

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 6 TRANSITION

000
Begin counter with the Gateway
Films/Vision Video logo

STEVE: It was one of those events that would help shape the future for centuries to come. The month: October. The year: 312. Constantine is preparing for battle. The stakes are high. Who will control the Roman Empire? Constantine pauses to pray. Suddenly, he has a vision. He sees the sign of the cross and the words, "In this sign you will win." He accepted the vision. He adopted the sign. He had the cross inscribed on his soldiers armor. He went into battle and he conquered. The momentous battle took place at the Milvian Bridge at Rome. After this battle, the church would never be the same. It is safe to say, the world would never be the same either.

OPENING LOGO

1:45

Hello, I'm Steve Bell at the Sea of Galilee in the Holy Land, and this is the final chapter in our six part series. In previous programs, we have looked at Christianity through its stormy and unpredictable early centuries. We have seen: the foundation—Christ, his apostles, and the great last apostle, Paul; the spread of the faith throughout the far reaches of the Roman Empire over its first 300 years; the accusations brought against the Christians by the pagans; the outbursts of persecution that threatened to wipe the young and fragile movement; and the testimonies of those who stood fast, willing to pay with their lives, who gave such strength and courage to the community of believers.

The last persecution, called the Great Persecution, was carried out by the Emperor Diocletian and his co-rulers. It was the worst and most savage of all. It was a desperate effort by paganism to reassert itself and to drive back the steadily expanding presence and power of Christianity.

Paganism did not prevail. Christianity had established deep roots in the heart, mind, and life of the empire. A transition began that is foundational to our modern world. To describe what happened let's go to my colleagues Russell, Nigel and Jane above Neumagen, near Trier in West Germany.

3:06

NIGEL: Constantine and his troops were marching on Rome from the west to do battle with his opponent, another would be emperor, Maxentius. It was before they engaged in battle that Constantine had his vision.

JANE: It has been traditionally thought that Constantine had his vision just before the battle outside Rome. We have two accounts of his vision. One is by Lactantius. The other is by Eusebius. Lactantius said that the vision took place the night before the battle. If that is the case, it would have to have had to take place near Rome. But the Eusebius account is based on a first-hand conversation with Constantine, who swore to him that he truly had had the vision. Eusebius places the vision after they left Trier.

RUSSELL: This would have been the first natural stopping point for his troops, about one day's march from Trier.

NIGEL: And this is the only place with a tradition. There are no other places with claims as the site of the vision.

JANE: Psychologically, it would make sense that the vision occurred here. Constantine loved Trier. He even built a palace here.

RUSSELL: Constantine preferred Trier to Rome. He spent his summer vacations here. So it's very possible that the vision occurred here on that autumn day in this lonely spot near Trier.

NIGEL: After the vision, he moved confidently to Rome and the decisive battle under the sign of the cross.

RUSSELL: This is a commemorative cross, placed here by the local people, and the inscription: "In this sign you will conquer. Good Christian, do not pass the spot without recognizing Jesus Christ our redeemer. Praise be to Jesus Christ forever and ever. Amen."

5:14

STEVE: Thus, Constantine effectively consolidated his hold on imperial power and determined to make Christianity his own religion and, eventually, the religion of the empire.

CARSTEN THIEDE: There are people who think that Constantine was about the worst thing that could have happened to Christianity. It took the church on its way towards a state church, an institution, with all that went with it.

STEVE: It didn't happen all at once, of course. But with Constantine the church moved in a dramatic new direction. Christianity had prevailed. And the more the political power of the empire waned, the more the church became the stabilizing and unifying source for Roman society. It outlasted the empire, and in a sense it replaced it.

But it remains for us in this program to ask: "Why did the church succeed? What did it have to offer?" No thinking person at the beginning of this era would have given it the slightest chance of prevailing. Recall how Jesus himself had only three years of public ministry, and his message was confined to a small remote area of the

empire. In the process Jesus made no discoverable impact outside of Judaism, and within Judaism he managed to alienate the two most important groups in power.

So Christian believers have always credited the providence of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit as the explanation for their survival and growth.

Of course, famous historians have set forth other reasons. Gibbon gave these: intolerant zeal; threat of Hell; miracles and exorcisms; sober lives; church government.

Each viewer will, of course, have to draw his or her own conclusions, but there are some other characteristics of early Christianity that would be essential to take into account. This is far from a complete list but it covers some of the prominent aspects that the latest research would support: promise of eternal life; simple message; universal appeal; close knit community; concern for others; and the person of Christ..

7:15

1. The promise of eternal life

JANE: No series on early Christianity would be complete without a visit to the catacombs.

RUSSELL: So often we're told that the catacombs are a symbol of the early church. And it is still a popular idea that Christians met here to worship, pray, and to hide for their lives. That is really a misconception. The believers dug out these catacombs to bury their dead. They are cemeteries. But what's important is that, as a place for the dead, they so strongly symbolize life.

NIGEL: They are an artistic expression of tunnels with biblical symbols depicting the gatherings of early Christians.

JANE: The Christians made a lot out of death. The early churches were formed as burial societies, and the Romans permitted this. Whereas it was not uncommon for the Romans to burn their dead, the Christians were careful to provide a dignified burial and respect for the dead. For to the believer, death was not the end but the doorway to life.

NIGEL: The martyrs were especially honored. Their deaths were commemorated. These memorials were held in sub-terranean tunnels.

RUSSELL: The dead were treated with such respect and their bodily remains lovingly cared for because of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. Just as Christ had been raised from the dead, so, they taught, his followers would also be raised and given new bodies and the gift of eternal life.

RUSSELL: The idea of the bodily resurrection was generally quite distasteful to the surrounding society, but it offered hope and solace to many. It was one of the definite promises given to new converts.

NIGEL: This also illustrates how the Christians valued not only the spiritual but the material world as well. Creation was from God.

JANE: Yes, creation was from God, and re-creation and resurrection of the body were also from God.

9:46

2. A simple message.

STEVE: The message that the Christians spread was on the one hand very complex and profound. The best minds of the church in the early centuries worked hard to show how the Gospel caught up the deepest and best from respected philosophers of previous ages, but they also argued that the Gospel went far beyond these philosophers to show the God who had revealed himself.

The job of clarifying and developing the ramifications of the faith has continued to occupy scholars ever since. One could not even begin to master in one lifetime all of the books that have been written just about Jesus.

But the communication of the faith to early church inquirers was done in simple terms that could be grasped by anyone, no matter how uneducated. The substance of that message was capsulized so well by the renowned Harvard historian Arthur Darby Nock more than 50 years ago:

STEVE: Christianity said, "You are in your sins, a state inevitable for you and aggravated by your willfulness. No action of yours will enable you to make a new start. No effort of yours will enable you to put aside your guilt in God's eyes, and you are doomed to endless suffering hereafter. So turn to us. Stake everything on Jesus the Christ being your Savior, and God will give to you the privilege of making a new start as a new being, and will bestow upon you grace which will enable you so to live here as to obtain a share in the life of the world to come. By using our sacraments, you will here and now triumph over death and will have a foretaste of the joys that await you in heaven. Christ became man so that you may become as God."

In language understandable to any age level, these basic teachings put Christianity within reach of all those prepared to listen and believe.

11:37

3. Universal appeal

STEVE: In the tenth chapter of the New Testament book of Acts, the apostle Peter had an amazing vision. It occurred on the rooftop of one Simon the tanner, here in the city of Joppa, on the west coast of modern day Israel, overlooking the Mediterranean. In fact, where I am standing right now is believed by many to be the actual location.

Incidentally, it is quite interesting that Peter would choose to stay with someone who tanned animal hides. It was a process that gave off a notoriously bad odor. Peter's vision represents an important landmark in Christian outreach because it shattered beliefs about religious separation that he held as a first-century Jew. After the vision, Peter exclaimed: "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean . . . but any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

NIGEL: So now, related to the simplicity of the Christian message, there was added the appeal of universality.

STEVE: Consider that the Roman world had room for all kinds of gods. Everyone could find a god to their liking and appropriate to their fears. But Christianity now turned this inside-out, proclaiming that there was only one God who had chosen everyone—everyone, that is, who would believe and obey him. There was no spiritual elite. Rich and poor would sit together, the educated and the ignorant, different racial groups, and social classes, slaves sitting right beside masters. In fact, a former slave who had worked the mines actually became bishop of Rome—Callistus in 217.

NIGEL: So, the invitation was without discrimination and without qualification. If you were ready to repent of your sins and accept Christ as Lord and Savior, you were as important as anyone else and you were welcomed, no matter where you came from.

STEVE: The Roman Empire gave political unity to an amazing diversity of cultures, nationalities and class groups and now the universal invitation of the Gospel message would go forth from here, offering spiritual unity to the same diversity of peoples.

13:41

4. Acceptance in a close-knit community

STEVE: And this spiritual unity of diverse peoples drew one into an intimate fellowship or community. The Christians typically met in homes. Evidence of actual church buildings being erected is not found until the mid 200s. Becoming a Christian in the early church was not a private act, even though it was a personal decision. To become a Christian meant becoming part of a community that would regularly meet in places not unlike this.

What was it like to be part of a Christian community? Well, for one thing, you were accepted regardless of your past life. Even the apostle Paul, once a fierce persecutor of the church, was accepted and became one of the most prominent leaders.

KEN CURTIS: The early church was a community where you were loved. “Behold how they love one another,” it was said of them. And it was a community where you were touched. When the pagans heard of the “kiss of peace” that was practiced in the Christians services, they naturally assumed something lustful had to be going on. But it was really nothing more than the kind of affection you would expect to be expressed within a family. And that’s exactly what the early church was. It was a new family. Your fellow believers were your new brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now if this sounds soft and sentimental, bear in mind that then it was revolutionary. Because this new family became your first loyalty. That could upset the age old patriarchal family system, and it did other things. It raised the status of women and even caused children to be looked on in a new light. Up to that time, children were seen as property and as labor. But now Jesus set them forth as the very model by which one had to approach the kingdom of heaven.

STEVE: And it was a community and family that knew no bounds. You could go almost anywhere in the empire and find a welcome from other Christians. In fact it was a rather amazing kind of “bed and breakfast” network.

The Christian community set forth expectations that by today’s standards might be

considered excessive. Anyone could become a Christian and be welcome-anyone, that is, willing to follow the very narrow path that led to the door.

For example you didn't just join the church. You went through an extensive period of training as a catachumen. That could last up to three years, during which you were closely monitored in your behavior to see if you indeed were sincere in seeking a totally new life within the Christian community. Those that were part of the church would fast two days a week, share their goods with those in need, and be expected to live by a strict moral code. Thus, the church became a well-defined, close-knit community where a person could be intimately known and strongly affirmed.

16:24 **5. Care for others**

RUSSELL as EMPEROR JULIAN: "Atheism is being specially advanced through the loving care devoted to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jewish beggar; while these godless Galileans (whom some call Christians) care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the service we should render them."

NIGEL: A great pestilence afflicted Carthage in North Africa in the year 252. Sickness afflicted many, many people. Corpses lay about in the streets. It was a time of great persecution for the Christians. The bishop Cyprian sent Christians out to minister to those who were sick and dying, and this meant caring for some who had so recently been persecuting them.

JANE (as early Christian ministering in the street): It was important for us as Christians not just to talk about our faith, but to do something about it. And we found that by taking care of those who were in need, that we really were able to make contact. Now, I want you to understand that it was not just a contrived publicity stunt to attract attention. No, it was simply an accepted expectation that Christians would take care of the needs of others.

NIGEL: One of the church fathers said it well: "We hold everything in common except our spouses. . . ." And he added, "Christians voluntarily contributed to support the destitute and to pay for their burial expenses, to supply the needs of girls and boys lacking money and power, and to support old people confined to the home"

STEVE: Community, caring, acceptance-all are essential elements of early Christian faith. But there is one more that transcends all the others, the person of Christ.

19:02 **6. The person of Christ**

STEVE: Here at the sea of Galilee, they catch what the Israelis call "St. Peter's fish." And I can assure you it is delicious. But I wonder how many of us have ever considered the important place of fish in early Christianity. At least five of Jesus' original apostles were fishermen by trade, and when he called them, he promised to make them "fishers of men". Also, several of his miracles involve fish, and the Gospels say that, when he met with some of his disciples after his resurrection, he served them fish. So it is not surprising that the fish became one of the important early symbols for Christianity.

Some have said the fish was a simple sign that Christians used to secretly identify

themselves to each other in times of persecution. You could draw a sign in the sand like this, or put it over your door to designate a place of meeting. But the fish also stood for the central confession of the Christian faith, centered in Christ. It was kind of an abbreviated summary.

KEN CURTIS: Of course, many of the teachings of early Christianity had parallels in the other religions of the day, but there was something different. What was absolutely unique to Christianity was the person of Christ. To the early Christians, Jesus Christ was more than a doctrine. He was alive, He was in heaven, present, available, ready to hear their prayers, ready to give them strength in their hour of need.

20:32

DAVID WRIGHT: Jesus was the promised one. That's what the first Christians believed. His life, his death, his resurrection, they were right at the heart of things. Hence it is no accident that eventually the followers of Jesus came to be called Christians.

BARGIL PIXNER: The eleven apostles must have seen something, and were convinced that Jesus was alive, because their attitudes were changed so completely. Before, they were frightened and hopeless. They didn't know what to do. They closed themselves up and locked themselves in behind doors. But then suddenly they went out without fear and preached the Gospel. Because of their conviction that Jesus was really the Son of God, the Messiah, they went everywhere preaching and talking about him. Nobody could stop them anymore. What a change! I just can't figure out how these people could have done that without a tremendous conviction that they knew Jesus was alive, Jesus lived.

STEVE: Christians now make up about a third of the human race. Today major organizations of Christians have committed themselves to reach the remaining two-thirds of the world with the Gospel of Christ by the year 2000.

No, they don't expect everyone to become a Christian. They know that many, perhaps most, will choose not to. But the goal is at least to present the invitation to every cultural group on earth before the beginning of the third millennium.

As this takes place, could we not see yet another major transition in the history of the church? In this series, we have covered two major transitions. First, when Christianity expanded its mission beyond its Jewish roots and became a faith for all the other peoples as well. Second, when under Constantine the church went from being a persecuted minority to become the official faith of the Roman empire.

NIGEL: The major transition taking place right now will see the historic Western concentration of the church give way to a new configuration of races and peoples who follow Christ.

23:00

STEVE: By 1900 there were some 558 million Christians on earth and 64 % of this Christian population was to be found in North America and Europe, but today the Christian church is in another period of rapid expansion, with more people becoming believers than at any time in history.

And the way this is happening could mean that by the year 2000 Europe and North

America no longer will represent the majority of Christians, but barely a third. South America and Africa, which in 1900 represented only 12 % of the church, by the year 2000 will boom to be about 48 %. And as the era of American and European concentration recedes, we're likely to see new kinds of church expressions, new emphases in theology, and new styles of worship. There are scholars who project there will be two billion Christians on earth to greet the year 2000. Much of the leadership the church will need in the unpredictable days ahead will emerge from these new areas of the world where vital expressions of Christianity are now manifest. Many of the problems they face will be the same ones we have seen encountered by the early church. But they also will face challenges unknown to the previous generations. Yet it will be the expectation of these leaders to find their strength in the same words that provided such sustenance to the early believers we have seen in the series. The words of Christ to his followers: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

I'm Steve Bell. For my co-hosts Jane, Nigel and Russell and for the many other people whose participation made these programs possible, I thank you for joining us.

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: EARLY CHURCH

PROGRAM SCRIPT

The history of Christianity is inextricably woven with the person and work of Jesus Christ. In one of the earliest documents of the New Testament, St. Paul wrote the following words to the Christians at Galatia: “But, when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law” (Gal. 4:4).

In the fullness of time. There are two separate words for time in the New Testament. There is *chronos*, from which we get our English words “chronic” and “chronology.” Chronos is time that can be measured, counted, divided into minutes, hours, months, years, centuries, and so on. *Chronos* is the tick-tick-tick time of an alarm clock in the morning or a stopwatch in a race. It is time as you and I live it and experience it, day in and day out.

But there is another word for time: *kairos*. *Kairos* means the opportune time, the right time, time that is laden with meaning and significance.

The Christian faith is based on the fact that the event of Jesus Christ — His life, His death, His resurrection — has forever changed the meaning of time and history itself. As St. John put it: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In Jesus, *chronos* became *kairos*. So significant was that event, for the whole history of the world, that we have subsequently divided time itself into A.D. (*Anno Domini*, Latin for “in the year of the Lord”) and B.C.

The study of Christian history is rooted in the most basic presupposition of our faith, namely, that God Himself, has entered the warp and woof of our human existence as a baby in a manger, as a man on a cross. And so the study of Christian history is not a luxury but a necessity. For Christianity is not primarily a philosophy of life or a code of behavior or even a set of rituals. It is the story of what God Himself has said and done, in space and time, in the person of His Son on earth, and in the work of His Spirit through the ages.

The word “church” occurs only twice in the Gospels, both times in Matthew. One text has been especially well-remembered through the centuries. In response to Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” Jesus said, “Upon this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18).

The history of Christianity is, to some extent, the story of the fulfillment of that prophecy. Christianity began as a small sect within Palestinian Judaism. By the end of the first century, it had already become a significant force within the

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: EARLY CHURCH

Roman Empire. When Jesus died, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, required that the words, "This is Jesus, King of the Jews," be written on His cross in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. These three languages represented the three worlds into which the early Christians carried their message of a crucified and risen Redeemer.

THE WORLD OF HEBREW RELIGION

Jesus was a Jew, as was His greatest interpreter, the Apostle Paul. When Paul reminded his young disciple, Timothy, how, from his early childhood, he had known the Holy Scriptures through which he had learned the way of salvation, he was referring, of course, to the Hebrew Scriptures, which the Christians regarded as the inspired Word of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. One of the most momentous decisions of the early church was the retention of the Old Testament as Christian scripture. Above all else, this meant that the God of creation, the God of the covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was none other than the God and Father of the Messiah, Jesus.

THE WORLD OF GREEK CULTURE

Since the time of Alexander the Great, some 300 years before Christ, the Mediterranean world had been drawn together into a common intellectual and cultural unity which we call Hellenism. A new form of the Greek language, the *koine*, or common tongue, came into general use. The New Testament writers used *koine* Greek to spread the message of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity also had to come to grips with the Greek philosophical tradition, the intellectual heritage of Plato and Aristotle, of Stoicism and Epicurianism. Tertullian, an important church father from Carthage, asked a famous question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Had not St. Paul himself said that the preaching of the cross was foolishness to the Greeks, just as it had been a stumbling block to the Jews? (1 Cor. 1:18). But if Christianity was to gain a hearing in the marketplace of ideas, then certain Greek words and ideas had to be "baptized" with Christian meaning. Certain apologists, such as Justin Martyr in the second century and Origen in the third, went so far as to claim that Greek philosophy, with its concepts of order, justice, and beauty, had, in fact, prepared the way for Christ among the Greeks just as Moses and the prophets had done among the Jews. Yet how far could one go in this direction without losing the essence of the Gospel itself? This tension would mark the history of Christian thought through Augustine and well beyond.

THE WORLD OF ROMAN ORDER

For more than 200 years, the world had known a period of relative peace and stability, known as the *pax Romana*. During this time, the Christian church was born. The story of Jesus was carried along the major highways and well-

developed sea routes of the Roman Empire into all the known world. The Apostle Paul was a citizen of the Roman Empire, and urged obedience to the civil authority. But he also knew that the Christian's prior political allegiance was to that heavenly commonwealth, "the Jerusalem that is above," as he called it (Gal. 4:26). From the beginning, Christianity was a missionary movement with a worldwide vision and a universal message. It was inevitable that Christianity should come to be seen as a threat to the prevailing world system, at whose head stood a man who was believed to be a God: Caesar. Had Christians been willing to worship Jesus and Caesar, to say their prayers to Christ and also place a pinch of incense on the altar of the imperial deity, then conflict could have been avoided, for religious pluralism was much in vogue in the Roman Empire. But when the Emperor Domitian arrogated to himself the title, *Dominus et Deus* ("Lord and God"), the Christians would not acquiesce. "Jesus is Lord," they said, "not Caesar." Thus the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

Some Christians, like Ignatius of Antioch, faced martyrdom with great eagerness. To a group of believers, he wrote:

I hope to obtain by your prayers, the privilege of fighting with the beasts at Rome. Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb, and leave no trace of my body. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world shall not even see my body.

The equanimity, and even joy, with which the martyrs faced persecution and death, was a great witness to the sustaining power of the Christian faith. Indeed, the arena became one of the most fruitful places for evangelism in the early church. Many of those who had witnessed the martyrs' deaths with such constancy, became themselves followers of Jesus. In time, the stories of the martyrs' deaths developed into a new genre of devotional literature. Martyr stories, like those of Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, and the Cathaginian noblewoman, Perpetua, and her servant girl, Felicitas, were read aloud to encourage young Christians to steadfastness and hope.

A major turning in the fortunes of Christianity took place in the early fourth century with the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Under two previous Emperors, Decius and Diocletian, the Christians had been savagely suppressed, their churches destroyed, their Bibles burned, and many put to death because of their refusal to sacrifice to the pagan gods. But rather than quenching Christianity, these persecutions were a stimulus to its growth and expansion. Christianity had permeated all levels of Roman society, including the nobility and the army, some of whose members faced death rather than deny their Lord.

As a soldier with political ambitions, Constantine was alive to the religious

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: EARLY CHURCH

questions within the Empire. He had linked his personal destiny to the sun god, *Sol Invictus*, a deity claiming universal dominion in all parts of the empire. However, as he prepared for a battle at the Milvian Bridge near Rome, on October 28, 312, Constantine had a dream in which he was told to place the sign of Christ, the “Chi Rho,” on the shields of his soldiers. According to another version of this story, he also saw the following words written in the sky: *In hoc signo, vinces*, “In this sign, you will conquer”. Constantine won the battle of Milvian Bridge. He went on to become Emperor, and he switched his allegiance from the sun god to the Son of God.

Constantine’s conversion has been endlessly debated by historians. Was it the result of divine intervention or merely an act of political expediency? However we interpret this event, it had enormous consequences for the history of the church. In 313, the Edict of Milan recognized Christianity as a *religio licita* (“a legal religion”), to be tolerated along with other religions within the empire. In time, however, accommodation gave way to assimilation, as Christianity became the official established religion of the empire. In 321, Sunday was declared an official holy day. December 25th, the festival day of Sol Invictus, became the day for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. The Christianization of the Roman Empire brought many great benefits to the Christian church, but there was a downside as well. Eventually Christianity became not merely tolerated but required. The Emperor Theodosius II permitted only Christians to serve in his army. Unbelievers, and even Christian dissenters, such as the Donatists in North Africa, were suppressed by the force of arms. Within less than two generations, the Christian church had moved from being an illegal minority to becoming the dominant religion. Christians, who were once persecuted, now became the persecutors.

The fourth century was a watershed in many other ways as well. I want us to look briefly at three of them:

- A New Sense of History
- A New Form of Spirituality
- The Classic Development of Christian Theology

A NEW SENSE OF HISTORY

The first generations of Christian believers looked forward to the end of the age and the return of Jesus Christ in power and glory. In the second and third centuries, for example, a group of charismatic Christians, known as Montanists, put forth prophecies concerning the date and place of Christ’s return. They urged Christians to withdraw from the world and into an ascetic lifestyle, in anticipation of the apocalyptic denouement of history. As time went on, this apocalyptic fervor began to wane. Although Christians still professed belief in the second coming of Christ, instead of looking forward to the future, they now began to look backward on the past.

It is no accident that the first real history of the Christian church was written in the fourth century by Eusebius, a bishop in Palestine. Eusebius also wrote the official biography of Constantine in which he referred to him as the “thirteenth apostle,” the visible head of the New Israel. Christians now began to erect houses of worship on a large scale. Church architecture was born as Christians moved from worshiping in the caves and catacombs into beautiful basilicas and stately houses of worship. The mother of Constantine, Helena, was a great advocate of this development. She supervised the building of churches over the presumed sites of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem and His death in Jerusalem. By 333, we read of pilgrims from Bordeaux visiting the Holy Land as an act of religious devotion. “Guided tours of the Holy Land” became a thriving business and has remained so to this very day!

As we have seen, the cult of martyrdom had a powerful effect on Christian devotion in the early church. With the cessation of persecution, however, the possibility of martyrdom (as the highest achievement of the Christian life) was removed. At this precise moment, a new and distinctive form of Christian spirituality emerged and established itself as an alternative to the growing lax mentality of official Christianity. The “white martyrdom” of monasticism would leave an indelible mark on the history of Christianity.

The father of monasticism was Saint Antony, who, at the age of 18, entered a church at the very moment when the words of Jesus were being read: “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you possess, give it to the poor, and come follow me” (Luke 18:22). Immediately, he went out, literally obeying the words he had heard. He secluded himself in the desert of Egypt, where he lived in tombs, doing hand-to-hand combat with the devil and his demons of the dark. Eventually, thousands of others followed Anthony into his monastic retreat.

The monks were the successors to the martyrs, a new form of the *militia Christi*, front-line fighters in the ongoing struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. In Syria, a unique form of monastic life developed around the pillar saints, the most famous of whom was Simeon Stylites, who died in 459. He built a stone pillar, some 70 feet high, where he lived an ascetic life of prayer for more than 30 years. His daily food was hoisted up by a band of loyal disciples, who camped at the foot of his stone edifice.

A more routine form of monasticism was developed by Pachomius and Basil the Great. This was “cenobitic” monasticism, from the Greek words, *koinos bios* (“common life”). They emphasized life in community, life together, with a definite form of prayer, a routine of manual labor, and obedience to the abbot, or leader, of the community. “Basil’s Rule” became the standard manual for cenobitic monasticism in the East as monasticism became integrated into the wider life of the church. It exerted a powerful influence on Christian devotion. It is no accident that St. Augustine, the greatest of all the church fathers, was profoundly moved toward the monastic life by reading the biography of St. Anthony.

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: EARLY CHURCH

Along with a new history and a new form of Christian community and spirituality, the fourth and fifth centuries also witnessed the formation of classic Christian orthodoxy in the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and Christology. From the beginning, Christian theology had been reoccupied with the question of Jesus during His earthly ministry: “Whom do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15). The Christian community answered with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Early debates over the nature of God and the person of Christ were often prompted by heretical groups within the church, such as the Gnostics, who tried to separate the God of creation from the God of redemption. How could the Eternal God have become human flesh, they asked. Or how could the Son of God have possessed a material body of flesh and blood? At best, they argued, Jesus only *appeared* to be a real human being. When he had walked along the shores of Galilee, His foot had only appeared to leave a print in the sand. Over against such views, the church set forth a rule of faith, basic principles of Christian belief, questions asked of every new Christian at the time of baptism. What we know today as the Apostles’ Creed developed out of this kind of baptismal confession of faith.

“Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?”
(To which the new Christian would answer), “*Pisteuo*, I believe.”

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate?”

“*Pisteuo*.”

“And do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?”

“*Pisteuo*.”

Still unresolved, however, was the fundamental question of how Jesus of Nazareth was related to the Eternal God whom He called Father. In its most basic form, the doctrine of the Trinity is the effort of the Christian church to reconcile the Old Testament affirmation, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one” (Deut. 6:4), with the New Testament confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:5-11). This was not merely a problem of semantics or philosophical word games. It went to the very root of Christian piety, in the fact that Jesus was an object of prayer and worship. As the Roman philosopher and Christian antagonist, Celsus, put it: “These Christians, in fact, worship to an extravagant degree this man, who appeared only recently, and think it not inconsistent with monotheism that they also worship God’s servant.”

The issue came to a head, in the early fourth century, in a fierce conflict between Arius and Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria. Arius emphasized the uniqueness and transcendence of God. The essence of God is indivisible, he declared, and therefore it cannot be shared with anyone else, not even with His Son. Therefore, the Logos, the Son, must be a creature. He must have had a

beginning or, as Arius put it, “There was when He was not.” (In the twentieth century, Dorothy Sayers has summarized Arian theology in a memorable couplet: “If you want the Logos doctrine, I can serve it cool or hot; God begot Him, and before He was begot, He was not.”)

Over against this idea of Christ as creature, Athanasius proclaimed that the Logos was *homoousios* (“of the same essence as”) the Father. A mere creature, Athanasius said, however exalted, could never atone for our sins. Only God Himself could rescue us from sin and death. In 325, the church set forth this view of Christ at the Council of Nicea:

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us men, and for our salvation, He came down from heaven.

The Council of Nicea did not stop the controversy over the Trinity, which continued to be debated along with the divinity and humanity of Christ. The Council of Constantinople in 381, the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 all contributed to the settlement of ecumenical orthodoxy: the doctrine that God is one in essence or being, three in Person; Jesus Christ is one Person in two natures. Near the end of the Patristic period, St. Augustine wrote a massive treatise, *De Trinitate*, (*On the Trinity*), in which he summed up the whole orthodox tradition of thinking about God, emphasizing the unity and equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well as the personal dynamic of relationship with the divine Godhead. In this realm, as in so much else, the theology of St. Augustine would leave an indelible imprint on Christian thinking for the next millennium.

TRADITIONS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Augustine himself had come to the Christian faith through a tortuous intellectual and spiritual quest. He was born in 354 in Tagaste, in what is today the modern North African country of Algeria. His father, Patricius, was not a Christian, but his mother, Monica, was a devout believer who had a dominant influence on Augustine’s life and development.

For seven years, Augustine followed the way of the Manichians, a radically dualistic religion with roots in ancient Persia. Then he became a skeptic, doubting whether genuine truth and meaning could be discovered at all. At last he turned to neo-platonism, which offered him a model of transcendence, pointing him beyond the visible world of flow and flux, from the temporal toward the eternal. The sermons of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, brought him closer to the Christian faith. But still he resisted, until one day, when he was sitting alone in

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: EARLY CHURCH

the garden, he heard a group of children singing a song at play: *Tolle lege, tolle lege*, "Take and read, take and read." He immediately picked up a copy of the Scriptures and opened them to a text in Romans 13 (Rom. 13:11-14). This event was a turning point in his quest for God. He was baptized by Ambrose on Easter Sunday in 387. He later described his spiritual pilgrimage in a work which has become a classic paradigm for Christian autobiography: *The Confessions*. He opens this book, which is really a prayer, by declaring to God: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

Adolf Von Harnack once characterized Augustine as "the first modern man." But we might also call him the first medieval man, for his life and his theology would exert a profoundly shaping influence on the one thousand years of Christian history between his death, in 430, and the birth of Martin Luther, another Augustinian monk, in 1483. Augustine was not only a great theologian, but also an active bishop and shepherd of souls. His voluminous writings deal with all kinds of problems faced by ordinary Christians in his day: the nature of the sacraments, discipline and penance, worship and prayer, how to venerate the martyrs and saints, how to study and teach and preach the Bible. In his debates with the British monk, Pelagius, Augustine set forth a theology of God's grace and salvation, which emphasized the impotence of human beings apart from grace, and stressed God's sovereign love and election. The church would later honor St. Augustine as the preeminent *Doctor Gratiae*, "The Teacher of Grace."

With the death of St. Augustine in 430, the world of classical antiquity drew to a close, giving way to a millennium of turbulence and realignment in western Christendom. In his fulsome life as a religious seeker, bishop, spiritual ascetic, and theologian, St. Augustine summed up the major themes of the early Christian era. His vision of God and his description of the Christian life would form the basis for numerous streams of medieval spirituality.

When he was born, the blood of the martyrs was still warm and wet in Christian memory. When he died, the organized church had become sufficiently strong in the world to assume the place of the fallen Roman Empire in the formation of a new civilization. One thousand years later, both Protestants and Catholics claim St. Augustine as the forerunner of their own efforts to advance the cause of Christ. For Christians today, both Catholics and Protestants, St. Augustine is above all the master teacher of the introspective conscience. His opening words from *The Confessions* still speak to us today:

Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. Whoever does not want to fear, let him probe his inmost self. Do not just touch the surface; go down into yourselves; reach into the farthest corner of your heart.

Glimpses

of people, events,
life and faith from

the Church Across the Ages

A Vision of Triumph Constantine wins the day for Christianity

IT STILL STANDS IN ROME, the Milvian Bridge, over the murky Tiber River. Here the battle took place that would be a critical milestone in the unfolding of Christian and European civilization.

The report has been preserved even though it was written almost 1700 years ago. The writer was the first really great historian of the church (Dr. Luke excepted), Bishop Eusebius of

Caesarea. He had no doubts whatsoever that the account he gives us is true. After all, The Man was his friend—he told Eusebius personally all that had happened and swore to him it was true. It's an amazing and perplexing story, relating one of those moments that redirects the stream of history for centuries to come.

The Man, Constantine. Here's what happened. The last great persecutor of the church, Diocletian, reformed the administration of the Roman Empire and appointed three co-rulers to govern with him. After Diocletian retired, there was a scramble for power. One of the scramblers was a general named Constantine, the son of one of Diocletian's co-rulers.

It was October, 312 A.D. Constantine and his troops marched toward Rome to do



Constantine statue

battle with his opponent, another would-be emperor, the tyrannical Maxentius. It was the greatest challenge the gifted young general had ever faced. The stakes were high: Who would control the mightiest empire that had ever appeared up to that time on the face of earth?

As Constantine stopped to consider his battle plans, he realized he needed greater power than

just military force. Maxentius was relying on magical enchantments. But how should Constantine pray? His father was a monotheist, believing there was only one God over all. Constantine saw that the pagan gods failed to protect their worshipers. So he sought his father's God in prayer, pleading for him to tell him who he was and to stretch forth his hand to help him. As he prayed (it was a little after noon), Constantine had an absorbing vision. He saw the sign of the cross emblazoned across the sky and the words *In hoc signo vinces*, "In this sign you will win."

Constantine was struck with amazement, along with his whole army (which also witnessed the miracle). That night in his sleep it was confirmed: this was the Christ of God he was dealing with.

So went the report of Eusebius.

Constantine accepted the vision. He adopted the sign. He had the cross inscribed on his soldiers' armor. He went into battle. Even though his forces were outnumbered, he won.

A new period

After his momentous victory in the battle at the Milvian Bridge, it is safe to say that the world would never be the same—and the church would never be the same. It is hard to miss the perplexing irony that a church that had been largely pacifist, that long survived as a suffering body, never cooked up any subversive political plots, and had never taken up arms, would find its right to exist established through a political and military conquest.

New privileges

The church began to savor the first sweet taste of secular power. Constantine patronized the church with favors it had never known before. He moved toward making Christianity the official religion of the empire. It didn't happen all at once, of course. But a dramatic new course had been set. Christianity had prevailed. It became the authorized faith of the Roman Empire by the end of the fourth century. And the more the political power of the empire waned, the more the church became the stabilizing and unifying source for the Roman society, outlasting the empire, and in a sense eventually replacing the empire.

New problems

"Success" brings its own kind of problems. For the church, prestige and power proved more precarious than the pressure of persecution. The church spread more rapidly than it ever had before. It became easier, indeed fashionable, to become a Christian. Accommodations were made to the pagan pasts of the new members. And sad to say, the church, which had known such prolonged oppression, did not shrink from becoming an oppressor once in power.

Was Constantine a Christian?

Was Constantine truly a Christian or just a political opportunist who saw the Christian movement as the wave of the future, a good ally for his ambitions? Why did he put off his baptism until just before his death in 337? Some see him as God's appointed agent for the church. They remind

us of his great contributions to Christianity. For instance, in 325 he convened and presided over the Council of Nicea, an important council that checked heresy and defined orthodox doctrine. Beyond any doubt, he took great personal risks in his espousal of Christianity. However, others see him as the catalyst that plunged the church into a sad departure from biblical faith and practice.

"Constantinian Christianity" provided benefits that have blessed the church down to our own day. But it also brought many temptations and raised questions about the true nature of the church. Some of these problems we are still facing.



Saint Helena Cima da Conegliano c 1495 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H Kress Collection

Constantine's Mom

The First "Christian Archeologist"?

Helena, the emperor's mother was one of the most prominent women in Early Christianity. She was born into a humble family around 255 and married Constantinius Chlorus. He abandoned and divorced her for political reasons in 292 to marry the step-daughter of emperor Maximian. Constantine gave Helena the honor due a "queen mother" and she became known as a devout Christian and took upon herself the task of finding and restoring historical sites sacred to Christianity. She made pilgrimages to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and sponsored the building of churches there. She was credited with finding the true cross of Jesus, though most scholars doubt this.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Emperor's New Religion

The story of early Christianity's most famous—and most controversial—convert.

Bruce Shelley

The first *Life of Constantine* describes its subject as "resplendent with every virtue that godliness bestows." This panegyric came from the hand of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, and perhaps Constantine's greatest admirer. It is the classic image that prevailed in Eastern Christianity for more than a thousand years.

Historians now debate whether "the first Christian emperor" was a Christian at all. Some think him an unprincipled power seeker who sought only to inflate his ego. What religion he had, many argue, was at best a blend of paganism and Christianity for purely political purposes.

Certainly, Constantine held to ideals we no longer share. He knew nothing of religion without politics or politics without religion. Yet he clearly believed he was a Christian, and he looked back to a battle at the Milvian Bridge, just outside the walls of Rome, as the decisive hour in his newly found faith.

Commander and strategist

Constantine's early years lie mostly in history's shadows. We know only that he was born in Illyria, a region in the Balkans. His father, Constantius Chlorus, was already a Roman official on the rise. Helena, the daughter of an innkeeper and Constantius's wife, gave birth to Constantine around A.D. 280 in Naissus, just south of the Danube.

In 293 his father became caesar of the West (assistant to the Western augustus [emperor], Maximian), and the young Constantine served in the court of Diocletian, the Eastern augustus.

The Most Widely Used Christian Symbol

The symbol Constantine made famous was formed by the overlapping of the Greek letters chi (**X**) and rho (**P**), an abbreviation for *Christos* already in use. Sometimes an alpha (**a**) and omega (**w**) were added, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, representing Christ as the first and the last.

When Diocletian retired in 305, in a realignment of power, Constantine's father became augustus of the West, and when he died a year later, Constantine succeeded him. The young ruler decided to let the East resolve its own conflicts while he turned his attention to consolidating power in his own empire, gaining valuable field experience as a commander and strategist.

But when Galerius, the Eastern augustus, died in the spring of 311, defending outlying regions became peripheral. Maximian's son, Maxentius, anxious about Constantine's power, was in the capital claiming to be the legitimate emperor of the West.

Field vision

With 40,000 soldiers behind him, Constantine rode south to confront an enemy whose numbers were

four times his own.

Under a fatal sense of security, Maxentius waited in Rome, with his Italian troops and the elite Praetorian Guards, confident no one could successfully invade the city. But Constantine's army was already overwhelming his foes in Italy as he marched toward the capital. When the formidable army at Turin fell, even the Roman crowds turned against Maxentius. At the October 26 chariot races, commemorating the anniversary of his accession two days later, the spectators openly mocked their leader.

The aggravated Maxentius turned to pagan oracles, finding a prophecy that the "enemy of the Romans" would perish on October 28, Maxentius's accession day. But Constantine was still miles away. Bolstered by the prophecy, Maxentius left the city to meet his foe. He made his stand at a place called Red Rocks, nine miles north of Rome. On one side stood massive hills. On the other flowed the Tiber River. It was a strong defensive position but made retreat difficult.

Meanwhile, Constantine and his army saw a vision in the afternoon sky: a bright cross with the words ***Hoc vince***: "By this sign conquer." As the story goes, Christ himself told Constantine in a dream to take the cross into battle as his standard.

Though accounts vary, Constantine apparently believed the omen to be a word from God. When he awoke early the next morning, the young commander obeyed the message and ordered his soldiers to mark their shields with the now famous Chi-Rho.

Maxentius and his troops fought well but were overwhelmed by Constantine's army, which was invigorated by this sign from heaven. Maxentius's troops fled in disarray toward the surging Tiber. The would-be emperor attempted to escape over the wooden bridge erected to span the stream, but his own army-turned-mob, pressing through the narrow passage, forced him into the river where he drowned by the weight of his armor.

Constantine had no desire to impose his newfound faith as a state religion. "The struggle for deathlessness," he said, "must be free.". Constantine entered Rome the undisputed ruler of the West, the first Roman emperor with a cross in his diadem.

Wavering believer

Once supreme in the West, Constantine met Licinius, the ruler of the Balkan provinces, and issued the famous Edict of Milan that gave Christians freedom of worship and directed the governors to restore all the property seized during the Diocletian persecution.

Eusebius in his ***Church History*** recorded the Christian jubilation: "The whole human race was freed from the oppression of the tyrants. We especially, who had fixed our hopes upon the Christ of God, had gladness unspeakable."

Constantine's faith was still imprecise, but few questioned its authenticity. In 314 Constantine sent a message to the assembled bishops at the Council of Arles. He wrote about how God does not allow people "to wander in the shadows" but reveals to them salvation: "I have experienced this in others and in myself, for I walked not in the way of righteousness. ... But the Almighty God, who sits in the court of heaven, granted what I did not deserve."

For a decade, though, he wavered. For example, on the Arch of Constantine, which celebrates his Milvian Bridge victory, pagan sacrifices usually depicted on Roman monuments are absent. Then again, there are still no Christian symbols, and Victory and the Sun God are honored.

He had no desire to impose his newfound faith as a state religion. "The struggle for deathlessness," he said, "must be free." He seemed to begin where his father left off: more or less a monotheist opposed to idols, and more or less friendly toward Christians. Only through the years did his Christian convictions grow.

Ten years after the Edict of Milan, Licinius had fought his way to supremacy in the East and, given the ambitions of the two emperors, conflict seemed inevitable. In 323 they took up arms to settle their differences. Constantine fought as the Christian champion against an enemy who put his trust in Jupiter.

Constantine triumphed and became the sole ruler of the Roman world.

Public relations expert

The victory over Licinius enabled Constantine to move the seat of government permanently to the East, to the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (now Istanbul). He enlarged and enriched the city at enormous expense and built magnificent churches throughout the East. The new capital was dedicated as New Rome, but everyone soon called the city Constantinople.

Christians were more populous and vocal in the East than they were in Rome, so during the last 14 years of his reign, "Bullneck" could openly proclaim himself a Christian. He proceeded to create the conditions we call "state-church" and bequeathed the ideal to Christians for over a thousand years.

In 325 the Arian controversy threatened to split the newly united empire into two camps. To settle the matter, Constantine called together a council of the bishops at Nicea, a city near the capital. He ran the meeting himself.

"You are bishops whose jurisdiction is within the church," he told them. "But I also am a bishop, ordained by God to oversee those outside the church."

Presiding at the council, Constantine was magnificent: arranging elaborate ceremony, dramatic entrances and processions, and splendid services. He was also a gifted mediator, now bringing his skill in public relations to the management of church affairs.

Unfortunately he could not follow abstract arguments or subtle issues and often found himself at a great disadvantage at these councils. This explains, in part, his explosions of temper and indecisive policy making and why he could be ardent in his convictions yet remain oblivious to moral implications.

Fat with flattery

As Constantine grew older, his private life seemed to degenerate. He grew fat and delighted in flattery and elaborate titles. His nephew Julian said he made himself ridiculous by his appearance: weird, stiff Eastern garments, jewels on his arms, a tiara on his head, perched crazily on top of a tinted wig.

He waited until death drew near to be baptized as a Christian. His decision was not unusual in a day when many Christians believed one could not be forgiven after baptism. Since the sins of worldly men, especially those with public duties, were considered incompatible with Christian virtue, some church leaders delayed baptizing such men until just before death.

He gave his sons an orthodox Christian education and his relations with his mother were generally happy, but he continued to act as a typical Roman emperor. He ordered the execution of his eldest son, his second wife, and his favorite sister's husband. No one seems to be able to explain fully his reasons.

While many of his actions cannot be defended, he did bid farewell to the old Roman gods and make the cross an emblem of Victory in the world.

Bruce Shelley is senior professor of church history at Denver Seminary and author of Church History in Plain Language (Word).

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Emperor Strikes Back

How the once illegal religion became the law of the empire.

John O. Gooch

Let superstition cease; let the folly of sacrifices be abolished. Whoever, after the publication of this law, continues to sacrifice, shall be punished according to his deserts."

That decree of Emperor Constantius in 341 marked the end of paganism and the beginning of the Christian era. Christianity was no longer a persecuted minority; it began its journey to becoming the official religion of the empire.

New persecutors

The story really begins in 313, when Emperor Constantine gave Christians complete freedom of worship and equality with other religions. Confiscated Christian property was returned, and Christians were again recognized as full citizens of the empire. A series of laws favorable to the church made it plain that Constantine was pro-Christian and anti-pagan.

With this, paganism collapsed. It apparently had been practiced only as a civic duty.

By Constantius's reign (337-61), Christians had become a majority in some areas, and they sometimes persecuted the pagans who had once persecuted them. The government rarely encouraged the behavior, but neither did it try to stop it.

In Alexandria, Egypt, philosopher Demetrius Chytas was convicted of sacrificing to the gods. He argued he was only carrying on a lifelong practice, one begun when such sacrifices were legal, even commanded. Nonetheless, Demetrius was tortured and put under house arrest. In some areas, wearing amulets against diseases and having astrologers cast horoscopes were considered crimes and could result in torture and death.

In his book *On the Error of Profane Religions*, a famous convert from astrology, Firmicus Maternus, urged rulers to wholly eradicate paganism. "Away with those temple treasures," he wrote. "Let the fire of your mints or the flames of your smelting works roast the gods. Transfer all the gifts to your service and control."

Not all Christians agreed. Some told the emperor he was hurting, not helping, the faith when he used the power of the state to advance the church's cause. Athanasius of Alexandria (who was sent into exile by the government four times) pointed to the example of Jesus, who only asked people to follow him: "How can there be anything like persuasion when the fear of the emperor rules?"

Mandating faith

Although emperors continued to add laws benefiting Christians and penalizing pagans, paganism continued. For example, Constantius did not destroy the pagan temples of Rome. It was not until 380, during Theodosius' reign, that Christianity became mandatory.

"It is our will," he decreed, "that all the peoples we rule shall practice that religion that Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans."

By 380 Christians constituted a majority of the empire's population. In fact for the first decade of his 16-year reign, Theodosius did not demand the closing of temples, preferring, like Constantius, to retain them as historical curiosities.

But in 391, public outcry against the temples, especially from the East, was too great. Temples were closed, and every pagan practice Theodosius could imagine was banned.

The "conversion" of the empire was complete.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

325 The First Council of Nicea (also spelled Nicaea)

At stake in the church's first general council was the simplest, yet most profound, question: Who is Jesus Christ?

Dr. Bruce L. Shelley is professor of church history at Denver Seminary and a member of the advisory board of Christian History

July 4, 325, was a memorable day. About three hundred Christian bishops and deacons from the eastern half of the Roman Empire had come to Nicea, a little town near the Bosphorus Straits flowing between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

In the conference hall where they waited was a table. On it lay an open copy of the Gospels.

The emperor, Constantine the Great, entered the hall in his imperial, jewel-encrusted, multicolored brocades, but out of respect for the Christian leaders, without his customary train of soldiers. Constantine spoke only briefly. He told the churchmen they had to come to some agreement on the crucial questions dividing them. "Division in the church," he said, "is worse than war."

A New Day

The bishops and deacons were deeply impressed. After three centuries of periodic persecutions instigated by some Roman emperor, were they actually gathered before one not as enemies but as allies? Some of them carried scars of the imperial lash. One pastor from Egypt was missing an eye; another was crippled in both hands as a result of red-hot irons.

But Constantine had dropped the sword of persecution in order to take up the cross. Just before a decisive battle in 312, he had converted to Christianity.

Nicaea symbolized a new day for Christianity. The persecuted followers of the Savior dressed in linen had become the respected advisers of emperors robed in purple. The once-despised religion was on its way to becoming the state religion, the spiritual cement of a single society in which public and private life were united under the control of Christian doctrine.

If Christianity were to serve as the cement of the Empire, however, it had to hold one faith. So the emperors called for church councils like Nicea, paid the way for bishops to attend, and pressed church leaders for doctrinal unity. The age of Christian emperors was an age of creeds; and creeds were the instruments of conformity.

A Troubling Question

We can see this imperial pressure at work at Nicea, the first general council of the church. The problem that Constantine expected the bishops to solve was the dispute over Arianism.

Arius, pastor of the influential Baucalis Church in Alexandria, Egypt, taught that Christ was more than human but something less than God. He said that God originally lived alone and had no Son. Then he created the Son, who in turn created everything else. The idea persists in some cults today.

Arius made faith in Christ understandable, especially when he put his teaching in witty rhymes set to

catchy tunes. Even the dockhands on the wharves at Alexandria could hum the ditties while unloading fish.

Arius's teaching held a special appeal for many recent converts to Christianity. It was like the pagan religions of their childhood: the one supreme God, who dwells alone, makes a number of lesser gods who do God's work, passing back and forth from heaven to earth. These former pagans found it hard to understand the Christian belief that Christ, the Divine Word, existed from all eternity, and that he is equal to the Almighty Father. So Arianism spread, creating Constantine's concern.

The Council of Nicea was summoned by Emperor Constantine and held in the imperial palace under his auspices. Constantine viewed the Arian teachings—that Jesus was a created being subordinate to God—as an “insignificant” theological matter. But he wanted peace in the Empire he had just united through force. When diplomatic letters failed to solve the dispute, he convened around 220 bishops, who met for two months to hammer out a universally acceptable definition of Jesus Christ.

Once the Council of Nicea convened, many of the bishops were ready to compromise. One young deacon from Alexandria, however, was not. Athanasius, with the support of his bishop, Alexander, insisted that Arius's doctrine left Christianity without a divine Savior. He called for a creed that made clear Jesus Christ's full deity.

In the course of the debate, the most learned bishop present, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (a friend and admirer of the emperor and a half-hearted supporter of Arius), put forward his own creed—perhaps as evidence of his questioned orthodoxy.

Most of the pastors, however, recognized that something more specific was needed to exclude the possibility of Arian teaching. For this purpose they produced another creed, probably from Palestine. Into it they inserted an extremely important series of phrases: “True God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father....”

The expression ***homo ousion***, “one substance,” was probably introduced by Bishop Hosius of Cordova (in today's Spain). Since he had great influence with Constantine, the imperial weight was thrown to that side of the scales.

After extended debate, all but two bishops at the council agreed upon a creed that confessed faith “in one Lord Jesus Christ, ... true God of true God.” Constantine was pleased, thinking the issue was settled.

An Unsettled Issue

As it turned out, however, Nicea alone settled little. For the next century the Nicene and the Arian views of Christ battled for supremacy. First Constantine and then his successors stepped in again and again to banish this churchman or exile that one. Control of church offices too often depended on control of the emperor's favor.

The lengthy struggle over imperial power and theological language culminated in the mid-fifth century at the Council at Chalcedon in Asia Minor (today's Turkey). There the church fathers concluded that Jesus was completely and fully God. And finally, the council confessed that this total man and this total God was one completely normal person. In other words, Jesus combined two natures, human and divine, in one person.

This classical, orthodox affirmation from Chalcedon made it possible to tell the story of Jesus as good news. Since Jesus was a normal human being, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, he could fulfill every demand of God's moral law, and he could suffer and die a real death. Since he was truly God, his

death was capable of satisfying divine justice. God himself had provided the sacrifice.

The Council of Nicea, then, laid the cornerstone for the orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ. That foundation has stood ever since.

Copyright © 1990 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 85: The Council of Nicaea: Debating Jesus' Divinity

How Arianism Almost Won

After Nicaea, the Real Fight Began

Christopher A. Hall

At the Council of Nicaea, Arius and his ideas lost. But for decades after the council, it appeared that an Arian perspective on the person of Christ would carry the day and the conclusions of Nicaea would disappear in a theological and ecclesial dustbin. Why? The Roman emperors were an important influence. A series of emperors (beginning with Constantine) understood their role to include the right to intervene in the affairs of the church, particularly when division within the church threatened the unity of the Roman Empire itself. Thus, if a Roman emperor was disposed favorably toward Arian ideas—as Constantius and Valens were—bishops supporting the creed formulated at Nicaea could be severely punished, most often by being deposed and exiled. If an emperor favoring Nicaea was in power, Arian believers would suffer.

Yes, the bishops of the church continued to play the major role in interpreting Scripture and constructing theology based on biblical exegesis. Yet behind the bishops and presbyters during and after the Council of Nicaea stood a series of Christian Roman emperors more than willing to intervene in the church's affairs and doctrine. When a series of pro-Arian emperors arrived on the scene, Arianism spread like wildfire.

Take the case of Constantine himself. Concerned over the growing rift within the church over Arius's ideas, Constantine both convened and intervened in the Council of Nicaea. Rowan Williams observes that when Constantine viewed Arius as a schismatic, the emperor penned a letter to Arius "and his supporters which is extraordinary in its venom and abusiveness, dubbing Arius 'Ares,' a god of war, who seeks to create strife and violence."

Constantine was not averse to taking harsh legal steps to bring wayward theologians back in line. Williams notes that the emperor's acid reply to Arius grouped Arius and his supporters with Porphyry, "the great pagan critic of the church." Constantine ordered "that Arius's works be treated like those of Porphyry: they are to be burnt, and anyone who does not surrender copies in his possession is to be executed."

Within ten years of the Council of Nicaea, though, Constantine became convinced that Arius's ideas fell within the pale of orthodoxy, though the exact details of Arius's position—at least as represented to the emperor in the years following Nicaea—remain somewhat murky. What is clear, though, is that neither Constantine nor later sons such as Constans and Constantius were skilled biblical interpreters or theologians. These Roman emperors were more concerned to preserve the unity of the church than to engage in prolonged debates over what to them often seemed theological nitpicking. Manlio Simonetti, for instance, comments that Constantine was "convinced that religious peace could be assured only by a broad concentration of moderate elements" and "was as averse to some of Arius's more radical opponents as he had been to the radicalism of the Anans." Both Arius and Athanasius experienced Constantine's displeasure. It was Constantine who in A.D. 335 ordered the first of Athanasius's five exiles—the same year Arius regained the favor of the Roman emperor.

Over the 56 years separating the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople, Roman emperors frequently deposed and exiled bishops and presbyters they deemed schismatic and heretical. These actions created a long-lasting atmosphere of suspicion, intrigue, division, and hatred

within the church. Eastern bishops who supported Nicaea suffered severely during the reign of Constantius. After the murder of Constantius's brother Constans in 350, the empire was consolidated under the rule of Constantius. It appeared that the entire Christian world had fallen into Arian hands. Though Constantius died in 361, successors were more concerned with maintaining the unity of the empire than with pursuing theological clarity. When Valens took command in the East in 364, Simonetti says, he behaved "ferociously" against bishops who questioned the Arian position.

Rational, but wrong

In addition to the help they got from the emperors, Arius's ideas were deeply attractive because they offered a rationally satisfying model of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Arius began with the fundamental presupposition that the divine essence is an indivisible unity, not a substance that can be divided or distributed like helpings of mashed potatoes. If this was true, how could one argue coherently that God could be divided into persons? It was impossible for God to "beget" a divine Son, for such a begetting or generation would involve dividing the inherently indivisible.

Thus, the Son must be created rather than uncreated. If we were to draw a line between the uncreated divinity and all creatures—however exalted those creatures may be—the Son would necessarily be included with all other creatures. Though Arius did not question the Son's exalted status over all creation, he could not be eternal in the same sense as the Father. "There was a time when he was not," Arius said.

Nicaea's response to Arius was that the Son was of the same substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, a statement vigorously debated throughout the fourth century. The church needed these years to sort through and clarify what the creed meant by *homoousios*. Some Christians criticized the *homoousios* clause because they believed it led to the disturbing conclusion that there is no genuine distinction between the Father and the Son. That is, the Nicene Creed simply served as a disguise for Sabellianism (also called Modalism).

Some believers who firmly affirmed the deity of the Son advocated the idea that the Father and the Son share a similar nature, not the same nature. This formula seemed to avoid the confusion caused by *homoousios*, but it raised questions of its own. If the Son's essence is only similar to that of the Father's, in what way is it different?

Aggressive intelligence

The theological pressure cooker of the years between Nicaea and Constantinople revealed the hidden fault-lines in the Arian model. Nicene advocates such as Athanasius continued to think through the implications and underpinnings of the creed formulated at Nicaea. In Athanasius we perceive the power of personality in history. His bright mind was linked to an aggressive, contentious personality that drove his opponents crazy but strengthened him through years of conflict and exile. Perhaps only a person such as Athanasius possessed the intelligence, industriousness, and persistence to weather the theological warfare that dominated the fourth century. Robert Payne observes that "in the history of the early Church no one was ever so implacable, so urgent in his demands upon himself or so derisive of his enemies. There was something in him of the temper of the modern dogmatic revolutionary: nothing stopped him."

Athanasius saw that if the Arian belief in Christ as an exalted creature won the day, the gospel itself would be lost. Two of Athanasius's central points bear repeating:

- 1. Only God can save. A mere creature can save no one. While Arius worked hard to preserve an exalted status for the Son, picturing him as elevated above all other creatures, his understanding of Christ faltered at this strategic juncture. The Arian Christ, Athanasius**

insisted, was not a Savior, as an adolescent) No creature possessed the ability or prerogative to save from sin. Salvation was the prerogative, privilege, and potential act of God alone. "The maker must be greater than what he makes... and the giver has to bestow what is in his possession."

2. **Christ was worshiped in Christian churches, including churches that followed the teaching of Arius. Athanasius asked how a church could worship Christ if Christ were not God. To worship a creature is to commit blasphemy. In fact, Athanasius contended, Arius and his followers committed blasphemy on two counts: they worshiped a creature as God and called God incarnate a mere creature. Athanasius insisted that when we worship the Son we are rightfully worshipping one whose deity finds its source or fount in the deity of the Father. As the "offspring" of the Father, Athanasius wrote, the Son is indeed distinct. But we must not allow this fundamental distinction to blur "the identity of the one godhead." "For the radiance also is light, not a second light besides the sun, nor a different light, not a light by participation in the sun, but a whole proper offspring of it. No one would say that there are two lights, but that the sun and its radiance are two, while the light from the sun, which illuminates things everywhere, is one. In the same way the godhead of the Son is the Father's."**

Like Father, like Son

The essential oneness of the Father and Son indicates, Athanasius argued, that whatever is predicated of the Father must be predicated of the Son, "except the title of 'Father.'" In short, if the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord. If the Father is light, the Son is light.

For many years in the fourth century the Arian cause appeared to have won the day. Arius's ideas offered a sensible rational approach to the relationship between the Father and the Son, while the Nicene Creed seemed confusing, nonbiblical, and provocative. In the end, however, the Nicene teaching won out.

Theodosius, the first emperor for many years to strongly oppose Arianism, affirmed the legitimacy and orthodoxy of bishops and priests who supported the Nicene Creed. Under his leadership and imperial authority the Council of Constantinople (381) reaffirmed and developed the statements made by the Nicene bishops some 56 years earlier.

It truly seemed for a time that it was Athanasius contra *mundum*. C. S. Lewis wrote:

"We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same.

He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, 'whole and undefiled,' when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius— into one of those 'sensible' synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away."

Christopher A. Hall is dean of the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University and author of *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers (InterVarsity Press, 2002)*.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 85: The Council of Nicaea: Debating Jesus' Divinity

Athanasius

Pugnacious Defender of Orthodoxy

Patrick Henry Rardon

A modern biographer of Athanasius of Alexandria speaks of "the predominantly polemical nature of most of his dogmatic works" and "the lack of serenity in his argumentation." Understandably so! In all of Christian history, it is safe to say, few churchmen have been so entirely embroiled in doctrinal and ecclesiastical disputes as Athanasius. In one comparison with him, one ventures that even so controversial a figure as Martin Luther lived out a relatively quiet and uneventful life.

Born into a Christian Family in Alexandria in 295, Athanasius was an infant during the persecution of Diocletian and barely more than a boy when the Edict of Milan legalized the church in 313. He was ordained a deacon five years later at age 23. The most indubitable claim we can make for Athanasius is that his entire life was absorbed in the service of the church.

The event that most marked the destiny of this ardent churchman was, of course, the council of Nicaea in 325. Although there is perhaps no other name more closely identified with Nicaea than Athanasius, this close identification had more to do with the aftermath of the council than with the event itself. Three facts conspired to make this so.

First, the fathers at Nicaea had formalized in the church a ranking patriarchal structure, according to which the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch would exercise general oversight of the other churches in their respective regions. Thus, when Athanasius was made Bishop of Alexandria in 328, just three years after Nicaea, he suddenly found himself in one of the most influential and prestigious positions in the whole church.

Second, Nicaea had also determined that the church at Alexandria, because of the superior records and resources of astronomy available in that city, would be charged with establishing the proper date of Easter each year, and so informing the rest of the church by an annual notice. This arrangement afforded Athanasius an official opportunity to send an annual letter to all of the other major ecclesiastical centers, and until his death in 373 he used these "Paschal Letters" as opportunities to teach and admonish Christians far beyond the borders of Alexandria. Because many successors of Athanasius followed his example in this respect, the bishopric of Alexandria became one of the most influential teaching authorities in the whole church, second only to Rome.

Third, because Nicaea had implicitly granted the Roman emperors an authority over the affairs of the church that they had never done before, the next several decades (even centuries) would see many instances of direct imperial interference with the church's teaching ministry itself, including the office of bishop. As various emperors exercised this interference, Athanasius was forced into exile from Alexandria no fewer than five times.

Athanasius spent these extended periods of banishment chiefly doing two things. First, he traveled extensively to far-off places, where he conferred with churchmen regarding the Arian heresy and other ecclesiastical matters, including imperial interference. These consultations greatly extended the reputation of Athanasius as a universal Christian teacher. Second, these periods of exile afforded him ample time to write the lengthy theological treatises that caused him to be ranked, even today, among the greatest exponents of Christian doctrine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 85: The Council of Nicaea: Debating Jesus' Divinity

Which Creed is Which?

In one of the quirks of church history, the "Nicene Creed" used in church hymnals and liturgies is a different creed from the one accepted at Nicaea.

In 381, the council of Constantinople affirmed the Nicene Creed and condemned heresies that had since arisen against Nicaea. But from later records (preserved at the Council of Chalcedon, 70 years later) we know that another creed was also used, now known as the Niceno—Constantinopolitan Creed. This creed is more strictly Trinitarian than the Nicene, describing each member of the Trinity in relation to the other members. The creed of 325 says less about the Father and only mentions the Holy Spirit with no description at all, since the council's attention was fixed on how the Son is no less divine than the Father.

The version below is the one used in the Western church; the Eastern version does not include the phrases in brackets. In particular, the statement that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son" is still contested by the Eastern Orthodox Church as an unwarranted addition to Nicene theology.

D.H. Williams

The Original Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible;

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, of one substance from the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead;

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, there was when he was not, and, before being born he was not, and he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the son of God is a different hypostasis or substance, or is subject to change or alteration ‐ these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (The "Nicene Creed" used in worship)

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; [God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits

on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, thee Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Copyright © 2005 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

Athanasius

"Black Dwarf" was the tag his enemies gave him. And the short, dark-skinned Egyptian bishop had plenty of enemies. He was exiled five times by four Roman emperors, spending 17 of the 45 years he served as bishop of Alexandria in exile. Yet in the end, his theological enemies were "exiled" from the church's teaching, and it is Athanasius's writings that shaped the future of the church.

Challenging "orthodoxy"

Most often the problem was his stubborn insistence that Arianism, the reigning "orthodoxy" of the day, was in fact a heresy.

The dispute began when Athanasius was the chief deacon assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. While Alexander preached "with perhaps too philosophical minuteness" on the Trinity, Arius, a presbyter (priest) from Libya announced, "If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not." The argument caught on, but Alexander and Athanasius fought against Arius, arguing that it denied the Trinity. Christ is not of a like substance to God, they argued, but the same substance. To Athanasius this was no splitting of theological hairs. Salvation was at issue: only one who was fully human could atone for human sin; only one who was fully divine could have the power to save us. To Athanasius, the logic of New Testament doctrine of salvation assumed the dual nature of Christ. "Those who maintain 'There was a time when the Son was not' rob God of his Word, like plunderers."

Alexander's encyclical letter, signed by Athanasius (and possibly written by him), attacked the consequences of the Arians' heresy: "The Son [then,] is a creature and a work; neither is he like in essence to the Father; neither is he the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is he his true wisdom; but he is one of the things made and created and is called the Word and Wisdom by an abuse of terms... Wherefore he is by nature subject to change and variation, as are all rational creatures."

The controversy spread, and all over the empire, Christians could be heard singing a catchy tune that championed the Arian view: "There was a time when the Son was not." In every city, wrote a historian, "bishop was contending against bishop, and the people were contending against one another, like swarms of gnats fighting in the air."

Word of the dispute made it to the newly converted Emperor Constantine the Great, who was more concerned with seeing church unity than theological truth. "Division in the church," he told the bishops, "is worse than war." To settle the matter, he called a council of bishops.

Of the 1,800 bishops invited to Nicea, about 300 came—and argued, fought, and eventually fleshed out an early version of the Nicene Creed. The council, led by Alexander, condemned Arius as a heretic, exiled him, and made it a capital offense to

possess his writings. Constantine was pleased that peace had been restored to the church. Athanasius, whose treatise [On the Incarnation](#) laid the foundation for the orthodox party at Nicea, was hailed as "the noble champion of Christ." The diminutive bishop was simply pleased that Arianism had been defeated. But it hadn't.

Bishop in exile

Within a few months, supporters of Arius talked Constantine into ending Arius's exile. With a few private additions, Arius even signed the Nicene Creed, and the emperor ordered Athanasius, who had recently succeeded Alexander as bishop, to restore the heretic to fellowship.

When Athanasius refused, his enemies spread false charges against him. He was accused of murder, illegal taxation, sorcery, and treason—the last of which led Constantine to exile him to Trier, now a German city near Luxembourg.

Constantine died two years later, and Athanasius returned to Alexandria. But in his absence, Arianism had gained the upper hand. Now church leaders were against him, and they banished him again. Athanasius fled to Pope Julius I in Rome. He returned in 346, but in the mercurial politics of the day, was banished three more times before he came home to stay in 366. By then he was about 70 years old.

While in exile, Athanasius spent most of his time writing, mostly to defend orthodoxy, but he took on pagan and Jewish opposition as well. One of his most lasting contributions is his *Life of St. Antony*, which helped to shape the Christian ideal of monasticism. The book is filled with fantastic tales of Antony's encounters with the devil, yet Athanasius wrote, "Do not be incredulous about what you hear of him... Consider, rather that from them only a few of his feats have been learned." In fact, the bishop knew the monk personally, and this saint's biography is one of the most historically reliable. It became an early "best-seller" and made a deep impression on many people, even helping lead pagans to conversion: Augustine is the most famous example.

During Athanasius's first year permanently back in Alexandria, he sent his annual letter to the churches in his diocese, called a festal letter. Such letters were used to fix the dates of festivals such as Lent and Easter, and to discuss matters of general interest. In this letter, Athanasius listed what he believed were the books that should constitute the New Testament.

"In these [27 writings] alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed," he wrote. "No one may add to them, and nothing may be taken away from them."

Though other such lists had been and would still be proposed, it is Athanasius's list that the church eventually adopted, and it is the one we use to this day.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/theologians/athanasius.html>

367 Athanasius Defines the New Testament

His letter is the earliest authoritative statement to fix the New Testament as we know it today.

Dr. Carsten Peter Thiede is president of Reinhold-Schneider-Gesellschaft e. V. in West Germany and a member of the advisory board of Christian History.

"Since you know my will, grant free admission to all those who wish to enter the church. For if I hear that you have hindered anyone from becoming a member, or have debarred anyone from entrance, I shall immediately send someone to have you deposed at my behest and have you sent into exile."

These are the words of Emperor Constantine the Great, written c. 328 to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius had not followed Constantine's growing interest in ecumenism. Instead, he had insisted upon excluding from the church anyone who did not subscribe to the Creed of Nicea. Consequently, Athanasius was deposed in 335 and exiled to Trier (today in West Germany, near the border with Luxembourg). Two years later, after Constantine's death, he returned to Alexandria, but he was removed from power again in 339 and fled to Pope Julius I, a supporter, in Rome. He returned in 346, only to be exiled three more times for various reasons. Athanasius finally resumed his bishopric in 366, which he held until his death in 373, at the age of 78.

Most of his writings defend the orthodox position against the influence of Arianism (***Three Speeches against the Arians***, c. 335), but he also ably defended the faith against pagan and Jewish opposition (***Speech against the Pagans*** and ***Speech on the Incarnation of the Word***, both c. 318). Another lasting contribution to church writings is his ***Life of St. Anthony***, c. 357, one of the first lives of a saint that can justifiably claim authenticity. The book, an early best seller, widely disseminated information on monasticism.

Famous Festal Letter

Perhaps Athanasius's single most influential writing, however, was his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter of 367.

It had been customary after Epiphany each year [the Christian festival held twelve days after Christmas] for the bishops of Alexandria to write a letter in which the dates of Lent and Easter were fixed, and thus, all other festivals of the church in that year. These letters were also used to discuss other matters of general interest. Athanasius wrote forty-five festal letters; thirteen have survived complete in Syriac translation.

The Thirty-Ninth has been reconstructed by scholars from Greek, Syriac, and Coptic fragments. It contains a list of the books of the Old and New Testaments, which Athanasius describes as being canonical. The New Testament list is identical with the twenty-seven writings we still accept as canonical, and thus Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter has been regarded as the first authoritative statement on the canon of the New Testament.

Athanasius wrote the list to end disputes about such texts as "The Shepherd of Hermas" or "The Epistle of Barnabas," which long had been regarded as equal to the apostolic letters. He also silenced those who had questioned the apostolic authenticity of Peter's letters or the Book of Revelation. Athanasius states that "in these [27 writings] alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. No one may add to them, and nothing may be taken away from them."

Controversial Canon

One document supports Athanasius's position: The famous Codex Vaticanus in the Vatican Library, a Greek codex of the Old and New Testaments. It consists of the same books in the same order as in Athanasius's festal letter—which is particularly noteworthy given the peculiar order: Gospels, Acts, Catholic Epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude), Pauline Epistles (including Hebrews between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy), and Revelation. The Codex Vaticanus probably was written in Rome, in 340, by Alexandrian scribes for Emperor Constans, during Athanasius's seven-year exile in the city. It would thus predate the festal letter. Even though Athanasius was probably not far away when the Codex Vaticanus was written, one realizes that the establishment of the canon was not a sudden decision made unilaterally by a bishop in Alexandria, but a process of careful investigation and deliberation, documented in a codex of the Greek Bible and, twenty-seven years later, in a festal letter.

On the other hand, Athanasius's view did not meet with unanimous support, not even at Alexandria. Some twenty years after that Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter was written, the Alexandrian scholar Didymus the Blind did not accept 2 and 3 John as canonical, but he fully backed and quoted 2 Peter, which still was occasionally disputed by others. Didymus also apparently regarded the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and even Didache and 1 Clement to be equally authoritative. And there were many such examples of divergence of opinion all over the Empire, both in the East and in the West. However, after the end of the fourth century, such occasional divergences of opinion have not altered the received tradition.

What might have happened had Athanasius and others not established an accepted "closed canon"? Gnostic, theologically unsound writings like the Gospel of Thomas might have crept in, diluting the historical message of Christ with what we would now call New Age elements. Or later pressure groups might have excluded writings that did not suit their purpose—Revelation, for example, or 2 Peter (a book the Syriac churches attempted to exclude). Later, Martin Luther would dearly have loved to have excluded James, which he regarded as contradicting Paul. Indeed, why not add Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" of 1964, as was suggested by some modern writers, or eliminate epistles currently thought to be inauthentic?

The "closed canon" that prevails in all Christian churches forms a consensus that prevents such eccentricities. And that canon can be traced back to Athanasius, and to the year 367, which justly remains an important date in church history.

Theodosius I 347-395

Emperor who made Christianity "the" Roman religion

In lists of Roman Emperors, Theodosius is far from the most notable. One historian noted that this son of an emperor killed for high treason "veered disconcertingly between opposites—febrile activity and indolent sluggishness, a simple soldierly life and the splendors of the court." But this little-known emperor forever changed the course of Christian history not in one way, but in two. He used his power to officially enforce orthodox Christianity, but ended up placing his power under that of the church, setting a standard for more than a millennium.

Military man

The blond, elegant Theodosius began his imperial career in the usual manner. He was born in northwest Spain, to a father who was a talented military commander. Theodosius learned his military lessons by campaigning with his father's staff in Britain and elsewhere.

After being crowned emperor in the East (379), he continued to battle German tribes in the north, but finally worked out a unique arrangement with them: for exchange of land and provisions, their soldiers would serve under the Roman banner when needed. It was a novel idea for the time, an arrangement that later emperors would depend on more and more.

To pay for this expanded army, however, Theodosius raised taxes brutally. "No man shall possess any property that is exempt from taxation," he decreed. City magistrates, who were responsible for collecting taxes, were flogged if they failed to levy taxes efficiently.

Yet it wasn't just tax dodgers that caught his attention, but heretics and pagans as well.

Emperor for Christ

Early in his reign, during a serious illness, Theodosius had accepted Christian baptism. In 380 he proclaimed himself a Christian of the Nicene Creed, and he called a council at Constantinople to put an end to the Arian heresy (which, contrary to Nicene doctrine, claimed Jesus was created), which had divided the empire for over half a century. One hundred and fifty bishops gathered and revised the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 into the creed we know today. Arianism has never made a serious challenge since.

Having won that victory, Theodosius tried to ram through his choice for patriarch of Constantinople, but the bishops rebelled and demanded he appoint a bishop from a short list they created. It was the first of many instances in Theodosius's reign in which the church got the better of him.

The most famous example came in 387: When the city of Thessalonica rioted because a favored charioteer was imprisoned (for homosexuality), Theodosius ordered revenge: a chariot race was announced, citizens gathered in the arena, the gates were locked, and soldiers were set upon the crowd. By the end of the day, 7,000 had perished.

Ambrose, the bishop of Milan who was a spiritual and political adviser to Theodosius, was furious. He refused to give Theodosius Communion until the emperor performed public penance: he must put aside his royal garments, don a shroud, and publicly plead for God's mercy.

When Theodosius consented, it marked a new chapter in the history of church and state. For the first time, a secular ruler submitted to the church. Less than a century earlier, emperors were trying to wipe out the church.

Turning the tables

Theodosius, for his part, tried to reverse that legacy by persecuting heretics and pagans. Arians and Manichaeans (dualists) were condemned and driven underground. One edict prohibited public discussion of any religious questions! Finally, in 391, pagan temples were closed and pagan worship forbidden. Later Roman historians, like Zosimus, looked back on this Christianization of the empire as the cause for the fall of Rome (a charge Augustine refuted in his [City of God](#)).

Theodosius ended his reign by defeating political enemies in the West, so that by late 394, he stood alone as emperor of a once-more united empire. The moment was brief, however, as Theodosius was dead within five months.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/rulers/theodosius.html>

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

405 Jerome Completes the Vulgate

This Latin translation stood as the preeminent Bible text for centuries—and set the standard for future translators.

Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, thankfully known as Jerome, took a roundabout path to becoming one of history's most significant Bible translators. He was born in northeast Italy in 345. By the age of 29, he was a disciplined scholar and an ascetic Christian. Then he had a dream that accused him of being preoccupied with secular learning ("You are a follower of Cicero," the dream said, "not of Christ"). So for the next several years Jerome lived an ascetic life in the Syrian desert, studying and transcribing the Scriptures and mastering Hebrew. He became secretary to Pope Damasus in 382, which proved to be his date with destiny. By the time he entered Damasus's service, he was probably the greatest Christian scholar in the world.

Motivation

In Jerome's day, Common Greek, the language of the New Testament, was widely known throughout the Roman Empire. The Old Testament also existed in a popular Greek form, the Septuagint, so anyone who knew Greek had access to the entire Bible.

But some populations in the Empire knew no Greek. Thus, early translations appeared in various languages, notably Latin (becoming the standard language of the Western Empire), Syriac, and Coptic. Despite the early translators' zeal, they didn't always possess a good command of Greek. Soon many Old Latin manuscripts, poor in quality and often differing from each other, were in circulation.

In a letter to Pope Damasus, Jerome explained the problem and proposed a solution: "If we are to pin our faith to the Latin texts, it is for our opponents to tell us **which**; for there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies. If, on the other hand, we are to glean the truth from a comparison of **many**, why not go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced by inaccurate translators, and the blundering alterations of confident but ignorant critics, and, further, all that has been inserted or changed by copyists more asleep than awake?"

Damasus suggested that Jerome produce a new Latin translation of the Bible, one that would throw out the inaccuracies of older translations. Damasus wanted the Western church to be clearly Latin; one way to accomplish this was to provide a trusted translation of the Bible in Latin.

Production

Jerome began translating in 382. He also preached strict asceticism and won many women to his way of life. Soon, however, accusations about his relationship to them and the charge that ascetic rigors led to one woman's death caused Jerome to move from Rome to the Holy Land, shortly after Pope Damasus's death in 384. He settled in Bethlehem, writing and studying, overseeing a monastery, and advising some of the women who had followed him from Rome.

After twenty-three years of labor, Jerome finished his translation in late 404 or 405. If twenty-three years seems like a long time for a translation, consider that Jerome was working alone. Also, he was churning out volumes of commentaries and other writings, and he involved himself in every theological battle of the day, contributing some eloquent, often caustic, letters.

At first Jerome worked from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. But then he established a precedent for all good translators: the Old Testament would have to be translated from the original Hebrew. In his quest for accuracy, Jerome consulted Jewish rabbis.

In translating the Old Testament, something struck Jerome: the books the Jews regarded as Holy Scripture did not include the books we know as the Apocryphal. These books had been included in the Septuagint, the basis of most older translations, and Jerome was compelled by the church to include them. But he made it clear that in his opinion the Apocryphal books were only *liber ecclesiastici* (church books to be read for edification), as opposed to the fully inspired *liber canonici* (canonical books to establish doctrine). Over one thousand years later, the leaders of the Reformation would follow Jerome's lead and not include the Apocrypha in the Protestant Bibles.

Influence

"The Divine Library," as Jerome called the Bible, was finally available in a well-written, accurate translation in the language commonly used in the churches of the Western Empire. Jerome's translation, known as the Vulgate (from the Latin word *vulgus*, meaning "common" language), became the standard. A millennium later, for example, Martin Luther, though he knew Hebrew and Greek, quoted Jerome's Vulgate throughout his life. The Vulgate was highly regarded by scholars and was used as the basis for translations into other languages for a thousand years. The Council of Trent, in 1546, declared the Vulgate the only authentic Latin text of the Scriptures.

Sadly, the text of the Vulgate that circulated throughout the Middle Ages was a corrupt form of Jerome's work, encumbered by copyists' errors. (In the late sixteenth century, corrected editions were published.) Further, Jerome's work became so widely revered that until the Reformation, translators worked from the Vulgate; not for a thousand years did scholars again translate directly from the Greek New Testament. And ironically, Jerome's Bible added impetus to the use of Latin as the church's language, resulting centuries later in a worship service and a Bible that lay people could not understand—precisely the opposite of what Jerome had first accomplished.

In the Vulgate, Jerome left an enduring legacy of biblical scholarship.

Copyright © 1990 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

Christianity and Women

By David Feddes

Imagine growing up as a girl, knowing that when you get to be twelve or thirteen years old, your father might sell you to an older man who wants a young girl for a wife. You might feel too young to be married. You might not like the man who is about to become your husband. But your wishes don't count. The law gives your father the right to do with you whatever he wants. He pays no attention to your wishes and sells you to the highest bidder.

And that's just the beginning. Once you're married, you become your husband's property. He has the power of life and death over you. The law gives him the right to strike and punish you if you don't please him. In some circumstances, he even has the right to kill you, with no penalty under the law.

If you have children, they belong to your husband, not to you. He has absolute, life-and-death authority over any children you have together. If he severely beats them or kills them, that is his right under the law. The man of the house has absolute authority; he answers to no other authority for how he treats his wife and children.

If you have an adulterous relationship with a man, your husband has the right to kill you. Meanwhile, your husband can be as adulterous as he likes. He can go to one of the local temples and enjoy orgies with various male and female prostitutes as part of religious ceremonies. For you as a wife, adultery could mean death, but your husband can sleep with prostitutes or parade around in public with a mistress (or several mistresses).

In fact, a mistress or prostitute has more freedom to appear in public without a veil than a married woman. Wives are to remain hidden. If your husband has guests to your home for dinner, you are expected to stay in another room. You are not allowed to share the meal or to have conversation with any male guests. If you ever leave your house and go out in public without a veil, your husband has the right to divorce you on the spot.

If your husband divorces you for any reason, the children are his. He has plenty of slaves to care for them, so they can get along without you. Under the law, if you are a wife and mother, you have no right to custody or guardianship of your children. The children belong totally to your husband. So does all the property in your household. It is under your husband's absolute control while he lives, and if he dies, you cannot inherit his property. Only a male can inherit property.

This scenario isn't just imaginary. This is what life was really like for many girls and women in the Roman Empire, and classical Greece was similar in some ways.

Of course, if you were born a female, you might not become a teenager or adult at all. In those cultures many female babies didn't live more than a few hours. Girls had such a low standing that many parents didn't want one. If a baby girl was born, it was common to abandon her to freeze or starve or be eaten by wild animals. How many girl babies were killed? It must have been millions. Living males outnumbered females by 30 percent.

Some Romans did value women—as they might value any other productive piece of property. Some Greek and Roman men thought a woman who produced strong, high-quality children was valuable property, so valuable that she ought to be

shared with friends. If a man had enough children of his own, why not loan his wife to a friend so that the friend could also have a fine crop of children? A good wife was like good soil. If she produced enough of a crop for one man, shouldn't she be loaned to another man as soil to raise a first-rate crop of kids for him?

It was not a good time to be a woman.

The Turning Point

Then along came some people who had a different view of women and marriage. They didn't kill girl babies; they cherished them. They didn't approve of men having mistresses and prostitutes; they insisted that a man and wife be faithful to each other for life. They didn't give men the right to kill their wives; they instructed men to sacrifice themselves for their wives. They didn't authorize men to do anything they wanted to women and children; they told husbands to love their wives and not to be harsh with them, and they told fathers not to embitter or exasperate children but to encourage them. They didn't prevent women from showing their faces in public. They didn't withhold teaching from girls. They thought the most important things in life should be taught not just to boys and men but also to girls and women. These people were called Christians.

A fierce critic of Christianity, an intellectual named Celsus, ridiculed Christianity because it attracted so many women. In the opinion of Celsus and many like him, any religion that appealed to women must be bad. But the church of Christ kept affirming women, and this honoring of women turned out to be a blessing not only for women but for men as well. Men found out that a loving, faithful relationship with one woman is far better than the pagan, promiscuous approach. Men found more joy in a godly, intelligent wife than in a doormat whose talents were stifled and whose personality was stunted. In fact, many Christian women demonstrated such talent, character, and courage that a pagan was moved to exclaim in grudging admiration, "What women these Christians have!"

An expert on ancient Rome says that "the conversion of the Roman world to Christianity [brought] a great change in women's status." For a thousand years Roman law upheld *patria potestas*, the absolute authority of a man over his wife and children, including the power of life and death. But shortly after Christianity gained acceptance in the Roman Empire, this thousand-year-old standard was repealed. Men no longer had the right to harm or kill wives and children. Women gained the right to have property and to have custody of children.

As Christianity gained ground, it became less and less common for fathers to give child brides to older men. Rather than girls getting married at age 12, most Christian women married later. Rather than being compelled to marry whomever their father sold them to, young women from Christian families had far more choice in whom they would marry. Parents could still be involved in matchmaking in various ways, but Christian girls were less likely to be forced to marry men against their will. As one researcher puts it, "Everywhere progress in free choice of a spouse accompanied progress in the spread of Christianity."

In light of all this, another scholar declares bluntly, "The birth of Jesus was the turning point in the history of women." This isn't just a matter of ancient history. Even in today's world, there are cultures with little Christian influence in which parents get

money by selling young girls to older men who want child brides. The girls have no right to say no to a man if he was selected by her father. Some cultures still order women to wear veils in public and refuse to educate girls. The Taliban's treatment of women in Afghanistan may have struck some outside observers as odd, but it's been far too common in many cultures in many parts of the world. For many women the situation is now different, thanks in large part to the powerful effect of Jesus and his message in the Bible.

A woman from a non-Christian religion once exclaimed to a Christian, "Surely your Bible was written by a woman!" When the Christian asked her why she said this, the woman replied, "Because the Bible says so many kind things for women. Our teachers never refer to us except in reproach." Well, the Bible wasn't written by a woman, but the Bible's author was and is the Lord who created women, as well as men, in his image, who paid with his own blood to purchase women for himself, and who loves women with a vast, immeasurable love. The Bible is indeed good news for women, because the Bible reveals Jesus and his love. Nowadays some radical feminists claim that the Christian faith oppresses women, but the truth is that Jesus and his followers uplifted women and family life more than any other influence in history.

Friend of Women

Jesus, the Son of God, was born among the Jewish people. God had dealt with the Jews in a special way and had revealed great truths to them, including the fact that God created both male and female in his image. The Jews had received God's law, a law that prohibited adultery, that defended the rights of widows and children, that praised a wife of noble character as a priceless gift from God. Even so, by the time Jesus was born, some Jewish religious leaders had a much lower view of women than of men.

One rabbinical teaching said, "Let the words of the Law be burned rather than committed to a woman ... If a man teaches his daughter the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery." But Jesus taught God's law to women. Once, Jesus was a guest at the home of a man named Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha was busy doing "women's work" as a hostess, but Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him teaching God's truth. Martha objected and asked Jesus to order Mary back to the kitchen to help. But Jesus said that Mary's choice was better. It was good for a woman to be a friend of Jesus and to be educated in God's truth (Luke 10:38-42).

Another saying of the rabbis declared, "He who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself" (Aboth 1:5). "One is not so much as to greet a woman" (Berakhoth 43b). But Jesus rejected such thinking. Jesus sat down at a public well and asked a woman for a drink. She was surprised that Jesus spoke with her, but he continued. He spoke to her of true worship, of her own sin, and of salvation and new life in him. The Bible says that Jesus' disciples were "surprised to find him talking with a woman" (John 4:27). But they got used to such things after a while. Jesus made it a common practice to preach to crowds that included women as well as men, to engage women in personal conversation and teaching, and to show them his love.

Jesus treated every woman he met with love, not lust. He cared about who they were as persons, not what their bodies looked like. He taught his followers that adultery

is wrong, that lust is a form of adultery, and a man who divorces a woman on a whim and marries someone else is guilty of adultery.

Jesus treated women with respect. In the Old Testament, God taught that male and female were created in God's image, and Jesus restored the dignity of women as image-bearers of God. While most other teachers would not instruct women, Jesus gladly taught them and engaged them in discussion. He was even willing to make them partners in his work. A number of women, grateful for his friendship and help, provided financial support and other assistance to Jesus and his disciples (Luke 8:1-3).

These women were drawn to Jesus, and not just because they liked his general attitude toward women. They followed Jesus because he helped them personally and gave them a new future. Jesus wasn't just the turning point for women in world history. He was also the turning point for many individual women in their personal struggles. Some were healed of terrible diseases. Some were saved from demons. Some were taken from prostitution and degradation to a brand new way of holy, healthy living. Such women found that Jesus would rather give a woman a new future than condemn her for her past.

Jesus' treatment of women differed from the rabbis of his time in so many ways. Many rabbis refused to teach women and also refused to allow women to testify as witnesses in court. They didn't think a woman's word could be counted on. But when Jesus died and rose from the dead, the first people he told were women. He made women the first witnesses to his resurrection, and these women carried the good news to Jesus' other disciples, even before Jesus himself appeared to those disciples.

Why was the spread of Christianity the turning point for women in the Roman Empire and in other parts of the world? Not because Christians are naturally such fine people. In fact, some Christians and church leaders were at times too influenced by the anti-women views of the world around them. All too often, they failed to follow Christ in this regard. But the Lord kept prodding his people on, changing them and changing cultures through them. Jesus made it clear that women are created in God's image, that women are bought by his blood and filled with his Holy Spirit, that women are to be baptized and share in the Lord's Supper along with men, that women are valued participants in God's mission.

Christ was a blessing for women, and women were powerful in spreading the faith. In the early years of Christianity, many churches met in homes and benefited from the hospitality of godly women. Christian women led others to Christ through their words and example. They did not serve as official preachers of doctrine in worship gatherings, but they could speak and prophesy in worship if they did so with proper decorum. They helped the church grow through personal evangelism, and they also contributed to the rapid growth of Christianity by rejecting abortion and infanticide and raising large families of godly, well-taught children. Christian fathers and mothers didn't dump girl babies, which added even more women and thriving families, enabling Christianity to grow faster than baby-killing paganism.

In short, Jesus was the best news women ever heard, the best friend women could have, and Christian women responded by doing much to make the church stronger and larger.

Defender of Widows

Christianity has been a tremendous help not only to girls, wives, and mothers, but also to widows. Jesus himself helped widows and rebuked religious leaders who mistreated widows (Mark 12:40). Jesus' brother James said in the Bible, "Religion that God the Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after ... widows in their distress" (James 1:27).

By contrast, widows have often been neglected or exploited in non-Christian settings. In fact, some religions and cultures have deliberately killed widows. Among many Hindu people throughout the centuries, if a man died, it was quite common to burn his widow in the same bonfire as her husband's dead body (a practice known as *suttee*). When widow burning became illegal in India, thanks in large to part to Christian efforts, some complained that "the foundations of Hindu society would be shaken if widows were not burned alive." One Hindu saying declared, "If her husband is happy, she should be happy; if he is sad, she should be sad; and if he is dead, she should also die." Killing widows occurred not just in India but was also practiced among some American Indians, among the Maori of New Zealand, and in pre-Christian cultures of China, Africa, Scandinavia, and Finland. Eskimo tribes didn't burn widows; they got rid of old people with ice instead of fire. They would set the elderly adrift on ice floes floating to sea, where they would freeze, starve, or drown.

Christian treatment of widows has been totally different. 88 times, the Bible speaks of widows, usually in connection with God's love and care for them and his wrath against those who harm them. The Bible says, "A defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling" (Psalm 68:5). Polycarp, a Christian leader a century after Jesus, preached, "Let not the widows be neglected. Be thou, after the Lord, their protector and friend."

Rather than saying a widow should die if her husband dies, the Bible encourages younger widows to remarry and build a new life. Rather than letting widows perish in poverty, Scripture instructs Christian relatives of a widow to care for her. If the widow had no relatives to help, church offerings must be set aside to help her. Even then, Christian widows are not seen merely as victims in need of help but as valuable workers.

In 1 Timothy 5, the Bible describes a plan for the church to provide for widows and says that each of these widows ought to have a significant role in church work and be known for "helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds." As the church helps the widow, the widow helps the church. This is the beautiful balance of the Christian way: helping a person in need and at the same time giving that person responsibility to be a blessing to others. This makes the widow a person of dignity, not just an object of pity.

It's wonderful for a woman to have a husband and children. But even if her husband is dead and her children no longer need her, a woman is still precious. A woman's value is not based only on her relationship to a husband and children but on her relationship to the Lord. The Bible leaves no doubt about the beauty and dignity of being a wife and mother, but the Bible also leaves no doubt about the beauty and dignity of serving Christ as a widow or as a single woman.

Abundant Life

Jesus once said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). He wasn't just talking about men and boys. He was also talking about women and girls.

Beware of anyone who claims to offer women a better life apart from Jesus. History confirms what Jesus said abundant life comes from him. If you want abundant life, don't think that just any religion and culture will do. You need Jesus Christ and the cultural direction of his Word, the Bible. Don't assume all religions and cultures are equally good for women. Some religions and cultures have authorized men to sell their daughters to the highest bidder. Some have authorized men to beat their wives and kill their children. Some have authorized the killing of widows. Some have authorized genital mutilation of girls. Some have taught a double standard in which husbands are expected to be sexual adventurers and wives are expected to be pure. But Christ provides a better way. Christ is the turning point. Faith in Christ turns people and cultures away from such harmful attitudes and behaviors. Faith in Christ turns us toward abundant life.

Jesus is good news for women. Jesus came to give abundant life to women. He didn't do this by making women less feminine and more masculine, or by turning women against men, as some non-Christian activists try to do. Jesus did it by loving women, honoring their feminine nature, and utilizing their talents. Jesus did it by forgiving women's sins, healing their hurts, filling them with his Holy Spirit, unleashing their potential, and granting them eternal life. Jesus did it by instructing husbands to be faithful and loving toward their wives and by renewing God's pattern for family life. Jesus did it by making every member of his church of equal value, whether male or female, married or single.

And what Jesus has done in the past, he continues to do. Still today, Christ remains good news for women. Still today, he gives eternal life to those who believe in him. Still today, Jesus makes life on this earth better for women, for their families, and for entire cultures. Believe in him, bless his name, and "forget not all his benefits" (Psalm 103:2).