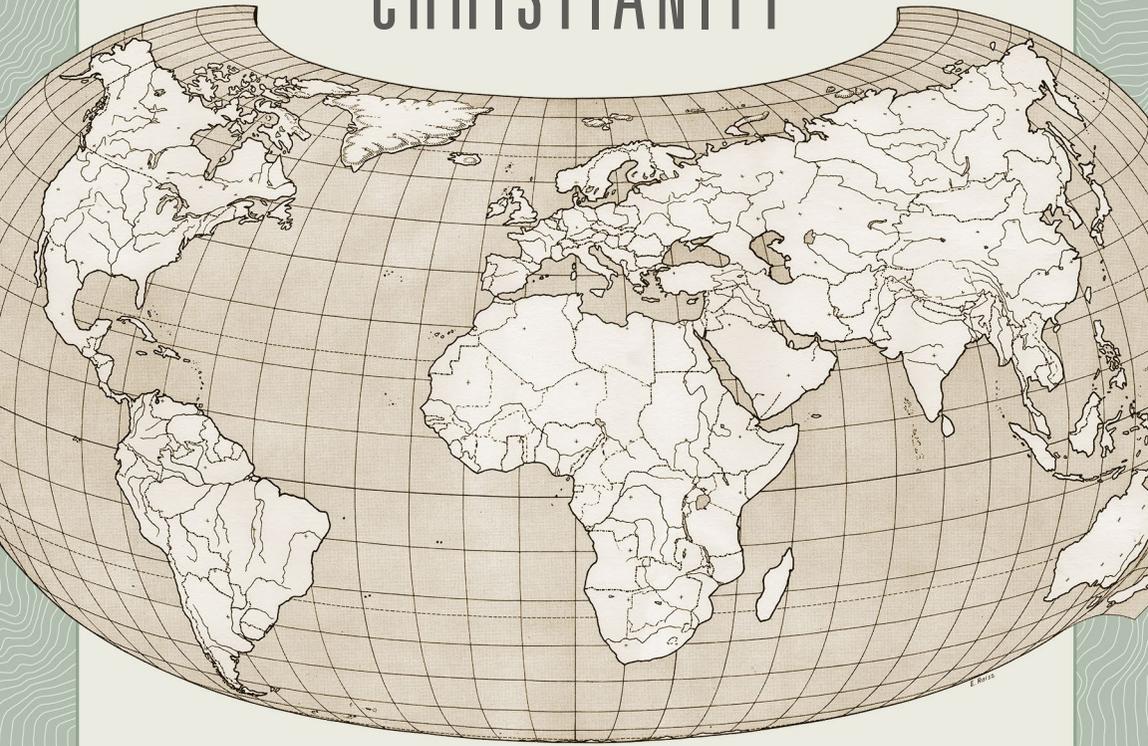


SECOND EDITION

A SURVEY  
*of the*  
HISTORY  
*of*  
GLOBAL  
CHRISTIANITY



MARK NICKENS

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MARK NICKENS

**B&H**  
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## PREFACE:

# WHAT *to* EXPECT

Welcome to a study of the history of global Christianity. After teaching church history in many schools, over many decades, and in different countries, I realized that most people develop an interest in church history for the same reason. Their interest peaks once they come to the same conclusion: church history not only explains why other Christians believe and act the way they do, but it also explains about oneself, why we each believe and act the way that we do. Therefore, since each church history book is designed to tell the story of Christianity with a certain focus, the focus of this book is to answer one question: Why? For example: Why does that group believe that? Why does my church do this? Why do I do what I do? Why is there one Bible but so many different Christian groups, churches, and denominations (or nondenominational church groups)?

All your “why” questions about the vast array of different Christian groups, movements, and ideas do have answers. Those answers are found by studying church history, with many of them are answered in this book. Here you will uncover answers to questions you have long pondered, and you will also learn the answers to questions you never thought to ask.

Therefore, as you read through this book, please pay attention to the explanations of different actions, reactions, and motivations in the developing of new doctrines, practices, churches, groups, and even denominations. Christians began most innovations for one of two reasons: they either reacted against another group, or they believed that a group was lacking and developed an alternative doctrine, practice, and so on. You will discover many of those reasons here, which will help you better understand why Christianity has one sacred writing, the Bible, and yet so many different groupings within Christianity, all stemming from that one Bible. In addition, you will find some of your own beliefs and practices explained and, therefore, will learn more about your own faith.

This will be a great trip as you learn how Christianity developed from a small group of followers at the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem to encompassing the world today with over two billion followers.

Mark Nickens

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was the result of studying church history for over thirty years, teaching it in traditional settings and online classes in over fifteen schools in the United States and in other countries for the past twenty-five years, and managing a church history website for fifteen years. I appreciate the questions students have asked over the years, which prompted me to write a church history book focused on answering questions. I also thank Teresa, Lindsay Ann, and Jean Nickens—my wife, daughter, and mother—who encouraged me along the way.

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful, appointing me to the ministry” (1 Tim 1:12).

*Soli Deo Gloria*, Glory of God alone.

## *Section 1:*

# The Early Church: 30–400

An interesting question to ponder: When did Christianity begin? In other words, when did people first become Christian? Thinking this through at the most basic level, all Christians could agree that a Christian is someone who has accepted the sacrifice of Jesus, seeks to please the Father, and enjoys a connection to God through the Holy Spirit. Using that definition, the first Christians were those in the upper room in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, since that event marked the first time God gave the Holy Spirit freely to all those who accepted the message of Jesus. At that time and in that place, the young Christian movement had the loosest of leadership structures, no Scripture to call their own (they used the Jewish Scripture), no creed to guide them, the barest understanding of the nature of Jesus, and a great fear of a quick arrest and crucifixion. That seemed to be a recipe for disaster. But fast-forward to the year 400: Christianity included a highly structured leadership style, a New Testament, a creed, and a 150-year history of meeting at councils to settle disputes and define doctrine; plus, Christianity is the official religion of the Roman Empire. To say that the first 370 years of Christianity were eventful is an understatement: those years were fascinating, with many moving parts, often occurring at the same time, while all worked toward the development of a robust faith. This first section covers that history.

### **Time lines, maps, and images for this section**

These are provided on the author's website: [www.studythechurch.com/earlychurch](http://www.studythechurch.com/earlychurch) for free. The time lines are available by century, and all three can be used as an aid to better understanding the development of Christianity in this time period.

## CHAPTER 1

# ENDURING PERSECUTION *and* DEVELOPING THEOLOGY

When most people think about the early church period, Roman persecutions of Christians usually spring to mind as the formative experience early Christians endured. Therefore, the beginning of this story of Christianity focuses on the persecution of Christianity. Another critical development in the early church period involved understanding how God functions within himself and in relationship with humanity, basically Christian theology. This chapter focuses on those two developments.

### Outline

1. Christianity's Unpredictable Journey: From Persecution to the Official Religion of the Empire
  - a. Two Independent Persecutions: Nero and Domitian
  - b. The Standard Persecution Proceedings: Trajan's Letter
  - c. Localized Persecutions from 112 to 250
  - d. Empire-Wide Persecutions Begin: Decius and Valerian
  - e. The Height of Christian Persecutions: Diocletian and Galerius
  - f. Freedom from Persecution to Official Religion
2. Development of Theology
  - a. Apostles and Apostolic Fathers
  - b. Misunderstandings and Apologists
  - c. Heretics, Theologians, and Councils

### **Christianity's Unpredictable Journey: From Persecution to the Official Religion of the Empire**

While it is true that Roman persecution of Christians occurred from the first to the fourth centuries, widespread Roman persecution of Christianity

occurred both infrequently and not immediately. Perhaps six emperors out of fifty from the time of Jesus to Constantine (d. 337) actively persecuted Christians. Roman persecution of Christians usually occurred locally, meaning that persecution frequently originated from within local communities or with governors instead of being directed by emperors. Empire-wide persecutions led by emperors occurred more frequently in the late third and early fourth centuries.

The attitude of the Roman emperors toward Christianity changed within the first century. In the early to mid-first century, Roman emperors considered Christianity as simply a Jewish splinter group. This misdiagnosis worked to the advantage of Christians. As long as the Roman Empire considered them as Jews, Christians enjoyed the religious privilege that Jews enjoyed: they did not have to worship Roman gods or even the emperor but could worship their one God, provided no disturbances ensued. Eventually Roman emperors recognized that Christianity and Judaism were two different faiths. The exact timing of that realization is uncertain, but one clue is a stipulation granted by Emperor Nerva in 97. After the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70, Rome required Jews to pay their regular temple tax to the Roman Empire; this was known as the *fiscus ludaeicus*, Latin for “Jewish tax.” Nerva declared that only practicing Jews were required to pay the tax. This recognition suggests that by this year, the Roman Empire recognized Christianity and Judaism as two separate faiths.

Note about using century names instead of numbers: this can be confusing, but the word *century* is always one more than the number of the century. For example, the years 1–99 are the first century, 100–199 are the second century, 200–299 are the third century, and so on.

Also, “c.” before a year means the year is an approximation, and “d.” before a year means that a person died in that year.

### *Two Independent Persecutions: Nero and Domitian*

Nero became emperor in 54 and soon gained a reputation for ruthlessness; for example, he ordered his mother’s murder in 59. Nevertheless, Nero was apparently uninterested in Christianity for most of his reign. That changed in July 64, when a catastrophic fire lasting six days burned through Rome. Aware that the crowds blamed him—since his plans to extend his palace into areas already occupied by others were well-known—Nero diverted their attention by blaming a small, unassuming group who also lived in Rome: Christians. He ordered their arrest and

death as arsonists. The result was horrific. Some Christians were covered with animal skins and torn to death by dogs. Others were crucified during the day, and after night fell, fires were lit at the bases of their crosses so Nero could ride his chariot through the spectacle. According to tradition, the apostles Peter and Paul were also martyred during this persecution. Nero ordered Peter to be crucified, yet Peter requested he be crucified upside down, stating that he was not worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Jesus. Since crucifixion was illegal for Roman citizens and Paul was both a Jew and a Roman citizen, he was beheaded.

This persecution was unique from later Roman persecutions for two reasons. First, although an emperor led this persecution, it remained a local affair, occurring only in Rome. Second, Nero did not persecute Christians for theological reasons, the habit of later Roman persecutions. Instead, Nero merely needed a scapegoat to blame for the fire. Nevertheless, Nero holds the distinction of being the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians, although not for theological reasons.

The next emperor to persecute Christians was Domitian. Domitian became emperor in 81 at the age of twenty-nine and, like Nero, took no initial interest in Christians. Domitian reversed his position fourteen years later after they refused to participate in the cult of divinity that Domitian carefully had constructed around himself (this included the Jews). The extent of the persecution is uncertain. Domitian ordered the execution of one of his cousins, Clemens, as well as the banishment of his cousin's wife, Domitilla, both of whom possibly were Christian. Christian historians writing later describe other Christians martyred by Domitian, but no supporting evidence exists. Nevertheless, Domitian had a habit of banishing his enemies, and this aligns well with a story told about the apostle John. Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, both living in the second century, independently reported that Domitian banished John to the island

Jerome shares this tidbit about the apostle John in his *Commentary on Galatians, 6:10*: "Blessed John the evangelist, when he was staying in Ephesus until extreme old age, used to be carried to church with difficulty by the hands of the disciples. He was not able to put many words together with his voice and was accustomed to utter nothing but this during every gathering: 'Little children, love one another.' Finally, the disciples and the brothers who were present became irritated because they constantly heard the same thing over and over, and they said, 'Teacher, why do you always say this?' He answered with a statement worthy of John: 'Because it is the Lord's command, and if it alone is done, it is enough.'"<sup>1</sup>

of Patmos. This is the island where John wrote the book of Revelation, c. 95. After Domitian died the following year, John was released and most likely traveled to Ephesus, where, according to tradition, he died several years later.

This persecution produced an interesting story. According to Hege-sippus, a second-century Christian author, Domitian commanded the deaths of all descendants of King David. This included the family of Jesus, but only two relatives of Jesus could be located: two daughters of Jude, the half brother of Jesus. They were brought to Rome and examined by Domitian. They described their poverty and the small piece of land they owned and farmed, plus showed calluses from working manual labor. After deciding that they presented no threat, Domitian allowed them to return to Palestine.

#### *The Standard Persecution Proceedings: Trajan's Letter*

Following Domitian's death, Nerva ruled as emperor for one year, followed by Trajan, who reigned for nineteen years. The success of Trajan's long rule produced a policy toward Christians that lasted for 140 years. In 112, Pliny, a Roman governor, wrote to Trajan and requested guidance on handling Christians. Pliny noted that true Christians refused to worship Roman gods; offer prayer, incense, or wine to the image of the emperor; or curse Christ. He, therefore, set those three as requirements for release from arrest. He informed the emperor that some did acquiesce and turn from Christianity, but others refused.

Trajan responded in a brief statement that governed the response of future emperors until Emperor Decius reversed it in 250: "They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance."<sup>22</sup> Ten years later, in a province of Asia, riots occurred between Christians and anti-Christian mobs. The governor, reminiscent of Pliny, sent a letter of inquiry to Emperor Hadrian, asking for guidance. Hadrian responded similarly to Trajan: Christians should only be punished if convicted of illegal acts and, therefore, not be sought out. Since governors and local officials determined the definition of "illegal acts," sporadic, local persecutions continued from time to time. But emperor-led empire-wide persecutions ceased until 250.

**Question:**

How did the fish symbol for Christianity originate?

**Answer:**

It was not because fish was Jesus's favorite food or due to the miracle of feeding the 5,000 with bread and fish. The fish sign, widely used as a symbol for Christianity, developed as a secret code during the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians. According to tradition, Christians used the symbol to identify other Christians by each drawing one-half of the symbol. This was innocent enough to bystanders but provided vital communication among Christians. The Greek word for "fish" is *ichthus*, and someone playfully discovered that it could form a useful acronym:

Iesous = Jesus

Christus = Christ

Theou = God's

Uios = Son

Soter = Savior



### *Localized Persecutions from 112 to 250*

During this time period, Christians were frequently martyred individually and in small outbursts of persecution. During one local persecution in 155, Polycarp, a bishop from Smyrna who may have known the apostle John, was arrested. The proconsul encouraged him to reject Christ out of respect for his old age and save his life, but the crowd demanded his martyrdom by shouting, "Down with the atheists!" Undaunted and unafraid, Polycarp responded, "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?" The proconsul then threatened him with death by fire. Polycarp responded, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want." The crowd rushed to gather wood and then sought to bind Polycarp to a stake. He said, "Leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire will enable me not to struggle without the help of your nails."<sup>3</sup> According to tradition, the fire did not kill Polycarp but instead encircled his body, requiring an executioner to kill Polycarp with a dagger as a dove flew from the wound.

What happened next helped set a pattern of pilgrimage and relics that will significantly expand and be codified in the medieval Catholic Church. The centurion in charge of the execution collected what remained of Polycarp's body and burned it. Christians gathered his bones and, according

to one source, they “put them in an appropriate place where, the Lord willing, we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year with joy and rejoicing, both to remember those who have run their race and to prepare those yet to walk in their steps.”<sup>4</sup>

Perpetua and Felicitas died as martyrs in Carthage, North Africa, in 203. As an example of a small, local persecution, many new converts to Christianity, including Perpetua and Felicitas, were arrested and placed in prison. Perpetua’s pagan father begged her to recant and escape execution. She had recently given birth and kept the baby with her in prison: all the more reason, according to her father, to renounce Christ and live. But, remaining true to her faith, she was baptized in prison and relinquished her baby to her family.

Felicitas was condemned alongside Perpetua and other Christians, yet she feared not being able to join in their martyrdom since she was pregnant, and pregnant women could not be executed. Much to her joy, she gave birth two days before the execution. While in labor, one of the guards remarked to her, “You suffer so much now, what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts?” She replied, “What I am suffering now, I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside of me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.”<sup>5</sup> She gave birth to a girl and gave her daughter to a woman in the Christian community to raise.

The most famous quote about persecutions:

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Tertullian, *Apology*

The Roman captors allowed the group of young Christians one final meal together, which they shared as a feast in honor of Christ. They were taken to the arena, where wild beasts were unleashed upon them. When they did not die from their wounds immediately, an executioner was dispatched and killed them all.

### *Empire-Wide Persecutions Begin: Decius and Valerian*

Emperor Decius (249–251) initiated the first Roman Empire-wide persecution of Christians, thus overturning Trajan’s relatively lenient religious policy, in place since 112. After winning several military victories, he quickly reestablished the old Roman practice of universal worship of the Roman gods. The Romans required everyone, except for Jews, to sacrifice and burn incense to the gods and the health of the emperor while in the presence of a magistrate and witnesses. In return, the worshiper received a certificate. (A number of these certificates have been discovered.) The

Christian response varied. Many Christian leaders were martyred, including bishops of Rome, Jerusalem, and Antioch. Wealthy Christians were killed outright, whereas poorer Christians were forced into labor that resulted in their deaths. Other Christians sacrificed or bribed officials and received certificates, while still others fled. This persecution ended with the emperor's death.

A fresco of Jesus as the Good Shepherd from the third century and located in a catacomb of Rome (an underground tomb where Christians hid).

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good\\_shepherd\\_02b\\_close.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_02b_close.jpg)



The next emperor to persecute Christians arrived two years later, Valerian (253–260). Christians initially enjoyed peace, yet, beginning in 257, various foes attacked the Roman Empire from numerous directions, almost driving the government to bankruptcy. Valerian, like Decius, sought the favor of the gods by requiring universal worship. He issued two edicts against Christians in 257 and 258. Christians could not gather, and upper-class Christians were forced to forfeit their property (to the state, who needed the additional finances) and recant. Noncompliance resulted in death. All bishops, priests, and deacons were banished or killed immediately: the bishop of Rome (whom Catholics consider a pope) and four of his deacons plus three bishops in Africa were among those martyred. This persecution was harsher than the Decian abuse—which merely ordered everyone to worship Roman gods—since it targeted Christians, their property, and their movements.

As was the case in other emperor-led persecutions, when Valerian died in 260, his successor immediately withdrew the edicts. This action initiated a peace for approximately forty years, known as “the Little Peace of the Church.” But, just as Valerian raised the bar of persecution horrors

over those that Christians experienced in the Decian persecution, the next persecution under Diocletian raised the bar even more.

### *Height of Christian Persecution: Diocletian and Galerius*

During the twenty-four years between Valerian and Diocletian, from 260 to 284, ten different emperors ruled the Roman Empire. Because of this political instability, Diocletian (284–305) focused on stability for the empire. He divided governing responsibilities throughout the empire among a tetrarchy (“rule by four people”). The empire was divided in two, each half being ruled by an Augustus, or “senior emperor,” and a Caesar, or “junior emperor.” Diocletian took control as Augustus of the eastern Roman Empire and promoted Galerius as his Caesar. He promoted Maximian as Augustus of the western Roman Empire and appointed Constantius (the father of Constantine) as his Caesar. While he believed this move would produce a stronger Roman Empire, it also laid the foundation of the empire splitting 100 years later.

Diocletian ignored Christianity during the first fifteen years of his reign. His attitude changed in 299. After returning from a war against the Persians, Diocletian sought guidance from the Roman god Apollo. This religious ceremony was not unusual, especially for an emperor who yearned for the return of the glory of “Old Rome.” Yet the priests reportedly were unsuccessful in reading signs from the slaughtered animals. They blamed their inability on the presence of unbelievers, and, eventually, Christians were targeted as the culprits. Diocletian and Galerius issued proclamations requiring everyone in the court and military to offer sacrifices. Following Galerius’s advice, Diocletian extended the persecution and issued four edicts in 303 and 304.

The first edict ordered that all churches (and possibly homes where Scriptures were found) be destroyed; all copies of Scriptures be collected and burnt; Christian gatherings be prohibited; and wealthy Christians be punished, perhaps by death, whereas lower-class Christians were denied legal recourse for their persecutions. The second through fourth edicts ordered the arrest of Christian clergy while allowing for their release if they capitulated and made a sacrifice. The Romans ordered everyone to offer a sacrifice to Roman gods or be killed. While the first edict affected the entire empire, the second through fourth edicts were only enforced in the Eastern Roman Empire where Diocletian and Galerius ruled. By all accounts, Maximian and Constantius (Constantine’s father) did not implement the latter edicts in western Roman Empire.

In 305, the year following the fourth edict, both Augusti (the emperors), Diocletian and Maximian, retired. Galerius replaced Diocletian to become emperor in the East. The eastern persecutions continued for six years until just before Galerius's death in 311. Just prior to his death, Galerius's attitude about Christians reversed. He ceased all Christian persecutions by issuing the Edict of Toleration. He then took an even more bizarre step in the same document. Being deathly ill, Galerius asked for all Christians to pray for him. Nevertheless, he died soon afterward and before he could implement his Edict.

His death worsened the infighting among the emperors of the east and the west. No less than seven men were involved in leadership struggles and wars until Constantine claimed victory as the sole emperor of the Roman Empire in 324.

### *Freedom from Persecution to Official Religion*

Diocletian had chosen Constantine's father, Constantius, as the original western Caesar in the late 300s. Upon his father's death in 306, Constantine received a promotion and eventually became western Augustus, yet he desired for greater glory: to be sole emperor of the entire Roman Empire. One emperor who stood in his way was Maxentius, the son of the first western Emperor, Maximian. In 312, Constantine's army faced Maxentius's army at the Milvian Bridge, ten miles north of Rome. Maxentius's army was twice as large as Constantine's army, plus Maxentius controlled Rome. While slightly different accounts exist, Eusebius, one of the first church historians, recounts Constantine telling him that, while on the way to do battle at the bridge, he looked into the sun and saw a cross of light with the words "In this sign, conquer." The following night Constantine dreamt that Christ instructed him to use that sign against his enemies. By the time the battle lines were drawn up, Constantine's army had placed the "chi-rho" sign upon their crosses. They not only defeated Maxentius's army, but also caused Maxentius's death. He drowned in the Tiber River after being overwhelmed by his own fleeing army on the very bridge he had chosen on which to fight.

"Chi-rho" are the first two Greek letters in "Christ"



The next year, Constantine (in the west) and the eastern emperor, Licinius, met in Milan (in northern Italy) in 313 to work out various problems common to their two

realms. They agreed to cease all persecutions of Christians in the areas they controlled: "It is our pleasure to abolish all conditions whatever were

embodied in former orders . . . about the Christians, that every one of those who have a common wish to follow the religion of the Christians may from this moment freely and unconditionally proceed to observe the same without any annoyance or disquiet.”<sup>6</sup> This Edict of Milan also ordered the return of land previously belonging to Christians and where churches once stood that the Roman Empire had seized.

**Question:**

Are we studying about how the Roman Catholic Church started?

**Answer:**

That depends on who you ask. The three options:

1. A Catholic would say yes. Catholics believe that the first pope was Peter, and the Roman Catholic Church is the original church that Orthodox and Protestants later left to form their own groups.

2. A Protestant would say no. Peter was not the first pope of all Christianity (nor is the office of the papacy biblical) and the Roman Catholic Church as an institution did not come into existence until the bishop of Rome began exerting authority over all Christians, in the fifth to sixth centuries. (That is also the time when Oriental Orthodox churches began separating from the European church, but that is covered in chapter 13.)

3. An Orthodox would say no. Orthodox Christians (Eastern/Greek and Oriental, more in chapter 13) believe they are the original church from which Catholics separated.

Licinius eventually did not hold to the Edict’s regulations nor did other Roman co-emperors. One of the most famous persecutions after the Edict of Milan occurred in an area controlled by Licinius. In 320, forty soldiers near Sebaste (present-day Sivas in the middle of Turkey) declined to reject their Christian faith. Since this happened in winter, their commander inflicted an unusual punishment on them. He ordered they be stripped and placed in the middle of a frozen pond where they would freeze to death. He also ordered a container of heated water be placed on the shore with the offer that anyone who renounced his faith could save his earthly life and enter the warm water. One of the Christian soldiers accepted his offer: he rejected Christ, left the frozen pond, and climbed in the warm water. Inspired by the example of the remaining thirty-nine, one soldier on shore removed his clothes and joined the future martyrs. The next day the commander ordered that those who were alive and those who were dead be burned. While most of their remains were thrown in a river, local Christians recovered some of the ashes and carried them away as treasured relics.

Meanwhile, cooperation between Constantine and Licinius continued to deteriorate such that, by the year 324, civil war ensued. Constantine was victorious and captured Licinius. He allowed Licinius to retire to Thessalonica, but the next year accused Licinius of plotting against him and had him hanged. Therefore, finally, in 325, Constantine became the sole emperor of the Roman Empire. All Roman emperors after Constantine claimed Christianity save one, Julian the Apostate, who ruled from 361–363. From 325 on, Christianity grew in number of believers and churches, such that it eventually defined the character of the Roman Empire. To that end, in 380, Emperor Theodosius I, in an attempt to prevent further heresy in the Empire, issued the following decree: “It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation should continue to profess that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, as it has been preserved by faithful tradition. . . . We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic [meaning “universal”] Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen . . . They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict.”<sup>7</sup> This, in effect, made Christianity the only legal faith in the Roman Empire.

The current practice of Catholics referring to themselves as “Catholic” instead of “Christian” dates from this document in 380. At that time, many heretical groups existed with each calling themselves “Christian.” Therefore, the meaning of “Christian” had been watered down. To alleviate any confusion, the term “Catholic” was chosen to define true Christians over against false Christians.

Constantine outlawed crucifixion in the year 337, the same year he died.

Thus, in the span of 350 years, Christianity advanced from its Messiah dying at the hands of Roman officials in c. AD 30, through experiencing Roman persecution for almost 300 years, to the establishment of the Edict of Milan and general relief from persecution in 313, to, in 380, becoming the official religion of the very same Empire that crucified Christ.

## Development of Theology

The development of theology in the first four centuries of Christianity progressed through five stages that often overlapped: *apostles*, *apostolic fathers*, *apologists*, *theologians*, and *councils*. (All dates are approximate.)

1. The apostles (30–100 with the death of the apostle John) established the foundation of Christianity and took the message of Jesus “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).
2. The apostolic fathers (80–175) were books focused on church leadership, worship, practice, and nascent theological issues. Note: The name can be confusing. Apostolic fathers were not the fathers of the apostles. Instead, the term referred to the next generation of leaders, theologians and writings after the apostles. The term “apostolic fathers” originated in the seventeenth century.
3. Many non-Christians grew wary of Christianity and made false accusations against that faith. Apologists (125–250) (“apology” means “defense”) countered a myriad of accusations from the Roman Empire as well as non-Christian antagonists by defending the Christian faith.
4. The theologians (225 onward) took a different approach. Whereas apologists defended from accusations outside of Christianity, theologians defended from attacks within Christianity by heretics. (“Heresy” refers to a false teaching; “orthodox” refers to a correct teaching.)
5. The final stage consisted of church councils. While the first church council held in c. 50 was composed of apostles and elders (Acts 15), the first council involving all bishops from throughout Christianity (known as an ecumenical council) did not meet until 325 in Nicaea (today inside the city limits of Iznik, Turkey) under the auspices of the Roman Emperor Constantine. Nevertheless, numerous smaller and regional councils (some prefer the term “synods”) occurred beginning with the first recorded one in Rome in 155. After 325, regional and ecumenical councils frequently occurred until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Note, throughout this book, any gathering of church leaders will be referred to as a “council,” whether it consisted of a local or larger gathering.

*Apostles and Apostolic Fathers*

The apostolic age lasted from the ascension of Jesus c. 30 to the death of the last apostle, John, around the year 100. During that time, the apostles, those linked with the apostles—such as Luke who traveled with Paul—or Jesus’s half-brothers (James and Jude) wrote books that would one day comprise the New Testament. Many New Testament books date to as early as the late 40s and 50s, whereas a few of the books date as late as the 90s. In addition, by 100, Christianity had spread throughout most of the Roman Empire and even beyond: Paul certainly traveled throughout present-day Greece, central and western Turkey, and perhaps Spain; the apostle Thomas went to India (covered in chapter 16); the apostle Matthew may have gone to Ethiopia; and Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, may have been the first bishop of Alexandria, Egypt.

Questions about leadership, worship, practice, and theology multiplied as the new faith spread. Different writings attempted to answer those concerns. These writings became known as “Apostolic Fathers.” This can be confusing: “Apostolic Fathers” does not refer to people but to different letters and books. Some of the authors may have known some of the apostles. In any case, these writings date from as early as 80 to as late as 175 (and were not the fathers of the apostles). Apostolic Fathers are:

1. *I Clement*, Clement of Rome (d. 96), Bishop of Rome. According to Roman Catholic Church tradition, he was the fourth pope. He wrote a letter to the churches in Corinth to encourage them and to help handle strife.
2. *II Clement* (mid-second century). While Clement’s name is listed, the author is unknown. This writing was written in the style of a sermon and described the proper life of a Christian with an emphasis on repentance. It is the earliest surviving sermon outside of the New Testament.
3. *Ignatius* (d. 107), Bishop of Antioch. He was arrested, taken to Rome, and most likely killed in the Coliseum. Along the way, he wrote seven letters: six to Christians in different cities (Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna) and one to Polycarp. Ignatius desired a martyr’s death and encouraged Christians not to rescue him.
4. *Shepherd of Hermas* (written between 80–150), anonymous. While it does contain some incorrect ideas about God (discussed later), this beloved ethical essay described how to live as a Christian.

5. *Polycarp* (d. 155) Bishop of Smyrna. He wrote a letter to the Philipian churches. His martyrdom was discussed in the “Persecutions” section above. He may have met or been discipled by the apostle John.
6. *Epistle of Barnabas* (written between 70 and 100). While the title mentions “Barnabas,” it is unlikely Barnabas of the New Testament wrote it. The epistle draws a clear line between the practice of Judaism and of Christianity.
7. *Epistle to Diognetus* (mid-second century). This book describes the uniqueness of Christianity.
8. *Didache* (mid-second century). This anonymous work (which means “Teaching” and is pronounced “did-ah-k”) consists of two parts. The first part describes the proper life of a Christian and includes quotes from the Sermon on the Mount. The second part consists of church administration instructions, such as appropriate conduct during the Lord’s Supper and how to perform baptisms.

One common misunderstanding about the Apostolic Fathers is that they are part of the New Testament Apocrypha. The Apocrypha are covered in detail in the next chapter, but a short statement here is necessary. The Apostolic Fathers were not part of the New Testament Apocrypha, but instead were valued as teaching tools in the early church. While extensively used in the early church period, they were ultimately not considered Scripture. Thus, the term “Apostolic Fathers” denotes books that did not include heresies, like many of the New Testament Apocrypha did, but that did not rise to the level of inspiration of the New Testament.

### *Misunderstandings and Apologists*

Misunderstandings about Christianity proliferated throughout the Roman Empire. Some of the accusations made against Christians included:

- **Cannibalism:** This misunderstanding stemmed from two sources. First, non-Christians misunderstood the language used to describe Communion: eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. Non-Christians assumed this meant that Christians ate human flesh and drank human blood. Second, Roman law allowed for unwanted infants to be placed in a field to die. Christians often rescued these infants, took them into their homes, and raised them. Non-Christians linked this action with Communion

and accused Christians of killing and eating dead babies during the Lord's Supper.

- Incest: Christians commonly referred to each other as “brother” and “sister.” Non-Christians witnessed husbands and wives referring to each other as “brother” and “sister” and reached the conclusion that Christian brothers and sisters married each other.
- Antisocial behavior: Christians refused to attend public events such as gladiatorial fights and were labeled as destructive to the general population.
- Atheists: Since Christians worshiped an invisible god, as opposed to Roman and local gods represented by idols, non-Christians accused Christians of atheism.
- Worshiping a criminal: Everyone recognized that the Roman Empire ordered Jesus's crucifixion. This raised the natural concern: Why do Christians worship a prisoner lawfully executed by the Roman Empire?
- Jesus's father was a Roman soldier: A fake news story circulated that offered an alternative account to the virgin birth of Jesus: Mary had an affair with a Roman soldier named Panthera, and Mary became pregnant and gave birth to Jesus.

Christian apologists attempted to address these and other false accusations against their faith. Among the most prominent apologists:

- Quadratus wrote one of the earliest apologies in c. 125 and sent it to Emperor Hadrian. He attempted to prove that Jesus healed people. Only one line of his apology exists in a book by Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340): “But the works of our Savior were always present, for they were genuine: those that were healed, and those that were raised from the dead . . . they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day.”
- Justin Martyr (beheaded in the 160s) wrote an apology addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius (reigned 138–161). He compared Christianity to Socrates and Socrates's death at the hands of Greeks to Christian deaths at the hands of the Roman Empire: “And when Socrates attempted, by true reason and examination, to bring these things to light (his ideas), and deliver men from the demons, then the demons themselves, by means of men who rejoiced in iniquity, caused his death, as an atheist and a profane person, on the charge that ‘he was introducing new divinities’; and in our [the Christian] case, they [the Romans] display a similar activity.”

- Tertullian (155–240; from Carthage in present-day Tunisia, North Africa). In his *Apology*, he attacked the accusation of cannibalism and incest: “If to be a Christian is to take part in baby-eating and ritual incest, why does no-one try to prove those charges? Despite the activities of the informers and way that soldiers blackmail the Christians, no-one has ever come across a half-eaten baby! It’s all just rumor. And do you think eternal life is worth it, if the price is eating babies and incest? If [you don’t], why do you suppose we do?”
- Origen (184–253; from Alexandria, Egypt, and died from injuries sustained during the persecution of Decius). Celsus wrote the earliest detailed attack against Christianity in c. 175. While this work does not exist independently, Origen does provide extensive quotes in his apology, *Against Celsus*. In this example, Celsus complains that Christians are not sufficiently engaged in the Empire as to be worthy citizens: “Then Celsus next exhorts us to help the emperor with all our power, and cooperate with him in what is right, and fight for him. . . . And this we do in obedience to the injunction of the apostle, ‘I exhort, therefore, that first of all supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings [or emperors], and for all that are in authority.’” Origen countered that Christians do aid the Empire by praying for the emperor and are, therefore, of value to the Roman Empire.

### *Heretics, Theologians, and Councils*

The apologists produced a wide range of external defenses of Christianity. Soon after, and even somewhat overlapping, came attacks on the nature of God, or internal attacks, which necessitated the writings of theologians and the development of councils. In the early church period (to 400), Christian heresies, or false teachings, centered on the nature of Jesus Christ. In response to this, theologians, councils, and creeds (covered in the following chapter) developed with the shared goal of limiting interpretations to a single, correct understanding. The response to heresies played a vital role in the development of Christian theology. Heretics wrote and debated and forced the church to better articulate and clarify biblical truths.

The earliest heresy to grapple with the nature of Christ was Gnosticism, from the Greek word for “knowledge.” Broadly speaking, Gnosticism embraced dualism: the spiritual realm is separate from the physical realm, whereas a focus on spirituality is desirable and physical

**Question:** What is the difference between heresy, false teaching, error, and opinion?

**Answer:** In this book, the following definitions will be used:

1. Heresy and false teaching mean the same thing, an idea that teaches against the orthodox (or true) understanding of God. Someone holding to this idea would be considered outside of the Christian community. An example would be Arius (see below), who taught that God the Father created God the Son.

2. Error is a level below heresy. An error involves a disagreement among Christians who both hold to orthodox understandings of God. An example would be differing beliefs in infant baptism vs. believer's baptism. An error is sufficient reason for many people to separate from worshipping together, while still considering others to be Christian.

3. Opinion is a level below error. A difference of opinion involves Christians who hold to orthodox understandings of God and could be members of the same church but disagree over non-essentials. An example would be whether to use pews or individual chairs in worship.

involvement inevitably leads to evil. Therefore, Gnostics sought to obtain the “secret knowledge” found only in the spiritual realm and not available in the physical realm. Irenaeus (d. c. 200) wrote an early theological treatise against Gnosticism called “Against Heresies.” An offshoot of Gnosticism was Docetism, from the Greek word “to seem.” Docetism taught that a messenger from the spiritual realm traveled to earth to explain the “secret knowledge,” that messenger was Jesus, and, therefore, Jesus was not physical. Gnosticism and Docetism were very real threats beginning in the first century, as is evidenced by 1 John 4:2: “This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,” and 2 John 7a: “Many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.” Gnosticism and Docetism became more prominent in the second century and influenced men such as Marcion and the writing of many of the New Testament Apocrypha (covered in chapter 2). Gnosticism as a threat to Christianity eventually faded in the third century, only to be replaced with other heresies.

In the late second century as heresies began to intensify, early church leaders attempted to more closely define and name theological realities. Theophilus of Antioch (d. 183), writing in Greek, is one of the first to attempt to describe the “Father, his Word [logos], and his Wisdom.” He chose the word “trias,” but this indicates more of a meaning of “triad” or three completely separate parts that are loosely connected. Tertullian (d. 220) used the Latin word *trinitas*, which means “trinity” and carries a

meaning that the three aspects are thoroughly related to each other while each part still retains a unique identity. He also provided a description of the Trinity, “All [Father, Son, Holy Spirit] are of one, by unity . . . of substance . . . which distributes the unity in a Trinity, placing in their order the three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. . . . Yet they are of one substance and of one condition and of one power.” This important distinction indicated that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were made of the same “substance,” or sameness of being divine, but each of the three “persons” had a uniqueness to itself. Therefore, while the word “Trinity” is not in the Bible, it does accurately describe the inner workings of God, being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A variety of heresies proliferated in the second and third centuries, for example:

- Theodotus (late second century) believed that Jesus was a man who, after being anointed with the Holy Spirit and baptized by John the Baptist, became Christ but was never God. This idea is known as “Adoptionism,” that God “adopted” the man Jesus and made him Christ. This is a form of “dynamic Monarchianism”; “Monarchianism,” or “one rule” referring to God being one person and not a Trinity, and “dynamic,” in that the man Jesus changed. Jesus was like God, but he was not of the same nature as God.
- Sabellius (early third century) believed that God was one entity that revealed itself in three different roles: as the Father in creation, as the Son in the incarnation, crucifixion, and redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in aiding humans to become Christ-like. This idea is technically known as “modalistic Monarchianism”; “Monarchianism,” referring to God being one person and not a Trinity, and “modalistic,” referring to the different modes or roles that one God takes. This false teaching presented God as taking on different roles (Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit) but is the same God in each role.

The case of Bishop Paul of Samosata (c. 265) illustrates a different aspect of the wider, evolving, young Christian movement: the use of councils. Paul believed that Jesus was a man and the power of God came to rest upon him at birth, thus he accepted a form of dynamic Monarchianism. His idea became very popular, and, in 296, a group of bishops, priests, and deacons gathered at a council in Antioch. The council condemned Paul’s teaching and removed him from his bishopric (role as bishop), yet not everyone accepted this decision nor the authority of the council. In a move not witnessed before in the relationship between

Not all heresies were widespread and popular. Some lesser-known heresies:

- The Alogi (third century), this group denied the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
- Artemon (third century) believed that Jesus was only a man, although greater than the prophets.
- The Messalians (fourth century) taught that everyone's soul is united with a demon due to Adam's sin. Only prayer will remove the demon, not baptism. After the demons departed, the person receives a vision of the Trinity.
- Noetus (third century) said that God the Father was born, suffered, and died. He denied the existence of the Son; to him, acceptance of the Father and the Son amounted to ditheism (worship of two gods; monotheism is the worship of one god).

the Roman Empire and Christianity, the emperor Aurelian stepped in to settle the dispute. The emperor was not a Christian and, no doubt, viewed this only as a disturbance within the Empire that he needed to calm. He consulted various bishops, all of whom voted against Paul, and Paul abandoned his position as bishop. This took place during “The Little Peace of the Church” mentioned earlier.

But the most damaging early heresy originated with Arius (d. 336) from Alexandria, Egypt. The bishop there, Alexander (d. 328), taught that the Son was eternal in the past and equal with God the Father, which is an orthodox teaching. (“Orthodox” with a small case “o” refers to correct teaching and not the Orthodox Church.) One of his priests, Arius, disagreed. After pondering the relationship between the Father and the Son, Arius concluded that the Father had at some point in the past created the Son; in his own words and as recorded by Socrates of Constantinople, *Church History*, “if the Father begat the Son . . . it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not.”<sup>8</sup> He viewed the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as having different “essences” or “substances”; they were distinct and not equal. This teaching spread, causing Alexander, aided by his secretary and future bishop Athanasius, also from Alexandria and nicknamed the “black dwarf,” to call a regional council. This local council met in Alexandria in 320, excommunicated Arius, and declared his teaching as a heresy in that region. Athanasius, who became the champion of Nicene orthodoxy (discussed in chapter 2), became the driving force in the rebuttal against Arius, writing statements like, “The generation [or begotten-ness] of the Son is not like that of a man . . . But [since the] nature of the Son of God [is] being infinite and eternal, his generation must, of necessity, be infinite and eternal as well.”<sup>9</sup> This means the Son of God preexisted and should not be

thought of as a human, each of whom has a beginning, which he believed was Arius's error. "Begotten" or "to generate" means something different when applied to the Son of God than when applied to a human child. The human child had a beginning, whereas the Son did not because the essence of God is eternally the same and does not change. Not only did Arianism attack the nature of Christ, but the nature of salvation as well. Alexander and Athanasius taught that the Son had to be human in order to redeem humanity. Arius believed the key to salvation centered on the obedience of the Son to the Father and not on the sacrifice made on behalf of humanity.

Nevertheless, the popularity of Arius's teaching grew. Arius communicated with bishops in the East and complained of the treatment of his idea, and many of them wrote letters condemning Alexander's view. Meanwhile, Constantine, the first Christian emperor, solidified his control over the entire Roman Empire in 324. As the new emperor, and one who spent many years seeking to unify the Roman Empire, Constantine was in no mood to consent to a long-running theological feud. He attempted to settle the debate by writing letters to Alexander and Arius, but neither moved on his position. Constantine then called a council of all bishops and ordered Arius to plead his case. He even paid for travel and lodging for all bishops to ensure the largest possible participation. He, no doubt, wished to settle theological issues in his empire as quickly as possible. He chose a city close to his palace and about fifty-five miles southeast of his new capital of Constantinople: Nicaea.

Constantine presided over the Council of Nicaea in 325. An array of bishops attended the council, with eyewitnesses numbering the bishops at between 250–318, including Arius. The bishops decided on a variety of matters, such as the dating of Easter and the readmission process for former heretics, but the most pressing and prominent concern centered on Arianism. Arius offered only two supporting bishops, and his feeble defense resulted in rejection. Eusebius, an early church historian and an eyewitness to the proceedings, recorded the result: "But the Holy Catholic and Apostolic church anathematizes [considers as heretics] those who say, 'There was a time when he was not,' and 'Before he was begotten, he did not exist' and 'He was made from that which did not exist.' The same goes for those who assert that he is of a different substance or essence from the Father, or that he was created, or can be changed."<sup>10</sup> Opposed to the idea of *homoiousious* favored by Arians and meaning "like substance," the Council advocated for *homoousious* (without the "i" in the middle), meaning "same substance."

The council also addressed other concerns: rules for ordination; rules for excommunication; punishment for those who yielded under persecution and either temporarily rejected the faith or offered sacrifice to the emperor; and rules regarding those former followers of Paul of Samosata who wished to return to the church. Counter to some suggestions, it did not address the development of the New Testament, but it did produce a creed against Arianism, which is addressed in the next chapter.

Although the council itself overwhelmingly opposed Arius, among the populace Arianism remained a widely held belief. Arius lost that battle, but Arians continued to fight the war. In addition, Constantine might not have been fully aware of the nuances of the theological debate. In his attempt to sustain peace in the Roman Empire, he eventually softened his stance against Arianism and even exiled Athanasius. An Arian bishop even baptized him just before his death in 337. Indeed, twenty-five years later, in c. 350, Jerome, who later produced the Latin Bible or *Vulgate*, wrote, “the whole world groaned and marveled to find itself Arian.”<sup>11</sup> The debate continued throughout the middle of the fourth century involving emperors, theologians, and even councils, albeit regional councils.

Eventually another Christian emperor, Theodosius I, called a second ecumenical council in part to defeat the lingering Arianism: the Council of Constantinople in 381. Like all councils, it also met to settle various other ecclesiastical matters, such as condemning Apollinarianism, a belief that Jesus had a human body but not a soul, instead the *logos* (or divine mind) took the place of the soul in Christ. But the main focus was to hammer the last nail in the coffin of Arianism. It rejected all pro-Arian theologies produced after the Council of Nicaea and adapted the Nicene Creed by strengthening the language advocating the “one God in three persons” doctrine. This council was successful, in that Arianism virtually vanished from the Roman Empire within a generation. Christians in the Empire finally celebrated. It took the church over fifty years, numerous councils (Nicaea and Constantinople plus smaller ones in between the two) and much ecclesiastical and even political infighting to finally vanquish Arianism in the Empire. But, while this is true, those Christians did not anticipate a new Arian threat: pro-Arian missionaries migrated into middle and northern Europe, successfully spreading their message. Those northern European Arian Christians would, in the next century, invade the Roman Empire with surprising results, which is covered in the Medieval Christianity section.