

The Early Church, 100–500

At some point around the year 60, the Roman authorities began to realize there was some kind of new secret society in the heart of their city, which was rapidly gaining recruits. The reports that filtered back spoke of a sect based on some mysterious and dark figure called “Chrestus” or “Christus,” whose origins lay in one of the more obscure and backward parts of the Roman Empire. But who was he? And what was this new religion all about? Was it something they should be worried about, or could they safely ignore it?

It soon became clear that this new religious movement might have the potential to cause real trouble. The great fire which swept through Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero in 64 was conveniently blamed on this new religious group. Nobody liked them much, and they were an obvious scapegoat for the failings of the Roman authorities to deal with the fire and its aftermath. The Roman historian Tacitus (56–117) gave a full account of this event just over fifty years later. He identified this new religious group as “the Christians,” a group who took their name from someone called “Christus,” who had been executed by Pontius Pilate back in the reign of Tiberius. This “pernicious superstition” had found its way to Rome, where it was gaining a large following.

As a result, Nero pinned the guilt (and inflicted highly refined tortures) on a class hated for their abominations, called “Christians” by the people. Christus, from whom they derived their name, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. Yet this pernicious superstition, though checked for the moment, broke out again not only in Judaea, the primary source of the evil, but even in Rome, where everything that is repulsive and shameful from every part of the world converges and becomes popular. Accordingly, all who pleaded guilty were arrested. Their information led to the conviction of an immense multitude, not so much for the crime of setting the city on fire, as for hating humanity.

Yet, muddled and confused though the official Roman accounts of this movement may be, they were clear that they centered on the shadowy figure of “Christus.” It was not regarded as being of any permanent significance, being seen as little more than a passing minor irritation. At worst, it posed a threat to the cult of emperor worship. Yet less than three hundred years later, this new religious movement had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. So how did this happen? In this chapter, we shall tell the story of the emergence of this new religion during its first five hundred years, and track its growth from a fringe movement on the margins of imperial society to the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

1.1. Setting the Context: The Origins of Christianity

Christianity began as a reform movement within the context of Judaism (1.1.7), which gradually clarified its identity as it grew, and began to take definite shape in the world of the first-century Roman Empire. There are no historical grounds for believing that the term “Christian” originated from Jesus of Nazareth himself. Early Christians tended to refer to each other as “disciples” or “saints,” as the letters of the New Testament make clear. Yet others used alternative names to refer to this new movement. The New Testament suggests that the term “Christians” (Greek: *Christianoi*) was first used by outsiders to refer to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 17:26). It was a term imposed upon them, not chosen by them. Yet it seems to have caught on.

However, we must be careful not to assume that the use of the single term “Christian” implies that this new religious movement was uniform and well-organized. As we shall see, the early history of Christianity suggests that it was quite diverse, without well-defined authority structures or carefully formulated sets of beliefs (1.1.4). These began to crystallize during the first few centuries of Christian history. This first chapter sets out to explain how this process took place, and explore some of its results. It focuses on the highly significant period between the death of the last apostle (c. 100) and the Council of Chalcedon (451).

The first major era of Christian history (c. 100–451), during which Christianity began to expand rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, is sometimes called the “patristic period.” The unusual term “patristic” comes from the Greek word *patēr* (“father”), referring to the “fathers of the church,” such as Athanasius of Alexandria or Augustine of Hippo.

It is difficult to make sense of the historical development of Christianity without a good grasp of this formative period, particularly its great theological debates. Yet it is also impossible to understand the development of Christianity without knowing something about its historical origins. We shall therefore begin our discussion of early Christianity by reflecting on its emergence within Judaism, and its rapid transformation into a faith which refused to recognize ethnic or social boundaries.

1.1.1. The Crucible: The History of Israel

From its outset, Christianity saw itself as continuous with Judaism. Christians were clear that the God that they followed and worshipped was the same God worshipped by the

Israelite patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament sees the great hope of the coming of a “messiah” to the people of Israel as having been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (1.1.3). Indeed, the New Testament use of the title “Christ” is an explicit reference to this belief. (The Hebrew term “Messiah” literally means “the anointed One,” an idea translated by the Greek term *Christos*.) Although most western readers assume that “Jesus Christ” is a name similar to “John Smith,” it is really a statement of identity: “Jesus who is the Christ.”

The continuity between Judaism and Christianity is obvious at many points. Judaism placed particular emphasis on the Law (Hebrew: *Torah*), through which the will of God was made known in the form of commands, and the Prophets, who made known the will of God in certain definite historical situations. The New Testament gospels report that Jesus of Nazareth emphasized that he had “not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17). The same point is made by Paul in his New Testament letters. Jesus is “the goal of the Law” (Romans 10:4, using the Greek word *telos*, which means “end” or “objective”). Paul also stresses the continuity between the faith of Abraham and that of Christians (Romans 4:1–25). The Letter to the Hebrews points out both the continuity of the relationship between Moses and Jesus (Hebrews 3:1–6), and between Christians and the great figures of faith of ancient Israel (Hebrews 11:1–12:2).

Throughout the New Testament, the same theme recurs: Christianity is continuous with Judaism, and brings to completion what Judaism was pointing towards. This has several major consequences, of which the following are the most important. First, both Christians and Jews regard more or less the same collection of writings – known by Jews as “Law, Prophets, and Writings” and by Christians as “the Old Testament” – as having religious authority. Although there have always been more radical thinkers within Christianity – such as the second-century writer Marcion of Sinope (1.2.3) – who argued for the removal of any historical or theological link with Judaism, the majority opinion has always been that it is important to affirm and value the link between the Christian church and Israel. A body of writings which Jews regard as complete in itself is seen by Christians as pointing forward to something which will bring it to completion. Although Christians and Jews both regard the same set of texts as important, they use different names to refer to them, and interpret them in different ways.

Second, New Testament writers often laid emphasis on the manner in which Old Testament prophecies were understood to be fulfilled or realized in the life and death of Jesus Christ. By doing this, they drew attention to two important beliefs – that Christianity is continuous with Judaism, and that Christianity brings Judaism to its true fulfillment. This is particularly important for some early Christian writings – such as Paul’s letters and the gospel of Matthew – which often seem to have a particular concern to explore the importance of Christianity for Jews. For example, at twelve points the gospel of Matthew notes how events in the life of Jesus can be seen as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

Yet the continuity between Christianity and Judaism also helps us understand some of the conflicts in early Christian history, especially in the region of Palestine. The New Testament suggests that at least some Christians initially continued to worship in Jewish synagogues, before controversy made this problematic. The letters of Paul help us understand at least some of those controversies. Two questions were of particular importance, and were keenly debated in the first century.

First, should Christian converts be required to be circumcised? Those who emphasized the continuity between Christianity and Judaism believed they should be. Yet the view which ultimately prevailed was that Christians were no longer subject to the cultic laws of Judaism – such as the requirement to be circumcised, or observe strict food laws.

Second, were non-Jewish converts to Christianity to be treated as Jews? (The Jewish term “Gentile,” meaning “someone who is not a Jew,” was widely used in this discussion, and is often encountered in the New Testament references to this issue.) Again, those who emphasized the continuity between Judaism and Christianity argued that Gentile believers should be treated as Jews. For this reason, they demanded the circumcision of male Gentile converts. Yet the majority view was quite different: to be a Christian was not about reinforcing a Jewish ethnic or cultural identity, but about entering a new way of living and thinking that was open to everyone. By the late first century, Christians largely saw themselves as a new religious movement, originating within Judaism, but not limited by its cultic and ethnic traditions. We shall consider this point in more detail later (1.1.7).

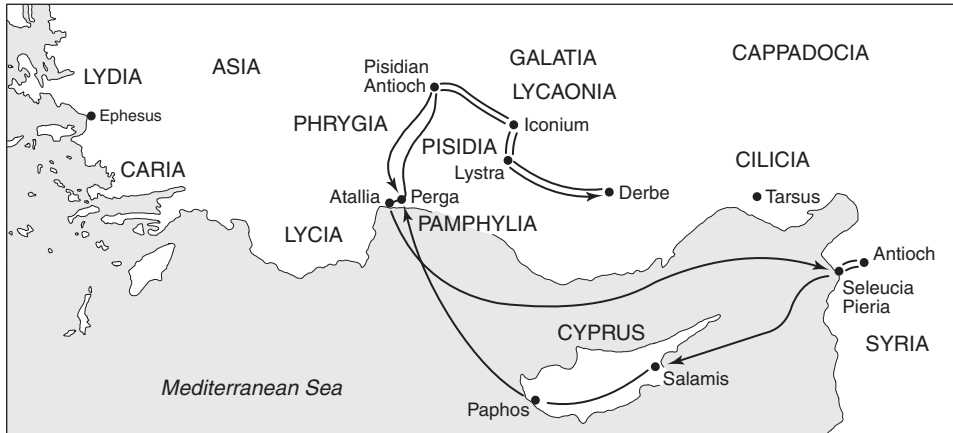
Yet despite Christianity having its origins within Judaism, which was viewed as a “legal religion” (Latin: *religio licita*) by the Roman authorities, early Christian communities were not considered to be entitled to imperial legal protection. These communities thus lived under the shadow of possible persecution, forcing them to maintain a low public profile. They had no access to power or social influence, and were often the object of oppression by the secular authorities.

One of the factors that helped crystallize a growing sense of religious identity within the churches was the rapid growth of Christianity outside Palestine, as it gained a growing following within the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. We shall explore this further in the following section.

1.1.2. A Wider Context: The Pagan Quest for Wisdom

Although its historical origins lay within Palestine, Christianity rapidly gained a following in the Greek-speaking world, especially within the cities of the Roman Empire. The missionary journeys of Paul of Tarsus, described in the New Testament, are of importance here. Paul was a Jewish religious leader who converted to Christianity, changing his name from “Saul” to “Paul.” His missionary expeditions took him to many cities and regions throughout the northeastern Mediterranean area – including Europe. As Christianity began to gain a foothold on the European mainland, the question of how it was to be preached in a non-Jewish context began to become of increasing importance.

Early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences, especially in Palestine, tended to focus on demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth represented the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. Peter’s sermon to Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2) follows this pattern. Peter here argues that Jesus represents the culmination of Israel’s destiny. God has declared him to be both “Lord and Christ” – highly significant terms, which Peter’s Jewish audience would have understood and appreciated. But what were Christians to do when preaching to Greek audiences, who knew nothing of the Old Testament, and had no connection with the history of Israel?



Map 1.1 Paul's first missionary journey

An approach that came to be particularly significant in the early Christian world can be found in Paul's sermon, preached at the Areopagus in the Greek city of Athens at an unknown date, possibly around 55. Paul here makes no reference to the ideas and hopes of Judaism. Instead, he presents Jesus of Nazareth as someone who revealed a god who the Athenians knew about, but had yet to encounter definitively. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Paul declared that the god who was made known through Jesus of Nazareth was the same god who had created the world and humanity – the god in whom, as the Athenian poet Aratus declared, "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Where early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, Paul presented the Christian faith as the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the human heart and the most profound intuitions of human reason. This was easily adapted to make use of some of the core themes of classic Greek philosophy, such as the idea of the "word" (Greek: *logos*) – the fundamental rational principle of the universe, according to popular Platonic philosophy of the first century (1.3.3). This theme is developed in the opening chapter of the gospel of John, which presents Jesus of Nazareth as the "word" by which the universe was originally created, and which entered into the world to illuminate and redeem it. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14).

This was not necessarily seen as displacing Christianity's historical and theological roots in Judaism. Rather, it was seen as a way of setting out the universal appeal of the Christian faith, which was held to transcend all ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers. The universal validity of the Christian gospel was held to imply that it could be proclaimed in ways that would resonate with every human culture. As we shall see, this approach to the appeal of Christianity would be of immense significance throughout its history, especially in missionary contexts.

Yet we have already assumed too much knowledge about the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. We need to consider this central figure of the Christian faith in more detail.

1.1.3. The Turning Point: Jesus of Nazareth

Christianity is an historical religion, which came into being in response to a specific set of events – above all, the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Although a full treatment of Jesus of Nazareth lies beyond the scope of this short work, it is nevertheless important to appreciate something of its fundamental themes, especially as they are taken up and developed within Christian history.

Traditionally, the life of Jesus of Nazareth is dated to the opening of the Christian era, with his death being located at some point around 30–3. Yet virtually nothing is known of Jesus of Nazareth from sources outside the New Testament. The New Testament itself provides two groups of quite distinct sources of information about Jesus: the four gospels, and the letters. Although the parallels are not exact, there are clear similarities between the gospels and the classical “lives” written by leading Roman historians of the age – such as Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars*, or Lucian’s *Life of Demorax*.

The gospels mingle historical recollection with theological reflection, reflecting both on the identity and the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The four gospels have their own distinct identities and concerns. For example, the gospel of Matthew seems especially concerned with establishing the significance of Jesus for a Jewish readership, where the gospel of Luke seems more concerned with explaining his importance to a Greek-speaking community. Establishing the identity of Jesus is just as important as recording what he said and did. The gospel writers can be thought of as trying to locate Jesus of Nazareth on a map, so that his relationship with humanity, history, and God can be understood and appreciated. This leads them to focus on three particular themes.

1. What Jesus taught, particularly the celebrated “parables of the Kingdom.” The teaching of Jesus was seen as important in helping believers to live out an authentic Christian life, which was a central theme of Christian discipleship – most notably, in relation to cultivating attitudes of humility towards others and obedience towards God.
2. What Jesus did – especially his ministry of healing, which was seen as important in establishing his identity, but also in shaping the values of the Christian community itself. For example, most medieval monasteries established hospitals, as a means of continuing Christ’s ministry in this respect.
3. What was said about Jesus by those who witnessed his teaching and actions. The gospel of Luke, for example, records Simeon’s declaration that the infant Jesus was the “consolation of Israel,” as well as the Roman centurion’s assertion that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. These can be seen as constituting public recognition of the identity of Jesus.

The letters of the New Testament – sometimes still referred to as “epistles” (Greek: *epistolē*, “a letter”) – are addressed to individuals and churches, and often focus on issues of conduct

and belief. These letters are important in helping us make sense of the emerging understandings of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth within the Christian community. The example of Jesus is regularly invoked to emphasize the importance of imitating his attitudes – for example, treating others better than yourself (Philippians 2). Although the letters make virtually no direct reference to the teachings of Jesus, certain patterns of behavior are clearly regarded as being grounded in those teachings – such as humility, or a willingness to accept suffering.

The letters also emphasize the importance of certain patterns of behavior – such as repeating the actions of the Last Supper, using bread and wine as a way of recalling and celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ. The sacraments of both baptism and the eucharist are clearly anticipated in the New Testament, and are traced back to the ministry of Jesus himself.

Yet perhaps more importantly, the letters also reveal the understandings of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth which were becoming characteristic of Christian communities. The most important of these themes are:

1. Jesus of Nazareth is understood to be the means by which the invisible God can be known and seen. Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (Greek: *eikōn*; Colossians 1:15), or the “exact representation” (Greek: *charaktēr*) of God (Hebrews 1:3).
2. Jesus is the one who makes salvation possible, and whose life reflects the themes characteristic of redeemed human existence. The use of the term “savior” (Greek: *sōtēr*) is highly significant in this respect.
3. The core Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is seen as a vindication of his innocence, a confirmation of his divine identity, and the grounds of hope for believers. Through faith, believers are understood to be united with Christ, sharing in his sufferings at present, while also sharing in the hope of his resurrection.

Each of these themes would be further developed as the Christian community reflected on their significance, and relevance for the life and thought of believers. The letters of Paul were of particular importance in setting out both the beliefs of Christianity and shaping its early social and cultural attitudes. We shall consider how early Christian thinkers developed these ideas later in this chapter.

1.1.4. The Early Spread of Christianity

The historical evidence suggests that Christianity spread very rapidly during the first and early second centuries. This naturally raises two questions. First, what were the mechanisms by which the movement spread? And second, what was it about the movement that proved attractive to people at the time? Unlike early Islam, Christianity was not spread by force; if anything, force was used against it by the imperial authorities. Since Christianity was not recognized as a legal religious movement until the fourth century, converts clearly believed there was something about the new religion that made it worth risking penalization or persecution. But what?



Figure 1.1 Rome was seen as especially important by early Christians, as it was believed that both the apostles Peter and Paul were martyred there. *The Martyrdom of St. Peter*, by P. Brancacci and F. Lippi. Church of St. Mary of Carmine, Florence. Photo: akg-images/De Agostini Picture Library

Earlier historians suggested that one of the primary mechanisms for the spread of Christianity was public preaching, noting the importance of Paul’s missionary journeys, described in the Acts of the Apostles. Yet there are relatively few historical accounts of the public preaching of the Christian faith, probably reflecting the fact that these would have been suppressed by the imperial authorities. Paul’s speech at Athens is a rare example of such public preaching; his preferred method was preaching in synagogues to Jewish audiences.

More recently, historians have noted the importance of networks in spreading the Christian faith. These loose organizations, often based around professions or specific localities, avoided meeting in public. Interested outsiders would be invited along to what were essentially secret meetings, often by Christians whose social or professional connections brought them into contact with such people. Early Christian gatherings or assemblies (Greek: *ekklēsia*) usually took place in private households, creating a strong sense of belonging and identity, given further weight by “sacred oaths” (Latin: *sacramenta*) of loyalty.

There is considerable evidence for the importance of commerce and trade in spreading Christianity, with itinerant preachers and teachers attending house churches in cities in which they had business. At this early stage, there was no centralized religious authority, no standard model of community organization at the local level, and no dedicated church

buildings or cathedrals. It was only after the conversion of the emperor Constantine that bishops from throughout the Christian movement would be able to meet together, and begin to resolve debates over Christian beliefs and provide official statements of faith.

So what was the appeal of Christianity? Why did so many convert to Christianity, despite the dangers this entailed? It is clear that this appeal was multi-layered, and not easy to characterize. At the social level, Christianity offered a new sense of identity and status. The growing realization of the importance of networks in spreading Christianity throughout the Roman Empire clearly points to the importance of a sense of belonging – of achieving significance and meaning. Roman society was strongly hierarchical; Christianity, in contrast, minimized the importance of socially constructed values. The Pauline letters, for example, declare that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28). Christian communities developed a value system that enabled those who would otherwise be at the base of the social hierarchy to develop an elevated sense of personal worth and value. The appeal of early Christianity to women (1.3.6), slaves, and other socially marginalized groups clearly reflects this perception.

Yet this emphasis on the importance of all members of the community of faith was supplemented by practical support. Early Christian communities seem to have regarded social outreach and support as being integral to their identity, raising funds to allow them to care for the poor, sick, and needy. A good example of this was the church’s care for widows, a social group which tended to be treated as insignificant in Roman society. Contemporary documents suggest that the Roman churches supported large numbers of widows, many of whom otherwise would have been without any perceived social value or personal means of survival.

Contemporary accounts suggest that many were drawn to consider the ideas of Christianity through the impact that it had upon their lives. It is no accident that the early church used medical models and imagery when referring both to Christian bishops and rites. The first-century bishop Ignatius of Antioch, for example, famously described the eucharistic bread and wine as the “medicine of immortality.” This vision of Christianity as a religion and community of healing resonated strongly with many, particularly at times of uncertainty and instability.

The theme of resurrection played an important role in early Christian outreach, not least in encouraging an attitude of contempt towards death. Accounts of the martyrdoms of early Christian leaders frequently emphasize their lack of fear of death, and the impact this had on pagan audiences. This remarkable absence of fear in the face of death – widely noted by cultural commentators of the age – was not due to any Stoic notion of indifference, but to the firm belief in immortality that was characteristic of Christianity.

Finally, we must give due weight to the powerful ideology that was implicit within the early Christian proclamation. Early Christian apologists emphasized the ability of their faith to make sense of the deep moral structure of the universe. It enabled them to cope with the enigmas of evil and suffering, by offering a fundamental reassurance that justice would ultimately triumph over deceit and oppression. Christianity proclaimed a wise and righteous governor of the universe, to be contrasted with the moral decadence of secular imperial institutions of power. Christianity offered an alternative vision of reality, which seemed to many to be preferable to what they experienced around them.

The appeal of Christianity to the world of late antiquity was thus complex and multileveled, capable of connecting with multiple aspects of the culture of this age.

1.1.5. The Apostolic Age

The first major period in Christian history is generally known as the “apostolic age.” The term “apostle” derives from the Greek verb *apostelein*, “to send,” and is often used to designate those commissioned by Jesus of Nazareth to continue and extend his ministry. Traditionally, this is defined in terms of the period during which the apostles were still alive, thus ensuring historical continuity between the church and the original community of faith which gathered around Jesus of Nazareth. We know frustratingly little about this period, even though it is clearly of immense historical importance. However, we can begin to sketch some of its aspects, providing an important transition to the better-understood history of the early church.

As we noted earlier, at the heart of the Christian movement lay a series of reports and interpretations of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. His significance was presented in terms of both his identity and his function, using a rich range of Christological titles and images of salvation, often drawn from the Jewish roots of Christianity. Initially, Christian groups appear to have been established in leading urban centers, such as Jerusalem, by individuals who had personally known Jesus of Nazareth, or who were familiar with his immediate circle.

Other Christian communities were established by others with more complex associations with the Jerusalem church, most notably Paul of Tarsus. According to the New Testament itself, Paul was responsible for establishing Christian churches in many parts of the Mediterranean world. At first Christianity would almost certainly have been seen simply as one more sect or group within a Judaism that was already accustomed to considerable diversity in religious expression. As recent historical studies of this period have made clear, Judaism was far from being monolithic at this time.

These Christian communities were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, each facing its own distinctive local challenges and opportunities. This raises two significant historical questions, neither of which can be answered with any degree of certainty. First, how did these individual Christian communities maintain their identity with regard to their local cultural context? It is clear, for example, that early Christian worship served to emphasize the distinctiveness of Christian communities, helping to forge a sense of shared identity over and against society in general.

Second, how did these individual communities understand themselves as relating to a larger universal community, increasingly referred to as “the church” in the later writings of the New Testament? There is evidence that these communities maintained contact with each other through correspondence and traveling teachers who visited clusters of churches, and especially through the sharing of foundational documents, some (but not all) of which were later incorporated into the canon of the New Testament.

It is widely thought that these concerns underlie some of the themes explored in the Pastoral Epistles – three later New Testament letters (1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Titus), possibly dating from the final decades of the first century, which show a particular concern for the

specifics of church order, and the importance of transmitting the key themes of faith to a later generation. Where earlier Pauline letters see faith primarily as trust in God, the Pastoral Epistles tend to treat faith more as a body of teaching, to be passed faithfully from one generation to another (1.5.8). The letters are an important witness to the increasing institutionalization of faith, and the exploration of the forms of ecclesiastical structure best suited for the future needs of the Christian faith.

There is no doubt that the early Christian communities believed that they shared a common faith, which was in the process of spreading throughout the civilized world. Individual churches or congregations saw themselves as local representatives or embodiments of something greater – the church. While it is possible to argue that early second-century Christianity possessed a fundamental theological unity, based on its worship of Christ as the risen Lord, the early Christians expressed and enacted their faith in a diversity of manners.

While some historians still speak of early Christianity as a single tradition, it is probably better thought of as a complex network of groups and individuals, who existed in different social, cultural, and linguistic contexts. All Christians might worship Jesus; this did not, however, lead to any kind of monolithic – or even uniform – Christian culture. These groups sought to relate their faith to those contexts, and express it in terms which made sense within those contexts. While it is potentially misleading to speak of these groups as “competing,” it is certainly fair to suggest that they possessed more autonomy at this early stage than is often appreciated. Early Christianity, as we shall emphasize later, did not possess any authority structures which allowed for the imposition of any kind of uniformity. Indeed, many intellectual historians value the sheer intellectual excitement of the era, evident in the way in which the early Christians explored and expressed their faith.

However, this historical observation does not imply that there was no core unifying strand in early Christianity. The sociological diversity of early Christianity was not matched by anything even remotely approaching theological anarchy. It is possible to identify a pattern derived from the apostolic witness and maintained across time as the “deposit of faith” (Latin: *depositum fidei*), referred to in the New Testament as “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). This pattern is embedded, like some kind of genetic code, in both the texts of the New Testament and the writings and worship of the early church. Yet despite this core “pattern of truth” which united them, early Christian communities clearly show diversity as well as unity. Although some scholars speak of the “emergence of diversity” within Christianity as if this was a later development, the evidence suggests that such diversity was there from the outset, even if later developments caused it to become more noticeable in certain situations.

1.1.6. Women in Apostolic Christianity

Women played an important role in Christianity during the apostolic age. As we have noted, Christianity emerged from Palestinian Judaism, which often adopted strongly negative attitudes towards women (1.3.6). It is for this reason that the gospels note that Jesus of Nazareth’s encounters with women occasionally provoked hostility and criticism from the official representatives of Judaism. It is clear from the gospel accounts of the ministry

of Jesus that women were an integral part of the group of people who gathered round him. They were affirmed by him, often to the dismay of the Pharisees and other religious traditionalists. The gospel of Luke emphasizes the significant role of women in the spreading of the gospel. We are told that “many women” (Luke 8:2–3) were involved in early evangelistic endeavors.

Our most important source for the history of apostolic Christianity is the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same Luke who compiled the third of the four gospels. Acts emphasizes the important role of women in providing hospitality for early Christian missionaries to Europe, with women converts such as Lydia making their homes available as house churches and staging-posts for missionaries. Luke appears to be concerned to bring out clearly the important historical point that the early church attracted significant numbers of prominent women within cultures which gave them a much greater social role than in Judaism, and offered them a significant role in the overall evangelistic and pastoral ministry of the early church.

In particular, Luke singles out Priscilla and Aquila as a husband-and-wife team who were engaged in an evangelistic and teaching ministry (Acts 18:1–3, 24–6). Paul commends to the Roman church “our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchrea” (Romans 16:1), commenting on how helpful she had been to him. Other passages in the New Testament letters (such as 1 Timothy 3:11 and 5:9–10) clearly point to women exercising a recognized and authorized ministry of some form within the church. Amid the large number of folk whom Paul lists as sending greetings in his Epistle to the Romans are Prisca, a “fellow-worker”; and Tryphaena and Tryphosa, “workers in the Lord” – descriptions that Paul also applies to men in the same passage.

Paul’s extended list of greetings in his letter to the Romans also includes Junia, who is named, along with Andronicus, as “prominent among the apostles” (Romans 16:7). Andronicus is a male name; Junia, a female name. (One early manuscript reads “Julia,” rather than “Junia.”) Early Christian writers regularly identified Andronicus’s partner as a woman. John Chrysostom (347–407), widely regarded as one of the greatest preachers of the eastern church, commented on this text as follows.

“Greet Andronicus and Junia who are outstanding among the apostles.” To be an apostle is something excellent. Yet to be “outstanding among the apostles” is a wonderful song of praise. They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been, since she was deemed worthy of the title of apostle.

Later copyists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when female leadership within the church was frowned upon, appear to have found it difficult to believe or accept that Junia could have been an apostle. In producing their manuscript copies of the text, they therefore altered this female name to the masculine form of “Junius.” In the thirteenth century, Giles of Rome came up with an alternative approach, declaring that while “Junia” was the correct form of the name, this actually referred to a man. Yet the textual evidence does not support these interpretations.

Alongside this clear evidence of women playing an important role in the life of early Christian communities, we find early Christians reflecting on the theoretical aspects of this

ministry. The New Testament affirms the theoretical equality among Christians. Differences of racial origin, gender, or class are seen in a new way on account of the new order that is understood to have arisen through Jesus of Nazareth. Spiritual gifts, Paul insists, are not bestowed on the basis of gender, race, or class.

This attitude is expressed in one of Paul's earliest statements. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This verse stands as the foundation of Paul's approach to differences of gender, class, or race. Paul affirms that being "in Christ" transcends all social, ethnic, and sexual barriers. Perhaps this vigorous and unambiguous statement was provoked by the local situation in Galatia, in which "Judaizers" (that is, people who wished Christians to retain the traditions of Judaism; see 1.1.7) were attempting to maintain customs or beliefs which encouraged or justified such distinctions. Paul does not mean that people should cease being Jews or Greeks, or male and female, as a result of their conversions. His point is that, while these distinctions may have importance in the social contexts within which the church was taking root, in the sight of God, and within the Christian community, they are transcended by the union between Christ and the believer.

Paul's affirmation potentially has two major consequences. Firstly, it declares that there are no barriers of gender, race, or social status to the gospel. The gospel is universal in its scope. Secondly, it clearly implies that, while Christian faith does not abolish the particularities of one's existence, they are to be used to glorify and serve God in whatever situation Christians might find themselves.

So how did these new ideas work out in practice? The new status that the early Christian movement accorded to slaves and women did not sit easily with traditional Roman or Jewish attitudes. It is therefore not surprising that the New Testament letters comment on some practical issues that arose at the time within church life and Christian families.

One issue that Paul engages is whether women should cover their heads during public worship (1 Corinthians 11:2–16). This passage is difficult to interpret, because we do not know enough about the Corinthian church, or local Corinthian culture, to be sure that we have understood Paul's point properly. One suggestion is that a woman with an uncovered head might have been mistaken for a prostitute. In that Corinth was noted as a center of prostitution, partly on account of the fact that it was a major commercial port, it is possible that this explanation would make sense of Paul's recommendation. However, there is not enough evidence to support this contention.

Historians suggest that Christianity laid the foundations for the undermining of traditional Roman and Jewish attitudes towards both women and slaves at two levels:

1. It asserted that all were one "in Christ" – whether Jew or Gentile, whether male or female, whether master or slave. Differences of race, gender, or social position were declared to place no obstacles between all believers sharing the same common faith.
2. It declared that all peoples – whether Jew or Gentile, whether male or female, whether master or slave – were members of the same Christian fellowship, and ought therefore to worship and pray together. Society might force each of these groups to behave in different manners, but within the Christian community, all were to be regarded as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yet, as we shall see, these early ideals were imperfectly realized. Paul's letter to Philemon presupposes that Christian masters continue to employ slaves. Paul urges Philemon to receive back a runaway slave, and treat him compassionately. There is no call for the abolition of slavery, but a plea to Philemon to receive Onesimus back "no longer as a slave" (Philemon 16) – that is to say, either to make him a free man, or to treat him in such a way that he would no longer be treated as if he were a slave.

The same pattern is observed in attitudes towards women. Traditional cultural attitudes towards social hierarchies and gender roles proved difficult to ignore, particularly when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Perhaps this was most obvious in Christian worship, where after a period of fluidity concerning attitudes towards women, traditional gender roles came to the fore once more. Even in the late first century, writers such as Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch indicate that public worship was led only by men. Whatever activities women might have had in the apostolic age begin to become curtailed through the rise of a clerical hierarchy of bishops, presbyters, and deacons, with women tending to be excluded as either bishops or priests.

1.1.7. Christianity and Judaism: A Complex Relationship

Early Christianity developed within Judaism, and most of the first converts to the movement were Jews. The New Testament frequently mentions Christians preaching in local synagogues. So similar were the two movements that outside observers, such as the Roman authorities, tended to treat Christianity as a sect within Judaism, rather than as a new movement with a distinct identity.

Although Christianity emerged from within Judaism, it rapidly developed its own distinctive identity. One of the most striking differences between the two faiths, evident by the early second century, is that Judaism tended to define itself by correct practice, where Christianity tended to appeal to correct doctrines. Historians of this age thus often speak of Jewish *orthopraxy*, and Christian *orthodoxy*.

While Christians declined to adopt the cultic rituals of Judaism (such as food laws, Sabbath observance, and circumcision) which served to identify Jews within a Gentile community, Marcion of Sinope's radical proposal in the second century that Christianity should be declared utterly distinct from Judaism failed to gain widespread support (1.2.3).

Christian self-definition was initially directed towards clarification of the relationship of Christianity and Judaism, centering upon the identity of Jesus, and subsequently upon the role of the Old Testament Law. It is thus perfectly reasonable to suggest that the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith represents a theoretical basis for the separation of Gentile Christian communities from Judaism.

This relationship between the Christian church and Israel was often expressed in terms of two "covenants" or "testaments." This terminology is used in the New Testament, especially the Letter to the Hebrews, and became normative within Christian thought over the following centuries. The phrase the "Old Covenant" is used by Christian writers to refer to God's dealings with Israel, as seen in Judaism; the phrase "New Covenant" is used by Christians to refer to God's dealings with humanity as a whole, as this is revealed in the teaching and person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian belief that the coming of Christ

inaugurates something *new* expresses itself in a distinctive attitude towards the Old Testament, which could basically be summarized thus: *religious principles and ideas* (such as the notion of a sovereign God who is active in human history) are appropriated; *religious practices* (such as dietary laws and sacrificial routines) are not.

This recognition of a continuity between Christianity and Judaism raised a number of serious difficulties for the early Christians, especially during the first century. What was the role of the Jewish Law in the Christian life? Did the traditional rites and customs of Judaism have any continuing place in the Christian church? There is evidence that this issue was of particular importance during the 40s and 50s, when non-Jewish converts to Christianity came under pressure from Jewish Christians to maintain such rites and customs.

The issue of circumcision was particularly sensitive, with Gentile converts to Christianity often being pressed to become circumcised, in accord with the Law. This controversy is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, which notes how, in the late 40s, a section of the church argued that it was essential that male Christians should be circumcised. Unless males were circumcised, they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). In effect, this group – often referred to as “Judaizers” – seemed to regard Christianity as an affirmation of every aspect of contemporary Judaism, with the addition of one further (and highly significant) belief – that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited messiah.

The New Testament gives an account of how this issue was resolved during the apostolic period. The first General Council of the Christian church – the Council of Jerusalem in 49 (Acts 15:2–29) – met to consider the complex relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The debate is initially dominated by converted Pharisees, who insisted on the need to uphold the law of Moses, including the circumcision requirements. Yet Paul’s account of the growing impact of the Christian gospel among the Gentiles caused the wisdom of this approach to be questioned. If so many Gentiles were becoming Christians, why should anything unnecessary be put in their way? Paul conceded the need to avoid food which had been sacrificed to idols – an issue which features elsewhere in his letters (1 Corinthians 8:7–13). But there was, he insisted, no need for circumcision. This position won widespread support, and was summarized in a letter which was circulated at Antioch (Acts 15:30–5).

Yet although the issue was resolved at the theoretical level, it would remain a live issue for many churches in the future. Paul’s letter to the church at Galatia, probably written around 53, deals explicitly with this question, which had clearly become a contentious issue in the region. Paul notes the emergence of a Judaizing party in the region – that is, a group within the church which insisted that Gentile believers should obey every aspect of the law of Moses, including the need to be circumcised. According to Paul, the leading force behind this party was James – not the apostle James, who is thought to have died around 44, but the brother of Jesus of Nazareth who was influential in calling the Council of Jerusalem, and wrote the New Testament letter known by his name.

For Paul, this trend was highly dangerous. If Christians could only gain salvation by the rigorous observance of the law, what purpose did the death of Christ serve? It is faith in Christ, not the scrupulous and religious keeping of the law of Moses, which is the basis of salvation. Nobody can be justified (that is, put in a right relationship with God) through keeping the law. The righteousness on which our salvation depends is not available

through the law, but only through faith in Christ. Aware of the importance and sensitivity of this issue, Paul then explores this question in some detail (see Galatians 3:1–23). The Galatians have fallen into the trap of believing that salvation came by doing works of the law, or by human achievement. So what has happened to faith? Did the gift of the Holy Spirit ever come through keeping the law?

Paul argues that the great Jewish patriarch Abraham was “justified” (that is, put in a right relationship with God) through his faith (Galatians 3:6–18). The great patriarch was not put in a right relationship with God through circumcision; that came later. That relationship with God was established through Abraham’s faith in God’s promise to him (Genesis 15:6). Circumcision was simply the external sign of that faith. It did not establish that faith, but confirmed something that was already there. Nor does the law, or any aspect of it, abolish the promises which God had already made. The promise to Abraham and his descendants – which includes Christians, as well as Jews – remains valid, even after the introduction of the law. Gentiles could share Abraham’s faith in the promises of God – and all the benefits that result from this faith – without the need to be circumcised, or be bound to the fine details of the law of Moses.

This controversy is important for several reasons. It casts light on tensions within the early church; it also raises the question of whether Jewish Christians enjoyed special privileges or status in relation to Gentile Christians. The final outcome of the debate was that Jews and Gentiles were to be given equal status and acceptance within the church. The chronological priority of Israel over the church did not entail the privileging of Jews over Gentiles within the Christian community. While the theological and ethical teaching of the Old Testament was to be honored and accepted by Christians, they were under no obligation to obey the ceremonial or cultic aspects of the Law, including circumcision or sacrifice. Those were both fulfilled superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ. For many early Christians, the fact that Jesus of Nazareth had himself been circumcised removed any need for them to undergo the same painful process.

The position of Jewish Christianity within an increasingly Gentile church became more difficult with the passage of time. Gentile Christians regarded themselves as liberated from cultic rules concerning circumcision, food laws, or the observation of the Sabbath, and cited Paul in support of their position. Although some accounts of the development of Christianity suggest that these issues were essentially resolved in favor of the Gentiles by the end of the first century, there is evidence that they lingered on well into the second century. For example, Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, written in Rome around the year 150, explicitly refers to such tensions. As we shall see later, the issue became contentious in Rome at this time, due to the teachings of Marcion of Sinope (1.2.3).

1.2. Early Christianity and the Roman Empire

It is impossible to understand the development of early Christianity without a good understanding of the Roman Empire, which many historians regard as having reached its zenith during the reign of the emperor Trajan, who ruled from 98 to 117. Christianity had its origins in the Roman province of Judaea, a relatively obscure and politically insignificant region, and would expand rapidly within the empire, eventually becoming its official reli-



Map 1.2 The Roman Empire under Trajan, c. 117

gion. In view of the importance of the Roman imperial context to the rise and shaping of Christianity, we shall look at this context in more detail.

1.2.1. The Roman Empire, c. 100

The expansion of Roman influence began during the period when Rome was a republic. However, political weaknesses led to power being centralized in a single figure of authority—the emperor (Latin: *imperator*, “one who gives orders”). For political reasons, this supreme ruler was not referred to as “king,” as this term was regarded as no longer being acceptable because of associated abuses of power in the pre-republican era. The term “emperor” was devised as a name for Rome’s supreme ruler, mainly because it avoided using language which linked it to discredited periods in Roman history. It was during the reign of the first emperor, Caesar Augustus, that the gospel of Luke places the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

A significant degree of Roman territorial expansion took place during the reign of Augustus, especially in Egypt and northern Europe. The imperial province of Egypt became of particular importance, providing substantial grain imports to feed the Roman population. Yet Augustus’s successor Tiberius, who reigned from 14–37, proved an ineffective emperor, preferring to live in seclusion on the island of Capri. Under Trajan, however, the stability of the empire was initially restored, followed by a period of further territorial expansion. A major program of public building in Rome itself enriched the city, emphasizing its status as the center of the greatest empire the world had then known.

A form of “civil religion” began to emerge at this time, linked with worship of the Roman emperor as an expression of allegiance to the Roman state and empire. A dead emperor

who was held worthy of the honor could be voted a state divinity (Latin: *divus*), and be incorporated into the Roman pantheon. Refusal to take part in this imperial cult was regarded as an act of treason. As we shall see, this placed Christians in a difficult position, as many of them refused to worship anyone other than the God of Jesus Christ.

The administrative and commercial links established by the Roman Empire made it relatively easy for new ideas – especially religious ideas – to be spread. The factors that made this possible include:

1. A common language. Latin was the official language of the empire, although the Romans permitted the use of local languages – such as Greek – wherever possible. The virtually universal use of Latin ultimately led to this language becoming the language of the church and academy during the Middle Ages, allowing the limits of national languages to be transcended.
2. Ease of transport. The Roman navy suppressed piracy, making travel by sea relatively safe. Land routes were widely used for military and commercial purposes.
3. Movement of people. Soldiers, colonial administrators, and merchants were free to move around the empire, often bringing home with them new ideas they had encountered. The Mithraic cult, or “cult of Mithras,” for example, appears to have been especially popular within the Roman army.
4. Immigration from the colonies to Rome. During the first century, the population of Rome expanded, with large numbers of immigrants from the colonies settling in the city, bringing their religious beliefs and traditions with them. While all were expected to conform to Roman civil religion, there was a substantial expansion of variety of personal religious beliefs and practices. Christianity easily fits into this general pattern of Roman religious diversification in this period.

In view of the importance of religion within the Roman Empire of this period, we shall consider the phenomenon of Roman religion in more detail. First-century Roman religion tended to draw a distinction between a state cult which gave Roman society stability and cohesion, and the private views of individuals. The Latin term *religio* derives from a root meaning “to bind together.” In many ways, this is a useful summary of the role of the state cult: to give the city and empire a stable sacred foundation. Religion was primarily understood in terms of “devotion” (Latin: *pietas*) – a social activity and attitude that promoted unity and loyalty to the state.

Roman citizens were free to adopt other religious practices and beliefs in private, so long as they did not conflict with this “official” civil religion. These private religions would take place in the household, with the head of the family (Latin: *paterfamilias*) taking charge of domestic prayers and ceremonial rites in much the same way as the public representatives of the people performed the state ceremonial rites. During the first century, these private religions often took the form of mystery cults, originating in Greece or Asia, brought back to Rome by soldiers and merchants. The best known of these was the cult of Mithras, which is thought to have originated in Persia.

Christianity would easily have fitted into this pattern of Roman religious diversity at this time. Yet Christians found it difficult to accept the distinction between public and

private religious beliefs, holding that their allegiance to the one God prevented them from taking part in the official Roman cult. This became increasingly problematic through the rise of the “imperial cult” in the late first century, which we shall consider in the following section.

1.2.2. Christianity and the Imperial Cult

The political background against which the early Roman suspicion of Christianity is to be set is dominated by the “imperial cult.” This is probably best understood as a highly elevated view of the Roman emperor, which resulted from the remarkable achievements of Augustus. It was no longer possible to regard Augustus simply as an outstanding ruler; he was widely regarded as a *divus*, being invested with some form of supernatural or transcendent significance. It was not regarded as necessary for imperial figures to be dead before they were accorded some form of divine status; there is ample evidence to indicate that at least some members of the imperial family (such as Julius Caesar) were treated as divine during their lifetimes.

The cult appears to have become especially significant in the two or three decades before the birth of Christ; by the second half of the first century – at which time Christianity was becoming a significant presence in the eastern regions of the empire – it had become firmly established as a routine aspect of Roman colonial life.

The cult seems to have taken different forms in the various regions of the empire. A distinction was drawn between the forms of the cult appropriate to Roman citizens and those who were not. In the east, the cult of “Rome and Julius” was prescribed for Roman citizens; others were required to take part in the cult of “Rome and Augustus.”

The cult appears to have been especially strong in those regions of the eastern empire in which Christianity would take root, such as the city of Corinth and the region of Galatia, both landmarks in the ministry of Paul of Tarsus. Imperial festivals became an important part of the life of Corinth during the first half of the first century. The figure of Julius Caesar was of particular importance to this cult, not least on account of his having given Corinth the status of a Roman colony shortly before his death. In Galatia, the imperial cult had become firmly established by the first decade of the century.

The imperial cult was so deeply rooted in the major cities of the eastern Roman Empire that it was inevitable that some form of confrontation between Christianity and the state authorities would take place. One of the most frequently cited pieces of evidence here is the famous letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan, dating from about 112 (1.4.1). In this letter, Pliny asked advice as to how to deal with the growing number of Christians who refused to worship the image of the Roman emperor. It is quite clear from Pliny’s letter that Christianity was suspect on account of its refusal to worship the emperor, which suggested that it was bent on overthrowing the existing social order.

The refusal of Christians to conform to the imperial cult helps us understand one of the more puzzling developments of this age – the tendency of Roman critics of Christianity to ridicule it as a form of “atheism.” This makes no sense if “atheism” is understood in the modern sense of the term – namely, rejection of belief in God. Yet the term “atheism” was widely used in classical culture to refer to a rejection of the official state religion. The

classical Greek philosopher Socrates was forced to commit suicide four centuries before the apostolic age for “atheism” – that is, rejecting the Athenian state religion. Socrates, of course, was no atheist in the modern sense of the word.

The relation between Christianity and the imperial authorities is one of the most important themes in the history of early Christianity. Yet other themes also emerged as important. The complex relationship between Christianity and Judaism, often the subject of discussion within the New Testament, became the topic of heated debate at Rome in the second century, leading to the emergence of a growing consensus that Christianity should not, and could not, abandon its Jewish heritage. We shall consider this debate in the next section.

1.2.3. Christianity and Judaism: Marcion of Sinope

Christianity’s relationship with Judaism remained a matter of debate in the late first and early second centuries (1.1.7). One group known as the “Ebionites” echoed Jewish ideas at a number of points, especially in their understanding of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. The term “Ebionite” is thought to derive from the Hebrew word *Ebyonim* (“the Poor”), perhaps originally applied to early Christians because they came from lower social groups and tended to be socially deprived. Ebionitism was an attempt to use ideas that were inherited from the Jewish context within which early Christianity emerged, and use these to explore and express the significance of Jesus of Nazareth.

The origins of such a trend can be seen inside the New Testament itself, in that the gospels record attempts to make sense of Jesus which are drawn from contemporary Judaism – such as interpreting Jesus of Nazareth as a second Elijah, a new Jewish prophet, or a High Priest of Israel. On this approach, Jesus of Nazareth was a human being who was singled out for divine favor by being possessed by the Holy Spirit, in a manner similar to, yet more intensive than, the calling of a Hebrew prophet. In the end, Christians discarded this approach as inadequate. Yet it remains an important early witness to the existence of Christian communities that saw Judaism as having continuing utility and significance for the church.

Precisely the opposite approach was advocated in the middle of the second century by Marcion of Sinope (c. 110–60), a wealthy Christian in Rome. By this time, Christianity had gained a significant following in the imperial capital. Marcion wanted to bring about a fundamental change to the way in which the church positioned itself in relation to Judaism. Christianity ought to sever all its links with Judaism, and should have nothing to do with its God, beliefs, or rituals. A clean break was necessary. The god of the Old Testament was a war-god, who had nothing to do with the Christian god.

What Marcion was proposing represented a radical break with both the established tradition of the church, and the writings of the New Testament. The majority position within the church, at Rome and elsewhere, was that Christianity represented the fulfillment of the covenant between God and Abraham, not its rejection or abrogation. The God whom Christians worshipped was the same as that worshipped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and whose will was disclosed through the law and the prophets. In marked contrast, Marcion

proposed severing links with Judaism completely, seeing Christianity as a new faith in a new God.

Marcion's core argument was that the "God" of the Old Testament was not the same as that of the New Testament. The Old Testament God was to be seen as inferior, even defective, in the light of the Christian conception of God. There was no connection whatsoever between these deities. For Marcion, the gospel comes from nowhere, without any historical context. There is no sense of it being the climax and fulfillment of God's engagement with humanity, which began with the call of Abraham.

Marcion proposed that Jesus of Nazareth had no direct relation to the Jewish creator god, and that he was not to be thought of as the "messiah" sent by this Jewish God. Rather, Jesus was sent from a previously unknown, strange God, characterized by love rather than the jealousy and aggression which Marcion regarded as hallmarks of the God of the Old Testament. The second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons observed that Marcion took the view that the Jewish God "is the creator of evil things, takes delight in wars, is fickle, and behaves inconsistently." The third-century theologian Tertullian points to Marcion's core belief in two quite different gods, "of unequal rank, the one a stern and warlike judge, the other gentle and mild, kind, and supremely good."

Yet Marcion was not prepared to rest content with affirming the radical difference between the God of the Jews and the God of Jesus of Nazareth. Many of the documents that were being widely accepted as authoritative by early Christians – which would later be canonically gathered together as the New Testament – made extensive reference to the Jewish scriptures. Marcion thus developed his own authorized collection of Christian documents, which excluded works which he regarded as contaminated by Jewish ideas and associations (1.5.2).

Needless to say, Marcion's biblical canon excluded the Old Testament altogether. It also omitted any New Testament works which seemed sympathetic towards Judaism, such as the gospel of Matthew. Marcion's Bible consisted simply of ten of Paul's letters, along with the gospel of Luke. Yet Marcion was obliged to edit even these works, in order to remove contaminating influences which suggested that there was some connection between Jesus and Judaism. Marcion thus removed the narratives of the annunciation and the nativity, Christ's baptism, temptation, and genealogy, and all references to Bethlehem and Nazareth from his version of Luke's gospel. Paul's letters also required some editorial work, to remove their associations with Judaism.

In the end, the church rejected Marcion's views. The model that began to gain the ascendancy in early Christianity was that of the fulfillment of the hopes of both pagans and Jews in Christ. As we shall see in the following section, writers such as Justin Martyr were adamant that the story of Jesus of Nazareth could not be told in isolation from its Jewish context. To understand the identity and significance of Jesus, it was necessary to tell other stories, and explore how they interlocked and interrelated. One of those stories concerns God's creation of the world; another tells of God's calling of Israel; a third tells the age-old human quest for meaning and significance. For Justin Martyr, the story of Jesus intersects all three, ultimately to provide their fulfillment. Jesus is the focal point from which all other stories are to be seen, and on whom all finally and decisively converge.

1.2.4. Christianity and Pagan Culture: Justin Martyr

One of the most important debates in the early church concerned the extent to which Christians could appropriate the immense cultural legacy of the classical world – such as its poetry, philosophy, and literature. How could Christians make use of classical philosophy in communicating or commending their faith? In what way could Christian writers use classical modes of writing – such as poetry – to expound and communicate the gospel? Or was the use of such ideas and literature impossible for Christians, because they had been tainted by their pagan associations? It was a debate of considerable cultural and intellectual importance, as it raised the question of whether Christianity would turn its back on the classical heritage, or appropriate it in a modified form.

One early and influential answer to this important question was given by Justin Martyr (103–65), a second-century writer with a particular concern to make use of the parallels between Christianity and Platonism as a means of communicating the gospel. Justin was born to pagan parents in the Roman province of Judaea, in the city of Flavia Neapolis (modern Nablus). He converted to Christianity as a young man, possibly at the great Asian city of Ephesus, partly through his admiration for the courage of Christians facing execution for their faith, and partly because of his fascination with the Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled through the coming of Christ. Justin later recalled that, “While pondering on [Christ’s] words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy.”

It is important to note that Justin speaks of Christianity as a “philosophy.” At the time, this term meant more than simply a set of ideas. A philosophy was as much about a way of living as a way of thinking. After his conversion, Justin became one of the many itinerant teachers of this age, wearing the distinctive cloak of a philosopher. He eventually made his way to Rome, where he lived in a small room “above Myrtinus’s baths.” He is now remembered for three works: the *First Apology* and the *Second Apology*, and the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. Justin was eventually betrayed to the Roman authorities, and executed in 165.

For Justin, Christianity brought the quest of the ancient world for wisdom to fulfillment. Both the Jewish law and the Platonic *logos* are fulfilled in Christ. God has sown the seeds of divine wisdom throughout the world, which meant that Christians could and should expect to find aspects of the gospel reflected outside the church. Justin developed a Christianized version of the Stoic idea of the “seed-bearing word” (Greek: *logos spermatikos*), which originates from God, and is divinely planted in the human mind. Justin’s version of the *logos spermatikos* is best understood as an attempt to translate Paul’s ideas about natural revelation, found in his letter to the Romans and the Athens address (Acts 17), into the language of contemporary philosophy. “All right principles that philosophers and lawgivers have discovered and expressed they owe to whatever of the Word they have found and contemplated in part. The reason why they have contradicted each other is that they have not known the entire Word, which is Christ.” For Justin, Christians were therefore free to draw on the riches of classical culture, in that whatever “has been said well” ultimately draws upon divine wisdom and insight.

Justin commended the study of Greek philosophy for two reasons. First, it allowed Christians to be able to communicate effectively with secular culture, using language and

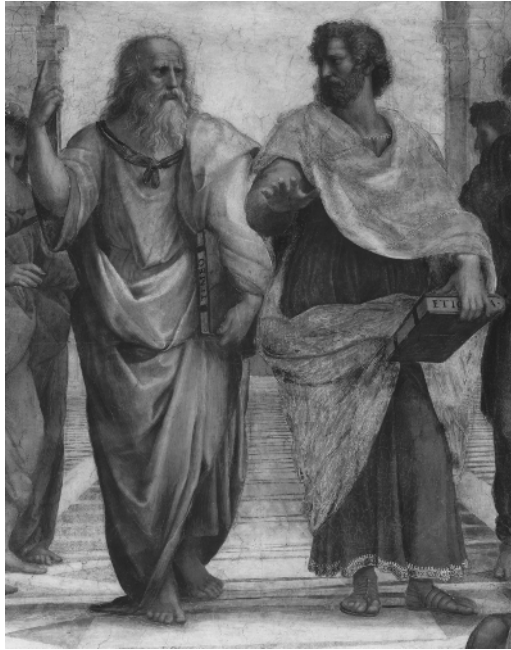


Figure 1.2 Justin Martyr and others in the early church encouraged a dialogue between Christianity and classical philosophy, such as Plato and Aristotle. Detail of Plato and Aristotle, from *The School of Athens*, by Raphael (1483–1520). Fresco. Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican City. © 2012. Photo: Scala, Florence

ideas that were already familiar to its cultural elite. Christians could express the core themes of their faith using Platonic terms, and adapting these as necessary. Yet perhaps just as importantly, engaging with secular Greek philosophy forced Christianity to try and give a more coherent and intelligent account of its ideas than might otherwise be the case.

Important though Justin's arguments may have been, they received a somewhat frosty reception in many sections of the Christian church. The main difficulty was that it was seen to virtually equate Christianity with classical culture, apparently suggesting that Christian theology and Platonism were simply different ways of viewing the same divine realities. The most severe criticism of this kind of approach was to be found in the writings of Tertullian, a third-century Roman lawyer who converted to Christianity. What, he asked pointedly, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What relevance has the Platonic academy for the church? Christianity must maintain its distinctive identity, he argued, by avoiding such secular influences.

1.2.5. Early Christian Worship and Life

Lacking official religious recognition and protection, Christianity could not be a public religion in the Roman Empire (1.4.1). There were no buildings dedicated to public

Christian worship. It is easy to see why the secrecy surrounding Christian gatherings and worship roused suspicions. Rumors rapidly developed that Christians indulged in orgies and cannibalism. It is easy to understand how this took place. There is much evidence that early Christian gatherings included a “love-feast” (Greek: *agapē*), which could easily be misunderstood in sexual terms. Equally, it is not difficult to see how the practice of consuming bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ could be misinterpreted by outsiders as some kind of cannibalism.

We possess several important witnesses to early Christian worship. One is a manual of church order and Christian living, dating from the late first or early second century, known as the *Didache* (a Greek word meaning “Teaching”). This work describes how Christians gathered together on the Lord’s Day – in other words, Sunday – “to break bread and give thanks.” The service is clearly understood to take place in a private home, not a public place.

Justin Martyr composed his *First Apology* in Rome in about 155. In this work, Justin describes two early Christian worship services. First, he provides an account of the baptism of new converts. Following their baptism, the new believers are led into the assembly of Christian believers. After prayers for the community and for the new convert, the worshippers greet one another with a kiss. Bread, wine, and water are then brought to the president, who offers a eucharistic prayer ascribing glory to the Father in the name of the Son and Spirit, and gives thanks that the gathered worshippers have been counted as worthy to receive the bread and wine. Justin does not use the term “priest” to refer to the president of this thanksgiving (Greek: *eucharistia*), presumably because this term had associations with Roman civil religion, which was then strongly hostile towards Christianity.

The second event that Justin describes is a regular Sunday gathering of the community of faith. Why meet on a Sunday, rather than the Jewish Sabbath? Justin explains that the community gathers on Sunday, or the first day of the week, both because it was the day of creation and because this was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. Only those who have been baptized are permitted to attend this service. The service begins with some readings from the “memoirs of the apostles” (almost certainly a reference to the Gospels) or the writings of the prophets, followed by a sermon based on these texts. This is followed by prayers and the celebration of the eucharist, along the lines just described. At the end of the service, those with sufficient means are invited to bring gifts to the president, who will distribute them to those in need. Justin’s description merits close reading.

On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or the outlying districts. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us. He urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue that we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray. When we have finished praying, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people show their assent by saying, “Amen.” The eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent.

Funeral rites were also important for early Christians. Romans tended to cremate their dead, and place their ashes in carved urns. Christians insisted on burial, seeing this as



Figure 1.3 Fear of persecution drove early Roman Christians underground. The illustration shows the third-century Catacombs of Calixtus, with an underground passage with niches or wall-graves on either side. Photo: akg-images/Erich Lessing

resting on the precedent of the burial of Christ. From the beginning of the second century, Christians constructed vast underground burial sites by digging into the soft porous pumice rock underneath the city of Rome and its neighborhood. This network – known as “the Catacombs” – consisted of passages and tunnels, with niches carved into the walls in which bodies could be placed, to await the resurrection. The catacombs of St. Callixtus, constructed in the middle of the second century, are among the most important of the Roman catacombs. With the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, the catacombs gradually fell into disuse, as Christians were able to provide funeral rites for their dead openly, without fear of persecution.

Early Christianity was not well organized, even in Rome, partly on account of difficulties in coordination while the Christian movement remained illegal. Although the movement possessed leaders, they were unable to offer any kind of centralized control. The Greek terms *episcopos* (bishop), *diakonos* (deacon), and *presbyteros* (elder) were all used to refer to leaders of the Christian community. It is significant that all three of these words were widely used in secular culture to refer to administrative positions within large households of the day. An *episcopos* was a domestic supervisor, a *diakonos* a servant, and a *presbyteros* a senior member of the household. Christianity appears to have taken over familiar secular words here, and invested them with specifically Christian meanings, referring to the “household of faith.”

At this early stage, there is no suggestion that a bishop had oversight of a group of churches, or an ecclesiastical region. This development took place later, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, even if anticipations of these developments can be found earlier. At this early stage, a “bishop” was often simply the leader of a single Christian community. The Roman churches in the second century are perhaps best compared to secular Roman clubs or societies (Latin: *collegium*), or to Jewish synagogues – essentially independent associations with no centralized control.

1.3. Early Christianity and the Hellenistic World

The military campaigns of the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great in the fourth century before Christ led to a massive expansion of Greek cultural and political influence in the eastern Mediterranean region, and far beyond. Tutored as a boy by the philosopher Aristotle, Alexander was proclaimed king of Macedon at the age of twenty, following the assassination of his father, Philip of Macedon. Alexander launched a massive military campaign against the Persian Empire, bringing vast areas of territory from Egypt to India under Macedonian control. After his sudden death, widely suspected to have been an assassination, Alexander’s body was transported to the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where it was buried in an ornate tomb.

The phrase “Hellenistic world” is generally used to refer to the new political and cultural order which resulted from Alexander’s conquests, especially in Egypt and the Levant. Jewish culture now found itself having to engage with Greek ideas, literature, and cultural norms. As Christianity began to take root in this area, it found itself engaging with the ideas and norms of this culture, which bore little relation to the Palestinian context from which it had emerged. In this section, we shall consider some aspects of this engagement.

1.3.1. The Greek-Speaking World, c. 200

One of the most important outcomes of the engagement between Judaism and Hellenistic culture was the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. This process, which is known to have begun three centuries before Christ, led to the Greek translation widely known as the “Septuagint,” traditionally held to have been produced by seventy scholars (Latin: *septuaginta*, “seventy”). This translation, completed in the first century before Christ, was widely used by early Christian writers, and can be seen in use at several points in the New Testament.

The impact of this process of Hellenization on Jewish thought is best seen from the writings of Philo, a Jewish writer based in Alexandria in the early years of the first century. Philo is generally regarded as having attempted to achieve a synthesis of Jewish religious and Greek philosophical thought, based primarily on use of allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament and an appeal to the Platonic notion of the *logos*, noted earlier. Philo’s doctrine of creation strongly resembles that set out by Plato in his dialogue *Timaeus*. However, it is important to note that Philo refused to accept Greek ideas which he held to be incompatible with Judaism – such as the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity and

indestructibility of the world. Philo's basic approach is that of the accommodation of Jewish ideas to Greek philosophy, not the rejection of distinctively Jewish ideas.

Philo's method of biblical interpretation is essentially allegorical, appealing to deeper meanings beneath the literal and historical senses of a passage. Philo considered allegorical ways of interpreting the book of Genesis to be a legitimate and appropriate way of bridging the gap between divine revelation (which primarily took the form of events) and Platonic philosophy (which primarily concerned abstract ideas). Rather than concentrating on the historical or literal sense of a passage, Philo argues that there is a deeper meaning concealed within the imagery of the text, which the skilled exegete can identify and explore. Philo does not want to depreciate or abolish the literal or the historical senses of the Bible, but to develop deeper meanings which are closer to the themes of secular wisdom. This kind of approach to biblical interpretation would be developed by early Alexandrian Christian writers, such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) and Origen (184–253).

As Christianity expanded from its original heartlands of Palestine into the great Greek-speaking cities of Alexandria and Antioch, it was inevitable that it would be influenced by the ideas and methods of Hellenistic philosophy. Although theirs was still an illegal religion, Christian writers did not hold back from debating their ideas with secular and religious writers of the age. Yet Christian writers and thinkers could not engage with the culture around them without using at least some aspects of its language and concepts. This observation raises one of the most important questions which is raised by the development of early Christian theology. Did Christian writers absorb more Hellenistic thought that they realized through interacting with their culture?

One of the most influential discussions of this theme was due to the great German Protestant church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack argued that the expansion of Christianity from its original Jewish context to the great Greek-speaking cities of Egypt and Asia led to the progressive Hellenization of Christianity. This change, Harnack argued, was most obvious in the development of metaphysical theological views about God and Christ – such as the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of the “two natures” of Christ. These developments, he declared, were the “work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the gospel.” The Christian faith came to be dependent on the categories of Greek metaphysics, distancing the church from its connections with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

More recent scholarship has questioned Harnack's judgment, concluding that he overstated his case for the “Hellenization” of the Christian faith. Yet there is equal agreement that some such process seems to have taken place, even if its extent and importance is open to debate. In any case, there is a problem with Harnack's implied suggestion that any such influence amounts to “corruption” or “distortion.” It is difficult to see how Christian theology can avoid being influenced and shaped by a variety of cultural and philosophical sources.

Nevertheless, Harnack's concern is to be taken seriously. For example, consider this theological question: can God suffer? Many writers within the Hellenistic tradition worked with an essentially philosophical notion of God, which emphasized perfection as a core divine characteristic. How could a perfect being suffer? Suffering was a mark of imperfection – of decay or change, characteristics of the material world, but not of the unchangeable

divine nature. Many Christian theologians in the Greek-speaking world seem to have accepted this judgment, despite the difficulties that this caused for them. If Jesus Christ suffered on the cross, and if Jesus Christ was God, surely a case could be made for God suffering in some sense of the word? Early Christian writers developed sophisticated ways of affirming the former but not the latter, wishing to ensure that they caused minimal intellectual offense to educated pagans at this point.

Yet the Hellenistic world was shaped by intellectual and cultural movements other than classical Greek philosophy. One of the movements that came to gain considerable influence in parts of Egypt and Asia was known as Gnosticism. As we shall see, this movement had considerable impact on the development of the Christian church's understanding of the identity of its core ideas, and how these could best be preserved.

1.3.2. The Challenge of Gnosticism: Irenaeus of Lyons

Older historical textbooks often speak of “Gnosticism” as if it were a relatively well-defined coherent movement. There is now a growing consensus that the use of the single term “Gnosticism” is misleading, in that it gathers together a number of quite different unrelated groups, and presents them as if they represented a single religious belief system. Perhaps Gnosticism is best understood as a family of religious doctrines and myths that flourished in late classical antiquity with three shared beliefs:

1. The cosmos is a result of the activity of an evil or ignorant creator, often referred to as the “Demiurge” (Greek: *dēmiourgos*, “craftsman” or “artisan”);
2. Humanity is trapped within this physical realm;
3. Salvation is a process in which believers receive the knowledge (Greek: *gnōsis*) of their divine origin, allowing them to break free from their imprisonment on earth.

The idea of an inferior creator god – the “Demiurge” – is found in classical Greek philosophy, and plays a significant role in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*. Gnosticism held that this demiurge created the physical world without any knowledge of the “true God,” falsely believing that he was the only God. Since the demiurge acted in ignorance of the true God, his creation had to be considered as imperfect, or even evil. Most forms of Gnosticism believed there was a radical gulf between the visible world of experience and the spiritual world of the true God.

So what of the place of humanity within this created order? A core belief for many Gnostic thinkers was that the human body was a prison for the spirit, which was actively seeking its liberation. The Greek slogan *sōma sēma* (“the body is a tomb”) was often used by such writers to express this idea of spiritual bondage. Most Gnostic teachers held that, while the human body was created by the demiurge, it nevertheless contains a divine spirit which had the potential to establish a connection with the highest God. Yet this divine spark can be awoken if and when a divine messenger awakes individuals from their dream of forgetfulness, allowing humanity to reconnect with its divine origins. For many forms of Gnosticism – especially Valentinism, the form of Gnosticism associated with Valentinus (c. 100–c. 160) and his circle at Rome in the second century – Christ was this

redeemer-figure, who awakened the divine spark within humanity, enabling it to find its way back to its true home.

In responding to Valentinus, the second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons developed the idea of the “economy of salvation.” The entire work of salvation, from creation through to its final consummation, was carried out by one and the same God. The creator God was no demiurge, nor was the redeemer some mere emissary from the heavenly realms. Irenaeus highlights the importance of the emerging doctrine of the Trinity as a means of articulating divine continuity throughout the history of the world on the one hand, and as safeguarding the essential unity of Scripture on the other. Matter is not intrinsically evil; it is God’s good creation, which has fallen, and is susceptible to restoration and renewal. For Irenaeus, the doctrine of the incarnation and the Christian use of sacraments represent explicit denials of any Gnostic notion of an intrinsically evil matter. Did not God choose to become incarnate? Does not the church use water, wine, and bread as symbols of divine grace and presence? Matter is something that God chose to use, not to reject.

Irenaeus’s main concern at this point was to place clear blue water between the church and its Gnostic alternatives. Yet underlying these differences of substance was a deeper concern about issues of method – above all, the interpretation of Scripture. As he reflected on Valentinus’s interpretation of sacred texts, Irenaeus appears to have come to the conclusion that the Gnostics had hijacked the foundational documents of Christianity, and interpreted its core terms according to their own taste. The outcome, in Irenaeus’s view, was that Valentinus turned Christianity into Gnosticism.

Irenaeus’s response to this development is widely regarded as marking a landmark in early Christian thought. Heretics, he argued, interpreted the Bible according to their own prejudices. Orthodox believers, in contrast, interpreted the Bible in ways that their apostolic authors would have endorsed (1.5.7). Irenaeus declared that the apostles had handed down to the church not merely the biblical texts themselves, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts. A continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation could be traced from the time of the apostles to Irenaeus’s own age. The church was able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to certain public standard creeds which set out the main lines of Christian belief.

Irenaeus thus saw tradition as a way of ensuring faithfulness to the original apostolic teaching, a safeguard against Gnostic innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts. The New Testament represents the teaching of the apostles, which is to be interpreted as the apostles themselves wished. The church, Irenaeus insisted, safeguarded both this text and its correct interpretation, passing both on to future generations.

This development is of major importance, as it underlies the emergence of “creeds” – public, authoritative statements of the basic points of the Christian faith. There was a need to have public standards by which such doctrines could be judged. We shall consider the importance of both tradition and creeds later in this chapter (1.5.7; 1.5.8).

1.3.3. The Challenge of Platonism: Clement of Alexandria and Origen

Christianity expanded rapidly in the Hellenistic world. This does not appear to have been the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of Christian leaders. On the whole, Christian

leaders and communities tended to keep a low profile, aware of their vulnerable position on account of their lack of legal status. One factor in this expansion in the eastern Mediterranean area was the willingness of some Christian leaders to adapt the vocabulary and concepts of the Christian faith to chime in with the ideas and issues of classical Greek philosophy – especially the forms of Platonism dominant in the region at this time, often known as “Middle Platonism.”

One of the most important centers of Christian engagement with Platonism was the great Egyptian city of Alexandria, founded by Alexander the Great. As we noted earlier (1.3.1), the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria had developed approaches to Judaism which emphasized its compatibility with Platonism. Some Christian writers in Alexandria took the building blocks used by Philo, and developed ways of thinking about the Christian faith which made it particularly attractive to Platonists.

Why would they want to do this? One obvious reason is that it allowed them to translate Christianity into a way of speaking and thinking that was more adapted to Hellenistic culture. Writers such as Titus Flavius Clemens (c. 150–c. 215), better known as Clement of Alexandria, who was head of one of Alexandria’s “catechetical schools” during the 190s, realized that the Hebraic ways of thought characteristic of apostolic Christianity did not make much sense to Greeks. Clement proposed that Christianity should be reformulated using concepts borrowed from Platonism and other classic Greek philosophical schools – such as Stoicism – which enhanced their appeal to this important audience.

Yet such a process of theological translation was risky. Using Platonic categories to communicate Christian ideas could lead to those ideas being distorted or misunderstood. Clement’s critics were never entirely sure whether he was Christianizing Platonism or Platonizing Christianity. Clement himself was clear that he was prepared to take such risks, because of their obvious benefits. So was Origen (184–253), who emerged as head of another Alexandrian “catechetical school” in the first decade of the third century. Both believed that Hellenistic philosophical systems owed their origins to divine revelation, and thus held that they were justified in reclaiming them in the service of theology. Yet some other writers of this period – such as Tertullian – held that this move was corrupting, opening the door to heresy and the dilution of Christian truth.

So how did this increased use of Platonism show up in the theology of the early church? One obvious outcome of this approach was an increased use of allegorical biblical interpretation. Where the Hebrew mind saw truth expressed in history, most Greek minds saw it expressed in timeless ideas. As Philo of Alexandria had shown earlier (1.3.1), allegorical biblical interpretation allowed the biblical exegete to strip away the historical shell of the Bible, and uncover its philosophical core.

Origen adopted this approach to biblical interpretation, and took it a stage further. He drew a somewhat controversial distinction between uneducated Christians, who tended to read the Bible literally and historically, and their more sophisticated counterparts, who were able to go beneath the outward appearance of the text, and discover its hidden deeper “spiritual” meanings using allegorical methods of interpretation.

Yet the Platonism of Clement and Origen is more clearly seen in their specifically theological doctrines, rather than the means by which they arrived at these ideas. Both regarded

the Platonic or Stoic notion of the *logos* as critically important for a proper Christology – that is, for an understanding of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Building on the gospel of John’s declaration that the “word (Greek: *logos*) became flesh” in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14), Clement and Origen argued that Jesus of Nazareth was to be understood as the “word incarnate.” This allowed them to emphasize that Jesus of Nazareth was the mediator between God and the creation. For Clement, the Logos “had come to us from heaven,” in that God has “entered into” or “become attached to” human flesh, thus allowing God to become visible and tangible to humanity.

Origen also used Platonic ideas to resolve other more speculative theological questions – such as the shape of the resurrection body. What shape would human beings take after they had been raised from the dead? Origen’s reply shows how he drew on Platonic norms in occasionally surprising ways. The resurrection body, he argued, would have to be a perfect shape. But according to Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus*, a perfect body is spherical. Therefore, Origen concluded, the resurrection body would be a sphere.

The debate about the merits of the approaches adopted by Clement and Origen continues today. What can be said, however, is that their approach seems to have secured a hearing for Christianity in the more intellectually sophisticated quarters of Hellenistic culture, and given Christian theology the beginnings of a secure intellectual foundation. More work would need to be done (and, in some cases, existing ideas would need to be undone). But an important step had been taken in ensuring that Christianity would be taken seriously by the Hellenistic world of the third century.

1.3.4. Christianity and the Cities: Alexandria and Antioch

Early Christianity established itself primarily in cities – such as the Greek-speaking port cities on the Asian coastline, including Ephesus and Pergamon – rather than in remote rural areas. Cities, especially ports, were centers of commerce and trade, one of the classical means by which new religious and philosophical ideas were spread in the ancient world. The cities also offered a greater degree of anonymity than was possible in the countryside, allowing Christians to conceal themselves during an age that was generally hostile to their beliefs and practices. Christian communities were able to meet in secret, celebrate their beliefs, and begin to share their vision with outsiders.

The link between Christianity and the cities of the Roman Empire became so significant that the Latin term for a “country-dweller” (Latin: *paganus*) later began to be used in western Christian circles to refer to someone who retained older Roman religious beliefs, at a time when the empire had adopted Christianity as its official religion. A Latin term that originally lacked any religious associations of any kind thus came to refer to someone who practiced traditional forms of religion.

As Christianity became more deeply embedded in the imperial cities, a number of significant institutional developments began to take place. One was the rise of the “metropolitan bishop” – that is, a bishop who was seen as the titular leader of all the churches in a city, rather than of one specific Christian community. The most important of these were the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Rome. After the

legalization of Christianity, these metropolitan bishops began to wield considerable political power – especially the bishop of Rome, who was seen as having a symbolic authority linked with the imperial authority of the city of Rome itself.

The two intellectual centers of Hellenistic Christianity were the cities of Alexandria and Antioch. Like Alexandria, Antioch had been founded by Alexander the Great. Located on the banks of the Orontes River in modern-day Turkey, this city came to be one of the great population centers of the Hellenistic world. (A smaller city of the same name is referred to as “Pisidian Antioch.”) By the middle of the fourth century, these two cities were firmly established as the leading intellectual and administrative centers of Hellenistic Christianity.

While it is important not to inflate the differences between them, two quite distinct approaches to the Christian faith became associated with each city during the early fourth century. One point of difference concerned their preferred ways of interpreting the Bible. Alexandria remained a center where allegorical exegesis was seen as particularly important; Antioch, however, preferred a more literal or historical approach.

Yet the more important difference was Christological, concerning the way in which the identity of Jesus of Nazareth was understood. The “catechetical schools” of both great cities were agreed that Jesus was to be understood as fully divine and fully human – a view set out by the Council of Nicaea in 325. Yet they understood this basic belief in quite distinct manners. During the fourth century, two different traditions began to crystallize.

The Alexandrian school insisted that, if human nature is to be deified, it must be united with the divine nature. God must therefore become united with human nature in such a manner that the latter is enabled to share in the life of God. This was what had happened in and through the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. The Second Person of the Trinity assumed human nature, and by doing so, ensured its divinization. God became human, in order that humanity might become divine. Alexandrian writers thus placed considerable emphasis upon the New Testament text John 1:14 (“the Word became flesh”), which came to embody the fundamental insights of the school, and the liturgical celebration of Christmas. To celebrate the birth of Christ was to celebrate the coming of the *Logos* to the world, and its taking human nature upon itself in order to redeem it.

Antiochene theologians tended to place their emphasis at a different point. If redemption is to take place, it must be on the basis of a new obedience on the part of humanity. In that humanity is unable to break free from the bonds of sin, God is obliged to intervene. This leads to the coming of the redeemer as one who unites humanity and divinity, and thus to the reestablishment of an obedient people of God. Jesus Christ is at one and the same time both God and a real individual human being. There is a “perfect conjunction” between the human and divine natures in Christ.

This may seem a somewhat technical debate, of little relevance to the wider life of the church. Nevertheless, it is an important marker of the growing importance of these two cities, both as centers of theological reflection and ecclesiastical leadership. By the end of the fourth century, when Christianity had gained imperial recognition and privilege, the bishops of these two cities were significant players in debates about the location of spiritual authority within the church. Did power lie with the bishop of Rome, the capital city of the empire? Or was it dispersed among the bishops of the great cities of the empire, each of

which was autonomous? These debates began to become increasingly important as the western empire came under threat, and political power began to shift to the eastern city of Constantinople (1.4.7).

1.3.5. Monasticism: A Reaction against the Cities

The growing presence of Christianity in the cities of the Roman Empire was seen by many Christians as a positive development. Not only was it an important witness to the increasing influence of the Christian faith; it was a means by which Christianity could begin to work for the transformation of urban culture and society. Christianity, some argued, was like yeast in bread dough – a small presence, which would gradually grow, and eventually change things for the better.

Other Christians, however, were not so sure that this development was quite such a positive thing. While they did not rule out the possibility that urban expansion of the Christian faith might bring about a moral and spiritual transformation of the degeneracy of the imperial cities, it was quite possible that the reverse might happen. Might the immorality and debauchery of the cities – a frequent topic of concern in early Christian sermons – end up contaminating and corrupting the church?

One of the most important developments to take place within early Christianity was the rise of monasticism. (The terms “monk” and “monasticism” both come from the Greek word *monachos*, meaning “solitary” or “alone.”) The origins of the monastic movement are generally thought to lie in remote hilly areas of Egypt and parts of eastern Syria. Significant numbers of Christians began to make their homes in these regions, in order to get away from the population centers, with all the distractions that these offered. Anthony of Egypt, who left his parents’ home in 273 to seek out a life of discipline and solitude in the desert, is an excellent representative of this growing trend.

The theme of withdrawal from a sinful and distracting world became of central importance to these communities. Yet it soon became clear that there were two quite different ways of withdrawing from the world. On the one hand, there were those who saw monasticism in terms of a solitary and ascetic life (a form of monasticism often referred to as “eremitic”). On the other, there were those who saw monasticism in communal terms (“cenobitic” monasticism). The more communal approach began to gain the upper hand in the fifth century. Solitary monks (often referred to as “hermits”) faced considerable difficulties. How would they find food? Or participate in the common prayer that was expected of all Christians?

While some lone figures continued to insist on the need for individual isolation, the concept of a communal life in isolation from the world gained the ascendancy. One important early monastery was established by Pachomius (c. 292–348), generally recognized as the founder of this communal form of monasticism, during the years 320–5. This monastery developed an ethos which would become normative in later monasticism. Members of the community agreed to submit themselves to a common life which was regulated by a Rule, under the direction of a superior. The physical structure of the monastery played an important role in reinforcing its spiritual values. The monastery complex was surrounded by a wall, highlighting the idea of separation and withdrawal from the world.



Figure 1.4 The Benedictine monastery at Montecassino (or “Monte Cassino”), Italy. © Witold Skrypczak/Alamy

The Greek word *koinōnia* (often translated as “fellowship”), frequently used in the New Testament, now came to refer to the idea of a common corporate life, characterized by common clothing, meals, furnishing of cells (as the monks’ rooms were known), and manual labor for the good of the community. Monastic communities were increasingly seen as being more spiritually beneficial than solitary forms of the Christian life, in that communal charity could more easily be practiced and experienced.

The monastic ideal proved to have a deep attraction for many. By the fourth century, monasteries had been established in many locations in the Christian east, especially in the regions of Syria and Asia Minor. It was not long before the movement was taken up in the western church. By the fifth century, monastic communities had come into existence in Italy (especially along the western coastline), Spain, and Gaul. Augustine of Hippo, one of the leading figures of the western church at this time, established two monasteries in North Africa at some point during the period 400–25. For Augustine, the common life (now designated by the Latin phrase *vita communis*) was essential to the realization of the Christian ideal of love. Furthermore, intellectual study and spiritual reflection were best done together with other believers, rather than in solitary isolation. The monastery, Augustine argued, was thus the basis for the kind of study and reflection that would enrich both personal devotion and the life of the church.

Pachomius insisted that monks should not be ordained, so that they could not become involved in struggles for ecclesiastical preferment. Monks, Pachomius believed, should not

make themselves vulnerable to temptation through ambition for promotion. Yet this view was not universally held. The Cappadocian writer Basil the Great held that monks could become priests, seeing this as a means by which the church as a whole could be enriched by monastic wisdom.

This development was consolidated after the fall of the Roman Empire. During the sixth century, the number of monasteries in the region grew considerably. It was during this period that one of the most comprehensive monastic “Rules” – the “Rule of Benedict” – made its appearance. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 550) established his monastery at Monte Cassino at some point around 525. The Benedictine community followed a rule which was dominated by the notion of the unconditional following of Christ, sustained by regular corporate and private prayer, and the reading of Scripture. Many argue that such monasteries acted as the agents of transmission of Christian theology and spirituality following the collapse of the Roman Empire, preparing the way for the theological and spiritual renaissance of the Middle Ages.

1.3.6. The Cult of Thecla: Women and the Churches

As noted earlier, women played an important role in the apostolic church (1.1.6). Yet, for reasons that are not fully understood, the churches began to adopt more traditional, culturally accommodated approaches to headship and hierarchy. In the Greco-Roman world, the ideal woman was portrayed as self-effacing, industrious, and loyal to her family. Funerary monuments provide some of the clearest expressions of these cultural norms, celebrating a deceased woman’s conformity to what was expected of her. This inscription on a first-century Roman tombstone illustrates how these virtues were embodied and commended.

Here lies Aymone, wife of Marcus, best and most beautiful of women. She made wool, she was devoted to the gods and her family. She was modest, careful with money, and chaste. She stayed at home.

Inevitably, assimilation of such cultural norms led to the exclusion of women from positions of communal and liturgical leadership, even if they may have exercised considerable social and political influence behind the scenes. There were three orders of ministry within the early church: bishops, priests, and deacons. Although women rapidly found themselves excluded from the former two roles, they remained active as deaconesses. This form of ministry is recorded from the second century onwards, and played a significant role in the pastoral life of the churches.

The “Didascalia of the Apostles” (Latin: *Didascalia Apostolorum*), thought to date from the first half of the third century, suggests that male deacons should be compared to Christ, and deaconesses to the Holy Spirit. In practical terms, it seems that deacons undertook pastoral ministry to men, and deaconesses to women. The Council of Chalcedon (451) ruled that women should not be allowed to be ordained as deaconesses until they were forty. This regularization of this ministerial order is generally held to point to its importance in the life of the church at the time.



Figure 1.5 Ruins of the historic north African city of Carthage. © Silvestro Castelli/istockphoto.com

Martyrdom remained one of the most significant areas in which women played a leading role. Two of the most celebrated women martyrs of the early church in the west were Perpetua and Felicitas, who were martyred together in Carthage in the first decade of the third century. The traditional account of their martyrdom offers some insights into the social dynamics of the churches at this time. Perpetua, a Roman noblewoman, was a nursing mother; Felicitas, her pregnant slave. Perpetua had been baptized against the explicit wishes of her father, indicating that she was prepared to break with familial traditions and loyalties on account of her faith. The fact that both a noblewoman and her slave were martyred together reflects a growing tendency for martyrdom to become a means of self-empowerment for women at this time, when imperial hostility to Christianity often led to sporadic harassment and occasionally to systematic persecution.

One of the most remarkable witnesses to the aspirations of women in the early church is found in the cult of Thecla of Iconium. This is thought to have originated in the second half of the second century, and is described in a document of this period known as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The document describes a noblewoman, Thecla, who was a traditional “stay at home” aristocrat. One day, she overheard the preaching of the apostle Paul through an open window. Enthralled by what she heard, she left behind her fiancé and her home to follow Paul, and eventually to travel and proclaim the gospel herself.

One of the core themes of this intriguing work is the rejection of the social role assigned to women of noble birth at this time in imperial Roman culture – especially the traditional bonds of familial loyalty, the expectation that they will marry, and their dedication to their

home – as a result of the counter-cultural values and beliefs of the Christian faith. At one point, Thecla was condemned to death by the Roman authorities at the instigation of her mother, who was outraged by her rejection of traditional cultural norms. Yet Thecla eventually prevailed.

The importance of the story of Thecla lies in its affirmation of the role of women in carrying out church responsibilities that were increasingly allotted to male agents – such as public leadership and evangelism. Thecla was prepared to dress as a man in order to be able to carry out this role. As early as 190, the Latin theological Tertullian expressed concern that some were using the story of Thecla to justify the public ministry of women in churches, especially in baptizing and preaching – something to which Tertullian was opposed.

Yet Christian women were now playing a significant role outside the mainstream of church life. The Montanist movement of the mid-second century, for example, centered on three charismatic individuals in the province of Phrygia – Montanus himself, and two women colleagues: Prisca (sometimes called Priscilla) and Maximilla. Montanism is perhaps best understood as a religious renewal movement, similar in some ways to modern Pentecostalism. Contemporary sources suggest that Prisca and Maximilla achieved greater status than Montanus himself amongst the movement’s followers. Although Montanism had considerable influence within the churches, especially in Africa, it is best seen as a movement operating outside the administrative and power structures of the church. This allowed women to assume charismatic leadership roles that were becoming problematic within church structures, which were increasingly conforming to Roman social norms.

The same is true of the monastic movement, which often arose as a response to concerns about the morality and spirituality of mainline Christian communities, especially in the cities (1.3.5). The *amma* (Aramaic: “mother”) became a recognized female figure of spiritual wisdom and discernment in the monastic spirituality of the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, especially during the fourth and fifth centuries. Syncletica of Alexandria (died c. 350) is one of a number of female spiritual writers whose sayings are included in the collection traditionally known as the “Sayings of the Desert Fathers.”

If space permitted, other women of importance in early Christianity could be noted – such as Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo. Despite the increasing limitations placed on women within the churches, many found ways to subvert these, and exercise a significant public ministry. The “cult of Thecla of Iconium” is important both for the narrative of evangelical aspiration associated with Thecla herself, but also for the influence that this story came to have on many women in the early church.

1.4. The Imperial Religion: The Conversion of Constantine

Although Christianity was born into a culture in which there was little sympathy for its ideas or values, the new faith spread rapidly in both the western and eastern regions of the Roman Empire. This rise in influence can be thought of as a “bottom up” development, which took place without imperial intervention or support, or the use of violence or force by the early Christians. It is difficult to identify the “tipping point” – the moment at which

the numerical strength of Christianity forced a change in the attitude of the Roman authorities towards its presence. As we shall see, one of the most significant turning points in the history of the Christian church took place in the early fourth century, with the conversion of the emperor Constantine (1.4.2). In this section, we shall consider the changing status of Christianity, and its implications for Christian identity within an imperial culture.

1.4.1. Roman Persecution of Christianity

Even in the New Testament, there are clear signs of awareness of antagonism on the part of the Roman authorities towards Christianity. The Roman historian Tacitus (56–117) provides some evidence of his popular resentment in the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome (64), when he spoke of Christians as “a class hated for their abominations.” The Revelation of St. John, the final work in the New Testament canon, is widely regarded as reflecting active hostility towards Christian groups in the late first century. It is thought to reflect the situation during the final years of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, particularly around 95. Yet although Domitian was a strong supporter of traditional Roman religion, there are no historical records of any official persecution of Christianity at this time. Cultural hostility may have been supplemented by local vendettas of one sort or another. But this was not centrally organized or authorized.

Cultural suspicion towards Christianity was aroused for a number of reasons. Christians refused to take part in games and other public ceremonies, because of their quasi-religious nature. This led to Christians being seen as hostile to their fellow citizens. They were also widely regarded as “atheists” on account of their refusal to acknowledge the official state religion, regarding their loyalty to God as preventing them from swearing allegiance to any other deities or figures – such as the emperor. Many Romans believed that proper devotion to the traditional gods was necessary for the well-being of cities and populations, and believed that Christianity’s refusal to endorse such ceremonies was dangerous. The proverb “no rain, because of the Christians” was well-established by the fourth century.

Yet many popular criticisms of the early Christians arose from ignorance and misunderstanding of their practices. The eucharist, for example, was widely understood to involve cannibalism, incest, child murder, and orgies. In part, these rumors gained credence because of the secrecy of early Christian meetings (1.2.5). Nobody really knew what was happening. And in the absence of hard information, defamatory rumors abounded.

The absence of any official imperial policy towards Christianity is suggested by a letter written by Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia, around the year 112 to the emperor Trajan. Pliny asked for guidance on how to deal with Christians. The rise of Christianity in the region was causing some resentment – for example, from traders who specialized in votive offerings at temples. Pliny needed a ruling on whether Christianity itself was illegal, or whether it was certain actions which were associated with, or arose from, Christianity that merited prosecution.

The fact that Pliny had to seek clarification on this matter suggests that there was no legislation on the status of Christianity from either the Roman Senate or emperor. There were a number of general grounds on which Christians might face prosecution. One of

the most significant was membership of a *collegium illicitum* – an illegal society, which might be considered to pose a threat to public order or imperial security. Such societies existed in Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia, and had caused problems for the magistrates. A second ground for prosecution was *coercitio* – the magistrates’ right to enforce their rulings. A failure to comply was regarded as a disobedience of public authority. The third ground was the *lex maiestatis*, which made it treasonable to support enemies of the state. None of these were specific to Christianity; each, however, could be adapted to deal with at least some aspects of Christian behavior – for example, the refusal to take part in the imperial cult.

Pliny himself was puzzled about the legal basis for the prosecution of Christianity, as he indicated that his own investigations had uncovered nothing to suggest that the movement was seditious or dangerous. As far as he could establish, Christianity seemed to be about:

coming to a meeting on a given day before dawn, and singing a hymn to Christ as to God, swearing with a sacred oath not to commit any crime, never to steal or commit robbery, commit adultery, dishonour a sworn agreement, or refuse to return a sum left in trust. When all this was finished, it was their custom to go their separate ways, and later to gather again to take food of an ordinary and simple kind.

There is no doubt that individual Christians and Christian groups were subjected to persecution at various points in the first three centuries. These, however, were often sporadic rather than systematic, local rather than global. There are also indications that popular demands for repression of Christianity were resisted by the imperial authorities at various points. One such persecution, however, merits closer attention: the Decian persecution in the middle of the third century.

During his brief reign (249–51), the emperor Decius ordered a general reversion to the religion of the classic Roman age, believing that this would safeguard the future of the empire. Decius’s views were shaped by the fact that his reign marked the millennium of the city of Rome, whose founding was traditionally dated to 752 BC. Every inhabitant of the empire was required to offer a sacrifice to the gods, and receive a certificate of compliance (Latin: *libellus*) from the local magistrate.

Decius clearly hoped that a return to traditional Roman *pietas* would restore the fortunes of the empire, at a time when it faced increasing challenges from threats to its borders from potential invaders on the one hand, and from various oriental cults and superstitions on the other. The rise of these cults, it seemed to Decius, robbed the empire of its religious unity. The survival of the empire depended upon the “peace of the gods” (Latin: *pax deorum*), which was only guaranteed by observing the traditional cult.

The Decian persecution ended in June 251, when Decius was killed on a military expedition. Many Christians lapsed or abandoned their faith in the face of persecution. Division arose immediately within the church over how these individuals should be treated: did such a lapse mark the end of their faith, or could they be reconciled to the church by penance? Opinions differed sharply, and serious disagreement and tension resulted. Very different views were promoted by Cyprian of Carthage and Novatian. Both of these writers were martyred during the persecution instigated by the emperor Valerian in 257–8. Christians

were now forbidden to visit their cemeteries. One early victim of this new persecution was Pope Sixtus II, who was beheaded in 258, and had to be buried in the safety of the underground catacombs.

One of the most severe outbursts of persecution came about in February 303, during the reign of the emperor Diocletian (284–313). An edict was issued ordering the destruction of all Christian places of worship, the surrender and destruction of all their books, and the cessation of all acts of Christian worship. Christian civil servants were to lose all privileges of rank or status and be reduced to the status of slaves. Prominent Christians were forced to offer sacrifice according to traditional Roman practices. It is an indication of how influential Christianity had become that Diocletian forced both his own wife and daughter, who were known to be Christians, to comply with this order. The persecution continued under successive emperors, including Galerius, who ruled the eastern region of the empire.

In 311, Galerius ordered the cessation of the persecution. It had been a failure, and had merely hardened Christians in their resolve to resist the reimposition of classical Roman pagan religion. Galerius issued an edict which permitted Christians to live normally again and “hold their religious assemblies, provided that they do nothing which would disturb public order.” The edict explicitly identified Christianity as a religion, and offered it the full protection of the law. The legal status of Christianity, which had been ambiguous up to this point, was now resolved. The church no longer existed under a siege mentality.

Following the end of its persecution in 311, Christianity was now recognized as a legal religion; it was, however, merely one among many such religions. The conversion of the emperor Constantine changed this irreversibly, and brought about a complete change in the situation of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. We shall consider this tipping point in the next section.

1.4.2. The First Christian Emperor: Constantine

Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus (272–337) – better known simply as “Constantine” – became emperor during a complex and difficult period in Roman imperial history, regarded by many historians as marking the transition between classical antiquity and late antiquity. A series of crises in the late third century (235–84) came close to bringing the Roman Empire to collapse through the threat of invasion, a damaging civil war, outbreaks of the plague, and serious economic depression. Finally, a compromise solution was devised in which absolute power was shared by four rulers. This arrangement, known as the “Tetrarchy,” was a pragmatic response to a situation in which no individual commanded enough support to rule the entire empire. Each was allocated charge of a specific region. Although Rome remained the symbolic capital of the empire, the four “tetrarchs” established their bases close to the frontiers of the empire, in order to be able to deal with the threat of invasion from the north and east.

By the end of the first decade of the fourth century, however, the threats of invasion had receded. The Tetrarchy now began to break down, as difficulties arose concerning the succession. Between 309 and 313 most of the claimants to the imperial office were eliminated. Constantine forced Maximian’s suicide in 310. Galerius, who had declared

Christianity to be legal, died of natural causes in 311. Following Maxentius's seizure of power in Italy and North Africa, Constantine led a body of troops from western Europe in an attempt to establish his authority in the region. Maxentius was defeated by Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 and subsequently killed. Maximinus committed suicide at Tarsus in 313 after being defeated in battle by Licinius. This left only two claimants for the title of emperor: Constantine in the west and Licinius in the east. It was not until 324 that Constantine finally defeated Licinius, and proclaimed himself the sole emperor of a reunited Roman Empire.

Constantine showed no particular attraction to Christianity in his early period. He declared himself to be a Christian shortly after his decisive victory at the Milvian Bridge, to the north of Rome, on October 28, 312, after which he was proclaimed emperor. This point is affirmed by both Christian and pagan writers. What is not clear is precisely why or when this conversion took place.

Some Christian writers (such as Lactantius and Eusebius) suggest that the conversion may have taken place before the decisive battle, with Constantine seeing a heavenly vision ordering him to place the sign of the cross on his soldier's shields. "In this sign you shall conquer" (Latin: *in hoc signo vinces*). Whatever the reasons for the conversion, and whether it dates from before or after the battle of the Milvian Bridge, the reality and consequences of this conversion are not in doubt.



Figure 1.6 Constantine I, the Great, the first Christian Roman Emperor, c. 280–337. Marble bust, 312–25. Museo del Prado. Photo: akg-images

The first change in imperial attitudes towards Christianity took place in 313, when Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, proclaiming freedom of religion in both the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire. This did not give Christianity any privileges; nevertheless, it opened the way to it playing a significant role in Roman society, allowing Christians to emerge from the shadows and margins, and assume major social roles. In the years that followed, Rome gradually became Christianized.

Yet Constantine proceeded cautiously. Initially, he retained traditional Roman pagan symbolism, anxious not to create popular discontent against his program of religious reform. The triumphal arch constructed in 315 to mark Constantine's victory in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge makes use of no Christian symbolism, but shows sacrifices being made to gods such as Apollo, Diana, and Hercules. In the late 310s, Constantine often made moves that could be interpreted as a reaffirmation of traditional paganism as much as of Christianity.

An important turning point took place in 321, when Constantine decreed that Christians and non-Christians should worship on the "day of the Sun." While this clearly reflected the Christian practice of meeting and worshipping on Sunday, it could also be presented as a reaffirmation of the sun-cult favored by earlier emperors, such as Aurelian. The Roman mints continued for some time to produce coins showing figures of traditional Roman deities, reassuring the population that traditional Roman paganism was still being taken seriously. Constantine proved to be an able diplomat, moving Rome towards Christianity while publicly retaining traditional religious symbols.

Yet alongside these traditional pagan images, Christian symbols now began to appear on Roman coins. Furthermore, Constantine stipulated that his statue erected in the Forum should depict him bearing a cross – "the sign of suffering that brought salvation," according to the inscription provided by the emperor himself. Christianity was now more than just legitimate; it was on its way to becoming the established religion of the empire.

A critical step in this process took place in 324–5, when Constantine led an army against the eastern emperor Licinius. The immediate cause of this campaign was religious: Licinius had reneged on the Edict of Milan, and had introduced policies which discriminated against Christians. Licinius was finally defeated at the Battle of Chrysopolis, near Chalcedon, on September 18, 324, and executed the following year. This victory made Constantine sole emperor over the entire Roman Empire. Christianity would now be tolerated throughout the empire. The city of Constantinople (from the Greek *Kōnstantinoupolis*, meaning "the city of Constantine") was established as a "new Rome," and would become the administrative center of the empire.

Apart from a brief period of uncertainty during the reign of Julian the Apostate (361–3), the church could now count upon the support of the state. Theology thus emerged from the hidden world of secret church meetings, to become a matter of public interest and concern throughout the Roman Empire. Increasingly, doctrinal debates became a matter of both political and theological importance. Constantine wished to have a united church throughout his empire, and was thus concerned that doctrinal differences should be debated and settled as a matter of priority. This led to the emperor summoning the Council of Nicaea in 325, to settle doctrinal disputes within the church and allow Christianity to function in a way that Constantine believed was appropriate for the religion of the empire.

1.4.3. The Christianization of the Roman Empire

The conversion of Constantine and his victory over Licinius in 324 removed any remaining barriers to Christians openly practicing their faith throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity was given the same legal protection as that offered to other religions, and Christians were given freedom to worship as and where they pleased. The most immediate result of this was that Christians felt confident enough to worship in public, no longer needing to meet secretly in private houses. The way was now clear for Christians to construct and own their own purpose-built churches.

It is important not to overstate the importance of these developments. After all, even in the early days of Christianity, house churches in the imperial cities were difficult to conceal. Neighbors were generally aware that these were Christian meeting places, and often chose to say nothing about it. Many Christians began to adopt names that were distinctively Christian, marking them out from their pagan neighbors. Yet there was a difference. Now, these things could be done with impunity, without fear of official sanctions, discrimination, or persecution.

This new benign attitude on the part of the imperial authorities helped the consolidation of Christianity throughout the empire. Yet other factors must be acknowledged as well. The crisis of the late third century seemed to many to mark the end of an era, and the need for change. Might the pagan religion of classical Rome have had its day? Might it be time for something new? Cults from Egypt were gaining adherents, and loosening the hold of the older religious system. The rise of Christianity contributed still further to the sense that classical paganism was on the wane. In the view of some scholars, the greatest rival to Christianity at Rome in the third century may not have been traditional Roman paganism, but the Egyptian cult of Isis.

Yet perhaps most importantly, the withdrawal of state sanction and support for paganism left it exposed and vulnerable. Its future now depended on its capacity to attract adherents, rather than the traditional sponsorship of the state. The evidence suggests that it was not up to this challenge. In the past, emperors and wealthy citizens had endowed temples dedicated to the traditional Roman gods. They now began to endow Christian churches instead. Constantine was responsible for the building of large basilicas in many European cities, giving Christianity a public presence in the cities. Imperial financial support for pagan temples was discontinued. Private individuals followed their emperor's lead, switching their financial support from paganism to Christianity. Lacking the means to raise funds, pagan temples quickly fell into disuse, often being converted to Christian churches.

Within a generation, Christianity had moved from being a persecuted movement on the fringes of imperial culture to becoming its establishment. The Christian church was simply not prepared for this radical transition. Its bishops were once merely leaders of congregations; they now became pillars of Roman society, with power and influence. Its churches were once private homes; they were now massive dedicated buildings, publicly affirming the important place of Christianity in imperial culture. The simple forms of early worship were replaced by ceremonies and processions of increased complexity, adapted to the splendor of the great basilicas now springing up in the imperial cities.

There were setbacks – most notably, the curious reign of Julian the Apostate from 361–3, notable mainly for its unsuccessful attempts to reestablish a fading and tarnished paganism as the official imperial religion. A later source reports that Julian’s final words were “You have won, O Galilean” (Latin: *Vicisti, Galilaeae*). Yet Julian’s abortive attempt to restore the fortunes of paganism merely proved to be an interlude in the inexorable rise of the political, social, and intellectual influence of Christianity. His successor, Jovian, rescinded Julian’s legal measures directed against Christianity. Theodosius the Great, who reigned as emperor from 379 to 395, finally issued a series of measures that made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, bringing to a conclusion the slow process of Christianization initiated by Constantine.

Yet many scholars argue that this process of establishment caused Christianity to change its character. In the next section, we shall consider the reasons for this concern.

1.4.4. The Imperialization of Christianity

As we noted in the previous section, Constantine initiated the extended process which would eventually lead to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. Yet this involved more than Christianity being given prominence and privilege in Roman society. The social roles and norms of traditional Roman religion were now transferred to Christianity. And, as events made clear, this led to significant changes in the ethos and outlook of Christianity, which changed its public face.

So what expectations were imposed on Christianity in making it the imperial religion? One of the core roles of traditional Roman religion was the maintenance of social cohesion. The primary function of religion was to unite the people in a sense of sacred solidarity. Each city had its own patron deities, ensuring its cohesion and giving it a distinct identity. Family religious rituals were carefully observed, especially funeral rites. The Roman military regarded religion as especially important, linking proper religious observance with success in battle. Securing the “peace of the gods” (Latin: *pax deorum*) was seen as essential to Rome’s continuing prosperity and expansion.

The Latin term *religio* means “binding together,” thus highlighting its role in ensuring the social and political cohesion of Roman society and culture. The Roman authorities were content for individuals to follow their own private religious beliefs, provided these did not come into open conflict with the state religion. Those who openly flouted it were branded “atheists” (1.4.1). The terms “superstition” and “cult” were often used to denigrate religions that were considered to be subversive of traditional Roman values.

Yet Roman religion was primarily about practice and binding duties, rather than an official “theology” or set of beliefs. To use technical terms, it was more about orthopraxis than orthodoxy. While Roman intellectuals often had misgivings about aspects of the state religion, they nevertheless regarded it as a valuable traditional resource that was important in maintaining cultural identity and stability.

An official Roman religion, therefore, was about creating civic unity, social coherence, and political solidarity. These obligations and expectations were now increasingly imposed upon Christianity. Having only just emerged from the margins of Roman society through being recognized as a legitimate religion, Christianity now found itself propelled to the

forefront of Roman civic life. It simply did not have time to acclimatize to being a legitimate faith before it became the religion of the imperial establishment.

As a result, it was relatively easy for Constantine to exploit the church as an instrument of imperial policy, impose his imperial ideology upon it, and deprive it of much of the independence which it had previously enjoyed. Christianity did not look much like a “religion” before Constantine. Yet Constantine’s demand for it to take on the role of an imperial unifying religion led to it assuming some of the religious functions and trappings that had been inherited from classical paganism. Christianity began to change. Some welcomed its new power and influence; others were anxious that its new status would compromise its beliefs and above all its values.

As we have emphasized, Roman religion was about ensuring social unity and cohesion. To his dismay, Constantine soon realized that there was a lack of unity within the church, potentially compromising its crucial religious role as a unifying imperial influence. Events in the province of Africa in the early fourth century caused an immediate headache for Constantine. The “Donatist” controversy, which simmered for years (1.5.5), had its origins in tensions that arose in Africa between two rival groups of Christians, who took very different attitudes towards those who had lapsed in the Diocletian persecution. In the end, Constantine declined to resolve the matter personally, appointing a synod of bishops to deal with the matter. The ill-feeling arising from the Donatist crisis simmered on throughout the fourth century, and erupted again in the late fourth century. We shall consider the theological issues arising from this controversy later.

Yet the main point to note here is how Constantine became drawn into ecclesiastical disputes. The new imperial status of Christianity meant that its unity and polity were now matters of significance to the state. Up to this point, heresy and orthodoxy had been concepts of importance within the Christian communities alone. They now became imperial political concerns, with important legal implications. If Christianity was to be the religion of Rome, it would have to function as Romans expected it to.

A similar issue arose later with the Arian controversy, in which the topic under discussion was the divinity of Christ (1.5.3). For Constantine, this was a dangerous debate, in that it threatened the unity of the church – and hence of the state. It was inevitable that this theological debate would be politicized. Constantine demanded resolution of the issue, for the sake of imperial unity. As the church itself possessed multiple centers of authority in rivalry with one another, it seemed to Constantine that it was unable to achieve such a resolution. Constantine therefore determined to resolve the matter in a way that would achieve political expediency and efficiency, while at the same time respecting theological integrity. The evidence suggests that Constantine was quite clear about his role in this matter. He would be an independent facilitator, who would allow the church itself to decide which was right, and thus bring the dispute to an end. Constantine wanted clarity on this matter, so that religious division and dispute could be avoided.

Constantine’s method of conflict resolution was without precedence in post-biblical Christianity. Never before had the bishops of the Christian church met together. Constantine summoned all the bishops of the church to a Council in Nicaea in Bithynia (now İznik in modern Turkey) in May 325. This was the first ever gathering of Christian

leaders from across the empire, reflected in the title that is often given to this event: “the first ecumenical Council.” The fact that the emperor had summoned the council made it quite clear that ultimate authority lay with the emperor within imperial Christianity. This was reinforced by Constantine’s decision to model the proceedings of the council on those of the Roman Senate. The structures of the church were subtly being aligned with those of the state. We shall consider the theological outcome of this council later. Yet our concern here is to note how the church was being forced to resolve issues for the sake of the wellbeing of the empire. Establishment might well have its privileges; it also had its obligations.

Culturally, the imperialization of Christianity led to the absorption of a number of Roman customs into Christian practice, where they were given a new interpretation. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the development of the “cult of the saints.” Traditional Roman religion honored the dead with ceremonial meals at the site of their tombs. This practice soon became absorbed into Christianity. Christians would gather at the tombs of prominent saints or martyrs, celebrating a eucharist in their honor. Though this practice was relatively easily accommodated theologically, it is important to note that its origins did not lie in the New Testament. Its development ultimately reflected the need for a Christian equivalent to a traditional Roman practice.

1.4.5. Augustine of Hippo: The Two Cities

By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had displaced its religious rivals, and become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Yet by that time, it was clear that Rome was in difficulty. Its northern frontiers were vulnerable to invaders. Even the “eternal city” itself seemed in danger. As a precautionary measure, the seat of government of the western empire was moved from Rome – initially to the northern city of Milan, and then in 402 to the northeastern city of Ravenna, which was regarded as easier to defend.

For there was no longer any doubt that Rome was vulnerable. In 387, a Gallic tribal army overwhelmed Rome’s defenses and briefly took control of the city. Yet the tipping point in the decline of Rome took place in 408, when a Visigoth army led by Alaric laid siege to Rome. In August 410, Alaric led his armies into the city, and pillaged it. This invasion was only a temporary development, lasting a few days. Yet before they withdrew from the city, the Alaric’s army burned many parts of Rome, shaking the confidence of an entire civilization. The “eternal city” was in danger of being overthrown, if not completely destroyed.

Yet the sack of Rome did not mark the end of the Roman Empire. The administration of the empire was increasingly located in the east, at the new imperial city of Constantinople. As a result of earlier decisions, made with this possibility in mind, Rome was no longer even the capital city of the western empire. The government of the western empire continued without interruption for another generation. Most historians regard the western Roman Empire as coming to an end sometime around the year 476; the eastern empire, based at the great city of Constantinople, continued to exist for the best part of a thousand years. Yet the symbolic importance of the sack of Rome was massive. The era of the “eternal city” seemed to be coming to an end.

The shock waves of this event were felt especially in Roman North Africa, where Augustine (358–430), bishop of the city of Hippo Regius, had established a reputation as one of the greatest Christian thinkers. After sacking Rome, Alaric led his armies south, with the intention of occupying Sicily and North Africa. However, Alaric's fleet was destroyed during a storm. Shortly afterwards, Alaric died. The Visigoth armies headed north instead, and finally settled in Aquitaine, in the southwest of France. Although an immediate threat had receded, Italy was nevertheless left in a state of chaos.

Refugees from Rome and southern Italy began flooding North Africa, bringing with them the burning question of the moment. Why had Rome been sacked? Was this not a confirmation of the fears of pagan philosophers, who had declared the rise of Christianity as breaking the *pax deorum*? Pagans had no doubt who was to blame for the international humiliation of Rome. Christianity had violated the sacred roots of Roman culture. The gods had responded by abandoning Rome to its enemies.

Augustine could not fail to appreciate the importance of these criticisms. He began to write his massive work *The City of God* in 412, shortly after the sacking of Rome. In the end, the work took him fifteen years to complete. His concern was first to rebut pagan criticisms of Christianity, and then to reassure Christians who were bewildered by the events taking place around them. Against the pagans, he pointed out that the history of Rome was full of calamities and disasters long before the coming of Christianity. The pagan gods seemed incapable of offering Rome protection in the past. Why would anyone think that their reintroduction at this time of crisis might cause them to do so now?

Yet Augustine's deeper concern is to make some sense of the unsettling historical context, especially the deep sense of insecurity and instability which had taken root in Roman colonial circles following the seizure of the city of Rome. In one sense, Augustine does not provide an explanation for the fall of Rome. His concern is to offer a Christian reading of history, and thus help believers to understand how they fit into the unsettling and disturbing events taking place around them. Augustine's fundamental point is made with reference to the image of "two cities" – the earthly city, and the heavenly city. They are not to be confused. Augustine here has in mind the theology developed by an earlier writer, Eusebius of Caesarea, who tended to think of the Christianized Roman Empire as a divinely ordained instrument to rule the civilized world.

Augustine set out a very different position, avoiding any suggestion that any human political system or structure was to be regarded as possessing divine sanction or ultimate authority. Christians, he declared, may live in this world, but they are not of this world. They are to think of themselves as strangers who are passing through a foreign country. While they may enjoy the blessings that this world has to offer, they must always be ready to move on. They are sojourners on earth, not citizens. The "eternal city" was not Rome, but the New Jerusalem. Heaven is the true home and ultimate destiny of Christians, and that was where their ultimate affections and loyalties must lie.

According to Augustine, believers live in an "intermediate period," separating the incarnation of Christ from his final return in glory. The church is to be seen as in exile in the "city of the world." It is *in* the world, yet not *of* the world. There is therefore a tension between the present situation of believers, in which the church is exiled in the world, and somehow obliged to maintain its distinctive ethos while surrounded by disbelief, and their

future hope, in which the church will be delivered from the world, and finally allowed to share in the glory of God.

The slow passing of the Roman Empire, for Augustine, is thus to be set against the backdrop of the rise and fall of other human empires. The Christian church is not to be identified with any human empire or city, but is to see itself as a Christian colony on earth, whose true homeland (Latin: *patria*) is in heaven. The fall of the Roman Empire was not to be understood as a sign of divine disfavor or divine abandonment. Rather, it was a reminder of the frailty and transiency of all human institutions – Rome included.

1.4.6. The Decline of the Western Empire

In the end, the Roman Empire continued to prosper, and even expand, in the east for a thousand years, for reasons we shall explore presently (1.4.7). In the west, however, Roman imperial power was widely recognized to be in terminal decline. Historians are unable to agree on a precise date for the fall of the western empire, nor on the ultimate cause of this event. For our purposes, we shall suggest that this event could be seen as taking place on September 4, 476, when Romulus Augustus, the last western emperor, was overthrown by the German military ruler Odoacer (433–93), who was declared king of Italy. The administrative changes Odoacer put in place within Italy effectively ended any idea of a “Roman Empire.” A nominal imperial center was maintained at the city of Ravenna for some time, but it never had the symbolic or actual power of Rome.

So why did Rome fall? In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), the British historian Edward Gibbon (1737–94) firmly – and not a little simplistically – identified the cause of Rome’s collapse as a loss of any sense of civic virtue among the Roman ruling class. Yet most recent historians have dissented from this somewhat superficial judgment.

Some identify other single causes – such as civil wars sapping the strength of the army, or military discipline and loyalty being eroded through the increasing use of mercenaries. Others, however, suggest that the “fall of the Roman Empire” is better seen as an extended and complex process, with numerous landmarks along the way, and having multiple – rather than single – causes.

Indeed, some have argued that it is misleading to speak of a “fall” of the western Roman Empire, in that it gradually transformed into something else. Peter Brown, the noted historian of late classical antiquity, thus argues for the gradual transformation of the western Roman Empire into what we now know as the Middle Ages.

So what were the implications of this change for Christianity? What happened to an imperial faith when the empire began to crumble and fall apart? One immediate threat was the religious faith of Odoacer, who was an Arian – someone who understood the identity of Jesus of Nazareth in a way that diverged from the Council of Nicaea in 325 (1.5.3). Yet this theological inconvenience does not appear to have led to the difficulties that might be anticipated, possibly because Odoacer was distracted from the finer points of theology by the somewhat more pressing demands of the military and political crises he faced in his new kingdom of Italy.

The real importance of the decline of imperial power for the Christian church is best seen from the standpoint of the Middle Ages. Looking back at the period of the break-up

of the Roman Empire, it becomes clear that many of the characteristic features of the church of the Middle Ages began to emerge as a result of this imperial decline (2.1.1). Three developments are of particular interest.

First, the erosion of Roman political and military power created a vacuum that was never really satisfactorily filled by the successors to the emperors. These rulers tended to see themselves as exercising local, rather than international, authority. Furthermore, such rulers often did not survive long enough to establish the traditions and institutions that would secure social and political stability. Gradually, the institution of the church began to emerge as a focus of constancy and continuity. Gregory the Great, who was pope from 590 to his death in 604, brought about reform and renewal of the church, and set in place missionary undertakings in northern Europe which led to the further expansion of Christian influence within the territories of the former Roman Empire.

Second, the rise of the monasteries created centers of learning, local administration, and leadership which were independent of national or international agencies (2.1.5). Although clearly affected to some extent by political and economic developments, the monasteries were able to offer intellectual and spiritual continuity during times of uncertainty and turbulence.

Third, the church continued to use Latin in its liturgy, preaching, administration, and works of theology. The language of the Roman Empire had a long history of use in political, philosophical, and theological contexts, and proved highly adapted to the needs of the western church. The emergence of Latin as an international language helped hold the western church together, enhancing its sense of being a coherent community. As academic communities gradually emerged from religious contexts – such as the great monastic cathedral schools – it was inevitable that Latin would emerge as the language of the academy in the Middle Ages.

These developments are all of major importance for an understanding of the history of Christianity in the west during the Middle Ages, which we shall consider in the next chapter. Yet it is important to understand that Christianity remained at the heart of a “new Rome” and a new empire for a thousand years. We need to turn to consider the rise of Constantinople as an imperial hub in the east, and the implications of this for the history of Christianity in this region.

1.4.7. The “New Rome”: Byzantium and the Eastern Empire

Having secured control of both the western and eastern regions of the Roman Empire through his defeat of Licinius in 325 (1.4.2), the emperor Constantine decided to establish a new imperial city in the east. The center of gravity of the empire now lay increasingly to the east, and Constantine regarded it as essential to locate the new administrative and military hub of the empire closer to its eastern frontiers. In the end, Constantine identified a suitable site on the Bosphorus, straddling the Mediterranean and Black Seas. A settlement had already been established there by the Greeks, which they named “Byzantium.”

Constantine took over the site of this older settlement, and redeveloped it. The new Greek-speaking city would be known as “Constantinople” (Greek: *Kōnstantinoupolis*, “the

city of Constantine”). From the outset, Constantine referred to his city as *Nova Roma* – the “New Rome” – which would be the capital of the empire. It was consecrated on May 11, 330. As Rome declined in power during the later fourth century, Constantinople’s reputation and importance rose.

Did Constantine suspect that the days of the western Roman Empire were numbered? Did he foresee the great invasions from the north, which would lead to the sack of Rome in 410? The evidence suggests that Constantine’s primary concern was to ensure that the eastern empire could be efficiently administered and securely defended. Yet in the event, the eastern Roman Empire, based at Constantinople, would outlive the western Roman Empire by a thousand years. It would not fall until 1453 (2.4.7).

Christianity had spread rapidly from its original heartland of Palestine to the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. Christian congregations were established in many of the cities of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Macedonia, and Egypt by the end of the first century. The theological foundations of this form of Christianity were given shape especially during the fourth century by writers such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

With the expansion of Christianity in the region, the bishops of two of its leading cities – Antioch and Alexandria – began to be regarded as having pre-eminence among their peers (1.3.4). Although Jerusalem remained of great symbolic importance to the early church, its political importance was rapidly declining. So how should the four great “sees” (or “bishoprics”) of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Rome relate to each other? Which, if any, had precedence over the others?

These questions of protocol were addressed by the Council of Nicaea, which was convened by Constantine in 325. Although the council’s primary concern was to formulate the identity of Jesus of Nazareth in terms that all regarded as acceptable, it also tried to resolve other issues which were becoming causes of concern within the church – including the status of the bishops of the great cities. At this stage, Constantinople was not considered as a leading metropolitan center; this, however, would change as the “New Rome” rose in power and influence later in the fourth century.

In the end, the Council of Nicaea recognized the four great sees of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Rome as having special standing within the worldwide church. In effect, the council conceded that Jerusalem had a place of honor, but not of power. The three “Petrine sees” of Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome were recognized as being both historically significant and politically influential. Traditionally, the churches at Rome and Antioch were held to be founded by the apostle Peter, and the church of Alexandria by his disciple, Mark the Evangelist, author of the second gospel in the New Testament.

With the establishment of the imperial city of Constantinople in the fourth century, the balance of ecclesiastical power began to shift. Constantine had declared that his city would be the “new Rome.” Did that not imply that it should enjoy the same ecclesiastical privileges in the east as those enjoyed by Rome in the west? The formal transfer of imperial authority from Rome to Constantinople took place in 330. Rome would remain the administrative center of the western Roman Empire until the threat of invasions from the north led to its relocation to Ravenna in the beginning of the fifth century. Constantinople was now the imperial capital.

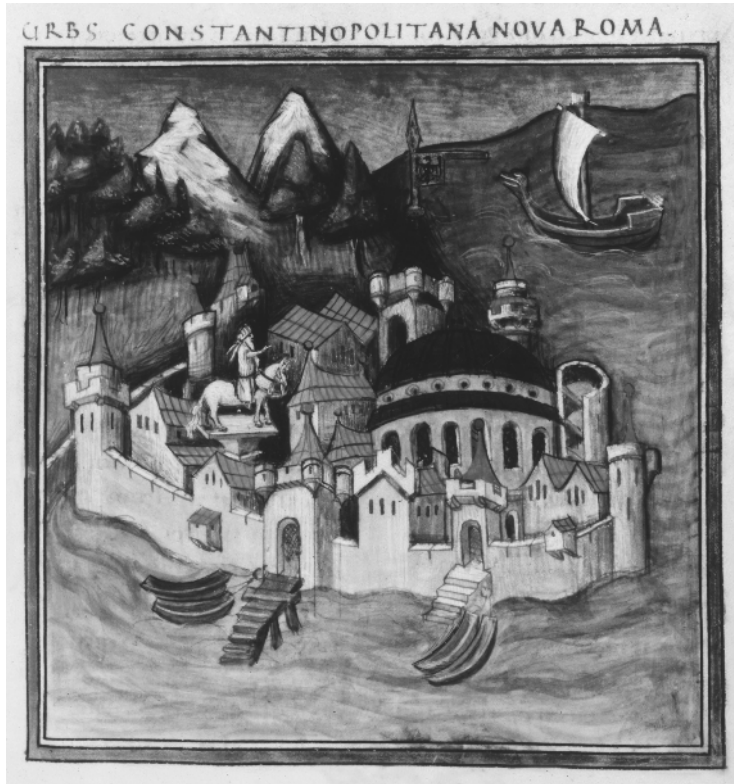


Figure 1.7 The great eastern city of Constantinople, from *Notitia Dignitatum*, Switzerland, 1436. The Art Archive/Bodleian Library Oxford

The decision to establish Constantinople as a see – that is, as the seat of a metropolitan bishop – changed this dynamic of power and status irreversibly. The Second Council of Constantinople (381) ruled that the Bishop of Constantinople was to have “the prerogative of honor after the Bishop of Rome, because Constantinople is the New Rome.” This ruling was fiercely resisted by other eastern bishops. Nevertheless, the imperial prestige of the new city was such that it was difficult to challenge this trend, especially on account of the growing alignment of secular and religious power within the empire. The Council of Chalcedon endorsed this view in 451 (1.5.9). As a result, many of the religious controversies of the age – particularly the Nestorian controversy – had obvious political dimensions, as the bishops of the older leading cities of the empire sought to assert their authority over and against the upstart see of Constantinople.

By the end of the fourth century, the eastern church had come to recognize a “pentarchy” of sees: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Although the details of what this meant in practice were sometimes sketchy, spiritual authority was understood to be distributed across these five leading cities, with none having exclusive powers or rights. As only one of these five centers was located in the western empire, it was

inevitable that Rome would emerge as the focus of Latin-speaking Christianity, even when the western empire began to disintegrate in the late fifth century. Yet there would be no equivalent of a pope in the eastern church. Spiritual authority was – and remained – distributed, not centralized, in this region.

1.5. Orthodoxy and Heresy: Patterns in Early Christian Thought

One of the challenges confronting the early church was the consolidation of its religious beliefs. The historical evidence suggests that this was not initially seen as a priority. Even by the middle of the second century, most Christians appear to have been content to live with a certain degree of theological fuzziness. Theological imprecision was not seen as endangering the coherence or existence of the Christian church. This judgment reflects the historic context of that age. The struggle for survival in a hostile cultural and political environment often led to other issues being seen as of lesser significance.

In this section, we shall consider some of the debates which developed within the church over its basic beliefs.

1.5.1. The Boundaries of Faith: A Growing Issue

The rise of controversy within the Christian churches over a series of matters – especially concerning the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth – led to a tightening of the boundaries of what was to be considered as “authentic” Christianity. The periphery of the community of faith, once relatively loose and porous, came to be defined and policed with increasing rigor. Views that were regarded as acceptable in an earlier and less reflective age began to fall out of favor as the rigorous process of examination accompanying the controversies of the age began to expose their vulnerabilities and deficiencies. Ways of expressing certain doctrines which earlier generations regarded as robust began to appear inadequate under relentless examination. It was not necessarily that they were wrong; rather, they were discovered not to be good enough.

A good example of this development can be seen in early Christian reflection on the doctrine of creation. From the outset, Christian writers affirmed that God had created the world. However, there were several ways of understanding what the notion of “creation” entailed. Many early Christian writers took over existing Jewish notions of creation, which tended to see the act of divine creation primarily as the imposition of order on pre-existing matter, or the defeat of chaotic forces. Such views remained dominant within Judaism until the sixteenth century.

Other Christian theologians, however, argued that the New Testament clearly set out the idea of creation as the calling into being of all things from nothing – an idea that later came to be known as “creation *ex nihilo*” (Latin: “out of nothing”). As this idea gained the ascendancy, the older view of creation as “ordering of existing matter” came to be seen initially as deficient, and subsequently as wrong. An idea that was once regarded as mainstream thus gradually came to be sidelined, and eventually rejected altogether. Similar

processes can be seen taking place in other areas of Christian thought, especially in relation to the church's understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth.

Early Christian doctrinal development can be compared to an intellectual journey of exploration, in which a range of possible ways of formulating core ideas were examined, some to be affirmed and others to be rejected. This process should not really be thought of in terms of winners and losers; it is better understood as a quest for authenticity during which all options were examined and assessed.

Yet this process of exploration was both natural and necessary. Christianity could not remain frozen in its first-century forms as it entered the second century and beyond. It faced new intellectual challenges which demanded that it proved itself to be capable of engaging with religious and intellectual alternatives to Christianity, especially Platonism and Gnosticism. This process of the conceptual expansion of the contents of the Christian faith proceeded slowly and cautiously. The final crystallization of this process of exploration can be seen in the formation of creeds – public, communally authorized statements of faith, which represented the *consensus fidelium* (Latin: the “consensus of the faithful”), rather than the private beliefs of individuals.

This voyage of intellectual exploration involved investigating paths which ultimately turned out to be barren or dangerous. Sometimes wrong turnings were taken at an early stage, and corrected later. It is easy to understand why many might believe that early patterns of faith are the most authentic. Yet recognizable forms of views that the church later declared to be heretical – such as Ebionitism and Docetism – can be identified within Christian communities as early as the late first century. Although many early Christian writers, such as Tertullian, held that the antiquity of a theological view was a reliable guide to its orthodoxy, this is simply not correct. Mistakes were made, right from the beginning, which later generations had to correct.

The issue of the boundaries of faith became increasingly pressing when Constantine adopted Christianity as the “unifying religion” of the Roman Empire (1.4.4). If Christianity was to be a unifying imperial force, it was clearly important that it should not itself be divided, or the cause for division. Constantine pressed for unity within the church, most obviously by convening the Council of Nicaea (325) to settle Christological disputes. The historical evidence suggests that Constantine did not favor any particular outcome of the council; he simply wanted the matter settled, leading to ecclesiastical unity.

Yet Christianity was not like classical Roman religions, which primarily focused on matters of practice – such as ceremonies, rituals, and binding oaths, all of which were seen as means of creating unity and cohesion within families, cities, and states (1.4.1). Christianity was also about ideas – ways of thinking about the world. At an early stage, it was appreciated that defective ways of conceiving the Christian faith led to inadequate ways of implementing it. Faithfulness and integrity could not be maintained simply by the regulation of practice. Ideas mattered. And the only way of working out which were the best ideas was through debates.

Constantine and his successors thus found themselves in the somewhat uncomfortable position of watching Christian theologians debating ideas about the identity of Jesus Christ and the nature of God – and in doing so, creating division and dissent within the church.

In what follows, we shall consider some of those debates, and their wider importance. The first debate concerned the texts on which subsequent debates would be based – the canon of the New Testament.

1.5.2. The Canon of the New Testament

The first Christians used the term “scripture” or “writing” (Greek: *graphē*) to refer to a book of the Old Testament, in that these were coming to be regarded as of foundational importance to the Christian church. Debate would continue over the nature of that influence, with a growing consensus that Christianity should appropriate the ideas, but not the practices, of the people of Israel. For example, Christians would not observe Jewish food laws or sacrificial regulations.

But what of the writings of Christians themselves? What was their status? And who was to decide which writings would be normative for the church? While Christianity remained an illegal religion, it was impossible to convene councils to settle such matters. Only in the fourth century could any kind of formal consultations take place between Christian leaders across the empire.

The evidence suggests that this issue was not seen as pressing during the apostolic period, partly because historical continuity with the apostolic tradition was sufficiently strong to ensure continuity of teaching and practice with the first Christians. Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, noted how the churches of the mid-second century were able to trace direct links between their own leaders and those of the apostolic community. Irenaeus wanted to maintain continuity with the ideas and values of the apostolic era, ensuring that the teachings of that formative period were accepted by his own age. For this reason, he placed an emphasis on the importance of institutional continuity between the present church leadership and the apostles. Yet as the historical distance between the churches and the apostles increased, it became increasingly necessary for churches to base their teaching on certain texts. This made it all the more important to reach agreement on which texts they would use to inform their life and thought. The term “canon” (Greek *kanōn*: “rule” or “norm”) came to be used to refer to the collections of writings accepted by churches.

A clear distinction emerged early in the second century between an inner core of texts which were widely regarded as authoritative by most Christians, and a more diffuse outer core, which some – but not all – churches regarded as useful. The four gospels and the letters of Paul rapidly acquired normative status throughout the Christian world. Other writings, such as the *Didache* (c. 70), 1 Clement (c. 96), the Epistle of Barnabas (c. 100), the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110), and the apocalypse of Peter (c. 150) did not secure such universal acceptance, being valued locally rather than universally. The Muratorian Canon – a document which reflects the practices of the Roman churches in the late second century – clearly identifies the gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles, and three other epistles (1 John; 2 John; Jude) as being valued and accepted across the churches. Other works – such as the Revelation of John and the Apocalypse of Peter – are “received,” although with a cautionary comment: “Some do not wish these to be read in churches.”

It is not clear what criteria were used in making such selections. What is clear, however, is that by the beginning of the third century, without any form of international consulta-

tion, something very similar to today's New Testament canon came to be accepted by most churches. Disagreement centered on the periphery, not the core. The term *antilegomena* (Greek: "writings that are disputed" or "writings that are debated") came to be used for a small group of texts that were not universally accepted by Christians. Some of these – specifically, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation – eventually achieved general acceptance. Others – such as the *Didache* and the apocalypse of Peter – did not.

By the middle of the fourth century, agreement seemed to be reached on the New Testament canon, without the need for any international council to settle the issue. Athanasius of Alexandria circulated an Easter festal letter of 367, which set out the New Testament canon in the form accepted today. Athanasius does not appear to see himself as determining what books were to be included in the biblical canons. His intention appears to have been to recognize or acknowledge those writings that had already obtained prominence from usage among the various early Christian churches. The formation of the New Testament canon was shaped by the habits of Christian communities, not the decisions of Christian bishops.

Once more, we can see the importance of the legalization of Christianity as an imperial religion on its self-definition. Once Christian leaders were free to meet and discuss their ideas, unresolved questions could be debated and adjudicated. The fixing of the canon of the New Testament and agreement on ideas of the Trinity and the person of Christ all date from this formative period.

It is sometimes suggested that the church tried to exclude or repress certain works which ought to have been recognized as authentic – such as the gospel of Thomas, or the gospel of Judas, which were found in collections of documents at Nag Hammadi in Egypt and elsewhere. The reason for their exclusion is sometimes suggested to be their unorthodox views on the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, which the church found embarrassing. There is little historical evidence for these suggestions. The "Gospel of Judas," for example, is a relatively late document, almost certainly originating within a marginalized Egyptian sect within Christianity which believed it was in possession of secret knowledge denied to outsiders. These documents were not known to Christian congregations in Rome or Antioch in the second century. They appear to have had a local influence among some Christians in Egypt in the third or fourth centuries, but were never taken seriously elsewhere. No serious case can be made for their inclusion in the New Testament canon.

1.5.3. Arianism: The Debate over the Identity of Jesus of Nazareth

One of the greatest challenges faced by the early church was the weaving together of the threads of the New Testament witness to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth into a coherent theological tapestry. Christians gradually came to realize that no existing analogy or model was good enough to meet their needs in expressing the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The concept of the incarnation began to emerge as of central importance to the church's understanding of Jesus Christ.

While the idea was developed in slightly different ways by different writers, their core theme was that of God entering into history, and taking on human nature in Jesus of Nazareth. This idea caused considerable philosophical difficulties for many of the

prevailing schools of Hellenistic philosophy. How, many asked, could an immutable God enter into history? Surely this implied that God underwent change? Contemporary Hellenistic philosophers drew a sharp distinction between the unchanging heavenly realm and the changeable created order. The notion of God entering into and dwelling within this transitory and changing order seemed inconceivable, and proved a significant barrier to some cultured pagans embracing Christianity.

This process of exploration of religious and philosophical categories suitable for expressing the significance of Jesus of Nazareth reached a watershed in the fourth century. The controversy which forced rigorous discussion of the issue was precipitated by Arius (c. 270–336), a priest in one of the larger churches in the great Egyptian city of Alexandria.

Arius's most fundamental belief was that Jesus Christ was not divine in any meaningful sense of the term. He was "first among the creatures" – that is, pre-eminent in rank within the created order, yet someone who was created, rather than being divine. The Father is thus to be regarded as existing before the Son. This is the point made by one of Arius's best-known theological slogans: "There was a time when he was not." Only the Father can be said to be "unbegotten"; the Son, like all other creatures, originates from this one source of being.

Arius's way of locating Jesus of Nazareth on a theological map can be seen, at least in part, as a continuation of the tendency in the second and third centuries towards "subordinationism." This approach recognized a trinity or triad within the Godhead, but regarded their relationship as essentially hierarchical. God the Father was the ultimate source of authority, who chose to act through Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy Spirit. Arius upheld this belief in one God who is superior to Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy Spirit, but defended it by denying the divinity of Jesus. The superiority of the Father was maintained by asserting that the Son was a creature – and hence, by definition, inferior to the Father.

Arius thus drew an absolute distinction between God and the created order. There was no intermediate or hybrid species. For Arius, God was totally transcendent and immutable. So how could such a God enter into history, and become incarnate? As a creature, the Son was changeable, and subject to pain, fear, grief, and weariness. This is simply inconsistent with the notion of an immutable God. Since the notion of a changeable God seemed heretical to Arius, he drew the obvious conclusion: Jesus of Nazareth could not be considered to be divine.

Arius's most indefatigable critic was Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 293–373). For Athanasius, Arius had destroyed the internal coherence of the Christian faith, rupturing the close connection between Christian belief and worship. There are two points of particular importance that underlie Athanasius's critique of Arius.

First, Athanasius argues that it is only God who can save. God, and God alone, can break the power of sin, and bring humanity to eternal life. The fundamental characteristic of human nature is that it requires to be redeemed. No creature can save another creature. Only the creator can redeem the creation. If Christ is not God, he is part of the problem, not its solution.

Having emphasized that it is God alone who can save, Athanasius then made a logical move which the Arians found difficult to counter. The New Testament and the Christian

liturgical tradition alike regard Jesus Christ as Savior. Yet, as Athanasius emphasized, only God can save. So how are we to make sense of this? The only possible solution, Athanasius argued, is to accept that Christ is none other than God incarnate. His logic runs as follows.

1. No creature can redeem another creature.
2. According to Arius, Jesus Christ is a creature.
3. Therefore, according to Arius, Jesus Christ cannot redeem humanity.

Now Arius had no problem with the idea that Christ was the savior of humanity. Athanasius's point was not that Arius denied this, but that he rendered the claim incoherent. Salvation, for Athanasius, involves divine intervention – which Athanasius saw affirmed in a critically important biblical text: the “Word became flesh” (John 1:14). God entered into the human situation, in order to change it.

The second point that Athanasius made is that Christians worship and pray to Jesus Christ. This pattern can be traced back to the New Testament itself, and is of considerable importance in clarifying early Christian understandings of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. By the fourth century, prayer to and adoration of Christ were standard features of Christian public worship. Athanasius argues that if Jesus Christ were a creature, then Christians were guilty of worshipping a creature instead of God – in other words, they had lapsed into idolatry. Did not the Old Testament law explicitly prohibit the worship of anyone or anything other than God? Arius was not in disagreement with the practice of worshipping Jesus; he refused, however, to draw the same conclusions as Athanasius.

An important debate emerged around this time over the best theological term to be used to define the relation of the Father to the Son. The Greek term *homoiousios*, “of like substance” or “of similar being,” was seen by many as allowing the proximity between Father and Son to be affirmed without needing further speculation on the precise nature of their relation. However, the rival Greek term *homoousios*, “of the same substance” or “of the same being” eventually gained the upper hand. This was seen as defending a stronger understanding of the relation of Father and Son. When the Nicene Creed – or, more accurately, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed – of 381 declared that Christ was “of the same substance” with the Father, it was insisting that the Son was not simply a representative or relative of God; rather, the Son was to be seen as God incarnate. This affirmation has since come to be widely regarded as a benchmark of Christological orthodoxy within all the mainstream Christian churches, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.

The politicization of the Arian controversy made its resolution more difficult than many would like. However, in the end, the church rejected Arius's position, holding that this compromised some core Christian affirmations about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Constantine did not require the church to adopt one position or the other; he simply wanted the matter resolved, to ensure religious harmony within his empire. Yet many scholars suspect that if Constantine had had a choice in the matter, he would have supported Arius. Why? Because of his emphasis on the sole location of authority in God the Father – a notion of “divine monarchy” which paralleled Constantine's own thinking about the authority and power of the emperor.

1.5.4. Trinitarianism: A Debate about the Nature of God

The Christian doctrine of God underwent slow development in the first three centuries. Early Christian creeds set out a threefold structure to Christian belief: most of these creeds consisted of three sections, dealing with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (1.5.8). Initially, Christian beliefs about God were framed in terms of God as creator and judge, the almighty ruler of the world to which all earthly rulers were subject, and who was the object of proper worship.

Yet the growing realization that Jesus of Nazareth had to be regarded as divine (1.5.3), in some sense of that word, demanded an expansion of this vision of God. The Council of Nicaea's firm declaration that Jesus Christ was to be regarded as fully divine – without in any way compromising his humanity – raised some fundamental theological questions. If Christ was God, how did this shape Christian thinking about God? Some scholars have suggested that second-century Christianity was really binitarian, committed to belief in God the Father, and God the Son. However, a more reliable reading of the historical evidence is that the early church was implicitly Trinitarian, while being reluctant to formalize this until clarification had been achieved on some important points.

The resolution of the Arian controversy (1.5.3) was one such moment of clarification. Yet this emphatic assertion of the divinity of Christ could be understood merely to confirm a binitarian vision of God – in other words, God as Father and Son. As the fourth-century writer Amphilochius of Iconium pointed out, the Arian controversy had first to be resolved before any serious discussion over the status of the Holy Spirit could get under way. The development of a rigorously Trinitarian theology demanded that the Holy Spirit also be recognized as divine.

Debate initially centered upon a group of writers known as the *pneumatomachoi* (Greek: “opponents of the spirit”), led by Eustathius of Sebaste. These writers argued that neither the person nor the works of the Spirit were to be regarded as having the status or nature of a divine person. In response to this, writers such as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea made an appeal to the formula which had by then become universally accepted for baptism. Since the time of the New Testament (following the practice of Matthew 28:18–20), Christians were baptized in the name of “the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Athanasius argued that this had momentous implications for an understanding of the status of the person of the Holy Spirit. In his *Letter to Serapion*, Athanasius declared that the baptismal formula clearly pointed to the Spirit sharing the same divinity as the Father and the Son. This argument eventually prevailed.

However, early Christian writers were hesitant to speak openly of the Spirit as “God,” in that this practice was not sanctioned by Scripture – a point discussed at some length by Basil of Caesarea in his treatise on the Holy Spirit (374–5). Even as late as 380, Gregory of Nazianzus conceded that many Orthodox Christian theologians were uncertain as to whether to treat the Holy Spirit “as an activity, as a creator, or as God.”

This caution can be seen in the final statement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit formulated by a Council meeting at Constantinople in 381. The Spirit was here described, not as “God,” but as “the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, and is worshipped and glorified with the Father and Son.” The language is unequivocal; the Spirit is

to be treated as having the same dignity and rank as the Father and Son, even if the term “God” is not to be used explicitly. The precise relation of the Spirit to Father and Son would subsequently become an item of debate in its own right, as the later *filioque* controversy indicates (2.1.10).

The following considerations seem to have been of decisive importance in establishing the divinity of the Holy Spirit during the later fourth century. First, as Gregory of Nazianzus stressed, Scripture applied all the titles of God to the Spirit, with the exception of “unbegotten.” Gregory drew particular attention to the use of the word “holy” to refer to the Spirit, arguing that this holiness did not result from any external source, but was the direct consequence of the nature of the Spirit. The Spirit was to be considered as the one who sanctifies, rather than the one who requires to be sanctified.

Second, the functions which are specific to the Holy Spirit establish the divinity of the Spirit. Didymus the Blind (d. 398) was one of many writers to point out that the Spirit was responsible for the creating, renewing, and sanctification of God’s creatures. Yet how could one creature renew or sanctify another creature? Only if the Spirit was divine could sense be made of these functions. If the Holy Spirit performed functions which were specific to God, it must follow that the Holy Spirit shares in the divine nature.

The way was now clear to the explicit formulation of a doctrine of the Trinity, consolidating the insights of earlier writers, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. Yet a number of questions still remained unclear. For example, was the Trinitarian formula an assertion about the actual being of God, or the manner in which God acted in history?

To make sense of the discussion that took place around the time of the Council of Nicaea (325), we need to go back to the early third century concerning the Trinity. The view known as “modalism” held that the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit is to be explained in terms of three different “ways” or “modes” of divine self-revelation (hence the term “modalism”).

One of the most influential forms of modalism, known as Sabellianism, argued for the following way of understanding the Trinity.

1. The one God is revealed in the manner of creator and lawgiver. This aspect of God is referred to as “the Father.”
2. The same God is then revealed in the manner of savior, in the person of Jesus Christ. This aspect of God is referred to as “the Son.”
3. The same God is then revealed in the manner of the one who sanctifies and gives eternal life. This aspect of God is referred to as “the Spirit.”

There is thus no difference between the three persons of the Trinity, except for their appearance and chronological location. For modalism, the one God is revealed in three different ways at different points in salvation history.

The doctrines of the Trinity which emerged in the early fourth century reasserted the “triunity” of God, moving away from modalism. The work of the Cappadocian Fathers in the eastern church and Augustine of Hippo in the western church did much to consolidate the doctrine of the Trinity. The traditional Trinitarian vocabulary – with its core notions of as “person,” “nature,” “essence,” and “substance” – allowed the theologians of the

early church to affirm the fundamental unity of God, while celebrating the richness of God’s relationship with the creation. Differences emerged between eastern and western approaches to the Trinity, particularly over the question of the Holy Spirit. Did the Spirit proceed from the Father alone (Basil the Great), or from the Father and the Son (Augustine)? This simmering disagreement would eventually lead to a debate between the eastern and western churches, which would create still further tensions between them, and make no small contribution to the “Great Schism” of 1054 (2.1.10).

1.5.5. Donatism: A Debate over the Nature of the Church

As we noted earlier, under the Roman emperor Diocletian (284–313), the Christian church was subject to various degrees of harassment and persecution (1.4.1). Under an edict of February 303, Christian leaders were ordered to hand over their books to be burned. Those Christian leaders who handed over their books to be destroyed in this way came to be known as *traditores* (Latin: “those who handed over [their books]”).

With the accession of Constantine (1.4.2), the persecution came to an end. But a sensitive issue arose in its aftermath: how were those who had lapsed or otherwise compromised themselves during the persecution to be treated? The matter became especially divisive in Roman North Africa, when Caecilianus was consecrated as bishop by three fellow-bishops, including Felix, Bishop of Aptunga – a *traditor*. Many local Christians were outraged that such a person should have been allowed to be involved in this consecration. They declared that they could not accept the authority of Caecilianus as a result, arguing that the new bishop’s authority was compromised on account of the fact that the bishop who had consecrated him had lapsed under the pressure of persecution.

The Donatists were a group who believed that the entire sacramental system of the Catholic church had become corrupted on account of the lapse of its leaders. How could the sacraments be validly administered by people who were tainted in this way? It was therefore necessary to replace these people with more acceptable leaders, who had remained firm in their faith under persecution. It was also necessary to rebaptize and reordain all those who had been baptized and ordained by those who had lapsed.

The issues were still live in Roman North Africa nearly a century later, when Augustine was consecrated bishop of the coastal city of Hippo Regius in 396. Augustine responded to the Donatist challenge by putting forward a theory of the church (or “ecclesiology”) which he believed was more firmly grounded than the Donatist viewpoint in the New Testament. In particular, Augustine emphasized the sinfulness of Christians. The church is not meant to be a “pure body,” a society of saints, but a “mixed body” (Latin: *corpus permixtum*) of saints and sinners. Augustine finds this image in two biblical parables: the parable of the net which catches many fishes, and the parable of the wheat and the weeds. It is this latter parable (Matthew 13:24–31) which is of especial importance, and requires further discussion.

The parable tells of a farmer who sowed seed, and discovered that the resulting crop included both wheat and weeds. What could be done about it? To attempt to separate the wheat and the weeds while both were still growing would be to court disaster, probably involving damaging the wheat while trying to get rid of the weeds. But at the harvest, all

the plants – whether wheat or weeds – are cut down and sorted out, thus avoiding damaging the wheat. The separation of the good and the evil thus takes place at the end of time, not in history.

For Augustine, this parable refers to the church in the world. It must expect to find itself including both saints and sinners. To attempt a separation in this world is premature and improper. That separation would take place in God’s own time, at the end of history. No human can make that judgment or separation in God’s place.

So in what sense can the church meaningfully be designated as “holy”? For Augustine, the holiness in question is not that of its members, but of Christ. The church cannot be a congregation of saints in this world, in that its members are contaminated with original sin. However, the church is sanctified and made holy by Christ – a holiness which will be perfected and finally realized at the last judgment.

For the Donatists, the sacraments – such as baptism and the eucharist or Lord’s Supper – were only effective if they were administered by someone of unquestionable moral and doctrinal purity. Augustine responded by arguing that Donatism laid excessive emphasis upon the qualities of the human agent, and gave insufficient weight to the grace of Jesus Christ. It is, he argued, impossible for fallen human beings to make distinctions concerning who is pure and impure, worthy or unworthy: This view, which is totally consistent with his understanding of the church as a “mixed body” of saints and sinners, holds that the efficacy of a sacrament rests, not upon the merits of the individual administering it, but upon the merits of the one who instituted them in the first place – namely, Jesus Christ. The validity of sacraments is thus not ultimately dependent on the merits of those who administer them.

We see here a major theme of Augustine of Hippo’s understanding of the Christian faith: that human nature is fallen, wounded, and frail, standing in need of the healing and restoring grace of God. The church, according to Augustine, is more to be compared to a hospital than to a club of healthy people. It is a place of healing for people who know that they stand in need of forgiveness and renewal. The Christian life is a process of being healed from sin, rather than a life of sinlessness, as if the cure were completed and the patient restored to full health. The church is an infirmary for the sick and for convalescents. It is only in heaven that we will finally be righteous and healthy.

The Donatist approach represents a principled yet ultimately dogmatic refusal to appreciate that all of humanity – including priests and bishops – are in need of the same healing that the gospel provides. The ministers of the Christian church proclaim the same healing which they themselves require. While the Donatist heresy appears to concern our understanding of the church and sacraments, it is more deeply rooted in an understanding of human nature, which ultimately makes the ministration of grace dependent on human merit rather than divine grace. A similar issue arose during the Pelagian controversy, to which we now turn.

1.5.6. Pelagianism: A Debate over Grace and Human Achievement

The Pelagian controversy, which erupted in the early fifth century, brought a cluster of questions concerning human nature, sin, and grace into sharp focus. Up to this point, there

had been relatively little controversy within the church on these matters. The Pelagian controversy changed that, and ensured that these issues were placed firmly on the agenda of the western church.

To understand the background to this debate, we need to consider some of the outcomes of the declaration that Christianity was the state religion of the Roman Empire (1.4.4). Inevitably, this meant that many saw the profession of Christianity as a career opportunity, and adopted it as their religion as a matter of convenience. To flourish within the Roman establishment, some realized, it was necessary to conform to its social and religious norms.

Pelagius, a British monk who arrived in Rome in the closing years of the fourth century, was distressed by the religious and moral nominalism of some Christians. He advocated personal moral reform: Christians ought to be morally upright. Such suggestions were relatively uncontroversial. Yet Pelagius set his demand for moral renewal and perfection within a theological framework that seemed to his opponents – above all, Augustine of Hippo – to convert Christianity into a religion of moral achievement. Several issues emerged as particularly controversial.

First, Pelagius declared that humanity was free to choose to act morally, and was therefore under an absolute moral obligation to do so. It was a matter of self-discipline, and the exercise of will over the lower human nature. Pelagius thus insisted that “since perfection is possible for humanity, it is obligatory.”

Augustine disagreed, arguing that human nature was damaged and corrupted by sin. As a result, human freedom was limited. Knowing what we should do did not imply that we were capable of achieving it. Human free will has been weakened and incapacitated – but not eliminated or destroyed – through sin. In order for the human free will to be restored and healed, it requires divine grace. Free will really does exist; it is, however, distorted, compromised, and weakened by sin.

For Pelagius and his followers (such as Julian of Eclanum), however, humanity possessed total freedom of the will, and was totally responsible for its own sins. Human nature was essentially free and well created, and was not compromised or incapacitated by some mysterious weakness. According to Pelagius, any imperfection in humanity would reflect negatively upon the goodness of God.

Second, Augustine developed the idea of the sinfulness of human nature in medical terms. For Augustine, humanity has no control over its sinfulness. It is something which contaminates life from birth, and dominates life thereafter. It is a state over which humans have no decisive control. Augustine understands humanity to be born with an innately sinful disposition, with an inherent bias toward acts of sinning. Sin thus causes sins: the underlying state of sinfulness causes individual acts of sin. Augustine explored this point by using three analogies to illuminate the nature of original sin: disease, power, and guilt. It is ill, and needs to be healed. Until human nature has been renewed and transformed, it is simply incapable of doing good.

In contrast, Pelagius argued that sin was basically a refusal on the part of human beings to do good. We have been commanded to act righteously, and that command implies an ability. For Pelagius, the human power of self-improvement was not compromised. It was always possible for humans to discharge their obligations towards God and their neighbors.

Failure to do so could not be excused on any grounds. Sin was to be understood as an act committed willfully against God.

Augustine replied that it was through realizing its inability to carry out God's will unaided that humanity discovered grace, which Augustine interpreted as the healing and renewing action of God. Pelagius agreed that human beings needed grace, but argued that "grace" was to be understood as God's generous provision of specific moral guidance. Instead of demanding that humanity was to be "perfect," in a very general and unspecific manner, God had made it clear precisely what was intended. The Ten Commandments and the moral example of Jesus of Nazareth were gracious demonstrations of the standards of righteousness that God expected Christians to display.

Although Pelagius's views were well-received at Rome initially, the passing of time led to growing skepticism about his approach. Many began to draw the conclusion that Pelagius basically advocated a rather stern moral authoritarianism, which made no allowance for human weakness or failings on the one hand, or the transforming work of grace of God on the other. The Synod of Arles (470(?)), for example, is generally agreed to have endorsed a slightly modified version of Augustine's theology, and criticized some Pelagian ideas.

Yet Augustine's own ideas on these questions changed further during his lifetime, and led to some tensions with others on issues of grace and free will. In particular, his later doctrine of "double predestination" was seen by many as a theological innovation, which was outside the mainstream of church opinion (1.5.7). Most theologians of the period believed that human free will was damaged or compromised by the Fall; nevertheless, it was not extinguished, but continued to function, even if in a weaker form. Indeed, Augustine's theological innovation proved so controversial to some that a new debate emerged. How could the church protect itself against this kind of theological novelty? We shall consider this in what follows.

1.5.7. Innovation: A Debate over the Role of Tradition

A series of controversies in the early church brought home the theological importance of the concept of "tradition." The word "tradition" comes from the Latin term *traditio* which means "handing over," "handing down," or "handing on." Both the notion and practice of "handing down" can be found in the New Testament. For example, Paul reminded his readers that he was handing on to them core teachings of the Christian faith which he had himself received from other people of significance (1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

The term "tradition" can refer to both the action of passing teachings on to others – something which Paul insists must be done within the church – and to the body of apostolic teachings which are passed on in this manner (1.1.5). Tradition can thus be understood as a *process* as well as a *body of teaching*. The Pastoral Epistles (three later New Testament letters that are particularly concerned with questions of church structure, and the passing on of Christian teaching: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) in particular stress the importance of "guarding the good deposit which was entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:14). The New Testament also uses the notion of "tradition" in a negative sense, meaning something like "human ideas and practices which are not divinely authorized." Thus Jesus of Nazareth

was openly critical of certain traditions within Judaism which he regarded as human constructions (e.g., see Matthew 15:1–6; Mark 7:13).

The importance of the idea of tradition first became obvious in a controversy which broke out during the second century. The Gnostic controversy centered on a number of questions, including how salvation was to be achieved. Christian writers found themselves having to deal with some highly unusual and creative interpretations of the Bible. How were they to deal with these? If the Bible was to be regarded as authoritative, was every interpretation of the Bible to be regarded as of equal value?

Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the early church's greatest theologians, did not think so. As we noted earlier (1.3.2), Irenaeus recognized that the question of how the New Testament was to be interpreted was of the greatest importance. Heretics, he argued, interpreted the Bible in any way that suited them. Orthodox believers, in contrast, interpreted the Bible in line with the apostolic tradition – in other words, in ways that apostolic authors would have recognized and approved. What had been handed down from the apostles through the church was not merely the biblical texts themselves, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts. This apostolic tradition enables the churches to remain faithful to the original apostolic teaching, and acts as a safeguard against innovations and misrepresentations on the part of heretics. As we shall see in the next section (1.1.8), the emergence of “creeds” reflects this need for public, authoritative statements of the basic points of the Christian faith, expressing the fundamental themes of this apostolic tradition.

This point was further developed in the early fifth century by Vincent of Lérins (died before 450), who was concerned that certain doctrinal innovations were being introduced without good reason. There was a need to have public standards by which such doctrines could be judged.

So what standard was available, by which the church could be safeguarded from such errors? For Vincent, the answer was clear – tradition. Christians ought only to believe ideas that had secured universal consent. “We hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people.” For Vincent, tradition was “a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is directed by the rule of the universal church.” Creeds played an important role in Vincent's understanding of the transmission of tradition, and we shall consider their nature and role further in the next section.

1.5.8. The Origins and Development of Creeds

The theological debates of the early church emphasized the importance of creeds – authorized, consensual, public statements of the essentials of Christian belief. Short creedal statements can be found, both in the New Testament and the literature of the apostolic age, such as the following:

I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3–4)

Yet it became clear that these terse statements needed amplification. As Christian pedagogy became of increasing importance, more structured statements began to emerge. These were often associated with the baptism of new Christians, which was preceded by an extended period of instruction in the basics of faith. By the fourth century the season of Lent was widely seen as a period in which converts who wished to be baptized would attend catechetical lectures in leading Christian basilicas, followed by baptism itself on Easter Day.

At their baptism, candidates would be asked to state their faith. The following account of this practice at Rome, clearly modeled on the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, dates from around the year 215:

When each of them to be baptized has gone down into the water, the one baptizing shall lay hands on each of them, asking, “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?” And the one being baptized shall reply, “I believe.” He shall then baptize each of them once, laying his hand upon each of their heads. Then he shall ask, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?” When each has replied, “I believe,” he shall baptize them a second time. Then he shall ask, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?” Then each being baptized shall answer, “I believe.” And thus let him baptize for the third time.

This is an example of an interrogative creed – that is to say, a way of publicly affirming the Christian faith, in which the candidates for baptism are required to assent to each of the creedal statements that are put to them. Candidates are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each clause is then summarized for them, and their consent required. Yet these brief statements of faith are not really “articles of faith”; they are really snapshots of the highlights of the Christian story. The dominant theme is “belief in,” not “belief that.”

In the end, two creeds emerged as commanding widespread support within Christianity. Their origins and context are quite different. The first to be considered is the Nicene Creed, first formulated by the bishops assembled at the Council of Nicaea in 325. This gathering was convened by Constantine, who wanted to ensure that the unity of the empire was not disrupted by divisions within the church. This creed is clearly shaped by the Arian controversy, and is concerned to emphasize the orthodox understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ over and against Arius and his supporters. As a result, the creed seems slightly skewed, the emphasis on a correct Christology leading to this section of the creed being somewhat longer than necessary. In addition, the creed concludes with a final set of condemnations of unsatisfactory theological positions.

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty [Greek: *pantokratōr*], the maker of all things seen and unseen.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; begotten from the Father; only-begotten – that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God; light from light; true God from true God; begotten not made; being of one substance with the Father, through whom all things in heaven and on earth came into being; who on account of us human beings and our

salvation came down and took flesh, becoming a human being; he suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens; and will come again to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say that “there was when he was not,” and “before being born he was not,” and “he came into existence out of nothing,” or who declare that the Son of God is of a different substance or nature, or is subject to alteration or change – the catholic and apostolic church condemns these.

This creed was subsequently developed in succeeding decades, generally in response to controversy, before assuming the form in which it is better known today.

The Apostles’ Creed, in marked contrast, did not rest on imperial authority, nor did it originate with any council, but appears to have emerged by consensus over an extended period of time, in much the same way as the canon of the New Testament. The most striking difference between the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds is that the former shows no signs of any polemical agenda. It does not define Christianity over and against any other position, in the way that the Nicene Creed so clearly defines orthodoxy in the face of an Arian threat. The Apostles’ Creed derives its name from a fifth-century belief that each of the Twelve Apostles contributed a statement to the text.

The creeds can thus be seen as serving two central functions: affirming the fundamental themes of faith, and offering a framework by which heretical or deficient versions of Christianity may be identified. The dual object of creeds is thus about defining the center of faith, and policing its periphery. Both these means of defining orthodoxy became increasingly important during the later fourth century, as Christianity’s imperial privileges made it necessary to enforce consensus within the church.

Yet there were a number of cases where intellectual persuasion was not enough to enforce orthodoxy within the church. At several points, orthodoxy had to be imposed by force. The most significant example of this development is to be found during the Donatist controversy, when Constantine and his son used coercive measures against the Donatists over a period of decades from 317, having failed to achieve church unity in the region by negotiation.

1.5.9. The Council of Chalcedon, 451

The emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 to settle debates within the Christian church over the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Although this Council publicly declared its support for a theological formula which recognized the full divinity and humanity of Christ – while allowing a certain degree of freedom in determining how this was to be expressed – this eventually proved inadequate to settle the matter. Fresh controversy broke out after the council, as Arius and Athanasius debated the theological significance of the divinity of Christ (1.5.3). The bishops of Constantinople, now emerging as the most important metropolitan center in the empire, made it clear that they were committed supporters of Arius.

Once more, it became clear that theological argument was not going to settle the debate. Some kind of official ruling was going to be required. The emperor Theodosius I, who

ruled from 379 to 395, made it clear that he expected Nicene orthodoxy to be enforced throughout his empire, and deposed the Arian bishops of Constantinople when they resisted. Like Constantine, Theodosius wished the imperial church to be united on the fundamentals of faith, and was prepared to use his authority to achieve consensus within the church.

Matters were complicated, however, by the simmering tensions between the bishops of Constantinople and Alexandria, both of whom regarded themselves as taking precedence within the Christian world. A major dispute – often referred to as the “Nestorian controversy” – broke out between Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, in the early fifth century. The issue was whether Nestorius’s understanding of the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ was adequate. Nestorius had expressed reservations about a traditional term used to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. The term *Theotokos* (Greek: “bearer of God”) had come to be widely used as a title for Mary, both expressing her own special place in the purposes of God and reaffirming the identity of Jesus as God. In fact, Nestorius’s concerns were reasonable. Why not also refer to Mary as *Christotokos*, he asked, to indicate that she was the bearer of the Messiah?

Cyril of Alexandria smelled heresy, and argued that Nestorius did not really believe that Jesus Christ was both divine and human. Nestorius protested both his innocence and his orthodoxy. In the end, Theodosius II, emperor from 408 to 450, convened a council at Ephesus in the summer of 431 to debate the matter. Nestorius presented his case poorly, and lost both the debate, and his bishopric. The 250 bishops present reaffirmed the decisions made at Nicaea in 325, and insisted that the use of the term *Theotokos* was justified.

Once more, the debate was not really resolved. The Council of Ephesus was a holding measure, not a solution. Further controversy developed, especially when a council convened at Ephesus in August 449 with a small number of bishops present was seen by many in the western church to have failed to defend orthodoxy adequately. Shortly after the death of Theodosius, his successor announced that a new council would meet in October 451 in the town of Chalcedon, in the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor. This Council was well attended, and formulated a consensual doctrine which has since become widely accepted within most – though not all – Christian churches.

The “Chalcedonian definition” sets out an agreed formula for making sense of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, which set out to safeguard his humanity, while affirming his divinity.

Following the holy Fathers, we all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ to be one and the same Son, perfect in divinity and humanity, truly God and truly human, consisting of a rational soul and a body, being of one substance with the Father in relation to his divinity, and being of one substance with us in relation to his humanity, and is like us in all things apart from sin.

The formulation was widely accepted by both the eastern and western churches, and has come to play a normative role in Christian discussions of the identity and significance of Jesus Christ.

But not all were satisfied. The position generally (though slightly misleadingly) known as “monophysitism” held that Chalcedon had developed a position which failed to do justice to the divinity of Christ (2.1.6). Many in Alexandria felt that Chalcedon had not adequately safeguarded Christ’s divinity. The resulting monophysite controversies are somewhat technical theologically, making them difficult to explain simply. Yet perhaps the most important outcome was political: many of the churches of Egypt now considered themselves to be at odds with the churches of Europe and Asia.

This survey of early Christianity has given an overview of some of the main developments to have taken place during this fascinating and formative period. During this era, the Christian faith moved from the margins to the center of imperial culture. Yet with the decline of Roman power, influence, and unity in the west, the church in that region faced new problems. How could it cope without imperial protection? Would it fade away, lacking an imperial protector?

In fact, the western church went on to develop a new sense of identity and purpose. In the following chapter, we shall consider the new social role and theological self-understanding of the western church, which emerged during the Middle Ages.

Sources of Quotations

- p. 1: Tacitus, *Annals*, XV.44.
 p. 12: Chrysostom, *Homily on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 31.
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 p. 39: Pliny, *Epistles*, X.96–7.
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