THE CHURCH THROUGH THE AGES

Two Thousand Years of
God Keeping His Promise



Martyrs, missionaries, and a promise that has never failed.

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY
Enterprises

The Church Through the Ages

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Andrew Dominguez

The Church Through the Ages: Two Thousand Years of God Keeping His Promise

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A note before you begin. This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Before You Begin

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

The night before He died, Jesus prayed for His followers. He prayed for the eleven men in the room with Him, and then He prayed for everyone who would believe through their word (John 17:20). That means He prayed for you and me. Two thousand years later, the people He prayed for are still here, in nearly every nation on earth.

This book tells how we got from that upper room in Jerusalem to the church you sit in on Sunday morning. It is the story of ordinary people who heard the gospel, believed it, and passed it on. Some of them were bishops and kings. Most of them were farmers, slaves, mothers, fishermen, shopkeepers, and soldiers whose names we will never know. Many of them died for it.

Why Church History Matters

A lot of Christians know their Bible fairly well and then jump straight from the book of Acts to their own church, as if nothing happened in between. But a great deal happened in between. The creeds we recite, the books in our Bible, the way we baptize and take the Lord's Supper, the hymns we sing, and even the reason there are so many different churches on the same street all have a history.

Knowing that history does at least four things for us.

- **It shows God keeping His promise.** Jesus said He would build His church, and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Empires have tried to stamp it out. False teachers have tried to bend it. Its own leaders have sometimes nearly ruined it. It is still here.
- **It guards us from repeating old mistakes.** Almost every false teaching you hear today has been tried before, and faithful believers already answered it. When you know the history, you recognize the old error in its new clothes.
- **It humbles us.** The church has done shameful things in Christ's name. We should say so plainly. A history that only tells the good parts is not honest, and it does not honor God.
- **It encourages us.** When you read about Polycarp facing the fire, or a shoemaker named William Carey sailing to India, or a young man named Jim Elliot giving his life in the jungle of Ecuador, your own faith gets braver.

How I Handle Dates and Quotations

I want you to be able to trust what you read here, so I have tried to be careful.

Every date in this book comes from a published source that you can check. For the very early church, many dates are approximate, and I say so with the word "about." Ancient writers did not always record the year, and scholars sometimes disagree by a few years.

When I quote someone from history, I quote them from a published English translation that I opened and checked word for word. Those quotations are set off in the text with the source given underneath. Some famous quotations are not as certain as people think. Luther's "Here I stand" is one of them. When a saying is doubtful, I tell you, and I tell you why.

You will also find gray boxes marked **From the Record**. These bring in an important document or eyewitness from outside the Bible. Each one carries one of three labels:

- **Text checked.** I opened a published translation of the original and checked the quoted words.
- **Reported.** The words come down to us through a later writer, such as Eusebius or Foxe, and we depend on that writer's report.
- **Disputed.** Historians seriously question whether the words were said or written as reported.

Appendix D lists every source I used.

Where I Stand

I am a Bible-believing Protestant Christian. I believe the Bible is God's Word and our final authority. I believe salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. I hold the pre-tribulation view of the Rapture, which you will see in the last part of the book. I will not hide those convictions from you.

But I have also tried to be fair. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians carried the faith through many centuries, and I owe a debt to those who copied the Scriptures, kept the creeds, and sent missionaries to the ends of the earth. Where I disagree with them, I will say so and give the reason from Scripture. Where Protestants have been wrong, I will say that too.

How the Book Is Laid Out

Part One: The First Church runs from Pentecost to the year 313. It covers the apostles, the fall of Jerusalem, three centuries of persecution, and the early fight to guard the gospel.

Part Two: The Church and the Empire runs from Constantine to the split between East and West in 1054. It covers the great councils and creeds, the church fathers, the first great missionaries, and the rise of Islam.

Part Three: The Church in the Middle Ages covers the power of the popes, the Crusades, and the brave men and women who called the church back to Scripture before the Reformation.

Part Four: The Reformation covers Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, the Anabaptists, the English Reformation and the English Bible, and the Catholic response.

Part Five: Revival and Missions covers the Puritans, the Great Awakening, the modern missionary movement, and the hard questions the 1800s brought.

Part Six: The Church in Our Time and the Days Ahead covers the 1900s, the church around the world today, what the Bible says is coming next, and what all of this means for you.

At the back you will find a timeline, the early creeds, a list of words to know, the sources I used, and an index of every Bible verse cited.

Every chapter ends with **Study Questions** for your own reading or for a small group.

A Few Notes Before We Start

Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words in bold italics inside a Bible quotation are words added in English so the sentence reads clearly.

I capitalize pronouns for God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (He, Him, His, You, Your) as a sign of reverence. Inside quotations from other writers, I leave their words exactly as they were printed, so you will sometimes see “he” or “thee” in lowercase there.

The older translations I quote use old English, words like “thee” and “hath.” I left them alone so you can trust that what you read is what was printed.

Last, this book is a survey. Whole libraries have been written on every chapter. My goal is to give you the big picture, the people worth knowing, and a reason to keep reading. If one chapter grabs you, chase it further. That is how I learned most of this myself.

Part One: The First Church (A.D. 30 to 313)

Chapter 1: Pentecost and the Church in Jerusalem

> *And they were steadfastly continuing in the teaching of the apostles and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.*
>
> Acts 2:42 (SLB)

Church history does not begin with a building or a bishop. It begins with a promise. Before Jesus went back to the Father, He told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. Then He gave them their marching orders.

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be witnesses to Me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to* ***the*** *uttermost part of the earth.*
> (Acts 1:8)

That one verse is the outline of the book of Acts, and in a real sense it is the outline of the whole history of the church. The gospel would start in Jerusalem, spread through Judea and Samaria, and then go to the ends of the earth. Everything in this book is that verse coming true.

The Day of Pentecost

Jesus was crucified at Passover, most likely in A.D. 30 or 33. Scholars still debate which year, and both have good arguments behind them. Fifty days after Passover came the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which Greek-speaking Jews called Pentecost, from the Greek word for fiftieth. Jerusalem filled with Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman world and beyond.

On that morning about 120 believers were gathered together (Acts 1:15). The Holy Spirit came on them with a sound like a rushing wind and what looked like tongues of fire. They began to speak in other languages, and the crowd of pilgrims heard the wonders of God in their own native tongues (Acts 2:1-11).

Peter, the same man who had denied Jesus three times only seven weeks earlier, stood up and preached. He told the crowd that the Jesus they had crucified was raised from the dead, and that God had made Him both Lord and Christ. The people were cut to the heart and asked what they should do. Peter answered, “Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). About three thousand people believed and were baptized that day (Acts 2:41).

The church was born, and it was born preaching.

What the First Church Looked Like

Luke gives us a short picture of that first congregation. They devoted themselves to four things: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). They met in the temple courts and in homes. They shared what they had, so that nobody went without. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

Notice what was not there. No church building. No paid staff. No printed Bible. The first believers were Jews who still went to the temple to pray. Their Bible was what we call the Old Testament. The New Testament had not yet been written. What they had was the living memory of the apostles, the Scriptures they already knew, and the Holy Spirit.

That is worth remembering every time we argue about worship styles or church programs. The four marks of Acts 2:42 are still the heart of a healthy church. Everything else is a tool.

The First Opposition

It did not take long for trouble to come. Peter and John healed a man lame from birth at the temple gate and then preached to the crowd that gathered (Acts 3). The temple leaders arrested them and ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. Their answer has encouraged persecuted believers for two thousand years.

> *But Peter and John answering said to them, "Whether it is righteous before God to listen to you rather than to God, you judge; for we are not able not to speak the things which we have seen and heard."* (Acts 4:19-20)

They were arrested again, flogged, and released. They went away rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer for His name (Acts 5:40-41).

The church also faced trouble from inside. Ananias and Sapphira lied about a gift to make themselves look generous, and God judged them (Acts 5:1-11). Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being overlooked in the daily food distribution, and the apostles had the church choose seven men to oversee it (Acts 6:1-6). Those seven are often seen as the first deacons. From the very beginning the church had to deal with sin among its members and with the plain business of caring for people fairly.

Stephen, the First Martyr

One of the seven was a man named Stephen, full of grace and power. Opponents dragged him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and he answered them with a long sermon that walked through Israel's history (Acts 7). When he finished, they rushed at him, drove him out of the city, and stoned him. As he died he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and then, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:59-60).

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. The word martyr comes from the Greek word for witness. In the early church the two ideas grew together, because so many witnesses for Christ paid with their lives.

A young man named Saul stood by and approved of the killing, holding the coats of those who threw the stones (Acts 7:58; 8:1). Hold on to that name. God was not finished with him.

Scattered and Spreading

After Stephen's death a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and the believers were scattered through Judea and Samaria, all except the apostles (Acts 8:1). What looked like a disaster

turned out to be God's plan. "Those who had been scattered went about preaching the word ***as*** the gospel" (Acts 8:4).

Philip, another of the seven, preached in Samaria, and many believed. Then the Lord sent him to a desert road where he met an official from Ethiopia, treasurer to the queen, reading the prophet Isaiah in his chariot. Philip explained that the Lamb led to the slaughter in Isaiah 53 was Jesus, and the man was baptized on the spot (Acts 8:26-39). The gospel was already headed for Africa.

Then Peter, through a vision and a visit to the home of a Roman officer named Cornelius, learned that God was pouring out His Spirit on Gentiles too (Acts 10). This was a hard lesson for Jewish believers. Peter had to explain himself to the church in Jerusalem, and when they heard what had happened, they glorified God and said, "Then God has given to the Gentiles also the repentance to life" (Acts 11:18).

Antioch, Where Believers Were First Called Christians

Some of the scattered believers went north to Antioch in Syria, one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. There they did something new. They preached the Lord Jesus to Greeks, not only to Jews, and a great number believed (Acts 11:20-21). The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to see what was going on. He was glad, and he went to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him to Antioch to help teach. Luke adds a small detail that turned into a big one: "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26).

Antioch became the launching point for the mission to the Gentile world. In the next chapter we will follow Saul, now called Paul, on that mission.

What This Means for Us

The first church had every reason to give up. Its leader had been executed. Its members were arrested, beaten, and scattered. It had no money, no buildings, and no political power. It did have the risen Lord, the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, and a message worth dying for. That turned out to be enough.

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 1:8. How does this verse give the outline for the rest of Acts? How does it still apply to your church?
2. What four things did the first believers devote themselves to in Acts 2:42? Which one is weakest in your own life right now?
3. Peter denied Jesus three times, then preached boldly at Pentecost. What changed him?
4. How did the persecution after Stephen's death end up spreading the gospel? Can you think of a hard time in your life that God used for good?
5. Why was it so hard for Jewish believers to accept that Gentiles could be saved without becoming Jews first?

Chapter 2: Paul and the Gospel to the Nations

> *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is **the** power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, both to **the** Jew first and to **the** Greek.*
>
> Romans 1:16 (SLB)

If you had told the believers in Jerusalem that Saul of Tarsus would become the greatest missionary the church would ever know, they would have laughed, or run. Saul was a Pharisee, a brilliant student of the law, and the church's most dangerous enemy. He was on the road to Damascus with letters from the high priest to arrest any followers of Jesus he could find.

Then he met the risen Lord.

The Road to Damascus

Near Damascus a light from heaven flashed around Saul. He fell to the ground and heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" He asked who was speaking, and the answer came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). Blind for three days, Saul was led into the city. A frightened believer named Ananias was sent to lay hands on him. Saul received his sight, was filled with the Spirit, and was baptized. Before long he was preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:17-20).

Paul tells us later that he spent time in Arabia and then returned to Damascus, and only after three years went up to Jerusalem to meet Peter (Galatians 1:17-18). Many of the believers there were afraid of him until Barnabas vouched for him (Acts 9:26-27). Barnabas shows up again and again in the early chapters of church history, the man who believed in people others had given up on.

Three Missionary Journeys

While the church at Antioch was worshiping and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart now for Me both Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). That was the start of what we call Paul's first missionary journey, probably in the late 40s A.D. They sailed to Cyprus and then went into the region of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey. They preached first in the Jewish synagogues and then to the Gentiles, and they planted churches in towns like Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13-14).

On the second journey, Paul took Silas, and later Timothy and Luke joined them. In a vision a man from Macedonia begged, "Having crossed over into Macedonia, help us!" (Acts 16:9). So the gospel crossed into Europe. A businesswoman named Lydia believed at Philippi, and a jailer and his whole house believed the same night that Paul and Silas sang hymns in his prison at midnight (Acts 16). Paul went on to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth, where he stayed a year and a half (Acts 18:11).

On the third journey Paul spent about three years in Ephesus, the great city of the goddess Artemis (Acts 20:31). The gospel spread so widely from there that the silversmiths who made shrines for Artemis started a riot because business was falling off (Acts 19:23-41).

The Letters

As Paul traveled he wrote letters to the churches he had planted and to a few he had not yet visited. Those letters, along with the letters of Peter, James, John, and Jude, became most of our New Testament. Paul did not sit down to write a systematic textbook. He wrote to real churches with real problems: divisions at Corinth, false teachers in Galatia, worry about believers who had died at Thessalonica.

Because they were written to meet real needs, the letters give us a window into the early church. We see house churches meeting in homes like that of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3-5). We see elders and deacons appointed to lead (Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5). We see believers taking the Lord's Supper together (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). We also see the church struggling with sin, false teaching, and quarrels. The early church was not perfect. It was real.

The Council at Jerusalem

The biggest question facing the young church was this: do Gentile believers have to become Jews to be saved? Some teachers came down to Antioch from Judea and said, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you are not able to be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas argued hard against them, and the church sent them to Jerusalem to settle the matter with the apostles and elders.

This meeting, probably about A.D. 49, is often called the Council of Jerusalem. Peter reminded them that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as He had to the Jews, cleansing their hearts by faith. He said, "through the grace of ***the*** Lord Jesus Christ we believe ***that we*** are saved in the same manner as they also" (Acts 15:11). James, the brother of the Lord and leader of the Jerusalem church, agreed. The council sent a letter telling the Gentile believers they did not need to be circumcised or keep the whole law of Moses, though it asked them to avoid a few things that would deeply offend their Jewish brothers (Acts 15:19-29).

This was a turning point. The gospel would not be a Jewish sect with a few Gentile guests. It would be good news for every nation, received by grace through faith. Paul would fight for that truth all his life, most famously in Galatians and Romans. Fifteen centuries later, Martin Luther would find his way back to God through those same letters.

Prison and Rome

Paul's last trip to Jerusalem ended in a riot and his arrest (Acts 21). He spent two years in custody in Caesarea, defended himself before the governors Felix and Festus and King Agrippa, and finally used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11). After a storm and a shipwreck on Malta, he reached Rome. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest there for two full years, welcoming all who came to him, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered" (Acts 28:30-31).

Luke does not tell us what happened next. Early Christian writers say Paul was eventually put to death in Rome under the emperor Nero. We will look at that in the next chapter.

What This Means for Us

Paul is proof that no one is too far gone for God. The man who held the coats at Stephen's stoning became the apostle to the Gentiles. And the Jerusalem Council is proof that the church has to decide hard questions by going back to what God has said and done, not by what feels comfortable. Those two lessons will come up again and again in the centuries ahead.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think God chose the church's worst enemy to become its greatest missionary?
2. Read Acts 13:1-3. What was the church at Antioch doing when the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas? What does that teach us about how mission starts?
3. What was the question at the Council of Jerusalem? Why did the answer matter so much?
4. Paul's letters were written to real churches with real problems. Which problem in those letters sounds most like the church today?
5. Barnabas stood up for Paul when others were afraid of him. Who has been a Barnabas to you? Who could you be one for?

Chapter 3: The Apostles' Last Days and the Fall of Jerusalem

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7 (SLB)

The book of Acts closes around A.D. 62 with Paul in Rome. For what happened after that, we have to turn to other sources: a few hints in the New Testament, the Jewish historian Josephus, Roman historians, and the early Christian writers who came after the apostles. Their reports are not Scripture, and they are not all equally reliable. But taken together, they give us a fairly clear picture of the end of the apostolic age.

The Death of James

James, the brother of Jesus, led the church in Jerusalem. He had not believed in Jesus during His ministry (John 7:5), but the risen Lord appeared to him (1 Corinthians 15:7), and he became a pillar of the church (Galatians 2:9). He wrote the letter of James.

Josephus, writing about A.D. 93, tells us that after the Roman governor Festus died, and before the next one, Albinus, arrived, the high priest Ananus took advantage of the gap. That was about A.D. 62.

> "so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others"
>
> *Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 20.9.1, translated by William Whiston*

Josephus says they were charged as breakers of the law and delivered to be stoned. This short passage is important for two reasons. It confirms James's death from a non-Christian writer, and it mentions Jesus "who was called Christ" in passing, as someone his readers already knew about. Most historians, including many who are not Christians, accept this passage as genuine.

Nero and the Great Fire of Rome

In July of A.D. 64 a great fire swept through Rome for days. Rumors spread that the emperor Nero had ordered it so he could rebuild the city to his own taste. Nero needed someone to blame. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing about fifty years later, tells us whom he chose.

From the Record: Tacitus on Nero's Persecution (*Text checked*)

Tacitus was a Roman senator and no friend of Christians. In his *Annals*, written about A.D. 115 to 120, he says Nero "fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace." He then explains where the name came from: "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus."

He goes on to describe believers covered in animal skins and torn by dogs, nailed to crosses, or burned as torches to light Nero's gardens at night. Even Tacitus, who despised the Christians, admits that people began to feel pity

for them, because they were being destroyed "to glut one man's cruelty."

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, Church and Brodribb translation.

This was the first time the Roman state turned its full power on the church. It would not be the last.

Peter and Paul in Rome

The New Testament does not record the deaths of Peter or Paul. Jesus told Peter he would die by stretching out his hands, a hint at crucifixion, and John says this pointed to the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (John 21:18-19). In his last letter, Paul wrote from prison that the time of his departure had come (2 Timothy 4:6).

Clement of Rome, writing to the Corinthian church in the 90s A.D., speaks of Peter and Paul as examples of faithful men who suffered and bore witness. The church historian Eusebius, writing in the early 300s, gathered the older reports. He says Paul was beheaded in Rome and Peter crucified there under Nero, and he quotes a Roman church leader named Gaius, from about A.D. 200, who said he could point out the burial places of the two apostles.

From the Record: The Trophies of the Apostles (*Reported*)

Eusebius quotes Gaius: "But I can show the trophies of the apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church."

The word trophies here probably means monuments or tombs. Gaius places Peter at the Vatican hill and Paul on the road to Ostia. Later tradition adds that Peter asked to be crucified upside down, because he did not feel worthy to die the same way as his Lord. That detail comes from later writings and is less certain.

Source: Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25, translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Volume 1.

The Fall of Jerusalem, A.D. 70

In A.D. 66 the Jews of Judea revolted against Rome. The war was long and terrible. In A.D. 70 the Roman general Titus, son of the emperor Vespasian, besieged Jerusalem, broke through its walls, and burned the temple. Josephus, who was there as a prisoner of the Romans, describes the famine, the fighting, and the fire in his book *The Jewish War*.

Jesus had warned of this almost forty years earlier. Looking at the temple, He told His disciples, "there will by no means be left here stone upon stone which will not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2). He told them that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies, they should flee to the mountains (Luke 21:20-21).

Eusebius records that the believers in Jerusalem took that warning to heart.

From the Record: The Flight to Pella (*Reported*)

Eusebius writes that "the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella." Pella

was a town east of the Jordan River.

Some modern historians question this report, but many accept it. It fits Jesus' warning in Luke 21, and it explains how the Jerusalem church survived the destruction of the city.

Source: Eusebius, *Church History* 3.5, McGiffert translation.

The fall of Jerusalem changed the church. The temple was gone. The mother church in Jerusalem was scattered. From then on, the center of Christian life shifted to cities like Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, and Rome, and the church became more and more a Gentile church.

John, the Last of the Apostles

Early Christian writers agree that the apostle John lived longer than the others. Irenaeus, a bishop in Gaul (modern France) who wrote about A.D. 180, says John lived in Ephesus into the time of the emperor Trajan, who began to rule in A.D. 98. Irenaeus had learned from Polycarp, and Polycarp had known John. That is a short chain back to an apostle.

Revelation tells us John was on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9). Most scholars date Revelation to about A.D. 95, near the end of the emperor Domitian's reign, though some date it earlier.

With John's death, around the end of the first century, the age of the apostles ended. Their teaching did not die with them. It was already written down in the Gospels and letters that the churches were reading, copying, and passing from city to city.

What This Means for Us

The apostles finished their race. They did not win the approval of the world. Most of them were killed by it. But they kept the faith, and they handed it on. Paul's words to Timothy are a charge to every generation: "the things which you heard from me through many witnesses, commit these to faithful men, who will be sufficient to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Study Questions

1. Why does it matter that a Jewish historian like Josephus and a Roman historian like Tacitus mention Jesus and His followers?
2. Read Tacitus's description of Nero's persecution. How do you think the believers in Rome kept going?
3. Jesus warned His disciples about the fall of Jerusalem decades before it happened. How did that warning help them?
4. How did the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 change the church?
5. Read 2 Timothy 2:2. Count the generations in that verse. Who entrusted the faith to you, and who are you entrusting it to?

Chapter 4: Three Centuries of Persecution

> *Fear nothing of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to cast **some** of you into prison, so that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life.*
>
> Revelation 2:10 (SLB)

For about 250 years after Nero, being a Christian in the Roman Empire was dangerous. Persecution was not constant everywhere. Long stretches went by in many places with little trouble. But at any time a governor, a mob, or an emperor could turn on the believers, and the law gave them little protection. Some of the most moving pages in all of church history come from this period.

Why Rome Hated the Christians

Rome was usually tolerant of other religions. Conquered peoples could keep their gods as long as they also honored the gods of Rome and the emperor. Jews were given a special exemption because their faith was ancient. Christians were a problem for several reasons.

- **They would not worship the gods or the emperor.** To Romans this looked like disloyalty, even treason. Christians were called atheists, because they refused to honor any god but their own.
- **They met in private.** Rumors spread that they ate human flesh and drank blood (a twisted version of the Lord's Supper) and practiced immorality at their love feasts.
- **They were blamed for disasters.** If the gods were angry and sent a plague, a famine, or a defeat, it was easy to blame the people who refused to worship them.
- **They were growing.** The faith spread among slaves and the poor, but also into wealthy homes. That made it a threat to the old way of life.

A Governor Asks the Emperor

One of the clearest windows into this period comes from a Roman governor, not a Christian. Pliny the Younger governed the province of Bithynia, on the Black Sea coast of what is now Turkey, about A.D. 111 to 113. Christians were being brought before him, and he was not sure what to do, so he wrote to the emperor Trajan.

From the Record: Pliny's Letter to Trajan (*Text checked*)

Pliny explains that he asked accused people three times whether they were Christians, and executed those who would not deny it. Some who had left the faith told him what Christians did. "They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they met on a stated day before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity, binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up."

Pliny tortured two female slaves, whom he says were called deaconesses, and found nothing but what he called superstition. Trajan replied that Christians should not be hunted down, but if they were accused and refused to worship the gods, they should be punished.

Source: Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, Book 10 (letter 96 in modern numbering, 97 in Melmoth's), translated by William Melmoth.

Notice what this hostile witness admits. The Christians met early in the morning, worshiped Christ as God, and promised one another to live honest, clean lives. That was their crime.

Ignatius: The Wheat of God

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch, the city where believers were first called Christians. Around A.D. 107 to 110, during Trajan's reign, he was arrested and taken under guard to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts. On the way he wrote seven letters to churches, and they survive. In his letter to the Romans he begged the believers there not to try to win his release.

> "I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ."

Ignatius, Letter to the Romans 4, in The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Volume 1, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson

Ignatius also urged the churches to stay united around their bishop and elders and to reject false teachers who said Jesus only seemed to have a real body. He is one of our earliest witnesses to how the churches were organized after the apostles.

Polycarp: Eighty-Six Years

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna, one of the seven churches of Revelation (Revelation 2:8-11). He had known the apostle John. When he was an old man, about A.D. 155 or 156, a persecution broke out in Smyrna, and the crowd demanded his death. The church in Smyrna wrote an account of what happened and sent it to other churches. It is the oldest account of a Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament.

From the Record: The Martyrdom of Polycarp (*Text checked*)

Brought into the stadium, Polycarp was told by the Roman proconsul to swear by the emperor and curse Christ, and he would be set free. "Polycarp declared, 'Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?'"

When the proconsul threatened him with fire, Polycarp answered that the fire of the judge would burn only for a moment, but the fire of the coming judgment is eternal. He was burned at the stake, and when the fire did not consume him, an executioner stabbed him.

Source: *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9, in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Volume 1, edited by Roberts and Donaldson. The year is debated; most scholars place it about A.D. 155 to 160.

Justin, Perpetua, and Many Others

Justin was a philosopher from Samaria who searched through the schools of the Greeks and found the truth in Christ. He opened a school in Rome and wrote defenses of the faith to the emperor. About A.D.

165 he and several of his students were beheaded for refusing to sacrifice to the gods. The church has called him Justin Martyr ever since.

In A.D. 177, believers in the cities of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul were tortured and killed. A letter from those churches, preserved by Eusebius, tells of a slave girl named Blandina who was tortured from morning until evening and kept saying, “I am a Christian, and there is nothing vile done by us.”

In A.D. 203 in Carthage, North Africa, a young noblewoman named Perpetua, a nursing mother, and her slave Felicity, who gave birth in prison, were put to death in the arena with several others. Perpetua’s own prison diary survives as part of the account of their deaths. Her father begged her to deny Christ for the sake of her baby. She pointed to a water pitcher and asked him whether it could be called by any other name than what it was. He said no. “Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.” (That is a paraphrase of her words. I could not open the full text to check the exact translation.)

The Empire Tries to Finish It

In the 200s the empire was in crisis: civil wars, invasions, plague, and money troubles. Some emperors decided the gods were angry and the Christians had to be forced back into line.

In A.D. 250 the emperor Decius ordered every person in the empire to offer a sacrifice to the gods and get a certificate proving they had done it. This was the first empire-wide persecution. Many Christians were killed, including the bishop of Rome, Fabian. Many others gave in and sacrificed. Valerian renewed the persecution in 257 and 258, and the great bishop Cyprian of Carthage was beheaded in 258.

The worst was still to come. In A.D. 303 the emperor Diocletian and his co-rulers launched what is called the Great Persecution. Churches were torn down, Scriptures were burned, church leaders were imprisoned, and Christians were tortured and killed, especially in the eastern half of the empire, where it went on until 311 and in places until 313.

Fallen Believers and a Hard Question

Persecution created a painful problem. What should the church do with believers who denied Christ under pressure and then wanted to come back? Some leaders said they could never be restored. Others said they could, after real repentance. The church as a whole chose the path of restoration, with care. That decision still speaks to us. Peter denied the Lord three times, and Jesus restored him (John 21:15-17).

Seed for the Harvest

The persecutions did not destroy the church. They spread it. The courage of the martyrs made people ask what kind of faith could make a slave girl or an old bishop face death so calmly. The North African writer Tertullian, about A.D. 197, wrote in his *Apology* that the blood of Christians is seed. (That is the sense of his words, often quoted as “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The exact Latin is shorter, and I could not open a translation to check the English wording.)

By the year 300, after all of this, Christians may have made up something like a tenth of the empire's population. Historians' estimates vary widely, because no one was counting.

What This Means for Us

Most of us reading this book will never face a lion. But the same questions face us. Will we confess Christ when it costs us something? Will we live honest, clean lives that even our critics have to admit? Will we restore those who fall? Jesus told the church in Smyrna, Polycarp's church, "Be faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Study Questions

1. Why did the Romans, who allowed so many religions, persecute Christians?
2. Read Pliny's description of the Christians. What does a hostile witness reveal about how they lived?
3. Polycarp said Christ had never done him any injury in eighty-six years. Could you say the same? Why?
4. How should the church treat believers who fall away under pressure and want to come back? What does John 21:15-17 teach?
5. Christians are still being persecuted in many countries today. How can your church pray for and help them?

Chapter 5: Guarding the Gospel: Scripture, Creeds, and False Teachers

> *Beloved, while making all diligence to write to you concerning our common salvation, I had necessity to write to you, exhorting **you** to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.*
>
> Jude 1:3 (SLB)

Persecution was the danger from outside. False teaching was the danger from inside. And in many ways it was the greater danger. A martyr's death strengthened the church. A twisted gospel could empty it of its life while leaving the name in place.

The apostles had already warned about this. Paul told the elders of Ephesus that savage wolves would come in among them and that men would rise up from their own number speaking twisted things (Acts 20:29-30). In the century after the apostles, that is exactly what happened.

The Gnostics

The biggest challenge in the 100s came from a set of movements we call Gnostic, from the Greek word *gnosis*, knowledge. There were many kinds, but they shared some core ideas.

- The physical world is evil, or at best a mistake, made by a lesser god, not the true God.
- Salvation comes through secret knowledge passed down to a spiritual few.
- Christ was a spiritual being who only seemed to have a body. He did not truly suffer and die.

You can see why this was so dangerous. If Jesus did not have a real body, He did not really die for our sins, and He did not really rise from the dead. The apostle John had already seen the start of this. He wrote, "every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ having come in ***the*** flesh is of God" (1 John 4:2).

The Gnostics also wrote their own gospels, books like the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Judas*. These were written in the 100s or later, long after the apostles, and the churches did not accept them. You may hear on television that these books are "lost gospels" the church tried to hide. The truth is that the early church knew about them, read them, and rejected them because they did not match the apostles' teaching.

Irenaeus Answers Back

The greatest early answer to the Gnostics came from Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul, who wrote a long work called *Against Heresies* about A.D. 180. Irenaeus had grown up in Asia Minor and heard Polycarp, who had known John.

Irenaeus made a simple but powerful argument. The Gnostics claimed to have secret teaching from the apostles. But if the apostles had any secret teaching, they would surely have given it to the men they put in charge of the churches. Those churches could name the leaders who came after the apostles, one after

another, and none of them taught what the Gnostics taught. The real teaching of the apostles was public, not secret, and it was written down in the Scriptures.

Irenaeus also gave one of the earliest lists of the four Gospels as a set. He said there could be no more and no fewer than four: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Marcion and the Question of the Canon

About A.D. 144, a wealthy shipowner named Marcion was put out of the church at Rome. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was a different, harsher god from the loving Father Jesus revealed. So he threw out the Old Testament completely. He kept only an edited version of Luke and ten of Paul's letters, with the parts he disliked cut out.

Marcion forced the church to answer a question it had not needed to answer in a formal way before: which books are Scripture?

How the New Testament Came Together

The word canon comes from a Greek word for a measuring rod. The canon is the list of books the church recognizes as God's Word.

It is important to get this right. The church did not make certain books Scripture by voting on them. The books were Scripture because God inspired them. What the church did, over time, was recognize which books carried that authority. Several tests were used:

- **Apostolic origin.** Was it written by an apostle or a close companion of an apostle, like Mark (Peter's companion) or Luke (Paul's)?
- **Agreement with the faith.** Did it agree with the teaching the churches had received from the start?
- **Use by the churches.** Had it been read in worship by churches everywhere, not only in one region?

By about A.D. 200 the four Gospels, Acts, and the letters of Paul were accepted almost everywhere. A few shorter books, such as 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation, were questioned in some places longer than others.

The first list we have that names exactly our 27 New Testament books, no more and no fewer, comes from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter letter of A.D. 367. Church gatherings at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 in North Africa affirmed the same list. They were not creating a new Bible. They were writing down what the churches already used.

The Rule of Faith and the Apostles' Creed

Even before the canon was settled, the churches had a short summary of the faith that new believers learned before baptism. Irenaeus and Tertullian both call it the rule of faith. It confessed one God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth; Jesus Christ His Son, born of the virgin, who suffered, rose, ascended, and will come again; and the Holy Spirit.

In Rome, the questions asked at baptism grew into what is called the Old Roman Creed, and that in turn grew into what we now call the Apostles' Creed. The apostles did not write it, despite a later legend that

each one contributed a line. But it is a faithful summary of what they taught, and its final form was settled by the 700s. You can read it in Appendix B.

Other Challenges

The church also faced the Montanists, a movement that began about A.D. 156 in Phrygia (central Turkey). Montanus and two women prophets claimed the Holy Spirit was speaking new revelation through them that went beyond the apostles. The churches rejected their claims. That decision helped set a principle: the Spirit does not add to or contradict the Scriptures He inspired.

Others taught that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were not three persons, but only three masks or modes of one person. This teaching, called modalism, was also rejected. Tertullian, answering it about A.D. 213, was the first writer we know of to use the Latin word *trinitas*, Trinity, for the one God in three persons.

What This Means for Us

Jude urged believers "to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Once for all means it is complete. We do not need a new gospel, a secret knowledge, or a new prophet to add to it. The early church fought hard to keep the gospel the apostles gave them, and we have the Bible we hold today in part because they did.

Study Questions

1. Why was the Gnostic idea that Jesus only seemed to have a body so dangerous to the gospel?
2. What would you say to someone who claims the church hid the "lost gospels"?
3. Did the church create the New Testament or recognize it? Why does the difference matter?
4. Read 1 John 4:1-3. How does John tell us to test what we hear?
5. Read the Apostles' Creed in Appendix B. Which line means the most to you, and why?

Part Two: The Church and the Empire (313 to 1054)

Chapter 6: Constantine and the Turning of the Empire

> *Streams of water **is** the heart of a king in the hand of the LORD; to all that He desires He turns it.*
>
> Proverbs 21:1 (SLB)

In the year 303 the Roman Empire was doing everything it could to destroy the church. By 313 the emperors had declared that Christians were free to worship. By 380 Christianity was the official faith of the empire. No one living through the Great Persecution could have imagined it. The change came through one man, and historians have argued about him ever since.

The Battle at the Milvian Bridge

When Diocletian retired in 305, the empire fell into a struggle among several rival rulers. One of them was Constantine, whose troops had proclaimed him emperor in York, Britain, in 306. In October 312 he marched on Rome to face his rival Maxentius. The two armies met at the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber River on 28 October 312.

Two Christian writers who knew Constantine tell us that before the battle he turned to the God of the Christians. Lactantius, who tutored Constantine's son, says Constantine was told in a dream to mark the heavenly sign of God on his soldiers' shields, and he did so with a symbol of the name of Christ. Eusebius, who wrote a *Life of Constantine* after the emperor died, says Constantine told him under oath that he and his army saw a cross of light in the sky above the sun with the words "Conquer by this." The two accounts do not fully agree, and historians debate what really happened. What is certain is that Constantine won the battle, Maxentius drowned in the river, and Constantine credited the God of the Christians with his victory.

The Edict of Milan, 313

Early in 313 Constantine met with Licinius, the emperor in the East, at Milan. They agreed on a policy of religious freedom, and Licinius published it in the East that June. It is usually called the Edict of Milan. It gave Christians and everyone else the freedom to follow whatever religion they chose, and it ordered that church buildings and property taken in the persecutions be returned.

For believers who had buried their friends and hidden their Bibles only a few years earlier, this must have felt like a miracle. Psalm 126:1 could have been their song: "When the LORD brought back the restoration of Zion, we were like those who dream."

Was Constantine a Real Christian?

This is one of the big questions in church history, and I will not pretend it is easy.

On one side, Constantine gave large gifts to the church, built great churches in Rome, Jerusalem, and his new capital, Constantinople, made Sunday a day of rest in 321, ended crucifixion as a punishment, and called the first worldwide council of the church at Nicaea. He spoke often of his faith in Christ.

On the other side, he kept the pagan title of chief priest, kept some pagan symbols on his coins for years, and had his own son Crispus and his wife Fausta put to death in 326. He was not baptized until he was dying in 337, which was not unusual then, because many people believed baptism washed away past sins and so they put it off.

Only God knows the heart. What we can say is that Constantine's support changed the church's place in the world, for good and for ill.

The Blessings and the Dangers

The blessings were real. Persecution stopped. Churches could meet openly, build, train leaders, copy Scriptures, and care for the poor and sick on a large scale. The emperor himself ordered fifty copies of the Scriptures for the churches of Constantinople, according to Eusebius.

But the dangers were real too.

- **Nominal faith.** When being a Christian helped your career instead of costing your life, many joined the church without real faith in Christ.
- **Political power.** Emperors began to take part in church disputes and to back one side with the power of the state. Bishops began to act like officials of the empire.
- **Persecution in reverse.** In 380 the emperor Theodosius I declared the Nicene Christian faith the faith of the empire. Over the following years, pagan sacrifices were banned, and later Christians who held to other beliefs could be punished. The persecuted had become, in some places, the persecutors.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Whenever the church has forgotten that and tried to rule by the sword, it has hurt its witness. We will see that lesson again in the Crusades and the wars of religion.

The Monks Go to the Desert

Not everyone was happy with the comfortable new church. Even before Constantine, some believers had gone out to the deserts of Egypt to live lives of prayer and self-denial. The most famous was Antony of Egypt, who about A.D. 270 heard Matthew 19:21 read in church, sold his family land, gave the money to the poor, and went into the desert. He died about 356 at a very old age. Athanasius wrote his life story, and it inspired thousands to follow.

Once the church became popular, more and more people went into the desert. They wanted to fight sin and the devil without the distractions of the city and the easy faith of the crowd. Some went to strange extremes, like Simeon the Stylite, who lived on top of a pillar in Syria for decades. Others formed communities that lived by a common rule of prayer and work. Pachomius started one of the first such communities in Egypt in the 320s. That was the beginning of monasteries, which would shape the church for a thousand years.

I do not believe the Bible calls Christians to leave the world in that way. Jesus prayed not that the Father would take us out of the world, but that He would keep us from the evil one (John 17:15). But I respect what those early monks were protesting. They saw that a faith that costs nothing is not worth much.

What This Means for Us

The story of Constantine is a warning for every country where it is easy to be a Christian. Freedom to worship is a great gift, and we should thank God for it. But the church's real power has never come from the government. It comes from the gospel and the Spirit. When the church trades those for worldly power, it always loses more than it gains.

Study Questions

1. What changed for Christians between 303 and 313? How do you think they felt?
2. Do you think Constantine was a real believer? What evidence would you weigh?
3. What dangers came with the church's new favor in the empire? Do you see any of them in your own country?
4. Read John 18:36. What does it say about the church using worldly power?
5. Why did the early monks go to the desert? What can we learn from them, even if we do not follow them there?

Chapter 7: Who Is Jesus? The Great Councils

> *In **the** beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*
>
> John 1:1 (SLB)

With persecution over, the church faced a question that went to the very heart of the faith: who exactly is Jesus? Every Christian confessed that Jesus is Lord. But what did that mean? Is He God in the same full sense that the Father is God? Is He truly human? How can He be both? The answers the church gave in four great councils between 325 and 451 are still confessed by almost every Christian church in the world.

Arius and the Council of Nicaea, 325

About A.D. 318, a popular priest in Alexandria named Arius began teaching that the Son of God was the first and greatest thing God created. He was a lofty being, through whom God made everything else, but He was not eternal. Arius and his followers summed it up in a slogan usually translated *there was when He was not*. Arius even set his ideas to popular tunes so sailors and dockworkers sang them.

Alexander, his bishop, saw the danger at once. If the Son is a creature, then Christians who worship Him are worshiping a creature, which is idolatry. And a creature could not save us. Only God can.

The dispute spread through the East. Constantine, who wanted a united church in a united empire, called a council of bishops to meet at Nicaea, near his capital, in 325. Around 300 bishops came, many of them bearing scars from the Great Persecution.

The council rejected Arius. It wrote a creed confessing that the Son is of one substance with the Father, in Greek *homoousios*, the same being as the Father, not a lesser being. In the familiar English of the Book of Common Prayer, the creed as later expanded calls Him “Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father.”

Athanasius Against the World

Nicaea did not end the fight. For about fifty years Arian ideas came back again and again, often with the support of later emperors. The great defender of the Nicene faith was Athanasius, who as a young deacon attended Nicaea and became bishop of Alexandria in 328. He was sent into exile five times by four different emperors. At one point it seemed as if the whole empire had turned against him, and a saying grew up about him: Athanasius against the world.

Athanasius argued from Scripture that the Son must be fully God. John says the Word was God (John 1:1). Thomas called the risen Jesus “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). Paul says that in Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). And Athanasius argued from salvation: only God can unite us to God. In his little book *On the Incarnation*, he showed how the eternal Word took on a human body to defeat death and restore the image of God in us.

The Holy Spirit and the Council of Constantinople, 381

While Athanasius defended the deity of the Son, three leaders from Cappadocia (central Turkey) helped the church think through the deity of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the Trinity. They were Basil the Great, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. They taught that God is one in being and three in persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In 381 the emperor Theodosius called a council at Constantinople. It confirmed Nicaea and expanded the creed, especially the part about the Holy Spirit. The creed now confessed the Spirit as "the Lord, and Giver of life," who proceeds from the Father and is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son. (The words "and the Son" after "proceeds from the Father" were added later in the West. Chapter 10 tells that story.) This expanded creed is what most churches today call the Nicene Creed. You can read it in Appendix B.

One Person, Two Natures: Ephesus and Chalcedon

Once the church had confessed that Jesus is fully God, a new question came up. How is He also fully human? Is He God wearing a human body like a suit? Is He two persons, one divine and one human, sharing a body? Or did His divine nature swallow up the human?

In 428 Nestorius, the new bishop of Constantinople, objected to calling Mary *Theotokos*, which means God-bearer, the one who gave birth to God. He preferred to call her Christ-bearer. His opponents, led by Cyril of Alexandria, believed Nestorius was dividing Christ into two persons. The Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Nestorius. It is worth being clear about why Theotokos mattered. The point was not to raise Mary up. The point was that the baby she carried was one person, and that person was God the Son.

Then the opposite error came. A monk named Eutyches taught that after the union, Christ had only one nature, with His humanity absorbed into His deity. In 451 the largest council yet, about 500 bishops, met at Chalcedon near Constantinople. It wrote a careful statement called the Definition of Chalcedon. It confesses one and the same Christ, truly God and truly man, known in two natures that are not mixed together, not changed into each other, not divided, and not separated.

That is a mouthful, but it guards something precious. Jesus is not half God and half man. He is fully God and fully man, one person. He is God, so He can save us. He is man, so He can stand in our place, be tempted as we are, and sympathize with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15).

Not Everyone Agreed

Chalcedon brought unity to much of the church, but not all. Many Christians in Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, and Armenia rejected it, mainly over the way it was worded, and formed their own churches, which still exist today, such as the Coptic Church of Egypt. The followers of Nestorius moved east, into Persia, and later carried the gospel as far as China. A stone monument set up in Xi'an, China, in 781 records the arrival of these Christian missionaries in 635.

Why Should We Care?

You may wonder why Christians fought so hard over Greek words. Here is why. Every one of these councils was defending the gospel. If Jesus is not fully God, He cannot save. If He is not fully human, He cannot represent us. If He is two persons, then the One who died on the cross was not God, and the cross loses its power. The creeds are not a replacement for the Bible. They are a guardrail along the road, built by people who had seen others drive off the cliff.

Study Questions

1. Why did it matter so much whether the Son of God is created or eternal?
2. Read John 1:1-3, 14 and Colossians 2:9. How do these verses answer Arius?
3. Athanasius stood almost alone for years. When is it right to stand against the majority?
4. Why must Jesus be both fully God and fully human to be our Savior?
5. Read the Nicene Creed in Appendix B slowly. What does it say about who Jesus is?

Chapter 8: Augustine, Jerome, and the Fall of Rome

For here we do not have an abiding city, but we are seeking the one to come.

Hebrews 13:14 (SLB)

The late 300s and early 400s gave the church some of its greatest teachers. They also brought a shock that rattled the whole Roman world. In 410 the city of Rome, which had not fallen to a foreign enemy in about 800 years, was captured and plundered by the Visigoths. Many pagans blamed the Christians. The greatest answer to that charge came from a bishop in North Africa whose own story is one of the most famous conversions in history.

Ambrose of Milan

Ambrose was the Roman governor in Milan when the bishop died in 374. A dispute broke out over who should take his place, and Ambrose went to the church to keep the peace. The crowd demanded that he become their bishop, even though he had not yet been baptized. Within a week he was baptized and made bishop.

Ambrose became a fearless preacher. In 390 the emperor Theodosius ordered a massacre of thousands of people in Thessalonica after a riot. Ambrose refused to give him communion until he publicly repented, and the emperor did. That was the first time a bishop had made an emperor bow to the moral law of God. It was a good moment. In later centuries the same idea would be stretched into popes claiming power over kings, which was not.

Jerome and the Latin Bible

Jerome was the great Bible scholar of his day. Born about 347, he studied in Rome, lived as a hermit in the Syrian desert, and learned Hebrew from a Jewish convert. In 382 Pope Damasus asked him to revise the Latin translations of the Gospels, which had become a confusing mess of different versions.

Jerome went much further. Settling in Bethlehem in 386, he spent many years translating most of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew, finishing about 405. His work became the core of the Latin Bible later called the Vulgate, from the Latin word for common, because it was in the common language of the western church. For a thousand years the Vulgate was the Bible of western Europe.

Jerome also made a point that would matter greatly in the Reformation. He said the extra books found in the Greek Old Testament, such as Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, could be read for example and instruction, but were not to be used to prove doctrine, because they were not in the Hebrew Scriptures. Protestants later followed Jerome on this. The Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in 1546 declared those books part of the Old Testament.

Augustine: A Restless Heart

Augustine was born in 354 in Thagaste, North Africa, in what is now Algeria. His mother Monica was a devoted Christian who prayed for him for years. His father was a pagan. Augustine was brilliant and ambitious, and he chased pleasure, success, and every philosophy that promised answers. He lived with a woman for years outside of marriage and had a son with her. He joined a religious sect called the Manichaeans. He became a professor of public speaking and moved to Rome and then Milan.

In Milan he went to hear Ambrose preach, at first just to study his speaking style. The sermons got under his skin. He was convinced the Christian faith was true, but he could not let go of his sins. He describes the struggle in his book *Confessions*, written about 397 to 400. One day in 386, in a garden in Milan, weeping under a fig tree, he heard a child's voice from a nearby house.

> "Take up and read; Take up and read."
>
> *Augustine, Confessions, Book 8, translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey*

He picked up the letters of Paul and read the first passage his eyes fell on, Romans 13:13-14: not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh. He later wrote that a light of peace flooded his heart and all the darkness of doubt fled away. He was baptized by Ambrose at Easter in 387. Monica died that same year, her prayers answered.

The *Confessions* opens with a prayer that has been quoted ever since.

> "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."
>
> *Augustine, Confessions, Book 1, Pusey translation*

Bishop of Hippo

Augustine went home to North Africa, and in 391, while visiting the port city of Hippo, he was pressed into becoming a priest. A few years later he became bishop, and he served there until his death in 430. He preached, wrote, settled disputes, and cared for the poor. He wrote more than almost anyone in the ancient world.

Two of his battles shaped the church for centuries.

- **Against Pelagius.** Pelagius, a British monk teaching in Rome, taught that people are born without sin and can obey God by their own willpower if they try hard enough. Augustine answered from Scripture that we are born fallen, dead in sin, and that we are saved only by God's grace, which goes before our faith and makes it possible (Ephesians 2:1-9). The church condemned Pelagius's teaching at Carthage in 418 and at Ephesus in 431. Luther and Calvin would draw heavily on Augustine here.
- **Against the Donatists.** The Donatists, a large North African church, said that a minister who had given in during the persecutions could never again give valid baptism or communion, and that only their church was pure. Augustine argued that the power of baptism comes from Christ, not from the holiness of the minister. Sadly, he also came to support the use of state force against the Donatists, which later generations used to justify persecution.

The City of God

When Rome fell to the Visigoths in 410, pagans said that the old gods had protected Rome and that the Christians' God had let it fall. Augustine spent thirteen years, from 413 to 426, writing his answer, *The City of God*.

He said that all of history is the story of two cities. The earthly city is built on love of self. The city of God is built on love of God. They are mixed together in this world, and no earthly kingdom, not even a Christian Rome, is the kingdom of God. Empires rise and fall. The city of God goes on forever. As Hebrews puts it, here we do not have a lasting city, but we seek the one to come (Hebrews 13:14).

That is a lesson for every Christian who puts too much hope in a nation, a party, or a leader.

Augustine died in 430 while the Vandals were besieging Hippo. He is honored by Catholics and Protestants alike, though both sides draw different things from him.

The Western Empire Falls

The Western Roman Empire did not end in a single day. Over the 400s, Germanic peoples settled across its lands: Visigoths in Spain, Franks in Gaul, Vandals in North Africa, Angles and Saxons in Britain. The Vandals sacked Rome again in 455. In 476 a Germanic general named Odoacer removed the last western emperor, a boy named Romulus Augustulus, and did not bother to name a new one. Historians often use that year as the end of the Western empire. The Eastern empire, ruled from Constantinople, went on for almost another thousand years.

In the West, the church was often the one institution left standing. Bishops took on the job of feeding cities, bargaining with invaders, and keeping order. In 452 Pope Leo I met Attila the Hun in northern Italy, and Attila turned back, though historians debate how much Leo had to do with it. More and more, the bishop of Rome came to be seen as the leader of the western church. That would have huge results in the centuries to come.

Study Questions

1. Ambrose made an emperor repent. When is it right for church leaders to confront those in power?
2. Why did Jerome separate the books in the Hebrew Bible from the extra books found in the Greek Old Testament?
3. Read Romans 13:13-14, the passage that changed Augustine's life. Why do you think it hit him so hard?
4. Augustine said our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Where have you seen that to be true?
5. What does Augustine's idea of the two cities teach us about putting our hope in nations or leaders?

Chapter 9: Missionaries to the Nations

> *Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, as many as I commanded you; and look, I am with you all the days, until the consummation of the age. Amen.*
>
> Matthew 28:19-20 (SLB)

As the Western empire broke apart, the gospel kept moving. In some ways it moved faster than before, out past the old Roman borders to peoples Rome had never ruled. This chapter follows a few of the missionaries who carried it. Some of their stories have collected legends over the centuries, and I will try to separate what we know from what was added later.

My own spiritual family tree starts with Pastor Jimmy Carter, who lived down my street in Victorville, took me to church and led me to Christ. Someone shared the gospel with him, and he passed it to a kid in his neighborhood. Years later, I got to pass it on through youth mission trips to Baja and teaching Bible studies. Every believer stands at the end of a long chain of ordinary people who did not keep the gospel to themselves.

Patrick of Ireland

Patrick is surrounded by more legends than almost anyone in church history: snakes driven out of Ireland, the shamrock used to teach the Trinity, and much more. None of those stories come from Patrick himself. What we do have is far better. Two short writings by Patrick survive, and one of them, his *Confession*, tells his own story in his own rough Latin.

From the Record: Patrick's Own Words (*Text checked*)

Patrick opens his Confession this way: "I, Patrick, a sinner, the rudest and least of all the faithful, and most contemptible to very many, had for my father Calpornius, a deacon, the son of Potitus, a priest."

He tells how he was captured as a teenager by Irish raiders from his home in Roman Britain and taken to Ireland as a slave, where he tended flocks and learned to pray, many times a day and night. After six years he escaped and made it home. Later he believed God was calling him back to the people who had enslaved him, and he returned as a missionary bishop.

Source: Patrick, *Confession* 1, in *The Most Ancient Lives of Saint Patrick*, edited by James O'Leary (1880), Project Gutenberg.

Patrick does not give us dates. Historians usually place his mission in the 400s. The traditional dates, arrival in 432 and death in 461, come from later Irish records and are not certain. What is certain is that a former slave went back to evangelize his captors, and that Ireland became a land of churches and monasteries that later sent missionaries back to Britain and across Europe.

Columba and the Irish Missionaries

One of those Irish missionaries was Columba, who sailed from Ireland in 563 and founded a monastery on the small island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. From Iona, missionaries went out to the Picts of Scotland and later to the English kingdom of Northumbria. Irish monks like Columbanus, who left Ireland about 590, founded monasteries in what are now France, Switzerland, and Italy. In a time when much of Europe was falling into chaos, these men kept the Scriptures, copied books, and preached the gospel.

Gregory and the Mission to England

Our main source for the conversion of England is a monk named Bede, who wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731. Bede is careful by the standards of his time. He tells us when he is relying on what older people told him.

Bede tells a story about Gregory, who would become pope in 590. Before he was pope, Gregory saw some fair-skinned boys for sale in the market at Rome and asked where they came from.

From the Record: Not Angles, but Angels (*Reported*)

Bede says Gregory was told the boys were pagans from Britain, called Angles. "'Right,' said he, 'for they have an angelic face, and it is meet that such should be co-heirs with the Angels in heaven.'" Told they came from the province of Deira, he made another play on words: "Truly are they *De ira*, saved from wrath, and called to the mercy of Christ."

Bede says this story was handed down by tradition, so we should hold it loosely. But it fits what we know: as pope, Gregory did send a mission to the English.

Source: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1, translated by A. M. Sellar (1907), Project Gutenberg.

In 597 a monk named Augustine (not the same man as Augustine of Hippo) landed in Kent with about forty companions, sent by Pope Gregory. King Ethelbert of Kent, whose wife Bertha was already a Christian, allowed them to preach, and he was baptized. Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury. Meanwhile, the Irish missionaries from Iona were working in the north. At the Synod of Whitby in 664, the king of Northumbria decided to follow the Roman customs rather than the Irish ones, such as how to set the date of Easter. Bede himself spent his whole life in a Northumbrian monastery and died in 735.

Boniface, Apostle to the Germans

Missions also went the other way. An English monk named Wynfrith, better known as Boniface, went to the German tribes in the early 700s. The best-known story about him is that at Geismar he cut down a great oak tree sacred to the god Thor, and when nothing happened to him, many people turned from their gods. That story comes from a life of Boniface written by a priest named Willibald soon after his death. Boniface was killed with a group of companions by robbers in Frisia (in the modern Netherlands) in 754, still preaching in his seventies.

Cyril and Methodius, Apostles to the Slavs

In 862 a prince of Great Moravia (part of the modern Czech Republic and Slovakia) asked the emperor in Constantinople to send teachers who could teach his people in their own language. Two brothers from Thessalonica, Cyril and Methodius, were sent in 863. They spoke the Slavic language, and Cyril created an alphabet so the Slavs could have Scripture and worship in their own tongue. They translated the Gospels and the worship books.

Some in the western church objected that worship should be only in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, the three languages on the sign above the cross. Cyril and Methodius traveled to Rome to defend their work, and the pope approved it. Cyril died in Rome in 869. Their students carried the work to Bulgaria, and from there it reached Serbia and Russia. The Cyrillic alphabet used by Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Serbs today is named after Cyril, though it was probably developed by his students from the earlier alphabet he made.

The Conversion of Rus

In 988 Prince Vladimir of Kiev was baptized, and the people of his realm, the Rus, followed. The Russian Primary Chronicle, written later, says Vladimir sent envoys to look at different religions, and those who visited the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople reported that they did not know whether they were in heaven or on earth. Whether or not every detail is true, the Rus took their faith from Constantinople, and the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches trace their start to that baptism.

What This Means for Us

Every one of us who is not Jewish became a Christian because someone, somewhere back in our family line, crossed a border with the gospel. For many readers of this book, that chain runs back through missionaries like Patrick, Columba, Augustine of Canterbury, and Boniface. Notice also how often God used translation. Cyril and Methodius, like Jerome before them and Tyndale after them, believed people should hear God's Word in their own language. The task Jesus gave in Matthew 28 is not finished, and the same convictions still drive Bible translators today.

Study Questions

1. Patrick went back to the people who had enslaved him. What would it take for you to share the gospel with someone who hurt you?
2. Why is it important to separate history from legend in stories like Patrick's?
3. Cyril and Methodius fought for Scripture in the language of the people. Why does that matter so much?
4. Trace your own spiritual family tree. Who brought the gospel to you, and who brought it to them?
5. Read Matthew 28:19-20. What part can you play in the task that is still unfinished?

Chapter 10: The Rise of Islam and the Great Schism

being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace

Ephesians 4:3 (SLB)

Two great events reshaped the Christian world between the 600s and the 1000s. The first was the sudden rise of Islam, which in about a hundred years took more than half of the old Christian lands. The second was the long, slow split between the Greek-speaking church of the East and the Latin-speaking church of the West, which became formal in 1054.

Muhammad and the Arab Conquests

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Arabia, about 570. Muslims believe he began receiving revelations about 610. In 622 he and his followers moved from Mecca to Medina, an event called the Hijra, from which the Muslim calendar is counted. By the time Muhammad died in 632, much of Arabia was united under Islam.

What followed was one of the fastest conquests in history. Arab armies took Jerusalem in about 638, Egypt by 642, and then swept across North Africa and into Spain in 711. In the East they conquered the Persian Empire. Within a century of Muhammad's death, the lands where the church had been born and where its greatest early teachers had lived, Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Augustine's North Africa, were under Muslim rule.

In 732 a Frankish army under Charles Martel defeated a Muslim army between Tours and Poitiers in France. Historians debate how important that battle was, but Muslim expansion into western Europe went no farther.

Christians Under Muslim Rule

Under Muslim rule, Christians and Jews were usually allowed to keep their faith as protected but second-class subjects called *dhimmi*. They paid a special tax, could not build new churches freely, could not share their faith with Muslims, and faced harsh penalties if a Muslim converted to Christianity. Over the centuries, many Christian communities slowly shrank. In North Africa the church, which had been strong in Augustine's day, eventually all but disappeared.

Yet in places like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, Christian communities held on for well over a thousand years, and some still do today, often under great pressure. They are some of the oldest churches on earth, and they deserve our prayers.

Icons and the Second Council of Nicaea

The East had its own fierce argument in the 700s and 800s, over icons, painted images of Christ and the saints used in worship. In 726 the emperor Leo III began moves against icons, and later emperors ordered

them destroyed. Those who opposed the images were called iconoclasts, image breakers. Others defended icons, arguing that because the Son of God became visible flesh, He could be pictured.

The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 ruled that icons could be honored but that worship belongs to God alone. The fight went on until 843, when icons were restored for good in the East. Protestants today generally believe the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-5) and the danger of idolatry call for much greater caution than that council showed. But it is worth knowing that the question was debated hard, by believers on both sides.

Charlemagne and a Western Emperor

In the West, the Franks became the strongest power. Their king Charles, called Charlemagne, Charles the Great, ruled much of western Europe. On Christmas Day in the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned him emperor of the Romans in Rome. From then on there were two "Roman" emperors, one in Constantinople and one in the West. The East saw this as an insult. It also tied the western church and its popes closely to western kings, for good and for ill.

Charlemagne pushed for better education for priests, the copying of books, and better versions of the Latin Bible. He also forced the conquered Saxons to be baptized on pain of death, which is the opposite of how the gospel spreads in the New Testament.

East and West Grow Apart

The split between East and West did not happen overnight. It came from centuries of drifting apart.

- **Language.** The East spoke Greek. The West spoke Latin. By the 800s, few church leaders in either half could read the other's language well.
- **The pope.** The bishops of Rome claimed authority over the whole church as successors of Peter. The East honored Rome as first among the great churches, but not as ruler over the others.
- **The creed.** In the West, the words "and the Son" (in Latin, *filioque*) were added to the Nicene Creed, so that it said the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The addition appears in Spain at the Council of Toledo in 589 and spread across the West over the following centuries. The East objected both to the theology and to the fact that the West had changed a creed agreed on by the whole church.
- **Customs.** The two sides differed on smaller things too, like whether priests could marry (the East allowed it for parish priests) and what kind of bread to use at communion.

1054

In 1054, Pope Leo IX sent a delegation led by Cardinal Humbert to Constantinople to discuss these differences with the patriarch, Michael Cerularius. The talks went badly. On 16 July 1054, Humbert laid a document on the altar of the great church of Hagia Sophia that excommunicated the patriarch. Cerularius and his council answered by excommunicating the papal delegates.

At the time, many people did not think this was the final break. There had been splits before that were healed. But this one was not. It was made far worse in 1204, when western crusaders captured and

plundered Constantinople, as we will see in the next chapter. In 1965, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras lifted the excommunications of 1054, but the two churches remain separate.

What This Means for Us

Paul urged the Ephesians to be "diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). The great split of 1054 was not caused by one meeting. It grew out of pride, politics, language barriers, and centuries of not listening to one another. Some differences are worth standing firm on, because the gospel is at stake. But many divisions in church history, and in local churches today, come from the same sins that tore East and West apart.

Study Questions

1. How did the rise of Islam change the Christian world? Why did the church in North Africa disappear while churches in Egypt and Syria survived?
2. What do you know about Christians living in Muslim lands today? How could you pray for them?
3. Read Exodus 20:4-6. How should Christians think about images in worship?
4. List the causes of the split between East and West. Which ones were about the gospel, and which were about pride or politics?
5. Read Ephesians 4:1-6. What practical steps keep the unity of the Spirit in a local church?

Part Three: The Church in the Middle Ages (1054 to 1500)

Chapter 11: Popes, Crusades, and Cathedrals

> *He has told you, O man, what **is** good; and what does the LORD require from you but to do justice, and to love steadfast love, and to walk humbly with your God?*
>
> Micah 6:8 (SLB)

The period from about 1000 to 1500 is often called the Middle Ages, the time between the ancient world and the modern one. For the church in western Europe, it was an age of enormous power and enormous contradictions. It built the great cathedrals and the first universities. It also launched the Crusades and the Inquisition. Popes claimed authority over kings, and some popes lived lives of open corruption. Through it all, ordinary believers prayed, worked, raised families, and heard the gospel, however dimly, in their local churches.

My family attended the Catholic church when I was young. Faith became personal for me when a neighbor showed me from Scripture that salvation is a free gift received through Christ, not something earned (Ephesians 2:8-9). That truth changed everything for me, and it changed the church at the Reformation too.

The Height of Papal Power

In the 1000s a reform movement swept the western church. Many priests were married or living with women, church offices were being bought and sold (a sin called simony, after Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:18-24), and kings were appointing bishops for political reasons. Reformers wanted a cleaner, more independent church.

The leading reformer was Pope Gregory VII, who became pope in 1073. He clashed head on with the German king Henry IV over who had the right to appoint bishops. Gregory excommunicated Henry. In January 1077, Henry came to the castle of Canossa in northern Italy and stood in the snow outside, barefoot as a penitent, for three days until the pope lifted the excommunication.

Over the next two centuries, popes claimed more and more power. Pope Innocent III, who reigned from 1198 to 1216, was the most powerful of them all. He placed whole kingdoms under interdict, which meant no church services could be held there, to force kings to obey him. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII issued a document called *Unam Sanctam*, which declared that it is altogether necessary for salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pope.

Protestants believe that claim goes far beyond anything in Scripture. Jesus is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18), and the apostles never claimed that kind of authority, not even Peter, who called himself a “fellow elder” (1 Peter 5:1).

The Crusades

In 1071 the Seljuk Turks, a Muslim people from Central Asia, crushed the army of the Eastern empire at Manzikert and took much of Asia Minor. The emperor in Constantinople asked the West for help. On 27

November 1095, at the Council of Clermont in France, Pope Urban II preached a sermon calling on western knights to march east, help their fellow Christians, and free Jerusalem. The crowd is reported to have shouted, “God wills it!” Urban promised the remission of the penalties of sin to those who went.

That was the First Crusade. Tens of thousands marched. On 15 July 1099 the crusaders captured Jerusalem and massacred many of its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. Even crusader writers describe the streets running with blood.

Other crusades followed over the next two centuries, most of them failures. The Muslim leader Saladin retook Jerusalem in 1187. The worst disgrace was the Fourth Crusade. In April 1204 the crusaders, who were supposed to be going to Egypt, turned on Constantinople, the greatest Christian city in the world, and sacked it. They looted its churches and killed many of its people. The pope, Innocent III, condemned the attack, but the damage was done. The Eastern church has never forgotten it, and it sealed the split of 1054.

On the way to the First Crusade, mobs of crusaders also attacked Jewish communities along the Rhine River in Germany in 1096 and murdered many hundreds of Jews. This is one of many dark chapters in the long history of Christians mistreating the Jewish people, the people from whom our Savior came (Romans 9:4-5).

What Should We Think of the Crusades?

Two easy answers are both wrong. One says the Crusades were a simple act of Christian aggression against a peaceful Muslim world. That ignores the four centuries of Muslim conquest of Christian lands that came before them. The other says they were a noble defense of the faith. That ignores the massacres, the attacks on Jews and Eastern Christians, and the idea that you could earn forgiveness by fighting.

The deepest problem was theological. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (Matthew 26:52). The gospel spreads by preaching and by lives changed by grace, not by armies. Whatever we think about a nation’s right to defend itself, the church went badly wrong when it offered forgiveness of sins for going to war.

Friars, Cathedrals, and Universities

The Middle Ages were not all dark. In the early 1200s, two new movements of friars, traveling preachers who lived in poverty, began. Francis of Assisi gave up his family’s wealth and founded the Franciscans. Dominic founded the Dominicans, an order of preachers, which the pope approved in 1216. These friars took the gospel into towns and cities in a way the old monasteries had not.

The great cathedrals rose across Europe, like Notre-Dame in Paris, begun in 1163. For people who could not read, the stained glass windows, carvings, and paintings told the Bible stories. Universities grew up in places like Bologna, Paris, and Oxford, and theology was studied as the queen of the sciences. The greatest theologian of the age, Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican who died in 1274, tried to show how faith and reason fit together. He left his greatest work, the *Summa Theologica*, unfinished.

What Went Wrong in the Church's Teaching

Over these centuries, teaching and practice in the western church moved further from the New Testament in several ways.

- **Transubstantiation.** The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 made official the teaching that in the Mass the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ in their substance, while only looking like bread and wine.
- **Purgatory and indulgences.** The church taught that most believers must pass through purgatory to be purified before heaven. Over time, the church sold indulgences, documents that were said to reduce time in purgatory, for oneself or for dead loved ones.
- **The saints and Mary.** Prayers to the saints and to Mary, the honoring of relics, and pilgrimages became central to ordinary faith.
- **The Bible locked away.** The Bible was in Latin, which most people could not understand. Some local church councils, such as Toulouse in 1229, forbade lay people from having the books of the Bible in their own language, with a few exceptions.

None of this means there were no true believers. There were many. But when Scripture is out of reach, error grows unchecked. The next chapter tells the story of men and women who saw that and tried to bring the church back to God's Word.

Study Questions

1. What did Pope Gregory VII want to reform? Why did the struggle between popes and kings matter?
2. Read 1 Peter 5:1-4. How does Peter describe himself and other church leaders? How does that compare with Unam Sanctam?
3. What is your honest view of the Crusades after reading this chapter?
4. Why is it wrong to offer forgiveness of sins as a reward for any human work, including going to war? See Ephesians 2:8-9.
5. Which of the medieval teachings listed in this chapter do you think did the most harm? Why?

Chapter 12: Morning Stars: Voices for Reform Before the Reformation

*A lamp to my foot **is** Your word, and a light to my pathway.*

Psalm 119:105 (SLB)

Long before Martin Luther nailed up his theses, God raised up men and women who called the church back to Scripture. Many paid with their lives. Later Protestants called John Wycliffe the "morning star of the Reformation," because he shone before the sun came up. He was not the only one.

Peter Waldo and the Poor of Lyons

About 1173, a wealthy merchant in Lyons, France, named Peter Waldo (also spelled Valdes) was deeply moved by the call of Jesus to sell everything and follow Him. He paid for parts of the Bible to be translated into the local language, gave away his fortune, and began preaching in the streets. His followers became known as the Poor Men of Lyons, and later the Waldensians.

The church told them to stop preaching without permission. They answered as the apostles had, that they must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). In 1184 they were condemned. They were persecuted for centuries, yet they survived in the Alpine valleys of northern Italy. In 1532 the Waldensians joined the Reformation, and their church still exists today.

John Wycliffe and the English Bible

John Wycliffe was a scholar and priest at Oxford University. In the 1370s and 1380s he began teaching things that shook the English church.

- He taught that Scripture is the highest authority, above the pope and church tradition.
- He rejected transubstantiation.
- He attacked the wealth and corruption of the church and said the true church is the company of all whom God has chosen to save.
- He insisted that ordinary people should be able to read the Bible in their own language.

Wycliffe and his followers produced the first complete Bible in English, translated from the Latin Vulgate. The first version was finished about 1382, and a smoother revision came after his death. Copies had to be made by hand. Wycliffe's followers, called Lollards, carried them through England and preached from them.

Wycliffe died of a stroke in 1384, at peace in his own parish. But the church did not forget him. In 1408 a council at Oxford forbade anyone to translate the Bible into English or read such a translation without a bishop's approval. In 1415 the Council of Constance condemned Wycliffe as a heretic, and in 1428 his bones were dug up, burned, and the ashes thrown into the River Swift.

Jan Hus of Bohemia

Wycliffe's writings traveled to Bohemia (the modern Czech Republic), because an English princess, Anne of Bohemia, had married King Richard II of England, and students moved between the two countries. At the University of Prague, a priest named Jan Hus read Wycliffe and agreed with much of what he said.

Hus preached in the Czech language at the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. He attacked the sale of indulgences and taught that Christ, not the pope, is the head of the church. He was excommunicated. In 1414 he was summoned to the Council of Constance in Germany, and the emperor Sigismund gave him a written promise of safe conduct. When he arrived, he was arrested anyway. The council demanded that he take back his teachings. He refused unless they could show him from Scripture where he was wrong.

On 6 July 1415, Jan Hus was burned at the stake in Constance.

From the Record: Hus at the Stake (*Reported*)

John Foxe, the English martyr historian, wrote his account more than a century later from earlier reports. He says that when the chain was put around Hus at the stake, Hus said, "My Lord Jesus Christ was bound with a harder chain than this for my sake, and why then should I be ashamed of this rusty one?"

Foxe also reports a famous play on words. Hus means goose in Czech, and Foxe has him say, "You are now going to burn a goose... but in a century you will have a swan whom you can neither roast nor boil." Foxe himself presents this as possibly prophetic of Luther. Many historians think the saying was shaped later, so hold it loosely.

Foxe ends by saying Hus sang a hymn in the flames so loudly that he was heard over the noise of the crowd.

Source: John Foxe, *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, a compilation based on Foxe and published by the John C. Winston Company, Project Gutenberg ebook 22400. Its editors say they shortened and modernized Foxe's wording, so these are not Foxe's exact 1563 words. His followers in Bohemia, the Hussites, fought off several crusades sent against them. One group, the Unity of the Brethren, would later play a part in the story of the Moravians and of John Wesley.

The Great Schism of the Papacy

While these reformers spoke up, the papacy itself fell into scandal. From 1309 to 1377, the popes lived in Avignon, in France, under strong French influence. Soon after the pope returned to Rome, a disputed election in 1378 led to two rival popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon, each excommunicating the other. From 1409 there were briefly three. Europe was divided over which one was real. This is called the Great Western Schism. The Council of Constance, the same council that burned Hus, ended it in 1417 by removing the rivals and electing a new pope.

Imagine being an ordinary Christian and being told that salvation depends on being subject to the pope, while not knowing which of two or three men is the pope. The scandal made many people wonder whether a council, or Scripture itself, should stand above the popes.

Two Events That Changed Everything

Two more events in the 1400s prepared the way for the Reformation.

The first was the fall of Constantinople. On 29 May 1453, the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Mehmed II captured the city, ending the Eastern Roman Empire. Greek scholars fled west to Italy, bringing Greek manuscripts with them. That fed a new interest in reading ancient texts in their original languages, including the Greek New Testament. The scholars of this movement had a motto: back to the sources.

The second was the printing press. About 1450, Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz, Germany, developed printing with movable metal type. His first great book was the Latin Bible, finished about 1455. Before Gutenberg, a Bible had to be copied by hand, which could take a scribe many months. Now books could be produced by the hundreds and thousands. Within a few decades, printing presses were working in cities all over Europe.

In 1516, Erasmus of Rotterdam, the greatest scholar of the day, published the first printed Greek New Testament, with his own Latin translation alongside. Erasmus remained a Catholic all his life, but his Greek New Testament would be used by Luther, Tyndale, and the other Reformers to translate the Scriptures into the languages of the people.

What This Means for Us

The men in this chapter believed that God's Word should be in the hands of God's people, and they were willing to die for it. Some of us have five or six Bibles in our homes and rarely open any of them. The psalmist said, "A lamp to my foot ***is*** Your word, and a light to my pathway" (Psalm 119:105). Wycliffe and Hus would ask us what we are doing with the light we have.

Study Questions

1. Why did church leaders forbid Waldo and Wycliffe's followers from preaching and translating?
2. What would it have been like to own a handwritten English Bible when doing so could get you arrested?
3. Hus asked to be shown from Scripture where he was wrong. Why was that such a dangerous request?
4. How did the printing press prepare the way for the Reformation?
5. How many Bibles do you own? What would it take for you to read one every day?

Part Four: The Reformation (1500 to 1650)

Chapter 13: Martin Luther and the Recovery of the Gospel

> *For in it **the** righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, even as it has been written, "And the righteous by faith will live."*
>
> Romans 1:17 (SLB)

On 31 October 1517, a monk and professor named Martin Luther posted a list of ninety-five statements for debate in Wittenberg, a small university town in Saxony, Germany. He did not mean to start a revolution. He wanted to debate the sale of indulgences. Within a few years, all of Europe was talking about him, and the western church would never be one again.

Of the Reformation's five "alones", Scripture alone has shaped my work most. When I translated the Steadfast Literal Bible, I wanted readers to have the words of the text without spin. Whenever I have drifted or faced hard decisions, coming back to what the Bible plainly says has been my anchor.

A Troubled Monk

Luther was born on 10 November 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony. His father, a miner who did well for himself, wanted him to become a lawyer. In July 1505, caught in a violent thunderstorm near the village of Stotternheim, Luther was knocked to the ground by a lightning bolt and cried out to Saint Anne, promising to become a monk. Two weeks later he entered the monastery of the Augustinian friars in Erfurt.

Luther was a very serious monk. He fasted, prayed, went to confession for hours, and punished his body. But he could find no peace. He knew God was holy and just, and he knew he was not. The more he tried, the more he saw his sin. He later said that he did not love the righteous God who punishes sinners. He hated Him.

His supervisor, Johann von Staupitz, wisely pointed him to Christ and sent him to study the Bible. Luther earned his doctorate in theology in 1512 and began teaching the Bible at the new University of Wittenberg. He lectured on the Psalms, then Romans, then Galatians.

The Righteousness of God

Somewhere in these years, Luther came to a new understanding of Romans 1:17. He had read "the righteousness of God" as the righteousness by which God judges sinners. As he studied, he saw that Paul was speaking of the righteousness God gives as a gift to those who believe. "And the righteous by faith will live" (Romans 1:17).

Late in life, in 1545, Luther wrote that when he understood this, he felt he had been born again and had gone through open doors into paradise itself. Historians still debate exactly when this breakthrough happened, some placing it before 1517 and some after. But the truth he found was not new. It was Paul's

gospel, recovered. We are not made right with God by our works. We are declared righteous by God because of Christ's work, received by faith alone.

The Ninety-Five Theses

In 1517 a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel was selling indulgences near Wittenberg to raise money for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. A popular saying was put in Tetzel's mouth: as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs. People were buying their way, and their dead relatives' way, out of punishment.

Luther wrote his ninety-five theses against this practice. The first one goes straight to the heart of the matter.

> "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said Poenitentiam agite, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance."
>
> *Martin Luther, Ninety-Five Theses, thesis 1, Project Gutenberg edition*

The Latin words *poenitentiam agite* mean "repent," or as the church read them, "do penance." Luther was saying that Jesus called for a change of heart that lasts a whole lifetime, not a payment to a priest.

Luther sent the theses to his archbishop, Albert of Mainz, on 31 October 1517. The famous story that he nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg comes from Philip Melanchthon, Luther's colleague, who told it after Luther's death. Some historians doubt it ever happened, though church doors in Wittenberg were used as a notice board. Either way, someone printed the theses, and within weeks they were being read all over Germany.

Here I Stand

The pope at first dismissed it as a quarrel among monks. But Luther kept writing, and his ideas went further. In debate at Leipzig in 1519, he admitted that popes and councils could err, and that he agreed with some of what Hus had taught. In 1520 he wrote three powerful books calling German nobles to reform the church, attacking the church's sacramental system, and explaining the freedom of a Christian. In June 1520 the pope issued a document threatening to excommunicate him. In December Luther publicly burned it. In January 1521 he was excommunicated.

In April 1521 Luther was called before the young emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, an imperial assembly. On 18 April, ordered to take back his writings, he answered that unless he was convinced by Scripture and plain reason, he would not recant, because his conscience was captive to the Word of God.

Most of us have heard that he ended with the words, "Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me." Be careful with that one. The earliest printed version of his speech includes the words, but they were not recorded on the spot by those who wrote down what he said, and many scholars doubt he spoke them in that form. The words about a conscience captive to the Word of God are the part we can be confident of. (See the *Christian History* article "What Luther Said," listed in Appendix D.)

The Wartburg and the German Bible

The emperor declared Luther an outlaw. Anyone could kill him without penalty. On his way home, he was "kidnapped" by soldiers of his own prince, Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony, and hidden away in Wartburg Castle for his safety. There, disguised as a knight called Junker Jörg, he translated the New Testament from Erasmus's Greek into German in about eleven weeks. It was published in September 1522. The whole Bible in German followed in 1534.

Luther's Bible was a masterpiece. It shaped the German language itself. And because of the printing press, it spread everywhere. A farmer or a seamstress could now read the Word of God for themselves.

The Reformation Spreads and Hard Days Come

Luther returned to Wittenberg in 1522 and led the reform there. Priests married. Communion was given to lay people in both bread and wine. Worship was held in German. Luther wrote hymns, including "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," based on Psalm 46. In 1525 he married Katharina von Bora, a former nun, and they had six children.

Not everything went well. In 1525 German peasants rose up in a great revolt, partly inspired by Reformation ideas of freedom. Luther first urged the princes to listen to their grievances, then, when the revolt turned violent, wrote a savage pamphlet urging the princes to crush the rebels. They did, killing many thousands. Late in life Luther also wrote shameful attacks on the Jewish people, especially in his 1543 book *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Those writings were later used by the Nazis. We must say plainly that they were wicked, and that they contradicted the gospel he preached.

In 1530 Luther's followers presented a statement of their faith, the Augsburg Confession, written mainly by Melanchthon, to the emperor. It remains the main confession of the Lutheran churches. Luther died in Eisleben, the town where he was born, on 18 February 1546.

The Solas

Later Protestants summed up the heart of the Reformation in five Latin phrases. Luther did not use them as a list, but they describe what he and the other Reformers recovered.

- **Sola Scriptura**: Scripture alone is our final authority (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- **Sola gratia**: we are saved by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8).
- **Sola fide**: we receive that grace through faith alone (Romans 3:28).
- **Solus Christus**: salvation is in Christ alone (Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5).
- **Soli Deo gloria**: all for the glory of God alone (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Study Questions

1. Why could Luther find no peace as a monk, no matter how hard he tried?
2. Read Romans 1:16-17 and 3:21-26. What is "the righteousness of God" that Paul describes?
3. Why did the sale of indulgences offend Luther so deeply?
4. Why is it important to be honest about Luther's sins, like his writings against the Jews?

5. Which of the five solas means the most to you right now? Why?

Chapter 14: Zwingli, Calvin, and the Anabaptists

> *Every Scripture **is** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which **is** in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work.*
>
> 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)

Luther was not the only Reformer. Within a few years, reform movements had sprung up across Switzerland, southern Germany, France, the Netherlands, and beyond. They agreed with Luther on the big things, especially salvation by grace through faith and the authority of Scripture. But they did not agree on everything, and their disagreements gave birth to the different Protestant families we still have today.

Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich

On 1 January 1519, a new priest named Ulrich Zwingli began preaching at the Great Minster church in Zurich, Switzerland. Instead of following the church's assigned readings, he announced he would preach straight through the Gospel of Matthew, verse by verse. That simple decision was revolutionary. People heard the Bible explained in their own language week after week.

Zwingli came to many of the same conclusions as Luther, partly on his own. In 1522 some of his followers broke the church's Lenten fast by eating sausages, and Zwingli defended them from Scripture. In January 1523 the city council held a public debate, and afterward Zurich adopted the Reformation. Images were removed from churches, the Mass was replaced with a simple communion service, and preaching became central.

The Argument Over the Lord's Supper

Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg in October 1529, hoping to unite the German and Swiss Reformers. They agreed on fourteen of fifteen points. They could not agree on the Lord's Supper. Luther insisted that Christ's body is truly present "in, with, and under" the bread, pointing to Jesus' words, "This is My body." Zwingli believed the bread and wine are signs that remind us of Christ's sacrifice, and that Jesus' body is in heaven at the right hand of the Father.

They parted without unity. Zwingli was killed in battle at Kappel in 1531, serving as chaplain with the Zurich army in a war against the Catholic Swiss cantons. His successor, Heinrich Bullinger, led the Zurich church for more than forty years.

The Anabaptists

Some of Zwingli's own students thought he was moving too slowly and leaning too much on the city council. They studied the New Testament and concluded that baptism is for believers who have personally repented and believed, not for infants. They also believed the church should be a gathered community of true disciples, separate from the state.

On 21 January 1525, in a house in Zurich, a small group met in secret. George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him, and then Blaurock baptized the others. Their enemies called them Anabaptists, which means rebaptizers, though they said infant baptism was no true baptism at all.

Both Catholics and Protestants persecuted them harshly. In January 1527, Zurich executed Felix Manz by drowning in the Limmat River, a cruel mockery of believer's baptism. That same year Michael Sattler, who helped write the Schleitheim Confession, an early Anabaptist statement of faith, was tortured and burned by Catholic authorities in Rottenburg. Thousands of Anabaptists were killed in the following decades.

A violent fringe group seized the city of Münster in Germany in 1534 and 1535, proclaiming a kingdom of God by force. Their disaster gave all Anabaptists a bad name, even though most were peaceful. A former Catholic priest named Menno Simons helped gather the scattered peaceful Anabaptists in the Netherlands, and his followers became the Mennonites. Today's Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites descend from these movements, and Baptists share their conviction about believer's baptism, though Baptists have a separate origin in England, which we will see in Chapter 15.

John Calvin

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, on 10 July 1509. He trained in law and in the new study of ancient languages and texts. About 1533 he experienced what he later called a sudden conversion. When the French king cracked down on Protestants, Calvin fled. In Basel in 1536 he published the first edition of a book that would become the most influential work of Protestant theology ever written, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He kept expanding it for the rest of his life. It opens with these words:

> "True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves."
>
> *John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion 1.1.1, translated by John Allen*

Later in 1536, Calvin passed through Geneva, intending to stay one night. The Reformer there, William Farel, threatened him with God's curse if he chose his quiet studies over the work God had for him in Geneva. Calvin stayed. He was forced out in 1538, spent three happy years in Strasbourg, and was called back in 1541. He spent the rest of his life in Geneva and died there on 27 May 1564.

Calvin's Geneva

Calvin preached almost every day, verse by verse through books of the Bible. He wrote commentaries on most of the Bible. He set up a system of church government with pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, drawn from his reading of the New Testament. He founded the Geneva Academy in 1559 to train pastors. Refugees poured into Geneva from France, England, Scotland, and Italy, and went home carrying Reformed teaching with them. John Knox, who led the Reformation in Scotland, called Geneva "the most perfect school of Christ" since the days of the apostles. (Knox wrote that in a 1556 letter. I could not open the text to check his exact words, so take the phrasing as approximate.)

Calvin's Geneva also had its dark side. In 1553 the city burned Michael Servetus, a Spanish doctor who denied the Trinity. Calvin supported his conviction, though he asked for a quicker form of execution than

burning. Nearly every government of that time, Catholic or Protestant, executed people for heresy. That does not excuse it. It does show how deeply even the Reformers had absorbed the old idea that the state should punish false belief.

Calvin's Teaching

Calvin is best known for his teaching on predestination, that God from eternity chose those whom He would save, by grace and not because of anything in them (Ephesians 1:4-5; Romans 8:29-30). Calvin did not invent this. Augustine taught it, and so did Luther. But Calvin gave it a central place, and the churches that followed him, called Reformed or Presbyterian, are known for it.

Bible-believing Christians still disagree, often sharply, about how God's choosing and human responsibility fit together. Both truths are in Scripture. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me," and in the same breath, "the ***one*** coming to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). I will not settle that debate here. But I would urge you to hold your view humbly and to treat brothers and sisters who see it differently as brothers and sisters.

Study Questions

1. Zwingli began preaching straight through Matthew. Why was that such a big change?
2. What did Luther and Zwingli disagree about at Marburg? Is it possible to disagree on that and still be brothers?
3. Why were the Anabaptists persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants?
4. Read the first line of Calvin's Institutes. Why do you think the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are tied together?
5. What should we learn from the fact that even the Reformers persecuted people who disagreed with them?

Chapter 15: The English Reformation and the English Bible

Grass dries up, a flower withers, and the word of our God will stand forever.

Isaiah 40:8 (SLB)

If you read your Bible in English, you owe a debt to a man who was strangled and burned for giving it to you. The English Reformation was a tangled story of kings, queens, politics, and martyrs. Running through the middle of it is the story of how the English-speaking world got the Bible in its own language.

My mother is British. It still strikes me that Henry VIII broke with Rome over a marriage dispute, not a love for the gospel. Yet God used that messy split to open the door for English Bibles to reach ordinary families. God does not need clean human motives to accomplish His purposes (Genesis 50:20).

William Tyndale

William Tyndale was born about 1494 in Gloucestershire and studied at Oxford and probably Cambridge. He was a gifted language scholar. He became convinced that the people of England would never understand the gospel until they could read the Scriptures for themselves. The story is told that he said to a learned man who opposed him that, if God spared his life, he would cause a boy that drives the plough to know more of the Scripture than the man did. (That comes from Foxe's account. I could not check the exact wording in Foxe's original.)

Remember the law of 1408 from Chapter 12. No one could translate the Bible into English without a bishop's permission. Tyndale asked the bishop of London for permission and was turned down. So in 1524 he left England for Germany, and he never came home.

Working from Erasmus's Greek New Testament, he translated the New Testament into clear, beautiful English. After a first printing in Cologne was interrupted by a raid, the complete New Testament was printed in Worms in 1526. Copies were smuggled into England in bales of cloth and barrels. The bishop of London had copies bought up and burned at Saint Paul's Cross. Tyndale reportedly used the money from those sales to fund a corrected edition.

Tyndale then began translating the Old Testament from the Hebrew, and published the first five books, the Pentateuch, in 1530. Many of the phrases we still use come from Tyndale: "Let there be light," "the powers that be," "the salt of the earth," and "fight the good fight."

In 1535 Tyndale was betrayed by an Englishman named Henry Phillips, who pretended to be his friend, and arrested in Antwerp. He was held for more than a year in the castle of Vilvoorde, near Brussels, and condemned as a heretic. On or about 6 October 1536 (the traditional date), he was strangled at the stake and his body burned. According to Foxe, his last words were a prayer: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Henry VIII and the Break with Rome

The king whose eyes Tyndale prayed for was Henry VIII. Ironically, Henry had been named Defender of the Faith by Pope Leo X in 1521 for writing a book against Luther. Henry's break with Rome was not about the gospel. It was about his marriage.

Henry's wife, Catherine of Aragon, had not given him a son. Henry wanted the pope to annul the marriage so he could marry Anne Boleyn. The pope refused, in large part because Catherine's nephew was the emperor Charles V, whose armies controlled Rome. So Henry broke with the pope. In 1534 Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, declaring the king the supreme head of the Church of England. Henry shut down the monasteries and took their land.

In doctrine, Henry stayed largely Catholic, and he burned Protestants as well as executing Catholics who would not accept him as head of the church, such as Thomas More in 1535. But a door had opened. Just a year after Tyndale's death, in 1537, Henry allowed an English Bible, largely Tyndale's work finished by his friends Miles Coverdale and John Rogers, to be sold in England. In 1539 the Great Bible, based on the same work, was placed in every parish church by royal order. Tyndale's prayer was answered faster than he could have dreamed.

From Edward to Elizabeth

Henry's son Edward VI, who became king at nine in 1547, was raised Protestant. Under him, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote the *Book of Common Prayer* in English (1549, revised 1552) and a Protestant statement of faith.

Edward died at fifteen in 1553, and his half-sister Mary I, a devout Catholic and daughter of Catherine of Aragon, brought England back under the pope. Nearly 300 Protestants were burned during her reign, which is why she is remembered as Bloody Mary. Among them were John Rogers, the bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, and Cranmer himself. John Foxe gathered their stories into his famous book, first published in English in 1563, now known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.

When Mary died in 1558, her half-sister Elizabeth I took the throne and restored a Protestant Church of England. She tried to steer a middle course, Protestant in doctrine but keeping bishops and much of the old worship. During these years, English exiles in Geneva produced the Geneva Bible (New Testament 1557, whole Bible 1560), with study notes. It became the household Bible of English Protestants. It was the Bible Shakespeare quoted and the Bible the Pilgrims carried to America.

Puritans, Separatists, and Baptists

Many English Protestants felt Elizabeth's church had not gone far enough. They wanted to purify it of practices they saw as unbiblical, so they were called Puritans. Most stayed in the Church of England and worked for reform from within. Others gave up on it and formed separate congregations.

One group of Separatists fled to Amsterdam. There, in 1609, their pastor John Smyth became convinced from Scripture that baptism is for believers only, and he began a congregation on that basis. Thomas Helwys led part of that group back to England in 1612 and founded the first Baptist church on English

soil, at Spitalfields, outside London. Helwys wrote a plea for religious freedom for all, even for non-Christians, addressed to King James. He died in prison for it.

Another Separatist group, from the village of Scrooby, went to Leiden in Holland, and in 1620 some of them sailed on the Mayflower to found Plymouth Colony in New England.

The King James Version

When James I became king in 1603, the Puritans asked him for reforms. At a conference at Hampton Court in 1604, one Puritan, John Reynolds, proposed a new translation of the Bible. James agreed, partly because he disliked the Geneva Bible's notes, which he thought questioned the authority of kings.

About fifty scholars worked in six teams at Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge. They worked from the Hebrew and Greek, and they leaned heavily on Tyndale's earlier work. Scholars estimate that a large share of the King James New Testament keeps Tyndale's wording. The Authorized Version, or King James Version, was published in 1611. For more than three hundred years it was the Bible of the English-speaking world.

What This Means for Us

Peter wrote that "the declaration of ***the*** Lord abides forever" (1 Peter 1:25, quoting Isaiah 40:8). Kings tried to keep the Bible from English readers and burned the men who translated it. Within a century, the English Bible was in every church and home. Kings and queens came and went. The Word remained.

Study Questions

1. Why did Tyndale risk his life to translate the Bible into English?
2. What does it tell you that Henry VIII broke with Rome over a marriage, not over the gospel? How did God still use it?
3. Why did Foxe gather the stories of the martyrs? Why are those stories worth reading today?
4. What did Thomas Helwys believe about religious freedom? Why was that so radical in 1612?
5. Read Isaiah 40:6-8. How does the story of the English Bible show this verse to be true?

Chapter 16: The Catholic Response and the Wars of Religion

for the anger of a man does not produce the righteousness of God.

James 1:20 (SLB)

The Roman Catholic Church did not sit still while the Reformation spread. It answered with its own movement of renewal and with a firm rejection of Protestant teaching. At the same time, Europe was torn apart by more than a century of wars in which religion and politics were tangled together. By the end, the map of Christian Europe looked much as it does today.

Reform Within the Catholic Church

Many Catholics agreed that the church needed reform. Long before Luther, some had called for an end to corruption, better-trained priests, and holier living. After Luther, the call grew louder. Historians call this the Catholic Reformation, or the Counter-Reformation.

The most important new movement was the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. Its founder was Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish soldier whose leg was shattered by a cannonball in 1521. While recovering, he read lives of Christ and the saints and gave his life to God. He wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*, a month-long guide to prayer and self-examination. Pope Paul III approved the Jesuits in 1540. They took a special vow of obedience to the pope and became the church's leading teachers, missionaries, and opponents of Protestantism. They founded hundreds of schools. One of the first Jesuits, Francis Xavier, preached in India and Japan and died off the coast of China in 1552.

The Council of Trent

Pope Paul III called a council to meet at Trent, in northern Italy. It met in three periods between 1545 and 1563. Trent reformed real abuses: it required bishops to live in their dioceses, ordered seminaries to train priests, and stopped the open selling of indulgences by professional sellers. But on doctrine, it rejected the Reformation's central teachings.

- It declared that justification is not by faith alone, and condemned anyone who taught that it was.
- It declared that Scripture and tradition are to be received with equal reverence.
- It declared the books Jerome had set apart, such as Tobit, Judith, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, to be part of the Old Testament, and made the Latin Vulgate the official Bible.
- It confirmed seven sacraments, transubstantiation, purgatory, prayers to the saints, and the value of indulgences rightly used.

Trent set the shape of the Catholic Church for four hundred years, until the Second Vatican Council of 1962 to 1965. Because Trent condemned justification by faith alone, the gap between Catholics and Protestants on the gospel itself was now written into official teaching. That is the main reason the division remains.

The Inquisition and the Index

Trent was not the only response. In 1542 Pope Paul III set up the Roman Inquisition to find and try heretics. In Spain, an Inquisition already run by the crown since 1478 had targeted Jews and Muslims who had converted under pressure, and now turned against Protestants too. In 1559 the church published its first official Index of Forbidden Books, which included the works of the Reformers and Bibles in the common languages that had not been approved.

France and the Huguenots

In France, Protestants who followed Calvin's teaching were called Huguenots. By 1562 there were perhaps two thousand Reformed congregations in France. A series of civil wars broke out between Catholics and Protestants. The worst moment came on 24 August 1572, Saint Bartholomew's Day. Many Huguenot leaders had gathered in Paris for a royal wedding. The killing began in Paris and spread to other cities. Thousands of Protestants were murdered, and estimates of the total range widely.

In 1598 King Henry IV, a former Protestant who had become Catholic to win the throne, issued the Edict of Nantes, which gave Huguenots limited freedom of worship. In 1685 King Louis XIV revoked it. Hundreds of thousands of Huguenots fled to England, the Netherlands, Prussia, South Africa, and the American colonies, taking their skills and their faith with them.

The Thirty Years' War

The bloodiest religious war of all began in 1618 in Bohemia, the land of Jan Hus, when Protestant nobles threw two Catholic royal officials out of a castle window in Prague. It grew into a war involving much of Europe, fought mainly in Germany, from 1618 to 1648. Armies burned towns and fields. Disease and famine followed. Parts of Germany lost a third or more of their population, by many historians' estimates.

By the end it was clear that the war was as much about power as about faith. Catholic France, under Cardinal Richelieu, fought on the Protestant side against the Catholic Habsburgs, because it served French interests.

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 ended the war. It generally let each ruler decide the official religion of his own land, with some protection for minorities, and it recognized the Reformed churches alongside Lutherans and Catholics. Europe was now permanently divided.

Was It Worth It?

Some people look at these wars and say the Reformation was a mistake. I disagree. The Reformation recovered the gospel of grace and put the Bible back in the hands of ordinary people. That was worth everything.

But the wars were a terrible sin, on all sides. James wrote that "the anger of a man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Catholics and Protestants alike made the old mistake of Constantine's age, trying to defend the faith with the sword. After all that bloodshed, many people in Europe began to think religion itself was the problem. That helped open the door to the age of skepticism that came next.

What This Means for Us

We can stand firm on the truth of the gospel and still treat those who disagree with us with love and respect. The Reformers were right to say that the gospel matters enough to divide over. They were wrong to think it matters enough to kill over. The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Study Questions

1. What did the Catholic Reformation get right? What did the Council of Trent reject?
2. Why does Trent's teaching on justification still matter for Catholic and Protestant relations?
3. Why do you think religious wars were so cruel?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. What are the weapons Christians are supposed to use?
5. How can you hold firm convictions and still love people who disagree with you?

Part Five: Revival and Missions (1650 to 1900)

Chapter 17: Puritans, Pietists, and the Great Awakening

*Will You not return **and** give us life, so that Your people may rejoice in You?*

Psalm 85:6 (SLB)

By the late 1600s the Protestant churches of Europe were established, organized, and in many places cold. Doctrine was correct, but hearts were often far from God. Then God sent revival. This chapter tells about the men and women who called the church back from dead orthodoxy to living faith, and about the great revivals of the 1700s on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Puritans

The Puritans we met in Chapter 15 grew into a powerful movement in England during the 1600s. In 1643 the English Parliament called an assembly of ministers at Westminster Abbey, which wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith (finished in 1646) and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms (1647). The Shorter Catechism's first question has become famous: man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Presbyterian churches around the world still use these documents.

The Puritans wrote some of the richest Christian books ever written. Richard Baxter wrote about pastoral care. John Owen wrote on sin and holiness. And a poor tinker named John Bunyan, a Baptist preacher jailed for twelve years for preaching without a license, wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678. For two hundred years it was the most widely read book in the English language after the Bible.

Other Puritans crossed the ocean to New England beginning in 1630, hoping to build a godly society. Their record was mixed. They valued education and founded Harvard College in 1636 to train ministers. They also banished people who disagreed with them, like Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island in 1636 with freedom of religion for all and is linked with the first Baptist church in America, at Providence in 1638. And in 1692 the colony was shamed by the witch trials at Salem, where twenty people were executed.

The Pietists

In Germany, a Lutheran pastor named Philipp Jakob Spener wrote a short book in 1675 called *Pia Desideria*, Pious Desires. He called for more Bible study by ordinary believers, small groups that met in homes to study Scripture and pray, an emphasis on Christian living and not just right doctrine, and better training for pastors. His movement was called Pietism.

His follower August Hermann Francke turned the town of Halle into a center of Pietism, with an orphanage, schools, and a printing house that put Bibles into thousands of homes. In 1706 two young men trained in this movement, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, went to Tranquebar in India as missionaries, a century before William Carey.

The Moravians

In 1722, refugees from Moravia, descendants of the Hussite Unity of the Brethren from Chapter 12, found shelter on the estate of a young German nobleman, Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, in Saxony. They built a village called Herrnhut, which means "the Lord's watch." After a time of quarreling, on 13 August 1727 the community experienced a deep renewal during a communion service. Soon after, they began a prayer watch in which someone was praying every hour of the day and night. Historians report that it continued for about a hundred years.

In 1732 the first Moravian missionaries sailed to the Danish West Indies to preach to enslaved Africans. In the following decades Moravians went to Greenland, South Africa, North and South America, and beyond. For their size, they sent out more missionaries than any church in history up to that time.

John Wesley's Heart Strangely Warmed

John Wesley was the fifteenth child of an Anglican rector in Epworth, England. At Oxford, he and his brother Charles led a small group of students who met to pray, study, take communion, and visit prisoners. Other students mocked them as the Holy Club, and as Methodists, for their methodical habits.

In 1735 the Wesleys sailed as missionaries to the colony of Georgia. On the voyage a terrible storm struck, and John, terrified, watched a group of Moravians calmly singing through it. In Georgia his ministry was a failure, and he came home in 1738 deeply troubled. He knew he lacked the faith those Moravians had.

On 24 May 1738, he went, in his words, very unwillingly to a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, where someone was reading Luther's preface to Romans. His journal tells what happened.

From the Record: Aldersgate Street, 24 May 1738 (*Text checked*)

"About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Notice the chain. Paul wrote Romans. Luther found the gospel in it and wrote a preface. Two centuries later, that preface was read aloud in London, and a struggling minister found peace.

Source: John Wesley, *Journal*, 24 May 1738, as printed on the United Methodist Discipleship Ministries site (see Appendix D). I checked the wording against that printing, not a printed edition of the journal.

Field Preaching

Wesley's friend George Whitefield, another Holy Club member, had a powerful voice and a gift for preaching. When churches closed their pulpits to him, he began preaching outdoors. In February 1739 he preached in the open air to coal miners at Kingswood near Bristol, and the tears made white streaks down their blackened faces. He asked Wesley to come and do the same. Wesley hated the idea at first, but on 2 April 1739 he preached in a field near Bristol.

For the next fifty years, Wesley rode an estimated 250,000 miles on horseback across Britain and preached tens of thousands of sermons. He organized converts into small groups called classes and

societies. His brother Charles wrote thousands of hymns, including “And Can It Be” and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Wesley remained an Anglican priest until he died in 1791, but after his death the Methodists became a separate church. Wesley and Whitefield disagreed sharply about predestination, Whitefield siding with Calvin, but they stayed friends. When Whitefield died in 1770, Wesley preached at his memorial service in London, as Whitefield had asked.

The Great Awakening in America

Whitefield crossed the Atlantic seven times. On his tour of the American colonies in 1739 and 1740, he drew enormous crowds. Benjamin Franklin, who was not an evangelical, heard him in Philadelphia and, in his autobiography, calculated that Whitefield could be heard by more than thirty thousand people at once.

Revival had already broken out in some places. In 1734 and 1735, in Northampton, Massachusetts, a young pastor named Jonathan Edwards preached on justification by faith, and the town was transformed. Edwards wrote a careful account of it. On 8 July 1741, he preached his most famous sermon at Enfield, Connecticut, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” He read it quietly, but people cried out under conviction so loudly that he had to stop before he finished.

From the Record: Edwards at Enfield (*Text checked*)

The sermon’s text was Deuteronomy 32:35, which in the King James Version Edwards used reads, “Their foot shall slide in due time.” Edwards warned that only the hand of God keeps the unconverted from falling into judgment, and then turned to the open door of grace: “And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners.”

Source: Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741), in *Selected Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by H. Norman Gardiner (1904), Project Gutenberg.

Historians call this movement the Great Awakening. Tens of thousands joined the churches. New colleges were founded, among them Princeton (1746) and Brown (1764). The revival also reached enslaved Africans and Native Americans in a new way. And it gave colonists from many colonies a shared experience that some historians link to the growing sense that they were one people.

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between correct doctrine and living faith? Why do we need both?
2. Spener called for small groups to study the Bible and pray. Why have small groups been so important in revivals?
3. Read the Wesley journal entry. What does it mean to trust in Christ alone for salvation?
4. Wesley and Whitefield disagreed about predestination but stayed friends. What made that possible?
5. Read Psalm 85:6. Pray it for your church this week.

Chapter 18: The Great Century of Missions

> *How then will they call on **Him** in whom they did not believe? And how will they believe **in Him** of whom they did not hear? And how will they hear without one proclaiming? And how will they proclaim unless they are sent? Just as it has been written, "How beautiful **are** the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, of those who preach the gospel of good things!"*
>
> Romans 10:14-15 (SLB)

The historian Kenneth Scott Latourette gave three volumes of his *History of the Expansion of Christianity* to the 1800s alone and titled them *The Great Century*. In about a hundred years, Protestant missionaries carried the gospel to India, China, Burma, Africa, the islands of the Pacific, and beyond. Many died young of disease. Many buried their wives and children. Their sacrifice is one big reason that today most Christians in the world live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

For five years I helped lead youth mission trips to Baja, Mexico. Getting out of the comfortable pew and crossing a border cured me of treating church like a Sunday routine. Hudson Taylor's challenge still cuts to the heart whenever we get too comfortable.

William Carey, the Shoemaker

William Carey was born in 1761 in a small village in Northamptonshire, England. He was a shoemaker by trade and a Baptist preacher. On his workbench, the story goes, he kept a homemade map of the world, and as he worked he prayed for the nations. He taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Dutch, and French.

In 1792 he published a small book with a very long title, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. Many Christians of his day believed the Great Commission had been given only to the apostles. Carey disagreed.

> "Our Lord Jesus Christ, a little before his departure, commissioned his apostles to Go, and teach all nations; or, as another evangelist expresses it, Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. This commission was as extensive as possible."
>
> *William Carey, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, Section 1, 1792, Project Gutenberg edition*

Carey argued that the command was still binding on every generation. On 31 May 1792 he preached a sermon to a meeting of Baptist ministers at Nottingham on Isaiah 54:2-3, "Enlarge the place of your tent." The sermon is remembered for a motto that later writers summed up as, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God." (The wording of the motto as we have it comes from later reports, not from a printed copy of the sermon.) That October, a group of ministers formed the Baptist Missionary Society.

Carey sailed for India in 1793 and never came home. His first seven years brought no Indian converts at all. His son Peter died. His wife Dorothy fell into mental illness. In 1800 he moved to the Danish colony of Serampore, near Calcutta, where he worked with William Ward and Joshua Marshman. That same year, Krishna Pal became the first Indian convert they baptized. Over the next decades Carey and his team

translated the whole Bible, or parts of it, into dozens of languages and dialects of India and Asia. Carey also campaigned against the practice of burning widows alive on their husbands' funeral fires, which the British government banned in Bengal in 1829. He died at Serampore in 1834.

Adoniram and Ann Judson

Carey's example inspired Christians in America. In 1806 a group of students at Williams College in Massachusetts took shelter from a thunderstorm beside a haystack and prayed for the world's missions. That prayer meeting led to the first American foreign mission board in 1810.

Among the first missionaries it sent was Adoniram Judson, who sailed in February 1812 with his new wife Ann. On the voyage they studied the New Testament and became convinced of believer's baptism, and in India they were baptized by Carey's colleague William Ward. They went on to Burma (modern Myanmar). Judson waited six years for his first Burmese convert. During a war between Britain and Burma in 1824 to 1826, he was imprisoned for nearly two years in terrible conditions. Ann kept him alive, bringing food and pleading with officials. She died soon after his release, in 1826.

Judson translated the whole Bible into Burmese, finishing in 1834. When he died in 1850, there were many thousands of Burmese and Karen believers. The Baptist churches of Myanmar today trace their roots to his work.

Hudson Taylor and Inland China

James Hudson Taylor first sailed for China in 1853, at twenty-one. He made a decision that shocked other missionaries: he adopted Chinese dress and grew his hair in a queue, the Chinese style, so the people could see the gospel was not just a foreign religion. Most missionaries stayed on the coast. Taylor's heart was for the hundreds of millions in China's inland provinces who had never heard.

Back in England because of illness, he grew deeply burdened. His book *A Retrospect* tells what happened in 1865 at the seaside town of Brighton.

From the Record: On the Sands at Brighton (*Text checked*)

"On Sunday, June 25th, 1865, unable to bear the sight of a congregation of a thousand or more Christian people rejoicing in their own security, while millions were perishing for lack of knowledge, I wandered out on the sands alone, in great spiritual agony; and there the LORD conquered my unbelief, and I surrendered myself to GOD for this service."

He asked God for twenty-four workers, two for each of eleven inland provinces without a missionary and two for Mongolia, and wrote the request in the margin of his Bible.

Source: J. Hudson Taylor, *A Retrospect*, Project Gutenberg edition.

That year he founded the China Inland Mission. In May 1866 he sailed with a party of missionaries on the ship Lammermuir. The mission never asked for money publicly, relying on prayer alone. By the time Taylor died in 1905, the mission had sent out hundreds of workers. Today the mission continues under the name OMF International.

Africa and the Pacific

In the 1800s, Christian missionaries went into the interior of Africa, often at terrible cost. So many died of fever along the west coast that it was called the white man's grave. David Livingstone, a Scottish doctor and missionary, explored central Africa from 1841 until his death in 1873, and worked to expose and end the Arab and Portuguese slave trade there. African Christians themselves did much of the work. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba man who had been rescued from a slave ship as a boy, became the first African Anglican bishop in 1864.

In the Pacific, John Williams of the London Missionary Society carried the gospel to many islands before he was killed on Erromango in the New Hebrides (modern Vanuatu) in 1839. John G. Paton, a Scottish Presbyterian, went to the same islands in 1858 and saw whole communities turn to Christ.

The Fight Against Slavery

The evangelical revival also drove the fight against the slave trade. John Newton had been a slave ship captain before his conversion. He became an Anglican minister and wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace," published in 1779. In 1788 he published a pamphlet confessing his part in the trade and describing its horrors.

William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament converted in 1785, gave his life to ending the slave trade. With a group of Christian friends known as the Clapham Sect, he fought for twenty years. Parliament finally abolished the British slave trade in 1807. Slavery itself was abolished in most of the British Empire by an act passed in 1833, three days before Wilberforce died.

In America, many Christians fought slavery and many others defended it, both claiming the Bible. The abolitionists were right. Paul lists "enslavers," people who kidnap and sell human beings, among the lawless and ungodly (1 Timothy 1:9-10), and every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

The Second Great Awakening

At home in America, a new wave of revival swept the young nation in the early 1800s. In August 1801, a camp meeting at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, drew a crowd that some at the time estimated at ten to twenty thousand people. Methodist circuit riders and Baptist farmer preachers followed the settlers west. Charles Finney led great revivals in the 1820s and 1830s. Many Christians of this era founded Sunday schools, Bible societies, and missions to the poor. The movement also gave rise to groups that strayed far from biblical teaching, such as the Mormons, founded in 1830.

Study Questions

1. Many Christians in Carey's day thought the Great Commission was only for the apostles. Why was Carey's argument so important?
2. Carey waited seven years for a convert and Judson waited six. What does that teach us about faithfulness?
3. Read Hudson Taylor's words from Brighton. Have you ever felt "secure" in church while others were perishing?

4. How did faith in Christ drive the fight against slavery? Why did some Christians defend it, and why were they wrong?

5. Read Romans 10:14-15. Who is sent today, and how can you take part?

Chapter 19: Faith and Doubt in the Modern Age

> *Watch out that no one will be the **one** who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ*
>
> Colossians 2:8 (SLB)

While missionaries carried the gospel around the world, the church at home faced a different kind of challenge. It was not swords or fire. It was ideas. From the 1700s on, many educated people in Europe and America began to doubt the Bible, the miracles, and the very idea of revelation. The church had to decide how to answer.

The Age of Reason

After the wars of religion, many thinkers in Europe wanted a faith based on reason alone, without creeds or miracles. This movement is called the Enlightenment. Some of its leaders were deists, who believed God made the world like a watchmaker and then left it to run on its own. The Scottish philosopher David Hume argued in 1748 that no testimony could ever be strong enough to make it reasonable to believe in a miracle. The French writer Voltaire mocked the church and the Bible. In the French Revolution of the 1790s, churches were closed and priests were killed, and for a time the revolutionaries tried to replace Christianity with a Cult of Reason.

Christians answered. In England, Bishop Joseph Butler published *The Analogy of Religion* in 1736, arguing that the objections people raised against the Bible applied just as much to nature. William Paley's *Natural Theology* in 1802 pointed to the design in living things as evidence of a Designer. And above all, the revivals of the Wesleys and Edwards showed that living faith was not dying out.

Darwin and Higher Criticism

In 1859 Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, arguing that living things had developed over long ages by natural selection. Many people took his theory as proof that the world needed no Creator. Christians responded in different ways, as they still do. Some rejected Darwin's theory outright. Others tried to fit it into the Genesis account. The debate over creation and evolution continues among Bible-believing Christians today.

At the same time, a school of scholars, mostly in German universities, practiced what was called higher criticism. Many of them began with the assumption that miracles do not happen and that prophecy cannot predict the future. From there they concluded, for example, that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible, that Daniel was written after the events it "predicts," and that the Gospels are largely legend. In 1835 David Friedrich Strauss published a *Life of Jesus* treating most of the Gospel stories as myth.

Notice the starting point. If you begin by assuming God cannot work miracles or speak through prophets, you will end by explaining away every miracle and every prophecy. The conclusion was built into the assumption.

Liberal Protestantism

Many church leaders accepted these ideas and tried to keep Christianity alive without its supernatural core. This movement is called liberal Protestantism. Its founder is often said to be Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian who taught that religion is at heart a feeling of absolute dependence on God. Liberals tended to see Jesus mainly as a great moral teacher, the Bible as a human record of religious experience, and salvation as following His example.

Liberalism spread through many of the major Protestant churches and seminaries of Europe and America by the early 1900s. The Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen, in his 1923 book *Christianity and Liberalism*, argued that liberalism was not a version of Christianity at all, but a different religion using Christian words.

Faithful Voices

God did not leave Himself without witnesses. In London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, converted as a teenager in a small Primitive Methodist chapel in 1850, became the most famous preacher of the century. His Metropolitan Tabernacle seated about six thousand people. His printed sermons sold by the millions. Late in life he fought what he called the Down-Grade, the slide of many in his own Baptist Union away from the authority of Scripture, and he left the Union in 1887.

In America, Dwight L. Moody, a shoe salesman with little education, became the great evangelist of the age. With the singer Ira Sankey, he held huge meetings in Britain and America in the 1870s. He founded schools in Northfield, Massachusetts, and what became the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, founded in 1886.

Others answered the critics with scholarship. Princeton Seminary, under men like Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, defended the inspiration and authority of the Bible. Between 1910 and 1915 a series of ninety essays called *The Fundamentals* was published and sent free to pastors and missionaries. The essays defended the authority of Scripture, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, His atoning death, His bodily resurrection, and His return. Those who held to these truths came to be called fundamentalists, a name that only later took on the negative sense it often has today.

Recovering the Hope of His Coming

The 1800s also saw renewed interest in what the Bible teaches about the end times. John Nelson Darby, an Irish Anglican minister who became a leader of the Plymouth Brethren, taught in the 1830s that God’s plan for Israel and His plan for the church are distinct, and that Christ will come for His church before the seven years of tribulation described in Daniel and Revelation. This view is called the pre-tribulation Rapture.

Critics sometimes say that because Darby made this view popular, it was invented in the 1830s. But the real question is not when a view became popular. The question is what Scripture teaches. Paul tells the Thessalonians that Jesus "is delivering us from the wrath that is coming" and that "God did not appoint us for wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9). Jesus promised the church in Philadelphia, "I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (Revelation 3:10). I believe the pre-tribulation view is the best reading of those passages, and I will say more in Chapter 22.

Darby's teaching spread through Bible conferences and especially through the *Scofield Reference Bible*, published by Oxford University Press in 1909, which carried his framework into millions of American homes. Many Christians have always held other views of the timing of these events, and they are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Azusa Street and the Pentecostal Movement

In April 1906, at a small mission on Azusa Street in Los Angeles led by William J. Seymour, an African American preacher, people began to speak in tongues and claim a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Meetings went on daily for about three years, with Black, white, Hispanic, and Asian believers worshiping together at a time of strict segregation. From Azusa Street and similar revivals, the Pentecostal movement spread worldwide.

Christians disagree, sometimes sharply, about whether the gifts of tongues and prophecy continue today. But no history of the church can ignore that Pentecostal and charismatic churches have become one of the largest and fastest-growing parts of world Christianity, especially in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Study Questions

1. Read Colossians 2:8. How does it apply to the ideas of the Enlightenment and higher criticism?
2. Why does it matter what starting assumptions scholars bring to the Bible?
3. Machen said liberalism was a different religion using Christian words. Do you agree? Why?
4. How does the date when a teaching became popular differ from whether it is true?
5. What can we learn from Spurgeon and Moody about faithfulness in a time of doubt?

Part Six: The Church in Our Time and the Days Ahead

Chapter 20: The Twentieth Century: Martyrs, Revivals, and a Worldwide Church

> *These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but take courage, I have overcome the world.*
>
> John 16:33 (SLB)

The 1900s were the bloodiest century in human history. Two world wars, the Holocaust, and the communist revolutions killed tens of millions of people. More Christians may have been killed for their faith in that century than in all the centuries before it, though nobody can count exactly. And yet the 1900s also saw the gospel spread faster than ever before. By the end of the century, the center of the Christian world had moved south and east.

Christians Under Communism

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the new Soviet government set out to destroy religion. Thousands of churches were closed, blown up, or turned into warehouses and museums. Priests and pastors were shot or sent to labor camps. Believers lost jobs and places in universities. The same pattern followed in Eastern Europe after 1945, in China after 1949, in North Korea, and elsewhere.

Yet the church survived. In Romania, a Lutheran pastor named Richard Wurmbrand spent fourteen years in communist prisons, beaten and tortured, and later founded The Voice of the Martyrs to tell the world about the persecuted church. In China, missionaries were expelled by 1952. Many in the West feared the Chinese church would die. Instead, despite fierce persecution under Mao Zedong, especially during the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966, the church grew in house churches. Today scholars estimate China has tens of millions of Christians, though exact numbers are disputed and hard to count.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the German Church

When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, many German Protestants welcomed him. A movement called the German Christians wanted to merge Christianity with Nazi ideas and remove anything Jewish from the church. Some pastors refused. In May 1934, at the Synod of Barmen, they adopted the Barmen Declaration, written mainly by Karl Barth, which declared that Jesus Christ, as He is attested in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, and rejected any other lord. These believers formed what was called the Confessing Church.

One of its young pastors was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He trained pastors at an illegal seminary until the Gestapo shut it down in 1937. That same year he published *The Cost of Discipleship*, which warned against what he called cheap grace, grace without repentance and without the cross. He became part of a plot against Hitler, was arrested in April 1943, and was hanged at the Flossenbürg concentration camp on 9 April 1945, less than a month before Germany surrendered. Christians still debate whether he was right to join a plot to kill. No one doubts his courage.

Righteous Among the Nations

During the Holocaust, about six million Jews were murdered. Most church leaders in Europe were silent. Some believers risked everything. In the Netherlands, a watchmaker's family named ten Boom hid Jews in a secret room in their home in Haarlem. In February 1944 they were betrayed. Casper ten Boom, the father, died in prison about ten days later. His daughter Betsie died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in December 1944. Her sister Corrie survived, and after the war she traveled the world telling how God's love had been deeper than the pit of the camp. Her book *The Hiding Place* was published in 1971.

In the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, Pastor André Trocmé and his Huguenot congregation, descendants of the persecuted Protestants of Chapter 16, sheltered thousands of Jewish refugees, many of them children. Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, has honored the ten Booms, the Trocmés, and the people of Le Chambon as Righteous Among the Nations.

Through Gates of Splendor

On 8 January 1956, five young American missionaries, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderian, were speared to death on a sandbar of the Curaray River in Ecuador by men of the Waorani people they had been trying to reach. Life magazine carried the story. Elisabeth Elliot, Jim's widow, and Rachel Saint, Nate's sister, later went to live among the Waorani, and some of the very men who killed the missionaries came to faith in Christ. Elisabeth Elliot's book about the five, *Through Gates of Splendor* (1957), sent thousands into missions.

Billy Graham and Evangelical Christianity

In the fall of 1949 a young Southern Baptist evangelist named Billy Graham held a tent crusade in Los Angeles that was extended week after week. Newspapers took notice, and his ministry became known nationwide. Over the next six decades Graham preached in person to many millions of people on every inhabited continent. He was known for integrity in money and in his personal life, and in the 1950s, before the civil rights laws, he refused to hold segregated meetings.

Graham also helped bring together evangelicals from around the world. In July 1974 he and others gathered about 2,700 Christian leaders from more than 150 nations at Lausanne, Switzerland. The Lausanne Covenant, written mainly by the English pastor John Stott, called the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Reliability of Scripture

In late 1946 or early 1947, Bedouin shepherds found ancient scrolls in a cave near Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Over the following years, scrolls and fragments were found in eleven caves. They included copies or pieces of every book of the Old Testament except Esther. The great Isaiah Scroll, dated to about the second century B.C., is about a thousand years older than the oldest complete Hebrew manuscripts of Isaiah known before. When scholars compared them, they found the text had been copied with remarkable care. The differences are mostly spelling and small details. That is a great encouragement to anyone who wonders whether the Bible we have is the Bible God gave.

Changes in the Catholic Church

From 1962 to 1965, the Roman Catholic Church held the Second Vatican Council. It allowed the Mass to be said in local languages instead of Latin, encouraged Catholics to read the Bible, and called Protestants "separated brethren." These were real changes. But the council did not reverse the Council of Trent's teaching on justification, the Mass, Mary, or the authority of the pope. Protestants and Catholics now work together on many moral and social issues, and that is good. The disagreement over the gospel itself remains, and it is serious.

The Center Moves South

In 1900 most Christians in the world lived in Europe and North America. By 2000 that was no longer true. The church exploded in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, especially South Korea, China, India, and the Philippines. In many of those places, the church grew through the work of local believers, often Pentecostal, often poor, and often persecuted. Meanwhile, church attendance fell sharply across much of Europe. We will look at the numbers in the next chapter.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think the church grew in China under persecution, when many expected it to die?
2. What did Bonhoeffer mean by cheap grace? Where do you see it today?
3. Most church leaders were silent during the Holocaust. What would it have taken for you to act like the ten Booms?
4. How do the Dead Sea Scrolls encourage our confidence in the Bible?
5. Read John 16:33. How does this verse sum up the church's twentieth century?

Chapter 21: The Church Around the World Today

> *After these things I saw, and look, a great multitude which no one was able to number, out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches in their hands*
>
> Revelation 7:9 (SLB)

If you could stand at a high point and see every Christian gathering on earth this Sunday, what would you see? You would see a grandmother in Lagos singing in a crowded hall, a group of young adults in Seoul praying before dawn, a few believers in Iran meeting quietly behind closed curtains, a cathedral in Europe with a handful of elderly worshipers, a storefront church in Texas, a village congregation under a tree in Uganda, and a house church in China. You would hear hundreds of languages. That is the church of Jesus Christ today.

The Numbers

Numbers can never tell the whole story, because only God knows who truly belongs to Him (2 Timothy 2:19). Many people who call themselves Christian on a survey have no living faith, and many true believers in dangerous places would never tell a stranger with a clipboard. Still, the numbers give us a rough picture.

In June 2025 the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, published a major study of how the world's religions changed from 2010 to 2020. Here is what it found about Christians:

- The number of people who identify as Christian grew from about 2.1 billion in 2010 to about 2.3 billion in 2020.
- But the world's population grew faster, so Christians' share of the world fell from about 31 percent to about 29 percent.
- Sub-Saharan Africa passed Europe as the region with the most Christians. By 2020, about 31 percent of the world's Christians lived in sub-Saharan Africa, and about 22 percent in Europe.
- The number of Christians in Europe dropped by about 9 percent over the decade, while in sub-Saharan Africa it grew by about 31 percent.

Pew's report points to people leaving the faith they were raised in as a major reason for the drop in Christians' share of the world. (Source: Pew Research Center, "Christian Population Change," 9 June 2025. Full details in Appendix D.)

Think about what those numbers mean. A hundred and twenty-five years ago, the typical Christian was a white European or American. Today the typical Christian is more likely to be an African woman. The missionaries of Chapter 18 sowed in tears. Their spiritual grandchildren are reaping with shouts of joy (Psalm 126:5-6).

The Persecuted Church

Christians are among the most persecuted groups in the world today. Organizations that track persecution, such as Open Doors and The Voice of the Martyrs, publish yearly reports on the countries where it is hardest to follow Christ. Their methods differ and their numbers are estimates, but they agree on the picture. In parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, believers face prison, beatings, the loss of their homes and families, and death. Converts from Islam often face the most danger, sometimes from their own relatives. In some countries, owning a Bible can bring a long prison sentence.

The Bible tells us how to respond. "Remember the prisoners as bound with ***them***, ***and*** those being mistreated, as being yourselves also in ***the*** body" (Hebrews 13:3). Pray for them by name if you can. Support ministries that serve them. And learn from them. Many of them would tell you that their faith grew stronger under pressure, the same way the church grew under Nero, Decius, and Mao.

Decline in the West

In much of Europe, the lands of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Spurgeon, church attendance has fallen to a small fraction of what it once was. Great churches stand nearly empty. In the United States and Canada, the share of adults who say they have no religion has risen sharply since the 1990s.

There are many reasons, and historians and sociologists argue about them. Some of the reasons go back to things we have seen in this book: the long slide of liberal churches away from the authority of Scripture (Chapter 19), the bad witness of Christians who used power cruelly (Chapters 11 and 16), and the comfortable, nominal faith that has troubled the church ever since Constantine (Chapter 6). Churches that cut themselves off from the Bible have, in general, shrunk faster than churches that held to it, though many Bible-believing churches have declined too.

But the West is not without hope. Immigrant churches from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are planting congregations in Europe and North America. In some ways, the mission field is sending missionaries back to the lands that once sent missionaries to them.

The Unfinished Task

Jesus said, "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). Mission organizations estimate that thousands of distinct people groups still have no church strong enough to reach its own people. Bible translators report that the full Bible is now available in hundreds of languages and the New Testament in many more, but that over a billion people still lack a complete Bible in their first language. Those figures change every year, and you can find the current ones from groups like Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Joshua Project.

The task that Jesus gave on the mountain in Galilee, that Paul carried to Rome, that Patrick carried to Ireland, and that Carey carried to India, is not finished.

Many Churches, One Lord

Today there are Catholic, Orthodox, and many kinds of Protestant churches: Lutheran, Reformed and Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, nondenominational, and more. Some of these differences are serious, especially those that touch the gospel itself. Others are differences of practice that faithful believers can hold with charity.

What unites every true Christian is not a denomination but a Savior. Paul wrote, “one body and one Spirit, even as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). One day, John saw “a great multitude which no one was able to number, out of every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). That is where church history is heading.

Study Questions

1. What surprised you most about the Pew numbers on world Christianity?
2. Why might a survey count people as Christians who are not, and miss people who are?
3. Read Hebrews 13:3. What is one practical way you or your church can remember the persecuted?
4. What do you think are the biggest reasons for the decline of the church in the West?
5. Read Revelation 7:9-10. How should that picture change the way you see believers from other nations and cultures?

Chapter 22: The Last Chapter Is Already Written

> *because the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with **the** voice of an archangel and with **the** trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them in **the** clouds to meet the Lord in **the** air; and so we will always be with **the** Lord.*
>
> 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (SLB)

Every history book ends with the present day, because historians cannot see the future. This one is different, because the God who built the church has told us how its story ends. We do not know the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36). But we know the shape of what is coming, and we know Who is coming.

The Blessed Hope

From the very beginning, the church has lived looking forward. The angels told the apostles at the ascension that "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you watched Him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The early believers used the Aramaic words *Maran atha*, meaning Our Lord, come (1 Corinthians 16:22). The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed both confess that He will come again to judge the living and the dead. Paul calls it "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).

Christians have held different views about the order of end-time events. Some, called amillennialists, read the thousand years of Revelation 20 as a picture of the present church age. Others, postmillennialists, believe the gospel will gradually win the world before Christ returns. Others, premillennialists, believe Christ will return before a literal thousand-year reign on earth. Many of the early church fathers, including Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, were premillennial. Augustine's view, closer to amillennialism, came to dominate the church for many centuries afterward. All of these views have been held by faithful believers.

Why I Hold the Pre-Tribulation View

I hold the premillennial view, and within it, the pre-tribulation view of the Rapture. Here is the order of events as I understand Scripture.

1. **The Rapture of the church.** Jesus will come in the air for His church. The dead in Christ will rise first, then believers who are alive will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).
2. **The Tribulation.** A seven-year period of judgment on the earth will follow, the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27). It will include the rise of the Antichrist and the judgments described in Revelation 6 to 19. During this time God will again turn to Israel, and many will be saved.

3. **The Second Coming.** At the end of the Tribulation, Christ will return visibly to the earth with His saints, defeat His enemies, and set up His kingdom (Revelation 19:11-16; Zechariah 14:4).
4. **The Millennium.** Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-6).
5. **The final judgment and the new creation.** After the last rebellion is crushed, the dead will be judged at the great white throne (Revelation 20:11-15). Then God will make a new heaven and a new earth, and He will dwell with His people forever (Revelation 21:1-4).

Why before the Tribulation? Here are the main reasons.

- **The church is promised deliverance from the wrath to come.** Paul says Jesus "is delivering us from the wrath that is coming" and that "God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9). The Tribulation is a time when the wrath of God is poured out on the earth (Revelation 6:16-17).
- **Jesus promised to keep the faithful church from the hour of testing.** He told the church in Philadelphia, "I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 3:10). He did not say He would keep them through it, but from it.
- **The church is missing from the earth in Revelation 4 to 18.** The word "church" appears again and again in Revelation 1 to 3. Then, in the long description of judgments on earth, the church is not mentioned until the bride returns with Christ.
- **His coming for us is always imminent.** The New Testament tells believers to watch and be ready, because the Lord could come at any time (Matthew 24:42-44; James 5:8-9). If seven years of clearly marked events had to come first, that urgency would make little sense.

Bible-believing Christians who disagree with me on the timing are not my enemies, and I am not theirs. We agree on what matters most: Jesus is coming again, bodily and visibly, to set everything right. And we agree on what He wants us to be doing until He comes.

The Bride Made Ready

All through this book, we have seen the church at its best and at its worst. We have seen martyrs and murderers, saints and scoundrels, sometimes in the same man. Is that really the bride of Christ?

Yes. Paul says Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, to make her holy, "so that He might present her to Himself, the church glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any of such things, but that she might be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27). The church has never been spotless in history. But she will be on that day, because Christ Himself will make her so. When we finally see the church as she will be, every martyr's blood, every missionary's grave, every faithful Sunday school teacher's labor, will be shown to have been worth it.

What We Do Until Then

Jesus did not tell us to stare at the sky. He told us to get to work. In His parable of the minas, the master tells his servants, "Do business until I come" (Luke 19:13). Every generation in this book had the same task: believe the gospel, live it, guard it, and pass it on. Ours is no different.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean that the church has always lived looking forward? Do you live that way?
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. What comfort did Paul give the Thessalonians about believers who had died?
3. Read Revelation 3:10. What does Jesus promise the faithful church?
4. Why is it important to hold firm convictions about the end times and still treat believers who differ as brothers and sisters?
5. Read Ephesians 5:25-27. How does Christ's plan for His bride change the way you see your local church, flaws and all?

Chapter 23: Lessons from Two Thousand Years

> *Therefore we also, having so great a cloud of witnesses encompassing us, having laid aside every weight and the sin that easily entangles, let us run with endurance the race lying before us, looking to the founder and perfecter of the faith, Jesus, who for the joy lying before Him endured **the** cross, having despised **the** shame, and sat down at **the** right hand of the throne of God.*
>
> Hebrews 12:1-2 (SLB)

We have traveled a long road together, from an upper room in Jerusalem to a worldwide church of every tribe and tongue. Before we close, I want to pull together some lessons that show up again and again in this story. They are not new. They are in the Bible. But church history shows them to us in flesh and blood.

Lesson One: Jesus Keeps His Promise

Jesus said He would build His church and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Think of what has come against it: the Sanhedrin, Nero, Decius, Diocletian, the Arian emperors, the fall of Rome, the armies of Islam, corrupt popes, the wars of religion, the Enlightenment, the guillotine, Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. Every one of them is gone. The church is still here.

That does not mean every local church or denomination will survive. Jesus warned the church at Ephesus that He would remove its lampstand if it did not repent (Revelation 2:5), and the great churches of Asia Minor and North Africa did largely disappear. But His church, His people, will never be destroyed.

Lesson Two: The Church Grows Best When It Has the Least

Over and over, the church grew fastest when it had no worldly power, and grew weakest when it had the most. It grew under Nero and shrank into nominal faith under some of the Christian emperors. It grew in Chinese house churches while it emptied out of state churches in Europe. Paul said God's power is perfected in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Church history agrees.

Lesson Three: Every Revival Starts with the Word

Look at the turning points. Augustine picked up Romans. Waldo paid for a translation. Wycliffe and Tyndale gave the English the Bible. Luther found the gospel in Romans and Galatians. Wesley's heart was warmed while someone read about Romans. Carey read about the Great Commission and the voyages of Captain Cook. Whenever the church has drifted, God has called it back through His Word. Whenever the church has kept the Word from the people, error has grown.

If you want revival in your life, your family, or your church, start where every revival in history started. Open the Bible.

Lesson Four: Truth Matters, and So Does Love

The early church fought for the deity of Christ and the truth of the gospel, and we owe them our faith. The Reformers fought for justification by faith alone, and they were right to. Truth matters. A church that does not care what it believes will soon believe anything.

But we have also seen what happens when Christians fight for truth without love. They burned Hus and drowned Manz. They massacred Huguenots and hanged witches. They attacked Jews and enslaved Africans. Paul said that if we have all knowledge and do not have love, we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2). We must speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Both halves of that verse matter.

Lesson Five: God Uses Ordinary People

Most of the people God used most in this book were not impressive by the world's standards. Peter was a fisherman. Patrick was a runaway slave. Bunyan was a tinker. Carey was a shoemaker. Moody sold shoes. And millions of believers whose names we will never know, mothers who prayed like Monica, slaves who refused to deny Christ like Blandina, farmers who hid a Bible under the floor, carried the faith from one generation to the next.

God has not changed His methods. "God chose the foolish things of the world, so that He might put the wise to shame" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Lesson Six: Every Generation Must Pass It On

The church is always one generation from disappearing. Faith is not inherited like eye color. Each generation has to hear the gospel, believe it, and pass it on. That is why Paul told Timothy to entrust what he had heard to faithful people who would teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2). You are a link in a chain that runs back to the apostles. Who is the next link?

Where Do You Fit?

The writer of Hebrews, after his long list of the heroes of faith in chapter 11, turns to his readers. "Therefore we also, having so great a cloud of witnesses encompassing us," he says, let us run with endurance the race set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The people in this book are part of that cloud of witnesses. They ran their race. Some of them ran it very badly for a while and were brought back. Now it is our turn.

If you have never put your trust in Jesus Christ, everything in this book points you to Him. Every martyr died for Him. Every missionary went for Him. Every true revival came back to Him. The church's whole story is about one Person: Jesus, the Son of God, who died for our sins, was buried, rose again on the third day, and is coming again (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

How to Be Saved

The gospel the apostles preached, the gospel Luther recovered, and the gospel Wesley finally understood at Aldersgate, is simple enough for a child and deep enough for a lifetime.

- **We have all sinned.** "for all sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).
- **Sin earns death.** "For the wages of sin ***is*** death, but the gift of God ***is*** eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).
- **Christ died for us.** "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).
- **Salvation is a gift received by faith.** "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this ***is*** not from yourselves; the gift ***is*** of God, not from works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- **Call on Him.** "if you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of ***the*** dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

If you want to trust Christ today, you can tell Him so in your own words. Here is a prayer that may help.

> *Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I cannot save myself. I believe You are the Son of God, that You died on the cross for my sins, and that You rose from the dead. I turn from my sin, and I trust You alone to save me. Thank You for Your gift of eternal life. Help me to follow You for the rest of my life, to read Your Word, and to find a church where I can grow. In Your name I pray. Amen.*

If you prayed that and meant it, tell someone. Find a Bible-believing church and get baptized. Start reading the Gospel of John. You have just joined the story told in this book, and you have joined it at the very best part: the part where Jesus is coming soon.

Study Questions

1. Which of the six lessons in this chapter speaks most to you right now? Why?
2. Where have you seen the church grow strongest when it had the least?
3. Why must truth and love go together? Which one do you tend to neglect?
4. Who in church history has inspired you most after reading this book? Why?
5. Read Hebrews 12:1-2. What is weighing you down in your own race, and what would it look like to fix your eyes on Jesus this week?

Appendix A: Timeline at a Glance

Dates marked “about” are approximate. Where historians disagree, I give the most common date. The chapter where each event is discussed is in the last column.

Year	Event	Chapter
about 30 or 33	Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; Pentecost	1
about 34 to 36	Stephen martyred; Saul converted on the Damascus road	1, 2
about 49	Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)	2
about 62	James, the brother of Jesus, stoned in Jerusalem	3
64	Great Fire of Rome; Nero persecutes Christians	3
about 64 to 68	Peter and Paul put to death in Rome (reported by later writers)	3
70	Romans destroy Jerusalem and the temple	3
about 95	John writes Revelation on Patmos	3
about 107 to 110	Ignatius of Antioch martyred in Rome	4
about 111 to 113	Pliny writes to Trajan about the Christians	4
about 144	Marcion put out of the church at Rome	5
about 155 to 160	Polycarp martyred at Smyrna	4
about 165	Justin Martyr beheaded in Rome	4
177	Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, including Blandina	4
about 180	Irenaeus writes Against Heresies	5
203	Perpetua and Felicity martyred at Carthage	4
250	Decius orders empire-wide sacrifice	4
303	Great Persecution begins under Diocletian	4
312	Constantine wins at the Milvian Bridge (28 October)	6
313	Edict of Milan grants religious freedom	6
325	Council of Nicaea	7
367	Athanasius lists the 27 books of the New Testament	5
380	Theodosius makes Nicene Christianity the faith of the empire	6
381	Council of Constantinople	7
386	Augustine converted in Milan	8
about 405	Jerome finishes his translation of the Old Testament into Latin	8
410	Visigoths sack Rome	8
431	Council of Ephesus	7
451	Council of Chalcedon	7
400s	Patrick’s mission to Ireland	9
476	Last western emperor removed	8
563	Columba founds the monastery on Iona	9
597	Augustine of Canterbury arrives in Kent	9

Year	Event	Chapter
622	Muhammad's Hijra to Medina	10
about 638	Muslim armies take Jerusalem	10
732	Battle of Tours	10
754	Boniface killed in Frisia	9
800	Charlemagne crowned emperor in Rome	10
863	Cyril and Methodius go to the Slavs	9
988	Vladimir of Kiev baptized	9
1054	Formal split between East and West (16 July)	10
1077	Henry IV at Canossa	11
1095	Urban II calls the First Crusade at Clermont	11
1099	Crusaders capture Jerusalem	11
about 1173	Peter Waldo begins preaching in Lyons	12
1204	Fourth Crusade sacks Constantinople	11
1215	Fourth Lateran Council	11
about 1382	Wycliffe's English Bible	12
1415	Jan Hus burned at Constance (6 July)	12
1453	Constantinople falls to the Ottoman Turks (29 May)	12
about 1455	Gutenberg prints the Latin Bible	12
1516	Erasmus publishes the Greek New Testament	12
1517	Luther's Ninety-Five Theses (31 October)	13
1521	Luther at the Diet of Worms	13
1522	Luther's German New Testament	13
1525	First Anabaptist baptisms in Zurich (21 January)	14
1526	Tyndale's English New Testament printed at Worms	15
1530	Augsburg Confession	13
1534	Act of Supremacy in England	15
1536	Calvin's Institutes, first edition; Tyndale executed	14, 15
1540	Jesuits approved by the pope	16
1545 to 1563	Council of Trent	16
1560	Geneva Bible	15
1572	Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre (24 August)	16
1611	King James Version	15
1612	First Baptist church in England	15
1618 to 1648	Thirty Years' War	16
1646	Westminster Confession of Faith	17
1675	Spener's Pia Desideria	17
1678	Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress	17
1727	Moravian renewal at Herrnhut (13 August)	17
1738	Wesley at Aldersgate Street (24 May)	17

Year	Event	Chapter
1741	Edwards preaches at Enfield (8 July)	17
1792	Carey's Enquiry; Baptist Missionary Society formed	18
1801	Cane Ridge camp meeting	18
1807	British slave trade abolished	18
1812	Judsons sail for Asia	18
1859	Darwin's On the Origin of Species	19
1865	Hudson Taylor founds the China Inland Mission	18
1906	Azusa Street revival begins	19
1909	Scofield Reference Bible	19
1910 to 1915	The Fundamentals	19
1934	Barmen Declaration	20
1945	Bonhoeffer hanged (9 April)	20
1947	Dead Sea Scrolls found	20
1949	Billy Graham's Los Angeles crusade	20
1956	Five missionaries killed in Ecuador (8 January)	20
1962 to 1965	Second Vatican Council	20
1974	Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization	20
2010 to 2020	Sub-Saharan Africa passes Europe as the region with the most Christians (Pew)	21

Appendix B: The Early Creeds

These are the two creeds most widely confessed by Christians around the world. The English text below is the traditional wording as printed in the Book of Common Prayer (Project Gutenberg edition 29622, published for the Episcopal Church in Scotland). “Catholic” here means universal, the whole church in every place, not the Roman Catholic Church. “Ghost” is the older English word for Spirit. “The quick and the dead” means the living and the dead. The line “He descended into hell” has been understood in different ways; many Protestants read it as meaning Christ truly died and went to the realm of the dead.

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried: He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; The holy Catholic Church; The Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed

This is the creed of 381 as later used in the western churches, including the words “and the Son,” which the Eastern churches do not accept (see Chapter 10).

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 his 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, and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost 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 sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, and Giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one 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.

Appendix C: Words to Know

- **Anabaptist:** "rebaptizer," a name given to Reformation-era believers who baptized only those who personally professed faith.
- **Apostolic Fathers:** the Christian writers of the generation after the apostles, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp.
- **Arianism:** the teaching of Arius that the Son of God was created and is not fully God.
- **Canon:** the list of books recognized as Scripture.
- **Council:** a gathering of church leaders to decide questions of teaching or practice.
- **Creed:** from the Latin *credo*, "I believe," a short summary of the faith.
- **Diet:** an assembly of the Holy Roman Empire, like the Diet of Worms in 1521.
- **Excommunication:** putting a person out of the fellowship of the church.
- **Gnosticism:** early movements teaching that salvation comes by secret knowledge and that the physical world is evil.
- **Heresy:** a teaching that denies a central truth of the faith.
- **Icon:** a painted image of Christ or a saint, used in Eastern worship.
- **Indulgence:** a document from the medieval church said to reduce punishment for sin in purgatory.
- **Justification:** God's act of declaring a sinner righteous because of Christ.
- **Martyr:** from the Greek word for "witness," a believer killed for the faith.
- **Monasticism:** the life of monks and nuns, living apart under vows and a rule.
- **Pietism:** a German movement of the late 1600s that stressed Bible study, prayer, and holy living.
- **Pope:** the bishop of Rome, head of the Roman Catholic Church.
- **Pre-tribulation Rapture:** the view that Christ will take His church to Himself before the seven-year Tribulation.
- **Purgatory:** in Roman Catholic teaching, a state of cleansing after death before heaven.
- **Puritan:** an English Protestant of the 1500s and 1600s who sought to purify the Church of England.
- **Schism:** a split in the church.
- **Synod:** a church meeting or council, usually regional.
- **Transubstantiation:** the Roman Catholic teaching that the bread and wine become Christ's body and blood in substance.
- **Trinity:** one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Appendix D: Sources and Credits

Documents I opened and checked word for word

Every quotation in a "Text checked" box, and every quotation set off with a source line, was checked against these published texts. The checked excerpts are saved with the book's source files.

- Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb.
- Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, translated by William Melmoth, edited by F. C. T. Bosanquet (Project Gutenberg 2811). The letter to Trajan is 10.96 in modern numbering.
- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1, translated by William Whiston (Project Gutenberg 2848).
- *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Volume 1, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Project Gutenberg 77576): Ignatius, *To the Romans* 4, and *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.
- Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25, 3.5, and 5.1, translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Volume 1 (Wikisource).
- Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey (Project Gutenberg 3296).
- Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of England*, translated by A. M. Sellar (Project Gutenberg 38326).
- Patrick, *Confession*, in *The Most Ancient Lives of Saint Patrick*, edited by James O'Leary (Project Gutenberg 18482).
- Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses* (Project Gutenberg 274).
- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen (Project Gutenberg 45001).
- *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, a compilation based on John Foxe (John C. Winston Company; Project Gutenberg 22400).
- Jonathan Edwards, *Selected Sermons*, edited by H. Norman Gardiner (Project Gutenberg 34632).
- William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, 1792 (Project Gutenberg 11449).
- J. Hudson Taylor, *A Retrospect* (Project Gutenberg 26744).
- *The Book of Common Prayer*, Episcopal Church in Scotland edition (Project Gutenberg 29622), for the creeds in Appendix B.
- John Wesley, *Journal*, 24 May 1738, as printed in Steve Manskar, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation," Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church, umcdiscipleship.org, 24 May 2013.

Other sources for facts and figures

- Pew Research Center, "Christian Population Change," part of *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, 9 June 2025, pewresearch.org.
- "What Luther Said," *Christian History*, Christianity Today, 8 August 2008, christianitytoday.com, on the doubtful "Here I stand" wording.
- Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 volumes (1937 to 1945); volumes 4 to 6 are titled *The Great Century*.
- The New Testament and the early councils and creeds are discussed from the standard published texts. Other dates in this book are the dates given in standard reference works on church history. Where those works disagree, the text says "about" or gives the range.

Quotations not checked word for word

I could not open a published text of these, so they appear in this book only as paraphrases, and the text says so: Tertullian's saying about the blood of Christians as seed (*Apology* 50), Perpetua's words to her father, John Knox's description of Geneva, Tyndale's "boy that drives the plough," Tyndale's last words as given by Foxe, Carey's "Expect great things" motto, the cry of "God wills it" at Clermont, and the words "Conquer by this" in Eusebius's account of Constantine.

Scripture

Scripture quotations are taken from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB), with familiar English forms of personal names, copyright 2026 Andrew Dominguez. The complete SLB is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

About This Book

The Church Through the Ages tells the story of the Christian church from the day of Pentecost to the present, in plain words, for ordinary believers.

It follows the apostles and the first churches, three centuries of persecution, the great councils that defended the truth about Jesus, the missionaries who carried the gospel to new peoples, the long medieval centuries, the Reformation and its recovery of the gospel of grace, the revivals and missions of the 1700s and 1800s, and the martyrs and worldwide growth of the church in the 1900s and today.

It does not hide the church's sins. It names the Crusades, the burning of heretics, the wars of religion, and the mistreatment of the Jewish people plainly. It also shows God keeping His promise that the gates of Hades would not overpower His church.

Every date is drawn from published sources, and quotations from history are checked against published translations, with honest labels where a famous saying is doubtful. Each chapter ends with study questions for personal reading or small groups. The appendices include a timeline, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, a glossary, the sources used, and a Scripture index.

The book closes by looking ahead to the return of Christ, from a pre-tribulation view, and by inviting every reader to trust the Savior the whole story is about.

Scripture Index

This index lists every Bible reference in the book, with the pages where it appears.

Genesis 1:27 (63)

Exodus 20:4-5 (35); 20:4-6 (36)

Deuteronomy 32:35 (60)

Psalms 85:6 (58, 60); 119:105 (41, 43); 126:1 (22); 126:5-6 (71)

Proverbs 21:1 (22)

Isaiah 40:6-8 (53); 40:8 (51, 53); 54:2-3 (61)

Daniel 9:24-27 (74)

Micah 6:8 (38)

Zechariah 14:4 (75)

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