



# Christian Church | Definition, History, & Types

## History of the Christian Church

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The history of the Christian Church is a complex tale of theological disputes, organizational intrigues, and liturgical controversies over the form of worship. It is the story of the evolution of philosophical thought, practices of worship, and the formation of institutions directed toward preserving, disseminating, and interpreting the teachings of

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Jesus Christ, his followers, and Jewish history and texts that forecast the appearance of the Christian Messiah.

The Christian Church evolved from its initial disorganized form into a highly structured social institution. It created a focus for civilization around which social norms were established, becoming the primary institution that framed human interactions. It was used to establish the calendar for human activities and festivities and eventually came to stand at the apex of human obligations of one social class to another.

## Christianity as the Roman state religion



As imagined by Rubens, the Emblem of Christ Appearing to Constantine (1622). The army of Constantine notices a chi-rho in the sky during the day.

The only organized religion – and the only one that was trans-regional in the [Roman Empire](#) – was Judaism. This monotheistic faith survived and grew slowly amidst a world dominated by paganism. The **Roman** version of paganism was a pan-empire, state-sanctioned, unorganized religion that was inconsistently practiced from region to region. Judaism survived in this more or less chaotic world of paganism because the **Roman emperors** and regional governors generally treated it as benign.

In the decades following Christ's crucifixion, burial, and ascension into heaven, his followers – the apostles – encouraged groups of Christians to worship together in homes and graveyards. Christians passed the Word of God and the message of His



earthly son to families, friends, and neighbors. This occurred in Jerusalem, where disciples gathered after establishing rudimentary Christian congregations in Galilee, as this was where Christ spent most of his life preaching.

The goal was to convince Jews that the Messiah, who had long been anticipated by their prophets and whose words were preserved in what for Christians became known as the Old Testament, had indeed appeared in the human form of Jesus Christ. Jews were ripe for absorption and conversion into the new Christian faith because, at its core, Judaism was an apocalyptic religion. That is, it was focused on the eventual revelation of divine truths that were the necessary precursors to the end times. Shortly after bringing the message to the Jews that the Messiah lived.

## Christianity in the 1st century



Jesus Washing Peter's Feet, (painting by Ford Madox Brown (1852–1856), Tate Britain, London)

The early Christians took their message to Gentiles, or non-Jews, thus spreading Christianity beyond the place of its origins in the Holy Land. At this point, it is important





to note that Christianity, like its forerunner, the monotheistic faith Judaism, began as a religion of a book. This is clear in the prologue to the Gospel, which is attributed to John the Apostle of Christ: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Thus, Logos, or the Word, is a name or title of **Jesus Christ**. At first, this book was a collection of oral histories recounting the life of Christ. Eventually, these were edited, expanded, and committed to writing. For example, the Gospel of Matthew is now thought to have been composed in the late 1st century CE, and modern biblical scholars reject its attribution to the apostle Matthew.

The Gospel of Mark is thought to have been written around 70 CE by an author drawing on various oral stories. Because the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were preserved only in later copies, they were unavailable as canonical texts to the earliest Christian churches. This led to the rise of regional variations in understanding the life and nature of Jesus Christ.

### **Council of Jerusalem**

The organization of the Christian Church can be traced back to a council held in Jerusalem in about 50 CE, known as the “**Council of Jerusalem**.” As outsiders in Roman society, Christians naturally fell victim to hostile attacks. However, the persecution was not as extensive as Christian propagandists, both ancient and modern, would have us believe. Although Christians were subjected to periodic persecution, it was not until the 3rd century that Christianity became subject to officially sanctioned persecution.

The official Roman persecution of Christianity ended when Emperor Constantine issued a proclamation known as the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, in which it was declared that Christians should be treated benevolently throughout the empire. Constantine’s magnanimity toward Christians resulted from being influenced by his mother, who was a Christian. Constantine himself formally converted to the Christian faith and was baptized on his deathbed.



## **First Council of Nicaea**

The adherents of Christianity throughout the empire had varied beliefs and ideas regarding their faith, and it was due to these vast numbers of variants in the Christian Church that Constantine called the **Council of Nicaea** in 325 CE. The central focus of this council was the immediate need to deal with the writings of a presbyter, Arius of Alexandria.

The attendees at the First Council of Nicaea established the orthodox faith, coming down on the side of Athanasius, an African theologian. Arianism – the belief that God created Christ; thus he was not a true, co-eternal part of the Trinity – was declared a heretical belief. In other words, it was blasphemy and was condemned by the Christian Church.

## **Nicene Creed**

The Nicene Creed – a statement of Christian belief crafted by the council – confirmed this. This creed continues to be used in various forms by Christian churches to this day. It stresses that all Christians subscribe to the belief that Christ was begotten and not made by God the Father and that Christ is one being with God; “Begotten, not manufactured, consubstantial with the parent,” says the creed.

” The Nicene Creed further affirmed that Christ came down to earth and was made incarnate as a man and that he was killed but rose into heaven for the salvation of mankind. The original creed ended with the condemnation of Arian theology. As well as theology, writers around the time of the First Nicene Council concerned themselves with the history of the Christian Church. Among them was Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote an Ecclesiastical History.

It sheds considerable light on the organization and events in the history of the developing Christian faith. It can be argued that Jesus initiated the institution of the Church in the 1st century when he began preaching his philosophy. Even if there were no physical foundations for the Church yet, the bedrock of its spiritual teachings had been laid.



The apostles carried the message further, and within a few centuries, Christianity found its physical dwellings and became the major religion of **Europe**. Our knowledge of the early Christian Church's evolution depends primarily on texts. These include the Acts of the Apostles and Saint Paul's letters to congregations of Christians in Galatia, a region in the south of modern-day [Turkey](#).

There are also texts by Christian theologians known as the Ante-Nicene Fathers, such as Athanasius and, before him, Origen of Alexandria and the Carthaginian Tertullian Athenagoras of Athens. Surviving tangible remains of the early Christian Church reveals the kind of growth suggested in written texts.

## House church

The first churches were homes in which the faithful gathered. This makes perfect sense considering that the church underwent periodic suppression by Roman authorities. To bridge the gap with the pagan faith, the early Christians used the same media as their pagan contemporaries – frescos, mosaics, and sculptures. They adapted pagan motifs for Christian purposes so that some art made for Christians could easily be mistaken for imperial Roman art. A perfect example of Christian ties to paganism is the date of Christmas: December 25.

The date did not mark the birth of Christ – in fact, the Romans chose it because it coincided with the winter solstice and a festival called Saturnalia – dedicated to the deity Saturn. Paganism and Christianity continued to exist alongside each other in the Roman Empire, and the cultural mark of Christian holidays and beliefs often turn out to be the last vestiges of European pagan thought in modern times. Christianity did not find its footing in isolation but was part of overarching historical circumstances. It is important to recognize these elements. Paganism is one such element; a couple of others are customs and orally imparted heritage.

According to tradition, Peter, one of Jesus Christ's twelve apostles, brought Christianity to Rome from its birthplace in the Holy Land. Peter is considered the founder of the orthodox line of heirs of authority in the Christian Church. Peter's mission in propagating the message of Christ is told in the Acts of the Apostles and Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. At first, Peter led the church in Jerusalem. It was widely believed by later



church writers that Peter went to Rome, where he became the first in the lineage of bishops of Rome, or popes, stretching to the present day.

## **Early centers of Christianity**

It is uncertain exactly how much authority the Roman pope had over the Christian churches, primarily those in Asia Minor, the Holy Land, and Egypt. When Saint Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, and when he appeared in the city, he made no mention of Peter as a pope or bishop of Rome. It was probably not until Constantine recognized Christianity in 313 CE that the pope in Rome came to dominate the church hierarchy, exerting authority over the church in Jerusalem and the center of development of Christian theology in Alexandria.

The first detailed text revealing the beginnings of the organization of the Christian Church under the leadership of a Roman pope is a letter written by Pope Clement I to the congregation at Corinth. By the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325, there were pockets of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Substantial numbers of Christians could be found in **Armenia**, [Egypt](#), **North Africa**, **Greece**, **Spain**, **Italy**, [France](#), **central Europe**, **southern India**, and **Ethiopia**. Syriac-speaking Christianity was centered in the Upper Mesopotamian city of Edessa, from which missionaries spread out over Mesopotamia and Persia.

## **Role of Christianity in Civilization**

It is argued that the religion's appeal to the lower classes, whose lives were significantly improved by the adoption of Christian principles, contributed to its swift spread.

Promises of salvation, the stories of miracles, and the fact that converting the head of the household meant the conversion of an entire family – all have been suggested as contributors to the swift expansion of the new faith. While the lower class was being unified in the name of the Lord, things were quite different in the upper echelons of the faithful.

The growth of Christianity in the immediate post-Nicaean period not only gave rise to disputes over authority, such as that claimed by the patriarch of the Persian church



over the authority of the Roman church, but it also led to doctrinal disputes. Saint Ambrose, Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine – probably the most popular of the bunch – and Saint Gregory, known as the Four Great Fathers of the West, developed ideas for the Western branch of the church.

In addition to these four, there were also the Four Great Eastern Fathers: Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom. While the theological writings of the Great Fathers of the church, both Eastern and Western, defined and resolved matters that caused conflict within the Christian Church, others, often less erudite, served as active proponents of the church's missionary function.

The lives of early medieval Christian saints who took the Word of God to the nether reaches of the known earth were recorded in popular hagiographies, praising their sanctity and stoicism in the face of opposition by barbarians and pagans. The missionary work of the vast numbers of faithful adherents was enhanced by the mystery of miracles that appealed to the common folk, for whom Christianity developed into a way of life. This appeal helped it evolve from its humble roots into a worldwide phenomenon that shapes the lives of billions of people today.

