

# Church History: Those Who Shaped the Christian Faith

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# The Early Church: Forbidden, Permitted, and Defined

## Scripture

**Acts 1:8** This prediction of the risen Christ summarizes the story of the early church: faithful witness and vast expansion.

**1 Peter 2:17** Peter's advice looked different at first when emperors commanded idolatry, and later when the church came to be the emperor's favored religion.

**John 16:13** In its early centuries, the church struggled to understand great issues and laid a foundation for our theology today.

## Prayer

Thank you, O God, that in early centuries when Christians could suffer and die for being your followers, many remained faithful even unto death. They bore witness to Christ—and the church grew and flourished. Thank you, O God, that when the church was made legal, it continued to flourish, expanding in numbers, in worship, in art, in organization. Thank you especially for those who loved you with great minds and great learning. They asked good questions and searched for wise answers, shaping what we still believe today. Help us to find models for faith in these, your witnesses. Amen.

## Introduction

In its first five centuries, the Christian church traveled a great distance literally and metaphorically. Beginning in and around Jerusalem, the church reached all the way around the Mediterranean and beyond—to what is now England to the West, and perhaps as far as India to the East. Beginning as a ragtag band led by fisherfolk, it came to be a well-organized, highly unified organization that could boast of the greatest minds in the Greek, Latin, and Syriac speaking worlds. Beginning as a sect of Judaism, it came to embrace and transform Hellenistic philosophy and culture. Beginning with a simple confession of the lordship of the risen Christ, it came to have a rich and sophisticated theology, capable of expressing the mysteries of the God who is ever One, but who is also eternally Three Persons;

and the saving work of Jesus who is one person with two distinct natures, fully God and fully human.

This week we will look at three great themes that illustrate the complicated story of these centuries. The first is the era of the martyrs, when the church had at best no legal standing, and at worst was subject to severe official repression. The second is the era begun by the emperor Constantine, who made Christianity legal—one of the greatest turning points in church history, with many consequences both good and bad. The third is the growing clarity and definition that came with the work of some amazing theologians, whether in the official councils of the East, or the solitary Western voice of a North African bishop.

In all three arenas the early church laid important foundations for us. Of course each of these periods came to an end, and life in the church was very different then than it is now. But in each case the themes, and the people who embodied them, shape the understanding we bring to our faith, including our ideal images of faithful witness, our assumptions about how the church relates to the society around it, and our basic views on a wide range of issues.

### **Perpetua (d. 203), Christianity Forbidden**

When the risen Christ was talking with his disciples, he told them they would be his witnesses. He used the Greek term behind our word *martyrs*, used for those who went to their death bearing witness to their Lord. Many think early Christians were hiding out in the catacombs, and every time they popped their heads up, the soldiers were there to snatch them and throw them to the lions. That was not really the case, though Christianity had no legal standing for its first three centuries. Christians did get thrown to wild beasts in the arena, but not every day. Persecution happened occasionally, and was usually a local matter. Sometimes government officials just didn't know what to do: Christians seemed to undermine the safety of the Roman Empire by refusing to make traditional religious offerings. In A.D. 112 one regional governor wrote to the emperor, Trajan, for advice. The reply: if someone makes a public accusation, you have to prosecute, but don't go looking for them. It was the original "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

The record of a young woman named Vibia Perpetua and her companions martyred under Septimius Severus (reigned 193–211) is an especially vivid, reliable account, with portions written by the martyrs themselves. They were recent converts preparing for

baptism, and they were sentenced to die. Perpetua's father, not a Christian, tearfully begged her to relent out of pity for him, or at least for her infant son. She just had to make a sacrifice, he said, implying it was no big deal. Her response, bearing witness to the truth of Christ, was to say she could not call herself anything other than she was. She *was* a Christian.

The story gives hints of the brutality of Rome and the courage of the martyrs. Felicitas, Perpetua's servant, gives birth prematurely in prison.

Refusing to wear garments of pagan priesthood, they are sent into the arena naked, milk dripping from Felicitas's breasts. Even as they are gored to death by a wild cow, they call to their companions to stand firm in the faith. Their male companions are cheekier, gesturing to indicate that as the officials have judged the Christians, God will judge the officials.

We also get a sense of the important roles martyrs played in the growth of the church. The guard seems to be converted by their witness, and indeed the theologian Tertullian (died c. 225) said the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. Their testimony was heard and the church grew. Its members were also given courage to be faithful in a world that was hostile to them. Perpetua's story points to this. In a vision she sees herself stomping on the head of a serpent; in a vision of one of her companions, Perpetua is seen in heaven with rank and authority to reconcile a teacher and a bishop who were quarreling. Martyrdom was a holy calling.

### **Constantine (died c. 337), The Church Legalized**

Everything changed when Constantine came to power. He rose to the role of co-emperor on his father's death, partly by the acclamation of his soldiers in England. He then set about consolidating the empire under his sole rule. First stop: Rome. There another co-emperor, Maxentius, was in power.

In 312, as Constantine was approaching Rome, he had a dream or a vision (sources differ) in which he saw a cross or the "Chi-Rho" symbol (the first two letters of the Greek word *Christ*), and heard the message, "In this sign you will conquer!" He had the symbol put on the shields of his soldiers. Whether you believe in the vision or not, it was a great piece of strategy: Christians in Constantine's army might feel more righteous

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about the conquest and fight harder, and Christians on Maxentius's side might hesitate. Constantine swept to victory.

In 313, Constantine and co-emperor Licinius signed a letter known as the Edict of Milan, making Christianity legal and ending

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governmental persecution. Christianity was not yet the required religion, but the church was increasingly favored by the government, and it was influenced by government as well. This was a revolutionary change, setting assumptions about the place of Christianity in society that are only now being left behind.

The consequences were many. The church could freely own property, including beautiful places of worship. Constantine's mother, Helena, was a devout Christian, and she traveled to the Holy Land to identify the sites of biblical events (as well as, she believed, discovering the cross on which Christ was crucified). She had churches and shrines erected that are travel destinations for Christian pilgrims to this day. The persecuted flock's view of Jesus as gentle shepherd gave way to images of Christ the king enthroned in power. Theological writing and preaching flourished as highly educated and gifted people came to leadership.

As if in protest against this easier Christian life in the midst of society, many went to live a monastic life in the desert. Only "as if," though, because the most famous Desert Father, Antony of Egypt, began his ascetic life in 285, and others were earlier still. They were not running from anything, but straight into spiritual battle, to be spiritual athletes and living martyrs.

Constantine himself was not baptized until the end of his life. It was not uncommon to postpone baptism, since that would require rigorous discipleship. An emperor would, by the nature of his work, break God's commandments from time to time, and restoration to fellowship after major sin was not simple.

But this did not hold Constantine back from involvement in the life of the church. When the church was divided by Arianism (the idea that the Son, incarnate in Jesus, was created rather than being fully God), it was Constantine who called the Council of Nicaea in 325. And it was Constantine who provided the crucial word as they wrote the Nicene Creed, saying that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father.

## **Augustine (d. 430), The Faith Defined**

Nicaea was the first of seven ecumenical councils where bishops from around the Christian world settled disputes. To these councils we owe our understanding of the Trinity: God is One God, existing eternally in Three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also owe them our understanding of Jesus Christ as one Person in two natures—fully human and fully God. These teachings still define orthodox Christian theology in all branches of the church, East and West.

Quite apart from the councils, in the West one person came to dominate theology: a Roman from North Africa named Augustine. His mother, Monica, was a Christian, but Augustine pursued other goals. He had ambitions as a professor and passion for sex. As a scholar of great literature, he also had a hard time with the Bible, especially the Old Testament. One by one, God conquered Augustine in each of these areas. Augustine saw it just that way. Following Christ was not something he could do by his own will. Sin had caused too much damage. Only when God took action and helped him could he even start. At 32 he was baptized, and soon he was made bishop of Hippo.

In the course of a long career he battled with three major groups. His arguments shaped the thinking of the church for generations to come.

First was Manicheism. This religion, which once claimed Augustine for a follower, rejected the Old Testament. Augustine argued one could take its troubling stories allegorically, looking for lessons about the spiritual life. Manichees were also dualists believing in a world where God and evil are in a pitched battle. Augustine argued that evil is not a “thing” fighting against God. *Everything* that exists was made by the good God, so no thing is evil. What we call evil is the *absence* of good—God’s good things misused.

Second was Pelagianism. Pelagius was a monk who was scandalized by Augustine’s claim he could not follow God’s ways. If a just God commanded it, we can and must obey. Augustine pointed out that no one lives without sin, and only God’s gracious action can save us. Our assurance, for Augustine, is in Paul’s teaching that we belong to God because we are predestined (elected) for salvation.

The third was Donatism. The Donatists were a North African movement that saw the main church as illegitimate because of a bishop who had not stood firm enough during the persecutions. This man continued in ministry, administering sacraments and

consecrating bishops. Augustine, as well as pointing out that the Donatists did their share of sinning, argued that the nature of the church is found in Christ's parable of the wheat and the weeds: it is always a mixture of saints and sinners, holy only because it belongs to Christ.

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## **Spiritual Practice**

In a journal or notebook, pray for the good company of the Holy Spirit, and write:

- What from the early church inspires you—or leaves you cold?
- What in the early church sounds similar to Christian life today—or different?

Let this lead to prayer for yourself and your church.

## **Questions for Reflection**

Imagine that today in our society, it is still the era of the martyrs. You are talking with friends about bearing faithful witness to Christ. What must a Christian do today to be a witness? What would you never, ever do, even if the government said you had to do so by law?

Imagine that today, in our society, it is still the era of the councils. What issues would you call a council to settle?

This lesson portrayed a number of issues as important in the early church. Which ones do you think are still important, and why? Which do you think are now unimportant, and why?