CHRISTIAN HISTORY

701-800 C.E.

May 6, 2026

Key Dates:
711-718 — Muslims conquer Spain
732 — Battle of Poitiers (or Tours) halts Muslim expansion in the West
787 — Second Council of Nicaea
800 — The pope crowns Charlemagne emperor

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: Distance between the Eastern and Western church increases as the Roman church stops leaning on the Eastern emperors for support • Muslims conquer Spain • Dispute over use of images disrupts church unity

Key Questions: Would Muslim forces take over all of Europe? Who will protect and support the popes in Rome? May Christians use images in worship and church life?

Key Places: Spain, which fell under Muslim control • **France**, increasingly influential in the Roman church • **Southern Italy,** home of the Lombards who threaten Rome and the pope • **Nicaea**, location of the last ecumenical council

Key People: Charles Martel • John of Damascus • Charlemagne

Church Leadership: the popes in the West (increasingly reliant upon Frankish rulers), the emperors in the East

1) SPREAD OF ISLAM

- In 640-678, Muslims had conquered much of the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire: Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa to the Atlantic Ocean. They had also conquered Persia. Muslim expansion into the Eastern Empire was stopped by Emperor Leo III in 718.
- Muslim power centered in Baghdad.
- Muslims in the West advanced from northwest Africa into Spain, especially during 711-713, taking control of almost all of Spain by 718. Conflict between Arian Christians and Roman (Catholic) Christians had been so divisive for so long that Islam easily overran the region. They were finally stopped by Charles Martel and his armies in the famous Battle of Poitiers (or Tours) in 732. (The battle was fought between Tours and Poitiers, which are about 100 kilometers apart; it took place closer to Poitiers than to Tours.)
- The Western church lost many people as Muslims conquered Spain and forced the people there to convert to Islam under the threat of death. Even so, Muslims were not always intolerant of Christians. Some church buildings were turned into mosques, but others remained as church buildings. The number of bishops in Spain decreased from 69 to 18; yet the fact that 18 remained tells us there were still churches that were allowed to continue. The monasteries and convents endured best and were sometimes used by Muslims as charitable centers to serve everyone, both Muslims and Christians.
- In Persia, when Islam became the dominant religion, Christians were persecuted less than they had been before (when the primary religion had been Zoroastrianism). Christian worship was tolerated and Muslims incorporated Christians into society and even into high civil office. A fair amount of mission work went on there, though there were occasionally persecutions.
- By 750, Muslim conquests had essentially ended.

2) SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

- ENGLAND continued to be a source of evangelistic zeal, sending missionaries into continental Europe.
- GERMANY was evangelized in the late 600s and 700s. In 718, a priest named Boniface (680-754; also called Winfrid) began to preach in Germany. He cut down an oak tree that was sacred to Thor and built a chapel from the wood, thereby convincing many people to follow Christ rather than Thor.
- The SAXONS (in north Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands) were conquered by Charlemagne (748-814) and were forced to be baptized. So many people became Christians so quickly, often through mass conversions of whole tribes and nations, that conversions without a real experience of faith became a major problem.
- In some areas, peoples chose to become Christians to gain protection by Christian nations from invaders.
- Evangelism by the Eastern church was less vigorous than that by the Western church because of several factors: geography, Islam's influence, and state control of the church in the East, among others. The Eastern church did send missionaries into Nubia, the Sudan, Ethiopia, the Balkans, and Bulgaria.

3) THE THREE MAJOR CHRISTIAN REGIONS

- By 800, the Old Roman Empire had been divided into 3 sections, and they were pretty stable:
  - NORTH AFRICA (formerly Christian) was held by Muslims. Christian influence was largely gone.
  - WEST: Most of the former Western Roman Empire was controlled by the Frankish kingdom and came to be called the "Holy Roman Empire" under Charlemagne in 800. Christianity in this region also spread north into central and northern Europe.
  - EAST: The Eastern (Byzantine) Empire, reduced in size by Muslim invasions in the 600s and 700s, remained under the control of the emperors at Constantinople. Christianity had also spread from the Eastern Empire all the way east to China and India, south into northeastern Africa, and north into eastern Europe.

4) THE WEST: POLITICS AND PAPACY

- 715-768, the popes in Rome faced 2 big pressures: attempts by the emperor in Constantinople to control their affairs, demand taxes, etc.; and the frequent threat of attack by the Lombards (who were Arian Christians) to the south. Because the Eastern Empire and its emperors were no longer strong enough to provide support and protection to the Western church, yet the Western church still faced threats and dangers, it turned to the Franks (a Germanic people originally from western Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands) for help.
  - The more the popes depended on the Frankish kings for protection and support, the more they had to adhere to whatever the kings told them to do. Charlemagne, who defended Rome and conquered the Lombards and was crowned emperor by the pope on Christmas Day 800, is a prime example of how this relationship worked.

CHARLES MARTEL (ca. 688-741; came to power in 714)

- Mayor of the Palace under the Merovingian king who supposedly ruled the Franks—but at this time the Mayor held the real power and the king was essentially a puppet ruler
- Muslims were threatening to conquer all of western Europe and had already taken Spain. Charles defeated them at the battle of Poitiers (near Tours) in 732. The Roman church was obligated to him because he had saved Christianity in western Europe.
- He supported Christian evangelism in his lands for the sake of unifying them.
- However, Charles also seized church lands and monasteries to pay his military expenses as he enlarged his kingdom. The churches and monasteries were very wealthy at this time, and when Charles died, they were still quite wealthy, though less so than before. His sons restored some lands to the churches and monasteries.

PEPIN, son of Charles Martel (ca. 714-768; came to power in 741)

- 751, he deposed the Merovingian king, took the title of king himself, and launched the Carolingian dynasty that would rule the Franks for about 250 years
- Arian Lombards in Italy threatened the authority of the pope. The pope turned to the Franks for help, and Pepin fought the Lombards in 754 and 756. In 754 he pledged to give conquered land from Rome to Ravenna to Pope Stephen II. This promised gift became known as the Donation of Pepin. It was the foundation for the papal states that the popes controlled in Italy from 756 to 1870, when the Italian people were unified. Pope Stephen II crowned Pepin (again; Pepin had claimed the crown earlier) as "King of the Franks and Patrician of the Romans" in 754. Stephen received the pledged land in 756.

About this time, legends about the Roman emperor Constantine (who lived in the 300s) were in wide circulation in written form. These legends claimed that Constantine had been miraculously healed of leprosy and had been converted to Christianity by Sylvester bishop of Rome, and that in return Constantine granted him special rights and territories. These legends had developed for centuries and were used to support claims that the popes held both spiritual and territorial authority. The circulating document claimed that Constantine had declared the church in Rome to be the head of all other churches, and its bishop the supreme bishop, and that he had given territories across the empire to him, as well as imperial rank. It also claimed that Constantine had moved to Constantinople so as not to interfere with the pope and his imperial authority. In 1440, this document was proved to be entirely forged some centuries after the events it claimed to describe.

CHARLEMAGNE son of Pepin (742-814; ruled 768-814)
- He embarked on a military campaign to conquer the Saxons (north Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands). Those he conquered often rebelled again, and he would either slaughter them or baptize them. His military campaigns were thus also religious campaigns. He forced mass baptisms and ordered the death penalty for anyone who attacked a church, ignored Lent, killed a clergyman, refused/avoided baptism, plotted against Christians, or was disobedient to the king. Saxons converted to Christianity by force began to convert their neighbors by force, too.
- Charlemagne controlled the largest area in the West since the Western Roman Empire ended in 476.
- Around 799, Pope Leo III was accused of wrongdoing in Rome, was attacked, and had to flee to Charlemagne. Charlemagne escorted him back to Rome and held a council to investigate the charges against Leo. Leo was cleared of wrongdoing and regained his position of authority. On Christmas Day 800, to Charlemagne's surprise, the pope crowned him emperor. This act suggested the superiority of the church to the state, though since it was also an act of gratitude it spoke to the church's need for the state's support. Charlemagne's empire became known as the Holy Roman Empire.
- He established a library and a system of education, with the primary goal being to prepare young men to read and understand the Bible. He instituted religious and moral reforms in the church, though they were not as effective as he had hoped.

5) STRUGGLES IN THE EAST

THEOLOGICAL STAGNATION — Theology in the Eastern church did not develop much during the Middle Ages, and even until the modern period. Perhaps the most important reason is that the church was basically controlled by the state, to the extent that it was more or less a department of the state's administration. Theology, therefore, was often dictated by the emperor, who (Kevin's guess) was probably inclined to keep the status quo most of the time for the sake of empire stability rather than risk division over theological changes, even changes that would have been spiritually healthy.

JOHN OF DAMASCUS (ca. 675-ca. 749)
- pretty much the only major advancer of theology in the Eastern church until the modern era; his writings became the Eastern equivalent of Thomas Aquinas's writings in the West

- born in Damascus, became a monk, argued for the use of images in the church, wrote commentaries on Paul's letters
- His most important writing is The Fountain of Knowledge, especially the third part, The Orthodox Faith, which gathers the comprehensive teaching of the Greek Fathers on major Christian doctrines and includes John's own perspectives on some issues.

THE ICONOCLASTIC CONTROVERSY

- Up to about 400, the church everywhere stood strongly against the use of images in church life because of the second of the Ten Commandments ("You shall not make for yourself an image… You shall not bow down to them or worship them…", Exodus 20:4-5).
- Starting in the 300s, though, as many people from the cultured and educated classes entered the church, it became increasingly common for Christians to honor sacred objects like relics of martyrs and saints. In the 500s, pieces of the supposedly true cross of Jesus appeared, along with images of Jesus and his mother. By the 700s, the use of images was common and was often taken to extremes.
- Both Jews and Muslims found the use of images highly offensive. Many Christians disapproved of their use, too. Monks were the strongest advocates *for* the use of images.
- The emperors began ordering the destruction and disuse of images starting in 725. Part of their goal was to foster greater peace between Muslims and Christians in the realm. Greece & Egypt rebelled against the order, and the papacy and Italy pushed back against it. Even the Patriarch of Constantinople resisted, saying the images were intended only to inspire people to imitate what they represented. The emperor replaced him in 730. Images, mosaics, and paintings were removed or painted over.
- 727, John of Damascus said the images are useful for countering a docetic view of Jesus (that Jesus only seemed to be fully human), and that the church does not worship the images but what they represent. He said that the incarnation of God's Son as a human being broke the second commandment, so why should Christians return to the bondage of Judaism, which disallowed the use of images? If Christians can honor the cross, why not other images too?
- in 731, Pope Gregory III convened a council that excommunicated all who destroyed or defiled images. The emperor responded by sending a fleet to Italy, but it was wrecked at sea, so he seized papal estates in Sicily and Southern Italy instead. This pushed the papacy to seek help from the Franks instead of from the emperor even more than before.
- in 753, Emperor Constantine V opposed both worship of images and prayers to the saints. A council he convened for this topic determined that the only lawful representation of Christ is the Lord's Supper, and that those who worship images are idolaters. They were rescuing the church from idolatry. The emperor tortured and executed monks and turned monasteries into military barracks.
- The next emperor, Leo IV, was more lenient about images. His wife Irene secretly maintained a devotion to them. After her husband died, she approved of images and restored relations with Rome. In 797 she deposed her son and became the empire's first ruling Empress.
- The last of the 7 Ecumenical Councils was held in Nicaea in 787. It permitted veneration, but not worship, of images. The controversy over images did not end with that decision, but continued until the mid-800s.

The 7 Ecumenical Councils

- theoretically representing all churches everywhere
- recognized by both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches
- primarily established authoritative doctrine on the nature of Christ and the Trinity

- 325 — First Council of Nicaea
- 381 — First Council of Constantinople
- 431 — Council of Ephesus
- 451 — Council of Chalcedon
- 553 — Second Council of Constantinople
- 680-681 — Third Council of Constantinople
- 787 — Second Council of Nicaea