CHRISTIAN HISTORY

601-700 C.E.

April 22, 2026

Key Dates:
632 — Death of Mohammad
640s-650s — Fall of Persia and the eastern and southern parts of the Byzantine empire to Muslim forces
678 — Muslim forces are stopped at Constantinople, marking the end of their conquests of Byzantine lands

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: WEST: As invasions began to settle down, the church struggled to regain stability; kings and popes struggled for power. EAST: Persian and then Muslim invasions devastated the empire and reduced the number of churches and Christians.

Key Questions: Who was in charge of the church now: emperor, other kings, pope? Would the Eastern empire and church survive the Muslim invasions?

Key Places: Ireland, center of church discipline and scholarship; **Rome**, still holding and competing for influence over the entire church; **Constantinople**, center of the Eastern church but threatened by Muslim invasions; **Mecca**, birthplace of Mohammad and Islam

Key People: Columban, Irish monk and leader of church reforms in the West; **Mohammad**, founder of Islam

Church Leadership: EAST: the Byzantine emperor, with the Patriarch of Constantinople under him, ruled the church; WEST: the Bishop of Rome ruled the church — Emperors and popes sometimes worked together and sometimes competed for power over the church.

1) CONTINUING SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

- The Western church expanded greatly into northern and western Europe in the period 590-800, and Christianity was still expanding eastward in the early 600s. But as Islam spread and Muslims invaded the Byzantine Empire, the Eastern church struggled just to hold its ground against them.
- CHINA — Christianity reached China in 635.
- BRITAIN — The Irish church sent missionaries to Scotland, Switzerland, and Belgium and influenced the growth of Christianity in northern England. The Irish church came to lead Europe in scholarship and mission work until the Viking invasions in the 700s-900s weakened the church in Britain.

2) NOT EVERYONE WAS CATHOLIC (Western Church) OR ORTHODOX (Eastern Church)

- Celtic Christianity grew into a separate branch of Christianity from that centered in Rome:
  - Celtic Christians did not accept the authority of the pope.
  - Celts did not always celebrate Easter on a Sunday.
  - Celtic monks could marry; Roman monks could not.
  - Celtic and Roman monks had different kinds of tonsure (the shaved area on top of the head).
  - Celtic Christianity tended to be more disciplined and rigorous than that based in Rome.
  - Celtic Christianity was dominant in northern England. Roman Catholicism was dominant in southern England. In 663, the ruler of England chose for all England to be Catholic.

Dr. Hans Grimm (1899-1983), a German historian and preacher in the churches of Christ, found evidence of churches faithful to New Testament teachings and not adhering to Roman or Byzantine church authority during this period. In his book, *Tradition and History of the Early Churches of Christ in Central Europe* (translated by Dr. H. L. Schug, published by Firm Foundation in 1963), pages 20-21, he tells this story:

Around 625, a man in Armenia named Constantine converted out of a Marcionite group "by the study of the four Gospels and of Paul's epistles and joined with the small church of true Christians in the Catacombs." Around the mid-600s this Constantine and fellow believers had to flee to Armenia because of persecution. A Byzantine governor named Simeon sent soldiers to capture him. He was stoned for leading "the church, Christ's pure bride" into adultery through Marcionite teaching (which he had actually long since abandoned). But his death impressed the governor, who "began to study intensively the teachings of the New Testament" and within a few years was preaching the gospel himself in Galatia and Cappadocia. Simeon was martyred in 694, but a number of people continued to come to faith through his influence. These people were called "Paulicians" because they answered every argument with the teachings of Paul.

"A Byzantine monk* of this time reports concerning a religious debate with them:

"Only the New Testament was accepted among them as rule for faith and church practice; they rejected the worship of the Mother of God and of the saints, even of the great martyrs George and Sergius; they do not consecrate a special worship to the Archangels or to Elias [Elijah], have no church feasts at all; each Sunday they assembled in places of prayer which are not worthy to be named thus, since they have neither altar nor wall for pictures of the saints, nor a place for keeping the holy vessels; they use neither incense nor chrism oil. They despise and scorn the baptism of the church and say that infants have no faith. They recognize neither the jurisdiction of the Patriarch at Constantinople nor of the Patriarch of Antioch and Jerusalem and have no respect for the schismatic church of the Armenians. They are proud of the fact that their churches are small and poor and that their evangelists live only from what sheltering believers give them voluntarily. They do not accept the false accusation that the heretic Paulus [probably meaning Paul of Samosata in the 200s] is said to have founded their sect, and say that they are not Paulicians, but Christians, and chosen of God."

**Kevin's note: Dr. Grimm doesn't record where he got this quotation. Most likely he found it in a heresiology (list of heresies) compiled by an anonymous monk in the second half of the 600s.*

3) THE WESTERN CHURCH

THE POPES

- From 604 to 701 there were 20 popes, averaging a tenure of less than five years each. The political powers in the West were constantly changing; so were the popes.
- During the 600s, the popes gradually weaned themselves off dependence on the Eastern emperor. After the 500s, the Eastern emperors simply were not strong enough to protect and support the pope reliably—especially after Muslim invasions of the Eastern empire began. Sometimes the pope and the emperor had a good relationship, sometimes they were enemies. Over time, the Western church stopped recognizing the emperor—and they stopped setting up his image in the churches, as had been the custom previously.
- The popes faced the challenge of bringing unity to many different people groups. Sometimes kings dominated the papacy.

IN FRANCE

- Christianity in France was quite corrupt in the early 600s. Monasteries were excessively wealthy and held vast properties. The rulers (the Merovingians) supported but also ruled the churches. Simony (buying

and selling of church offices) became common. Evangelization dwindled except when rulers wanted to conquer new territory.

- The Irish monk Columban (ca. 543-615) came to France and brought a more disciplined kind of monasticism with him, focusing on God and his relationship with people instead of on relics and worship of saints. He taught morality, self-examination, confession, and appropriate penance.
- Even as some kings supported the church and others basically controlled it, it was understood among church leaders that the king always got the final say.
- By the late 600s, though, church discipline had broken down so badly that neither kings nor bishops had much control. Bribery and disobedience of the bishops were common. Reform was needed.

IN ENGLAND

- Bede (later called "Venerable Bede") was the greatest English scholar of his time. He studied the scriptures deeply, taught, wrote several biographies and guides for the church, was a careful historian, and wrote poetry.

IN SPAIN

- Spanish Christians were mostly Arians at first, but Catholics worked diligently there, and by the end of the 600s Spain was mostly Catholic. Kings supported and partially ran the church, but they also needed the church's support to legitimize their own authority.

> Conversion of the Jews was of special concern. At the Fourth Synod of Toledo in 633 Isidore of Seville [one of the greatest teachers, writers, and church leaders of the time] spoke strongly against the forcible conversion of Jews. Under pressure from the king, however, later councils decreed that Jewish children should be separated from their parents in order to free them from their influence and lead them to baptism. They also decided to give all Jews a choice of emigration or conversion. In the Gothic Kingdom there was to be no place for any except the Catholic faith. — *E. Glenn Hinson, The Early Church, 302-303*

4) THE EASTERN CHURCH AND THE RISE OF ISLAM

- Emperors were de facto leaders of the church. Patriarchs were often essentially officials of the emperor. They rarely challenged his authority over the church. Monks, however, tended to be more independent.
- In the 620s, Persians advanced into the Eastern Empire, causing problems for the empire and the church.

MUHAMMAD AND THE RISE OF ISLAM

- Muhammad lived 570-632 in the Arabian Peninsula. He was born and raised in Mecca, worked as a camel driver, and encountered Christianity on a trip with his uncle to Syria and Palestine. He married a rich widow and with his new wealth had time for religious meditation.
- He felt called by God to proclaim monotheism. Over three years, though, he won only 12 converts, mostly relatives. He preached against idolatry, but opposition forced him to flee to Medina in 622.
- Muhammad gained followers in Medina. In 630 he and his followers captured Mecca. He died in 632.
- Islam continued to grow. Muslim conquerors invaded regions beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Muslim-controlled areas expanded rapidly for 100 years, until 732.
  - In 640, Muslims took Syria from the Byzantine Empire. They also took Palestine around this time.
  - In the 640s, they took control of Egypt from the Byzantine Empire.
  - By 650, they had taken over Persia.
  - Muslim conquerors proceeded to take over North Africa (part of which had been controlled by the Byzantine Empire) all the way to the Atlantic Ocean.
  - The church lost many people. Many were forced to convert to Islam under the threat of death.
  - In some areas Muslims let Christians maintain their Christian faith.
  - Muslim advances in the East were finally stopped by Constantine IV in 678.

• Some key Muslim beliefs:
  - follow the teachings of Muhammad in the Koran
  - believe in 1 God (Allah, the Arabic word for "God")
  - believe in 25 prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—but Muhammad was the last/greatest
  - deny Jesus' deity and his death on the cross
  - emphasis is on submission to the will of God—after judgment, one will enjoy paradise or face hell
  - good Muslims pray 5 times a day (facing toward Mecca), recite their creed daily, fast, give to the poor, and (for the holiest) make pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime

MUSLIM IMPACT ON THE EASTERN CHURCH

• The Byzantine Empire and the Eastern Church lost a vast number of people to Islam, including the entire, strong North African church. They also lost Egypt, Palestine (the Holy Land), and Syria.
• Patriarchs of the church in Alexandria and Antioch, being under Muslim domination, could no longer speak for the church at large, leaving the Patriarch of Constantinople as the leader of the church (under the emperor) in the East and the Bishop of Rome (the pope) in the West.
• Muslims accused Eastern Christians of idolatry because those Christians used pictures and images in the church. Muslim pressure pressed the church had to decide whether images & pictures could be used in the church ("the iconoclastic controversy").
• The old dispute over the two natures (human and divine) in Christ endured, causing much division (Did Christ have one nature or two? One will or two?). With the Persians and then the Muslims invading, the emperors needed to bring both sides together for the unity and strength of the empire. Sometimes unity increased, sometimes influential leaders stirred up the controversy again.
  - In 648 Emperor Constans II outlawed any disputing over the issue. Pope Martin I (in Rome), however, convened a synod in 649 that affirmed "two natures" and "two wills" in Christ. When his decision reached the emperor, the emperor sent forces to arrest the pope. Martin was arrested in June 653, brought to Constantinople in September 654, and treated roughly there. He died September 16, 655.
  - After the Muslims were stopped in 678, Constantine IV reached out to the West again, held a council at Constantinople, and agreed with the West's decision about "two natures" and "two wills", thus bringing reconciliation with the West.

> Islam devastated the empire in the seventh century… The Islamic forces came like a hurricane. Within a century of the death of Muhammed (ca. 570-632) they had overwhelmed the Persian Empire (636-640), conquered Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and swept across North Africa and stood at the threshold of Gaul [France], where Charles Martel halted their advance at Poitiers. [The Eastern Empire was already exhausted from fighting the Persians. At the same time,] "the Saracens [Arab desert tribes] overran southern Asia and Armenia (651-654) and set siege to Constantinople itself for five years, 673-678. Fortunately, a storm and the newly invent[ed] 'Greek-fire' [an early version of napalm] united to destroy most of their ships, enabling Constantine IV to crush what remained at Syllaeum. — *Hinson 305*

• In 692, the Council in Trullo set rules for Eastern clergy that suggest there were serious problems with clergy character and conduct. The rules prohibited clergy from being involved with inns, horse racing, theaters, dice, and brothels. They also prohibited boys from taking vows to become monks before age ten and gave rules for church members concerning theaters, clothing, observance of pagan festivals, and impersonation of women by men, and penalized those who missed worship 3 consecutive Sundays.

MUSLIM IMPACT ON THE WESTERN CHURCH

• The Western church lost many people, though not as many as in the East.
• Mission work had to center on northwestern Europe because there was little opportunity for evangelism in Muslim-held areas. Muslims strongly resisted papal and Western mission efforts among them.
• The pope gained influence over the church at large as the influence of rival patriarchs in Alexandria and Antioch fell because of Muslim domination.

5) SPIRITUALITY & WORSHIP IN THE 600s

- The 600s launched a golden age for monasticism that continued into the 1100s. Monasteries held vast influence in society. Monks set the standard for godly living, preserved knowledge, promoted reforms in the church and the papacy, served the church and society, received rich gifts from the wealthy and powerful, and came to control vast amounts of land across Europe. They built beautiful churches and monasteries. Monasticism no longer required a removal from society but became an essential part of society. The monks' success, though, led to eventual decline of their influence as they drifted away from a focus on poverty and prayer.
- PENANCE — The early (2^{nd}-4^{th} centuries) church's system of penance became impossible to maintain once the invasions of the 400s-500s began and social systems broke down. Among commoners, nobility, and clergy alike there were brutality, treachery, intrigue, and corruption. By the 600s, bishops' enforcement of church discipline varied widely and was sometimes severe. The Synod of Toledo in 693 reported that offenders sometimes chose suicide over paying the penance required. Most penitent sinners, though, simply put off their repentance until their deathbeds rather than pay penance.
  - In the West around the 600s, *penitentials* (books of instructions on how to take confession and assigning penalties for various sins) become increasingly common (the earliest dated to the 400s). They helped standardize and improve church discipline. Private confession to a priest, monk, or nun became increasingly common. Penalties could include recitation of psalms, fasting, uncomfortable physical exercises, flogging, taking a monastic vow, exile, pilgrimage, temporary exclusion from the church, or payment of money. The option of paying money in certain situations eventually led to the common payment of financial indulgences for forgiveness of sin—a problem denounced in the Protestant Reformation.
- SPIRITUALITY at this time was primarily about participation in the church's liturgy (worship assembly & rituals) led by the priests. In the East, imperial sponsorship shaped church buildings and holy sites, and worship came to look more and more like the imperial court. After all, if the emperor deserved the best, didn't the King of kings deserve even more? Fine dress, décor, and pomp and circumstance became the norm, and images were used starting in the 500s.
  - Over time, it became less common for Christians to take Communion every Sunday, in both the East and the West. Western church councils came to require at least three sharings of Communion per year, at Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas; in 1215 that number was reduced to one, at Easter.
  - In the East, emphasis was placed on the mystery of redemption as something mystical and transcendent. The East also emphasized Jesus' resurrection, whereas the Western church emphasized Jesus' crucifixion. Worship in the West tended to be more practical and simple than in the East, though heavily ritualized in both regions.
  - Church services continued to be held in Latin in the West, with parts of the service in the local language, even though only the highly educated knew Latin anymore; in the East, Greek was used, but use of the local language was encouraged.
  - Congregational singing diminished as church music became more elaborate.

6) REFLECTION ON THE FIRST 600 YEARS

One fundamental dynamic that shaped church life in the centuries from 100 to 600 CE that is not nearly as influential today, especially among Protestants, is the expectation that the church will be not merely a family or an affiliation of believers but a single organized institution, a unity. This expectation, which developed over time from the rise of the bishops in the 100s to the establishment of the patriarchs in the East and the papacy in the West, required (so it was thought) a high degree of sameness across all churches not only in doctrine but also in worship practices (liturgy, church discipline, etc.). Councils and creeds that were originally intended to defend the church against false teaching became tools for

defining what all believers must believe and do—and so came, in practice, to have a level of authority similar to that of Scripture. Groups not adhering to the Catholic or Orthodox hierarchy of authority and to standard practices were persecuted and punished.

Once the church came under the sponsorship of the emperors and (later, in the West, the kings) beginning with Constantine in 312, church unity came to be equated with national unity, so that, for example, when Muslims invaded the Byzantine Empire the emperor needed to put an end to doctrinal debates lest they threaten national unity in a time of war. Evangelism became a tool for conquest. The line between the church's interests and the state's interests often became blurred—or such interests at least competed with each other. The church sometimes used force to carry out its mission; the state often used the church to build up the ruler's legitimacy and to control the people.

Was this the kind of unity Jesus intended for his church, for which he prayed in John 17:20-26? Is Christian unity to be based on agreement on every issue (see Romans 14:1, 14:4, 15:7)? Was the church intended to be either empowered by the government or ruled by the government? Shouldn't the church influence the world like Jesus did: not from a position of coercive power, but through the power of humility? For a long time, the influence of the monks came from a position of humility and service; by these means they spread the gospel and became models for the common people.

It's interesting to me that whenever human beings try to accomplish God's will or pursue God by consolidating power, God decentralizes us. It happened at least twice in biblical history. At Babel, when humans tried to stay together to reach God through the tower they were building, God dispersed them (Genesis 11:1-9). In Jerusalem, when the original church was slow to evangelize the world and believers stayed together in that one place, God permitted persecution to send them in every direction, and the church grew because of it (Acts 8:1-4). Perhaps God, working out his plans through his church, finds a centralized human authority less helpful than a decentralized organization that keeps us from collecting coercive power. Perhaps our unity does not derive from having the same name, liturgy, or human leader, but from our common faith in Jesus—and that, if we genuinely live it out, is enough.

Even with all its flaws, the church of the years 100-600 did manage to convey the gospel to faraway peoples and to future generations. In every generation there were influential leaders who, though flawed themselves, recognized problems in church structure, practice, and governance and tried to initiate reforms. It may be that many of these reformers glimpsed some of what Jesus truly called his church to be and strove for it—a challenge that we continue to face even today.