CHRISTIAN HISTORY

301-400 C.E.

April 1, 2026

Key Dates:
303-313 — Diocletian Persecution
313 — Constantine declares religious freedom for all
325 — Council of Nicaea
381 — Council of Constantinople

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: The church goes from persecuted to imperially supported, and even to persecuting heretics and unbelievers.

Key Questions: How far should the church go in employing the government's coercive power for God's good purposes? What should we do with all these new converts?

Key Places: Rome (still the leading church) • Constantinople (new capital of the empire) • Antioch & Alexandria (very influential churches) • Nicaea (site of an important council in 325)

Key Person: Constantine (ruled 306-337; first Christian emperor) • **Emperor Theodosius** (ruled 379-395)

Church Leadership: Bishops in every city still increasing in authority, and now granted some governmental authority

1) CHURCH EXPANSION BY THE EARLY 300s

- much of Asia Minor [Turkey today] had become Christian
- Armenia adopted Christianity as its official religion in 300.
- in Georgia, the king and queen became Christians, and many of their people followed them
- By 300, the Roman Empire included 50-75 million people. Around 10 percent (5 to 7.5 million) were Christians.

2) PERSECUTION UNDER EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN (ruled 284-305; persecution 303-313)

- At first, Diocletian seemed to favor Christianity. His wife and daughter were either Christians or prospective Christians.
- He began to see Christians as disrupters and a threat to society. In 303, he ordered "that churches be leveled to the ground, scriptures burned, persons holding places of honor degraded, and household servants (perhaps commoners) who refused to submit deprived of freedom" (Eusebius, *Church History* 8.2.4). He prohibited Christian meetings and imprisoned Christians who held to their faith in Christ. He later ordered all Christians to sacrifice to the gods, under threat of death. His edict was enforced with varying levels of intensity in various places. In some places, prisons became so crowded with Christians that there was not enough room for criminals. Christians were punished by loss of property, exile, imprisonment, labor in the mines, or execution.
- CANON OF SCRIPTURE: The threat of death for those who did not turn the Christian scriptures over to the authorities for burning forced Christians to decide which writings were worth dying for. These writings turned out to be our Old and New Testament books, which the church believed held highest authority from God primarily through the prophets and apostles.

• Diocletian became sick in 304 and stepped down from office in 305. His co-emperor, Galerius, hated Christians and continued the persecution. In 310 he developed cancer. He rescinded persecution orders (some persecution persisted) and asked all Christians to pray for his healing.

3) EMPEROR CONSTANTINE (ruled 306-337; ruled the West by himself beginning in 312, and took control of the East in 324)

• 312 — For reasons that remain uncertain, Constantine began to favor Christianity in about 312.
- *Theory #1: Later in life, he claimed he had seen a cross of light in the sky shortly before a major battle, and under it was written, "By this conquer." When he did conquer, he began to follow Jesus.*
- *Theory #2: It may be that he turned to Christianity hoping this rising religion could unite the fractured Roman Empire. Also, his mother Helena was a Christian.*

• June 15, 313 — THE EDICT OF MILAN — Constantine (ruler of the West) and Licinius (ruler of the East) declared freedom of worship for all religions. They also ordered restoration of places of worship and other church property that had been confiscated and sold.

• 318 — Constantine allowed bishops to act as judges in civil suits.

• 321 — Constantine built the Basilica Constantiniana and endowed churches in Italy, Sicily, Africa, Gaul (France), and Greece.

• 324 — DISAGREEMENT — The more Constantine (in the West) supported Christians, the more hostile Licinius (in the East) became toward them. Licinius eventually cracked down on Christians in his territory, forbidding councils, prohibiting bishops from visiting one another's cities to appoint new bishops, purging his court and the civil service of Christians, arresting many bishops, executing some Christians, and demolishing some church buildings. This new persecution gave Constantine an excuse to go to war against him for the sake of the Christian God. Constantine defeated Licinius and reunited the entire Roman Empire.

• CHANGES UNDER CONSTANTINE:
- blamed pagans for wars, famines, and other calamities
- required return of Christian exiles and of confiscated Christian property
- granted property of martyrs to their next of kin or to the churches
- outlawed idols, divination, and offering private sacrifices
- provided for government funding for the building of new church buildings
- he and his mother Helena sponsored construction of church buildings in Jerusalem to commemorate Jesus' burial and resurrection, in Bethlehem to commemorate his birth, and on the Mount of Olives to commemorate his ascension from there.

• 325 — THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA *(Nicaea today is Iznik in Turkey)*
- Called by Constantine to deal with divisions caused by Arianism *(see "Arianism" below).* Constantine paid most of the expenses himself.
- Other heresies were also condemned.
- A creed was written up, but it was later lost. (The "Nicene Creed" we have today comes from Constantinople in 381.)
- Easter was officially set to be celebrated on the Sunday after Passover.

• 326 — CONSTANTINOPLE — Constantine was disappointed that he could not convert ancient Rome to Christ (the Senate and the people refused), so he decided to move his capital to Byzantium and make it a fully Christian city, a "new Rome." Renamed Constantinople (today Istanbul), it was dedicated in 330.

• MORE CHANGES UNDER CONSTANTINE:
- mid/late 320s, outlawed Christian heresies and schisms (Arians, etc.)
- 330-337, destroyed pagan temples and gave their treasures to churches or to his capital

• 337 — BAPTISM — Constantine delayed his baptism until near his death. He became ill soon after Easter 337 and was baptized. He died at Pentecost and was buried in Constantinople. Why did he wait till near death to be baptized? Maybe to avoid offending pagans in the empire; maybe because he felt unworthy; maybe to avoid having to pay penance for any sins he might commit after his baptism. Despite his Christian faith, the Roman Senate declared him a god after his death.

Christians can scarcely be faulted for the enthusiasm with which they celebrated the conversion of Constantine and the beneficent era of peace he inaugurated. From the perspective of later history, they might have viewed more circumspectly some of the aid he gave the churches, but for most it must have appeared like the arrival of the Millennium… Christians could truly sing the "new song" of the psalmist (Ps. 98:1-3) and exult in the things martyrs longed to but did not see. Constantine had vanquished a "whole race of God-haters" and signaled a bright and glorious new day for Christianity. He had freed all humankind from the tyranny of oppressors and led all in confessing faith in the one true God. Not only so, but he was also raising up magnificent new edifices to restore those razed by the tyrants, sending bishops letters and gifts and honors, and, in other ways, showering the churches with favors. Eusebius, Christianity's first church historian, could not find phrases adequate to depict the first Christian emperor–"almost another Christ," "the only true philosopher," "vessel of the divine Logos." – E. Glenn Hinson, The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages, 197

Constantine moved from tolerance of all cults to favoritism of Christianity to open intolerance and efforts to make Christianity the religion of the empire. Not only so, but he sought also to effect unity among Christians, since, in his view, the unity and well-being of the empire depended on the concord in common faith and worship of all of its citizens… Christians had themselves experienced fearsome persecution at times, but even that did not equal the pain they inflicted on non-Christians and even on other Christians as they gave religious sanction to the state's coercive powers. By the time of Theodosius I, intolerance had become a public virtue." – Hinson, 206-207

The conversion of Constantine, however interpreted, opened a new chapter in Christian history. Instead of representing a despised and persecuted minority, Christianity now became the fad, and Christian leaders found themselves with the enviable task of trying to christianize the masses who knocked on church doors trying to get in, erect new and grand buildings to replace those destroyed under Diocletian and his cohorts, and expand existing structures to reach into every nook and cranny of the empire with the gospel of Jesus Christ. – Hinson, 218

4) THE NEXT EMPERORS

CONSTANTINE'S SONS (337-361) — Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans
- crushed the Donatist movement in North Africa by military force (but could not destroy it)
- appointed and removed bishops when they saw fit
- ordered all temples closed and all sacrifices ended under penalty of death (no pagans were actually killed, because local authorities did not enforce these orders strongly)
- exempted clergy from some taxes and certain other obligations

JULIAN (361-363)
- opposed Christianity and supported traditional Greco-Roman religions
- reopened temples, restarted sacrifices to the gods, worshiped the sun god especially
- encouraged heresies and divisions among the churches where he could
- He inadvertently paid Christianity a high compliment by requiring all pagan priests to be people of high moral character, like Christian clergy, and by ordering that charities be established to care for strangers, like the Christians did.
- killed in battle in Persia on June 25, 363

JOVIAN (363-364) & VALENTINIAN (364-379)
- both generally avoided interference in church/religious matters

THEODOSIUS I (379-395), last emperor to rule both the East and West halves of the Roman Empire
- 380, commanded all his people to follow the form of Christianity taught in Rome and Alexandria

(focusing especially on holding to the accepted teaching about the Trinity); those who refused were to be dealt with first by God, then (if necessary) by imperial action as guided by heaven

- opposed Arians and anyone who did not accept the Nicene Creed
- 381, COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE
    - convened by emperor Theodosius I, who supported the Nicene perspective
    - the original Nicene creed had been lost, so they drafted a new one
    - many groups of heretics were condemned
    - the council emphasized the full deity of the Holy Spirit, which had come into question since Nicaea
    - Emperor Theodosius ordered that all churches be surrendered to leaders who agreed with the decisions of the Council of Constantinople; this did not end the divisions and controversies, though
- 381, ordered the death penalty for certain heretics
- 391, ordered all pagan sacrifices ended

• In 390, Theodosius ordered a massacre in Thessalonica to punish the people for a riot. Then, regretting that order, he quickly sent a second messenger to cancel it—but the massacre was carried out before the second messenger arrived. Ambrose, powerful Bishop of Milan, wrote to the emperor, demanding that he do penance for this sin, just as David had done after having Uriah the Hittite killed. Theodosius submitted and for a whole year wore sackcloth and ashes.

- Theodosius died January 17, 395.

THE PURSUIT OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

mid-100s	the Christian martyr Justin argues for religious freedom
early 200s	Tertullian says religious liberty "is a fundamental human right… It is not in the nature of religion to coerce religion, which must be adopted freely and not by force." (*To Scapula* 2)
late 300s	Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, calls Jews "mindless" and "worse than lepers"
late 300s	Christians of Callinicum destroy a Jewish synagogue in a rage against unbelievers; Emperor Theodosius requires the Christians to make reparations, but Ambrose rebukes the emperor for this
370	Optatus, Bishop of Milan, advocated for the death penalty for Donatists
late 300s	Ambrose urged imperial action against heretics, schismatics, and pagans
late 300s	John Chrysostom urges monks to destroy idol temples, but to bring people to faith through persuasion
late 300s	some clergy urged Christians not to employ violence, but to leave the elimination of heresy and paganism to the state
ca. 399	in Sufes, pagans massacre 60 Christians for toppling a statue of Hercules

5) DIVISIONS & DISAGREEMENTS

DONATISM (began about 312) — a disagreement over who was the rightful bishop of Carthage in Africa; it became a division between the Donatists and the church at large; Constantine supported the church at large; conflicts between Donatists and the larger church continued into the early 400s.

ARIANISM (began about 318) — Arius, an old deacon in Alexandria, disagreed with Alexander Bishop of Alexandria over how to explain the unity of God. Arius insisted that the Son is subordinate to the Father not only in role but also in nature. He believed the Father exists from all eternity, but the Logos (the Word; that is, God's Son) is created, and there was a time when the Logos did not exist. He believed the Logos united with the flesh of Christ, so that the Logos itself did not have a human soul—which explained why Christ did not sin when all other humans do. This belief threatened the biblical teaching that Jesus is fully God and truly one with the Father. It was opposed strongly by many church leaders.

• Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea to deal with Arianism and so preserve church unity.

• Arius was excommunicated by the church and exiled by Constantine. Nevertheless, his views gained broad acceptance until 357; after that time, their influence gradually diminished. Church leaders on either side of this debate denounced, deposed, and disfellowshipped one other.

6) THE CHURCH RAPIDLY TRANSFORMING

• BUILDINGS — With government blessing and funding, churches began to rebuild church buildings that had been destroyed—and construct new buildings, too, especially to provide space for so many new converts to Christianity. Most church buildings were built not like pagan temples, but in the basilica style used in Roman civic structures.

- See the Saint Stefano Rotondo in Rome, which dates from the 300s.

• CONVERSIONS! — Now that imperial pressure motivated people to become Christians, people flocked to the churches. This growth, while welcome, produced difficulties:

- new church buildings were needed
- many new converts did not know how (or desire?) to live by Christian standards
- many wealthy, educated converts delayed baptism, perhaps to enjoy the pleasures of secular life as long as they could
- new church leaders had to be appointed quickly — many were not ready and soon fell into sin (especially sexual sin or greed) and brought the church into disrepute
- at the same time, Christian discipline and morality, along with charity and a push for justice, genuinely attracted many people to the Christian faith

• LITURGY AND LEADERSHIP

- church leadership tended to be structured to reflect the structure of political leadership
- with imperial support behind the churches, liturgy came to reflect some of the pomp and formality of the imperial court

• JEWS — There were still Jews around, but few came to Christ willingly. By the end of the 300s, Christian preachers like John Chrysostom and Augustine were preaching and writing violently against the Jews.

7) CHURCH EXPANSION BY THE LATE 300s

• John Chrysostom (Bishop of Antioch, late 300s) estimated that half of Antioch's 200,000 citizens (not counting children and slaves) were believers.

• Christianity was probably the majority religion in the Roman Empire by the end of the 300s. Paganism persisted in most places, especially among the aristocracy in Rome.

• OUTSIDE THE ROMAN EMPIRE

- many Goths (from northern Europe) became Christians in the 300s
- in Persia, Christians were left unbothered as long as Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire; but once Constantine converted and urged Sapor, the ruler of Persia, to support Christianity, Sapor took this invitation as a threat to his nation and began persecuting Christians
- Christianity may have come to India through Christians fleeing persecution in Persia
- Christianity spread across the Alps into Gaul (France) and central Europe
- Christianity spread into Arabia
- 2 Roman boys taken captive and enslaved seem to have spread Christianity in Ethiopia

8) MORE DETAILS

CANON — Around 324, Eusebius listed 20 of our New Testament books as Scripture accepted by all the churches. He noted uncertainty about James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation. In 397, the Council at Carthage agreed that all churches accepted all 27 of our New Testament books.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP — By 313, pretty much everyone accepted the authority of the bishops via apostolic succession.

CHURCH CALENDAR

• SUNDAY — Constantine declared Sunday an official day of rest beginning in 321. (It was called "Sunday" in honor of the sun god worshiped in Mithraism, the largest religion competing with Christianity in the Roman Empire at this time—until Emperor Theodosius I banned it.)

• EASTER — At the Council of Nicaea, bishops from across the Roman Empire agreed to celebrate Easter on the Sunday after Passover (as we do today).

• CHRISTMAS — Christians' celebration of Jesus' birth began in the 300s. December 25 (a day of celebration in Mithraism) began to be observed as Jesus' birthday around 330-335, probably in Rome.

MONKS — Both male and female monasteries popped up everywhere, especially in the East. Devout believers sought ways to express their deep devotion to God with as much passion as they saw in the martyrs of earlier times. They also looked for ways to escape the corruption they saw rising in the church as masses flooded into the churches and even the leadership faltered at times.

- Some monks lived as hermits, but many lived in communities ranging in size from a few people to thousands.
- By the end of the 300s, rules were being established to urge monks to use their time productively, to pray but also work, to study Scripture extensively, to stay connected with and serve the local church, and to live simply and eat simply. Some monks still went to extremes in asceticism, but most did not.
- The most famous monks became household names across the empire.