Pentecost: The Birth of the Church

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and instructed them for 40 days, after which he ascended to heaven. While with them, he said: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5). That baptism of the Spirit would be called the birthday of the church.

Jesus' words were fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4), and the apostle Peter preached his first sermon, urging the crowds to repent, to believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 38). That very day, some 3,000 people were baptized as the people of God (verse 41). The church had begun.

The day called Pentecost is named after the Greek word *pentekostos,* which means 50th. It is the festival observed by Jews, Shavuoth, sometimes called in the Old Testament the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:15; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:9-12). Other names for the day are the Feast of the Harvest and Day of First Fruits (Exodus 23:16; Numbers 28:26). Pentecost was to be observed in ancient Israel on the 50th day after the priest waved a selected sheaf of the first grain that had been harvested in the spring (Leviticus 23:15-21). Seven weeks elapsed between the day of the wave sheaf offering and the beginning of Pentecost, thus the name of the festival — the Feast of Weeks. This festival had come to signify for Jews the commemoration of the giving of the Law of Moses (the Torah) at Mount Sinai in the third month after the Exodus Passover (Exodus 20–24).

Perhaps the Holy Spirit came on the Jewish day of Shavuoth, or Pentecost, to signal that God had now moved to write the Law not on tables of stone, but in the hearts of his people through the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3). The indwelling Spirit, the Comforter or Advocate Jesus had sent, was replacing the external "schoolmaster" Law of Moses that had supervised ancient Israel's worship under the old covenant (Galatians 3:23-25).

"If I am lifted up," Jesus said, "I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). God had moved once and for all through his Son to rescue humanity from sin and death. The coming of the Spirit into human hearts and minds on that Day of

Pentecost in the early 30s was God's sign that in Christ he was creating a new people — a new Israel — an Israel of the Spirit (Galatians 6:16) that included Jews and Gentiles alike.

Pentecost or Whitsunday

Many Christians celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in worship activities on Pentecost, or as it is sometimes called, Whitsunday. This name is said to arise from the ancient practice of newly baptized individuals wearing white robes during this time. In the Christian liturgical year, Pentecost is the seventh Sunday after Easter and closes the Easter season.

Easter in the Church

The death and resurrection of Jesus have been the central events of the church's faith confession since it was founded (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). It's not surprising that the Lord's crucifixion and rising to life should become the focal points of communal Christian worship and remembrance.

There is evidence that the apostolic church celebrated Jesus' Sunday morning resurrection in its worship gatherings on the first day of each week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). The Lord's death was remembered in the bread and wine communion that was probably part of Christian fellowship meals (Luke 22:19-20).

The "Easter" festival begins

At some point in the first two centuries, it became customary in the church to have a yearly celebration of the Lord's death and resurrection called "Pascha." It is the same word used for "Passover" in the Greek version of the Scriptures. Our Easter[1] season has grown out of the old Pascha celebration. In time, the Pascha became observed throughout the church.

The early church saw the symbolic continuity between the slaughtered lamb of the Passover and the crucified Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. When Paul speaks of Christ as "our Passover Lamb" (Greek, *pascha*) in 1 Corinthians 5:7, he is affirming that the God who acted mightily in ancient Israel's release from Egyptian bondage, typified by the Passover, is the same God who has acted in Christ to free us eternally from all spiritual prisons of sin and death.

Originally, the great Paschal celebration of the church was a unified commemoration of the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord. Only later were the events divided into separate commemorations, with the ascension observance being moved to the 40th day of the Easter season.

Gradually, in the early centuries of the church, with an increasing emphasis on Holy Week and Good Friday, Pascha took on its distinctive character as the Christian celebration of the resurrection. Good Friday commemorated Jesus' crucifixion and death. The feast of the resurrection, which completed the whole work of redemption, became gradually the most prominent part of the Christian Pascha, and identical with our Easter Sunday.

Since as early as the fourth century, Resurrection Sunday, or what we call

"Easter Sunday" in the English language, has been the center of the Christian liturgical year and calendar.

When to observe Easter?

Before A.D. 325, Christian communities in different regions celebrated Easter on a variety of dates and on different days of the week, and not always on Sunday. However, the Christian Council of Nicea of that year issued the "Easter Rule." Nicea decided that the resurrection of Jesus should be celebrated by all churches throughout the world on the same Sunday.

The council standardized the Easter observance date so that Easter is the first Sunday following what is called the Paschal Full Moon for the year. This means that the date of Easter can range between March 22 and April 25, depending on the lunar cycle.

Eastern Orthodox churches use the same calculation, but base their Easter date on the old Julian calendar and use different Paschal Full Moon tables. The Orthodox Easter Sunday in most years follows the Western Easter by one or more weeks.

Discussions began in the last century in hopes of forging a possible worldwide agreement on a consistent date for Easter. Various proposals have been put forth by churches, Christian organizations and clergy of various denominations. One idea is to disregard the moon altogether in determining the date of Easter. None of the proposals has been adopted by any church up to now.

Even if the date for Easter changes in the future, it won't affect our worship. Christians do not worship days or "holy time." They use such days and seasons as opportunities to worship Christ. Easter is a time when we can reflect on and contemplate the meaning of the wondrous events of our common salvation — a pure gift of God in Christ.

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[1] Some claim that the word "Easter" is "pagan" because it may have once been associated with ancient heathen gods. However, Christian churches were celebrating the resurrection of Jesus in spring long before the English word "Easter" was adopted by English-speaking Christians. The objection against "Easter" is irrelevant in other nations because a different word is used for the Christian spring festival. In most other languages of the world, the name for the

festival is derived from *Pesach* or *Pesah*, the Hebrew name of the Jewish Passover. The holiday is called in French Paques, Italian Pasqua, Spanish Pascua, Scottish Pask, Dutch Paasch or Pashen, Danish Paaske, and Swedish Pask, to name a few.

Irenaeus and the Second-Century Church

Irenaeus has been called the most important Christian theologian between the apostles and the third century. He was a Greek born in Roman Proconsular Asia, today southwestern Turkey, probably between A.D. 130-140. Raised in a worshipful Christian home, as a youth he heard and knew the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp (c. 70-155). Irenaeus explained how Polycarp spoke of his conversations "with John [the apostle] and with the others who had seen the Lord."[1]

When a young man, Irenaeus migrated to Lugdunum, Gaul (modern Lyons, in France). He became a missionary to the Celts and eventually an elder in the Lyons congregation. Later, Irenaeus was ordained the second bishop of Lyons, replacing Pothinus, age 90, who had been martyred.

Irenaeus died perhaps around the end of the second century. His last known appearance occurs when he writes a firm but respectful letter of protest to Victor, the bishop of Rome between 189-199. Victor wanted to excommunicate the Christians of Asia because they kept the church's traditional Paschal festival on Nisan 14.

Against the heretics

His widely-circulated theological work in five books was titled *On the Detection and Refutation of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*. Written about 175-185, it exposed the heresies of various Gnostic sects, especially the most sophisticated group, the Valentinians.

Irenaeus lived too late to personally hear the apostles and their disciples speak or teach. He relied on the succession of bishops in each major city to provide a theological and faith link between himself and the apostles. He gave special attention to the succession of bishops in the church at Rome as an example of the deposit of apostolic tradition that could be found in other churches. Irenaeus cites this succession as "a complete proof that the life-giving faith is one and the same, preserved and transmitted in truth in the church from the apostles up till now."[2]

Irenaeus also relied heavily on the teaching of the New Testament to refute the claims of the heretics. He explained that in the church's writings can be seen "the unfeigned preservation, coming down to us, of the scriptures, with a complete collection allowing for neither addition nor subtraction."

Irenaeus "is the first writer whose New Testament virtually corresponds to the canon that became accepted as traditional."[3] He quotes from most of its writings, though he doesn't cite Philemon, James, 2 Peter or 3 John. We can't say whether he knew of these letters, or if he did, what his view might have been of their authority for the church.

Irenaeus was the first Christian writer to list all four Gospels as authoritative for the church. He said that through them "the tradition of the apostles, manifest in the whole world, is present in every church to be perceived by all who wish to see the truth."

Trinitarian theology

Irenaeus testified to the church's Trinitarian understanding of God's nature long before the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) produced their traditional confessional creed. "In his various statements of faith there appear all the essentials of the Creed of Nicaea except its technical terms."[4]

Irenaeus explained that the church "received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God the Father Almighty…and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, incarnate for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit." He also insisted that God's word witnesses to the Son of God in the Incarnation being fully God as well as true human. "All the prophets and apostles and the Spirit itself" testify to this, he said.

Irenaeus believed that Jesus' redemptive work in his Incarnation, perfect life, death and resurrection was a "Victory in Christ" over all of God's enemies. He wrote: "[Christ] fought and was victorious…for he bound the strong man, liberated the weak, and by destroying sin endowed his creation with salvation."

Irenaeus' legacy is his struggle to preserve and pass on the revelation of God that had been given to the apostles. It's no wonder both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches consider him among the special "saints" of the church. Catholics celebrate a day in his honor each June 28.

Footnotes

[1.] Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, bk. 5.20.6.

[2.] Quotes of Irenaeus are from *On the Detection and Refutation of the*

Knowledge Falsely So Called, translated by Robert M. Grant, in *Irenaeus of Lyons.*

[3.] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church,* 81.

[4.] Cyril C. Richardson, editor, *Early Christian Fathers,* 350.

Persecution, Penance and "the Lapsed"

For the first 300 years of the church's history, believers faced many local and empire-wide persecutions of varying intensity. One of the most terrifying struck in A.D. 250. This was the "Decian Persecution," named after the Roman Emperor Decius Trajan (249-251), who started it.

Decius, a pagan, believed that the gods were unfavorable to Rome because the empire's citizens were not suitably worshipping them. The survival of the empire was in the balance, in his way of thinking. He considered Christians — and anyone else — who didn't worship the gods to be atheists and guilty of high treason. Decius issued a decree commanding all people throughout the empire to sacrifice to the gods and to the emperor. Those complying would receive a *libelli*, a certificate attesting to this fact.

Decius didn't want to turn Christians into martyrs, so comparatively few were actually killed. The goal was to force them to recant their faith and return them to the pagan fold. Arrest, exile, confiscation of property, threats and even torture were employed to force Christians to abandon their faith. The bishops and officers of the church were hit especially hard, with a number of martyrdoms in their ranks.

Many Christians steadfastly refused to go along with Decius' demands and confessed Christ even under brutal torture. They were given the honorary title "Confessor" by the church. However, many Christians did sacrifice to the gods and the emperor. Some bribed authorities to obtain fraudulent certificates stating they had sacrificed, even though they had not. The Christians who complied with Decius' order were excommunicated from the church as apostates and called the *lapsi*, those who had lapsed from the faith.

The persecution under Decius was severe, but it did not last long. He died in battle just two years after attaining office.[1] A decade later, Gallienus (260-268) was on the emperor's throne. Under his reign the church began to enjoy about 40 years of freedom from persecution.[2] Many of the lapsed Christians then wanted to return to the church.

This situation created a great controversy. Should the lapsed be readmitted? Should they be required to do penance and "prove" their loyalty to Christ and the church? Should the lapsed be rebaptized before being readmitted? What about

those who had renounced their faith, but then reaffirmed it even while the Decian persecution was in progress?

Enter Novatian (c. 200-258), a prominent Roman presbyter and theologian. He insisted that no lapsed person should be readmitted to the church. Novatian contended that the lapsed had forfeited grace through a denial of Christ. The group he formed posed another problem when certain of its members later wanted to be readmitted to the church.

Enter Cyprian (248-258), the respected bishop of Carthage. Cyprian and his supporters held that the lapsed should be received back into full fellowship and communion, but only after an interval of probation and penance. Cyprian also insisted that those individuals who had been baptized by priests of schismatic groups, like Novatian's, would have to be rebaptized by priests of the church.

Cyprian convened several North African church councils between the years 251 and 256 to decide the issues. In 256, the North African synod voted unanimously that any individuals baptized by heretical or schismatic groups would have to be rebaptized before being granted full fellowship with the church.

Enter the bishop of Rome, Stephen (254-257). He ordered that the lapsed or heretics should be accepted into the church *without* a second baptism. Cyprian resisted this order for some time, but finally yielded.

Such thorny and divisive questions of how to deal with the lapsed led to the establishment of "a rigorous and fixed system of penitential discipline," wrote Philip Schaff in his monumental *History of the Christian Church*, page 189. Persons who had been excommunicated because they had lapsed, and were now seeking re-entry, became "penitents." They had to undertake a series of acts of penance before being readmitted.

The controversy over how to handle the lapsed had long-lasting repercussions for the church. As church historian Justo González points out in *The Story of Christianity*, page 90, "It was out of that concern that the entire penitential system developed. Much later, the Protestant Reformation was in large measure a protest against that system."

Endnotes

1. Decius was succeeded as emperor by Gallus (251-253) and then Valerian (253-260). While there were changes in the level of persecution, and temporary

easing at times, those were still years when it was not safe to be a Christian.

2. The 40 years of rest was followed by the last and most violent persecution, under Emperor Diocletian (284-305).

Jesus Christ of 'One Substance with the Father'

— The Council of Nicea, May-August, A.D. 325

May 20, 325 was a watershed date in the history of the Christian church. The first international Christian council was convoked at Nicea, a city in what is today northwestern Turkey. The council dealt with a number of issues, such as the controversy concerning the date for celebrating Easter. However, the most important reason was to discuss the nature of Jesus Christ. Apostolic writers had not systematically described Jesus Christ's relationship to the Father in a theological or formal way.

The subject might not even have arisen were it not for the influence of Greek philosophy in the Roman Empire, and even on some Christian thought. To the Greeks, the perfect deity was unchangeable and could have nothing to do with a flawed humanity or our world of matter, which is changing and corruptible. Some Christians began to think of God in the same way as the philosophers, that is, that God was immutable, impassible and fixed in his being.

In the early 300s, a man named Arius was a popular presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt. He taught that the Logos or Word, who became incarnate as Jesus Christ, was a uniquely brought forth and highly exalted being. Arius' teaching began what was at first a local quarrel in the church at Alexandria between himself and his bishop, Alexander. But bishops outside Egypt soon began to side with Arius against Alexander. In the years 318 to 320 the contest between the two views broke out into the open.

While Arius included the Word in the created order, Alexander placed all of creation on one side and the Father and the eternal Word on the other. While the motto of the Arians regarding the Logos was "there was when he was not," Alexander taught that the Word existed eternally with the Father.

Emperor Constantine appealed for agreement, but the controversy continued to rage. The emperor sent letters to Christian bishops throughout the empire, urging that they come to Nicea to settle the issue. Among the most prominent at the council were Alexander of Alexandria, the main opponent of Arius' teachings, and Eusebius of Nicomedia, the chief spokesman for the Arian position. Among the attendees was a young deacon, Athanasius of Alexandria. While he was unable

to participate, not being a bishop, the council formed the prelude to his central role in later articulating the Trinitarian confession of the church.

Most of the bishops were repelled by the idea that Jesus Christ could be thought of as what to them amounted to a created being. When they worshiped Christ, they did not worship a creature — they worshiped God. They were saved not by a created being, but by God. The bishops proceeded to craft a creedal statement of faith concerning what they believed about the Son of God. They wanted the statement to absolutely exclude the claims of Arius that the Logos was a product of the will of God rather than of the very essence of God.

The bishops wrote in their statements that Jesus Christ was "God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father." A key phrase was "of one substance," which translates the Greek *homoousios.* This means that what God is in his essence, Jesus Christ the Son of God is also. Eventually all the bishops except for two signed the creedal statement, believing that it contained the ancient faith of the apostolic church and that it was an accurate reflection of the truth of God's nature to which the New Testament points.

The deity of the Holy Spirit did not come up for discussion at Nicea. The two bishops who opposed the statement were deposed and exiled. Arius and his writings were also anathematized and he was exiled to Illyria. The controversy continued, however, until the council of Constantinople in 381, when the Nicene creed was expanded, and ratified once and for all.

The creedal statement at Nicea regarding Christ's divinity and co-eternal existence with the Father formed the basis of the Nicene Creed, which after 381 became the most universally accepted statement of the church's confession about the being and nature of God.

Is Jesus Really God?
A Look at the Arian Controversy

Few Christians are aware that two of the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith — the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity — were not finally decided until some 350 years after the death of Jesus.

Both doctrines were forged in the fourth century out of the religious and political firestorm sparked by Arius, a popular presbyter of the church in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius had a simple formula for explaining how Jesus Christ could be divine — and therefore worthy of worship along with God the Father — even though there is only one God.

The simple formula taught by Arius was well received by the common believers in Alexandria, but not by Arius' supervisor, bishop Alexander. Each man lined up supporters and the battle lines were drawn for what history would call the Arian Controversy. This bitter ordeal for the Christian churches of the eastern and western Roman Empire began in A.D. 318, led to the Creed of Nicea in 325 and finally ended with the Nicene Creed established at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Monarchianism

Church Fathers from as early as the late 100s had been writing that the Word of God, the *Logos*of John 1:1-2, was co-eternal with the Father — and therefore uncreated and without beginning. The presbyter Arius was not the first to dispute this. Similar challenges had already arisen by the late second and early third centuries in the form of Monarchianism.

Monarchians fell into two broad categories. The Adoptionist or Dynamic Monarchians held that Jesus was only a man in whom dwelled the power of the supreme God.[1] The Modalist Monarchians taught that God revealed himself in three modes — as Father, Son and Spirit — but never at the same time. This preserved the idea of the full divinity of the Son, but at the expense of any real distinction between the Son and the Father. Some Modalists believed that Jesus Christ was actually the Father in the flesh. All forms of Monarchianism were eventually branded as heresy and rejected by the Christian churches across the empire.

Arius

In one sense, Arius was simply the latest thinker to try to reconcile monotheism (belief in one God) with the Christian belief that Jesus Christ was divine. But there was a great difference between Arius' attempt and all previous efforts. No longer was Christianity an officially unsanctioned, often underground and persecuted religion. Now the Roman emperor Constantine had granted Christianity unprecedented legitimate status in the Empire, so that the question of who Jesus is could finally come before the whole Church to be settled.

Arius was a popular senior presbyter in charge of Baucalis, one of the twelve "parishes" of Alexandria in the early fourth century.[2] By A.D. 318, Arius had begun teaching his followers that the Son of God (who is also the *Logos* or Word of John 1:1-2) did not exist until the Father brought him into existence. To Arius, the Father first created the Word, and then the Word, as the Father's unique and supreme agent, created everything else.

Arius' idea seemed to preserve monotheism as well as uphold the divinity of the Son, even if it was a bestowed divinity as distinct from the inherent and eternal divinity of the Father. With the help of catchy rhymes and tunes, Arius' ideas quickly caught on among the common converts of Alexandria.

Alexander

Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and his assistant, a presbyter named Athanasius, saw great danger in Arius' teaching and took action to arrest it. Contrary to Arius' teaching that God was once without the Word, Alexander asserted that God *cannot* be without the Word, and that the Word is therefore without beginning and eternally generated by the Father.

Alexander sent letters to neighboring bishops requesting support and convened a council at Alexandria that excommunicated Arius and a dozen other clergy.[3] Arius also sought backing, however, and obtained the support of several leaders, including Eusebius, the bishop of Nicomedia. Eusebius enjoyed a close relationship with Emperor Constantine, which would play a major role in the unfolding of the controversy. Another supporter of Arius was the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, whose history of the early Christian church is still available today.

Constantine steps in

The Emperor Constantine became aware of the developing problem, and saw a need to resolve it. As Emperor, Constantine's concern was not so much for the unity of the Church as for the unity of the empire itself. Theologically, he viewed it as a "trifle."[4] Constantine's first move was to send his religious advisor, Bishop Hosius of Cordova, Spain, to sort out the differences. Hosius was unsuccessful in bringing Arius and Alexander to peace, but he presided over a council in Antioch in early 325 that condemned Arianism and censured Eusebius of Caesarea.[5]But the division continued, so Constantine called a universal council of the Church to settle the dispute.

Ancyra had been the original choice of venue, but Constantine changed the location to Nicaea, a city closer to his Nicomedia headquarters. The emperor personally opened the council in June of 325 with about 300 bishops present (most from the east). Constantine was looking for mutual tolerance and compromise. Many of the bishops present were also apparently prepared to find compromise.

As the proceedings unfolded, however, thoughts of compromise quickly eroded. Once the tenets of the Arian position became clear, it did not take long for them to be rejected and condemned. The ideas that the Son of God is God only as a "courtesy title" and that the Son is of created status were vehemently denounced. Those who held such views were anathematized. The divinity of the Logos was upheld, and the Son was declared to be "true God" and co-eternal with the Father. The key phrase from the Creed established at Nicaea in 325 was "of the essence of the Father, God of God and Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

Homoousios (of the same essence) was the key Greek word. It was intended to convey, against the Arians, that the Son is equally divine with the Father. This it did, but it also left unanswered the question of how the Son and the Father, if they are of the same essence, are in fact distinct. Consequently, though Arianism was condemned and Arius banished, the Council of Nicaea did not see an end to the controversy.

A little letter makes a big difference

Athanasius and most other eastern bishops said that the Son was *homoousias* with the Father, meaning "of the same essence." The Arian theologians disagreed,

but suggested a compromise: they could accept the word with the addition of only one letter, the smallest Greek letter, the iota. They said that the Son was *homoiousias* with the Father — a Greek word meaning "similar essence."

But similarity is in the "i" of the beholder, and the Arians actually meant that Jesus was not the same kind of being as the Father. It would be like saying that he was "almost" divine. The orthodox theologians could not accept that, and would not accept a word that allowed such an unorthodox interpretation.

Imperial reversals

Eusebius of Nicomedia, who presented the Arian cause to the Council and was deposed and banished for it, enjoyed a close personal relationship with Emperor Constantine. In time, he was able to convince Constantine to ease the punishment on the Arians, and to order Arius himself recalled from exile. Eventually, after a council at Jerusalem formally acquitted him of the charge of heresy in 335, Arius was to have been received back into the fellowship of the church in Constantinople. Philip Schaff wrote:

> But on the evening before the intended procession from the imperial palace to the church of the Apostles, he suddenly died (A.D. 336), at the age of over eighty years, of an attack like cholera, while attending to a call of nature. This death was regarded by many as a divine judgment; by others, it was attributed to poisoning by enemies; by others, to the excessive joy of Arius in his triumph.6

Athanasius, meanwhile, had succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria in 328 only to be condemned and deposed by two Arian councils, one at Tyre under the presidency of Eusebius of Caesarea, and the other at Constantinople in about 335. He was then banished by Constantine to Treves in Gaul in 336 as a disturber of the peace of the church.[7]

This turn of events was followed by the death of Constantine in 337 (who received the sacrament of baptism on his deathbed from the Arian Eusebius of Nicomedia). Constantine's three sons, Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius succeeded him. Constantine II, who ruled Gaul, Great Britain, Spain, and Morocco, recalled Athanasius from banishment in 338. In the east, however, matters were quite different. Constantius, who ruled the east, was firmly Arian. Eusebius of Nicomedia, the leader of the Arian party, was appointed Bishop of Constantinople

in 338. Before long, war in the west between Constantine II and Constans gave Constantius a free hand to again exile Athanasius in 340.

When Constantine II died, however, and the western empire was united under Constans, Constantius had to follow a more moderate line with the Nicene party. The two emperors called a general council in Sardica in 343, presided over by Hosius, at which the Nicene doctrine was confirmed. Constans also compelled Constantius to restore Athanasius to his office in 346.[8]

Semi-Arianism

When Constans died in 350, the pendulum swung again. Constantius, now the sole emperor and still Arian, held councils supporting Arianism and banished bishops who opposed their edicts, including Hosius and Athanasius. By now, Arianism had itself become divided into two factions. One party had slightly modified its position to affirm *homoiousios*, or similarity of essence, rather than the original *heteroousios*, or difference of essence, still held by the strictest Arians.

This "compromise," sometimes called "semi-Arianism," still represented an unbridgeable chasm from the orthodox *homoousios*, or same essence. It only served to pit the Arians against one another. For Nicenes who still had difficulty with the apparent lack of distinction between the Father and the Son represented by *homoousios*, though, the semi-Arian *homoiousios* did, for a time, afford a reasonable compromise. In any case, by the time of the death of Constantius, the Church had become Arian, at least on the surface.

Imperial reversals

It was the death of Constantius in 361 that set the stage for the permanent triumph of Nicene faith. Julian the Apostate became emperor and implemented a policy of toleration for all the Christian parties. Though Julian's policy, at first glance, seems positive toward Christianity, his real hope was that the opposing factions would destroy one another. He recalled the exiled bishops, including Athanasius (though Athanasius was soon banished again as an "enemy of the gods" but was again recalled by Julian's successor Jovian).[9]

It was through the efforts of Athanasius that the concerns of the Nicenes and the semi-Arians about blurring the distinction between the Father and the Son were assuaged. Athanasius argued that *homoousios* could be interpreted in such a way as

to affirm the same essence as long as the distinction between the Father and Son were not destroyed. In other words, he made it plain that "same essence" must retain the unity but never be allowed to destroy the distinctions in the Godhead. With this understanding, along with the compelling work of the Cappadocian bishops, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, the Nicene faith again began to gain ascendancy.

Julian died in 363, and was followed by Jovian, who was favorable toward Athanasius and the Nicene faith. His reign was short, though, ending in 364. He was succeeded by Valens, a fanatical Arian, whose intensity against both semi-Arians and Nicenes tended to bring those two parties together. In 375, he was followed by Gratian, who was of Nicene faith, and who recalled all the exiled orthodox bishops.

By the end of Gratian's reign, Arianism was greatly waning in intellectual defense and in morale. At last, it was the long reign of Theodosius I, who was educated in the Nicene faith, that finally ended the long controversy. He required all his subjects to confess the orthodox faith. He appointed a champion of Nicene faith, Gregory of Nazianzus, as patriarch of Constantinople in 380. In 381, Gregory presided over the Council of Constantinople.

The Council of Constantinople

The Council of Constantinople affirmed the Creed of Nicaea, altering it only slightly and in non-essential ways. It is the form of the Creed adopted at Constantinople that today bears the name Nicene Creed. The controversy was at last ended in the empire. However, Arianism would continue to impact the Church for the next two centuries in the form of the various peoples outside the empire who had become Christians according to the Arian faith (most of whom scarcely even knew the difference).

Athanasius, who had so diligently and unswervingly opposed the Arian heresy, did not live to see the conflict ended. He died in 373 in his native Alexandria. In the end, the unyielding Athanasius is a fair representation of the unyielding truth of the orthodox Christian faith. Fundamental to the validity of Christianity is the reality of redemption, made possible only by the work of no being less than true God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Arius believed that a Christ designated as divine by virtue of his special

creation could serve as true Redeemer and true Mediator between God and humanity. It took the dogged, relentless, unwavering faith of an Athanasius to hold fast to the truth that no being less than true God could in fact reconcile humanity to God.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Corinthians 11:19). Likewise, the Arian controversy became an essential waypoint on the journey of the church, for despite the trial and pain of controversy, the truth of the nature of the divine One who had come to redeem humanity had to be made plain.

Who was who?

Arius (c. 250-336): Theologian in Alexandria, Egypt, a presbyter (an elder) of the church. He taught his followers that the Son of God did not exist until he was brought into existence by the Father.

Alexander of Alexandria (d. 326): Bishop of Alexandria and Arius' supervisor. He strongly opposed Arianism.

Athanasius (293-373): A presbyter of the church in Alexandria and assistant to Bishop Alexander. He later succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria and spearheaded the effort to oppose Arianism and establish the Nicene faith.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263-339): Bishop of Caesarea and author of several works chronicling the history of early Christianity, including *Ecclesiastical History*. He hoped for a compromise in the Arian controversy, and as a historian he recorded the proceedings at the Council of Nicea.

Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341): Bishop of Nicomedia. He supported Arius' ideas and presented the Arian side of the controversy at the Council of Nicea.

Constantine the Great (272-337): Emperor of the Roman Empire who legalized Christianity in the Empire. He called the Council of Nicea in an effort to bring an end to the dispute among the churches that was threatening the security of the Empire.

Hosius of Cordova (c. 256-358): Bishop of Cordova, Spain. He was sent to Alexandria by Constantine to mediate the Arian controversy.

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1 Clyde Manschreck, "Monarchianism," in *Dictionary of Bible and Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 704.

2 David Wright, "Councils and Creeds," *The History of Christianity* (Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1977), 156.

3 Wright, 157.

4 Wright, 159.

5 William Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 19.

6 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprinted by Eerdmans, 1987), vol. III, 663.

7 Schaff, 663.

8 Schaff, 635.

9 Schaff, 638.

J. Michael Feazell

The Nicene Creed

Ancient Greeks believed in a wide variety of gods and goddesses – beings who fought one another, were immoral, dishonest and only partly powerful. But eventually Greek philosophers began to teach that there was a supreme God, a being who had all power, wisdom and perfection. Since there could be only one being who had all power, there was only one supreme God. Since perfection does not change, this God did not change. This God was above all other gods, not swayed by humanlike emotions, not affected by physical things that change.

This philosophy eventually affected Christianity. At first, it was a convenient tool for the gospel. Christians who were criticized for having an invisible God could point out that even sophisticated Greek philosophers believed in an invisible, omnipotent God. The Christians then claimed to teach more information about this God whom the Greeks knew only imperfectly.

But sometimes it worked the other way around. Some Christians began to assume that the Christian God was like the philosophers' God – he was perfect, unchangeable, totally unlike physical beings. Such a perfect God would have nothing to do with flawed human beings. Nor would an unchangeable spirit being have anything to do with the changing world of matter.

So some Christians began to speculate that the supreme God created angels, and that these angels were the ones who created the physical world and interacted with the physical world. They were intermediaries between physical humans and God. In this way of thinking, Jesus simply became an intermediary, more like an angel than like God.

The Arian heresy

One of the people who was affected by this philosophy was Arius, an elder in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. He taught that there was one Creator, who created the Logos, the Word or Wisdom of God, who in turn created everything else. This Logos became Jesus Christ.

According to Arius, Jesus was the Son of God because God had created him. Moreover, because he is the closest thing to God that we can relate to, he could also be called God even though strictly speaking, he was not God. He was a unique created being, created even before time itself was created. He was an intermediary

between the perfect spiritual world and the ever-changing physical world.

But Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, said that the Word was eternal, not created. "If asked to draw a line between God and creation, Arius would draw that line so as to include the Word in creation, while Alexander would draw it so as to separate all of creation on one side from the Father and the eternal Word on the other" (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 161).

Alexander tried to remove Arius from his position. However, Arius was a popular church leader. The people of Alexandria, as well as several other church leaders, greatly respected Arius for his strict morality, his self-discipline and his teaching abilities. The people took to the streets in public demonstrations, chanting slogans of Arius.

Christians had been debating theology and the nature of Christ for centuries. But now there was a new element in the debate: the Roman Emperor Constantine. Constantine had just finished a war to unite a divided empire. He did not want religious debates to divide the people again, so he ordered all the Christian bishops to meet together to decide the issue.

The emperor was not then a Christian, but he was favorably disposed toward Christianity, and he wanted this rapidly growing religion to support peace within the empire. Constantine thought that an official council could settle the matter once and for all. So he called a meeting in the year 325 at the city of Nicea, in Asia Minor near Constantinople.

About 300 bishops came, almost all from the Eastern Empire. The bishop of Rome could not come because of his age, but he sent some elders to represent Italy. "Most of the bishops from the Latin-speaking West had only a secondary interest in the debate, which appeared to them as a controversy among eastern followers of Origen" (Gonzalez, p. 164). Even many of the Eastern bishops were not too concerned about the controversy.

The Nicene Council

The bishops met to discuss the nature of God and Jesus Christ. They reviewed previous controversies and the new arguments of Arius and his supporters. Most of the bishops could not accept the idea that Jesus was a created being. When they worshiped Jesus, they did not worship a creature – they worshiped God. They were saved not by a created being, but by God. They were

convinced that Scripture taught that Jesus Christ was God.

So the bishops wrote a statement of faith concerning what they believed about the Son of God. They wanted to make it clear that they believed Jesus Christ to be fully divine, not created. So they said he was "God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father." The last portion was particularly significant in the debate: "of one substance" is a translation of the Greek *homoousios,* which means of the same substance, same essence, or one being. What God is in his essence, the Son of God is, too.

Two bishops at the council could not agree with this statement, and the council deposed them. The controversy was seemingly resolved, Constantine was happy and everyone went home.

But one of the chief supporters of Arius happened to live near the emperor, and it was not long before he was able to convince Constantine to support the Arian idea. (Constantine wasn't a Christian and had no training in theology. He was more interested in political stability than in any particular doctrine.) With Constantine's support, some new bishops were appointed who supported the teachings of Arius.

Several smaller councils approved Arian statements of faith. Nicene supporters were thrown out of office, banished or killed. For several decades, theological and political intrigues swirled, opinions went back and forth, bishops were reinstated, deposed and reinstated again. The tides of opinion changed quickly as nine emperors fought for power over the next 50 years.

In time, more of the issues were given a fair hearing. Nicene supporters made it clear that they believed the Father and the Son to be distinct, even though of one substance. They supported their views from Scripture.

The Holy Spirit also came under discussion. The Nicene council had merely said that "we believe in the Holy Spirit," without saying anything about who or what the Spirit is. Arius had taught that the Holy Spirit was a created spirit being; bishops such as Athanasius of Alexandria made it clear that the Holy Spirit is divine in the same way that the Son is.

Council of Constantinople

Eventually, Theodosius became emperor, and the council of Constantinople was called in 381. Theodosius expelled the Arian supporters, and Nicene bishops

were appointed. The council agreed that Jesus is fully divine, eternal, not created. They accepted the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They taught that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there is only one God – one God in three *Persona.*[1] They did not explain how this is so – they just said that it *is* so. They felt compelled by Scripture to come to this conclusion.

The result is a creed, called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, more commonly known by the shorter and more pronounceable name Nicene Creed. It is based on the creed of Nicea, reportedly edited at the council of Constantinople, but first seen in its final form 70 years later. Notice in it some phrases from Nicea, quoted above, and some phrases similar to the Apostles' Creed:

> We believe in one God the Father, the Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen.
>
> We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.
>
> We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son).[2] With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.
>
> We believe in one, holy, catholic[3] and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen. (Translation by the International Consultation on English Texts, 1975, published in appendix A of Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ,* InterVarsity Press, 1984.)

The Nicene Creed is accepted by almost all Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and it offers a basis for unity. Unfortunately, however, it has

also been at the center of a controversy between Western and Eastern churches (see note 2). The church has its flaws. Doctrinal controversies are not always resolved in a Christlike way. The Nicene Creed is testimony to that. And yet truth wins in the end. Scripture supports the teaching of the Nicene Creed.

[1] *Persona* is a Latin word that originally referred to masks worn by actors on a stage. Theologians adopted the term to indicate three ways of being, not to imply three separate beings. The Greek term is *hypostasis.*

[2] The words "and the Son" were not in the Greek text of the creed, but they were added later in the Latin. The Eastern churches objected to this addition because it had not been approved by the council.

[3] *catholic* (with a small c) means "universal" or "worldwide." In the creed, it is not a reference to the Roman church, which later claimed to be universal.

Nicene Myths	**Truth**
• The Roman Catholic Church called the Nicene Council to enforce Trinitarian teaching.	• Rome did not call the council and was poorly represented. • The council did not have a complete doctrine of the Trinity, and gave scant mention of the Holy Spirit.
• Constantine forced the council to accept a pagan doctrine. • Constantine forced all Christians to accept the Nicene Creed.	• Arius' idea of God was shaped by the ideas of pagan philosophers. • Constantine cared more about uniformity than doctrine, and he soon supported the Arians and tried to enforce Arianism.

The Need for "Depth Perception" in Church History

An important part of learning to drive is depth perception. Drivers need to know where they are in relation to the other vehicles around them. I think depth perception should also be a part of a Christian education. We are Christians in a certain moment in time. We need to understand our time in relation to what has gone before and what may come after.

Most of us have a rather hazy view of church history. We've probably heard of the Protestant Reformation, but have little idea what was "reformed" and why it needed to be. Our knowledge of the early church is even sketchier. You may have heard of such figures as Athanasius, Arius, Eusebius, Chrysostom, Constantine or Augustine. But what did they do, or say? Were they "good guys" or "bad guys"?

Early church history is sometimes presented as a struggle against a "great conspiracy," when, in a "lost century," the "faith once delivered" was undermined by "false prophets" who introduced "pagan" ideas.

That's an idea that seriously lacks historical "depth perception." The real story of the church is one of continual struggle, punctuated with moments of turmoil, as sincere but less-than-perfect men and women tried to respond to the challenges of their times. Even the earliest Christians — those who knew and were taught by Jesus personally — took a long time to grasp something we now take for granted: that Gentiles should be accepted as equal partners in the faith.

In the second and third centuries other issues arose. Some of these would also cause us to say, "Huh? *That* was a problem for them?" Like, for example, a question about the nature of Jesus. "Was he really God in the flesh?" Or was he a created being, endowed by God with very special powers? Ideas and doctrines we now accept without question were once hot issues, debated with passion, tension and — sometimes, even intrigue.

Church history is not just the province of scholars. Our faith today also faces some important questions—about abortion, homosexuality, the role of women, the plight of the poor, evolution and an appropriate Christian response to the environmental crisis, to name only a few. Passions run high on all sides, and the answers are not easy. Some will disagree with that, claiming that the answers are so obvious there is no room for discussion. Here some depth perception will help.

As C. S. Lewis wrote,

> Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united — united with each other and against earlier and later ages — by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century — the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how could they have thought that?" — lies where we have never suspected it.

Remember how just two centuries ago, sincere Christians vigorously defended slavery on biblical grounds? Within living memory, the Bible was invoked to support segregation and Apartheid? We should not be so sure we have grasped today's controversial issues correctly. What will future generations see as our "great mass of common assumptions"?

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide believers into all truth (John 16:13). But that guidance often comes by the Spirit working through fallible human beings. So politics, prejudice and intolerance compete with a genuine passion for the truth.

The story of the battle over the divinity of Jesus is instructive on many levels. A vital truth was preserved, but *how* it was preserved can leave us wincing. Let's learn from the past, not just to strive earnestly to maintain the integrity of the faith, but also to treat each other with the love, mercy and patience of Jesus while we are doing it.

The First Church Christmas

"Joy to the world!" Christians look forward to a joyous Christmas season each year. Yet, surprisingly, for the first 300 years of the church's life there was no Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth. Possible reasons include:

The apostolic church had expected that Christ's coming in glory was just around the corner and its worship pointed to the future instead of the past.

The church's primary focus was on Christ's death and resurrection and his presence through the Spirit, which were celebrated during Easter and Pentecost.

Epiphany, or "manifestation," another early church festival, afforded a remembrance of Jesus' Incarnation and birth.

There was no corresponding Old Testament festival from which Christmas could emerge, as there had been for Pasha or Easter (Jewish Passover) and the Christian Pentecost (Feast of Weeks).

The date of Jesus' birthday was, perhaps, not known.

First Christmas at Rome

In A.D. 336 the church at Rome proclaimed December 25 as the *dies natalis Christi,* "the birthday of Christ." An entry in the Chronograph of A.D. 354 (also called Philocalian Calendar) records, "Our Lord Jesus Christ was born on the eighth before the calends of January," or December 25. It doesn't state that Christmas was being observed on that date, but it is likely that the observance began at Rome around this time.

A generation after the Chronograph was published, church father John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) wrote that Rome was celebrating a December 25th Christmas: "On this day also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed."

The "profane ceremonies" referred to by Chrysostom centered around the birthday of the "Invincible Sun," or Sol, which was also celebrated on December 25, the day of the winter solstice in the old Roman calendar. The cult of the Sun was of grave concern to the church at Rome. It was introduced in A.D. 218 when

Elagabalus (c. 203-222) became emperor of the Roman Empire. Elagabalus venerated the Sun god and introduced his cult into Rome under the title *deus Sol invictus,* that is, the invincible, undefeated or unconquered sun god.

Emperor Aurelian, Roman emperor from A.D. 270 to 275, decreed the Unconquered Sun as supreme god of the Roman Empire. Mithra, a god of Persian origin, was part of the Sun cult worship. Mithra's birthday was also on December 25. The Roman Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, who ruled prior to Constantine the Great (306-337), venerated the Sol Mithras Deus invictus cult. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was a devotee of the Sun cult before his conversion.

Struggle against sun worship

A December 25th birthday celebration for Christ served to compete with and counteract the festival of the pagan devotees of Sol-Mithra. The church was able to challenge the worshippers of Sol Invictus with Jesus Christ, whom they proclaimed as the true Son of God and the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; Revelation 1:13, 16).

Christmas celebration was an effective evangelizing event for turning the hearts and minds of people to Christ and away from worship of Sol. It also provided church members with a safe, Christ-centered worship alternative to other heathen festivals, such as the late December Saturnalia. Simultaneously, the Roman church could promote prayerful and moral behavior, in sharp contrast to the licentiousness that accompanied the pagan festivals.

Celebration of Christmas (or Advent, a term referring to Christ's coming) also was effective in combating heresies about Jesus, pointing to his incarnation as a real human being.

It's not surprising that the December 25th Christmas celebration quickly spread from the congregations in Rome to churches throughout the empire. From the fourth century on, every Western calendar assigns Christmas to December 25. By the middle of the fifth century, most of the Eastern churches had adopted the Christmas festival, although on January 6, and by the time of Jerome (347-420) and Augustine (354-430), Christmas is everywhere established in Christendom.

Over the next thousand years, Christmas observance followed the expanding community of Christianity around the world. Today Advent/Christmas is one of the church's most important worship seasons. Have a joyful Christmas celebration

and a blessed new year.

Paul Kroll

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Christmas Past and Present in the Church

Have you ever wondered how Christmas came to be part of the annual Christian calendar? Here's the fascinating story, which we begin with a surprising observation. Neither Jesus nor the apostles commanded or even suggested that the church should have a Christmas festival — and no evidence of such a celebration is in the New Testament.

In the church of the second century, we see evidence of an annual celebration of Jesus' resurrection in the spring, but no celebration of his birth. (It's possible that the roots of the resurrection celebration go back to the apostolic church.) The church also added Pentecost and Epiphany to its yearly worship calendar in the second century. Epiphany, on Jan. 6, celebrated not the birth of Christ, but the manifestation of his divine sonship, his kingship and his divine power as displayed in his baptism, the visit of the Magi, and his miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. Pentecost commemorated the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Epiphany was the church's earliest annual celebration in connection with the Incarnation of Jesus. However, it was not until the fourth century that we have clear evidence of the birth of Jesus being celebrated on Dec. 25.

Why December 25?

One theory for the origin of Christmas is that it was intended to compete with or supplant the pagan celebration of the sun-god on that date. According to this hypothesis, accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Jesus was given near the date of the winter solstice. On this day, as the sun began its return to the northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the birthday of the invincible sun. The cult was particularly strong at Rome when Christmas celebration arose.

The idea is that the church tried to counteract this pagan worship with its own celebration of Jesus' birth. That makes good sense, since the church was, in effect, providing its members with a Christian worship and fellowship opportunity while the pagans were cavorting and doing homage to their gods. It was also an opportunity for the church to preach the true gospel. If this reasoning is correct, what Christians did, then, was to redeem in Christ an understanding that he (not a pagan sun god) was the true Son and Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) — the

true light that lights our path with his grace (John 8:12).

Another idea as to why Christmas celebration began and expanded throughout the church has to do with its need to combat a heresy about Christ's Person. The council of Nicea in 325 had condemned Arianism, which claimed that Jesus Christ was only an exalted creature and not true God of true God.

It was not long afterward that the Christmas festival first appeared in Rome, and then spread to the churches in other parts of the Roman Empire. In this view, the controversies of the fourth century about the incarnation and person of Christ impelled the church to create a festival that would celebrate the mystery of God becoming human, as a kind of teaching tool for the church.

Birthday of Jesus?

Why wasn't Jesus' birthday celebrated earlier than the fourth century? One reason might be that neither the day nor month of Jesus' birth is given in the Gospels or any other early Christian writings—and cannot be determined with any certainty. Despite this, it seems to have been the opinion of some church leaders in the first four centuries that Christ was actually born on Dec. 25.

Theologian John Chrysostom (347-407) appealed, in support of this view, to the date of the registration under Quirinus (Cyrenius). He apparently believed that the census and tax records of Jesus' family were preserved in the Roman archives. Justin Martyr (100-165) stated that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, saying such can be ascertained "from the registers of the taxing" (*Apology I,* 34).

Tertulian (160-250), spoke of "the census of Augustus — that most faithful witness of the Lord's nativity, kept in the archives of Rome" (*Against Marcion,* Book 4, 7). The early church father, Hippolytus (180-236), came up with a Dec. 25 date, which he attempted to calculate from information in the Gospel of Luke regarding the ministry of the priest Zechariah, John the Baptist's father (Luke 1:5, 8-10).

Whatever the facts might be about the date of Jesus' birth, it is clear that the church sensed the need to have a festival that commemorated the birth of our Savior. In the words of the church historian Philip Schaff, it was inevitable that the church would have "sooner or later called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honor of Christ" (*History of the Christian Church,* volume 3, "Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity," page 395).

Schaff points to Chrysostom's observation that "without the birth of Christ there would be no salvation history in Christ — no baptism, passion, resurrection, ascension or outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Hence, there would be no celebration of Epiphany, of Easter or of Pentecost."

However meaningful Christian worship was during the Christmas season, we must also acknowledge that Christmas was often celebrated with the same sensual excesses as some pagan feasts had been among the general populace. Truly, at several times in the history of the church, it was needful to put Christ back into Christmas.

Puritans in Britain and America

"Puritans" was the name given in the 16th century to a group of Protestants that arose from within the Church of England. As part of their broad-based reform agenda, they demanded that the church should be purified of any liturgy, ceremony or practices that were not found in the Bible.

Since the Christmas celebration was not mentioned in Scripture, the Puritans concluded that it must be stopped. When the group came to political power in England under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), they outlawed Christmas. Cromwell and the Puritans even banned special church services, not just on Christmas but also on Easter and Pentecost. Christmas Day was a regular work day and shops remained open. Parliament was to sit as it usually did. Criers were sometimes sent through the streets, shouting, "No Christmas today, no Christmas today."

The year 1642 saw the first ordinance forbidding church services and civic festivities on Christmas day. These were issued regularly in the ensuing years. On June 8, 1645, the Puritan-dominated Parliament abolished the observance of Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and the Saints' days. But in 1660, things changed. The monarchy was re-established, and the Puritan clergy were expelled from the Church of England.

But the Puritans were already established in America. Many Puritans had migrated to New England beginning in the second decade of the 17th century. In Puritan New England, Christmas was a regular workday, and any violation of this was punishable by fine or dismissal. In 1659, the Massachusetts Puritans declared the observation of Christmas to be a criminal offense. Offenders had to pay five shillings as a fine. In Massachusetts, Dec. 25 did not become a legal holiday until

1856. It is hard to realize now that worship on Christmas was outlawed in New England until the second half of the 19th century.

Twelve Days of Christmas and Advent

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" is more than a secular, traditional Christmas song. At one time it was common for Christmas worship and celebration to last 12 days, from Dec. 25 until Jan. 5, the beginning of Epiphany. This tradition has almost disappeared.

Today, the season of Advent begins the yearly worship or liturgical calendar. Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas. It is devoted to the commemoration of the coming of our Lord in the flesh as well as to his return at the final judgment. That's why they are called Advent Sundays, since "advent" means the coming or arrival, especially of something extremely important. (What event could be more important than the coming of the Son of God in human flesh — and then his coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords!)

Lawrence Stookey, in his book *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church,* explains it this way:

> The primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called "the second coming." Thus advent concerns the future of the Risen One, who will judge wickedness and prevail over every evil. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death…. The beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things. (pages 121-122)

Meaning of Christmas

For the church, the entire Christian year centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christians do not "celebrate" or "keep" days as though holy in themselves, but rather worship Christ and recall the great events of our salvation, using those special times as opportunities for worship. The purpose of the annual worship year is to keep our minds focused on the story of salvation and to worship Jesus Christ in a way that ministers to his glory. Specifically, Christmas, Advent and Epiphany were meant as vehicles to celebrate Jesus Christ.

The yearly Christian festivals remind us of the leading events of the gospel history, and beckon us to participate in worship of Christ. In the words of Philip Schaff: “The church year is, so to speak, a chronological confession of faith; a moving panorama of the great events of salvation; a dramatic exhibition of the gospel for the Christian people” (*History of the Christian Church,* volume III, page 387).

Paul Kroll

Athanasius Lists the New Testament Writings

The 27 books of the New Testament are the Scriptures of the church. They are understood to be written by the apostles or their close associates, such as Luke and Mark. Along with the Old Testament they comprise the official canon[1] of the church.

But in the early centuries of the church, before the New Testament canon had been established, there was a significant variety of opinion among Christian churches about what writings should be considered authoritative. Because of this, some Christian leaders were concerned that heretical writings might carry an undeserved authority. For example, a writing called the Gospel of Peter, which was a product of a Gnostic group that claimed to possess a secret knowledge of God, circulated in parts of the world in the early centuries.

Some leaders also doubted the apostolic authority of writings such as the book of Revelation and the second letter of Peter. The question about which writings should be considered authoritative for the whole church became more and more pressing as influential leaders began to form lists of their own to support their heretical teachings. Marcion, for example, teaching in the middle second century, rejected the Old Testament and most of what is today our New Testament, creating his own short version of just a few New Testament writings.

Other heretics wrote compositions that claimed to record the acts of apostolic figures. Since some claimed the status of sacred Scripture for these writings, it's not surprising that this created confusion in the church.

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, addressed this problem on Jan. 7, A.D. 367, when he wrote his annual Easter letter to his churches.[2] It was a landmark letter because it contained the same list of 27 books of the New Testament that are found in our Bibles today. So far as we know, Athanasius was the first Christian leader to compile a list of New Testament books exactly as we know them today. Bruce Metzger, a New Testament scholar, wrote, "The year 367 marks, thus, the first time that the scope of the New Testament canon is declared to be exactly the twenty-seven books accepted today as canonical."[3]

Here are portions of Athanasius' letter, in which he lists the books of the Old and New Testaments that he considered authoritative. The English translation is the work of the late F.F. Bruce:

> Inasmuch as some have taken in hand to draw up for themselves an arrangement of the so-called apocryphal books and to intersperse them with the divinely inspired scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, even as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered it to the fathers: it has seemed good to me also, having been stimulated thereto by true brethren, to set forth in order the books which are included in the canon and have been delivered to us with accreditation that they are divine.

Athanasius then gives his list of Old Testament books and lists the 27 New Testament books.

> Let no one add to these or take anything from them…. No mention is to be made of the apocryphal works. They are the invention of heretics, who write according to their own will, and gratuitously assign and add to them dates so that, offering them as ancient writings, they may have an excuse for leading the simple astray.[4]

Athanasius' letter was important because he was the bishop of a prominent city, Alexandria. He was one of the most influential theologians and apologists of the church at the time. Athanasius had spent much of his life battling the infamous Arian heresy, which had denied the co-essential divine nature of Christ.

We shouldn't think of Athanasius as sifting through a stack of writings, and pronouncing this one as Scripture and the next one as unscriptural. He was merely recognizing and recording what amounted to the general but unofficial consensus of the churches.

Some of the books not listed among the 27 continued to be considered something like devotional writings, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* and letters of Clement. But these also needed to be defined for what they were so they would not be confused as having the same authority as the writings of the apostles and their colleagues.

The first church councils to approve the New Testament canon met in A.D. 393 at the Synod of Hippo Regius and in A.D. 397 at Carthage, in North Africa, some 30 years after Athanasius published his list. The councils merely endorsed what had already become the consensus in the churches of the West and most of

the East about the extent of the canonical books of Scripture.

Endnotes

1. The word *canon* comes from the Greek *kanon,* where it meant a straight rod that could be used as a measuring stick. The word came to mean a standard, norm or, in a biblical context, an authoritative list of Scriptural writings.

2. The bishop of Alexandria was given the responsibility of informing his brother bishops well ahead of time each year about the date of the next Easter. Athanasius, in his long tenure as bishop of Alexandria (328-373) issued 45 such festal letters. In these letters, he gave an Easter homily and also took the opportunity to discuss some other matter of current importance to the church. In his 39th letter he dealt with the question of the canon of the Old and New Testaments.

3. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance,* 212.

4. *The Canon of Scripture,* 78, 209.

Augustine "Father" of the Western Church

Augustine (354-430) has been called the most significant Christian theologian "since New Testament times."[1] He was born Augustinus Aurelius in the North African town of Tagaste, in today's Algeria. His pagan father, Patricius, was a Roman official and his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian. They sent their son to a prestigious school in Carthage at age 17, where he studied rhetoric. The teenage Augustine took a young woman as a concubine, whom he kept for 15 years. She bore a son, Adeodatus, "given by God."

Dabbling in philosophy

Augustine adopted Persian Manichaeism when he was 19. The philosophy failed to answer his nagging question about why evil exists, so he cast it aside after nine years. At age 29, Augustine decided to move to Rome. His mother, Monica, vexed by his lifestyle and interest in pagan philosophies, determined to chaperone him. He eluded her, sailing away secretly.

Augustine won a position as professor of rhetoric at Milan's imperial court. He dabbled in the skeptical philosophy of the Academics and then adopted Neoplatonism around age 32, which would infuse itself into his theology.[2]

Augustine's mother caught up with him at Milan, imploring him to attend the congregation of the illustrious Bishop Ambrose (340-397). Augustine agreed, because Ambrose was known as a good orator. Ambrose was able to decisively answer Augustine's objections about the Bible and the Christian faith. Augustine now began an ambivalent struggle against his fleshly pulls. This conflict is poignantly summarized in his plea to the Lord in his retrospective spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, "Give me chastity and continency, only not yet."[3]

Conversion and baptism

Augustine's conversion occurred in the summer of 386. In his *Confessions* he describes his tearful prayer in a Milan garden setting, beseeching God to purify his unclean thoughts and habits:

> I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a

girl — I know not which — coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, "Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it."[4]

Augustine ran to the bench, where he had left the book of Romans.

I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eye first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:13).[5]

Augustine explains that when he read the passage "there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away."[6] After prebaptism study and counseling, the 33-year-old Augustine and his son were baptized by Bishop Ambrose on Easter evening, April 24, 387. He mentions this baptism in a meaningful sentence in his *Confessions*, "We were baptized, and anxiety for our past life vanished from us."[7] He progressively left his old life, his career in rhetoric and his concubine.[8]

Soon after his baptism, Augustine was struck with a double tragedy. His devoted mother died unexpectedly and so did his teen-age son, Adeodatus. After a period of deep grief, Augustine sailed for North Africa in August 388. He hoped to live an ascetic and contemplative life studying the Scriptures and writing theological expositions. His expectation was quickly dashed. While attending church at Hippo in 391, he was put on the spot by Bishop Valerius, who openly prayed that "someone" — think Augustine! — would come to shepherd the congregation.

Augustine was virtually drafted into the priesthood by bishop and laity and ordained in 391. Four years later, at age 42, he was ordained co-bishop of Hippo. The elderly Valerius soon passed away and Augustine became full bishop.

He would also continue to write extensively throughout his life. Augustine authored more than 100 major Christian treatises, 200 letters and 400 sermons, covering important areas of Western Christian theology. Luther, Calvin and Roman Catholic theologians each appealed to Augustine's writings during the Protestant Reformation, leading to his being thought of as the "forerunner of the Reformation."[9]

For more than four decades Augustine wrote, combated heresies and dealt with church and pastoral problems. He died on August 28, 430 as the Vandal siege

of Hippo was in its third month.

Endnotes

1 Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (HarperCollins, 1984), 216, 212.

2 Some theologians, Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance in particular, believe the influence of Platonic dualism is a major structural fault in Augustine's theology. Torrance says he heard Barth go so far as to refer to his theology as *süses Gift!* — "sweet poison" in German! On the other hand, Torrance speaks of Augustine's *De Trinitate* as among a class of "supremely great" works of Christian theology. See *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, Thomas F. Torrance, pages 4-7, 122, 138, 156, 172, 185, 189, 194, 197.

3 Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by E. B. Pusey.

4 William C. Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, page 105, "The Confessions," book 8, chapter 12.29.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by E. B. Pusey.

8 At this time Augustine betrothed himself to a young girl at his mother's encouragement, but his affianced bride was too young for marriage. He then took another concubine for a short time.

9 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, volume 3, pages 1017-18, 1020.

The Council of Chalcedon and the "Two Natures" Controversy

In A.D. 381 the Council of Constantinople rejected the teaching of an elderly bishop from Syria, named Apollinaris. Apollinaris had theorized that Jesus Christ's divine nature displaced Jesus' human mind and will. To him, Jesus possessed only a divine nature, and therefore did not truly take on the fallen nature of humanity.

Controversy about the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus continued with Nestorius of Antioch, who was appointed bishop of Constantinople in 428. Nestorius concluded that Jesus had two separate natures and two wills, making him two persons— a double being — one divine and the other human, sharing one body. Nestorius' teaching was condemned by a church council at Ephesus in 431, but the controversy did not end.

In the 440s, a respected monk from Constantinople, Eutyches, denied that Jesus was truly human. He taught that Jesus did not exist in two natures because his human nature was absorbed or swallowed up by his divine nature. Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, convened a synod in 448, condemning Eutyches' position, but Eutyches appealed the decision. The fight took a nasty turn when Dioscorus, Patriarch of Alexandria, became determined to reinstate Eutyches and his views. Eastern emperor Theodosius II, also favoring Eutyches' position, called another church-wide council to meet at Ephesus in August 449. He appointed Dioscorus to chair the proceedings and to silence any dissent.

Leo I, bishop of Rome, sent delegates to the synod with his *Tome*, an exposition of how the two natures, divine and human, are joined in Christ. Dioscorus prevented the reading of Leo's letter and rejected his position. Eutyches' teaching was declared orthodox. Bishops who refused to accept the council's decision were deposed.

Council of Chalcedon

An unexpected event dramatically changed the situation. On July 28, 450, while out riding, Theodosius' horse bolted. The emperor fell, broke his neck and died. His sister Pulcheria became empress with her husband, Marcian, as co-emperor. They were opposed to Eutyches' teaching and eager to redress the

wrongs perpetrated by Dioscorus.

Emperor Marcian called for a church council to meet at Chalcedon, on the outskirts of Constantinople. More than 500 bishops attended — the largest church council gathering to that time. All delegates were from the Eastern Church, except the few representatives from Rome and two from Africa. Deliberations lasted from October 8 to November 1, 451.

Leo again sent representatives with his *Tome,* which was read and approved by the council. Chalcedon reversed the "Robbers' Council" decision and condemned Eutyches' teaching. It anathematized those who taught that Christ had only a single, divine nature and those "who imagine a mixture or confusion between the two natures of Christ."

Definition of Faith

Marcian urged the council to write a statement of faith to provide unity and understanding for the Church. In response, the council produced the "Chalcedonian Definition." The Definition affirms that Christ is "complete in Godhead and complete in humanness, truly God and truly human." He is "of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his humanity."

Jesus Christ is to be "recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." The "distinction of natures" is "in no way annulled by the union." "The characteristics of each nature" are to be considered as "preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence." They are not to be "separated into two persons."

In summary, the Definition confesses Jesus Christ is "*one* person, who is *both* divine *and* human." Though its wording has been criticized as inadequate, it has helped the church in "setting the limits beyond which error lies" in speaking of the human and divine union in Christ. The Definition confesses the gospel message that Jesus Christ assumed our fallen humanity in order to save us, for as Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), said, "That which he [Christ] has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved."

The Apostles' Creed

As the Christian church spread throughout the Roman world in the first century, and as the first leaders died out, there was a practical need for local churches to have a basic statement of beliefs. As false teachers began to bring in strange ideas, Christians needed to know "Just what is it that we believe?"

Some of these churches had a few books of the New Testament, perhaps some of Paul's letters or one of the four Gospels. But none of the churches had all the New Testament. They needed a standard to judge whether a teaching was truth, or heresy. The early Christians also realized that new people didn't have to know everything before they could be baptized and accepted as believers. How much should they know and accept before being admitted into the church? This was another reason that early churches wanted a brief statement of what they believed to be most essential.

Churches in different cities and regions made their own lists, which had many points in common, since all the churches had traditions tracing back to the apostles in one way or another. The small differences were eventually eliminated as church leaders discussed these things with one another. They shared not only the scriptures they had, but also their statements of faith.

When Christianity became a legal religion in the fourth century, this process became easier. Churches throughout the empire agreed on which books should form the New Testament, and they agreed on several basic statements of faith.

A summary of apostolic teaching

One of the doctrinal lists commonly used in the Western empire was called the Apostles' Creed. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning "I believe." It was called "Apostles" not because the apostles themselves wrote it (although some people may have thought this), but because the Creed was believed to be an accurate summary of what the apostles taught.

The Creed was useful in several ways:

The Creed was a public statement of faith, a standardized way in which new people could confess their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Creed anchored Christian faith to a tradition, to make it difficult for people or churches to be led astray by strange doctrines.

The Creed was a preaching and teaching tool, giving an outline for further discipleship.

The Creed was memorized through frequent repetition, which helped the many believers who could not read.

The Creed provided a doctrinal basis for different churches to accept one another, and to reject those who did not accept the basic truths.

The Bible itself contains brief creed-like statements (1 Corinthians 8:6; 15:3-4; 1 Timothy 3:16). The early church leaders also wrote short creeds, perhaps as baptism ceremonies. These eventually were recited by congregations in their worship services.

Writing in Greek somewhere around the year 200, Irenaeus describes a creed that has some similarities to the Apostles' Creed, and may have been a precursor. He presented his creed not as something new, but as something the church had been using for a long time. He lived in what is now France, but had grown up in Asia Minor, where he had been taught by Polycarp, a student of the apostle John.

An early Latin version of the Creed is in the writings of Tertullian, from North Africa, about the year 220. About a century later, Marcellus, from Asia Minor, had a similar creed. In A.D. 390, after study in Rome, Egypt and Judea, Rufinus had a similar creed in northern Italy.

Augustine, bishop in North Africa in 400, had a nearly identical creed, and it was apparently standard in Gaul in 650. The text accepted today is identical to what was written in 750 by Pirminius, who lived in what is now Switzerland.

This history shows that churches in many different regions were involved in the development of the Apostles' Creed. As churches in one part of the empire communicated with others, their short list of doctrines became standardized.

What does the Creed say?

Let us look at what the Creed says, and comment on some of its points. It is short, so we'll begin by quoting all of it.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth;

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was

> conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
>
> I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen. (translation by the International Consultation on English Texts)

The Creed, although having a Trinitarian structure, is not explicitly Trinitarian. The Creed began to be developed before the Trinitarian controversy arose, and the Creed (unlike the Nicene Creed) was not an attempt to correct a specific heresy.

Numerous scriptures could be mentioned as support for the various points of the Creed. The Creed was believed to be in full agreement with the apostolic writings, and the same churches accepted both the Creed and the Scriptures as authoritative, as faithful reports of what the apostles taught.

The Creed begins with a simple statement of faith in God, who has all power and is the originator of everything. This statement is a rejection of pagan mythologies, but it was acceptable to Jews and to some of the more educated Greeks.

Most of the Creed is about Jesus Christ, for he is the definitive doctrine of the faith. Beliefs about Jesus separate Christians from everyone else. Jesus was a specific person, born of a woman, executed under a specific Roman governor. Unlike mythological deities, he did not come from the distant and hazy past — he interacted with the real world. He had a real body that was born, crucified and buried, and yet he was divine, too — conceived by the Holy Spirit, resurrected, ascended into heaven at a position of supreme power. He is the unique Son of God, a unique Lord who is above all earthly lords, and he is the Judge who will return to earth to determine everyone's reward.

The early church knew about Jesus' earthly ministry and his miracles, but they did not feel that these were essential to the Christian faith. The Creed focuses more on his supernatural birth, his death and his supernatural power. These are of greatest theological significance, and were therefore included in the statement of

faith.

‘Descended to the dead’

The phrase “descended to the dead” is of special interest, in part because it used to be translated “descended into hell.” Some medieval theologians came up with elaborate theories about what Jesus did in hell, but this misses the original purpose of the phrase.

Irenaeus and Tertullian do not have this phrase; it first appears in the writings of Rufinus, who said that it meant only that Jesus went to the grave, the “place” of the dead. This is in agreement with Scripture, which says that Jesus rose from “the dead” (a plural adjective used as a noun, meaning the situation that all dead people are in, as in Acts 4:10).

Peter applied the words of Psalm 16 to Jesus: “You will not abandon me to the grave” — to Hades, the realm of the dead. When Jesus was dead, he was in Hades. Some believe he was conscious, and others believe he was not, but either way, he was in Hades, the realm of the dead.

The phrase “descended to the dead” disappeared from the creed for more than 200 years. Augustine did not have it. It occurs again in the Gallic Creed of 650 and remained from then on.

Some are troubled by this phrase and its history in the Creed; others are troubled by ancient and modern misinterpretations of the phrase. Some would prefer it be eliminated, since it does not add anything essential to the Creed, and is a point of disagreement rather than agreement.

Wayne Grudem argues:

> Unlike every other phrase in the Creed, it represents not some major doctrine on which all Christians agree, but rather a statement about which most Christians seem to disagree. It is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians. My own judgment is that there would be all gain and no loss if it were dropped from the Creed once for all. (*Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, 583-594).

Nevertheless, the words are in the Creed, and we cannot change the tradition. However, we can understand the words correctly so we can agree with them. Others may interpret these words differently, but we do not need to argue

about that.

‘The holy catholic church’

The Creed ends with a few brief statements. We can easily agree to a belief in the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection and eternal life. (Some may question “resurrection of the body.” First Corinthians 15 says that our body will be transformed to be spiritual rather than fleshly, but it will still be our body.)

Some people are also put off by the words “holy catholic church.” The word catholic comes from the Greek words *kat’ holos*, literally meaning “according to the whole,” or in actual use, worldwide or universal. The word catholic became part of the Creed before “catholic” became associated with the Roman church, and many Protestant churches use the Creed with the word catholic. In the Creed, we do not express faith in a specific denomination, but in the church worldwide — that is, that there is one body, united by God’s Spirit. The phrase “communion of saints” implies the same thing — that as we all commune or have unity with Christ through the Holy Spirit, we also commune with each other. We will be united to one another forever.

The Apostles’ Creed has been part of the Western church tradition for many centuries. It has not been perfect, but it has been useful for Christian confession, doctrine and discipleship. We accept the creed as a valid statement of faith for Christians. For further comments on the Apostles’ Creed, you may want to read Alister McGrath, *“I Believe”: Exploring the Apostles’ Creed* (InterVarsity, 1998). Several other authors have also written on this subject, including William Barclay, Stuart Briscoe and Michael Horton.

Michael Morrison

How Russia Became Christian

Each July 15, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and some Protestant Christians commemorate the baptism of Prince Vladimir (956-1015). He was ruler of Rus, an area stretching from northwestern Russia to southern Ukraine.

The principal account of this pagan king's baptism and the Christianization of his domain are found in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, dating from the 11th century.[1] This book explains that Vladimir had listened to envoys from Islam, Judaism and the Greek and Roman Christian church seeking to convert him and evangelize his people. The wise men he sent to investigate these religions were especially impressed with the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople and the splendor of its religious services.

When Vladimir heard their account, he decided to adopt the form of Christianity practiced at the Byzantine court, the center of what is today the Eastern Orthodox faith.[2]

Prelude to baptism

Before choosing a faith, Vladimir besieged the Byzantine city of Kherson, north of the Crimea. The *Chronicle* tells the story: A man from Kherson, Anastasius, informed him he could take the city by cutting off the springs feeding its water supply. Vladimir followed his advice, forcing the city to surrender.

Next, Vladimir engaged in some hard-ball political bargaining. He promised to be baptized and bring Byzantine Christianity to his people only if emperors Basil and Constantine gave him their sister, Anna, in marriage. If they refused, he threatened to destroy Constantinople, their capital city, as he had Kherson.

Greatly anguished, the emperors persuaded their sister to agree to the marriage. One church historian cynically says that Vladimir "captured a Byzantine town in the Crimea and as a price of peace exacted the hand of a Byzantine princess to add to his collection of wives and concubines."[3]

Anna arrived in Kherson around 988 with priests to perform Vladimir's baptism. When she heard he was afflicted with a terrible eye disease, she urged him to be baptized immediately to be healed of the condition. According to the *Chronicle:*

> When Vladimir heard her message, he said, "If this proves true,

> then of a surety is the God of the Christians great," and gave order that he should be baptized. The Bishop of Kherson, together with the Princess's priests, after announcing the tidings, baptized Vladimir. When the Bishop laid his hand upon him, he straightway received his sight. Upon experiencing this miraculous cure, Vladimir glorified God, saying, "I have now perceived the one true God."[4]

Let the baptisms begin

After his baptism, Vladimir married Anna and prepared his subjects for baptism. He ordered that at a given hour all the people of Kiev — men, women and children — should go to the Dnieper River and be baptized in a grand religious ceremony. The *Chronicle* describes the baptismal event and Vladimir's prayer of thanksgiving:

> When the people were baptized, they returned each to his own abode. Vladimir, rejoicing that he and his subjects now knew God himself, looked up to heaven and said, "O God, who has created heaven and earth, look down, I beseech thee, on this thy new people, and grant them, O Lord, to know thee as the true God, even as the other Christian nations have known thee."[5]

The eminent church historian Philip Schaff saw this act from a disparaging perspective: "Thus the Russian nation was converted in wholesale style to Christianity by despotic power."[6] Yet, the spread of Christianity during the 9th through 11th centuries generally worked this way. The peoples of Scandinavia, central Europe and the Balkans were Christianized through the conversion of rulers who supported, often by forceful means, the work of Christian missionaries among their people.

After the Eastern and Western church split in 1054, the rulers and people of the expanding Russian empire continued to follow the Orthodox faith. Under the Czars, Moscow became the religious rival of Latin Christianity, "the Third Rome," and the bishop of Moscow took the title of Patriarch. As leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, he became a "Russian Pope."

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[1] Even skeptical historians believe the *Chronicle* provides a generally accurate account of these events.

[2] Several decades later, in 1054, a formal split between the church in the East and West occurred. See article "The Great Schism of the Church."

[3] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 392.

[4] *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, edited and translated by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 4, "Medieval Christianity," page 141.

The Great Schism of the Church

July 6, 1054 was rapidly approaching, and the Christian world was about to experience a major event on the road to a schism that continues to our day — the divide between the Western and Eastern Christian churches. The central actors in the looming conflict were Michael Cerularius, the patriarch of Constantinople,[1] and Leo IX, the bishop or pope in Rome.

In the months leading up to July 6, 1054, Cerularius had strongly condemned the Western church for some of its religious practices and beliefs.[2] As part of his attack, Cerularius excommunicated the bishops of Constantinople who followed certain rites of the Western church, and he closed down their churches.

In April, Leo sent a legation to Cerularius, headed by Cardinal Humbert, with his own set of demands and accusations against the patriarch. As it turned out, Leo died in the midst of the mission, but the group continued its task. The meetings between Cardinal Humbert and Patriarch Cerularius were angry and bitter. Mistrust and a desire to maintain ecclesiastical power ruled the day. No useful dialogue could occur in such a poisoned atmosphere.

Mutual excommunication

Finally, relations between Cerularius and Humbert were strained to the breaking point. The Roman legates marched into Constantinople's St. Sophia church and placed a papal decree on the altar, excommunicating Cerularius. Cerularius then convened his bishops and issued further accusations about the practices of the Western church. They condemned Humbert and the other representatives of the papacy. The possibility of healing and reconciliation became a shattered dream.

The mutual excommunications of 1054 were the dramatic climax of a centuries-long period of growing estrangement between the two areas of the church, East and West, despite the fact that in earlier centuries they had been solidly united against a number of heresies, including Arianism.[3]

The split between the Eastern and Western halves of the church also had much to do with the political and geographical reality of the Roman Empire. The political disunion in the Roman Empire was replicated in the church. The last Roman emperor to rule over a united empire was Theodosius the Great, who died

in A.D. 395. The empire was divided into eastern and western halves, with each having its own emperor. The Western Roman Empire was torn apart by barbarian invasions in the fifth century, while the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, continued, with its capital at Constantinople, the modern Istanbul, Turkey.

The churches of Rome and Constantinople grew in power and became rivals more for their political status rather than for any spiritual or religious reasons. In earlier centuries, ecclesiastical authority in the church had become concentrated in five bishops in the main Christian centers of Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome. This had occurred as early as the fourth century A.D.

A growing reconciliation?

For hundreds of years after the tragic events of July 1054, the Eastern and Western churches essentially went their separate ways, though there were contacts between them and periodic attempts at reconciliation. Meanwhile, the Western church expanded into the Americas and experienced further splits, which created the Protestant Christian world. The Eastern church expanded northward, into the Balkans and in Russia.

A significant step toward reconciliation began in March 1991, when the Eastern Orthodox Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches reached a consensus on the Filioque Clause disagreement.[4] Theologian Thomas F. Torrance was instrumental in the dialogue.

Overtures have also been made by leaders in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. In 1965, Pope Paul VI and Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras issued a joint text that mutually nullified the joint excommunications of 1054. The declaration was read simultaneously at a public meeting of the ecumenical council in Rome and at a ceremony in Istanbul. The declaration showed a desire for reconciliation between the two churches.

In 1995, Patriarch Bartholomew[5] met with Pope John Paul II in a series of meetings intended to pull the two churches closer together. The patriarch, along with other leaders of Eastern churches, attended the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005. This provided a hopeful symbol — an olive branch extended to the Roman Catholic Church for reconciliation. Benedict XVI has said that he, too, wants to find reconciliation and dialogue with other Christians.

Only time will tell whether full reconciliation will occur in the future and

what shape it will take. Christians can only pray that the unifying love and Spirit of Christ will shine from all who desire his body, the church, to exhibit a genuine unity and oneness.

Endnotes

1. The city once called Byzantium was renamed Constantinople after the Roman Emperor Constantine, who made the city his capital in A.D. 330.

2. Perhaps the most notable difference had to do with the issue of the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Western church added what's called the Filioque clause to the Nicene Creed, affirming the double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. This was rejected by the Eastern church, which taught that the Spirit proceeded solely from the Father.

3. In the later Patristic period (ended about A.D. 450) theologians in the eastern empire had an integral part in fighting heresies and in giving authentic expression to the New Testament understanding of God's nature through their theological leadership and participation in the first seven ecumenical councils. One of the biggest threats confronting the church had been the ideas of Arius, who claimed that Jesus Christ was not true God of true God, but a created being. Churchmen from the East were instrumental in combating this heresy. The Second Council of Nicea, in 787, was the seventh and last council accepted by both eastern and western churches.

4. As noted in the article about the Nicene Creed, the Latin version of the creed says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (Latin, *filioque*); the Greek version says only that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Torrance's proposal was that the Spirit proceeds from the being of the Father.

5. Bartholomew, whose seat is in Istanbul, the former Constantinople, is given the honor of primacy in the broader Orthodox faith. Self-governing national Orthodox churches choose their own patriarchs.

William Tyndale and the Birth of the English Bible

On October 6, 1536, Englishman William Tyndale (c.1494-1536) was strangled by the civil executioner in Belgium and his dead body was burned at the stake. His crime? Tyndale had translated the New Testament and major portions of the Old Testament from the original languages into English so that English-speaking Christians could read the Scriptures in their own tongue.

Persecution and Bible burning

In our time, we are privileged to have access to a wide variety of Bible translations in English. The idea that a Bible translator could be hunted down like a criminal and his Bible translation burned and destroyed seems shocking. Why did such a tragedy happen? Let's briefly explore the religious-political situation in England between 1380 and the 1530s for the answer.

We begin with the first English version of the Bible, translated and published in 1380 by John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384).[1] An Oxford theologian, Wycliffe was a severe critic of what he believed was a corrupt church. He hoped that people could be called back to a more biblical faith, and for this to happen he was convinced that they needed to read the Bible in their own language.

By producing a translation, Wycliffe ran afoul of church authorities. The few Wycliffe Bible copies in existence were banned by a synod of clergy in Oxford in 1408. An edict was issued against any unauthorized translation of the Bible into English. Wycliffe was pronounced a heretic and was called "a son of the old serpent, forerunner and disciple of Antichrist" by the English Archbishop.[2] In 1415, the Church Council of Constance condemned Wycliffe's writings and ordered his bones to be dug out of the ground and to be burned.

We can now begin to understand why Tyndale and his Bible translation would not be appreciated. Church authorities seemed to take a dim view of Christian folk having the Bible in the language of the uneducated laity. In the words of Church historian Philip Schaff, "Down to the very end of its history, the Medieval Church gave no official encouragement to the circulation of the Bible among the laity. On the contrary, it uniformly set itself against it."[3]

Genesis 1:1–2, from the Tyndale Bible:

> In the begynnynge God created heaven and erth. The erth was voyde and emptie, ad darcknesse was vpon the depe, an the spirite of god moved vpon the water …

The Protestant Reformation begins

Tyndale would be in danger of the church hierarchy solely on the basis of his producing an unauthorized English translation. However, Tyndale had two strikes against him, because he was also enmeshed in the Protestant Reformation, which was in full swing by the time he completed his New Testament in English in 1526. The first shot of the Reformation had been fired nine years earlier, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. (Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1522.)

Tyndale had thrown in his lot with the Reformers and was highly critical of the church structure in England. The established church in England had no real case for objecting to a Bible in English, except perhaps on the traditional view that it was unhealthy for people to read the Bible for themselves. However, church officials also objected to the critical commentary that Tyndale's New Testament contained. This gave the clergy the rationale to condemn Tyndale and seize copies of his translation.

A determined Tyndale

Tyndale was aware of the dangers of embarking on the translation project he was contemplating. However, he was convinced that the common people must be able to read the Bible in order to be called back to the biblical gospel. In one debate with a cleric, he vowed that if God spared his life, he would see to it that the plowboy would know more about Scripture than untutored priests.

Tyndale first approached Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall (or Tonstall) of London in 1523 to request permission to translate the Bible into English. He hoped that the bishop would both authorize his translation work and also provide him with a residential chaplaincy so he could support himself financially during his project. The bishop denied both requests and suggested Tyndale look for employment elsewhere.

The next year Tyndale decided to go to the Continent, where, with the support of a group of British merchants, he completed his translation of the New Testament. Tyndale found a printer in Cologne, but opponents raided the printing establishment. Escaping with the pages that were already printed, he headed to Worms, Germany, where his New Testament in English was printed in 1526. The first printing of 6,000 copies was then smuggled into England.

Church officials in England, especially in London, did everything they could to intercept copies of Tyndale's New Testament and destroy them. But copies kept appearing, to the chagrin of Bishop Tunstall. He hit upon the idea of buying up as many copies as possible. Once he accomplished his aim, the bishop held a public burning of these New Testament copies at St. Paul's cathedral.

Despite this campaign against Tyndale's New Testament, new copies kept appearing in England. Tunstall then conceived of a plan to buy up large numbers of copies on the Continent before they made their way to England and then destroy these as well. The bishop made an agreement with Augustine Packington, a merchant in Belgium to buy all of Tyndale's remaining printed New Testaments.

Tyndale was made aware of this plot and agreed to sell the copies. He would use the money he received to publish a new edition and have even more copies to distribute. The bishop's plot was foiled. In the words of Edward Halle, a chronicler of the times: "And so forward went the bargain: the bishop had the books, Packington had the thanks, and Tyndale had the money."[4]

More translation, opposition and Tyndale's death

Meanwhile, Tyndale traveled to Antwerp, Belgium, where he began translating the Old Testament into English. By 1530, he had completed and published the English translation from the Hebrew of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.

Tyndale is also considered to have translated the Old Testament books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, though his translation did not appear while he was alive. As Tyndale was involved in the theological disputes of the day and because he was hounded by those seeking to capture him, he was unable to complete the translation of the entire Old Testament.

Tyndale's second edition of the New Testament was finished in 1534. It was his definitive work, and it is this edition that served as the basis of the 1611 King

James Authorized Version.

As Tyndale worked in Antwerp, the agents of King Henry VIII and other opponents were scouring Europe, hoping to find and capture him. Tyndale was betrayed by a fellow Englishman, kidnapped and arrested on May 21, 1535. He was imprisoned in a Belgian fortress and eventually brought to trial for heresy and found guilty. The verdict condemning him to death came in August 1536. On October 6 of the same year he was executed at Vilvorde, Belgium.

Tyndale's final prayer, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes," is said to have been directed to English King Henry VIII (1491-1547). His prayer was a hope that the king would allow copies of the Bible in English to be circulated. Tyndale's prayer had already been answered. An English version of the Bible that drew on his translation work was in circulation before his death. Three years after Tyndale's death, Henry required every English parish church to make a copy of the English Bible available to parishioners.

In the biblical books that Tyndale translated, perhaps up to 90 percent of his wording is found in the King James Version. Where the 1611 King James Version departed from Tyndale's translation, later revisers of this version often returned to it. For his pioneering work of translation, William Tyndale is considered the "Father of the English Bible."

In the United States, National Bible Week is celebrated each year from Sunday to Sunday of Thanksgiving week.[5] *This is a timely opportunity to recall the struggles of individuals such as Wycliffe and Tyndale, who suffered grave injustices to help make the Bible available to people in the English language and to reform the church. It is also an appropriate time to remember that many people around the world do not yet have a Bible in their own language.*

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[1] Wycliffe's translation was made before the invention of moveable type and the printing press. All copies of his Bible had to be copied by hand. His version was not a translation of the original languages in which the books of the Bible were first written.

[2] David Ewert, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, page 184.

[3] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. vi, page 722.

[4] From Halle's 1548 chronicle of England from Henry IV to Henry VIII in F. F. Bruce, *History of the English Bible*, page 38.

[5] The National Bible Week celebration is sponsored by the Laymen's

National Bible Association. The week-long observance began in 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a message in support of the event.

When Astronomy Became a Theological Football

Imagine a book on astronomy being condemned as heretical by a Christian church. This is precisely what happened to *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres)*, published in March 1543. The publication was written by Polish astronomer-mathematician, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543).

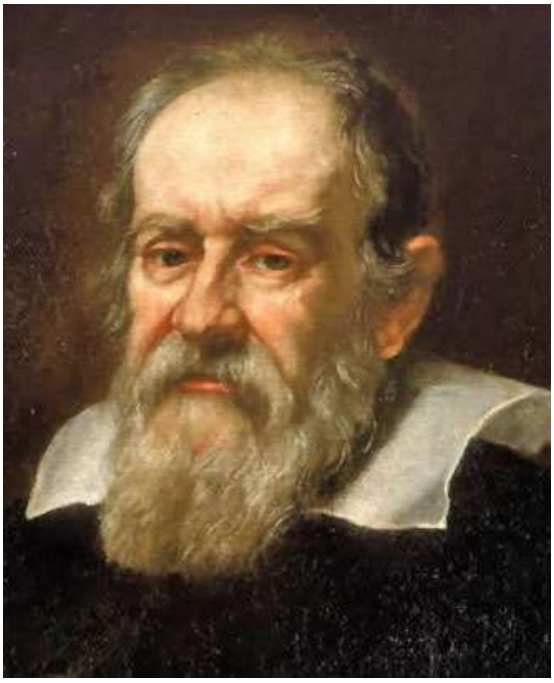
Copernicus proposed a heliocentric model of the universe, in which the earth revolves around the sun. He believed that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the planetary system. However, the cosmological theory accepted in Copernicus' day by many European Christians placed the earth at the center of the universe. His contrary proposition, if true, meant that the earth was just one planet among others. This concept opposed the official view of Rome. It took the church 73 years to place the book on the Index of forbidden books. Why so long?

A Lutheran pastor at Nuremberg, Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), wrote a letter to the reader that was inserted in the book as an anonymous preface. Copernicus had no knowledge of it. The preface claimed that Copernicus thought the heliocentric theory described in his book was only an unproven hypothesis.

Ironically, Osiander's unauthorized preface probably saved the book from instant condemnation by the church. *De Revolutionibus* was not placed on the Index of forbidden books until 1616, some 73 years after its publication. The papal decision to censor Copernicus' work was based on a conclusion that a heliocentric claim was contrary to the literal meaning of Scripture. But because *De Revolutionibus* had contributed to calendrical reform, it was not prohibited entirely, but would require revision.

Enter Galileo. Galileo Galilei was born in 1564 at Pisa, 21 years after *De*

Revolutionibus was published. By 1598, Galileo believed in the truth of the Copernican heliocentric theory, and was teaching it publicly. In 1615 Galileo went to Rome to argue the merits of the Copernican theory. But the next year *De Revolutionibus* was placed on the Index, and Galileo was warned not to promote its theory as reality. In 1633, Galileo was interrogated under threat of torture and made to recant the heliocentric proposition. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, which he spent in house arrest at his home in Arcetri. Galileo died in 1642.



It is a good lesson for us today. We have no need to condemn the work of science by looking for biblical passages to back up our views about how the creation functions. The Bible is God's self-revelation as Creator and Redeemer of all things, not a science text on how he designed the physical universe. For that sort of knowledge God gives us the joy of research and discovery.

Fasting and Repentance After the Salem Witch Trials

On Jan. 15, 1697, the town of Salem and the Massachusetts Bay Colony proclaimed a day of fasting and repentance because of the senseless witch trials and executions that had occurred five years earlier in the colony. More than 150 people were accused of being witches and were imprisoned, and 19 suspected witches were hanged.

The day of personal and public repentance was called "so all of God's people may offer up fervent supplications unto him, that all iniquity may be put away, which hath stirred God's holy jealousy against this land; that he would show us what we know not, and help us, wherein we have done amiss, to do so no more."

The witch-hunting hysteria had begun when two children claimed they were bewitched by certain townspeople. Later, during the trial, other children and young people made similar accusations. No real evidence of Satan worship, witchcraft or other paranormal activities was presented. Most of the accused were women, though it included George Burroughs, former minister of Salem Village, who was hanged on Aug. 19, 1692.

While the witch trials were an isolated unbiblical miscarriage of justice in a tiny community, they point out the fact that Christians must avoid having their faith high-jacked by hysteria, scapegoating or superstition. There have been other, more extensive miscarriages in Christian history, such as the Inquisition, which remind us that we need to always live in step with the Holy Spirit and to show the wisdom and love of Christ to others in all situations.

The Great Awakening

*In 1734, Northampton village in the colony of Massachusetts experienced a remarkable revival that became the catalyst for revivals throughout the Colonies and in England, Scotland and Germany. By the early 1740s, revival events dominated Colonial newspaper headlines from Boston to Charleston. They reported on itinerant preachers thundering out messages of eternal damnation and salvation to frightened, wailing and repentant crowds on city streets, in parks and at meetinghouses.

This series of revivals was later dubbed the "Great Awakening." Some considered it a "mighty work of God" equal to the Holy Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost and an echo of the Protestant Reformation.

Edwards and Whitefield

Northampton's pastor was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), one of Colonial America's best-known theologians. Deeply involved in the Great Awakening from beginning to end, he preached, promoted and defended revival events through his many writings and contacts with other evangelicals. In 1736 he wrote "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God." This article soon became a popular book relating how hundreds of Northampton citizens and people in surrounding communities had been converted and saved. It became a script for spotting, staging and reporting revivals throughout Colonial America.

The young evangelical preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770), known as the "Great Itinerant," provided the Great Awakening with its strongest momentum. The most notable of his three evangelistic tours through the Colonies lasted between November 1739 and January 1741. During one month crowds of 8,000 or more heard Whitefield speak nearly every day. An estimated 20,000 listened to his sermons in Philadelphia and Boston. "That tour may have been the most sensational event in the history of American religion," observed Mark A. Noll, professor of history at Wheaton College.

Jonathan Edwards' July 8, 1741, sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," is a famous example of Great Awakening hell-fire and brimstone preaching. "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath

towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire," Edwards warned his frightened congregation.

Hell-fire message

He defended this kind of "scare tactic" as necessary to wake up unconverted people from their spiritual lethargy. Edwards' grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in a 1713 sermon had said: "The misery of many Men is that they do not fear Hell…so they take a great liberty to Sin…. If they were afraid of Hell, they would be afraid of Sin."

Revival sermons caused people in the audience to weep and scream in a frenzy. This rampant emotionalism was at the heart of a bitter dispute between "Old Lights" and "New Lights." Charles Chauncy, pastor of the First Church in Boston, Massachusetts, was one of the revival's most ardent critics. His sermon "Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against" was an attack on the revivalists' manipulation of listeners' emotions.

To counter Antirevivalist arguments and to defend the authenticity of conversions, Edwards wrote "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" in 1741. He sincerely believed that the Great Awakening was a "work of God" and had resulted in many genuine conversions. While admitting that excesses had occurred, he defended the Colonies-wide revival as a special outpouring of the Spirit.

As suddenly as it began, the Great Awakening began to weaken. In a December 12, 1743, letter, Jonathan Edwards complained to Thomas Prince that a "very lamentable decay of religious affections" was beginning to creep back into Colonial society. By 1749, the Church had returned to "its ordinary State." According to Gilbert Tennent, another revivalist, the Great Awakening was dead.

Mary Jones and the First Major Worldwide Bible Society

Mary Jones was born Dec. 16, 1784 in the Welsh village of Llanfihangely Pennant. From an early age, Mary longed to have a Bible in her own language that she could read. Mary's dilemma was that it was well-nigh impossible for a Welsh child from a poor family to afford a Bible. Bibles were expensive in 18th century Wales. Nevertheless, over the years Mary scrimped and saved enough money from doing odd chores for neighbors to buy a Bible. Mary was now around 16 years old.

Mary's odyssey

She heard that a minister named Thomas Charles in the town of Bala had some Welsh Bibles for sale. Bala was some 25 miles (40 kilometers) from her home. She gathered her savings and trudged across the hills to Bala to find the minister. He gave Mary some bad news. Every copy of the Bible he had was already sold. He was moved by the diligence she had shown in seeking a Bible and handed her his last copy, which he had put away for another buyer.

Mary's goal of obtaining her own Bible and her meeting with Charles set in motion the creation of a truly international Bible society.[1] Charles presented the need for more copies of the Scriptures in Welsh at a meeting of the Religious Tract Society in December 1802. Though the Tract Society was sympathetic about the need, they were not in a position to meet the demand. But one member, Joseph Hughes, suggested that "a society might be formed for the purpose [of distributing Bibles]—and if for Wales, why not for the [United] Kingdom; why not for the whole world?"

On March 7, 1804, a meeting was conducted at the London Tavern in Bishopsgate, at which the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) was formed. Some 300 citizens from several denominations formed the society.[2]

The Society's work

The BFBS would be non-sectarian, and its governing committee was interdenominational. The members set as their goal "the wider distribution of the Scriptures, without note or comment." The Society had no interest in fostering any particular interpretation of the Bible. Its sole purpose was to provide people with easier and less expensive (or free) access to the Scriptures.

The BFBS was concerned with translating and distributing Bibles in all languages throughout the world. One of its first international achievements was the production of the Gospel of John in the Mohawk language. The society provided missionaries with Bibles for people being evangelized. William Carey (1761-1834), missionary to India, was funded by the society in his translation work. The society helped Robert Morris, the first Protestant missionary to China, with a translation of the Bible into Chinese, and aided Henry Martyn, who was working on a Persian translation.

Satellites of the main society sprang up. In just 10 years, 60 other Bible organizations had formed. By 1907, the BFBS had distributed 204 million Bibles, New Testaments and portions of Scripture throughout the world. An international organization providing Bibles to people around the world had been inspired by the needs of one girl in Wales, Mary Jones.

The British and Foreign Bible Society is now more commonly known as The Bible Society. Its slogan is "Making the Bible heard." Its website is www.biblesociety.org.uk. The BFBS marked its 200th anniversary in 2004 as it launched its Revised New Welsh Bible, harking back to Charles offering his last Welsh Bible to Mary Jones. The Bible Society distributed 256,548 Bibles, 68,985 New Testaments and 43,029 portions of Scripture in that anniversary year.

The BFBS today works through a global alliance of more than 137 Bible Societies. These national Bible Societies are part of a worldwide fellowship called the United Bible Societies, formed in 1946.

Paul Kroll

[1.] Mary Jones died in 1864, in her 80s. The story of Mary Jones and her Bible is a traditional one. Mary did not write down her own account, so over the past two centuries the story has been recounted with some variations.

[2.] Various kinds of Christian organizations and societies made efforts to disseminate Bibles long before the British and Foreign Bible Society was organized, but these did not achieve the international scope and lasting impact of BFBS.

The African-American Church in America

"Eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour, and Sunday school is still the most segregated school of the week," is an oft-quoted statement from Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968). King was referring to the fact that during his lifetime most African-Americans worshiped in congregations and churches mainly or entirely composed of black people.

These African-American churches' roots go back to the North and South of the Revolutionary War period of the 1760s and 1770s. Like whites, blacks also began to come to Christ during the religious revivalism of the period.

African-Americans shared a common belief with European-American evangelicals that the biblical account of God's past dealings with the world offered clues to the meaning of life in America. But, there was a difference. White Protestants often likened America to the Promised Land — the New Israel — a "city set on a hill." Black worshipers were more likely to see America as Egypt — as the land of their captivity. They longed for their own emancipation, just as God had delivered ancient Israel in the Exodus.

This desire for emancipation eventually led to the African-American church movement. Blacks in the Methodist church took the lead in creating independent denominations.

In the Revolutionary period, the impetus for blacks to have their own churches owes much to the work of Richard Allen. He was a former slave and deacon-elder at the integrated St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia.

In 1787, Allen with Absalom Jones organized the Free African Society in Philadelphia. Allen founded the all-black Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1791, after Jones and he left St. George's over its segregationist practice of relegating black members to the church balcony during worship services.

Over time, growing numbers of African-Americans formed their own congregations. In 1816, representatives of these congregations joined to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E. church), with Allen as the first bishop. The most significant growth of this church occurred during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

African-American churches took up what has been their historical mission to care for the spiritual and physical needs of black people, since they were neglected and discriminated against by white society. Yet, they did not forget the ultimate mission of the church — to make disciples in all nations and among all peoples. The A.M.E. church sees its mission in this way: "To minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed…that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy."

African-American churches have been a bulwark in the black community — a refuge from the larger, cruel world. Richard Wright, in his book *12 Million Black Voices*, wrote: "It is only when we are within the walls of our churches that we are wholly ourselves, that we keep alive a sense of our personalities in relation to the total world in which we live."

The black church was also a sanctuary for praise and worship of Christ. Here members could express themselves freely and unite culturally in their beliefs and life practices. As worshipful communities, African-American Christians saw their relationship with Jesus as the bedrock of a faith that gave them hope for a better future.

By the late 1950s, a generation of African-Americans began to drift away from the church. The relevance of the church was dealt a serious blow, as many urban youths felt it no longer had anything to offer — that it did not speak to the reality of their lives.

However, the African-American church continues to be for many black people the place of worship and source of strength, though it is much more diverse than it once was.

The Sunday service may still be a time when people of different racial backgrounds to some degree are segregated, as Martin Luther King Jr. observed. However, today even most exclusively black churches have made connections to the larger Christian community and serve black people as well as people of all races in ministry and the gospel of Christ.

Black History Month: An Interview With Curtis May

J. Michael Feazell interviewed Curtis May, director of the Office of Reconciliation Ministries, an outreach ministry of Grace Communion International, about Black History Month.

JMF: ***What is Black History Month?***

CM: Black History Month began in 1926 as Negro History Week. It was established by Carter G. Woodson as a way to bring attention to the positive contributions of black people in American history. In 1976 Negro History Week became Black History Month.

JMF: ***Who was Carter G. Woodson?***

CM: Dr. Woodson was a son of former slaves. He worked in the coalmines in Kentucky to put himself through high school. He graduated from Berea College in Kentucky in 1903, and then went on to Harvard for his Ph.D.

It bothered Woodson to find that blacks had hardly been written about in American history books, even though blacks had been part of American history from as far back as colonial times. And when blacks were mentioned, it was not in ways that reflected the positive contributions that they had made.

So he wanted to do something about that. In 1915, he established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now called the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History) and then founded the *Journal of Negro History* and *Negro History Bulletin.* Then in 1926 he started promoting the second week of February as Negro History Week.

JMF: ***Why February?***

CM: Woodson chose February because the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass were in that month. These were two men who had a great influence on black Americans.

In addition, several other important events took place in February. For example, the 15th Amendment, which said that the right to vote could not be denied on account of race, was ratified on Feb. 3, 1870.

W.E.B. DuBois, educator and writer, was born in February 1868. The first black U.S. senator, Hiram Revels, took his oath of office in February 1870. The founding of the NAACP in 1909 took place in February, as did the murder of Malcolm X in 1965, and the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-in at the Woolworth's

lunch counter in 1960.

JMF: ***Why is Black History Month important today?***

CM: All young people need positive role models to inspire them and spur them on and to help them know that they, too, have the potential to achieve their dreams and accomplish worthwhile and important things.

Young blacks need to know about the many positive achievements of black men and women throughout history in every field of endeavor. Knowing what others have done inspires confidence in young people to know that they can do worthwhile things too.

Knowing about the achievements of black doctors, scientists, lawyers, economists and journalists provides encouragement and incentive to black young people to strive for excellence themselves. Without such knowledge and encouragement, young people can end up wasting precious time and energy blaming the system and feeling victimized.

JMF: ***How would you describe the value of Black History Month for nonblack people?***

CM: Black history is not merely black history; it is American history. By better understanding the positive contributions of another ethnic group, all Americans benefit. When we understand one another better, we are that much closer to having positive relationships with one another.

Many nonblacks, even many blacks, have erroneous stereotypes in their minds about blacks and their history in the United States. These negative ideas and impressions create barriers to good relationships and to the true potential that all Americans have for working together toward our common goals for freedom, peace and achievement.

Black History Month provides a focus on the positive history, achievements and contributions to American ideals that blacks have made throughout history. And that helps to dispel the negative ideas and stereotypes that invariably spring up when the truth is not given the light of day.

The experience of black Americans in our history can be a further inspiration to all Americans that no matter how tough the struggle, no matter what the odds, when we don’t give up, when we stand together firmly for the right and the truth, great things can happen. And there’s nothing more truly American than that. It’s our collective legacy and heritage.

JMF: ***How can Christians benefit from Black History Month?***

CM: The civil rights movement was born in Christian faith and values. The early leaders of the movement were Christian ministers, black and white alike, who saw injustice and worked in nonviolent ways to bring the love of Jesus Christ to bear on a system that reflected neither the gospel itself nor the deepest values of the U.S. Constitution.

As Christians, when we rehearse that struggle and celebrate the positive achievements of Americans who excelled despite having been socially marginalized, we affirm the values and responsibilities of our faith.

JMF: ***Can you give me one word that in your mind characterizes Black History Month?***

CM: Well, I think I'd have to say *hope.* It's all about promoting hope — hope for a better tomorrow that springs from the lessons, the tears and the joys of what has gone before. It's a hope that grows from understanding and from truth — and from the power of love.

And I thank Jesus Christ, because he takes all our meager efforts and turns them into a real and true hope that sees past all the challenges of the present and into a future where his love binds all people together, all people of all backgrounds and ethnicities and histories all bound together as one in him.

William Wilberforce:
Christian Abolitionist, Reformer, Statesman

"God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners," said William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the man who would be the driving force in the ultimate end of slavery in the British Empire. When Wilberforce was born, English sailors were raiding the African coast, capturing tens of thousands of Africans yearly and shipping them across the Atlantic into slavery. An estimated one in four died in route.

The economies of the British colonies depended on the slave trade. A promoter of the West Indies trade wrote, "The impossibility of doing without slaves in the West Indies will always prevent this traffic being dropped."

As a young man, Wilberforce wasn't aware of the horrors of the slave trade. After attending St. John's College, Cambridge, he decided on a political career. At age 21, he won a seat in the House of Commons from his hometown, Hull. Small and frail, Wilberforce suffered throughout his life from various ailments, sometimes being bedridden for weeks and on several occasions at death's door.

Conversion to Christ

In 1784, at age 25, Wilberforce became an evangelical Christian within the Anglican Church. He questioned whether he could pursue politics and remain a

Christian. Wilberforce's spiritual mentor was evangelical minister John Newton (1725-1807), writer of "Amazing Grace," and former slave trader captain. He encouraged him to remain in politics, saying, "It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of his church and the good of the nation."

Once Wilberforce learned of the evils of the slave trade, he devoted his life to its abolition. He wrote: "So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the Trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition." In 1787, abolitionists Sir Charles and Lady Middleton persuaded Wilberforce to use his political influence as a Member of Parliament to legislate against the slave trade. He joined the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, allying himself with such abolitionists as Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846).

Wilberforce became associated with the "Clapham Sect" called "the Saints." Members were Christ-centered, Anglican evangelicals, influential in government and business. The group included such abolitionist luminaries as Granville Sharp, Zachary Macaulay, Hannah More and Thomas Clarkson. Wilberforce became the parliamentary "lightning rod" and team-building leader of this group of Christian reformers. John Venn, rector of Clapham parish church, was their chaplain.

The struggle and victory

In May 1788, Wilberforce introduced a 12-point motion to Parliament to abolish the slave trade. The motion was defeated as planters, businessmen, ship owners, traditionalists, MPs and the Crown opposed him.

The abolitionists, having to decide whether to attack the slavery institution or the slave trade, chose the latter course. Wilberforce educated himself on its evils and gave his first parliamentary speech in May 1789, a three-and-a-half-hour marathon. "I have proved that, upon every ground, total abolition [of the trade] ought to take place," he told Parliament. But legislators were unswayed and buried his motion in committee for two years. Then, in 1791, the bill to abolish the slave trade was put to a vote in Commons and defeated by a landslide, 163 to 88.

Wilberforce now understood that the struggle would be long and bitter. He unsuccessfully reintroduced abolition bills regularly during the 1790s. The early years of the new century were also quite bleak for the abolitionists, as all legislation introduced in Parliament against the slave trade failed to win passage. Eventually, the tide turned.

On February 23, 1807, Parliament voted in favor of Wilberforce's Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. Passing overwhelmingly, first in Lords and then in Commons by nearly an 18 to 1 margin, the bill received Royal Assent and became law on March 25, 1807. Through the efforts of Wilberforce, members of the Clapham Sect and others, the slave trade was declared illegal in the British Empire. Wilberforce wept for joy. Eighteen years he had fought the good fight in Parliament.

The struggle was not over, however. Although the slave trade was illegal, it still flourished, and slavery itself remained in the British colonies. Some abolitionists argued that the only way to stop slavery was to make the institution illegal. Wilberforce was convinced of this, but also correctly understood there was little political will for emancipation at the time. He also feared that a sudden abolition of slavery would be disastrous for both slaves and society.

Wilberforce decided legislation was needed to plug holes in the anti-slave trade law. He pushed for a Slave Registration Bill with other abolitionists, arguing that if a slave was registered, authorities could prove whether the slave was recently transported from Africa. The measure was not executed or enforced.

Finally, Wilberforce joined the campaign to end the institution of slavery, but his health was deteriorating. Unable to campaign as vigorously as he had against the slave trade, in 1821 he offered leadership of the parliamentary anti-slavery crusade to Thomas Fowell Buxton (1786-1845), an MP, abolitionist, social reformer and fellow evangelical.

In March 1825, at age 66, failing health forced Wilberforce's retirement from Parliament. His last public appearance for the abolition cause was at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1830. While Buxton, Clarkson and others were equally important to the abolitionist cause, Wilberforce had played the key role, as team builder and inspirational, visionary leader.

Near death, on July 26, 1833, Wilberforce received wonderful news. The Slavery Abolition Bill ending slavery throughout the British Empire had passed the Commons, with passage assured in Lords. All slaves throughout the Empire would be freed and plantation owners would be compensated. Wilberforce said, "Thank God that I have lived to witness a day in which England is willing to give twenty millions sterling for the abolition of slavery."

Three days later, Wilberforce died.

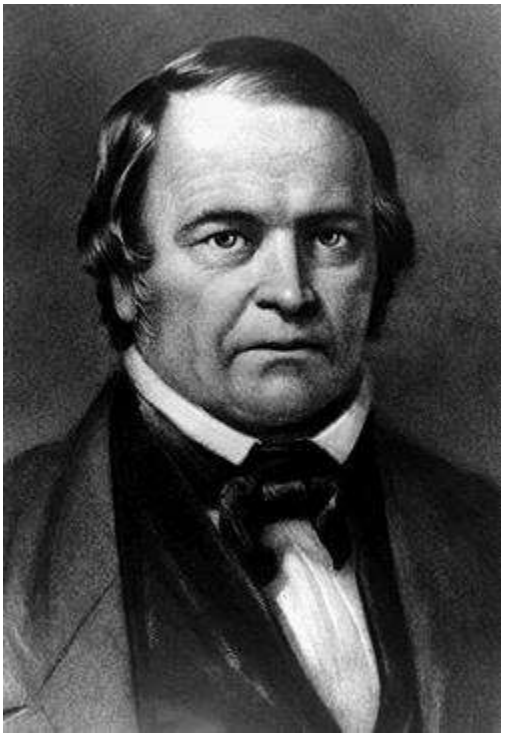
The Slavery Abolition Bill became law August 29, 1833, and came into

force a year later, abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire. On July 31, 1834, one year after Wilberforce's death, 800,000 slaves, chiefly in the British West Indies, were "free at last."

A generation later, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in states that had rebelled against the Union. With the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865, the institution of slavery in America came to an end.

The Great Disappointment

On October 22, 1844, as many as 100,000 Christians gathered on hillsides, in meeting places and in meadows. They were breathlessly and joyously expecting the return of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The crowds had assembled because of the prophetic claim of an upstate New York farmer and Baptist layman named William Miller (1782-1849). He was certain from his studies of the Bible that Jesus Christ was going to return on that day.



The prophesied return date had arrived. The waiting crowds, gathered at various places, mainly throughout the Northeast United States, peered expectantly upward as the hours slipped away. Anxiety grew as nightfall descended. Then the midnight hour tolled and still Christ had not returned. People became ever more restless. Through the wee hours of darkness, the dejected and stunned crowds began to disperse. When the daylight of Oct. 23 arrived, it was clear that Christ was not going to return as expected.

Failed prophecy and its aftermath

This dashed hope came to be known as "The Great Disappointment." In his book *When Time Shall Be No More,* historian Paul Boyer offers an example of the

deep despondency suffered by the Millerites. In the words of one tragically disappointed believer: “Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before…. We wept, and wept, till the day dawned” (page 81).

When Jesus did not return as expected, many who had hopefully waited for the return of their Savior threw off their faith completely. Some refused to give up their hope and eventually replaced one delusion with another. They would claim that Christ must have come invisibly in 1844, moving into the Holy of Holies in heaven to begin his “investigative judgment” of Christian lives.

Many simply returned to the churches out of which they had come, no doubt confused, distraught and embarrassed to have accepted something that was revealed to have been an empty fantasy. Miller, having renounced his prophecy studies after the Great Disappointment, died in 1849. Any remaining followers split up over differences of belief and doctrine. Ultimately, a variety of groups arose from the ashes of the Millerite camp, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists.

Actually, the October 1844 debacle was the *second* great disappointment for followers of Miller’s chronology and prophecy blueprint. He had previously announced that the coming of Jesus Christ would occur in about the year 1843. The year came and went without Christ’s return. Miller’s prophetic claim had failed and disappointed many people.

Then someone pointed out that he had neglected to take into account the transition from B.C. to A.D., so that his calculations were one year off. Miller then moved the expected return of Jesus forward by one year, this time to Oct. 22, 1844. But the great disappointment happened once again to the thousands of followers who had given away their possessions and waited in expectant belief — for nothing.

William Miller, as all Christians do, yearned for the coming of God’s kingdom. However, this yearning was translated by him into a misguided belief that Christ’s return would occur in his time on a specific date. Miller thought he had discovered in the Bible certain prophecies, which if rationally studied, could provide him with a certain date for Jesus’ return. His study and calculations of various prophecies, such as the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 and the 2300 days of chapter 8, brought him, he believed, to Oct. 22 as the date for Christ’s return.

American prophetic streak

Prophetic beliefs such as Miller's are strongly entrenched among some Christians and in American popular religion. The Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s was not an isolated event. As Miller and other leaders of his movement crisscrossed the northern states, they found a ready audience of people who held to various prophetic ideas about how and when Jesus would return.

The Millerite phenomenon is not an isolated movement, but grew up in a Premillenialist culture popular with many Christians. Many tens of thousands of Christians living at the time — average people — were eager to follow Miller's belief or some other prophetic scheme. As Boyer observes, quoting from David Rowe, a commentator on the Millerite experience: "Millerites are not fascinating because they were so different from everyone else but because they were so like their neighbors" (*When Time Shall Be No More,* page 82).

The excitement in speculative prophecy that characterized the Millerites has continued through the 19th and 20th century, and into our time, especially under a different mode of interpretive prophecy identified as Dispensationalism. This movement began through the work of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).

Though most prophecy buffs of a Dispensationalist persuasion have avoided setting exact dates for Jesus' return, they nonetheless continue to use Bible prophecy as a blueprint for their views of the end time. Usually, they maintain that his coming is imminent — in our generation. They claim the next dispensation of God's dealing with humanity will begin with the rapture — when the Christian saints are supposedly taken to heaven while the rest of humanity is left behind.

'Imminent return' the watch phrase

To Dispensationalists, the signs of the times are always with us. While date-setting is usually avoided, Christians are told that they must be ready because the rapture could occur at any moment. The time of the end is always right now, even though we may not know the precise date. Many fundamentalists, evangelicals — and other Christians — still believe that biblical prophecy is meant to be interpreted in such an apocalyptical and speculative way. If rightly interpreted, they believe, biblical prophecy can tell us what will happen in the near future — in our lifetime.

But as with William Miller's failed calculations, all this speculation about

the end of the age is the invention of often brilliant, but confused minds. Christians would do well to remember the Great Disappointment of Oct. 22, 1844. Miller's prophecy construct seemed like a logical and biblically based creation, but proved to be nothing more than a mirage.

William Seymour and the Rise of Pentecostalism

April 2006 was the 100th anniversary of a momentous revolution in Christianity that began at 312 Azusa Street in a ramshackle part of downtown Los Angeles. A writer for a local newspaper captured the significance of the Azusa Street Revival when he noted that it is "now seen as the great awakening of the Pentecostal / Charismatic movement."[1]

The pastor at the Azusa Street church was William J. Seymour (1870-1922). Seymour, the son of former slaves, had been raised as a Baptist and later joined a radical Holiness church. There he came to believe in divine healing, the rapture of the saints and Premillennialism, justification by faith and "sanctification as a second work of grace."[2]

Seymour had also been a follower of a Holiness preacher named Charles Fox Parham (1873-1929). He attended Parham's Bible school in Houston, Texas, where he was taught the idea that tongues-speaking is the biblical evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Seymour came to Los Angeles, where he was invited to minister to a house church on North Bonnie Brae Street. It was here that a defining event happened during a worship service on April 9, 1906. A member of the small group suddenly spoke in "tongues." Then, in a chain reaction, other members at Bonnie Brae also became tongues-speakers.

This led to much notoriety and a crush of new worshippers filling the small church. It forced Seymour to relocate his congregation to a larger building on Azusa Street in what is today the Little Tokyo section of Los Angeles. The new church was called the "Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission." Here the revival grew into a crescendo as more and more people began to speak in tongues.

The Apostolic Faith, the Azusa Street congregation's newspaper, trumpeted the group's growing belief that tongues-speaking was a sign that all the gifts of the Spirit had been restored to the church. A headline in the paper's first issue (September 1906) proclaimed: "Pentecost Has Come. Los Angeles Being Visited by a Revival of Bible Salvation and Pentecost as Recorded in the Book of Acts."[3]

The local revival sown on Azusa Street became the seed-bed of an international Christian movement. Over the next three years, hundreds of people worshipped there, many speaking in tongues, and revolutionized Christianity in

several ways:

- During a time of rampant segregation and discrimination, the Azusa Street congregation was multiracial. African-Americans, Anglos, Hispanics, and Christians of other ethnic backgrounds freely mingled, worshipped together and shared leadership.
- A missionary fervor characterized the Azusa Street worshippers and those who had joined with them. Many members of the Azusa group streamed out across America and into other lands to preach the gospel. This evangelistic fervor would lead to a worldwide explosion in Pentecostalism.
- The Azusa Street revivalists possessed a deep-seated belief that *all* the supernatural gifts of the Spirit had been dispensed to believers so they could preach Christ's gospel and build his church.

Speaking in tongues, faith healing, fervent prayer, emotional, from-the-heart participatory worship and stress on evangelism became the hallmarks of the Azusa Street experience. These traits appealed to many Christians and seekers. Pentecostalism's influence began to be felt in non-Pentecostal churches and denominations. The Charismatic movement developed out of this worship and stress on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today, the number of classical Pentecostals worldwide and those who are considered Pentecostal-like charismatics has exploded. Because of a fervent missionary zeal, it has become one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in South America and Africa. *The Dictionary of Christianity in America* cites Pentecostalism as being "perhaps the single-most-significant development in twentieth-century Christianity."[4]

For the most part, Pentecostalism has been considered a movement of the poor and marginalized people of the world, and that has been true up to a point. However, it has also made dramatic inroads into mainstream and mainline Western Christianity. Because of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement, all Christians have had to consider more deeply the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and in Christian mission around the world.

Endnotes

1 Andrew Moyle, "A Century of Faith: Event Celebrates 100th Anniversary of Azusa Street Revival," *Downtown News*, April 24, 2006, page 7.

2 Vinson Synan, “Introduction,” in Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street: The Roots of Modern-day Pentecost* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980) page ix.

3 “The Apostolic Faith,” vol. 1, no. 1, Sept. 1906.

4 Roger G. Robins, “Pentecostal Movement,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Daniel G. Reid, ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), page 885.

Karl Barth: "Prophet" to the Church

Swiss theologian Karl Barth has been called "the most outstanding and consistently evangelical theologian that the world has seen in modern times." Pope Pius XII (1876-1958) called Barth the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. By any measure, Karl Barth has had a profound influence on modern Christian leaders and scholars across a wide variety of traditions.

Student days and faith crisis

Barth was born in 1886, at the height of liberal theology's influence in Europe. He was a student-disciple of Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922), a leading proponent of what was described as self-authenticating religious experience in German Protestant thought. Barth wrote of him, "Herrmann was *the* theological teacher of my student years." In these early years, Barth also followed the liberal teachings of German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). "I was inclined to believe him blindly," he wrote.

Barth served as pastor for the Reformed congregation of Safenwil, Switzerland, between 1911 and 1921. In August 1914 his liberal Christian belief system "was shaken to the foundations" by a manifesto signed by 93 German intellectuals in support of Kaiser Wilhelm II's military aspirations. The liberal theology professors Barth venerated were among the group. "I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history," he said.

Barth believed his teachers had betrayed the Christian faith. "When the Christian gospel was changed into a statement, a religion, about Christian self-awareness, the God was lost sight of who in His sovereignty confronts man, calling him to account, and dealing with him as Lord."

Eduard Thurneysen (1888-1974), pastor from a nearby village and Barth's close friend from their student days, experienced a similar faith crisis. One day, Thurneysen whispered to Barth, "What we need for preaching, instruction and pastoral care is a 'wholly other' theological foundation."

Together they struggled to find a new basis for Christian theology. "We tried to learn our theological ABC all over again…by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testaments, more thoughtfully than before" and "they

began to speak to us." A return to gospel basics was needed. "We must begin all over again with a new *inner* orientation," he concluded, "recognizing God once more as God."

Romans and *Church Dogmatics*

Barth's ground-breaking commentary, *The Epistle to the Romans,* first appeared in 1919 and was completely rewritten for a 1922 edition. His reworked *Romans* introduced a bold new theological system "concerned quite simply with *God* in his independent sovereignty over against man, and especially the religious man."

Barth found a "new world" in Paul's letter to the Romans and in other scriptures that spoke "not the right human thoughts about God but the right divine thoughts about men." He declared God as "the wholly other" — beyond our comprehension, hidden from us, alien to our sensibilities — knowable only in Christ. Barth said "God's very *deity*, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*," and should be thought of as "a doctrine of God and man."

In 1921 Barth was appointed to the position of professor of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen, where he taught until 1925. There he lectured on dogmatics, which he described as "reflection on the Word of God as revelation, holy scripture *and Christian preaching*…as it is actually given."

Barth became professor of dogmatics and New Testament exegesis at the University of Münster in July 1925 and five years later was appointed to the chair of systematic theology at Bonn, a position he held until 1935. In 1932, Barth published the first section of his *Church Dogmatics*. The new work grew year by year out of his class lectures.

The *Dogmatics* has four "volumes," each in two or more part-volumes or sections and consists of 13 separate books in English, in 8,000 pages and 6 million words. Barth planned five volumes, one for each of the major doctrines of the faith: Revelation or the Word of God (CD I), God (CD II), Creation (CD III), Reconciliation (CD IV), and Redemption (CD V). He was unable to complete the Reconciliation volume, and the Redemption volume remained unwritten at his death.

Thomas F. Torrance described Barth's *Dogmatics* as "far and away the most original and remarkable contribution to systematic theology that the modern age

has seen." He called CD II, parts 1 and 2 "the high point of Barth's *Dogmatics*," especially "his doctrine of God as *being-in-his-act and act-in-his-being*." Torrance believed CD IV to be "the most powerful work on the doctrine of atoning reconciliation ever written."

Christ: elected one and elector

Barth challenged the full range of Christian doctrine, reinterpreting existing theology in the light of the Incarnation. He said: "My new task was to rethink everything that I had said before…as a theology of the grace of God in Jesus Christ." Barth sought to position Christian preaching as an activity that proclaims "the mighty acts of God" rather it being "a proclamation of the acts and words of man."

Christ is the center of the *Dogmatics* from beginning to end. "Karl Barth was a *Christian* theologian, one concerned above all with the *uniqueness and centrality of Christ and his Gospel*," according to Torrance. Barth said, "If one goes wrong here, one is wrong all along the line." This starting point in Christ kept him free from entrapment in "natural theology," the idea that man "has a legitimate authority of his own over the message and the form of the church."

Barth insisted that Christ is the revealing and reconciling address of God to man, and as Thomas Torrance explained, "the place where we know the *Father*." "God is known only through God," Barth would say. True talk about God exists "when it conforms to Jesus Christ." Barth insisted that "between God and man there stands the person of Jesus Christ, Himself God and Himself man, and so mediating between the two." For Barth, it is in Christ that "God reveals Himself to man. In Him man sees and knows God."

Barth declared "the divine predestination" to be "the election of Jesus Christ" with "a double reference — to the elector and to the elected." Jesus Christ is "the electing God" and "also elected man." Election, then, has to do wholly with Jesus Christ, in whose election we are elected by him to share. "In the light of the election of the man Jesus, all election can be described only as free grace," Barth concluded.

Before and after World War II

Barth's teaching years at Bonn coincided with Adolph Hitler's rise to

national power. The Protestant church in Germany, the "German Christians," supported Hitler, believing the *Führer* was sent by God to rescue the nation. In April 1933 the "Evangelical Church of the German Nation" was created on the idea that the German ethos "about race, blood, soil, people, state" was a second basis and source of revelation for the church. In response, the Confessing Church was formed, utterly rejecting this nationalist, human-based ideology, with Barth as one of its leaders.

The church produced the May 1934 Barmen Declaration, mostly written by Barth and echoing his Christ-centered theology. The Declaration in six statements called on the church to give faithful allegiance to Jesus Christ rather than to human powers and authorities. As Barth would say, "There is no different source of church proclamation from this one Word of God."

Barth was suspended from teaching at Bonn in November 1934 for refusing to sign an unqualified oath of loyalty to Adolph Hitler. Formally dismissed from his position in June 1935, he was immediately offered the chair of theology at the University of Basel, Switzerland, a post he held until his retirement in 1962.

Barth was invited back to Bonn in post-war 1946, where he delivered a series of lectures published the following year as *Dogmatics in Outline*. The book, using the Apostles' Creed as a framework, discussed themes he had developed in his massive *Church Dogmatics.*

In 1962, Barth visited the USA, lecturing at Princeton Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago. According to church lore, during his trip he was asked to summarize the theological meaning of the millions of words in the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth thought for a moment and said: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Whether or not he actually said this, it is the way Barth would often answer a question. It undergirds his understanding that at its heart the gospel is a simple message pointing to Christ as our Savior who loves us with a perfect, godly love.

Barth did not consider his revolutionary *Dogmatics* as the last word in theology, but "as the opening of a new conversation." He mused about the ultimate importance of this work: "I shall be able to dump even the *Church Dogmatics*…on some heavenly floor as a pile of waste paper." He concluded in his last lectures that his theological insights would require rethinking in the future because the Church "is directed every day, indeed every hour, to begin again *at the beginning*." Karl Barth died in Basel on December 10, 1968 at the age of 82.

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The Protestant Church in Hitler's Germany and the Barmen Declaration

On January 30, 1933, German President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler Chancellor of Germany. Less than two months later, Hitler was the nation's dictator. Many German Christians at first openly welcomed Hitler's Nazi party to power as a historic moment of Christ's work on earth through and for the Aryan people. A leading Lutheran theologian wrote in 1934, "Our Protestant churches have welcomed the turning point of 1933 as a gift and miracle of God."

A "faith party" of "German Christians" began to develop and grow in influence. In their first national convention in April 1933, in Berlin, the delegates stated their goal to reorganize the 27 Protestant regional churches in Germany into a single, national church under the leadership of a national bishop.

The "German Christians" published a number of programmatic papers during 1932-1933 that give us an insight into their hopes and goals. They wanted a church rooted in German nationhood based on an Aryan model. "We want a vital national Church that will express all the spiritual forces of our people," stated one "German Christian" document from 1932.

On June 28, 1933, with Hitler's authorization, Ludwig Müller, a fervent Nazi, took over chairmanship of the council of the Federation of the 27 regional Protestant churches. A new constitution established a single "Protestant Reich Church." On September 27, 1933, Müller was elected national bishop by a synod dominated by "German Christians."

Restrictions were immediately placed on the clergy. They had to be "politically reliable" and accept the superiority of the Aryan race. Pressure was exerted to expel Jewish Christians from ministry. The Nazi "Führer Principle" was to be adopted by the churches, which was a claim that Hitler was "lord" over the German church and that its Christ and Christianity were uniquely Aryan.

Confessing church and Barmen

Some German Protestant pastors, led by Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), stood in opposition to the "German Christians." In September 1933, Niemöller sent a letter to all German pastors, inviting them to join a Pastors' Emergency League. Niemöller asked the pastors to pledge themselves to be bound to Christ as Lord,

teach the gospel message of the Scriptures and the historic Confessions of the Church. Aryanism, a doctrine of racial superiority, was to be rejected as an anti-Christian teaching.

In April 1934, the League created the Confessing Church. It included ministers and churchmen from Reformed, Lutheran and United Churches, as well as other church groups. The Confessing Church took its name from the fact that its members had pledged themselves to affirm the great historic Confessions of the Church.

The leaders of the Confessing Church met on May 29-31, 1934, at Barmen. Here they issued the historic Barmen Declaration, drafted by Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, with input from other Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches leaders.

The Declaration was written in direct opposition to the national church government — the "Faith Movement of the German Christians" — rather than against the Nazi regime itself. It challenged Christians who were attempting to bring the Protestant church into line with the nationalistic ideals and aspirations of Nazi rule. However, since the "German Christians" were a proxy for the Nazi state, the Declaration became also a condemnation of Hitler's totalitarian rule.

The Barmen Declaration asserts that Christ alone is the one Word of God — the source of all authority and truth — whom we must hear, trust and obey. It rejects the notion that other powers apart from Christ could be sources of God's revelation. It stands on the principle that Christ cannot be co-opted by, used in the service of, or be remade in the image of religious or political ideologies created by fallen human beings and structures in opposition to God. Barmen confesses the reality that God's grace for us cannot be reinterpreted or replaced by ideas and programs growing out of human creaturely self-interest and evil designs.

In these ways, Barmen speaks not only to the times and crisis of the church in Nazi Germany, but to Christians throughout the history of the church and in our time and place.

One ‘Mere Christian’ in Church History
Clive Staples Lewis

He was listed as one of the 10 most influential Christians of the 20th century by *Christian History* magazine, along with such people as Karl Barth, Pope John XXIII, Billy Graham and Martin Luther King Jr. The magazine called him “the atheist scholar who became an Anglican, an apologist, and a ‘patron saint’ of Christians everywhere.”

He has also been described as “one of the best loved 20th century Christian apologists” and the “apostle to the skeptics” because he decisively answered common objections people throw up against accepting Christ as Savior. This individual was chosen for a 1947 *Time* magazine cover because he, having been perceived as a secular academic, was affirming publicly his Christian faith in his writings, on radio and in his relationships with others. By now, many of you know this person is Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), or C.S. Lewis, as he is popularly known.

His varied background

Lewis, called “Jack” by his friends and family, was a distinguished professor at Oxford and Cambridge universities, renowned literary critic, and highly acclaimed author of science fiction and children’s literature. His best-known work in this genre is the children’s adventure tale, the *Chronicles of Narnia,* which retells the story of the Creation, the Fall and redemption of humanity and contains other Christian themes in allegorical form. Lewis’ 25 books on Christian topics include *Mere Christianity* (1952), *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *Miracles* (1947), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), *Surprised by Joy* (1955) and *The Great Divorce* (1945). *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933) was a thinly disguised story of his personal road to conversion.

Between 1942 and 1944, Lewis went on British radio at the request of the director of religious broadcasting for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Lewis gave a number of talks in those years on what he called “mere Christianity,” the common or central beliefs of the faith. The popular weekly broadcasts reached a wide audience of receptive Brits in the dark years of World War II. The collection of radio talks were later brought together in one of Lewis’ most

influential books, *Mere Christianity.*

One of Lewis' most-often-quoted statements is from *Mere Christianity,* where he insists that people are confronted with three choices by Jesus' claims about himself. Thinking of Jesus as a profound moral teacher will not do, said Lewis. People must decide whether he is a liar, lunatic or the Lord, as he claims:

> A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Becoming a Christian

What is most fascinating about Lewis, especially to evangelical Christians, is the story of his own conversion. The history of the church is a history of human beings who in one way or another at various stages of their lives encountered the risen Lord and responded with a "Yes, Lord, I will" to his "Yes, come." The church is the sum total of men, women and children who have been enabled by the Father to be drawn to Jesus Christ through the Spirit (John 6:44, 65). Most of their names are unknown to us, and so are their conversion stories. But we are fortunate to know C.S. Lewis' testimony because he has told it to us in his writings, especially in *Surprised by Joy.*

God works in many and diverse ways to bring his children to Christ — and he draws people to himself from all walks of life, cultures, intelligence rankings, ages, races and social levels. The Lord came to C.S. Lewis over several ways in a "small, still voice," using various means — especially intellectual ones — to reach him. His conversion story is one example of how Christ has built his church over the centuries and continues to build it today.

C.S. Lewis was born into a Protestant family in Belfast, today Northern Ireland, on Nov. 29, 1898. He endured an unhappy and lonely childhood. He was

especially crushed by the unexpected death of his mother from cancer when he was less than 10 years old. Her death left a hole in his heart and caused him to be disillusioned about God's nearness. He rejected any Christian beliefs he might have had, even as a youth, and became an avowed atheist. When asked at age 18 what his religious views were, he called the worship of Christ and the Christian faith "one mythology among many." By the time he had served in the British army on the front lines of France during World War I and began his studies at Oxford University as a student, now barely 20, he was a thorough-going materialist.

Lewis had been a voracious reader of what we would call good books. What he didn't know was that Christ was beckoning him through his reading, slowly drawing the young man to himself.

Lewis was greatly influenced by two writers, George MacDonald, the 19th century Scottish Presbyterian minister and novelist, and G.K. Chesterton, a Christian apologist and London journalist. "In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald," he wrote in *Surprised by Joy,* "I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere…. God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous."

Lewis' close friends also played a vital role in causing his heart to be open to Christ's love through their talks with him about Christianity and Christ. One was Owen Barfield, who had also trod the road from atheism to theism and finally to Christ. Another was Nevill Coghill, who Lewis was amazed to discover was a Christian. Two close friends on the English faculty at Oxford's Magdalen College, where Lewis also taught, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien, were also among a group of diverse people who witnessed the Lord to Lewis.

Finding God

In 1929 C.S. Lewis found himself challenged with God's existence. This important milestone in his conversion journey was reached suddenly. As he tells the story, on one occasion during this time he happened to take a bus ride. When he got on the bus he was an atheist. When he came to his stop, he got off the bus believing in God's existence. Not that Lewis was seeking God. He said he didn't really want to find him. The revelation about God's existence was something of a fright to him. He wrote in *Surprised by Joy:* "Amiable agnostics will talk

cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.”

But God was seeking C.S. Lewis and he found him. His call was coming and Lewis could find no place to hide. As Jonah running from the Lord, Lewis had been confronted with his own great “whale,” so to speak. It was God beckoning to him. The reluctant prodigal finally knew it was time to come home. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells us about his feelings when he could no longer deny God’s existence to himself:

> You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England…. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.

When God drew Lewis’ heart to himself, he became conscious of the presence of his own sinfulness. “For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose,” wrote Lewis. “And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name is legion.”

When Christ comes calling

Though Lewis was frightened by what he saw in himself, the Holy Spirit would open Lewis’ heart and mind to Christ’s forgiveness and love. It happened in September 1931 when Lewis was converted to the faith. He had engaged in a lengthy conversation about Christianity with J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson that started with dinner on the 19th and continued into the early morning hours of the 20th. The discussion challenged Lewis’ thinking and set the stage for what happened two days later.

It was on Sept. 22, 1931 that Lewis said yes to the Lord’s offer of himself — according to his testimony, this was the exact day he became a Christian. It

happened on a ride to the Whipsnade Zoo with his brother, Warren. Lewis tells about it in his book, *Surprised by Joy:* "I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion…. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."

One recalls the experience of the apostle Paul, who was also on a road trip, in his case from Jerusalem to Damascus. When Paul started out for Damascus, he did not know the Lord. As a rabbi, he had a strong belief in the God of Israel. But he had not yet been encountered by the living Christ. When he started his journey he did not know Christ, but when he arrived at his destination at Damascus, he was a converted disciple of the Lord (Acts 9:1-20).

Lewis was not struck down with blindness on the road to the zoo and didn't hear the risen Christ audibly speaking to him. Nevertheless, the still quiet voice of Jesus had been dramatically impacting his mind and heart for some time, bringing him to the opportunity to utter the final yes. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis described that final time before he put his faith in Christ as a period of free and enlightened choice:

> The odd thing was that before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice…. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out…. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armor or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corslet meant the incalculable.

On Christmas Day 1931, C.S. Lewis joined the Anglican Church and took communion. For the next three decades he devoted much of his time to writing and speaking about Christ and the Christian faith. He had truly become a disciple of Christ who makes disciples. After several months of ill health and intermittent recovery, Lewis died peacefully on Nov. 22, 1963 — on the very day that U.S. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Vatican II and the Future of Church Unity

On October 11, 1962, twenty-four hundred Roman Catholic bishops marched phalanx-style in rows of six through St. Peter's Square. Behind them strode the College of Cardinals, followed by Pope John XXIII, seated in a massive chair and carried by attendants. The entourage went into the splendid basilica, and the prelates took their seats. Across the aisle sat observers from other Christian faiths, invited by the Pope to attend the proceedings. The Second Vatican Council — the 21st ecumenical council recognized by the Roman Catholic Church — was about to begin.

Vatican II was the largest council gathering in the church's history. The Council held 178 meetings in four successive years, adjourning Dec. 8, 1965. It produced 16 official documents. Several focused on ecumenism and unity with non-Catholic Christians. Pope John XXIII died in 1963, after the first session. The newly elected Pope Paul VI continued Vatican II with the same goals John had proclaimed.

Inside Vatican II

Vatican II transformed the church's internal life[1] and inaugurated a new era in its relationships with non-Catholics. For the first time, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox were regarded as "separated brethren."

The Council acknowledged in its Decree on Ecumenism that the Holy Spirit was active in non-Catholic Christian communities. It said all who have been baptized and justified by faith "are members of Christ's body, and have a right to be called Christian" and "brothers" by the Catholic Church.

The same decree devoted a section to the strong family relationship — as "sister Churches" — that the Catholic Church believes exists between itself and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Great and present divide

Catholics and other Christians have always been in general agreement on essential teachings of their common faith — God's Trinitarian nature, the divinity of Christ, the Incarnation, Resurrection and Second Coming, and reverence for God's word.

However, it cannot be denied that deep-seated differences — doctrinal, historical, cultural and emotional — continue to divide them. "We have no illusions that the centuries-long wounds of our divisions will be quickly or easily healed," wrote Charles Colson, a Protestant, and Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic. Problematic Catholic beliefs, especially to Protestants, include:

- Papal authority and infallibility.
- Means of grace and role of the church's sacraments.
- Relationship between Scripture and Roman Catholic tradition.
- Purgatory and devotions to the saints.
- Devotion to the Virgin Mary, her immaculate conception and bodily assumption.
- The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.
- Identity of the Church as perceived by Catholic dogma.

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI released a document prepared by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The brief document in the form of five questions and answers reaffirmed "the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church." Other churches were said to be "separated churches and Communities." The document stated that though "the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation," they "suffer from defects." The Orthodox ("oriental") churches are considered to be "separated from full communion with the Catholic Church." Nevertheless, they "have true sacraments" and "the apostolic succession," and are therefore considered "sister Churches."

Many Protestant leaders immediately roundly criticized the statement, with some claiming that ecumenism had been set back to a time before Vatican II. The document itself stated that the Vatican remained committed to ecumenical dialogue. There was little new in the 2007 document; Benedict had said much the same thing in a 2000 document, "Dominus Iesus."

Perhaps some Protestants were in denial of what the Catholic Church believes about itself. The Vatican II Council statements, as the recent document notes, "neither changed nor intended to change" the Catholic doctrine of the church. The Catholic Church has always understood itself to be the one church "Christ 'established here on earth'."

Vatican II altered Catholic Church life in many fundamental ways and opened up dialogue between Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox churches with a new openness. However, Benedict's recent reassertion of Roman Catholic primacy

has created a sense of realism among Protestants. How much headway in dialogue and ecumenism can be made in the future is anyone's guess.

[1] One example was Vatican II's institution of common-language forms of the Latin mass. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI authorized a wider use of the Latin version, which had been marginalized by the council's decision.

The Life and Times of Martin Luther King Jr.
1929-1968

Martin Luther King Jr. was a major leader of the U.S. civil rights movement beginning in the mid-1950s. Americans celebrate his birthday as a national holiday each January, recalling the struggle to end racism and bigotry in America. King was an eloquent Baptist minister who advocated and participated in nonviolent means to achieve civil right for blacks and equality for all.

King received a bachelor of divinity degree from Crozier Theological Seminary in 1951 and earned a doctor of philosophy degree from Boston University in 1955. He came from a long line of Baptist ministers. His father was pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, and in 1960, King moved to the city to pastor his father's congregation. King was chosen as the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957.

In 1963, he was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, after a nonviolent protest that led to a confrontation with Public Safety Commissioner "Bull" Connor and municipal authorities. While in jail, King was criticized by a group of white clergymen who blamed him for inciting the violence and who voiced concerns about his civil rights strategy. It was then that he penned his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." King ended his letter with these words:

> I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

King's most soaring and hopeful civil rights plea came in August 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Here he delivered his rallying "I Have a Dream" speech."

For his work to end segregation and discrimination, King was awarded the

Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King was only 35 years old when he accepted the prize on behalf of all who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, making him the youngest recipient of the award at the time.

But the seeds of human hatred and bitterness cut short King's life less than four years later. On April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, he was shot to death by James Earl Ray. King was only 39 years old. Though he did not waver from his position and practice that nonviolence must remain the approach of the civil rights movement, he died a martyr's death from an assassin's bullet.

Billy Graham: Evangelist to the World

> My one purpose in life is to help people find a personal relationship with God, which, I believe, comes through knowing Christ. —Billy Graham

Graham's evangelistic tours in America and around the world awakened many people to the need for a spiritual rebirth and a personal relationship with Jesus. It is estimated that some three million people responded to Graham's offer at the end of his campaign sermons to come forward and accept Christ. Graham reached countless other millions with the gospel of Christ through television specials, satellite crusades, radio ministries, motion pictures, a literature ministry, and the books he wrote. Training ministries and seminars have equipped thousands of grass-roots evangelists in large-scale and one-on-one evangelism.

Graham met with the pope, the queen, several prime ministers and kings and celebrities. He met every U.S. president from Dwight Eisenhower to Barack Obama. Graham has often been called on to serve as "America's pastor," helping to inaugurate or bury a president or otherwise lend a public voice of assurance in times of tragedy or crisis.

Early life and education

William Franklin ("Billy") Graham, Jr. was born November 7, 1918, near Charlotte, North Carolina, the eldest of four children. His parents regularly attended the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church with the children. While attending revival meetings in Charlotte at age 16, Graham experienced conversion, committing his life to Christ. He changed his denominational affiliation to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1938 and was ordained the next year as a Baptist minister in the St. John's River Association.

From 1936 through 1943, Graham attended three different Christian colleges. He stayed at the ultraconservative Bob Jones College in Tennessee for only a few months, graduated from the Florida Bible Institute in 1940 with a Bachelor of Theology degree and from Wheaton College in Illinois in 1943 with a B.A. in anthropology.

At Wheaton he courted fellow student Ruth Bell. The couple married on August 13, 1943. After graduation, Graham served for a little over a year as the

pastor of a Baptist church in the Chicago suburb of Western Springs.[1] In 1945 Graham became the field representative of a dynamic evangelistic movement, Youth for Christ International. For the next four years, Graham traveled throughout the United States, Canada and Europe speaking at rallies and organizing YFC chapters.

Evangelistic missions

Graham gained sudden national attention in 1949 with a seven-week tent revival campaign in downtown Los Angeles attended by 350,000. Graham said of the Los Angeles tent campaign: "Overnight we had gone from being a little evangelistic team…to what appeared to many to be the hope for national and international revival."[2]

In part, Graham gained national attention because newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst instructed his newspapers across the country to "puff Graham." Other newspapers and the Associated Press also picked up the story of his evangelistic rally. Newsreels of the campaign began to appear in theaters.

Graham launched his worldwide ministry with his 1954 London campaign, supported by a thousand churches in the greater metropolitan area. More than two million people heard Graham speak during his three-month-long series of sermons, and thousands came to Christ. The outstanding success of the Greater London Crusade[3] helped establish the validity and scope of Graham's international ministry.

Graham's successful 1957 New York City evangelistic campaign established him as the acknowledged standard-bearer for evangelical Christianity. At the 16-week rally in New York City, almost 2.4 million people packed Madison Square Garden and other venues and events to hear the young preacher. It is estimated that 96 million people saw at least one of the Madison Square Garden meetings on television. "That experience showed us that God was opening the door to a new medium for the furtherance of the Gospel," said Graham.[4]

Those are but three examples of hundreds of evangelistic campaigns through the decades that Graham has organized and led. He has preached the gospel to more people in more nations and territories before live audiences than anyone else in history — more than 210 million people in over 185 nations.

Creating a sure footing for evangelism

As Graham's fame increased, so did criticism of his evangelistic style. Some branded him a real-life "Elmer Gantry" preacher, after the 1925 Sinclair Lewis novel and 1960 film about a salesman who teams up with a female evangelist to sell religion to America in the 1920s. To counter such complaints he knew were sure to come, early on in 1948, Graham and his associates created "The Modesto Manifesto." They determined to avoid behavior that failed to reflect Christian values and gave evangelists a bad name.

The Manifesto dealt with the problem of evangelists falling into the trap of seeking financial self-enrichment and indulging in sexual immorality. Adherence to strict ethical standards allowed Graham to remain untouched by the sensational financial and sexual scandals that embroiled prominent television preachers during the 1980s.

Fundamentalists would accuse Graham of corrupting the gospel message by accepting help and support from mainline Protestant denominations and liberal Christian clergy. Despite the criticism, he was determined to seek a broad base of ecumenical support for his evangelistic campaigns. Graham once said, "I intend to go anywhere, sponsored by anybody, to preach the gospel of Christ, if there are no strings attached to my message."[5]

To enable his ministry to run on an orderly, businesslike basis, Graham, his wife and a number of key people in his ministry incorporated as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) in 1950.

The role of the BGEA

The heart of the BGEA program was the mass evangelistic mission events that Graham led with fellow evangelists and in partnership with churches around the world. They are now chiefly conducted by his son, William Franklin Graham III, who has stepped into his father's shoes as president of BGEA (since 2001).

Graham's evangelistic campaigns have always been meticulously planned and organized down to practical details such as recruiting choir members, ushers and counselors. The BGEA sends out teams of workers to assist communities planning to hold evangelistic meetings. The organization holds rallies only where they have been invited by a large number of local pastors and churches.

People coming forward to accept Christ at the evangelist's service-ending

invitation meet with volunteer counselors, who refer them to participating pastors in their community. BGEA's follow-up programs have proved successful. According to surveys, 70-80 percent of those converted at evangelistic missions remain committed Christians.

In 1992 the BGEA announced that Graham had Parkinson's disease and would be less involved in mission activities. He described his goal: "Whatever strength I have, whatever time God lets me have, is going to be dedicated to doing the work of an evangelist, as long as I live."[6]

The Billy Graham Library

The Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina, was dedicated on May 31, 2007 on the grounds of the international headquarters of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). Though ill and infirm, 88-year-old Billy Graham was on hand for the festivities and briefly addressed the 1,500 guests. Former presidents George H.W. Bush, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton also spoke at the opening of the $27 million dollar, 40,000-square-foot complex.

Graham's son, Franklin, explained the purpose of the Library, pointing out that his father didn't want "too much of Billy Graham in it." He wanted it to reflect the message of the gospel he had preached for 60 years. Graham, speaking from in front of the Library, repeated this hope in his address. "The building behind me is just a building," he said. "It's an instrument; it's a tool of the gospel."

The Library complex includes innovative multimedia exhibits, a theater, bookstore and rustic café. Visitors can take an inspiring tour through six decades of the evangelistic work of Billy Graham and the BGEA, bringing the gospel to people of all walks of life. The cavernous lobby of the structure is styled after a dairy barn to highlight Graham's upbringing on a farm only four miles away.

The Library is open to the public free of charge. For information about the library, please visit the website www.billygrahamlibrary.org/.

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1 Graham and his late wife, Ruth, have lived in Montreat, North Carolina, since 1945. Ruth Bell Graham died at age 87 on June 14, 2007, at their home. They have three daughters, two sons, 19 grandchildren and many great grandchildren.

2 Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (HarperCollins, 1997), p. 158.

3 Graham's evangelistic rallies, called "crusades" for many years, are now

referred to as “missions.”

4 *Just As I Am*, p. 323.

5 “Billy Graham: Evangelist to Millions,” http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/evangelistsandapologists/graham.html.

6 Ibid.