

How did a group of 3,000 who were baptized at Pentecost become almost one-third of the world population today? That is a long, fascinating story; one that people study for years in school and college, but what is presented here is a whirlwind tour of Church history to condense a millennium into a digestible summary. History books divide church history in many ways, but this essay divides history into four time frames:

AD 1-100: The Apostolic Church

AD 101-300: The Persecuted Church

AD 301-600: The Roman Church

AD 601-1054: The Medieval Church

1-100 AD: The Apostolic Church

The Apostolic Church was the community led by the [apostles](#), the relatives of Jesus, and other believers who had firsthand experience of Jesus' life and that of His disciples. The teachings of the apostles brought the early Church into conflict with some Jewish religious authorities. This frequently led to their expulsion from the [synagogues](#) and gradually, Christianity acquired an identity distinct from [Rabbinic Judaism](#). Even though Paul was a Roman citizen and wrote that believers must respect the governing authorities, he was arrested as a troublemaker and sent to Rome to stand trial around 60 A.D., the outcome of which is not recorded in Scripture or in the historical records. The Book of Acts and the Epistles take us up to 63 A.D., and it was not long after that when the Roman government noticed how Christians were beginning to affect the culture of the empire.

Church and Society: Congregations established a hierarchy of leadership consisting of overseers known as bishops, elders, and deacons. Early bishops included Peter, James, and their disciples Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement. The bishops preserved the unchanged teachings of the apostles with obedience to the teachings of Jesus. The elders and deacons oversaw matters of faith and practice. They encouraged unconditional love of fellow believers, and separation from the world in which they lived. Slaves, women, children, and disabled people were treated with respect. Personal wealth, which was a measure of status in Roman society, was considered irrelevant to the Christians, and many of them used their wealth to support the Church. Christians chose not to participate in festivals honoring Roman gods or other events in the life of their communities.

Eventually this caused problems between family members, neighbors and the government. In Acts chapter 19, during Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus during his third journey, the local economy was impacted when Christians refrained from honoring the goddess Artemis, whose temple was one of the ancient wonders of the world and a great tourist attraction. This caused a riot and Paul was quickly whisked from the city under cover to save his life.

The Roman government at first relegated the solving of these problems to the Jewish religious leaders; however, eventually the government began to see the impact of the Christians on the Roman way of life. The high moral standards of the Christians reproached the pagan lifestyle. Sometimes emancipated slaves were appointed as

deacons or elders rising to positions of authority which was unacceptable in Roman culture. The Christian rites and ceremonies were misunderstood by the outside world. Eventually religious disputes caused problems within society at large.

Persecution Begins: Because the Christians would not worship Roman gods, they were blamed for natural disasters or a defeat in battle. Christians at first were merely subject to discrimination, but eventually they came under government persecution in the early 60's. Emperor Nero's plan to rebuild the city of Rome began with a fire that burned large sections of the city in 64 AD. When Nero placed the blame for the fire on the Christians, few people complained when they were unfairly punished for the deed. Christians became spectacles when they were covered with skins of beasts and torn apart by dogs, or crucified, or burned as human torches, or sawed in half. It was during this time of persecution that both Peter and Paul are believed to have been executed. Although the persecutions subsided after Nero, they were periodically re-instated until the end of the century depending on the whim of the local leaders.

Outside of Rome, the military forces were busy with a Jewish revolt in Galilee and Judea. By September 8, 70 A.D., all of Jerusalem was completely conquered. The Jewish Temple was so completely destroyed that only the foundation stones of the retaining wall of the Temple Mount were left. It still stands today as the Wailing Wall. This ended any form of temple-based Christianity. Historian Josephus recorded that over a million Jews were killed in the siege. According to historian Eusebius, Romans hunted down and killed all descendants of the royal line of David. The Romans exiled Jews and Christians from Israel and sent them to other lands. In his attempt to completely erase Jewish history from the land, the Emperor Hadrian changed the name of Judea to "Syria Palestina." Nevertheless, the believing Church continued to grow as the first apostles and their followers died out by the end of the first century.

Progress of Early Church: By the year 100 A.D., there were church congregations in every city that Paul had visited on his missionary journeys. Much of the New Testament writings had been circulating, and The Didache (or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) had been written and distributed to the house church congregations. It served as a guide to church order and was based on the words of Jesus and much of Paul's writings. The Church's foundation was secure, and it continued to grow despite opposition. How bad was the opposition? Roman Emperor Tacitus established new laws stating that anyone who admitted to being a Christian must be killed. It looked like the enemy might succeed in wiping out the Body of Christ.

100-300 AD: The Persecuted Church

With the death of the apostle John at the end of the first century, there was no more firsthand information about Jesus. The church entered its post-apostolic era. Early church leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, and Polycarp of Asia, were personal disciples of the original apostles and they all left writings that help us understand the post-apostolic Church. The "memoirs of the apostles," which became known as the Gospels, were regarded as highly as the Old Testament. The Gospels,

the Septuagint texts, and some apocryphal writings were read as Scripture in Church meetings. The Septuagint was the first translation made of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. It was begun over two hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ and was in widespread use among the Jewish community during Paul's lifetime. Here are some developments that took place during this time period:

Buildings: The first church buildings were meeting places in the Jewish synagogues, with smaller groups meeting in the homes of believers who had larger houses which could accommodate groups. Later when the Church completely split from the Jewish faith, early Christians met in public meeting spaces, such as pagan temples, libraries, or warehouses. As a persecuted minority, they could erect no public buildings but managed to find ways to meet for weekly services and celebrations . . . all without social media! Despite the lack of a permanent space for gatherings, the early Christians had the sense of being one Church and were diligent in bringing others into the faith.

Worship Meetings: The Church fathers developed an order of worship based on their Jewish traditions. Meetings consisted of singing, preaching from a church leader, and the agape meal, also known as a love feast. It served not only to celebrate the Last Supper meal with communion, but as a way to share fellowship among believers. Eventually, due to abuses and the inconvenience associated with feeding large numbers of people, the churches separated the agape meal from the worship services and established Communion as part of the order of worship. This became known as the liturgy. Those outside the Church misunderstood nature of Christian worship. Words like "love feast" and "eating Christ's flesh" sounded understandably suspicious to the pagans, and they accused Christians of orgies and cannibalism.

Clergy: A hierarchy of clergy began to develop within different congregations. Each church was independent with a bishop, who was responsible before God for the welfare of the Church. The bishop was appointed to preach and teach the congregation if he could trace his succession from one of the original apostles or disciples. Elders were also experts in the faith and in doctrine and could teach when needed. The deacons oversaw the daily running of the organization, and they would often lead the worship.

Eventually there were hundreds of bishops each with oversight of individual congregations. Occasionally, bishops moved away from the original teachings and began to teach heresies, which caused controversy within and between congregations. As the church grew and heresies continued to rise and cause division, many decided to ordain the leaders to assure trustworthiness. The ordained leaders were given the title of "priest" since they also prepared the bread and wine of communion as an offering from the people.

Beliefs: The beliefs of the early church were based upon a literal interpretation of the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament; however, Christianity of the early church days was relationship centered. The essence of early Christianity was an obedient love-faith relationship with Christ and agape love for each other. At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire church as it did in

the first three centuries. And Roman society took note and would exclaim, "See how they love one another!"

The love of the early Christians wasn't limited simply to their fellow believers. Christians also lovingly helped non-believers: the poor, the orphans, the elderly, the sick, the shipwrecked—even their persecutors. When a devastating plague swept across the ancient world in the third century, Christians were the only ones who cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves. Meanwhile, pagans were throwing infected members of their own families into the streets even before they died, to protect themselves from the disease. It's no wonder that Christianity spread rapidly throughout the ancient world. The love they practiced drew the attention of the world, just as Jesus said it would.

Persecution Intensifies: The supreme example of the early Christians' absolute trust in God was their acceptance of persecution. From around 100 to 300 A.D., Christianity was illegal within the boundaries of the Roman Empire; a crime punishable by death. Hatred of Christians arose from the belief that proper "piety" to the Roman gods helped to sustain the well-being of the cities and their people. The Romans believed that bad things would happen if the gods are not respected and worshiped properly. Christians in some towns suffered horrible tortures and death, while Christians in a nearby area would be untouched if the governing authorities were more sympathetic. It was unpredictable, but every Christian lived daily with a death sentence hanging over his head.

An unknown author, writing in about 130, describes Christians to the Romans as follows: "They dwell in their own countries simply as sojourners . . . They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and, at the same time, they surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death but restored to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich. They possess few things; yet they abound in all. They are dishonored, but in their very dishonor are glorified . . . And those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred." That is far cry from the description of Christians given today by non-believers!

Justin Martyr explained to the Romans, "Since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men put us to death. Death is a debt we must all pay anyway."

300-600 A.D: The Roman Church

The tide of Christian popularity began to change in 301 A.D., when the Kingdom of Armenia became the first state to declare Christianity as its official religion. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the world's oldest national church. It was the first of many others to come. However, before that took place in Rome, there was one last effort to destroy the Church under the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284-305).

By this time, Christians were considered unpatriotic because they refused to follow the laws governing worship to Roman gods. The Peace of Rome, which had

brought so much prosperity to the empire, began to erode as leaders became corrupt, invaders overran the borders, the economy spiraled out of control, and political leaders were assassinated one after the other. The emperor blamed the empire's problems on the growth of Christianity and ordered "The Great Persecution" intending to wipe out the Church. It lasted until 311 and failed as many were inspired by the faith of the believers as they faced death.

As Origen, an early theologian, had earlier told the Romans, "Eventually, every form of worship will be destroyed except the religion of Christ, which alone will stand. In fact, it will one day triumph, for its teachings take hold of men's minds more and more each day." Those words turned out to be prophetic as Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean Basin and would soon change the culture of the Roman world.

Division and turmoil in the Roman Empire caused a struggle for power and the leader who eventually conquered his rivals was Constantine, whose mother Helena was a devout Christian. At the time, less than 10% of the population was Christian, but with Constantine's support, Christianity eventually became the dominant religion in the Roman world. He issued the Edit of Milan in 313, which allowed freedom of religion and ended government persecution of Christians. This notion of religious liberty eventually spread throughout many parts of the world. Millions of new members poured into the Church as becoming a Christian became socially and politically correct.

With the new wave of converts, came an era of church building and government support for the Church leaders. Bishops with authority over churches now took on leadership roles in the communities for which they were paid. Bishops of large cities often helped to resolve conflicts in smaller towns. The bishop of the largest city, Rome, was first referred to as the "pope" around 366. With the influx of new congregants who were not raised in the ways of the Church, differing church standards of belief and heresies arose.

The emperor saw the quarrels within the church not only as a threat to Christianity, but as a threat to society as well. Since the failing Roman Empire was now under Constantine's rule, he felt "called" to use his authority to help bring about unity, peace, and love within the church, and thus save the Empire from ruin. His response was to call for a meeting of bishops to be held in Nicaea (modern day Turkey) in order to resolve escalating controversies among the church leadership throughout the empire. The issues included the nature of Jesus Christ, the proper date to celebrate Easter, and other matters of church practice. At the Council of Nicaea, Constantine encouraged the 300 bishops to settle their internal disagreements and become Christ-like agents who could bring new life to a troubled empire. The Council of Nicaea overwhelmingly affirmed the deity and eternality of Jesus Christ and established as doctrine the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as three co-equal and co-eternal Persons. The council developed the Nicene Creed, a statement of doctrine which was upheld by the church and enforced by the emperor. The Nicene Creed is still used in many churches today as a statement of faith. Those bishops who did not agree with the Creed were excommunicated and split from the Roman church. Many of them led the Arian movement into some of the so-called cults of today, which differ on their view of Christ's divinity.

The Council of Nicaea set the precedent for a number of subsequent ecumenical councils to establish doctrinal orthodoxy and unity within the Church. In A.D. 363, the Council of Laodicea determined the Books of the New Testament and in 391, Jerome's Latin translation (the Vulgate) of the Bible was approved. The Council of Hippo in 393 approved a [Christian Biblical canon](#) that was later affirmed at the [Council of Carthage](#) in 397.

In addition to his support of Christianity, Constantine attempted to slow the decline of the Roman Empire by re-organizing the government. He divided the empire into two parts to make it easier to govern. He selected the city of Byzantium for the new capital, re-built it to look like Rome, and named it Constantinople. It soon became an important center of learning and the capital of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church. After Constantine's death, Rome declined as a political center and the Bishop of Rome's authority as pope became more influential. Soon after, Christianity was made the state religion in 381.

Now with the tables turned, all Roman citizens were pressured to convert to Christianity. At the same time, barbarians from the north and east invaded many towns and had set up their own government systems. Gradually the Roman leaders lost control of their territories and were unable to defend themselves when the Visigoths invaded Rome in 410. Many of the invading tribes, the Goths, the Vandals, the Franks became Christian and abandoned their pagan gods. Thus, as the political power of the Roman Empire declined, Christianity grew stronger.

When Pope Leo I negotiated a peace treaty with Attila the Hun in 452, saving the city of Rome from destruction at that time, his leadership became more respected than that of the emperor. The Empire had been in crisis since its invasion in 410, but finally in 476, the last Roman emperor was forced out of the city and much of Rome destroyed. Many people blamed the destruction of Rome on the rise of Christianity, whose God, they said, had not protected the Roman Empire. In response, Augustine wrote the *City of God*, showing that the true movement of history was the unseen conflict between sin and salvation; between the city of man and the kingdom of God. It remains an important document even today.

After the fall of Rome, the Western Roman Empire entered an era called the Dark Ages. Throughout Europe, while economies collapsed and schools disappeared; people became dependent on Church leaders for inspiration and direction. Several developments took place:

1. A hierarchy of Church leaders was formalized. As a reflection of their increased standing in the Empire, clergy began to adopt the dress of the royal household distinguishing them from the lay people. Religious orders of priests, nuns, and monks were established to educate the clergy.
2. Monasteries were built. They became major storehouses of civilization, preserving craft and artistic skills while maintaining intellectual culture within their schools and libraries. They functioned as agricultural, economic and production centers as well as a focus for spiritual life.

3. Church buildings became monumental in both the Western and Eastern empires; with the most elaborate being the Church of Holy Wisdom, the Hagia Sophia, in Constantinople in 532.

4. The calendar was codified. Around 550, a monk in Rome established a modern system of dating which established the birth of Christ as the centerpiece with the year zero. All events after Christ were now catalogued as “Anno Domini” in the year of our Lord.

5. Missionary activity expanded. The western part of the former Roman Empire came under missionary zeal; Patrick claimed a call to evangelize Ireland; Pope Gregory sent missionaries to convert the Anglo-Saxons in England; and King Clovis of the Franks conquered half of France and established it as a Christian nation.

6. Beliefs and Practice changed. The liturgical calendar was put into place, the cult of martyrs and relics from the catacombs became popular, and the glorification of the Virgin Mary became mainstream. As diverse cultures came into the Church, parts of pagan spirituality and magic became acceptable, and incense was introduced into the church services. By the end of the 500's, Pope Gregory the Great put the order of the Mass in the same format which would remain for over 1400 years.

7. Mohammed was born in 570 and founded the religion of Islam. His religion would challenge the church as never before.

600-1000 A.D: The Medieval Church

By this time, the Roman Catholic Church was firmly established throughout Europe, and it dominated the lives of the people. Rich and poor alike were convinced that the only way to heaven, and avoid the terrors of hell, was by following Church laws and traditions. Everyone attended church where they were regularly informed of the horrors of hell each time they sinned.

Peasants and others worked on church land for free or paid a 10% tithe. Everyone paid for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and burials on church grounds, thus making the Church very wealthy. They followed the church calendar with fasting and attendance at Mass, celebrated holy days, and participated in the sacraments. Church bells called people to worship in each town, and organs began to be used for church music.

Meanwhile, the followers of Mohammed began invading the Middle East. They invaded Jerusalem in 638 and the Greek Orthodox patriarch was forced to surrender the city to the Muslims. Fortunately, at that time, they left the Christian holy sites intact. However, this was not the case in other lands. In less than 100 years after Mohammed's death in 632 A.D, Islam had supplanted Christianity in northern Africa and had invaded Spain. As the Islamic forces were about to cross the Pyrenees Mountains into France, they were finally stopped by military leader Charles Martel of France. His decisive victory in 732 at the Battle of Tours is considered to have saved Europe for Christianity.

The grandson of Charles Martel inherited the royal throne of France in 768. His name was Charlemagne and during his 48 years of rule, he dominated much of Europe and converted all his defeated opponents into the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope

made Charlemagne the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 800 and fulfilled a dream of establishing a kingdom with a Christian king.

At that time, few people could read the Scriptures in Latin, so Charlemagne hired scholars to teach Latin to the clergy so that they could read the Vulgate version of the Bible. He encouraged the clergy to properly teach the people the tenants of the faith. He encouraged the building of monasteries as centers of learning and repositories of sacred writings and scriptures. He tried to eliminate corruption in the church and organized church services so that they were consistent throughout the Empire. Charlemagne's reign was known as the Carolingian Renaissance and was important in preserving the literature of the Middle Ages.

After the death of Charlemagne, weak leaders were unable to adequately defend the empire from the repeated attack from Islamic forces, and the Church began a period of decline. As the year 1000 approached, the people feared for their future. They looked for the end of the world and the return of the Lord. To encourage high moral behavior and religious devotion, the Church developed criteria for naming Christian heroes as Saints and began to officially canonize them.

As we know, the world did not end after the first millennium and the Lord did not return. What happened next is the subject of the next essay. Our tour though the first thousand years of Church history ends in 1054 with a major split in Church unity. The Eastern and Western Roman Empires, divided in the days of Constantine, had developed wide rifts that could not be resolved. Both the patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople considered themselves the true descendants of St. Peter. Their divided loyalties had resulted in centuries of conflict over issues of Papal control, which language to use for liturgies, and doctrinal issues regarding Communion, the Holy Spirit and the canonization of saints.

The Roman church had implemented the use of religious pictures, statues and images in their churches. The Iconoclasts objected to [icon](#) worship because of the possibility of idolatry. The defenders of icon worship insisted on the symbolic nature of images and on the dignity of created matter. The two churches divided over the issue, called iconoclasm, at the second Council of Nicaea in 787 when the Roman Bishops voted in favor of using icons and statues in church practice. Although icons were restored to the Eastern Orthodox Church in 842 and are still very popular today, the other unresolved conflicts resulted in the Great Schism of 1054, when the two empires split permanently into the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Eastern Orthodox Church no longer recognized the Pope of Rome as its authority, but maintains its universality with the true Body of Christ established under the leadership of the first apostles. The Eastern Orthodox Church consists of three additional sections each with distinctive cultural traditions: the Greek Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church and they maintain a shared leadership over Catholicism in their respective areas to this day. In many areas of the Middle East, they are under intense persecution today as they live out their faith in the homelands.

The cultural differences between the Latin West and the Greek East were substantial, but a formal division finally occurred when the two popes' representatives mutually excommunicated the others.

Church History: to 1000 AD

Laurel Ann Porro

Revised June 2026

We'll continue with the next thousand years of Church History in April. Until then, we wish you a blessed Christmas as we celebrate the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.