

A Brief History of the Apostolic Fathers, Church History, and the Spread of Christianity in the Western Hemisphere

Compiled by Hannah Abcede for personal study and ministry resource purposes. For questions or concerns, please contact me via the email on Cru's Outreach website (*Magnify*).

The Apostolic Fathers

Influenced the generation of Christians coming right after the apostles

- Polycarp [trained by Apostle John]
 - 2-office view: Bishop/Presbyter (elder), Deacon
 - Emphasis on avoiding false teaching like Ignatius
 - Accused of being atheist because he didn't believe in the Roman gods
 - Death: Bound and burned at the stake, then stabbed to ensure his death
- Ignatius of Antioch [trained by Apostle Peter]
 - 3 office view: Bishop, Elder / Presbyter, Deacon
 - Emphasized on obeying to church authority since many heretics were against it
 - Claims the real presence of Christ in communion
 - Claims the writings of the apostles (New Testament) are greater than his own authority as a Bishop
 - "I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant." – Epistle to Romans Chapter 4
 - Be willing to die for the faith and was looking forward to dying for the faith – He did die for the faith
- Clement of Rome [trained by Apostle Paul]
 - Leader of the church in Rome, shortly after
 - Wrote a letter to the Corinthians, correcting them of their behavior like apostle Paul did
 - Identified in Philippians 4:3
 - 'Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. ' Philippians 4:3

Ante-Nicene Fathers

Lived before Constantine and Imperial Christianity and the Council of Nicea

- Tertullian
 - Skeptical of greek philosophy and theology

- Helped the church develop the idea of the Trinity, other church Fathers believed in the Trinity but Tertullian was the first to use the term Trinity.
- Premillennial and was against infant baptism (so he was a credobaptist), as he believes that baptism washes away sins, so we should wait as long as we can to be baptised
- Believed in apostolic succession
- Iconoclasm (no icons of Jesus)
- Ireneus
 - Lots of writings against heretics, especially against gnostics
- Justin Martyr – A Christian apologist
 - Uncertain whether he believes the son was personal before the incarnation
- Clement of Alexandria
 - Church fathers debated whether Greek philosophy should be used in Theology. Clement of Alexandria was most in favor
 - A big fan of plato
 - Taught universalism which is that everyone is going to be saved and have eternal life in the end
 - Against sacred imagery

Constantine

- He makes Christianity the state religion and unites all the churches; this is called the Council of Nicea

The Council of Nicea

- Athanasius was in the council of Nicea and defended it because arianism kept showing
- Athanasius
 - Greatest defender of trinitarian orthodoxy; that's why the Athanasian creed which talks about the trinity is named after him
 - Filioque? (western): "the spirit has the same relation of nature and order with respect to the Son as the Son has with respect to the Father" – Athanasius, letter to Serapion
 - Theosis? (Eastern): "God became man so that man might become God" – Athanasius, Discourses
 - Criticism received: Cappadocian Fathers didn't think he talked about the Holy Spirit as being distinct enough

The Cappadocian Fathers

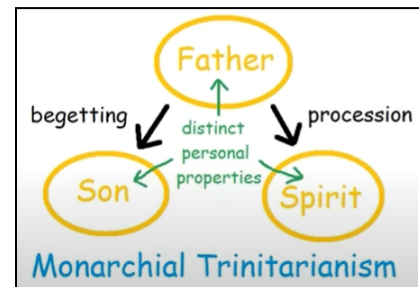
Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus

- The cappadocian fathers came after Nicea and Constantine
- Seen as the founders of Eastern Christian theological tradition
- Heroes of the Council of Constantinople
- Much of eastern orthodoxy is based on their ideas

- Gregory of Nyssa
 - Seen as the thinker and hippie, as he had a very high view of women's rights and was anti-slavery, seemed to believe in universal salvation that everyone will be saved in the end
- Basil the Great (the doer)
 - Build and apply christian schools, monasteries
 - Held to a literal 6-day creation
 - Disagreed with the Alexandrian fathers who had a more metaphorical interpretation (Alexandrians: Athanasius, Clement, Origen)
- Gregory of Nazianzus (The speaker)
 - The holy spirit is a distinct person (hypostasis) and fully divine
 - Believed monarchial trinitarianism where divinity really belongs to the father and the son and spirit are only divine by extension of the father (the son is through begetting of the father, while the spirit is through the procession)
 - Wouldn't have believed in filioque

Major Theological Traditions of the Early Church

1. Cappadocian Fathers (Asia Minor / Cappadocia)
 - Key figures: Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa
2. Alexandrian School (Egypt)
 - Key Figures: Athanasius, Clement, Origen
 - Emphasis: Christ's divinity, Allegorical interpretation of scripture, High Christology, strong on the unity of Christ's person
3. Antiochene School (Syria)
 - Key figures: Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom
4. Latin (Western) Tradition (Rome, North Africa, Gaul)
5. Constantinopolitan Tradition (Byzantium)



Western Fathers

Formed the basis for Western Christianity of which much of protestant and Roman Catholicism is based on their ideas

- Prosper of Aquitaine
 - Brought forth the idea that Jesus only died for the elect, meaning they believed in limited atonement
- Fulgentius

- Fulgentius, prosper of Aquitaine, and augustine were very influential to Calvinism
- Ambrose
 - “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”
 - He saw different churches doing things differently and he told people not to make a big deal out of it
 - Told that the church should not submit to the government
 - Important to the development of Christian worship music
 - Influenced Lutheran theology, talked about salvation by God’s grace and sacramentology
- Augustine
 - THE MOST IMPORTANT theologian for western Christianity
 - Famous for defeating the heretic pelagius who said that we are all born as blank slates with free will to do good or evil which Augustine didn’t believe because of original sin
 - Because of the fall, all of us are dead in sin from the moment of conception, meaning we all deserve to go to hell even babies
 - We’re too sinful to believe in Jesus unless God makes us believe. Does God do that for everyone? No. That's why he believes in predestination. He predestined some people to be saved and passes other people ..expanded by prosper of Aquitaine above..
- Jerome
 - Translated the Latin Vulgate Bible text (the official version used by the Catholic church), translating all 73 books used by the church but believed only 66 books were true scripture because he believed that we should use the Hebrew Jewish Canon of the Old Testament
 - Believed in 2-office episcopal view but overtime evolved into a 3-office Episcopal structure because certain presbyters got power hungry

Other Information

Oriental Orthodoxy

- Based on the idea of Cyril of Alexandria, who defeated the heretic Nestorius who separated Christ's divinity by referring to Christ’s divinity as God and man nature, Jesus. He [Nestorius] said we can call Mary as the mother of Jesus but not the mother of God, we can say Jesus died on the Cross but not God died on the cross—Cyril of Alexandria believed this to be heretical

John Chrysostom

- Patriarch of Constantinople, famous for his expository Bible preaching

A Brief Summary of the Spread of Christianity to the Western Hemisphere

1. **Origins in Judea (1st Century)**

- Starts in Jerusalem with Jesus' disciples (Acts 1–7).
- Persecution spreads the church to surrounding regions (Acts 8–28).
- Paul's missionary journeys take the Gospel across the eastern Roman Empire.

2. **Spread to Rome & the Empire (1st–4th Centuries)**

- Christianity reaches Rome early (Paul writes to the Roman church ~A.D. 57).
- Despite persecution, the faith grows.
- Emperor Constantine legalizes Christianity (Edict of Milan, 313).
- Theodosius I makes Christianity the state religion (380), giving Rome spiritual dominance.

3. **Spread Across Europe (5th–15th Centuries)**

- Missionaries bring the Gospel to Germanic tribes, Celtic peoples, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe.
- Church power grows alongside political kingdoms (medieval Christendom).
- Corruption and theological drift set the stage for reform.

4. **Protestant Reformation (16th Century)**

- Figures like Martin Luther (Germany), Ulrich Zwingli (Switzerland), and John Calvin (France/Geneva) challenge Rome's authority.
- England separates from Rome under Henry VIII, leading to **Anglicanism**.
- This marks both theological reform and a new church–state relationship.

5. **Christianity in the Western Hemisphere (17th–18th Centuries)**

- Brought by European colonists — Catholics to Latin America, Protestants to North America.
- Puritans, Anglicans, Quakers, and others establish communities in the New World.

6. **Evangelical Revivals (18th Century)**

- First Great Awakening led by George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and John Wesley revitalizes colonial Christianity.
- Strong emphasis on personal conversion and heartfelt preaching.
- Shapes American religious identity and paves the way for later revivals.

Citations

“Every Church Father explained in 10 minutes.” YouTube video, 10:24. May 29, 2024.
https://youtu.be/_6_Byhht3Sk?si=C1itwFMwg4MzBe7s.

OpenAI. 2025. ChatGPT model. “A Brief Summary of the Spread of Christianity to the Western Hemisphere.” Personal communication, August 13, 2025. <https://chat.openai.com/>.