CHRISTIAN HISTORY

401-500 C.E.

April 8, 2026

Key Dates:
406-430 — Augustine's Influence
410 — Brief Fall of Rome
476 — End of the Western Empire

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: Instability in the West • Violence becomes more common as a solution to church disputes • Papacy develops

Key Questions: In the West, how will the church respond to—and will it survive—the repeated invasions of people migrating from north and central Europe?

Key Places: Rome (its fall, its church's prestige as the head church) • **Constantinople** (disputes over church doctrine; advancement of imperial power in the church)

Key People: Augustine • Pelagius • John Chrysostom • the popes (bishops of Rome, growing in power)

Church Leadership: Churches in a few cities are esteemed as the leading churches, and their bishops as the leading bishops. The bishop of Rome begins to claim—and receive—authority as pope (father) of the church everywhere (though his authority is strongest in the West).

1) SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

- During the 400s, and into the 500s, missionary work—and more or less professional missionaries, became more important.
- The church was everywhere by 400, but most strongly in the cities, and even there many resisted it and held to other religions. The aristocracy still resisted imperial pressure to conform to Christianity. Paganism held on even longer in rural areas. In fact, our word "pagan" comes from the Latin word *paganus*, which means "farmer".
- IN PERSIA — Christianity was officially tolerated and continued to grow, but there was some persecution.
- IN ARMENIA — Armenia, the first self-declared Christian nation, taken over by Persia in the 400s. The Persians, who practiced Zoroastrianism, persecuted Christians there until near the end of the 400s.
- IN INDIA — There is strong evidence for the presence of Christianity in India by the end of the 400s.
- IN THE WEST — For a couple of hundred years now, large populations from central and northern Europe had been gradually migrating south and into the Roman Empire. For a long time, they were absorbed into the empire without difficulty. Many of them were converted to Christianity (particularly the Arian version of Christianity; see below).
- IN THE BRITISH ISLES — Christianity was rather strong in Britain by 429. But Angles and Saxons from the continent invaded later in the 400s and pretty much wiped out Christianity in the eastern part of Britain. In the west, especially in Ireland, Christianity remained strong and looked to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons.
  - PATRICK, "THE APOSTLE OF IRELAND" — Patrick (ca. 389-461) was kidnapped by pirates at age 16 and taken from Britain to Ireland. There he tended pigs for six years. He escaped, fled to Gaul (France), and lived at a monastery for a time. After a while he returned to his family, trained for ministry, and felt a calling to return to Ireland as a missionary. He worked among the Celts of Ireland 432-461. Because of his work, Ireland became a strong center of Celtic Christianity.

• *For a sample of Christian art and architecture from the 400s, see the well-preserved Orthodox Baptistery at Ravenna, Italy. It was completed between 400 and 450 and renovated around 475.*
• Advantages of the spread and official adoption of Christianity:
  - greater dignity given to women
  - elimination of gladiatorial shows
  - milder treatment of slaves
  - Roman legislation became more just
  - missionary work was speeded up
- Disadvantages
  - Government provided position, protection, and aid, and in return demanded the right to interfere in spiritual and theological matters (as Constantine asserted his leadership at the Councils of Arles (314) and Nicaea (325)).
  - The church, where it gained sufficient power, persecuted pagans as arrogantly as pagans had previously persecuted Christians.

2) THE INVASIONS

Migrations of large populations from central and northern Europe—especially the Huns (originally from central Asia, through Eastern Europe) and Visigoths (from northern Europe)—moved southward into the weakening (Western) Roman Empire. As the empire weakened and their own numbers strengthened, these groups began to take military control of the West. Over time they invaded Italy, Gaul (France), Spain, and North Africa.

IN THE WEST…

• The Germanic tribes (Visigoths etc.) who invaded the Western Roman Empire largely converted to Christianity during the decades/centuries of their migration. They posed a challenge not so much to Christianity overall, but to the catholic (in the sense of "universal") version of the faith. They had largely converted to an Arian form of Christianity, which viewed the Son as a second-level deity below the Father, and created by the Father, not eternal or co-equal with the Father.
• Roman culture declined and society began to crumble under the impact of repeated invasions, wars, shifts in leadership, demolition of cultural institutions (schools, organizations, government offices, etc.), and constant uncertainty. During this time, the church became the most enduring cultural institution. The bishop of Rome in particular grew in political as well as spiritual power.
• In 410, a Visigoth warlord, Alaric I, became fed up with broken promises from, and other problems with, the Western emperor. Alaric invaded Rome, which had not been taken by a foreign force in 800 years. He took it plundered it for three days, stunning the civilized world. Then he and his forces moved into Gaul and Spain. Those in Rome who had resisted Christianity blamed Christians for the fall of Rome, since Christians had failed to honor the gods who for so long had (supposedly) protected the city. *Augustine wrote his great work, The City of God, in response to this claim, aiming to demonstrate that Rome had fallen because of her own wickedness, not because of Christian disservice to the gods.*
• For many years, the emperors (based now in Ravenna, the new Western capital) employed barbarian (non-Roman) commanders and soldiers. But in 476, the commander Odovacer took full control of the Western empire, ending the line of emperors in the West. The peoples of the West were too fragmented to hold control of such a vast territory, though, and the Western empire broke down into multiple territories. The church, though, remained largely united, even across political territorial lines.
• The churches and especially bishops and monks helped smooth the transition to new leadership under the barbarians in many places. Sometimes they negotiated, sometimes they sheltered refugees in church buildings, and sometimes they led troops in battle to defend against invaders.

- In Gaul, Christianity was greatly disrupted by repeated invasions by Attila and the Huns and then by Visigoths and others. Strong leadership helped the church survive, though there was much disputing between Arians and Catholics.
- The Vandals invaded North Africa in the first half of the 400s. Three branches of Christianity were involved in the conflict: the Donatists (a breakaway group from the larger church) joined the Arian Vandals against Catholics. The Vandals won, and Catholics were the persecuted group until about 533, when a Byzantine general recaptured North Africa.

3) THE USE OF COERCIVE FORCE (VIOLENCE)

- IN THE WEST — Augustine (early 400s), considered the greatest theologian of the Latin-speaking church, at first opposed the use of force—until he saw some Donatists employing violence and decided the state needed to use force to stop them. He urged a local official to use force like parents must with children because they love them. By 417, seeing that force worked, Augustine applauded its use, since many had (through use of force) been converted to Christianity and now gave thanks for their status as Christians. They were, he said, like patients cured by their doctors' painful measures. He said the pagans persecuted Christians unjustly, but Christians persecute pagans justly, for their good. *This rationale would later be used to justify the inquisitions and the crusades of the Middle Ages.*
- IN THE EAST — John Chrysostom ("John Golden-Tongue"), widely considered to have been the greatest preacher in the East in his time, originally from Antioch, was Bishop of Constantinople 398-404. He urged his churches to stimulate unbelievers to faith by living lives of commendable godliness, and not to try to force conversions. At the same time, in some of his sermons in Antioch, he spoke against the Jews so strongly that later generations used his words as a foundation for persecution of the Jews.

> A tragic sidelight of Christianity's success was growth of intolerance to pagans, Jews, and other Christians, which would result in violence as a style of mission that reached its consummation in the crusades of the Middle Ages. — E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church*, 285-286

4) THE MONASTIC MOVEMENT

> During the fifth and sixth centuries, the contemplative life became the rage in both East and West. Husbands and wives, sometimes entire families, and the best and brightest youth took up the ascetic way as the ideal philosophical/religious life. — Hinson 287

- In some places (like Constantinople and Antioch), so many monasteries were developed that they caused problems for the emperors, who had to work to disperse them.
- In the West, monasticism offered stability and the means to endure the shockwaves of one invasion after another, along with repeated cultural disruption.
- Monks led evangelistic efforts in some places and became so influential that royalty began using monks and monasteries to bring order to their realms.
- On extreme forms of hermitism (especially in Syria): "The Boskoi grazed like cattle. Dendrites lived in trees. Catenati loaded themselves down with chains to prove the triumph of mind over body. The Stylites erected pillars and raised them higher and higher toward heaven." — Hinson 288
  - Most monks, though, both male and female, followed rules first set down by Basil of Caesarea between 358 and 364, regulating asceticism, setting hours for liturgical prayer and labor, and imposing rules of poverty and chastity. They also advocated for education for children and care for the poor.
  - Benedict (ca. 480-547), in Italy, set up what became a greatly influential rule for monastic life. Under his rule, monks focused their days around 4 hours of liturgical prayer, 4 hours of meditative reading, and 6+ hours in manual labor.

"Why did people of power and wealth found monasteries? Some did so out of the hope of winning salvation through relief of poverty, the good work of good works. Others wanted to ensure perpetual prayer on their behalf and for their families. Others valued the fact that the monasteries guarded relics of martyrs and holy persons, and those that could claim important relics prospered… Some others recognized in the founding of monasteries a way to save family properties, otherwise easily seized or lost, and continued to exert some influence over their use. Individuals entered monasteries, of course, to find salvation, to have more security than the world offered, and to give themselves to the life of prayer." — Hinson 293

5) EAST VS. WEST — AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE

- The Eastern and Western churches maintained their connection until 1054, despite a couple of brief breaches of their relationship in the 400s-500s and 800s. There came to be many differences between them, though:

IN THE WEST…	IN THE EAST…
• invasions, collapse of societal institutions	• greater stability
• many new nation-states developing from the old Western empire	• empire still intact
• primary language was Latin	• primary language was Greek
• the church used Latin only, and did not translate into the language of the local people	• the church used Greek primarily, but also used the language of the local people
• more Roman heritage	• more Hellenistic (Greek) heritage
• more practical concerns: how to survive day-to-day, the problem of sin and evil	• more abstract concerns: theological questions and debate
• church authorities (who had the time and training) controlled theological perspectives	• everyone had a say in theological debates
• *key concern:* how to help people overcome temptation, sin, and guilt	• *key concern:* Jesus' relationship to the Father (one nature shared? separate essences? etc.)
• less imperial control (because the empire was weaker and eventually fell)	• greater imperial control
• the church lost some influence because of the chaos wrought by invasions	• the church lost some influence because of constant theological conflicts
• some, but less, political interference in church disputes	• emperors tried to quash dissent on religious matters in order to produce national unity (it didn't work)

- IN THE EAST — Beginning with Constantine in the 300s, the emperor came to be seen as God's official representative in all affairs of the empire, including religion. To disobey the emperor was to disobey God.
- IN THE WEST — The papacy (centered in the Bishop of Rome) came to be the church's primary defense against rulers' domination of the church. The bishops of the West sometimes pushed back against the power of the emperors. Also, the invasions produced a political/military power vacuum at times that the popes/bishops used to make the church more powerful than the state. The church was generally more stable than the state.
- THE RISE OF THE PAPACY

• From very early, the Roman church was highly honored for Peter's and Paul's ministry there, for many martyrdoms there, for its hold to apostolic teaching, and for its renowned charity to other churches.
• Gradually, bishops of Rome began to use this distinction of their church to claim higher authority than other bishops. Sometimes other bishops and church leaders agreed! The churches in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and later Constantinople came to have highest prestige as the leading churches.
• In the late 300s, the Western emperor, Gratian, gave the bishop of Rome the exclusive right to act as judge over all church leaders accused of wrongdoing. This rule applied only in the West; in the East, this rule was met with skepticism.
• Damasus Bishop of Rome (366-384) convened a Roman synod that declared "the first official definition of papal claims", based on Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19.
• Eastern bishops accepted Roman primacy when it suited them, but also ignored it when they wished.
• Papal authority was first formalized under Leo I (440-461):

"(1) Jesus bestowed supreme authority on Peter, as Matthew 16:18-19; Luke 22:31-32; and John 21:15-17 prove.
(2) Peter was the first bishop of Rome.
(3) Peter's authority has been perpetuated in his successors.
(4) This authority is enhanced by the continuing mystical presence of Peter in the see of Rome.
(5) Thence, the authority of other bishops does not derive directly from Christ but is mediated to them through Peter and Peter's successors.
(6) Further, while other bishops' authority is limited to their own dioceses, the bishop of Rome has a *plenitude potestatis* ('fullness of power') over the whole church and a responsibility to govern it." — *Hinson 348*

• When the Huns invaded and Leo led the church boldly, his influence increased. Then when Vandals invaded North Africa and the system of bishops' synods there was broken down, Africa looked to Rome for leadership. In 445, responding to a leadership dispute in the churches in Gaul to which Leo gave his decision but the churches did not all accept it, the emperor ordered that the bishops of Gaul and other provinces all do nothing without the authority of the Venerable Pope of the Eternal City (Rome).
• Two competing authority structures were present in the church (West+East):
- *SOME:* Rome first, then Constantinople
- *OTHERS:* Rome first, then Alexandria, then Antioch
- *IN BOTH CASES: Rome came first, though the East did not always listen to Rome.*

6) IMPORTANT PEOPLE

• JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (ca. 349-407)
• first ministered in Antioch
• Bishop of Constantinople 398-407
• worked hard to rebuke sin and paganism in the church, reach out to unbelievers, and call the sagging commitment of the clergy in Constantinople to a higher level
• the clergy were offended, and so was the Empress Eudoxia, who forced him out of his position
• the people demanded his return, but he again offended the empress by calling her to repent of ungodly conduct — on Easter 404, as he prepared to baptize 3,000 people, imperial troops attacked the congregation, arrested him, and confined him to his palace — he was sent into exile again and died in exile in 407
• AUGUSTINE (354-430, bishop of Hippo in North Africa) & PELAGIUS (ca. 354-ca. 420, a British monk)
• debated the cause of sin and the role of grace in human lives
• Augustine believed human beings are all fallen because of "original sin" inherited from Adam because of his sin — we are all incapable of coming to God and doing right without God's grace

- in his more extreme positions, Augustine argued that God's grace is irresistible and that even infants, if not baptized, are lost
- Pelagius believed human beings sin because of abuse of our own free will — we can theoretically do right even before we receive help from the Holy Spirit, but we fail and must turn to God for help
- in his more extreme statements, Pelagius seemed to deny the need for grace, putting all responsibility for redemption on the individual's decision and all responsibility for sin on the individual — he generally disagreed with the idea that infants need baptism, since they have not (by their own free will) sinned
- this debate was so fierce in the churches that it tended to push both sides toward more and more extreme positions
- with much debate, church powers and especially the popes in Rome eventually sided with Augustine over Pelagius, but many monks favored Pelagius's views — debate continued until the Synod of Orange in 529

7) OTHER MATTERS

- MARY, VIRGINITY, AND CELIBACY (as viewed in Rome)
  - a Latin theologian, Helvidius, denied the perpetual virginity of Mary and was strongly opposed to that concept
  - Jovinian (died ca. 405), a monk, was condemned by synods at Rome & Milan for denying that virginity was a higher level of Christian life than marriage and that abstinence as such was better than eating
  - in 402, Innocent I (Bishop of Rome) required celibacy of all clergy
- JUST WAR THEORY
  - Just-war theory was first expounded by Augustine, in response to Donatists who had become violent against the state. He taught that war can be justified under certain conditions (just cause, pursued not out of hate but out of love [e.g., to protect the weak], of limited scope and duration, etc.).