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Main Events in the History of Christianity

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Main Events in the History of Christianity

The history of Christianity and events which shaped the Church have played a vital and pivotal role in the development of western Christian civilization, and the modern world. Christianity is the dynamic element in the history of the Western culture.

The Church transcends the contingent facts of this world, yet at the same time is deeply connected to historical events. The Christian view of history is a vision and interpretation of time in terms of eternity and of human events in the light of divine revelation.

Early Christianity (c. 31/33–324)

During the early history of Christianity, it spread from its beginnings as a 1st century Jewish sect, to a religion of the whole Greek and Roman world, and beyond. Early Christianity may be divided into two distinct phases: the **apostolic period**, when the first apostles were alive and led the Church, and the **post-apostolic period**, when an early Episcopal (church government by bishops) structure developed, and persecution of Christians was intense. The Roman persecution of Christians ended in AD 313 under the reign of Constantine the Great.

Apostolic Church

The Apostolic Church was the community led by the apostles. In his "Great Commission", the resurrected Jesus commanded that his teachings be spread to all the world. The Acts of the Apostles is the major primary source of information for this period. Acts gives a history of the Church from this commission to the spread of the religion among the Gentiles and the eastern Mediterranean by Paul and others.

The first Christians were essentially all ethnically Jewish. In other words, Jesus preached to the Jewish people and called from them his first disciples. However, the Great Commission is specifically directed at "all nations", and an early difficulty arose concerning the matter of Gentile (non-Jewish) converts as to whether they had to "become Jewish" (usually referring to circumcision and adherence to dietary law), as part of becoming Christian. Circumcision in particular was considered repulsive by Greeks. The actions of Peter, at the conversion of Cornelius the Centurion, seemed to indicate that circumcision and food laws did not apply to Gentiles, and this was agreed to at the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem.

Initially the spread of Christianity was like lightning. The movement spread primarily to the urban centers, where the non-Palestinian Jews lived. In most of the important cities of the Roman Empire, Judaism had established synagogues and was engaged in an active missionary program, proclaiming the God of Israel as the one true God. When the early Christians moved through the Roman world, proclaiming that the long-expected Jewish Messiah had come in the person of Jesus, they went first to these Jewish synagogues to hear the scripture and found a ready made audience

The doctrines of the apostles brought the Early Church into conflict with some Jewish religious authorities. This eventually led to their expulsion from the synagogues. Thus, Christianity acquired an identity distinct from Rabbinic Judaism, but this distinction was not recognised all at once by the Roman Empire. The name "Christian" was first applied to the disciples in Antioch, as recorded in Acts 11:26, coined as a derogatory term, meaning "little Christs", and was meant as a mockery, a term of derision for those that followed the teachings of Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul, helped to organize Churches in northern and southern Greece. Some of the letters he wrote in connection with his missionary activities constitute the earliest Christian literature. Peter, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, was at first a leader of the Church in Jerusalem, but later moved to Rome. By the year 65 A.D. the Christian message had penetrated into Syria, Asia Minor, Greece and Rome.

Stories and sayings of Jesus told by the disciples of Jesus were circulated orally by the teachers and leaders of Christianity. These varied in detail according to the particular need of the time, place and circumstances. A collection of these stories and sayings were then written down. They were called the '*gospels*', meaning 'good news'. The oldest '*gospel*' is that attributed to Mark, written shortly after 70 AD. About twenty years later were written the gospels of Matthew and Luke. John was the last one to write his gospel. There may have been other writings, but only these four gospels succeeded in winning the approval of all the Churches as reliable and authoritative records. To these gospels were shortly added a collection of letters of Paul and several other documents of importance written by the apostles of Christ. Thus a "New Testament" was gradually formed for the guidance of the Christians

Post-Apostolic Church

The post-apostolic period concerns the time after the death of the apostles (roughly 100 AD) until persecutions against Christians ended with the legalisation of Christian worship under the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great.

Judaism was recognized as a legal religion under Roman rule and the Jews, therefore, were exempt from the requirement to worship the emperor. Christianity did not receive such an exemption. So, when Christians refused to worship the emperor, they faced persecution. The most common charge leveled against the Christians was atheism; because the Romans could not conceive of a religious worship without idols and temples whereas the Christians had none of these. Fortunately, the outbreaks against the Christians were local and sporadic which, therefore, gave sufficient time for the Christians to grow steadily and quietly.

It was not until the year 250 that the Roman government took systematic steps to stamp out the Christian movement. "Christians to the lions!" was a common demand of the blood-thirsty masses. The last but the severest of all the prosecutions was under Diocletian.

In spite of these sometimes intense persecutions, the Christian religion continued its spread throughout the Mediterranean and its appeal to the masses was tremendous. There is no agreement on how Christianity managed to spread so successfully prior to the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark argues that Christianity triumphed over paganism chiefly because it improved the lives of its adherents in various ways. Within the church, members enjoyed social equality regardless of their station in worldly affairs. Master and slave, rich and poor shared a common table and, if personally qualified, were alike eligible for any office in the community. The churches also acted as employment agencies for members out of job and insured means of support to those unable to find work. And so, slowly each important city had its own church and the heads of the churches were called 'Bishops' and the bishop of Rome, as the successor of Peter, the chief of the Apostles, exercised a dominant authority over the other bishops.

But it ended in the victory of Christianity, because under the next emperor, Constantine the Great, (324-337), the decree that Christianity was an official religion of the empire, was passed.

3 Christianity during late antiquity (313–476)

Emperor Galerius, who had previously been one of the leading figures in persecution, in 311 issued an edict which ended the persecution of Christians. Galerius reigned for another 2 years and was succeeded by an emperor with distinctively pro Christian leanings, Constantine the Great.

Emperor Constantine I was exposed to Christianity by his mother, Helena. At the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine commanded his troops to adorn their shields with the Christian symbol in accordance with a vision that he had had the night before. Victory allowed him to claim the emperorship in the West. In 313, he issued the Edict of Milan, officially legalizing Christian worship within the Roman empire.

In 325 he summoned all the bishops' throughout the empire to meet at the First Council of Nicaea, in Asia Minor, to stop the warring within Christian factions over the nature of Christ. He presided over this council, setting the precedent of an emperor as responsible to God for the spiritual health of his subjects, and thus with a duty to maintain orthodoxy. The emperor was to enforce doctrine, root out heresy, and uphold ecclesiastical unity.

Such a sudden elevation given to Christianity, as the official religion of the empire, brought with it enormous external and internal transformations. The bishops became high dignitaries of the state and were granted extensive powers as magistrates in civil and judicial affairs. The numerous councils which met to debate doctrinal issues brought all sections of the church into contact with one another, which helped in having a common worship and a common discipline in the church. Thus Christianity grew in vigour and strength.

Monasticism

On account of the secular powers given to the Christian leaders, many bishops, priests and laymen, failed to maintain the detachment from the world, obligatory to all Christians. To counteract these lamentable conditions, there arose at this time monastic movements, not as a protest but as a clearly visible sign of Christian perfection. Monasteries were secluded places where people dedicated themselves to a simple life of hard manual labour, prayer, fasting and sometimes study. All the great bishops and theologians of the fourth century were closely connected with monasticism. The strong missionary impetus, the remarkable development of pastoral care, the efforts to Christianize the Roman State and above all the theological work of the councils of the fourth to the seventh century are inconceivable without monasticism.

Medieval Christianity (600-1500 A.D.)

The period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of the modern European nations is usually called the medieval period or the Middle Ages. During this period, the Christian church was a major force in the total culture of the Eastern and Western Europe.

Early Middle Ages (476–799)

The early years of the fifth century saw the entire western half of the empire attacked and overrun by barbarian Germanic tribes. All the frontier defenses of the Roman Empire, which for centuries had held them out of bounds of the Roman civilization, were shattered. The main interest of these Germanic

peoples was not in conquest but in plunder, and having satisfied themselves with material wealth and sensual pleasures.

The most significant event after the Germanic invasion of Europe was the success of the Church in bringing the Germanic peoples (called barbarians by the Romans) into the fold of the Church. During these centuries of chaotic social change, the Church pushed its evangelizing work into the rural areas, which under the old empire had been little touched by Christianity. On all the great landed estates, parish local churches were built and clergy instituted to serve the village and the country folk, including both the native Romans and the barbarian settlers. Rural areas rose as power centres whilst urban areas declined. Although a greater number of Christians remained in the East (Greek areas), important developments were underway in the West (Latin areas) and each took on distinctive shapes.

The Bishops of Rome, the Popes, were forced to adapt to drastically changing circumstances. Maintaining only nominal allegiance to the Emperor, they were forced to negotiate balances with the "barbarian rulers" of the former Roman provinces. In the East the Church maintained its structure and character and evolved more slowly.

Western missionary expansion

Already as early as in the 5th century, missionary activities from Roman Britain into the Celtic areas (current Scotland, Ireland and Wales) produced competing early traditions of Celtic Christianity, that was later reintegrated under the Church in Rome.

Prominent missionaries were Saints Patrick, Columba and Columbanus. The Anglo-Saxon tribes that invaded southern Britain some time after the Roman abandonment, were initially pagan, but converted to Christianity by Augustine of Canterbury on the mission of Pope Gregory the Great. Soon becoming a missionary centre, missionaries such as Wilfrid, Willibrord, Lullus and Boniface would begin converting their Saxon relatives in Germania.

The largely Christian Gallo-Roman inhabitants of Gaul (modern France) were overrun by the Franks in the early 5th century. The native inhabitants were persecuted until the Frankish king Clovis I converted from paganism to Roman Catholicism in 496. Clovis insisted that his fellow nobles follow suit, strengthening his newly established kingdom by uniting the faith of the rulers with that of the ruled.

After the rise of the Frankish Kingdom and the stabilizing political conditions, the Western part of the Church increased the missionary activities, supported by the Merovingian kingdom as a means to pacify troublesome neighbouring peoples.

Controversy and Crusades dividing East and West

From the time of the establishment of the city of Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman Empire (330 C.E.), there developed a gradually widening division between the Christians of the East and those of Western Europe. This basic division was political and geographic as well as theological.

When Constantine set up his capital in the East, he took an active role in the development and direction of the church and called the Council of Nicaea to settle theological differences. His successors followed his example and usually took an active part in directing religion. In the West, Rome had been left without an effective political leadership. Into this vacuum stepped the able bishops of the Roman church, who even took some of the titles of the ancient Caesars. When the barbarians massed at the walls of Rome, it was the popes who negotiated with them for the city. The largest issue dividing

Eastern and Western Christians was the papacy. The great cities of the East had outstanding bishops who became known as patriarchs. Although Constantinople was the capital, its patriarch could never gain authority over the patriarchs of the other major cities. In the West, there was only Rome and the bishop of that city clearly led the Western Church. Gradually, the bishop of Rome claimed to be the leader of the Christendom, but the Eastern patriarchs refused to accept his authority.

Numerous minor differences also developed between these churches, which came to be known as Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

The rift known as the East-West Schism arose between the two branches of Christendom and continued to grow during its first thousand years. Western Christians were busy repelling various barbarian invasions and building what has become Western Europe, while the East saw almost all of its empire fall into the hands of Muslim invaders in the seventh and eighth centuries. Antagonism reached a climax in 1054, when Pope Leo IX sent delegates to Constantinople to excommunicate Michael Cærolarius, Patriarch of Constantinople. Even this breach might have been healed, but Christian Crusaders from European nations stopped at Constantinople in 1204 on their way to the Holy Land and sacked the city.

Crusades

The Crusades refer to the campaigns in the Holy Land against Muslim forces sponsored by the Papacy. The Holy Land had been part of the Roman Empire, and thus Byzantine Empire, until the Islamic conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries. Thereafter, Christians had generally been permitted to visit the sacred places in the Holy Land until 1071, when the Seljuk Turks closed Christian pilgrimages and assailed the Byzantines, defeating them at the Battle of Manzikert.

Emperor Alexius I asked for aid from Pope Urban II for help against Islamic aggression. He probably expected money from the pope for the hiring of mercenaries. Instead, Urban II called upon the knights of Christendom in a speech made at the Council of Clermont on 27 November 1095, combining the idea of pilgrimage to the Holy Land with that of waging a holy war against infidels.

The First Crusade captured Antioch in 1099 and then Jerusalem. The Second Crusade occurred in 1145 when Edessa was retaken by Islamic forces. Jerusalem would be held until 1187 and the Third Crusade, famous for the battles between Richard the Lionheart and Saladin.

The Fourth Crusade, begun by Innocent III in 1202, intended to retake the Holy Land but was soon subverted by Venetians who used the forces to sack the Christian city of Zara. When the crusaders arrived in Constantinople, they sacked the city and other parts of Asia Minor and established the Latin Empire of Constantinople in Greece and Asia Minor. This was effectively the last crusade sponsored by the papacy, with later crusades being sponsored by individuals.

Jerusalem was held by the crusaders for nearly a century, and other strongholds in the Near East would remain in Christian possession much longer. The crusades in the Holy Land ultimately failed to establish permanent Christian kingdoms. Islamic expansion into Europe would renew and remain a threat for centuries culminating in the campaigns of Suleiman the Magnificent in the 16th century.

Eastern Orthodox captivity (1453–1850)

In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire. Under Ottoman rule, the Greek or Eastern Orthodox Church acquired substantial power. The ecumenical patriarch was the religious and

administrative ruler of the entire "Greek Orthodox nation" (Ottoman administrative unit), which encompassed all the Eastern Orthodox subjects of the Empire. Eastern Christians fleeing Constantinople, and the Greek manuscripts they carried with them, is one of the factors that prompted the literary renaissance in the West at about this time.

Isolation from the West

As a result of the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, and the Fall of Constantinople, the entire Orthodox communion of the Balkans and the Near East became suddenly isolated from the West. For the next four hundred years, it would be confined within a hostile Islamic world, with which it had little in common religiously or culturally. The Russian Orthodox Church was the only part of the Orthodox communion which remained outside the control of the Ottoman Empire.

It is, in part, due to this geographical and intellectual confinement that the voice of Eastern Orthodoxy was not heard during the Reformation in 16th-century Europe. As a result, this important theological debate often seems strange and distorted to the Orthodox. They never took part in it and thus neither Reformation nor Counter-Reformation is part of their theological framework.

Late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance (1300–1520)

Avignon Papacy (1309–1378)

The Avignon Papacy, sometimes referred to as the Babylonian Captivity, was a period from 1309 to 1378 during which seven Popes resided in Avignon, in modern-day France. The period was one of conflict and controversy during which French Kings held considerable sway over the Papacy and rulers across Europe felt sidelined by the new French-centric papacy.

In 1309, Pope Clement V, due to political considerations, moved to Avignon in southern France. For sixty-nine years popes resided in Avignon rather than Rome. This was a time of confusion and of political animosity as the prestige and influence of Rome waned without a resident pontiff. Though Pope Gregory XI, a Frenchman, returned to Rome, the strife between Italian and French factions intensified. Troubles reached their peak in 1378 when, Gregory XI died while visiting Rome.

A papal conclave met in Rome and elected Urban VI, an Italian. Urban soon alienated the French cardinals, and they held a second conclave electing Robert of Geneva to succeed Gregory XI. By 1379, he was back in the palace of popes in Avignon, while Urban VI remained in Rome.

Western Schism

This Western Schism, or Papal Schism, was this prolonged period of crisis with two or more claimants to the See of Rome.

For nearly forty years, there were two papal curias and two sets of cardinals, each electing a new pope for Rome or Avignon when death created a vacancy. Each pope lobbied for support among kings and princes who played them off against each other. In 1409, a council at Pisa to resolve the issue declared both existing popes to be schismatic (Gregory XII from Rome, Benedict XIII from Avignon) and appointed a new one, Alexander V. The existing popes refused to resign and thus there were three papal claimants. Another council was convened in 1414, the Council of Constance. In March 1415 the Pisan pope John XXIII fled from Constance in disguise. He was brought back a prisoner and deposed in May. The Roman pope, Gregory XII, resigned voluntarily in July. The Avignon pope, Benedict XIII, refused to come to

Constance, nor would he consider resignation. The council deposed him in July 1417 and elected Pope Martin V as pope in November, having finally cleared the field of popes and antipopes.

Rise of Protestantism

John Wycliffe, an English scholar and heretic best known for denouncing the corruptions of the Church, was a precursor of the Protestant Reformation. He emphasized the supremacy of the Bible, and called for a direct relationship between man and God, without interference by priests and bishops. Jan Hus, a Czech theologian in Prague, was influenced by Wycliffe and spoke out against the corruptions he saw in the Church; his continued defiance led to his excommunication and condemnation by the Council of Constance, which also condemned John Wycliffe.

Reformation

In the sixteenth century, a third major division in Christianity, the Protestant, became distinct. The Western church was torn asunder by a revolution from which it has never fully recovered. This revolution has been called the Reformation, but it went far beyond reforming Christianity; it upset it, destroyed its unified hold on Europe, challenged its authority, and disrupted it for centuries. The rift occurred in Germany, France, and Switzerland; soon most countries of Europe had participants.

The causes of this revolution are varied, and intricate. Many people were sick, angry, and fearful over corruption in the priesthood, waste of revenue from local parishes, and conflicts between princes of the world and princes of the church. The conflict of authorities was between the papacy and all others; the authority of the papacy was also disputed. Many reformers sought to revive earlier forms of holy life, inner piety expressed in good deeds. A few reformers challenged the basic authority of the medieval church, preferring scripture over tradition.

The Papacy had suffered a grievous loss of prestige. The Popes seemed to be more concerned with the Renaissance than with spiritual matters of Christendom. Bishops and the Priests were not leading the life required by Christianity. All this and much more gave rise to a division in Christendom, which up to now was one holy Catholic Church.

The Protestant aspect of European Christianity is what we call 'the Reformation' which has 4 main forms: Lutheranism, Calvinism, Radicalism and Anglicanism.

The most outstanding figure of the Reformation was Martin Luther of Saxony (1483-1546). Like many others, Luther began to call for moral reform within the Church. He was particularly incensed by the sale of indulgences by a monk named Tetzel, who promised people that as soon as their money fell into the coffer, a soul rose from purgatory. On the basis of his opposition to this sale of indulgences, Luther chose his Ninety-five Theses as grounds for debate and nailed them to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. These theses were widely read all across Germany and created an immediate sensation. It was widely regarded as the primary catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. In the publications and debates that followed, Luther was led into more and more controversy with the papacy. He came to declare that every Christian was a priest who could interpret Scripture and that the popes and the church hierarchy were not superior to the believer. He also challenged the doctrine of transubstantiation, which taught that at the mass the bread and wine literally became the body and blood of Jesus.

The Catholic reform is known as the 'Counter Reformation', which resulted in a reassertion of traditional doctrines and the emergence of new religious orders aimed at both moral reform and new missionary activity.

Pope Paul III (1534-49) cautiously undertook measures of reform. He initiated the Council of Trent (1545–1563), a commission of cardinals tasked with institutional reform, addressing contentious issues such as corrupt bishops and priests, indulgences, and other financial abuses.

The Council clearly rejected specific Protestant positions and upheld the basic structure of the Medieval Church, its sacramental system, religious orders, and doctrine. It rejected all compromise with the Protestants, restating basic tenets of the Roman Catholic faith. The council reinstated the Latin Bible as authoritative. Armed with these documents of the Council, and led by Jesuits and other scholars, the Catholic Church recovered much lost ground and became once more a powerful factor in European life.

The Counter Reformation reconverted approximately 33% of Northern Europe to Catholicism and initiated missions in South and Central America, Africa, Asia, and even China and Japan. Protestant expansion outside of Europe occurred on a smaller scale through colonisation of North America and areas of Africa.

Church and the Enlightenment (1610–1800)

The Galileo affair, in which Galileo Galilei came into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church over his support of Copernican astronomy, is often considered a defining moment in the history of the relationship between religion and science.

In 1610, Galileo published his *Sidereus Nuncius* (Starry Messenger), describing the surprising observations that he had made with the new telescope. These and other discoveries exposed major difficulties with the understanding of the Heavens that had been held since antiquity, and raised new interest in radical teachings such as the heliocentric theory of Copernicus.

In reaction, many scholars maintained that the motion of the Earth and immobility of the Sun were heretical, as they contradicted some accounts given in the Bible as understood at that time. Galileo's part in the controversies over theology, astronomy and philosophy culminated in his trial and sentencing in 1633, on a grave suspicion of heresy.

Puritans in North America

The most famous colonisation by Protestants in the New World was that of English Puritans in North America. The Puritans, or Pilgrims, left England so that they could live in an area with Puritanism established as the exclusive civic religion. Though they had left England because of the suppression of their religious practice, most Puritans had thereafter originally settled in the Low Countries but found the licentiousness there, where the state hesitated from enforcing religious practice, as unacceptable, and thus they set out for the New World and the hopes of a Puritan utopia.

The Modern Era

The First Great Awakening was a wave of religious enthusiasm among Protestants in the American colonies, emphasising the traditional Reformed virtues of Godly preaching, rudimentary liturgy, and a deep sense of personal guilt and redemption by Christ Jesus. It centered on reviving the spirituality of established congregations, and mostly affected Congregational, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, Baptist, and Methodist churches, while also spreading within the slave population.

The Second Great Awakening (1800–1830s), unlike the first, focused on the unchurched and sought to instill in them a deep sense of personal salvation as experienced in revival meetings. It also sparked the beginnings of groups such as the Mormons, the Restoration Movement and the Holiness movement.

The Third Great Awakening began from 1857 and was most notable for taking the movement throughout the world, especially in English speaking countries.

Expansion

Emigration and missionary evangelization have since 1789 established the Church in almost every corner of the globe and greatly increased its members. Millions of emigrants from Christian countries of Europe have been the main factors in building the Church in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; they have also augmented the Christian population converted earlier in Latin America.

Missionary activities of unparalleled zeal increased the number of Christians in Africa and Asia. According to the latest statistics there are nearly 2.1 billion Christians all over the world, representing one third of the world population.

Conclusion

The History of Christianity is well documented and provides additional insight into the development of Christianity. The inextricable ties between the development of the Western world and culture and Christianity as a religion make it a fascinating study and provide rich context to our modern times. Christianity continues to evolve and influence world culture today, given the large number of Christians around the globe.

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