

Turning Points

*Decisive Moments
in the History of Christianity*

Second Edition

Mark A. Noll



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To the Illinois Presbyterians and Transylvanian Baptists
for whom the material in this book was first prepared
and who, though students, have taught me
much more than ever I gave to them

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Introduction: *The Idea of Turning Points and Reasons for Studying the History of Christianity*



Among the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples were statements recorded in Matthew, chapter 28, and Acts, chapter 1. These words, though they are important for many other reasons, also outline a framework for the history of Christianity.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Nothing could now happen to the followers of Christ that lay outside the reach of his sovereignty; no experiences that the church underwent, no matter how glorious or how mundane, were irrelevant to the living Word of God.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” The history of Christianity would always involve at least two related actions: a movement outward to reach places where Christ’s name was hitherto not known and a movement inward to train hearts in learning more of Christ.

“[S]urely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.” However the church might wander, whatever the sins committed by Christians as individuals and as a body, the people of God would be sustained, not by their own wisdom, but by the presence of Christ.

“[Y]ou will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” The Christian faith would take root in particular cultures, and it would profoundly shape individual peoples, regions, and nations. But Christianity itself would belong to none of them. Rather, the church would exist to bear witness to God’s love revealed in Christ and to bear that witness throughout the whole world.

These parting words of Jesus do not, of course, provide details about the later history of Christianity, but they do provide orientation for that history. The history of Christianity has wound its way through vast regions across vast stretches of time and in a vast variety of forms. But it

remains the history of those who worship the Lord of Life, who seek to serve him, and whose witnesses they are.

One of the most interesting ways to grasp a general sense of Christian history (though there are many others) is to examine critical turning points in that story. Identifying such critical turning points is a subjective exercise, for an observer's decisions about what those most important turning points are inevitably depends upon what the observer considers to be most important. Yet however subjective it is to select a limited number of turning points as *the* critical moments in Christian history, such an exercise has a number of advantages.

- It provides an opportunity to select, to extract from the immense quantity of resources available for studying the history of Christianity a few striking incidents and so to bring some order into a massively complicated subject.
- Concentrating on the turning points of church history also provides an opportunity to highlight, to linger over specific moments so as to display the humanity, the complexity, and the uncertainties that constitute the actual history of the church, but which are often obscured in trying to recount the sweep of centuries.
- Studying specific turning points more closely also provides an opportunity to interpret, to state more specifically why certain events, actions, or incidents may have marked an important fork in the road or signaled a new stage in the outworking of Christian history.

The advantages for organizing an introduction to Christian history around a series of turning points were pressed home to me over a period of several years. First was the need for a framework for organizing an adult education course at my church. Then came the opportunity on two occasions to introduce the sweep of church history in short courses for Romanian pastors and lay workers. Finally was the chance to rethink the best way of teaching a one-semester survey of the history of Christianity to students at Wheaton College. For each of these audiences, a concentration on critical turning points turned out to allow greater focus on specific episodes while also providing more opportunity for interpretive reflection than I had found when teaching such material in other ways.

This book comes directly out of those varied teaching experiences. In each case, much was sacrificed in order to concentrate on a few major turning points. But much also was gained by attempting to combine more focus than a survey usually allows, while still attending to large-scale movements of institutions, people, and doctrines in the history of the church.

The book that grows out of these teaching assignments is intentionally shorter rather than longer. It is written for laypeople and introductory students rather than for scholars. It comes from an author with Christian presuppositions (specifically of the Protestant evangelical variety), but it intends to be as fair and as nonpartisan as such presuppositions allow. It is also written with an intent to present Christianity as a worldwide religion rather than a faith for just Europeans and North Americans.

The twelve turning points singled out for special attention, as well as the potential turning points for the twentieth century discussed in the final chapter, are by no means the only ones that could have been selected. A good case could have been made for including many other events, for example (as only a partial list):

- the mission of Patrick to Ireland in the early fifth century;
- the foundation of the reforming monastery at Cluny in France in 909;
- the arrival of Eastern Orthodoxy in Kyivan Rus in 988;
- the start of the Crusades in 1095;
- the revival of monasticism through the friars (especially Dominicans and Franciscans) at the start of the thirteenth century;
- the fall of the Byzantine Roman Empire to Islam in 1453;
- any number of significant moments in the missionary proclamation of Christianity beyond the West;
- the production of important translations of the Bible (for example, Jerome into Latin ca. 400, the English translation inspired by Wycliffe at the end of the fourteenth century, Luther's translation into German of 1522, the King James Bible of 1611, or some of the many new translations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries);
- the beginning of independent churches in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century; and
- the emergence of significant protest and humanitarian movements that decisively influenced the shape of later history (for example, the Waldensians in 1173, Conrad Grebel and the Anabaptists in 1525, John Smyth and the Baptists in 1609, George Fox and the Quakers in 1652, or William and Catherine Booth and the Salvation Army in 1878).

Attempting to select the twelve most important turning points in the history of Christianity is a good exercise in itself. I have chosen the turning points treated in this book primarily because I think they reveal vitally important matters about church history, but also in part because

these are events I know something about from my own teaching and reading. If the book inspires others to think about why the turning points found here are not as important as other possibilities, it will have been a successful book.

Each chapter begins with a relatively detailed account of the turning point itself, since historical details remind us that “Church History” is never just the grand sweep through great eons of magisterial Doctrines, clashing Principles, or inevitable Consequences, but is rather the cumulative result of the often blurred thoughts, often hesitant actions, and often unforeseen consequences experienced by people more or less like ourselves.

Only after attempting to flesh out history in this kind of concrete way do we go on to larger, more general questions of why, how, and so what. Why was this event crucial? How did it relate to what went before and lead on to what followed? And what might those of us looking back at the end of the twentieth century learn from the event? Answers to these questions must, of necessity, be more general, but they are intended to connect, rather than disconnect, grand historical consequences with sharply focused critical events.

To provide even more context for the turning points, each chapter begins with a hymn and ends with a prayer that were written close to the time of the turning point under discussion. Each chapter also contains several longer quotations from people who took part in the turning point or who were affected by it. These materials, along with maps, charts, and illustrations, are intended in part to provide a more readable book. But they are also meant as a way for putting some flesh on the bare bones of history. The great decisions of the Christian past were made by people who sang and prayed with their fellow believers, who experienced the priceless nurture of regular worship and the disillusioning sorrows of intrachurch conflict, and who often expounded at great length on the page or in public speech. To hear their voices is not just to offer window dressing, but to show that the great events of church history always involved real people, for whom regular worship, study of Scripture, participation in the sacraments, and attention to preaching and teaching provided a foundation for what gets written up in books.

But why, the question might be raised, be concerned about church history at all? Why think that any sort of knowledge about the Christian past—which can so easily seem obscure, petty, confusing, or complex—should interest or assist Christian believers in the present?

Obviously, some people are more naturally inclined to historical study than others. But for believers at the end of the twentieth century, there are several reasons why at least some attention to the history of Christianity is valuable. Brief explanation of those reasons builds a foundation for the specific turning points that make up this book.

1. In the first instance, studying the history of Christianity provides repeated, concrete demonstration concerning the irreducibly historical character of the Christian faith. The Bible itself is rife with explicit statements of that great truth. For instance, God gave the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel in direct consequence of his action-in-history on their behalf: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2–3). The vision of the New Testament is just as fully taken up with historical realities. The narrative heart of Christian faith, as well as its central dogma, is the truth that the Word became flesh (John 1:14). The apostle John spoke further of the Christian faith in the concrete terms of that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (1 John 1:1). Luke wrote at the beginning of his Gospel that the Christian message depended on “the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:1–2). The apostle Paul spoke of events in Jewish history that provided “examples” for believers in the first century (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

The message of these and many other biblical passages is summarized in the key affirmations of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 concerning the historical character of Christ’s work, who for the sake of humanity and our salvation “came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again.”

In a word, since Christianity is not captured simply in a set of dogmas, a moral code, or a picture of the universe—though Christianity certainly involves dogmas, morality, and a worldview—since Christianity is ultimately the acts of God in time and space, centrally the acts of God in Christ, then to study the history of Christianity is continually to remember the historical character of Christian faith.

To be sure, there are dangers in taking history seriously. Throughout the entire history of Christianity, problems have constantly arisen when believers equate the human acts of the church with the acts of God, when Christians assume that using the name of God to justify their actions in space and time is the same as God himself acting. But

that danger grows from a positive reality: to be a Christian is to have an infinite stake in the events of God-in-Christ, with all that led up to the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and all that now flows from those realities in the shape of the church's history.

2. A second contribution of church history is to provide perspective on the interpretation of Scripture. In varied forms, all Christians testify to their dependence upon the Bible, yet as even the briefest reflection indicates, there are vast differences in how the Bible is understood and used. Studying the history of Christianity provides guidance in several ways for discovering the meaning of Scripture.

We may view the Christian past like a gigantic seminar where trusted friends, who have labored long to understand the Scriptures, hold forth in various corners of the room. There is Augustine discoursing on the Trinity, here St. Patrick and Count von Zinzendorf comparing notes on the power of Light over Darkness, over there Catherine of Siena and Phoebe Palmer discussing the power of holiness, across the room Pope Gregory the Great on the duties of a pastor, there the Orthodox monk St. Herman of Alaska and the first African Anglican bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther on what it means to carry Christianity across cultural boundaries, here St. Francis on the God-ordained goodness of the earth, in a huddle Thomas Aquinas, Simeon the New Theologian, and Blaise Pascal talking about the relation of reason to revelation, there Hildegard of Bingen and Johann Sebastian Bach on how to sing the praises of the Lord, here Martin Luther on justification by faith, there John Calvin on Christ as Prophet, King, and Priest, there Charles Wesley on the love of God, there his mother, Susanna, on the communication of faith to children, and on and on.

If a contemporary believer wants to know the will of God as revealed in Scripture on any of these matters, or on thousands more, it is certainly prudent to study the Bible carefully for oneself. But it is just as prudent to look for help, to realize that the question I am bringing to Scripture has doubtless been asked before and will have been addressed by others who were at least as saintly as I am, at least as patient in pondering the written Word, and at least as knowledgeable about the human heart.

Teachers of foreign languages say that you don't really know your own language unless you have tried to learn a second or a third language. In the same way, students of the Scriptures usually cannot claim to have understood its riches unless they have consulted others about its meaning. In fact, Christians are always consulting one another about the meaning of the Bible, whether by listening to sermons, by reading commentaries, or by meeting for Bible studies of one kind or another. The dimension added by the history of Christianity is the re-

alization that in books may be found a wondrously rich reservoir of engagement with the Scriptures from those who, though dead, still speak of what they have found in the sacred texts.

As much as church history offers this kind of direct help in understanding the Scriptures, it also offers a great caution. From the distance supplied by time, it is often quite easy to see that some biblical interpretations that once seemed utterly persuasive were in fact distortions of Scripture. When we find out, for example, that some believers once thought the Bible clearly taught that the Roman Empire was to usher in the millennium or that Christ would return in 1538 or that Africans were an inherently inferior form of humanity, then we can see the role that specific thought patterns or intellectual conventions of an age have played in interpretations of the Bible.

The benefit from noting such mistaken interpretations from the past is to raise the possibility that some of our treasured interpretations of Scripture today may be as dependent on conventions of our own era, and also as irrelevant to the actual message of the Bible as clearly deviant interpretations of former epochs were. For this problem it is difficult to provide examples from the present, since the biblical interpretations I hold most dear are likely to be precisely those that I consider to be least influenced by passing fashions. (It is much easier to see where biblical interpretations I reject are dominated by the thought forms of today.) Still, to see in the past that very godly people were able to maintain bizarre interpretations of Scripture should be a caution for us all.

3. The study of church history is also useful as a laboratory for examining Christian interactions with surrounding culture. To take one pressing, if not all-important, example, many Western churches at the end of the twentieth century struggle with questions about what kind of music to use in church. Should all the old hymns be dropped in favor of new songs of praise? Should music be provided by an organ? a combo? Should it be performed a capella? with electricity? with drums? Study of the past cannot provide easy answers on how best to use music for Christ today. But to examine periods like the first half of the sixteenth century, when, in response to the tumults of the Reformation, at least five or six different decisions were taken with respect to the use of music in church, would certainly be a help. When Roman Catholics took the path of complex music and professional performance, Calvinists of congregational Psalm-singing with straightforward tunes, the Orthodox of preserving ancient liturgies, Anabaptists of rejecting all “worldly” forms of music in favor of unaccompanied congregational song, Lutherans of combining professional music with congregational singing, and Anglicans wobbling (typically) among

Lutheran, Catholic, and Calvinist styles, there were consequences that helped shape each of these Christian traditions. To see what flowed from the decision for traditional, trendy, populist, professional, elaborate, or simple forms of music provides substantial context for trying to think through issues in the use of music today.

On a question that can have life-or-death consequences, modern Christians face weighty choices in how to live as believers in various political situations. Again, the history of Christianity cannot provide definitive answers, but it can provide a welter of contrasting scenarios. Sometimes the church has thrived under tyranny, sometimes tyranny has decimated it. In different eras the church has supported (or attacked) monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy. Churches have both upheld and resisted ruling regimes. Modern believers in Montana, Serbia, Kuwait, Russia, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland are probably going to be looking for direction of different kinds from church history, but all will be able to find some fellow believers who have gone down a road something like theirs before.

And so it is with many other circumstances: Christian engagement with science, Christian attitudes to alien ethnic groups, Christian promotion of peace or war, Christian contributions to different forms of economic organization, Christian discussion about what to eat or drink, Christian strategies for organizing the work of God, and so on.

Even a little bit of historical understanding may benefit modern believers attempting to act responsibly in any of these cultural spheres. The first reassurance is that almost all such issues have been faced before, at least in some form. The second is that believers—guided by Scripture, church authorities, sage employment of worldly wisdom, and the inner prompting of the Spirit—have often acted wisely and well on such cultural matters. The third is that, even where in retrospect it appears that Christians have blundered badly in their decisions, the Lord of the church has not abandoned them to their folly but, despite their misbegotten efforts, has remained to sustain his own.

4. This realization, which historical study fairly shouts out loud, that God sustains the church despite the church's own frequent efforts to betray its Savior and its own high calling, points to another benefit from the history of Christianity. Study of the past can be useful, that is, in shaping proper Christian attitudes. It is often easier in reviewing the past than in looking at the present to discriminate between matters that are absolutely essential to genuine Christianity and those that are either of relative importance or not important at all. If we are able to isolate from past generations what was of crucial significance in the church's mission, then we have a chance in the present to order our

emotional and spiritual energies with discrimination—preserving our deepest commitment only for those aspects of Christian faith that deserve such commitment and acting with ever greater toleration as we move from the center of the faith to its periphery.

Even more important, study of church history should increase our humility about who we are and what we believe. There is nothing that the modern church enjoys that is not a gift from previous generations of God's people. To be sure, we modify, adjust, adapt, and expand these gifts from the past, but we do not make them up. Again, if the church is always only one generation from extinction, it also enjoys a peerless inheritance. The more we know about how those gifts have come down to us, the more we may humbly thank God for his faithfulness to past generations, as well as to our own.

Even more than humility, a study of the Christian past can also engender profound gratitude. Despite a dazzling array of God-honoring triumphs and despite a wide and deep record of godliness among believers of high estate and low, the sad fact is that the church's history is often a sordid, disgusting tale. Once students push beyond sanitized versions of Christian history to realistic study, it is clear that self-seeking, rebellion, despotism, pettiness, indolence, cowardice, murder (though dignified with God-talk), and the lust for power along with all other lusts have flourished in the church almost as ignobly as in the world at large. A study of church history can be an eye-opener. The heroes of the faith usually have feet of clay—sometimes thighs, hearts, and heads as well. The golden ages of the past usually turn out to be tarnished if they are examined closely enough. Crowding around the heroes of the faith are a lot of villains, and some of them look an awful lot like the heroes.

And so along with all the positive direction and ennobling examples in church history stands also a full record of human wrongdoing. Our response? It could be to despair at the persistent human inability to act toward others and toward God as God has acted toward humanity. It would be better, however, to consider the hidden reality that the long record of Christian weakness and failure reveals, for what it shows is a divine patience broader than any human impatience, a divine forgiveness more powerful than any human offense, and a divine grace deeper than our human sin.

Despite a tangled history, the promise of the Savior concerning the church has been fulfilled: "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). But precisely that tangled history points to the reason why Christianity has endured: "*I will build my church.*"

By way of final introduction, it may be helpful to say a few last words about what follows.

Most of the chapters speak more often of “the history of Christianity” than of “church history,” since “church history” entails a stronger commitment to a particular expression of the faith than does “the history of Christianity.” My own conviction is that “Christianity” means something definite with boundaries that are fairly well defined by the major creeds treated in the first three chapters. Furthermore, my own evangelical Protestant convictions lead me to think that revitalized forms of Reformation faith are the truest and best forms of Christianity. At the same time, however, historical study has convinced me that confessional Protestants have sometimes honored the ideals of the Reformation more in words than in reality. Historical study also shows that believers in other Christian traditions regularly display Christ-like virtues and practice humble dependence upon God’s grace more than my confessional Protestant convictions tell me they should. With these facts in mind, I have tried to write with as much respect as possible for the widely diverse forms of Christianity that have been practiced with integrity, and continue to be practiced with integrity, in all parts of the Christian church.

The pages below reflect what might legitimately be called a male bias toward the history of Christianity. In a stellar book on the religious lives of medieval Catholic women, Caroline Walker Bynum writes that “women tended to tell stories and develop personal models without crises or turning points.”¹ The fact that it is mostly men who figure as the principal actors in the turning points that follow is less a statement about the intrinsic character of the faith than it is a reflection of how the church’s public life has been documented through the centuries. It is gratifying indeed to see that the flourishing of scholarship over the past decades on women in Christian history is already leading to the kind of popular general studies that this one also tries to be, but written with a focus on the spheres of Christian life,² in which the experiences of women have figured more prominently.

1. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 25.

2. For example, Ruth Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Amy Oden, ed., *In Her Words: Women’s Writings in the History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); and Margaret Bendroth and Phyllis Airhart, eds., *Faith Traditions and the Family* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996).

Finally, it may be worth observing that the abbreviation “ca.” is from the Latin *circa*, “about,” and is used to designate a date concerning which there is some uncertainty.



Each of the chapters ends with a prayer taken from a figure related in some way to the turning point of the chapter. It is therefore appropriate that this introduction do the same by enlisting from the Psalms two parts of a great biblical prayer of Moses concerning the rule of God over human history:

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn men back to dust,
saying, “Return to dust, O sons of men.”
For a thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep men away in the sleep of death;
they are like the new grass of the morning—
though in the morning it springs up new,
by evening it is dry and withered.*

*Teach us to number our days aright,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Relent, O LORD! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants.
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.
May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands.*

(Ps. 90:1–6, 12–17)

Further Reading

Each of the chapters ends with a short list of books and articles that provide further reading concerning the turning point or its broader context. At the end of this introduction it is appropriate to list some of the general and reference works that were most helpful in preparing this book.

- Barrett, David B., ed. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Bettenson, Henry, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Bradley, James E., and Richard A. Muller. *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Clouse, Robert G., Richard V. Pierard, and Edwin M. Yamauchi. *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture through the Ages*. Chicago: Moody, 1993.
- Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Douglas, J. D., ed. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974.
- Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- The 100 Most Important Events in Church History* [*Christian History*, no. 28]. 1990.
- Lane, Tony, ed. *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.
- Leith, John H., ed. *Creeds of the Churches*. 3rd ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1982.
- New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 17 vols. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967–79.
- The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. 13 vols. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–14.
- Schaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom*. 3 vols. 6th ed. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919.
- Walker, Williston, with Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy. *A History of the Christian Church*. 4th ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985.

1

The Church Pushed Out on Its Own: The Fall of Jerusalem (70)

The apostle Paul encouraged the church at Ephesus to “sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Several of Paul’s letters indicate that the singing of “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” formed part of the earliest Christian expression of worship, an outpouring of thanksgiving and gratitude to God for Jesus’ saving action on the cross (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16; also 1 Cor. 14:26). Although scant evidence remains concerning the content of hymns during the first century of the church, some scholars have identified “hymnic” passages in the New Testament based on their “lyrical quality and rhythmical style,” as well as their unique vocabulary and doctrinal content.¹ Drawing initially on Jewish expressions of praise, the first Christians quickly began to develop uniquely Christian hymns and their own, separate forms of liturgy.

One of the earliest accounts of the church from an outsider happens to mention hymn-singing. It is from Pliny, the Roman governor of the province of Pontus and Bithynia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) from A.D. 111 to 112. Describing to the emperor Trajan what he has learned of Christian practice, Pliny writes that “on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as a god.”²

1. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 48.

2. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 3–4.

Later accounts testify that hymn-singing was well established in Christian worship by the second century. As it developed, believers used models from the New Testament like the following lyric passage from Colossians. In it the early Christian community declares the centrality of Jesus in creation and in the church, looking back to Christ's death and resurrection and forward to the restoration of all things in him:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
for by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
all things were created by him and for him.
He is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

(Col. 1:15–20)



In A.D. 66, Jewish exasperation with the insensitive rule of Rome at last came to a boil. A long history of strife lay in the background between Jews and the Roman occupiers of Judea. Jewish relations with Greek-speaking settlers, merchants, and imperial officials, who were sheltered by the Roman umbrella, were no better. Rome had frequently raided the temple treasury to make up for what it called unpaid taxes. It had sent Greek-speaking procurators as rulers to Palestine who had neither interest in nor sympathy for Judea or Judaism. It had monopolized positions of wealth and influence. It had pushed the Jewish farmers of the countryside deeper and deeper into debt.

The Jewish revolt began in Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast about fifty miles northwest of Jerusalem. Greek-speakers celebrated a local legal victory by launching an attack on the Jewish quarters. The Roman army stood by passively as Jews were cut down. When word of these events arrived in Jerusalem, there was an immediate reaction. Al-

though the Jews were divided into many factions, radical voices carried the day. Jews attacked the local garrison, slaughtered its defenders, and appealed for an end of the hated subjugation to Rome. When priests and other more moderate Jewish leaders stopped the mandated ritual sacrifices to the Roman empire, all-out war became inevitable.

Seven years of bloody strife followed. At first the Jewish rebels gained the upper hand. Then, under the tested veteran general Vespasian, Rome sent four legions to discipline its wayward Judean colony. Vespasian advanced cautiously, first securing the Mediterranean ports and then moving slowly against Jerusalem. The noose he was constructing for the Jewish capital relaxed in the summer of 68, when the emperor Nero died, for Vespasian himself was a candidate to succeed him. Events in Rome moved slowly, but eventually Vespasian was handed the palm, and so he left Judea. But this was only a temporary respite. To carry on the job, Vespasian left his son, Titus, who proved just as forceful as his father.

Once again the Roman legions moved toward Jerusalem. Once again the noose tightened. This time there was no relief. In April of the year 70, the siege began. The suffering of those who were trapped in Jerusalem became horrific. In September the most zealous Jewish rebels made their last stand in the temple. Fragmentary sources describing the revolt leave conflicting accounts as to Titus's intentions. Josephus, a former Jewish general who had come over to the Romans in the early days of the revolt, wrote that Titus hoped to save the temple as a gesture of Roman moderation. A later Roman authority, Sulpicius Severus, reported an account from the great Roman historian Tacitus with a different story. This report held that Titus was eager to destroy the temple. Titus's reasoning, as reported by Sulpicius Severus, is particularly noteworthy, for he wanted to eradicate the temple "in order that the Jewish and Christian religions might more completely be abolished; for although these religions were mutually hostile, they had nevertheless sprung from the same founders; the Christians were an offshoot of the Jews, and if the root were taken away the stock would easily perish."³

Whether or not Sulpicius Severus got the story right, his comments illuminated a crucial reality about the early history of the Christian church. Titus would go on to wipe out the last remnants of Jewish resistance, including the determined band that held the mountain fortress Masada for nearly three years after the fall of Jerusalem. Later Jewish resistance to Rome would elicit even harsher repression, espe-

3. Quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from Its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 156.



This frieze, taken from an archway in Rome, depicts the conquering general Titus and his troops carrying away spoil from the sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

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cially from Emperor Hadrian in response to a revolt in 135. But even before Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, Titus's observation about the mutual dependence of Christianity and Judaism had become ancient history. While Christianity in its very earliest years may, in fact, have functioned like an appendage of Judaism, by the year 70 it was moving out on its own. That move to independence from Judaism was greatly accelerated by Roman destruction of the Jewish temple and the cessation of the sacrifices that had played such a large role in Jewish worship.

The blows that Vespasian, Titus, Hadrian, and other Roman generals rained upon Jerusalem did not destroy the Christian church. Rather, they liberated the church for its destiny as a universal religion offered to the whole world. Yet from the perspective of the very earliest Christians, Roman decimation of Jerusalem probably seemed like an unspeakable tragedy. Christianity was born in the cradle of Judaism. As indicated by the great meeting reported in Acts 15, the early center of Christianity's communications, organization, and authority was Jerusalem. The first leaders of the church, like James the half-brother of Jesus, who presided over the council in Acts 15, functioned like presidents of a synagogue. The Gospels were written, in large part, as a demonstration of the way that Jesus brought Israel's earlier history to its culmination—Matthew to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophetic promises for the Messiah, Luke to show that Jesus fulfilled the essence of Jewish law, and John to show that the divine revelation to Abraham had culminated in Jesus Christ (John 8:58, "Before Abraham was born, I am"). Several of the early Christian writings were directed to the Jewish diaspora, such as the Epistle of James, which begins, "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." Other early Christian writings that

would also become part of the New Testament were preoccupied with negotiating the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. The apostle Paul, especially, argued frequently against those who wanted to maintain the Jewish rite of circumcision as a requirement for salvation. And his interpretations of the Old Testament returned repeatedly to the way in which Jesus' work climaxed God's consistent offer of grace to the Jews. In sum, as historian W. H. C. Frend has written, "All Christianity at this stage [in the apostolic period] was 'Jewish Christianity.' But it was Israel with a difference."⁴

The great turning point represented by the destruction of Jerusalem was to move Christianity outward, to transform it from a religion shaped in nearly every particular by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance in the broader reaches of the Mediterranean world, and then beyond. The apostles Peter and Paul were probably martyred in Rome under the emperor Nero about the time that Titus and Vespasian were advancing on Jerusalem. Just a few decades later, Rome would replace Jerusalem as the center of Christian communications and authority. Theological discussion likewise turned rapidly away from problems posed by the system of Jewish morality to issues framed by Hellenistic philosophy or Roman conceptions of order. Already by A.D. 70 Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the Mediterranean, rather than temple worship in Jerusalem, provided the main vehicles for Christian outreach.

When the Romans conquered Jerusalem, most Christians had already left. A tradition, reported in the fourth century by the early church historian Eusebius, says that the Christians had taken refuge in Pella, a substantial town northeast of Jerusalem across the Jordan. Archaeological and later evidence has not verified Eusebius's report, but the physical fate of Jewish Christianity is not the main issue. Rather, the smashing of Jerusalem accelerated a change in perception. To Christians, to Jews, and soon to many others, it was increasingly clear that Rome's disruption of Judaism had pushed the Christian church out on its own. As the historian and biblical scholar F. F. Bruce once put it, "In the lands outside Palestine, the decade which ended with the year 70 marked the close of the period when Christianity could be regarded as simply a variety of Judaism. . . . From A.D. 70 onward the divergence of the paths of Jewish Christianity and orthodox Judaism was decisive. . . . Henceforth the main stream of Christianity must make its independent way in the Gentile world."⁵

4. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 123.

5. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 157–58.

Now, however, many questions loomed. How would the church define itself? Organize its worship? Find secure authority? Evangelize? Ward off dangerous teaching? In other words, once the “given” framework of Judaism passed away, what would take its place? The three centuries after the fall of Jerusalem provided answers to these questions. We turn now to the means that the church employed to find stability and to sustain its growth in the period after the apostles (that is, the “subapostolic” period). But as we do, it is well to be reminded of how symbolically important was the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. By making it impossible for Judaism to continue in a normal course of development, the Romans also forced great changes upon the Christian church. The turning point of Christian history at Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was the church’s emergence on its own.

Links to the Past

Christianity has maintained a special relationship with Judaism. That relationship would later lead to tragic consequences, especially in circumstances where Christians dominated a local culture or nation and where Jews were regarded as second-class citizens. In those circumstances the near kinship of the two religions raised Christian ire, which all too often flamed into violence when Jewish communities went about the practice of their ancestral faith.

Viewed from another perspective, however, the links between Judaism and Christianity can be seen in a more positive light. Although the church would go on to break from Judaism, it is a remarkable fact that the main problems of the church’s early centuries were problems shaped by Judaism. First, Christians asked, What is truth? If the church went beyond Judaism in finding ultimate truth in a personal revelation from God—that is, in the life and work of Jesus Christ—still, the church drew upon its Jewish heritage in believing that divine revelation held the key to life’s most important realities.

Second, Christians asked, How do we know the truth? Again, if in answering this question the church went beyond Judaism to rely on the writings of the New Testament and the testimony of the apostles to Christ, still that trust in a written revelation from God and reliance upon leaders who provided authoritative interpretations of that written revelation followed the Jewish pattern of honoring sacred books and studying them diligently.

Third, Christians asked, How do we put the truth into action? If the church went beyond the organization of life around the ritual year of the temple and the activities of local synagogues, still the church’s own development of bishops and the planting of new churches under the

leadership of local elders, priests, or ministers expanded upon what had been a Jewish way of nurturing the faithful and organizing to face the world.

The early church benefited from its ties to Judaism in one other important way. For several decades after A.D. 70, the church continued to enjoy the legal status that the Jews had won through hard and difficult trial. Normally in the Mediterranean world of that time, nations conquered by Rome were forced to adapt local religions to Roman religion; they had to recognize Rome's gods along with their own. The fierce monotheism of the Jews had therefore been a source of ceaseless conflict from the first century B.C., when Rome reached out to enfold Judea. Eventually Rome came to recognize Judaism as a legal religion, despite Jewish refusal to acknowledge the Roman gods. This status as a *religio licita* protected the Christian church through its association with Judaism, even after the destruction of Jerusalem had in fact driven the two religions apart.

As the Christian church moved out into the Roman world, its Judaic roots would be obscured, but even beneath the surface, those roots remained a critical part of what Christianity had been and what it would become.

Outward from Jerusalem

The stabilization of the church on its own is an involved story. Movement from self-definition dictated by a Jewish agenda to self-definition appropriate for a missionary religion expanding throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond was certainly influenced by the general conditions of the time. The Roman peace (*pax Romana*) that had been established by Caesar Augustus, who ruled from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, provided political and social stability, making possible the easy movement of ideas and people. The pervasive Hellenistic culture that accompanied the expansion of Roman political power made a common (*koinē*) form of the Greek language available to all relatively learned people who lived under Roman rule. The dispersion of Jews from Judea, which had been going on for several centuries before the time of Christ, meant that communities of God-fearers who studied the Hebrew Scriptures were sprinkled widely throughout the Roman world. By the first century A.D. there was also a widespread dissatisfaction with the inherited religions of the Mediterranean, which were sinking all too rapidly into either stale philosophical argument or nominal political observance. The Christianity that spread outward with increasing speed from Judea after the year 70 was able to take advantage of each of these existing conditions.