

# History of Christian Movements and Theology



## 3. Triumph and Controversy

### Key Dates #

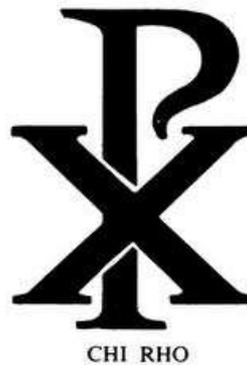
312	Constantine victorious over Maxentius at the battle of Milvian Bridge, near Rome; becomes Emperor of the West
313	Edict of Milan provides religious tolerance and gives Christians equal rights as followers of other religions
316	Constantine outlaws and banishes the Donatists
314	Constantine proclaimed Emperor of East and West - favours Christianity
325	Council of Nicaea condemns Arianism
328	Athanasius becomes Bishop of Alexandria
345	John Chrysostom, a reforming teacher, is born
347	Jerome, Bible scholar and author of the Vulgate, is born
361-363	Reign of Julian the Apostate; restores paganism, opposes the power of the Bishops
367	Canon of 66 Books in the Bible is officially accepted (re-affirmed in 382, 393, 397)
379-395	Reign of Theodosius, established Christianity as the official religion of the empire
381	Council of Constantinople, concerned with the nature of Jesus Christ; coincided with edict by Emperor Theodosius that all subjects were to believe in the Trinity
386	Conversion of Augustine of Hippo
389	Birth of Patrick, missionary to Ireland (died 461)
400	Death of Nestorius
410	Fall of Rome to Alaric and the Visigoths
413-416	Augustine writes <i>The City of God</i> , a response to accusations Christians were responsible for the fall of Rome
431	Council of Ephesus, also debating the divinity of Jesus Christ
451	Council of Chalcedon, further debates about the divinity of Jesus Christ
476	End of the Roman Empire; Romulus Augustulus is deposed by German general Odoacer.

### Overview

One of the ironies of Christian history is that great persecutions often saw aggressive evangelism and rapid growth, but as the church became officially tolerated it passed into a period of theological confusion and diminished evangelistic effort. By the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, pagan temples were largely neglected, whereas the church was established and powerful, yet increasingly institutionalised. One of the trigger points was the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 313 AD. The fourth century was a period of consolidation of the church within the political landscape and bitter debate over basic beliefs about the person of Jesus Christ.

### Triumph - *Constantine*

Constantine's formal religion was originally the worship of the Unconquered Sun. However, according to tradition, on the eve of a crucial battle with Maxentius (a rival, stronger contender to the throne), Constantine asked "the Supreme God" for a sign. The response was a cross in the sky with an inscription that can be translated, "By this sign conquer".



The story has never been satisfactorily verified, but the conversion of Constantine to Christianity marked a turning point. Christianity became the favoured (though not yet official or exclusive) religion of the empire and changes he initiated made it easier for Christians to expand their influence.

Over time, Constantine aligned himself with the established church leadership. He often became involved in issues the church was facing; he sought to settle matters confronting the bishops; this was the first time a head of state was personally involved in church affairs and marks the beginning of political interference in the Kingdom of God, the Christian community.

The descendants of Constantine (with a single exception, Julian the Apostate, one of his grandsons, who attempted to re-assert the traditional pagan religions) were also nominal Christians. In the space of a century Christianity went from being a religion under fire to the predominant faith of the Empire, with the state influential in how it operated.

## Controversies

Early controversies in the church centred on:

- the universality of the message (not a sect of Judaism)
- how to understand and interpret the Bible (the Jewish OT, in the absence of the NT)
- the nature of Christ; how to explain Jesus as True God & True Man (unknown in paganism)
- the person and nature of the Holy Spirit
- the Trinity
- the ecclesiastical and civil scope and authority of church structure/leaders (not all outcomes were positive, in particular decisions that increased clericalism in the church)
- the increasing role of the state in church life (and vice versa)
- dealing with schisms and promoting unity in the growing Christian community
- how to deal with Christians who lapsed (eg in the face of persecution) but then repented
- how to approach fundamental Christian doctrine
- agreement on doctrines and formulation of statements of faith in the context of heresies
- intersection with non-Christian philosophies and religions (Christianity was theologically exclusive but often syncretistic in practice)

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## *Donatists*

This movement stemmed from a controversy surrounding the ability of lapsed Christian leaders, or those who collaborated with the Roman persecutors (in particular leaders who informed on other Christians to the Romans), were fit persons to distribute the “sacraments”. Donatus (a Bishop of Carthage) taught that the validity of the sacraments depended on the moral character of the minister involved, and that those who had committed apostasy (fallen away) in the face of persecution, or betrayed fellow-Christians, had disqualified themselves from ministry.

The Donatists set about rebaptising church members who had been baptised by ministers accused of collaboration. The central church hierarchy opposed this because it took the matter out of their hands, especially when consecrated bishops were not recognised as such and Donatists only accepted the spiritual authority of members of the sect whose moral authority had been judged (by them) to be satisfactory. Constantine sided with the church hierarchy and banned the group, but this only fuelled debate in many places and the movement grew.

The tide changed when Augustine spoke out against the Donatists. Theologically, the weakness of the movement was the notion that any minister could ever be pure enough to function as such. All Christian ministers are human and succumb to temptations. The idea that such a person could not be an effective minister of Christ was unsustainable. Also, God’s acceptance of us is not based on the moral standing of church leadership, but our own conscience before Him, and our dependence on the work of Christ for salvation. In essence, whether or not the Donatists excluded individual ministers did not reduce the value of any sacrament.

In 411 the sect was again officially banned.

## *Arianism and the First Council of Nicaea*

Divisions continued, along theological fault lines. Christianity grew up in a world with deep, powerful cultural traditions. One of the greatest early threats came from Arianism. From around 312 Arius (a church presbyter from Alexandria) preached a version of Christianity that challenged the conventional view about the divinity of Christ. He taught that Christ was not eternal, but had a beginning, that he had come into being out of non-existence; that he was a creature made by God. He was the most noble of created beings, who went on to create the Holy Spirit and the physical universe, but he was inferior to God, the Creator, who eventually “adopted” Him as His Son. Christian leaders took sides for and against (mostly against) Arius.

To settle matters, Constantine called the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 324. Apart from the Council of Jerusalem, this was the first event of its kind. Constantine sought to bring together all of the major church leaders from across the empire; an estimated 1800 were invited; around 300 participated. Bishops assembled and debated the nature of Christ, the cult of Arianism, Easter, whether or not heretics should be baptised and what to do with lapsed Christians who repented.

In contesting various positions about who Jesus was, what was at stake was whether He was of the same essence as God or of similar essence as God. The Council ultimately resolved that He was; the Son of God, pre-existent with the Father, only begotten of the Father (from eternity), of the substance of the Father, very God of very God, ie Jesus Christ was God, eternal, revealed in human flesh. Anything less threatened the Trinity, if Jesus is not equal to the father.

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Their conclusions, more or less in this form, formed the basis for what became known as the Nicene Creed.

Arius and his followers were banished from Rome. His works were burned. Anyone possessing them was under threat of execution. Easter was formally separated from the Jewish Passover feast. This was largely a reflection of the dominance of Gentiles in the church. The Council also decreed a number of so-called canon laws, which set out to regulate church life and procedures.

Two years later Constantine welcomed Arius back. His opponents, especially Athanasius, were then banished. The church in Europe was henceforth affected by division into pro/anti-Arian camps.

While Christianity was not yet the official religion of the empire it was dominant. In 321 Sunday was proclaimed a day of rest in honour of the sun.

## *The Nicene Creed (325 AD)*



I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

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And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

(The Nicene Creed is used by the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Church of the East, Oriental Orthodox churches, Anglican Church and most mainstream Protestant denominations. The so-called "Apostles Creed" was written later; the earliest reference to it is dated 390 AD.)

Many Roman Catholics believe that the Council of Nicaea recognised the role of the Bishop of Rome as the head of the universal church. However, the Council did not do this.

## *Pelagianism (345-420)*

Born in Britain, Pelagius was a well-known teacher in Rome. He taught that human nature is basically good and that people could keep God's word and requirements (without the need for grace). Pelagius taught that, just as Adam had to make a choice in Eden, the same choice is offered to individuals, who have the capacity to decide either way (including the ability to choose to live a perfect life); he regarded Adam's sin as an example and a warning for us. He likewise taught that Jesus' life was an example for us to follow, however he did also believe in the atonement.

The fundamental weakness in Pelagius' teachings is that he failed to acknowledge that all are sinners (Ephesians 2:3; Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:23) and in need of the grace of God for salvation and Christian living. Augustine, who believed in the doctrine of original sin and the need for divine intervention to bring about change, opposed Pelagius.

## *The Council of Constantinople (381)*

Theodosius (346-395) was the last emperor to rule over a united Roman Empire. In 380 AD he established Christianity as the state religion, with the Nicene Creed as its statement of faith, and convened the Council of Constantinople to validate this. The Council debated and re-affirmed Christian beliefs, including the Trinity and the deity of the Holy Spirit. In January 381 Theodosius issued a proclamation mandating belief in the Trinity as a central plank in Christianity; all other beliefs were declared to be heresies, subject to civil and divine punishment. Paganism was banned. (Judaism also fell outside the law.) Some historians claim that Theodosius imposed his will on the Council. If this is the case, it may have been the hand of God at work in the context of church-state politicisation and cultural, theological debate.

## *The Council of Ephesus (431)*

This council of Bishops was called to deal with the teachings of Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, who taught that Jesus Christ had two distinct natures, to such an extent that his detractors claimed he taught the divine and human Jesus were in fact two different persons. Monophysites (Greek: monos = "only, single" + physis="nature") taught that Jesus had a human nature for the purpose of the incarnation, but now had only a divine nature. Nestorius had also opposed a theological tide that resulted in Mary being declared Theotokos, the Mother of God; Nestorius insisted that Jesus was the mother of Jesus the Man, but not the mother of his deity. Ultimately he was exiled.

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Monophysite movements continue to function in the Syrian orthodox of Church of Antioch and the east in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, as well as among the Copts of Egypt.

The Council also dealt with Pelagianism and excommunicated its leading proponents.

## Some Influential Christians During the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

### *Augustine of Hippo (354-430)*

Perhaps the best known Christian since the Apostles and Paul. Augustine was a well-known theologian. In his youth, he had resisted his mother Monica's urgings he become a Christian. Looking at options, he became a Manichean for a period. After becoming a believer (387AD), under the influence of Ambrose (337-397) in Milan, he wrote prolifically, opposed heresies and became a bishop in Hippo, North Africa, in 395. In terms of doctrine, he was close, from the outset, to the style of the Apostle Paul. Augustine combatted Pelagianism (see separate notes), insisting that we are all sinners and all need the grace of God for salvation; he (correctly) taught that the grace of God can be resisted/rejected through individual choice.

Augustine became one of the most important leaders in the evolution of Christianity in the west. As to the formulation of his ideas, he initially drew heavily on the writings of Plato (however, see below). His theology focussed attention on original sin and the concept of a "just war". When Rome fell, he taught that the focus of Christian believes is not on an earthly city, but a *City of God*, the Christian community.

August's most famous work was *The Confessions*, the story of his life and conversion. His *On Christian Doctrine* explained how Christianity related to classical learning.

Well known sayings:

As a young man seeking pleasure: "Grant me chastity and continence , but not yet".

As a Christian believer: "You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they find rest in you."

"What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like."

"I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are wise and very beautiful; but I have never read in either of them: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden.' "

Some of Augustine's writings were problematic, including his insistence that there is no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church. He also encouraged the use of relics as aids to faith and taught the existence of purgatory.

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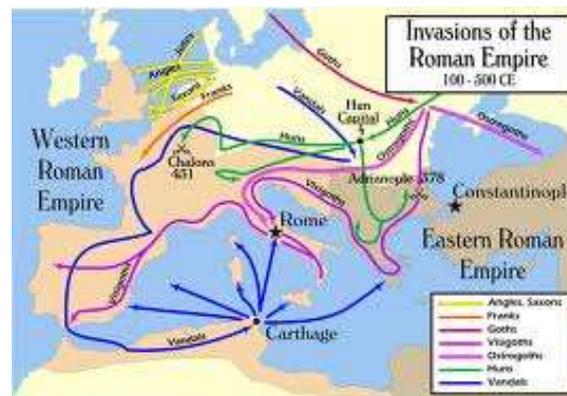
## *John Chrysostom (347-407)*

Chrysostom (meaning Golden Mouthed) was at one time Archbishop of Constantinople. He was well known for his oratory, the stands he took against abuse in the organised church and the political leadership. A prolific theologian, he wrote more than any of the Eastern Church fathers. He offended the Empress with his preaching and teaching about the need for repentance, and was exiled in 403 AD. Roman Catholics know him as the patron saint of orators. In modern times, proponents of Nazism drew on Chrysostom's anti-Semitism.

## *Jerome (347-420)*

Jerome was the leading Bible scholar and writer in the west during his time. Concerned about the lack of a reliable translation of the Bible he committed his life to studying the ancient languages (including, initially, the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint; he later based his revisions on Hebrew texts), producing a new version of the Bible (the "Vulgate", for the "vulgus" or common people) in Latin and writing commentaries on various New Testament books, including Matthew, Romans and Galatians. He spent much of his life living in Bible lands, to enable him to speak first-hand about the contexts of texts he was redacting.

## *The Visigoths and the Fall of Rome (410, 476)*



<http://www.google.com.au/search?q=map,+fall+of+rome>

Emperor Constantine believed that Rome as a city was too far away from key parts of the empire and transferred the capital to Constantinople (now Istanbul; built on the foundation of Byzantium; the city ultimately fell to Ottoman Muslims in 1453).

As a result of this move of the seat of imperial power, the western part of the empire was left weakened. The Ostrogoths attacked the western empire from the east. The Huns (a tribe from Asia), attacked from the west. In turn, the Franks, Visigoths and Burgundians overran strategic parts of the empire. As part of a strategic compromise that further weakened the empire, the Vandals and Visigoths were allowed to remain within the borders of the empire itself, allegedly to provide additional protection from the Huns, however this only ensured their continued encroachment. In 398 AD Alaric (leader of the Visigoths, and an Arian) made further inroads, eventually capturing and sacking Rome in 410. The Western Roman Empire ended in 476, when the Germanic general Odoacer deposed the last Emperor Romulus Augustulus.

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## Additional Reading

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Renwick, AM, *The Story of the Church*, Intervarsity Press, Edinburgh, 1973