

How
Jesus
Built His Church

A Survey of Church History

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Built His Church
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By Joshua Schwisow
and
Kevin Swanson



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Introduction: Why Study Church History?

Dear Parents and Teachers,
Church History is the study of the greatest project the world has ever seen: Jesus Christ building His kingdom.

Unlike the history of other kingdoms of this world, this is the story of a kingdom that never fails. Pick up a textbook on world history and the recurring theme will be the rise and fall of empires, kingdoms, and nations. This recurring pattern of human history was dramatically revealed to the once-great Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar. In a startling dream, Nebuchadnezzar was given a window into the future.

Unable to make sense of the meaning of this dream, Nebuchadnezzar looked to God's prophet Daniel. It was soon revealed that the various parts of the statue in the dream were different world kingdoms. Each kingdom rose to prominence, only to be destroyed by the next. Yet, there was one kingdom, the final in the dream, that would never fail. As Daniel revealed: "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed" (Dan. 2:44).

This is the kingdom we are focusing on when we turn our attention to church history. It is a kingdom that will never be destroyed.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, He gave His disciples a promise. It was a promise of the church's victory over the forces of evil. In Matthew 16:18, we read:

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matt. 16:18)

Many read this verse of Matthew and think that the church is being assaulted by the forces of hell, and the church will not fall. The church is pictured like the old Alamo (in Texas), assaulted by forces on every side and barely holding on. In the case of the Alamo, the Mexicans eventually prevailed even though the Texans fought valiantly against all odds.

But to picture the church like a victorious Alamo is to misread the verse. What the verse actually says is that the gates of hell are being assaulted by the church of Christ. The forces of Christ's kingdom are doing spiritual battle with the forces of hell, and the gates of hell will eventually fall. Satan's kingdom will come to complete ruin.

To read church history is to be a front row spectator in this grand battle of Christ's kingdom against Satan's kingdom. And even though the church faces persecution, suffering, and sometimes even a decline in numbers, the kingdom of Christ marches on. The gates of hell will not be able to prevail against the onslaught of Christ and His disciples against the forces of spiritual darkness.

Important Themes in Church History

When approaching any subject, it can sometimes be difficult to keep in focus the most important things when there are so many details, so many stories, so many people, and so many dates. Any time we study history, the big question you should ask is this: "What is God doing in history?"

This assumes, of course, that God is sovereign over the entire universe, from the empires that rise to sparrows that fall from the sky (Matt. 10:29).

There is one interpretive rule that every Christian must bring to history. Jesus Christ is the ruler of all things to the church (Eph. 1:22-23). Everything that happens in history works its way out for the benefit of His church.

For Christians, God's Word is the most important interpretive tool for historical studies. What then are some important biblical truths we should keep in mind?

Here are some of the most important themes to remember as you embark on this study of church history.

Theme #1 — The conflict between the serpent and the Seed of the woman

The Lord Jesus Christ is the promised deliverer who crushes the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The ancient foe of humanity, the one the Bible calls the adversary and the accuser, is defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ. The decisive blow to the serpent's head happened when Jesus died on the cross and rose again. The devil is mortally wounded. But until Jesus returns, the devil will use all of his remaining strength to go after Jesus and Jesus' people. In fact, the Bible says that the devil knows "his time is short" (Rev. 12:12). This makes him even more enraged.

Revelation 12 describes the ongoing conflict between the serpent and God's people.

Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev. 12:13-17)

The final verse of this biblical quotation helps us understand what is taking place in church history. Satan is out to make war against the offspring of the woman (the church). Those who follow Jesus are defined as those who "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."

Satan's warfare against Christ's followers takes several forms. The Bible teaches us that Satan is a murderer and a liar. As such, it should not surprise us that one of his strategies against the offspring of the woman is to kill them. He does this through persecutions.

Another common strategy Satan employs is to introduce lies into the church. These we call "false teaching" or "heresies." These falsehoods have the effect of confusing followers of Jesus, dividing the church, and in some cases leading some people down to hell.

Persecutions and heresies, then, are common occurrences in church history.

Theme #2 — The kingdom of God grows throughout history

A second theme the Bible instructs us to look for in history is the growth of Christ's kingdom. You will see the kingdom of God grow as the church of Jesus Christ expands around the globe. The church of Jesus Christ will include every tribe and nation by the end. Jesus' kingdom works like leaven, quietly and steadily growing. Our Lord's parable in Matthew 13 says so.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” (Matt. 13:31-33)

Most of the work done by the followers of the carpenter from Galilee does not make it to the front page of the newspapers. But when the dust settles and the history books are written, we find a church around the world. We find Christian hospitals and orphanages everywhere. We find Christian culture impacting every aspect of human life on planet earth! That is how the mustard seed and the leaven works. It is slow. It is subtle. But it does really grow.

Theme #3 — Jesus Christ builds His church through the faithful ministry of His people

Unlike human empires, Jesus does not expand His kingdom with human weapons like swords, spears, or cavalry. He does not deploy tanks or airplanes. Instead, our Lord advances His kingdom through the faithful ministry of His people. Church history is about what Jesus did through faithful men, women, boys, and girls.

In the building of Christ’s church, Ephesians 4 tells us that especially important are those faithful pastors and teachers who equip the rest of the saints for ministry.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12)

In the pages that follow, you will learn about faithful pastors and teachers who edified the church and equipped God’s people for ministry. But you will also learn about people from numerous backgrounds. These include men of renown such as kings. But they also include people who the world thought of little to no importance. A poor young lady like Blandina did not seem important to the world. But her testimony in martyrdom lives on today.

Jesus’ kingdom works differently than the world’s kingdoms. The world prioritizes the mighty. Jesus uses weak people to put to shame the strong. The world prioritizes the rich. Jesus’ people do great things though they are poor. The world prioritizes the wise. But Jesus’ people often appear foolish to the world.

The stories of church history, then, are about faithful Christians who served Jesus. Through them, Jesus builds His church.

Theme #5 — The importance of preaching and teaching the Word of God

The dying words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy provide for us the mandate for the Christian Church:

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure

sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Tim. 4:1-5)

Preach the Word! That is the mandate. Wherever the Word of God is preached, clearly, truthfully, and sincerely, the work of the kingdom progresses. Where the church becomes slothful, where human ritual displaces the people's interest in the Word, where the sacraments play a stronger role than the Word, where the Word is read and preached in a language unfamiliar to the people listening, the church wilts and dies.

Jesus told us to disciple the nations by baptizing and teaching them all things Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:18-20). Therefore, the preaching and teaching of the Word of God is vital for the growth of the church.

Applying What You Learn

Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). And learning about church history should change the way you live. How can you apply what you learn in this course?

First, the goal of studying church history should be to give praise to God for what He has done. As Psalm 78 says, "We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done" (Ps. 78:4). As you read of God's wonderful works through the lives of men and women, give praise to God!

Second, you can apply what you learn by learning from those who came before you. How did these men and women stand fast for Christ in adversity? How did these men and women teach the faith to others? How did these men and women influence future generations? Paul once said, "follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). You should do the same for the men and women covered in this course. Insofar as they faithfully followed the Lord Jesus Christ, you should follow in their footsteps.

Third, this course should help you love Christ's church more. The Lord Jesus died for His bride, the church. He nourishes and cares for it. If we love what Christ loves, then we too must love His church. Our Lord said, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

It is our prayer that this resource will be used by our Lord to instruct, edify, and equip you to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33) and to dedicate your life to the most important project on planet earth: discipling the nations for Jesus.

The Church shall never perish!
 Her dear Lord to defend,
 To guide, sustain, and cherish,
 Is with her to the end:
 Though there be those who hate her,
 And false sons in her pale,
 Against or foe or traitor
 She ever shall prevail.
 (From Samuel J. Stone, "The Church's One Foundation")



BC 250

Old Testament
Septuagint
Produced

BC 4/AD 1

Jesus is Born

AD 33

Jesus' Death,
Burial, and
Resurrection

AD 44

Martyrdom of
James

AD 54-68

Reign of Nero

AD 64-67

Persecution
under Nero

AD 67 or 68

Martyrdom of
Peter and Paul



AD 451

Council of
Chalcedon

AD 430

Death of
Augustine of
Hippo

AD 426

Augustine
completes *The
City of God*

AD 417

Pelagian
Controversy

AD 410

The Sack of
Rome

AD 397-400

Confessions by
Augustine is
Written

AD 383-404

Latin Vulgate
translation of
the Bible is
Produced

Unit 1

The Early Church (AD 30-500)



AD 81-96
Persecution
under Domitian

AD 155
Martyrdom of
Polycarp

AD 177
Martyrdom of
Blandina

AD 202
Persecution
under Septimius
Severus

AD 303-311
The Great
Persecution
under
Diocletian

AD 312
Battle of
Milvian Bridge

AD 319
*On the
Incarnation
of the Word* by
Athanasius is
Written



AD 381
Council of
Constantinople

AD 369
First Hospital
Established

AD 354
Augustine of
Hippo Born

AD 328
Athanasius
Becomes Bishop
of Alexandria



AD 325-326
Eusebius' *Account of
Church History* is
Written

AD 325
Council of
Nicaea



THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

In the Fullness of Time

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4-5)

The Bible describes Christ's church as a building and as a household. All buildings have different components including walls, a roof, and a foundation. If we are to learn about the history of Christ's church, we need to begin by looking at the foundation. The foundation, according to the Bible, is the apostles and prophets. But even more important than them is the cornerstone: our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2 says:

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, (Eph. 2:19-20)

Let's look at the cornerstone first: our Lord Jesus; who He is, and what He did. Secondly, we must also look at the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Before we look at more of this glorious structure that is the church, we need to first look at the cornerstone and the foundation. There would be no more to the structure without the foundation.

Who Jesus Is, and What He Came to Do

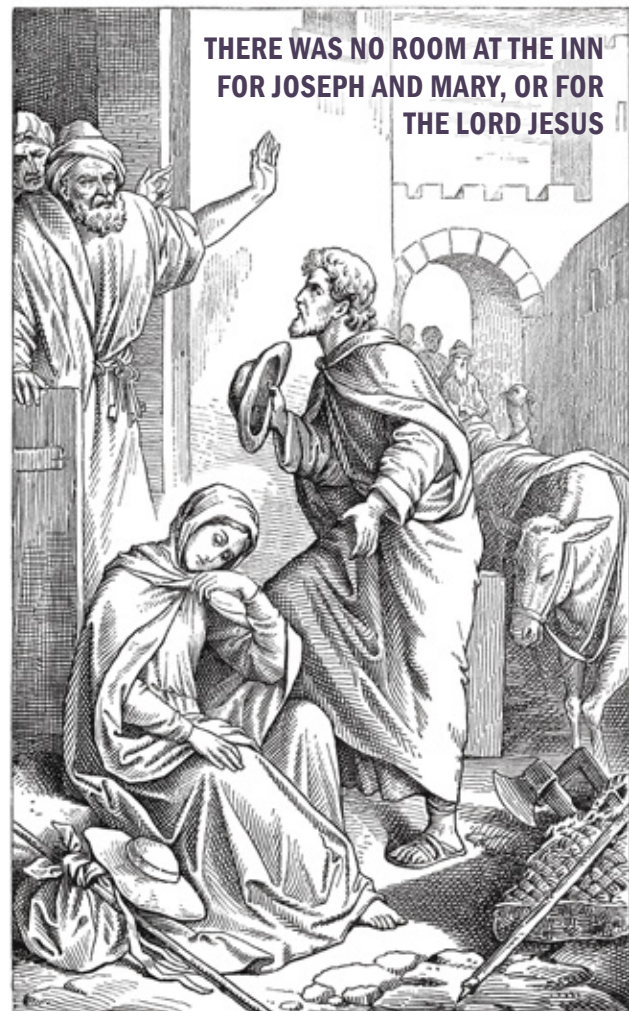
The cornerstone of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the most important person in all of human history. There is good reason that cal-

endars in the Western world have been divided between **BC** and **AD**:

BC ▪ Before Christ

AD ▪ Anno Domini (Latin for "in the year of our Lord")

This division of history into two sections is a recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To say that we are living in the year AD 2023 (the date of this publication) is to say this: we are living in the year 2023, in which Jesus Christ continues



to reign over all things. Of course, not everyone acknowledges that Jesus Christ is Lord over all things. But one day, they will (Phil. 2:10-11).

Why is Jesus so central to human history?

Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, the creation has been groaning for redemption. Mankind has experienced the terrible effects of sin. Sin has many destructive effects. But the final consequence of sin is death and eternal judgment. Even though mankind fell in the garden, the Lord God was merciful to make a promise: a promise that one day a Redeemer would come and destroy sin, Satan, and death (Gen. 3:15). The rest of the Old Testament contains promises, pictures, and prophecies about that coming Redeemer. By promises, God told His people that He would be merciful to them

and forgive their sins. By pictures, such as animal sacrifices, the Lord showed His people that they needed covering for their sins. By prophecies, the Lord gave some shadowy details about who the Messiah would be and what He would do when He came.

All of the Old Testament and the entire BC period of history was a waiting period. Mankind was waiting for the Redeemer to come.

God had planned the exact timing to send His Son into the world. Paul tells us that Jesus, the Son of God, was born of a woman, “in the fullness of time.” This means, when the appointed time came, Jesus came, just at the right time.

The King of kings came in a rather unexpected way. The great rulers of the kingdoms such as Augustus Caesar or Herod the Great were in their lavish palaces. But the one who was to be King over all the nations was born in a manger, among animals, in a small village. The news concerning His birth went out, not to the exalted rulers of the earth, but to lowly shepherds one night. **Luke** the physician recounts these events in His carefully written and researched Gospel:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:8-14)

The angels announced to the shepherds who this child was. He was the Savior who would deliver God’s people from their sins. He was the Christ (the Messiah), the anointed one who would ful-





fill all of God's promises, pictures, and prophecies. And He was (and is) Lord over all!

Many years passed as Jesus grew up in Nazareth. During that time, Jesus did not exercise a public ministry. But around thirty years of age, our Lord entered into His public ministry when He was baptized by John the Baptist. By His baptism, identifying with a sinful people, and by His temptation, Jesus demonstrated that He came to do what the first Adam failed to do. Jesus would obey the Lord. Jesus would defeat Satan. Jesus would accomplish a redemption through His atoning death on the cross. And He would destroy death through His resurrection.

Each of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) culminate with the central events of our Lord's death and resurrection. Before the cross, Jesus' disciples failed to understand why it was necessary for Him to die. But following His resurrection, they began to understand why He had to die and rise again. Our Lord explained from the Old Testament how He came to fulfill all that was written:

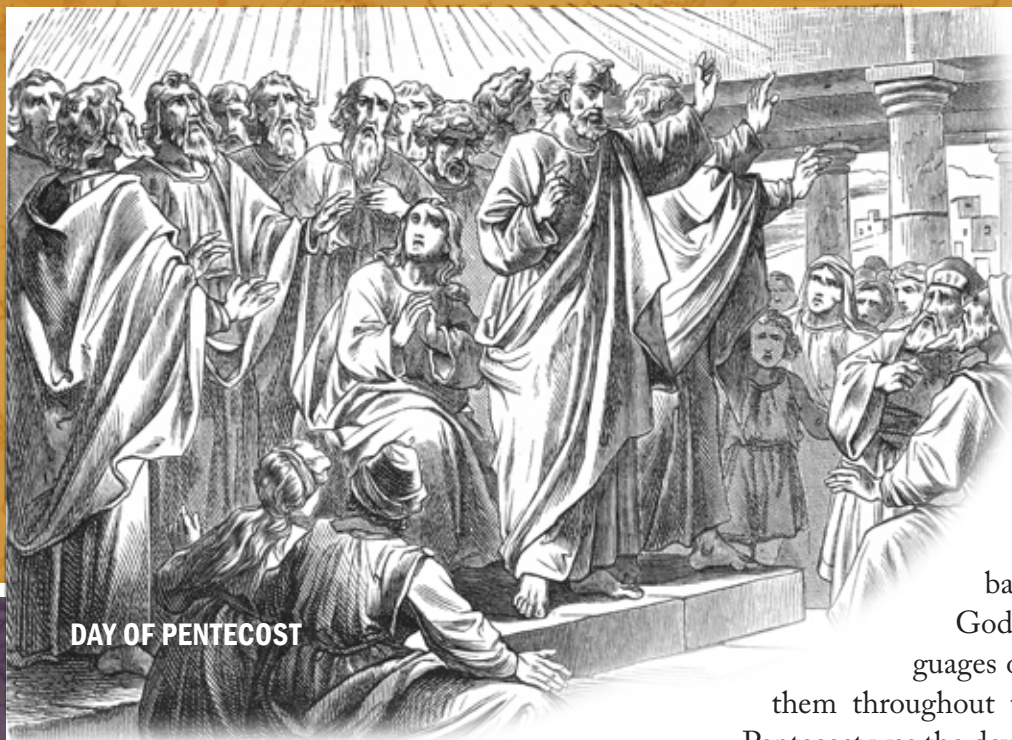
Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He

expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

After a period of forty days, the Lord Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, where He remains at the present, ruling over all things. Before His ascension, our Lord gave His disciples the Great Commission. The commission was great because it involved an enormous task: discipling all the peoples of the earth by baptizing and teaching them Christ's commands. It is a project that continues today. The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus' words in the **Great Commission**:

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matt. 28:18-20)

This is a monumental mission. It would be impossible if it relied on man's strength alone. But the risen Lord Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth. For this reason, we know that the commission will be accomplished. The church of Jesus Christ will prevail!



DAY OF PENTECOST

The Meaning of Pentecost

Before His ascension, the Lord Jesus promised to pour out the Holy Spirit on His disciples. Our Lord told His disciples to wait for the promise of the Spirit. Luke records Jesus' parting words to His disciples in Acts 1.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:6-8)

Such a worldwide mission effort would require power. That is why the Holy Spirit came on the **Day of Pentecost**. The powerful Holy Spirit of God gave His disciples power to preach the Gospel to all nations and fulfill the Great Commission.

About forty days after Jesus rose from the dead came the Day of Pentecost. Worshipers of God from different lands gathered in Jerusalem for this festival each year. On that day, the Holy

Spirit descended upon the Christian disciples. They were given the ability to proclaim "the wonderful works of God" in different languages.

Early in human history, the peoples of the earth had been divided at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). To keep mankind from banding together against God, the Lord divided the languages of the peoples and scattered

them throughout the earth. But the Day of Pentecost was the day on which the reunion of all mankind began. From then on, and to the present, peoples from every tribe, nation, and tongue are redeemed by the Lamb of God (Rev. 5:9-10). The church is the manifestation of what the Bible calls "one new man," which refers to all peoples being united into one (Eph. 2:15-16).

At Pentecost, the worldwide gospel mission had begun. From Jerusalem the message would spread to Judea. From Judea the message would spread to Samaria. Eventually, the message would reach the heart of the Roman Empire: the city of Rome. And from Rome, the good news about Jesus would spread throughout all the earth.

The Spread of the Early Church

One of the earliest and best documents to learn about the early history of the church is the **Book of Acts**. Not only is this book early and detailed; it is also inspired by the Holy Spirit. Acts is an infallible record of what the Lord Jesus did, through the Holy Spirit and through the apostles, to establish the foundation of the church.

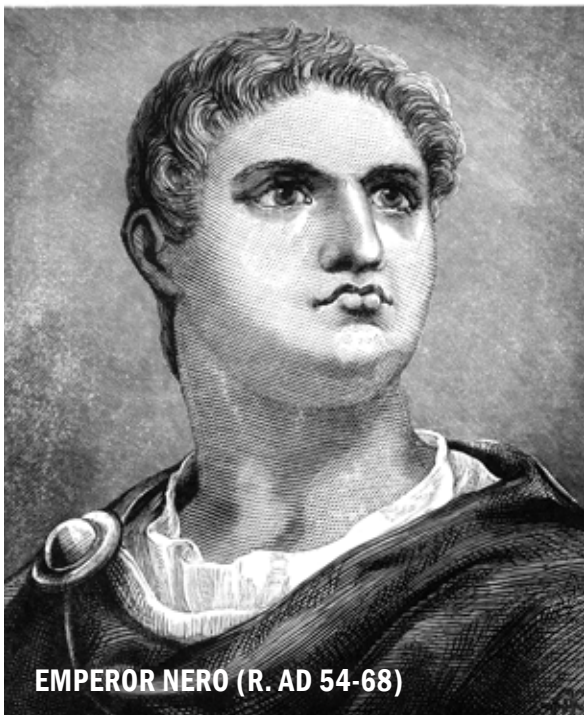
Acts is especially focused upon the spread of God's Word and the growth of Christ's church. A good summary of what happens in Acts is found in chapter 9.

Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee,

and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied. (Acts 9:31)

The church multiplies in Acts, finally culminating in Paul's arrival at Rome (Acts 28).

Much of Acts focuses on the missionary efforts of the **Apostle Peter** and the **Apostle Paul**. Peter served as an apostle to the Jews. Paul was called by Jesus Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus told Peter in John 21:18 that he would face martyrdom. Peter began ministering primarily to the Jews in Jerusalem, in Joppa (by the Mediterranean Sea), and Antioch (in Syria). Peter's ministry included Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) and Rome. Peter finished the work God had for him. His earthly life ended when he was killed in Rome. By order of the evil **Emperor Nero** (reigned AD 54-68), Peter was executed around AD 67 or 68. We learn from a Christian writer named **Origen** (c. AD 185-253) that Peter was crucified upside down. This was by Peter's own request. Peter did not see himself as worthy to die in the same way Jesus had been crucified.



EMPEROR NERO (R. AD 54-68)

The conversion of Paul to faith in Christ is one of the most dramatic events in Acts. At first, we read that Paul (first called Saul) is responsible for the execution of some of the first Christians. Paul oversaw the execution of **Stephen**, the first witness to die in Acts (Acts 7-8). But on the road to Damascus, on his way to imprison and kill more Christians, Jesus stopped Paul. Paul was blinded by the light of Christ's glory. Jesus then commanded Paul to go to Damascus and wait. The Lord then sent His servant Ananias to minister to Paul. The Lord Jesus told Ananias:

Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake. (Acts 9:15-16)

Paul was baptized and was then sent by Jesus to bear witness to all the nations. In many ways, Paul was an ideal evangelist. The Lord Jesus used Paul's natural gifts for God's glory. Paul was an educated man. Paul understood Greek philosophy, having been raised in Tarsus. He was also one of the most committed Pharisees. Paul was a former disciple of one of the leading Jewish teachers, a man named Gamaliel. Paul would use this training in His preaching and teaching. But the most important factor in Paul's ministry was the Holy Spirit's empowering.

One notable example of Paul's preaching is found in Acts 17, when he confronts the pagan philosopher on Mars Hill in the ancient city of Athens. Atop Mars Hill, Paul proclaimed the truth of the gospel. When Paul saw in the city a statue to an "unknown God," he saw an opportunity to make known the one true and living God to the people of Athens who had so long lived in ignorance of the one true God.

Here is a portion of the sermon Luke the physician recorded in Acts:

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will

judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

The truth of Christ's resurrection was a central topic of gospel proclamation in Acts. It was a central point in Peter's sermon in Pentecost. And it appears many other times in Acts, including in Paul's sermon on Mars Hill. The resurrection of Christ changed everything. Now, every creature on the earth needed to hear this good news (Mark 16:15).

Paul's life as an apostle wasn't easy, however. Few missionaries have ever suffered as much as Paul did. Paul tells us that he suffered the loss of all things in order to gain Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:7-11). Paul's first missionary journey covered

1,400 miles (covering Cyprus and modern-day Turkey). His second missionary journey was twice as long. It spanned about 2,800 miles. He traveled through Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Jerusalem, mostly on foot. On his third missionary journey, Paul visited Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, and Israel. On this third journey, Paul logged another 2,700 miles. The Apostle Paul also wrote a large portion of the New Testament. In his letters, Paul wrote to churches and individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon). On Paul's fourth missionary journey, he sailed to Rome. On this fourth journey, Paul was under arrest by the Romans, as he went to have an audience with Caesar. Sometime after this fourth journey, Paul was put to death in Rome. Historical records tell us Paul was executed by the Emperor Nero. A likely date for Paul's execution is AD 67.



PAUL ON THE DAMASCUS ROAD

Paul's final written testimony was sent to his son in the faith, Timothy. Paul wrote:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:7-8)

After Peter and Paul's deaths, the Apostle John's ministry went on. John's ministry was active particularly in Asia Minor. It is believed that John spent much of his time in Ephesus (modern-day Turkey). He wrote five New Testament books in all, including three letters (1, 2, 3 John) and the Gospel of John. He penned his fifth work, the Book of Revelation, while exiled on the island of Patmos. After his exile, John died somewhere between AD 80 and AD 100 and was buried at Ephesus.

The missionary labors of the other apostles are not all recorded in the New Testament. How-

ever, early church documents tell us that the other apostles took the gospel into Egypt, Syria, Greece, Africa, and India. The apostles were faithful in carrying out Jesus' commission.

The Romans did not intend for the gospel to spread throughout the world. But in God's perfect providence, the Romans and Greeks prepared the way to make it happen. The Christian faith spread rapidly. This was due in part to the peace of Rome (the **Pax Romana**), which provided for safer travel. A ship could cross the Mediterranean without encountering a single pirate. Also, a vast network of well-built roads throughout the Roman Empire gave the apostles a solid path upon which they would wear out their sandals. They did exactly that as they spread the good news all over the world.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian church. Upon that stone was built the foundational ministry and teaching of the apostles and prophets. That foundation having been laid, the church of Jesus Christ continues to be built to the present day. ■



THE COLISEUM IN ROME

The Church Faces Opposition

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. (John 15:18-20)

Before our Lord’s crucifixion, He told His disciples that they would also suffer persecution. To be a disciple, Jesus said, was to take up a cross and follow in His footsteps. A servant is not above his master. It was no surprise then that the first Christians immediately met with opposition and persecution.

Christianity is considered by many the largest religion in the world today. It should be no surprise then that persecution of Christians today is more extensive than it has ever been. Wherever the gospel advances, the defeated dragon, with the assistance of his demonic hordes, fights back (Rev. 12:17). The dragon makes war with those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony concerning Jesus Christ.

It is important for us to learn how the early Christians responded to the opposition of the dragon. By recounting the stories of those faithful witnesses who went before us, we too can be strengthened to stand for Jesus Christ.

It was not long before opposition against the gospel mission occurred. The early chapters of Acts record the Apostles’ courage in the face of violent opposition. Suffering for the name of Jesus became a common experience for those early disciples.

The Bible records that **Peter** and **John** were imprisoned for their preaching of the gospel (Acts 5:17-18). **Stephen** suffered a martyr’s death

(Acts 7:54-60). **James** also died at the hands of Herod (Acts 12:1-2).

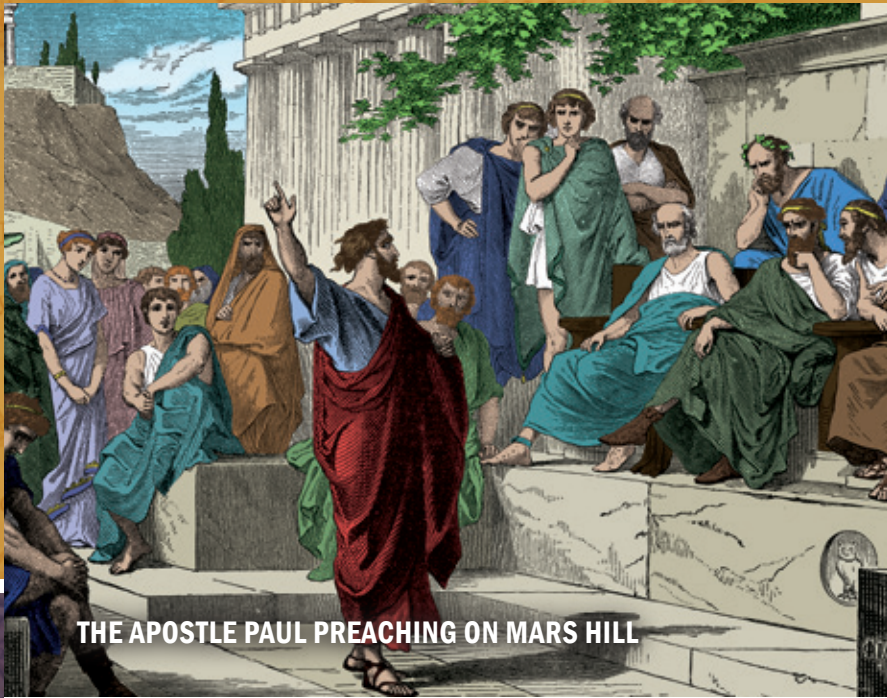
Gospel advance and church growth is evident throughout the Book of Acts. But with that church growth came suffering. It was necessary for the apostles to strengthen the hearts of the disciples. They were not to be surprised by this suffering. One example of that kind of exhortation is found in Acts 14.

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:21-22)

Entering the kingdom of God *through* tribulation was a necessity, Paul and Barnabas proclaimed. Such tribulation was not wasted. As the Apostle Peter wrote, the sufferings they experienced refined their faith in the furnace. As a result of such refining fires, their faith came out shining even more brightly. Such faith was more valuable than gold or silver.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, (1 Pet. 1:6-7)

Many of the early chapters of Acts detail these persecutions. Acts records some of the challenges the apostles faced, including a riot in the city of Ephesus (Acts 19). In Acts 17, the Christians are described as those who “are turning the



THE APOSTLE PAUL PREACHING ON MARS HILL

world upside down.” This is an apt description of the effect that Christ has upon the world. Where the saving work of Christ takes effect, people are changed, and then cultures are changed.

One of the earliest and most severe persecutions of the early church occurred during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero (AD 54–68). Nero is considered by many to be one of the most wicked

men who ever lived. Nero was a murderer and a despot who lived according to his own pleasures. Many of the Roman emperors had practically unbounded power. They often used their authority to secure their own selfish interests. Such was the case with Nero.

The Persecution under Nero

Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. (1 John 3:13)

When a fire broke out in Rome in AD 64, **Nero** blamed the Christians for the catastrophe. Many suspected that Nero himself had ordered the fire. But who would hold the emperor accountable for such a thing? The Christians proved an easy target to blame. They were a minority in the empire. Few Romans understood the claims of Christianity. Many slanderous misrepresentations of Christi-

CHRISTIAN MARTYRS IN THE COLISEUM

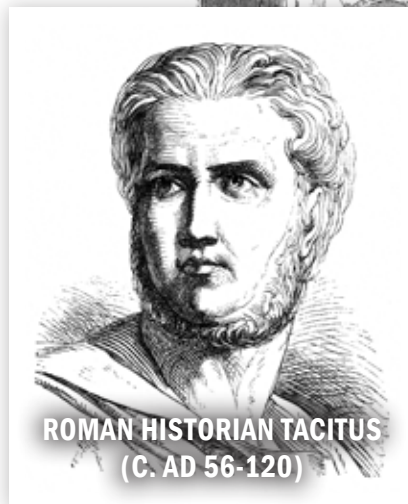


anity passed around the empire. Lies told about the Christians made many citizens of the empire hostile to this new and strange group of people.

What were some of the lies? They seem strange to us today. But they were believed by many. Christians were accused of cannibalism because they spoke about eating the body and blood of Christ. This was a reference to the practice of the Lord's Supper. But it confused many Romans. Christians were also accused of being **atheists**. The word "atheist" means someone who does not believe in God. It seems odd then, that Christians would be accused of atheism. But they were accused of this because the Christians rejected all the false gods of Rome. Christians were also accused of incest/immorality because they called each other brother and sister. Christians used these names because they were part of the same spiritual family. But some Romans were confused and believed false accusations. False charges like these made many Romans wary of the Christians.

It also happened to be the case that the area of Rome that most Christians resided in was largely untouched by the fire. To the superstitious Roman, this suggested that the Christians were to blame for such destruction. Nero cast blame upon the Christians and their dangerous religion. The Roman historian **Tacitus** (c. AD 56-120), in his *Annals*, records how this occurred:

In spite of every human effort, of the emperor's largesse, and of the sacrifices made to the gods, nothing sufficed to allay suspicion nor to destroy the opinion that the fire had been ordered. Therefore, in order to destroy this rumor, Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty. Christ, from whom



they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for a moment, this evil superstition reappeared, not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid and abominable from every corner of the world come

together. Thus, first those who confessed (that they were Christians) were arrested, and on the basis of their testimony a great number were condemned, although not so much for the fire itself as for their hatred of humankind.¹

It is clear from this quotation that Tacitus is no friend to Christianity. But Tacitus also recognized that it was not actually the Christians who had caused this disaster. Tacitus believed that the Christians were hand-picked by Nero as a target for the catastrophe. Tacitus went on to record how the Christians were persecuted:

Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illuminate it. Nero opened his own gardens for

these shows, and in the circus he himself became a spectacle, for he mingled with the people dressed as a charioteer, or he rode around in his chariot. All of this aroused the mercy of the people, even against these culprits who deserved an exemplary punishment, for it was clear that they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person.²

This kind of cruelty was common during the persecution of Nero which lasted until about AD 67. According to church historian **Eusebius**, Peter and Paul were also martyred in Rome during this persecution.

When Christianity first began to spread in the Roman Empire, many thought that Christianity was just a sect of the Jews. It appeared to be a variation on the religion of the Jews rather than a new religion altogether. It is true that Christianity is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. But for those Jews who rejected Christ, they saw Christianity as a dangerous heresy. But for the average citizen of the Roman Empire with little knowledge of the Old Testament or Judaism, it was difficult to distinguish Judaism and Christianity.

One example of this attitude is found in the words of Gallio, the pronconsul of Achaia recorded in Acts 18.

And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters.” (Acts 18:14-15)

For Gallio, and for many other citizens of the empire, the claims of Christ were just a Jewish dispute about words and names. In time, however, this perception would change.

For centuries, the Jews had dispersed across the Roman Empire and had freely practiced their religion. While pagan Romans thought the Jews strange, there was an allowance for Jews to practice their religion unhindered in the empire. Judaism gained the status of *religio licita* (lawful religion).

But as Christianity became more widely known, and as people in the Roman Empire became familiar with Christians, they learned that

RUINS OF THE TEMPLE OF APOLLO IN CORINTH



real differences existed between Judaism and Christianity. As a “new sect,” Christianity did not enjoy the legal protections that were afforded the Jews. As such, at different times in the early centuries of the church, Christianity was considered *religio illicita* (unlawful religion). Nero’s persecution was evidence of how Christianity was beginning to be perceived in Rome and elsewhere.



A DENARIUS
DEPICTING DOMITIAN

The Persecution under Domitian

After the death of Nero, widespread persecution abated for a time. But it resumed during the reign of **Domitian** (AD 81-96). Domitian unleashed another wave of persecution. It is not known for sure what Domitian’s motive was in harming the Christians. However, Domitian did intend to “restore” the glory of the Roman Empire. In his mind, this included the restoration of Roman religion. If Rome would be restored to a former state of glory, the gods of Rome would be glorified. This was an obvious problem for the Christians. The lordship of Christ demanded that no rival god could take His place. Christians obeyed the first command. “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3).

After the reign of Domitian, persecution was sporadic and localized. One historical record of note is a series of letters between **Pliny the Younger** (c. AD 61-113) and the Emperor **Trajan** (r. AD 98-117). Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wrote to the Emperor Trajan for guidance. Pliny was unsure how to handle Christians in his region.

Trajan told Pliny not to go on the hunt for Chris-

tians to arrest them. But if a Christian was exposed and would not submit to the worship of the Roman gods, then they were to be arrested, tried, and executed. By Trajan’s calculation, it was not worth the resources and effort to seek out Christians. But when a Christian defied the laws of the empire, they were to be punished. It was this policy outlined by Trajan that was followed for periods in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. As a result, per-

secution was not constant or universal. However, during the reign of **Marcus Aurelius** (r. AD 161-180), a severe persecution occurred in AD 177 in the south of France.

The Persecution under Decius

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Tim. 3:12)

Near the beginning of the 3rd century, persecution once again increased during the reigns of **Septimius Severus** (r. AD 193-211) and **Decius** (r. AD 249-251). However, it was the “great persecution” under **Diocletian** (r. AD 284-305) and



EXTENT OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN AD 117

his successors that was the worst and most widespread persecution of the early church. It lasted for eight years from 303-311. This persecution is recorded with eyewitness accounts by the Christian historians **Eusebius** (c. 260-339) and **Lactantius** (c. 250-325). These narratives and eyewitness accounts are gruesome and heartbreaking. Yet they also serve as remarkable examples of tremendous faith in Christ.

The title “martyr” began to be applied to those Christians who gave their life for Christ. Originally derived from the Greek word “witness,” the martyrs were those witnesses for Christ who “did not love their lives to the death” (Rev. 12:11), but overcame by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony.

What follows in this chapter are a few brief accounts of well-known martyrs of the early church.

The Martyrdom of Ignatius

Ignatius (died c. 108) of Antioch wrote many

letters to various churches which we still have today. In the next chapter, we will learn more about Ignatius and his writings. He is among the earliest of all Christian writers to whose writings we have access.

Ignatius was arrested by the emperor and was sentenced to be thrown to the wild beasts in Rome. He longed to give honor to Jesus his Savior, saying:

May the wild beasts be eager to rush upon me. If they be unwilling, I will compel them. Come, crowds of wild beasts; come, tearings and manglings, wracking of bones and hacking of limbs; come, cruel tortures of the devil; only let me attain unto Christ.³

Ignatius’ commitment to Christ was evident by his willingness to undergo such suffering. According to early church testimony, that is what Ignatius did. He gave his life for the Lord Jesus.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Polycarp (c. AD 69-155) was another early church leader who gave his life for Christ. Polycarp had the unique privilege of being discipled by one of the apostles (John). The story of Polycarp’s martyrdom is recorded in the early church document, **The Martyrdom of Polycarp**.

Polycarp was arrested and brought into the amphitheater in Smyrna. Since there were no images of gods in the churches of the Christians, the pagan Romans concluded that the Christians did not believe in the existence of gods.

The proconsul commanded Polycarp to join with the cries of the multitude gathered and say, “Away with the atheists!” Polycarp joined the cry and said, “Away with the atheists!” but he pointed at the crowds instead, proclaiming that they were the real atheists since they did not believe in the one true God.

The proconsul asked Polycarp to “revile Christ.” He promised to release Polycarp if he would reject Jesus. Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme Him, my



POLYCARP BEFORE THE ROMAN PROCONSUL

King, who has saved me? I am a Christian.” The crowds then cried, “Let him be burned!”

Wood was then collected and made into a pile. The woodpile was lighted, and as the flames surrounded him, Polycarp prayed to God one last time with these words:

Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I praise You that You have judged me worthy of this day and of this hour, to participate in the number of Your witnesses, and in the cup of Your Christ.⁴

This was the witness of Polycarp, pastor of the church in Smyrna.

The Martyrdom of Blandina

As noted above, a significant persecution took place in AD 177. There is no indication that Marcus Aurelius was directly responsible for the persecution. However, it took place during his reign. A noteworthy example of steadfast faith is the young woman named Blandina. She gave her life for Christ in the town of Lyons (pronounced “lee-own”). Eusebius, the church historian, quotes from an eyewitness account of Blandina’s testimony in Lyons.

Blandina was filled with such power as to be delivered and raised above those who were torturing her by turns from morning till evening in every manner, so that they acknowledged that they were conquered, and could do nothing more to her. And they were astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken; and they testified that one of these forms of torture was sufficient to

destroy life, not to speak of so many and so great sufferings. But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, renewed her strength in her confession; and her comfort and . . . relief from the pain of her sufferings was in exclaiming, “I am a Christian, and there is nothing vile done by us.”⁵

Despite the numerous tortures inflicted upon her, Blandina prevailed. She was stronger than her persecutors. Not that she did this in her own strength, but the Spirit of God enabled her to stand fast for Jesus.

And, after the scourging, after the wild beasts . . . she was finally enclosed in a net, and thrown before a bull. And having been tossed about by the animal, but feeling none of the things which were happening to her, on account of her hope and firm hold upon what had been entrusted to her, and her communion with Christ, she also was sacrificed. And the heathen themselves confessed that never among them had a woman endured so many and such terrible tortures.⁶

Blandina was just one of many other women who “did not love their lives to death” but gave all for their Blessed Redeemer.



ANCIENT AGORA (A PUBLIC SPACE FOR ASSEMBLY AND MARKETS) IN SMYRNA



**Precious in the sight of the Lord
Is the death of His saints. (Ps. 116:15)**

The Conversion of Constantine

In God's providence, a pivotal event occurred near the beginning of the 4th century. After Diocletian's death, **Galerius** (r. AD 305-311) continued persecuting Christians. But in 311, he brought an end to the persecution while on his deathbed. He issued an edict allowing Christians to assemble for worship. He even asked for prayers to be made on his behalf by the Christians.

Prior to Galerius' reign, the Roman Empire was divided into four administrative regions. Different emperors ruled over each region. This occurred during Diocletian's rule. This provided a degree of stability for such a large empire. But eventually, power struggles occurred. Civil war between the various co-emperors broke out. In 312, a battle occurred that dramatically altered the direction of Western history. It is known as the **Battle of Milvian Bridge**. In that battle,

Emperor Constantine defeated Emperor Maxentius on the outskirts of Rome.

The defeat of Maxentius enabled Constantine to take control of Rome. After Maxentius' defeat, Constantine took control of the Western portion of the empire. Constantine made an agreement with Licinius (who had control of the East). This agreement afforded additional protections for Christians. It granted toleration of both Christianity and Roman religion throughout the Roman Empire. Additionally, it called for the restoration of property that was confiscated from Christians in previous years. For a time, the empire was divided between Constantine and Licinius, but in 322, Constantine attacked Licinius' territory and eventually defeated him. This made Constantine the sole emperor of the entire Roman Empire.

Constantine's rise to power also played a significant role in church history. Before Constantine's battle with Maxentius, Constantine claimed to see a vision where he was told to use the sign of the cross as he went into battle. Constantine was told in the vision, "By this sign, conquer." The form of this sign was reported to be the first two Greek letters of Christ's name (Chi and Rho). Put together, these two letters can form a cross symbol.

The day after Constantine received the vision, he had the Chi-Rho cross symbol painted upon the shields of his soldiers. He prayed to God for victory. And by God's sovereign determination, Constantine did win the battle.

Constantine interpreted the victory as God's favor upon him. As a result, Constantine became a friend of and protector of Christians. Constantine himself claimed a Christian profession. He attended Christian worship regularly. He often made speeches in his court condemning pagan idolatry. Additionally, Constantine enacted laws in the empire favorable toward Christianity. In a later chapter, we will also learn how Constantine participated in the development of church doctrine.

Constantine did enact a law prohibiting pagan sacrifice. While those who still performed sacri-

fice were not prosecuted, this nevertheless demonstrated Constantine's commitment to the worship of the one true God. Peter Leithart wrote that "by the 350s sacrifice was rare enough that it took some daring to perform."⁷ Legislation under Constantine took an increasingly biblical direction. He made Sunday a day of rest and exempted churches from taxation. Prior to this, Sunday had been a working day in the Roman Empire.

The gladiatorial games began to be restricted and would eventually be prohibited. New laws against various forms of sexual immorality were enacted. He banned crucifixion as a form of punishment. His legislation even extended to the humane treatment of animals. Constantine had his flaws. He may have wrongly executed people. One of the most tragic events in Constantine's life was the execution of his son Crispus and his wife Fausta. We don't know why Constantine executed them or whether he carefully investigated the charges against them before doing so.

Regardless of Constantine's heart condition, we can see that Constantine's allegiance to Christianity changed the direction of church history. Once a forbidden and persecuted religion, under Constantine's reign, Christianity became not only tolerated but embraced by many. From that point on, Christianity would have a much larger influence on the development of culture in Europe.

After Constantine's death, both Christianity and paganism continued their existence side-by-side in the Roman Empire, but paganism gradually declined. But the struggle between the dragon and Christ's followers did not end with the rise of Constantine. Wherever Christ's gospel goes forth, the dragon strikes



THE MILVIAN BRIDGE IN ROME

back. However, we need not fear the attacks of the evil one. Our Lord Jesus is the victorious King. He is greater than the prince of this world. ■

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)





ONE OF PAUL'S LETTERS BEING READ TO THE EARLY CHRISTIANS