



ROSE

BIBLE BASICS

Christian History Made Easy



A quick and colorful guide to understanding the key events and people that every Christian should know

by Timothy Paul Jones, PhD

"Here you have a beautifully simple, beginner-friendly telling of Christian history, a precious heritage."

—J.I. Packer

ryszostom
marche from Lipie
zum in Sanok, Poland!

AD247 - AD420

ROSE

BIBLE BASICS

Christian History Made Easy

Timothy Paul Jones, Ph.D.



Torrance, California



© 2009 Timothy Paul Jones
Rose Publishing, Inc.
4733 Torrance Blvd., #259
Torrance, California 90503 U.S.A.
Email: info@rose-publishing.com
www.rose-publishing.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, posted on the Internet, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Layout design by Nancy Fisher, cover design by Sergio Urquiza

Character illustrations on pages 10, 25, 37, 53, 68, 85, 97, 99, 106, 111, 129, 143, 158, 177, and 180 were created by Stephen Hesselman.

Rose Publishing is in no way liable for any context, change of content, or activity for the websites listed. Inclusion of a work does not necessarily mean endorsement of all its contents or of other works by the same author(s).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jones, Timothy P. (Timothy Paul)

Christian history made easy / Timothy Paul Jones. – [Rev. ed.].

p. cm. – (Rose Bible basics)

Includes index.

Summary: "An overview of the development and history of Christianity from AD 1 to the 21st century"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-59636-328-1 (pbk.)

1. Church history. I. Title.

BR145.3.J66 2009

270-dc22

2008056128

About the Author

Timothy Paul Jones has authored, co-authored, or edited more than a dozen books, including *Conspiracies and the Cross* and the CBA bestseller *The Da Vinci Codebreaker*. After fourteen years in vocational ministry, he now serves as professor of leadership and church ministry at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to receiving the Bachelor of Arts in biblical studies and the Master of Divinity with a focus on historical theology, Timothy has earned the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Southern Seminary. His academic research has earned the Scholastic Recognition Award from the North American Professors of Christian Education, as well as the Baker Book House Award for theological studies. Timothy, his wife Rayann, and their daughter Hannah reside in the city of St. Matthews in Louisville, Kentucky.

CHRISTIAN
HISTORY MADE **Easy**

Contents



introduction
Why Does
Church
History
Matter?
06



chapter 1
The
Gospels, the
Apostles,
Then...
What?
09



chapter 2
Balancing
the Past
with the
Present
21



chapter 3
The Church
Wins...and
Loses
33



chapter 4
Servant-
Leaders or
Leaders of
Servants?
47



chapter 5
From
Multiplication
to Division
63



chapter 6
God Never
Stops
Working
79

Continued
on next page



CHRISTIAN
HISTORY MADE **Easy**

Contents



chapter 7
Everything
Falls Apart
91



chapter 8
Wild Pigs
in a Dirty
Vineyard
105



chapter 9
Change
Doesn't
Always Do
You Good
121



chapter 10
You Say
You Want a
Revolution?
135



chapter 11
Optimism
Has Its
Limits
149



chapter 12
Modern,
Postmodern
...and
Beyond
165



Study Guide
189



Index
222

Foreword

Church history is being stolen from us, and I don't think we should stand for it anymore.

Church history is being stolen by professional historians who have discarded reporting tales of tragedy, valor, and pathos for writing textbooks crammed with dates, social analysis, and political posturing. It's being shoplifted by television, which lulls us into an entertainment stupor, so that our minds can no longer grasp anything more complicated than Wheel of Fortune. And we're pickpocketed by our own foolishness, this panting after the latest, the new, the "now."

How do we bring church history back? We can write it in a way that shows its relevance. We can follow Augustine's dictum that communication should entertain while it informs. We can be honest about Christian failures—which have been manifold—and yet refuse to wallow in cynicism. We can make sure we don't produce textbooks but books filled with people and stories we will never forget.

Okay, I admit it. I'm biased when it comes to church history.

What I'm saying is that good history should read like *Christian History* magazine, because that's precisely the sort of history that I worked for several years to produce there. And that is precisely what drew me to *Christian History Made Easy*. I know good history when I see it, and I see it here.

The study of church history can do many things for us, to name a few: it gives perspective; it frees us from faddishness; it shows God's working in the world; it gives wisdom; it implants hope deep within us. If you're looking for such things—or perhaps just wondering how you and your fellow believers ended up at this time and place in the larger scheme—reading Christian history, and this book in particular, is one place to begin.

Mark Galli
Managing Editor, *Christianity Today*

Introduction

Why does church history matter?

In a classic *Peanuts* comic strip, Sally carefully labels her paper, “Church History.” As Charlie Brown glances over her shoulder, Sally considers her subject.

“When writing about church history,” Sally scrawls, “we have to go back to the very beginning. Our pastor was born in 1930.”

Charles Schulz’s comic strip may be amusing, but it isn’t too far from the truth. In sermons and devotional books, Christians encounter names like Augustine and Calvin, Spurgeon and Moody. Their stories are interesting. Truth be told, though, most church members have a tough time fitting these stories together. The typical individual’s knowledge of church history ends with the apostles and doesn’t find its footings again until sometime in the twentieth century.

Still, the story of Christianity deeply affects every believer in Jesus Christ. The history of the Christian faith affects how we read the Bible. It affects how we view our government. It affects how we worship. Simply put, the church’s history is our family history. Past Christians are our mothers and fathers in the faith, our aunts and uncles, our in-laws and—in a few cases—our outlaws!

When a child in Sunday School asks, “How could Jesus be God and still be like me?” she’s not asking a new question. She is grappling with an issue that, in AD 325, three hundred church leaders discussed in a little village named Nicaea [ni-SEE-ah], now the city of Iznik in the nation of Turkey. Even if you’ve never heard of Iznik or Nicaea, what those leaders decided will influence the way that you frame your response to the child’s question.

If you’ve ever wondered, “Why are there so many different churches?” the answer is woven somewhere within two millennia of political struggles and personal skirmishes. When you read words like “predestined” or “justified” in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, it isn’t only Paul and your pastor who affect how you respond. Even if you don’t realize it, Christian thinkers such as Augustine and John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards also influence how you understand these words.

So, if the history of Christianity affects so much of what we do, what’s the problem? Why isn’t everyone excited about this story? Simply this: A few pages into many history books, and the story of Christianity can suddenly seem like a vast and dreary landscape, littered with a few interesting anecdotes and a lot of dull dates.

Despite history’s profound effect on our daily lives, most church members will never read Justo González’s thousand-page *The Story of Christianity*. Only the most committed students will wade through all 1,552 pages of Ken Latourette’s *A History of Christianity*. Fewer still will learn to apply church history to their lives. And so, when trendy novels and over-hyped television documentaries attempt to reconstruct the history of Christianity, thousands of believers find themselves unable to offer intelligent answers to friends and family members.

What we don't seem to recognize is that church history is a *story*. It's an exciting story about ordinary people that God has used in extraordinary ways. What's more, it's a story that every Christian ought to know.

That's why I wrote this book.

Christian History Made Easy is a summary of the church's story, written in words that anyone can understand. I haven't cluttered the text with abstract facts and figures and footnotes. *Christian History Made Easy* is a collection of stories. Together, these stories are intended to sketch one small portion of what God has been up to for the past 2,000 years.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I was not a professional scholar. I was a young pastor in a small town in rural Missouri. A decade later, I have pastored a much larger congregation, and I do now bear the titles of "professor" and "Ph.D." Yet this book still bears the marks of that original context.

In the months that formed the first edition of this book, I spent my days among small-town farmers and school-teachers, in hayfields and hospitals, with lonely widows and life-loving youth. As I wrote, I thought not only about Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, but also about a tiny congregation that graciously referred to me as their pastor, though they probably knew more about pastoral ministry than I did. I loved those people—Thelma's pure and simple heart that could express Christ's love through the larded crust of a gooseberry cobbler, Harold and Kathrine's gentle reprimands that prodded me toward pastoral maturity, the transformation that I witnessed in the home of John and Laura. Today, I cherish those people even more than I did then, because I see more clearly what God was doing in my life through them. It was for those ordinary people that I wrote *Christian History Made Easy*, because I longed for them to grasp what it means to be surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses," the saints not only of the present but also of the past (Hebrews 12:1).

I remain indebted to Carol Witte and Gretchen Goldsmith for taking a chance on a then-unknown author and publishing this manuscript; to Jeff Cochran for providing many of the books that undergirded the original research; to Robin Sandbothe, Connie Edwards, Daniel Schwartz, Barbara Harrell Brown, Lianna Johns, and Larry Sullivan for proofreading the first draft of the manuscript; Kenny McCune, Brent McCune, and Amy Ezell for their help on the learning activities; to W. T. Stancil for proof-reading above and beyond the call of duty; Stephanie, Heather, Diane, and Christy at the McDonald's on Highway 50 in Sedalia, Missouri, who fueled the original project with copious amounts of cholesterol and Diet Coke; to the Starbucks baristas at Frankfort Avenue in Louisville, Kentucky, who fueled this updated edition; to my wife and to our daughter Hannah—ten years ago, who could have dreamed what God would do in our lives?

This book is dedicated to my parents, Darrell and Patricia. By chance, you gave me life. By choice, you gave me love. By wisdom, you let me forge my own path. By grace, you gave me wings to fly. This first book will always be for you.

—Timothy Paul Jones

what you should know about Christian history

AD 64 — AD 177

5 EVENTS you should know

1. **Jerusalem Council (AD 49 or 50):** Church recognized that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to follow Jesus Christ (Acts 15).
2. **Fire in Rome (AD 64):** Flames destroyed nearly three-fourths of capital city. Emperor Nero blamed and persecuted the Christians.
3. **Destruction of Jerusalem Temple (AD 70):** After a Jewish revolt, Emperor Vespasian ordered his son, Titus, to regain Jerusalem. Titus torched the city and leveled the temple.
4. **Pliny's Letter to Emperor Trajan (around AD 112):** Pliny, governor of Pontus, asked Trajan how to handle Christians. Trajan ordered Pliny not to pursue Christians. Only when people were accused of being Christians were they to be hunted down.
5. **Martyrdom of Polycarp (AD 155):** Polycarp of Smyrna—modern Izmir, Turkey—was burned alive because he would not offer incense to the emperor.

10 NAMES you should know

1. **Peter (martyred between AD 65 and 68):** Leading apostle of the early church.
2. **Paul (martyred between AD 65 and 68):** Early Christian missionary and apostle.
3. **Nero (AD 37-68):** Roman emperor, persecuted Christians after fire in Rome.
4. **Clement of Rome (died, AD 96):** Leading pastor of Rome in the late first century. The fourth pope, according to Roman Catholics. Perhaps mentioned in Philippians 4:3.
5. **Josephus (AD 37-100):** Jewish writer. His historical works tell about early Christianity and the destruction of the Jewish temple.
6. **Ignatius (AD 35-117):** Apostolic church father and leading pastor in Syrian Antioch. Wrote seven important letters while traveling to Rome to face martyrdom.
7. **Papias (AD 60-130):** Apostolic church father. Wrote about the origins of the Gospels.
8. **Polycarp (AD 69-155):** Apostolic church father. Preserved Ignatius' writings.
9. **Justin Martyr (AD 100-165):** Christian philosopher and apologist. Martyred in Rome.
10. **Blandina (died, AD 177):** Slave-girl. Martyred in Lyons alongside the city's leading pastor.

4 TERMS you should know

1. **Anno Domini:** Latin for "the Lord's Year," usually abbreviated AD. Refers to the number of years since Christ's birth. Dionysius Exiguus, a sixth-century monk, was the first to date history by the life of Christ. His calculations were off by between one and five years. So, Jesus may have been four or five years old in AD 1!
2. **Century:** One hundred years. The first century extended from AD 1 to 100; the second century, from AD 101 to 200; the third, from AD 201 to 300, and so on.
3. **Yahweh:** Hebrew name for God. The name means "I AM" (see Exodus 3:13-14).
4. **Apostolic Fathers:** Influential first-century Christians, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias. A few later theologians—such as Augustine—are known as *church fathers*.

The Gospels, the Apostles, Then ... What?



IN THIS CHAPTER

AD 64 — AD 177

Emperor Nero

Peter and Paul Martyred

Destruction of Temple

Martyrdom of Polycarp

Justin Martyr

Who were the Christians, anyway?

What is a “Christian”? If someone asked you that question, you could probably come up with a response without much thought. Chances are, you would say something like, “It’s someone who has trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord.” But what if you lived in a world in which only a small percentage of the population had even heard about Jesus?

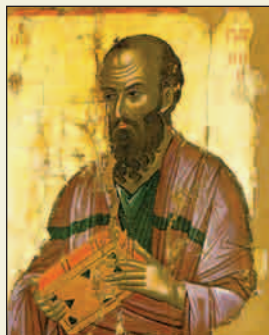
In the first few decades of Christian faith, followers of Jesus struggled to help people around them understand what it really meant to be Christian. From the Roman perspective, Christians were simply one more Jewish sect (Acts 16:20). The Jewish faith was recognized throughout the Roman Empire, so this association protected Christians in many areas. Yet, according to some Jewish leaders, Christians were renegades who had abandoned the ancient and venerable Jewish faith. Christians claimed that their faith fulfilled the Jewish Law, even calling themselves “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). At the same time, as Christianity expanded among non-Jews, Christians’ practices increasingly separated them from the Jewish faith that Jesus and his first apostles had practiced.

By AD 100, the Christian and Jewish faiths were recognized as two separate groups. Jewish synagogues had excluded Christians, and the Roman Empire had engaged in widespread persecution of Christians. How did those who claimed Jesus as their Messiah come to constitute a distinct group? The answer can’t be confined to any one event. Yet two fires—one in Jerusalem, one in Rome—contributed to this separation in a critical way.

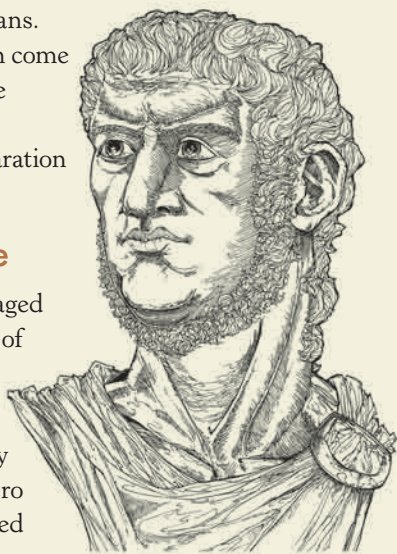
Rome burns, but Nero doesn’t fiddle

In midsummer, AD 64, Rome burned. Flames ravaged the city for six days. When the smoke cleared, ten of Rome’s fourteen districts had been reduced to charred rubbish.

Nero, the Roman emperor, was several miles away when the fire began. When he heard the news, Nero rushed back to Rome. During the fire, he organized fire-fighting efforts. After the fire, thousands of refugees stayed in his gardens. Yet, as the rebuilding



Paul's missionary journeys spread Christianity through Asia Minor and the western Roman Empire. Believers were first called Christians in Antioch, in modern Turkey. (The Chora Monastery, Istanbul)



Nero

the web

To take a virtual tour of ancient Rome:

www.dalton.org/groups/rome/

Check out the dates and historical contexts of New Testament events:

www.beliefnet.com/gallery/TheFinalInquiry.html

of Rome began, many citizens blamed Nero for the tragedy.

According to one rumor, Nero had ordered his servants to start the fire. Nero torched Rome—the rumor claimed—so he could rebuild the city according to his own whims. Later rumors even insisted that Nero had played his harp while Rome burned. In fact, the fire probably began by accident in an oil warehouse—but this probable fact was quickly lost amid raging gossip and rumors.

Nero responded to the rumors by lavishing gifts on the citizens of Rome. Nothing helped. In desperation, Nero blamed the fire on an unpopular minority group—the Christians. Nero became the first emperor to recognize publicly that Christianity was a different religion, and he began immediately to persecute this faith. One Roman historian described the persecution in this way, “Some were dressed in furs and killed by dogs. Others were crucified, or burned alive, to light the night.”

The apostle Peter was martyred in Rome during Nero’s persecution. According to ancient tradition, Peter didn’t believe he was worthy to die like his Savior, so the big fisherman asked to be crucified upside down. Roman authorities also arrested the apostle Paul. Since it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen, Paul probably died by the sword.

In some ways, Nero’s false accusation made sense. Christians *did* claim that a great inferno would accompany the end of the world (Revelation 20:9). Some overly eager Christians may have seen a certain sign of Christ’s return in Rome’s reduction to rubble. Yet Christians were—according to a pagan writer—“hated for their abominations” *before* the fire. What made Christian faith so unpopular?

Christians rejected all other gods

Christians believed in only one God—the God of Israel, revealed in Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Timothy 2:5). This belief seemed arrogant to the Romans. Most Romans covered all their spiritual bases by sacrificing to many gods, known and



Roman imperial coin of Claudius
AD 41 to 54

WORDS from the ones who were there

Anonymous pagan writer

who misunderstood the

Lord’s Supper: “An infant is covered with dough, to deceive the innocent. The infant is placed before the person who is to be stained with their rites. The young pupil slays the infant.

Thirstily, they lick up its blood! Eagerly, they tear apart its limbs. After much feasting, they extinguish [the lights]. Then, the connections of depraved lust involve them in an uncertain fate.”

Quoted by Minucius Felix, Octavius 9

THINK about it...

Early Christians refused to share in cultural customs that devalued human life, such as abandoning unwanted infants. What cultural customs should Christians avoid today?

unknown (Acts 17:23). They even offered incense to dead emperors. (As one emperor died, he joked, “I think I’m becoming a god now!”) Yet Romans didn’t sacrifice simply for their own sakes. They sacrificed for the sake of their empire. Numerous sacrifices, they believed, secured divine assistance for their government. To deny the existence of any divinity was, at best, unpatriotic and, at worst, perilous to the security of their empire.

Christian customs were widely misunderstood

When they described their worship, Christians talked about consuming the “body” and “blood” of Christ at their “love-feasts” (John 6:53-56; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-27; Jude 1:12).

Believers called one another “brothers and sisters”—terms used in Egypt to refer to sexual partners.

Alone, either of these practices might have struck the Romans as odd. Combined with the Christian conviction that Christians followed the only true God, such practices convinced many citizens that

Christianity was a dangerous cult. Romans couldn’t quell their concerns by attending a church service. When early Christians shared the Lord’s Supper, they wouldn’t even let nonbelievers watch. Without firsthand information, Romans began to accuse Christians falsely of cannibalism and incest.



Many scholars believe that a group of Jews hid their sacred scrolls in these caves near the Dead Sea. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the late 1940s, they confirmed the reliability of the Hebrew Bible.



Christians challenged the social order

Paul had declared, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). In other words, every person matters, whatever his or her social status.

Early Christians lived out Paul’s words. The results offended the Romans.

The church challenged the entire structure of Roman society by welcoming the lower classes and by valuing every human life. The laws of Rome prevented slaves from inheriting property; the customs of the empire treated women as lesser beings. If a Roman father didn’t want his child, he left the infant alone in a field, to die. Christians defied such social structures by adopting unwanted infants and by welcoming slaves and women as equal inheritors of God’s grace.

This map illustrates the Roman Empire at its peak, with various provinces and regions color-coded and labeled. Key geographical features include the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Adriatic Sea, Tyrrhenian Sea, and the Ionian Sea. Major cities and locations are marked with dots and labeled, such as Rome, Carthage, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. The map also shows the extent of the empire into North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Major Regions and Provinces:

- Italy:** Includes regions like Dalmatia, Illyricum, and Italia.
- Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean:** Includes Macedonia, Thracia, Bithynia, Pontus, Cappadocia, Galatia, Lycaonia, Asia Minor, Phrygia, Pisidia, Lycia, Pamphylia, Cilicia, Syria, Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Phoenicia.
- North Africa:** Includes Cyrenaica, Libya, and Egypt.
- Other Regions:** Includes Numidia, Tripolitania, Malta (Melita), and Sicily.

Major Cities and Locations:

- Italy:** Milan, Rome, Three Taverns, Appii Forum, Puteoli, Pompeii.
- Greece and Eastern Mediterranean:** Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis, Thessalonica, Berea, Mt. Olympus, Athens, Corinth, Cenchreae, Sparta, Delphi, Nicopolis, Chios, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Hierapolis, Laodicea, Colossae, Miletus, Perga, Attalia, Myra, Patara, Chidus, Cos, Paphos, Sidon, Tyre, Ptolemais, Caesarea, Antipatris, Joppa, Jerusalem, Gaza, Damascus, Antioch, Seleucia.
- North Africa:** Cyrene, Alexandria.
- Other:** Carthage, Malta (Melita), Rhagium, Syracuse.

From *Deluxe Then and Now Bible Map Book* (692X) Rose Publishing, Torrance, California.

Christianity was a new religion

New and improved products seem to fascinate people today. The trend in ancient Roman society was precisely the opposite: It seemed better to them to choose an old, proven product than to fall for a new, improved gimmick. Romans tolerated the Jews' belief in one God partly because the Jewish faith was so ancient. One thousand years before Rome was founded, Abraham had encountered Yahweh [YAH-way] in the desert.



Trajan's market in Rome

To be sure, Christians claimed that their religion reached back, beyond Abraham (John 8:58). Still, from the Romans' viewpoint, the church was very new. What's more, unlike the Jews, Christians had no sacrifices, no temples, no sacred city. As result, Christians seemed unusual, unsafe, and unpleasant to their Roman neighbors.

THINK about it...

A few years earlier, Nero had abused the Christians in Rome. Yet Christians refused to partake in the revolt against Rome in AD 70. What does this tell you about the church's relationship to the state?

Read 1 Peter 2:13-17.

The first fire—the one that ravaged Rome in 64—highlighted habits of life and faith that caused Christianity to be unpopular among the Romans.

There was another fire, this time in Jerusalem, that helped to solidify the distinction between Christian and Jewish faiths.

Jerusalem burns and bleeds

The Romans tolerated the Jewish faith because of its ancient roots, but the Romans rarely showed any real respect for the Jewish people. Around AD 50, for example, thousands of Jews were celebrating their sacred Passover. A Roman fortress towered over the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly, one guard “lifted up his robe and bent over indecently. He turned his backside toward the Jews and”—in the words of the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus—“made a noise as indecent as his posture.” In the riot that followed, as many as 30,000 women and men may have died.

A new Roman ruler, a man named Florus, arrived in Judea in AD 64. For two years,

the web

Read Josephus's account of the Jewish rebellion in Book 7 of *The Jewish Wars*:

www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/works/files/works.html

See a model of the temple before its destruction:

www.bible-history.com/jewishtemple/

Take a video tour of Masada:

<http://social.huji.ac.il/video/mesadahigh.wmv>

Florus flagrantly insulted the Jews. When several Jewish leaders demanded that Florus stop stealing from the temple, Florus sent his soldiers into the market. Their orders? Slaughter and steal. Before the day ended, 3,600 Jews were dead.

Seeds of anger toward Rome had germinated for years. Now, they blossomed into open revolt. In a few weeks, bands of Jewish rebels violently overwhelmed Roman strongholds in Jerusalem and Galilee.

Emperor Nero knew that, to maintain his hold on this corner of the Roman Empire, it was necessary to stop the rebellion. He provided 60,000 soldiers to a Roman general named Vespasian [ves-PAY-see-unn]. Vespasian's mission was to regain the Galilean and Judean provinces at any cost. Vespasian's campaign began in Galilee, destroying Jewish communities as he moved southward. Thousands of Jews fled to Jerusalem in the face of the advancing legions. As Vespasian prepared to attack Jerusalem, he received an unexpected message: Nero had committed suicide. This provided Vespasian with a chance to seize the throne for himself.

In the end, Vespasian did rule the Roman Empire, but he never forgot his previous task. As soon as his position was relatively secure, Vespasian sent an army to besiege Jerusalem. On August 5, AD 70, Jerusalem fell. The rebels

were massacred. The sacred city was plundered. The survivors were sold as slaves. The temple was burned to the ground. Only one wall of the temple mount—a segment known today as the “Wailing Wall”—remained. Within a few years, every rebel stronghold had fallen to the Romans. The Jewish defenders of the final fortress—Masada, near the Dead Sea—chose mass-suicide instead of surrender. The revolt was over.



The siege ramp (circled) was built by the Roman army at Masada, the Jewish rebels' last stronghold.

After the revolt, the religious landscape of the Roman Empire shifted. Many people wanted to make certain that they weren't associated with odd religious sects. During the last half of the first century AD, this shift would lead eventually to rejection and widespread persecution of Christians.

From the web

Read Pliny's original letter to Emperor Trajan:

www.tyrannus.com/pliny_let.html

What should we do with all the Christians?

“I won’t wait to be a god!”

For a few years—from around AD 70 until the early 80s—Roman emperors ignored Christianity. Then, Vespasian’s son, Domitian [do-MEE-shan], became emperor. Previous emperors had waited until death to be declared divine. Domitian didn’t want to wait, though. He demanded the title “Lord and God” throughout his reign. Domitian also decreed that, since the Jewish temple was gone, Jews should send their religious tithes to Rome. Some Jews refused.

Domitian reacted by enacting laws against all “Jewish practices.” His sweeping sentence included Christian worship. For the first time, persecution spread beyond the Italian province.

Persecution continued even after a new emperor, Trajan, took the throne. Pliny, a governor in northern Asia Minor—the region now known as Turkey—wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan. Pliny described how he treated Christians. He gave alleged followers of Jesus three chances to recant. All who cursed Christ, he released. Roman citizens who refused to curse Christ went to Rome to await their trial.

Common persons who refused to curse Christ were executed immediately. Emperor Trajan applauded Pliny’s procedures.

Pliny had interrogated two deacons from a nearby church to find out what Christians believed. He reported that he learned nothing from them but “outlandish superstitions.”

And indeed, that’s precisely what Christianity seemed like to the cultured people of the Roman Empire. Christians were even accused of “atheism,” because they rejected the reality of the Roman gods and goddesses.

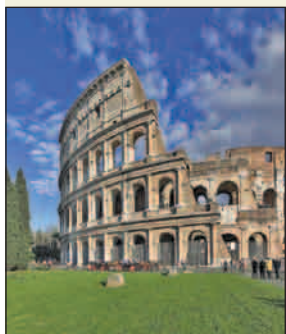
“We’re not outlaws!”

In the mid-100s Christian scholars began to answer the charges that critics hurled at them. These scholars were called “apologists” [a-PAW-lo-jists]. Apologists didn’t try to convert the Romans. They simply wanted to prove that Christians weren’t criminals.

One of the most famous apologists was Justin. Unlike some Christians, Justin embraced Greek philosophy. Why? According to Justin, the pagan philosophers had discovered dim shadows of God’s cosmic Word. In Jesus,

KEY concept

God uses human factors and even human failures to bring glory to himself.



Colosseum, Rome, Italy

on the web

Do you want to learn more about Justin Martyr?

www.earlychristianwritings.com/justin.html

this cosmic order “became flesh” (John 1:14). As a result, even in pagan philosophy, there was a point of contact with Christian faith.

In his attempts to show the connections between Christian faith and pagan philosophy, Justin sometimes seems to have conformed biblical concepts to his own Greek world-view. Yet Justin clearly recognized the distinction between faith in Jesus and faith in the pagan religions. When forced to choose between Jesus and the Roman gods, the apologist chose Jesus without hesitation and without apology. Around AD 165 he was beheaded for his faith. He soon became known as “Justin Martyr.”



The Celsus Library ruins in Ephesus, a few miles south of the city Smyrna where Polycarp served as pastor

It wasn't only philosophers that found themselves facing such fates. Polycarp [PAW-lee-karp] of Smyrna was a prominent pastor who had personally known John the apostolic elder. When several Christians were executed at the arena in Smyrna—a city in modern Turkey, known in modern times as Izmir—the crowd began to chant, “Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!” The authorities tortured one of Polycarp's stewards until they learned Polycarp's hiding place. When confronted, the elderly pastor surrendered peacefully.

At the judgment seat, the Roman governor said, “Have respect for your old age. Say, ‘Away with the atheists!’” Polycarp slowly surveyed the throng that surrounded him. Pointing to the very people who considered him to be an atheist because he rejected the Roman gods, Polycarp said, “Away with the atheists!” Turning back to the governor, Polycarp declared, “Eighty-six years, I have served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king, the one who has saved me?” Polycarp was burned alive.

Why did the churches grow?

“Outlandish superstitions”

That's what Pliny called the core Christian beliefs that he heard from two tortured deacons.

Viewed from the perspective of cultured Romans, that's the sole function Christian faith seemed to serve. Why, then, did people continue to become Christians, even when Christian faith could cost them their lives?

To be sure, the church grew because God's Spirit was working. Still, God uses human factors—and sometimes even human failings—to prepare

the web

Find biographies of hundreds of ancient martyrs:

www.catholic.org/saints

people to receive God's truth. To draw first-century Romans to trust in Jesus, God used their longings for moral guidance, for personal value, and for personal relationship with the divine.

Christianity provided moral guidelines

By the mid-100s, the moral depravity of the ancient Roman Empire repulsed not only Jews and Christians but also many Gentiles who had never heard God's moral law. (The word "Gentile" refers to any person who is not a Jew.) Some Romans turned to the loving-yet-righteous God of Israel. Yet, because of the painful custom of circumcision, Gentile men were often hesitant to commit themselves fully to the Jewish faith. Many of these men were content to attend the synagogues and to support them financially. These Gentiles received a title of respect from the Jewish people—"God-fearers" (see Acts 10:2; 13:26). Christianity appealed to these Gentiles. Gentiles could embrace a relationship with the God of Israel without submitting to the ritual of circumcision that God had ordained to signify his eternal covenant with the Jewish people.

Christianity offered equality and respect

The Christian view of women differed deeply from the view of many Romans. One pagan writer depicted the role of women in this way: "We have courtesans for pleasurable sex, young female slaves for day-by-day physical usage, and wives to produce legitimate children and to serve us faithfully by managing our houses."

Christians not only encouraged women to become followers of Jesus; Christians embraced and respected women as equal heirs of God's salvation (see Galatians 3:28). The church's acceptance of women and slaves provided ammunition for many pagan writers who wanted to ridicule Christian faith. Celsus, an anti-Christian writer, put it this way: "Because Christians admit that ignorant people are worthy of their God, Christians show that they want and can convert only foolish, dishonorable, stupid people, and only slaves, women, and little children."

Why did Christians treat women with respect? For starters, they were following the example of Jesus! During his ministry on planet earth, Jesus talked to women. He taught women. It was to women that he first entrusted the news of his resurrection. In the early church, Philip's four daughters served as prophets (Acts 21:9). The apostle Paul may have referred to a woman named Junias as a person whom the apostles found to be noteworthy (Romans 16:7). Phoebe may have served as a deaconess in the early church. (The word translated "servant" in Romans 16:1 in many Bibles is the word rendered "deacon" in passages such as Philippians 1:1.)

Christianity offered a personal relationship with God

Among many Romans, the ancient gods and goddesses seemed increasingly impotent and inadequate. The Christian faiths, as well as mystery cults imported from Eastern provinces, claimed to provide a pathway to direct fellowship with the divine realm. Yet Christianity offered more than fellowship with the divine. Christians claimed that they worshiped a deity who became flesh and whose life had intersected human history (John 1:14-18). This deity not only embraced human flesh but also experienced human suffering (Isaiah 53:3-7; Hebrews 2:17-18).

The knowledge of Christ's sufferings strengthened thousands of early martyrs. In the city of Lyons in the region known today as France, nearly fifty Christians died in one bloody massacre, during the early August festivities that celebrated the greatness of the Roman emperors.

Years earlier, Polycarp had personally sent Pothinus [poh-THÉE-nuss] to establish a church in Lyons. Pothinus the pastor of Lyons, now 92 years old, was tortured and imprisoned in a cell that was about the size of a small refrigerator. Two days after he was confined to his cell, Pothinus died. The deacon Sanctus had red-hot plates of steel pressed against his groin before being placed on the rack. It was later said that, as death claimed Sanctus, it was seen that "nothing is fearful where the Father's love is found, and nothing is painful so long as the glory of Christ is near."

Others were tormented in the amphitheater to entertain the crowds. From dawn until evening, Blandina [blahn-DEE-nah], a physically challenged slave, was tortured. Still, she refused to offer incense to the emperor. In the arena, Blandina's tormentors hanged her naked body on a cross. Wild beasts were released to devour the girl, but they did not touch her. Blandina was stripped from the cross and scourged. Still refusing to offer incense, Blandina was thrown on a red-hot grill.

Finally, a bull gored her twisted body and tossed her to the ground. There, she died. As fellow-Christians watched her, it was said that "they saw in the form of their sister"—an eyewitness recalled—"him who was crucified for them." They glimpsed a reflection of the One who understood their sorrow.



The Martyrdom of Blandina From the Martyrs Mirror, this is an etching by Jan Luyken (1649-1712)

what you should know about Christian history

AD 90 — AD 250

4 EVENTS you should know

1. **Gnostic Controversy (AD 90-150):** The Gnostics' false teachings first surfaced in the first century. By AD 140, Gnostics outnumbered Christians in some areas.
2. **Second Jewish Rebellion (AD 132-135):** Simon Bar Kokhba, claiming to be the Messiah, revolted against the Romans. Jerusalem was destroyed again.
3. **Montanist Movement (AD 156-220):** Montanists—also known as “New Prophets”—tried to return churches to the New Testament’s emphasis on dynamic acts of the Spirit. Their harsh moral standards and failed prophecies led many Christians to reject the movement.
4. **Books of the New Testament Recognized (before AD 190):** The Muratorian Canon acknowledged every New Testament book with the exception of Hebrews, James, and Peter’s epistles; decades passed before these texts were universally acknowledged.

10 NAMES you should know

1. **Marcion (died AD 160):** Proponent of Gnostic ideas. Rejected the Old Testament and tried to remove sixteen books from the texts that Christians recognized as apostolic.
2. **Montanus (died AD 175?):** Earliest leader of the New Prophets (also known as “Montanists”).
3. **Maximilla (died AD 190?):** Leader of the New Prophets.
4. **Prisca (died AD 190?):** Leader of the New Prophets, predicted Jesus would return to Phrygia.
5. **Victor (died AD 198):** Overseer of Rome. Excommunicated Christians in the eastern part of the Empire who celebrated Easter during Passover. Fourteenth pope, for Roman Catholics.
6. **Irenaeus (AD 130-200):** Church father. Defended eastern Christians during Easter controversy.
7. **Felicity (died AD 203):** North African slave girl and Christian, probably a Montanist. Martyred with Perpetua, a fellow Christian. Felicity bore a child in prison. Their captor scoffed, “You’re in such pain now! What will you do when you’re thrown to the beasts?” She replied, “Now, I suffer alone. Then, there will be another in me. He will suffer for me, for I am about to suffer for him.”
8. **Tertullian (AD 160-225):** North African church father. Attacked “modalism” (the belief that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not distinct in any way). Became a Montanist near the end of his life.
9. **Hippolytus (AD 170-236):** Roman theologian. Recorded the *Apostolike Paradosis* (Apostolic Tradition), which includes an early form of the Apostles’ Creed.
10. **Origen (AD 185-254):** Overseer of Alexandria. Treated difficult scriptures as allegories.

4 TERMS you should know

1. **Heresy:** Any teaching that directly contradicts an essential New Testament teaching.
2. **Gnosticism:** From the Greek, *gnosis* (“knowledge”), the belief that the physical world is evil and that only secret, spiritual knowledge can free persons from the physical world.
3. **Docetism:** From the Greek, *dokein* (“to seem”), the belief that Jesus only seemed to possess a physical body. Most Gnostics were also Docetists.
4. **Rule of Faith:** A series of statements that tested a new believer’s understanding of essential Christian doctrines, known today as “the Apostles’ Creed.”