatic and lasting impact on Christianity.

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