

A History of Christian Thought: A Survey of 2000 Years

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February 18, 2024

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Biblical Era, 2000 BC-95 AD

Why study the church's history and tradition?

1. Christianity is unique among the religions of the world in that it is more about beliefs than practices.
2. It teaches us that we are not the first people to wrestle with these faith questions.
3. We learn how our forefathers and foremothers arrived at the beliefs they taught us. And how others, who believe differently than we do, arrived at their beliefs.
4. It sets us free from the bondage of prejudices that has bound us to wrong thinking.

I. Old Testament Era - 2000-4 BC

Palestine is named by the Romans for the Philistines; it was the land bridge
It is on the land bridge & trading route between Persia and Egypt (the Levant)

PreChristian Judaism (time estimates)

2000-1875 BC Era of Patriarchs

1875-1440 BC The Children of Israel were in Egypt

1440-1400 BC Moses delivers the Children of Israel and they wandered in Sinai

1400-1000 BC The 12 Tribes attempt to take the land promised to Abraham
(Genesis 15:18-21 is their title deed to the land.)

1000 BC David captures Jerusalem (It took the 400 years to capture the land.)

1000-931 BC The Reigns of David and Solomon (This is Israel's golden era.)

959 BC The Temple of Solomon is completed

721 BC Northern Kingdom (10 lost Tribes) defeated by Assyrians; i.e., Samaria.

Only Tribes of Benjamin, Judea, Levi left; i.e., Judea, Jews

586 BC Southern Kingdom defeated by Babylonians; Destruction of the Temple
Beginning of the Babylonian captivity; development of the synagogue

539 BC Persian defeat the Babylonians

519 BC Second Temple is dedicated (small and inferior to Temple of Solomon)

332 BC Greeks (Alexander the Great) defeats Jerusalem

323 BC The death of Alexander the Great. Alexander's empire was divided among 4
Generals: Ptolemaic Kingdom (Egypt), Seleucid Kingdom (east), Pergamon Kingdom
(Asia Minor), Macedon (Greece). The control of Israel went back and forth between
the Ptolemies and the Seleucids until 200 when the Seleucids gained permanent
control.

285-247 BC The Hebrew Bible were translated into Greek at the request of Ptolemy II
by 72 Hebrew translators. The Septuagint became the Bible for the early church.

This explains why some New Testament quotes from the Hebrew Bible vary a bit from
the Hebrew text. 167-141 BC Maccabean Revolt, Israel was a sovereign state. The

story of this revolt is in I & II Maccabees in the Apocrypha; i.e., symbol, the palm branch.

63 BC Romans defeat Jerusalem

37-4 BC Reign of Herod the Great. After Herod's death, the Romans divided his kingdom among three living sons: Herod Archelaus, tetrarch of Judea, Samaria, & Idumea; Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea; Herod Philip, tetrarch of territories north and east of the Jordan River.

20 BC Temple of Herod is dedicated

6-4 BC Jesus' birth, just before the death of Herod the Great.

II. New Testament Era - 26-95

26-36 Pontius Pilate (appointed governor of Judea

27-30 Jesus leaves the carpenters shop in Nazareth (Mark 6:3), receives John's baptism (Mark 1:9-11), and begins an itinerant ministry, teaching and healing. Jesus attends the Passover in Jerusalem 3 times (John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; and 19:14).

30 The church's four great festivals, each based on the lunar calendar:

> April 9 Good Friday (crucifixion was a shameful death, "cursed" Deuteronomy 21:23);

> April 11 Easter Sunday (Luke 23:26-56, 24:1-49). Resurrection is not about the immortality of Jesus' soul. It is about his being restored to life, body and soul. Jesus appearing to his disciples to assure them he was alive.

> May 21 Ascension (40 days after Easter, Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:3, 9-11). Before his ascension, Jesus told his followers to "wait for Pentecost (Acts 1:4), but they cast lots to select a replacement for Judas; i.e., Matthias (Acts 1:12-26). Did God have Paul in mind as the 12th Apostle?

> May 31 Pentecost, Hebrew harvest festival, the Feast of Weeks (50 days after Easter, Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-41). People came from all over the world to attend (Acts 2:9-11). Phenomenologies: wind, tongues of fire, and tongues. Was this a miracle of speaking or hearing? Peter called people to repent and be. Attendees became missionaries.

31 Selection of 7 deacons (servants). They were Hellenistic believers selected to aid in the distribution of food, but they soon became preachers; i.e., Stephen, the first martyr (Acts 6:8-7:60) and Philip (Acts 8:4-8, 26-40). Later in the New Testament era, some women were also deacons (Romans 16:1-2).

34 Church, which was made up of Jews, grew (Acts 4:4; 6:7), Jews began to expel them from the Temple and synagogues (Acts 5:17-47; 6:8-15; 7:54-60). Many believers left Jerusalem to avoid persecution (Acts 8:1). As a result Phillip preached outside of Jerusalem to Samaritans and an Ethiopians eunuch (Acts 8:4-8, 26-40), and Apostle Peter preached to Gentiles (Acts 10:1-48). The Great Commission was being fulfilled (Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8).

35 Conversion of Saul of Tarsus (called "Paul" or "little"; Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-22; 36:1-32). He was a persecutor who became a preacher to Gentiles.

35-38 Paul went Arabia and Damascus seeking guidance for how to fulfill his calling (Galatians 1:15-17). Finally, he goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and James, Jesus' half-brother (Acts 9:26-27; Galatians 1:18-24). They regard him as a double

agent and send him home.

38-48 Paul lives in Tarsus (Acts 9:30). Paul spent a decade doing ministry in his hometown.

48 Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch where a church, not founded by the Apostles (Acts 11:20), was flourishing. The two men taught together for a year. It was in Antioch where the disciples were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26; 26:28; I Peter 4:16).

They had previously been called "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:2) and "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). Antioch was an interracial church (Acts 13:1).

49 First missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:4-14:28; Galatians 1:21-24). They traveled primarily in small cities in Cyprus and Asia Minor. When they received little response in the synagogues, they reached out to Gentiles. They did not require Gentile believers to become Jews.

49 Council of Jerusalem, 19 years after the Great Commission (Acts 15:1-20; Galatians 2:1-10). The Apostles were still in Jerusalem! The issue: do Gentile believers have to become Jews? Some said "Yes", including James, not the Apostle but Jesus' brother (Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; I Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19; 2:9), who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem; i.e., nepotism. Peter said, "No" based on his experience in ministering to Gentiles (Acts 8:14-25; 10:1-11:18). He said, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us (*at Pentecost*). He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8-9). Peter carried the day. Until then Christianity had been a Jewish sect that did not regard the Oral Tradition as authoritative and accepted Jesus as Messiah. They wanted a faith which wanted to unite Jews and Gentiles, which was the vision of Isaiah ("I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Isaiah 49:6). Paul had continuous problems with "Judaizers" (I Corinthians 9:1-4; II Corinthians 10:1-13:6; Galatians 1:6-2:21; 3:15-25; 5:2-6) who tried to persuade Gentile Christians to become Jews.

49-54 Second Missionary Journey with Paul and Silas (Acts 15:36-18:22). Paul and Barnabas parted company over John Mark. These journeys included larger cities in Asia Minor and Eastern Europe. Paul claims the title "Apostle".

50 First books in New Testament written, I & II Thessalonians.

54-58 Third Missionary Journey with Paul and Timothy (Acts 18:23-21:16). These journeys were largely cover the same territory as the second missionary trip.

58 Paul's arrest and imprisonment in Judea (Acts 21:17-26:32).

60 Paul's voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:14).

61 Paul under house arrest and imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:15-31).

64 The Apostle James (brother of John) is martyred by Herod Agrippa 1 (Acts 12:1-2). Note that Peter is still in Jerusalem 34 years after the Great Commission (Acts 12:3-19).

65 Paul's martyrdom in Rome (II Timothy 4:6-8).

66 A violent Jewish military uprising took place. It was an attempt to overthrow the Romans.

69 First Gospel written by Mark (probably written by John Mark, Mark 14:51-52). The early church taught that Peter was Markan source. "Gospel Parallels" make it clear the

Mark was one of the sources of Matthew and Luke but not John. But Matthew and Luke had a source unknown by the writer of Mark. Scholars call it "Q" or Quelle (meaning "source"). It contained a collection of Jesus' words and deeds. Luke speaks of doing primary research (Luke 1:1-5). John's Gospel "Q" or Quelle (source). It is also clear that Luke did careful research before writing Luke-Acts (Luke 1:1-4). Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the Synoptic Gospel, contain a parallel story-line of Jesus life, teachings, and miracles. They are snapshots of Jesus from a Roman, Jewish, and Greek perspective. They are sermons that confront the reader with the question, "Who is Jesus to you" (Mark 8:27-30; 14:61-62; 15:2, 26)?

70 Siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (Mark 13:1-2), led by future Emperor Titus. 1,100,000 Jews were killed and 97,000 taken captive, priests were murdered according to Josephus. The Arch of Titus, located in the Roman Forum, was constructed in 81 by Emperor Domitian. It contains panels depicting the triumphal procession in Rome celebrated in AD 71. It contains one of the few depictions of artifacts from Herod's Temple. After this event Biblical Judaism becomes rabbinic Judaism. The Temple, priests, and the sacrificial system was replaced with synagogues, rabbis, and the Oral Tradition (Talmud).

90 John's Gospel is written. It leaves out some stories in the Synoptic Gospels (Jesus' baptism, the Last Supper) and adds many more. John is a portrait of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God who was co-equal with God.

90 Old Testament Canon closed at Council of Jamnia (modern Yavne, Israel), where the Sanhedrin was moved after the destruction of the Temple. Ruth and Esther was questioned as scripture because they were about interracial marriage. Each book accepted was written in Hebrew. This was also when the Jewish authorities decided to exclude believers in Jesus as the Messiah from synagogue attendance. The Talmud, which may refer to either the Mishnah (written 200) or the Gemara (written 500) alone or together, contains the second Law. This is the Oral Tradition which Jesus did not regard as authoritative.

95 Final books in New Testament canon written, II Peter and Revelation.

SESSION ONE

Patristic Era, 100-325

Many things went right in this historical era:

A. The church experiences phenomenal growth. By the year 300 there were 6,300,000 Christians, or 10 percent of the population of the empire, Christians were finding their way into every level of society. This is a demographic miracle. Reasons:

1. The pagan religions had lost their purchase.
2. Judaism's ethical monotheism was attractive but people were resistant to conversion.
3. People in the ancient world admired people who were willing to die for what they believed.
4. The Christian Gospel was exclusive.

B. The church offered a transformational community. We have many documents from the primitive church. We also have the "Didache", was found by a scholar in a library in

Alexandria, Egypt in 1873. It was written about 100-150. Together these documents make clear that:

- > The early Christians were known for their moral purity.
- > The believers gathered in homes and had a common meal.
- > There developed a regimented process for admission to the church; i.e., catechumen (like Confirmation) class for 40 days, usually during Lent, concluding with Baptism.
- > They worshipped on Sunday.
- > Christians prayed 3 times a week, using the Lord's Prayer, and fasted two days a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays.
- > There were traveling preachers and prophets, and members were expected to provide them housing and board for up to 3 days.
- > Members were to select bishops and deacons from among them to lead them.
- > The Christian hope was not going to heaven when you died.

This being said I want to tell you some of the stories that don't get told.

1. There was an uncomfortable growth of antisemitism.

- > Christians regularly said Jews were cursed for killing Jesus. ("Let his blood is on us and on our children." Matthew 27:25)
 - > 130 Letter of Barnabas says Judaism is a false religion.
 - > 787, Second Council of Nicaea (the seventh Ecumenical Council), the church forbade Jewish converts from practicing Jewish customs, thus preventing Messianic Christianity.
 - > by the Middle Ages (500-1500) Jews were being blamed for everything that went wrong; i.e., the Black Plague (1347-1351) Jews and Muslims were to wear special clothing to distinguish them from Christians.
 - > 1391-1492 Spanish Jews were required to convert or be expelled: 200,000 converted, 100,000 were expelled.
 - > Martin Luther proposed burning synagogues, confiscating property, expelling them from Germany. One wonders if the seeds he planted was one cause of the Holocaust.
2. There were many non-mainstream theological ideas that gained a hearing in the first 300 years of Christian history.

A. **Gnosticism.** ["gnosis"= "having knowledge"]

Most of the gnostic writings were destroyed by the Church. But in 1945, a collection of Gnostic Christian writings were discovered in Egypt. They are called the Nag Hammadi library. The most famous of the manuscripts is called The Gospel of Thomas, which teaches that women are saved by becoming men.

Teachings of Gnosticism:

- > *God*: Gnosticism is polytheistic.
- > *YHWH*: YHWH is a lesser god who created our material world. He messed the creation up badly. The world we live in is flawed and evil. YHWH is that god of the Jews. He is jealous, demanding, and punitive. YHWH who does not want us to find out about our divine origin. He does not want us to become divine ourselves. He refused to let us eat of the tree of knowledge so we could become as gods. He is trying to Gnosticism is us here trapped in materialism.
- > *Jesus*: Jesus was a pre-existing divine being. He was sent, not by the God of the OT (YHWH), but the Supreme God to reveal our true identity, and to lead us back to the

recognition of our own divine nature. Like Jesus, we too are pre-existing spiritual beings. Notice how poorly the God of the Jews comes off. Jesus did not have a physical body. He was a phantom, an apparition. He walked but didn't leave a footprint. i.e., Docetism (meaning "to appear").

> *Jesus is a male. The Holy Spirit is a female.* Francis of Assisi said the same thing.

> *Spirit vs. Flesh:* Flesh is evil. The Spirit/Soul is good. Only the Spirit/Soul can be saved. It is destined to be in the heavenly realm.

> *Divine Spark:* We have a spark of our original divine spirit in us. If we do not nurture it, it is like a light that will go out.

> *Demonic Beings:* The same demonic creatures that attacked Jesus attack us, because they do not want us to gain knowledge about who we are. Jesus' ministry of defeating demons was particularly important. It is these demons that do not want us to gain divine knowledge.

Many of these ideas circulated in the New Testament era (I Corinthians 12:3; I John 4:1-3; II John 7) and were rejected.

B. Marcionism

This was a church started by Marcion of Sinope (85-160) which flourished for a while. He was the son of an early Christian bishop from what is now Northern Turkey on the Black Sea. He came from Asia Minor with 200,000 silver coins to give to the church at Rome. They excommunicated him in 144 and gave him his money back. But his ideas are still with us. See if you don't recognize his ideas from a Sunday School discussion. Chances are there are some Marcionites in the room: he believed:

> *God:* There is a god of the Old Testament (YHWH) and a God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament is legalistic, judgmental, and harsh; he enjoys punishing people for their sins. The god of the New Testament is merciful, forgiving, and full of grace.

> *Jesus:* Jesus is not the Jewish Messiah. He is a spiritual entity that was sent by the God of the NT, a God of love, to speak to the fragment of light left in us. He came into an alien world as a sheer act of love for us. He came to announce our true origin and destiny as divine creatures. He also came to liberate us from the bodies in Chichester we had become trapped. Salvation is a form of self-realization. Jesus is special only because he is the messenger of this knowledge.

> *Asceticism:* When we understand this message, we begin to practice sexual abstinence. They regarded lust for one's wife and for another woman as essentially the same. It is lust, and lust is bad. Marriage and children simply keep us trapped in matter.

> *Baptism:* They encouraged people to postpone baptism until their life was pure.

> *Canon:* The only truly inspired scriptures were Paul's letters and a portion of Luke's Gospel.

C. Montanism

This was a movement which was begun by a second century Christian prophet name Montanus. He lived in Central Turkey. He is one of the few Christian leaders that we know little about, because the church buried him in history. We don't know when or where he was born or died. What we know is that early in the second century what we might call a second Pentecost broke out and spread like wildfire through Asia Minor and Northern Africa.

> *Acts 2*: They begin to experience the same things we read about in the Book of Acts: miracles, healings, prophesy, word of knowledge, word of wisdom, glossolalia, and personal holiness.

> *Purity*: There was also a strong emphasis on moral purity. This includes sexual purity. They considered sexual abstinence to be the preferred mode of being, and forbade second marriage.

> *Spiritual disciplines*: They imposed strict rules on fasting and prayer.

> *Martyrdom*: They advocated the willing to accept martyrdom for the faith.

> *Women*: Many early leaders were women. They emphasized that in the church "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Two virgin women, Prisca and Maximilia, assisted Montanus in his ministry. Tertullian (155-220) converted to Montanism in 206. The Montanists were condemned and excommunicated early in the third century, though the movement persisted for several centuries. Instead of being dependent on the gifts of the Holy Spirit the early church opted to be ruled by people with orders.

3. In spite of these Christian variants there was a growing worldwide consensus about orthodoxy. Nevertheless, even the greatest theologians had some non-orthodox theological ideas. There are many we could examine, but we will look at only two.

A. Irenaeus of Lyon (130-200)

Originally from Smyrna (Izmir, Turkey), he had known Polycarp, who had known the Apostle John. There is little question why he was the first church father to talk about the importance of Apostolic succession, that there was a unbroken succession from the Apostles to today's bishops. He is also the first person to give us the equivalent of an Apostle's Creed. Nevertheless, he had some peculiar ideas:

> *The Fall*: Irenaeus didn't believe in it. He believed that humanity was created weak and immature, and that God intended his creatures to take a long time to grow into God's likeness.

> *The Incarnation*: The incarnation was God's plan to help humanity overcome a bad start. By becoming a human being, Jesus conveys eternal qualities to us, and enabled us to become more like God. It was therefore Jesus' incarnation, not his crucifixion that saves us.

> *Eve and Mary*: He compares the first Adam to Jesus, and Eve to Mary.

> *Jesus' death*: Jesus died in old age, which he regarded as beginning at age 50.

> *Universalism*: He was a universalist. He believed everyone will be saved. He said that even after death people could turn to God and choose to act according to the divine will in the world to come. And even if there were punished for their wickedness after death, it would be temporary and remedial. Ultimately everyone will be saved.

B. Origen of Alexandria (185–253)

He was a giant. He was the church's first great theologian and philosopher. He was raised in a Christian family. As a young man he castrated himself in obedience to Matthew 19:12, an action that he later repudiated. Estimates are that he wrote between 2,000 and 6,000 treatises, hundreds of which we still have. He had 7 full-time scribes who did nothing but take dictation. In 250, late in his life, Emperor Decius said he believed the Christian's refusal to worship him as a god had caused a plague, and had Origen put in prison and tortured until he renounced his faith. Origen refused, though

after Decius was dead Origen died of complications from his injuries. He too had some peculiar theological ideas:

> *Trinity*: He taught that the Trinity was a hierarchy. He believed that the Father is superior to the Son and created the Son, and that the Jesus is superior to the Holy Spirit.

> *Universalism*: He too was a universalist. He did not believe anyone will spend eternity in hell. Eventually everyone will be saved, even Satan.

> *Pre-Existence of Souls*: He believed that everyone in this world preexisted in a spiritual world. All of these souls once loved their Creator, but their fervor cooled. So God created our world and sent us there. Those whose love for God diminished the most became demons. Those whose love diminished moderately became humans souls, eventually to be incarnated in fleshly bodies. Those whose love diminished the least became angels. One soul, however, who remained perfectly devoted to God became, through love, one with the Word of God. The Logos eventually took flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary, becoming the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth.

> *Reincarnation*: He believed in the transmigration of the soul, or reincarnation.

> *The Church*: He taught that the church is a spiritual rather than an organizational, bureaucratic institution.

> *Eucharist*: He taught that the Eucharist was only symbolically the Body and Blood of Christ.

4. The biggest problem the church faced was persecution.

A. **Persecution by Jews.**

The Roman Empire was polytheistic. Very few people were atheists. You could worship any god you wished. There was only three thing everyone in the empire was expected to do once a year: (1) make an animal sacrifice; (2) pay tribute (a denarius) to Caesar and (3) say, "Kaiser kurios" which translates to "Caesar is Lord". And it had to be certified by a Roman official. The Christians refused to do this. Only the Jews were exempt from this law because they were monotheists. When the Christians objected to doing this because it was idolatry, they Jews said, "They are not one of us. They already believe in 3 god, why not 4?" The Jews began throwing the Christians out of their synagogues after 90 following the Council of Jamnia.

B. **Persecution by Romans.**

Persecution began with Emperor Nero (37-68) and crescendoed under Emperor Diocletian (245-312). Roman historian Tacitus' "The Annals of Imperial Rome" was written in 115. He records the persecution of Christians under Nero in 64. A great destructive fire which raged for 6 days, died down, and then broke out again. 10 of 14 districts were severely effected, 3 districts were completely destroyed. Tacitus suggested that Nero ordered a fire set because he had building plans for the city and existing buildings were in the way. At the very least he had showed little sympathy. Rumor had it that he was playing music, fiddling while Rome burned. To shift blame he pinned it on the Christians; accusing them of arson. They were a convenient scapegoat. Tacitus said he chose them because they were known to hate humanity; i.e., telling people they were sinful and going to hell. Nero had them rounded up, tortured, and then martyred.

Persecution crescendoed in the middle of the second century, because of the growth of the movement. Histories call the 50 year period between 235-284 "the crisis of the

3rd century." The Roman Empire have 2 break away states, one in the east and the other in the west; there was drought; epidemic, economic disaster, barbarian invasions, political chaos, 21 emperors and over 30 pretenders emperor. The Christians were a perfect scapegoat. They were accused of being atheists (refusing to do emperor worship) and cannibals ("this is my body...blood"). The gods were not happy.

Oddly rather than killing the church, persecution caused it to grow. As Tertullian (160-220) wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

The church began collecting the bones of saints as relics. The Roman mass still requires a relic under the altar. The idea of asking the martyrs, who were in the presence of God, to intercede for believers began to arise.

Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be persecuted:

> "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." *John 15:20*

> "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." *Romans 8:18*

> "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps" / *Peter 2:21*

> The Greek word for "martyr" means "witness". If you witness you are likely to become a martyr.

It should be pointed out that some Christians surrendered their faith rather than suffer or die. They were referred to as the Lapsi (the fallen). Bishops were divided over whether the lapsi should undergo public penance and stages of restoration before being restored to leadership in the Church, or be considered permanently excommunicated.

5. The Beginning of Imperial, Institutional Christianity.

The Roman Empire's transition from a pagan empire to a Christian empire could not have been foreseen. Constantine's decision to embrace Christianity as his national religion changed the world. And it changed Christianity. Christianity went from being:

> *Organizationally flat to having a religious hierarchy.*

> *Fluid doctrinally to having pin-point exact beliefs and if you subscribe you were not a Christian.*

> *A pacifistic religion to being the support system for the world's most powerful and violent military power.* Early church fathers, such as Tertullian (155-220 AD), Origen (185-253 AD), and Lactantius (240-320 AD), forbade military service for two reasons: because the Roman military life was inseparable from Roman religion; and because killing human beings was considered a breach of the the 10 Commandments.

> *Persecuted to being privileged.*

Rome was in trouble financially. Inflation was rampant. Instead of expanding, it was contracting as Germanic tribes threatened Rome's hold on Northern Europe. In 310 there were 7 rival contender for the throne. One by one Constantine (280-337) eliminated these rivals, either through assassination or battle. His final rival, Maxentius, was eliminated at Battle of the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312. This victory was celebrated by the Arc of Constantine, near the Forum, built in 315. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (265-339) records that as Constantine's army moved to Rome that he had a mid-day vision of the Chi (looks like an X) -Rho (Looks like a P) (the first 2 letters in the name of Christ) sign in the sky and the words "In this sign you will

conquer. Later that night Jesus came to Constantine in a dream telling him to affix the symbol to his soldier's shields and they would win the battle.. And they won the battle the next day. Eusebius said that at the time he still did not know what the sign meant. He called in spiritual advisors who explained who Christ was and what happened on the cross. He had a cross built with the letters Chi and Rho at the top. He later claimed that it was the Christian God who aided him in the victory. And it was on that day that he converted to Christianity. He won with this cross every battle he fought afterward.

Afterwards he issued the Edict of Milan in 313, the first document in history that guaranteed freedom of religious belief, allowing toleration for Christians. Which meant the era of persecution was over. They also were allowed to own property and that church property was exempt from taxation. These are the same rights pagan religions had enjoyed. Also, in 313 Christian symbols begin appearing on Roman coins for the first time. By 323 pagan symbols disappear from Roman coinage.

After becoming sole Emperor of the Roman Empire in 324, one of Constantine's boldest innovation was the founding of a new Rome in 330, naming it after himself. He chose to rebuild an Ancient Greek city called Byzantium which had been founded in the 7th century BC, destroyed, and then rebuilt by the Romans in 198. The location was perfect; it was highly defensible. Constantinople repelled all invaders for over 1000 years. It is on the land bridge between East and West. Constantine uses materials from pagan temples and buildings all over the empire to construct the city.

Constantine quickly and decisively moved to become Christianity's the protector and benefactor. And paganism slowly dried up. Even though Christianity did not become the official religion of the empire until 380:

- > In 346, pagan sacrifice was forbidden.

- > In 392, pagan worship was proclaimed high treason, punishable by death. The persecution show was on the other foot. The persecuted became the persecutor. Christianity became a political religion.

Why would Constantine do this? 2 possible reasons:

- > His mother Helena (248-328) had become a Christian at some earlier point. Constantine's father, who had been the ruler of the Western part of the Empire, had divorced her. But Constantine remained close to her. Helena went on to build churches at the Empire's expense in Jesus' birthplace(Bethlehem), the place of Jesus' Ascension, the place of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (the Temple of the goddess Aphrodite had to be torn down so the Church of Holy Sepulchre could be built).

- > Constantine needed a religion that he could mold which would serve the interests of the Empire. He wanted his adopted religion to unify his Empire.

In 325, one year after becoming the sole Emperor, Constantine called together 1800 bishops from across the known world—1000 from the Eastern part of the Empire, and 800 from the West. They were to meet in the Bithynian city of Nicaea from May through August to establish a unified set of beliefs for the church. 318 bishops attended, only 7 from the Western Church. Constantine, though unbaptized (Many people waited until their deathbed to be baptized because it was believed Hebrews 6:4-6 meant that people who sin after baptism lost their salvation; Constantine was baptized by an Arian bishop on his deathbed in 337), presides over the opening session and determines the Council's agenda.

The presenting challenge was what Christianity believed about the Trinity (I Corinthians 8:4-6; II Corinthians 5:19). Arius (256-336 AD), a brilliant Alexandrian presbyter (elder or priest), taught that Jesus Christ was divine but not co-eternal with God the Father. Since Jesus was begotten (born) of the Father, he was a created being born at a particular time. Therefore, Jesus is not eternal and could not be of the same essence as God. Jesus was subordinate to God the Father and had only the powers God vested in him. Arius pointed out that when Jesus prayed to the Father he was not talking to himself. Even though not ordained a bishop, Arius was allowed to attend the Council and defend his views.

In the end, the vote was 316-2. Arius and two bishops supporting him, were excommunicated and exiled. In addition, the conclave ordered that all copies of "Thalia," the book in which Arius expressed his heretical views, be burned. Anyone who refused to burn their copy of "Thalia" was to be executed. Consider this: the followers of Jesus, who taught "love your enemies", were now authorized to persecute and murder sisters and brothers whose formulation of faith was different from their own.

Five decisions were made in 325 which would change the church's trajectory forever:

A. *Church Councils*: Before Nicaea, even though a New Testament canon had not been formally approved, scripture was the primary source of church authority. After Nicaea, the collective teachings of church council, often referred to as "tradition" superseded scripture in importance. The teachings of church councils became the interpreter of scripture.

B. *Church Doctrines*: Prior to Nicaea, the church had no settled doctrines. It would be more accurate to talk about Christianities rather than Christianity. After Nicaea the church had a creed that was mandatory for people to believe in order to call themselves Christians. The church's beliefs were codified into a well-crafted creed, the Nicene Creed. If a person did not subscribe to every word of the creed, they were not a Christian. Theological deviations would not be tolerated.

C. *Church Hierarchy*: Before Nicaea, there had been two Biblical streams of church leadership: spiritual gifts (those gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do acts of ministry) and orders (those ordained by the Church to be bishops, elders or priests and deacons). The pre-Nicene church's organizational structure was relatively flat. The communal aspects of church life were valued above its institutional life; after Nicaea clericalism prevailed. The teaching of spiritual gifts either disappeared or was reserved for the laity. New orders were invented: Metropolitans, later called "Patriarchs". These were bishops over an important ecclesiastical province; initially there were 4 of them; i.e., Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and Jerusalem. Notice that the bishop of Rome was considered equal with the other three patriarchs. Notice also that the lines of ecclesiastical authority mirrored the Roman Empire's judicial system. And since the church increasingly owned property, the Patriarchs became property managers.

D. *Church Laws*: Twenty canons laws were approved by the Council of Nicaea. With these laws came the authority to enforce adherence and levy punishments, including excommunication, banishment, and capital punishment.

E. *Church Calendar*: The Council determined that the Church would no longer follow the Jewish calendar and that Easter was to be celebrated on a common day throughout the world. But the council did not say what that day was to be. As a result today the Eastern and Western church celebrate Easter on different days. The Orthodox Easter

follows the Julian calendar, established by Julius Caesar in 45 BC. Roman Catholic Easter follows the Gregorian calendar, established by Pope Gregory VIII in 1582.

6. The Closing of the New Testament Canon

In 397, The New Testament canon (approved list of authoritative books) was closed at the Council of Carthage. These 27 books and no others are considered Holy Scripture. Many documents were left out.