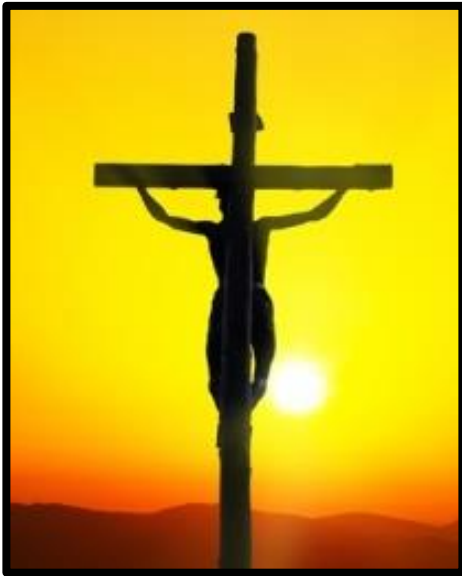


Christianity

Christianity begins with Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who was born in Judea (modern Israel) then a small corner of the Roman Empire. Little is known of his early life, but around the age of 30, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and had a vision in which he received the blessing of God.



After this event, he began a ministry of teaching, healing, and miracle-working. He observed the Jewish faith and was well acquainted with the Jewish Law. He spoke of the "kingdom of God," condemned religious hypocrites and interpreted Jewish law in new ways. He spoke before crowds of people, but also chose 12 disciples whom he taught privately. Jesus taught His disciples about the will of God and about the "new covenant" God would bring to humanity through belief in him. His disciples eagerly followed him, believing him to be the long-awaited Messiah of Jewish prophesy who would usher in the kingdom of God on earth.

After just a few years, however, opposition mounted against Jesus. Jesus' teachings stirred the hearts of people and created instability, something the Romans and Jewish religious authorities feared. He was ultimately executed by crucifixion by the Romans. Most of Jesus' followers scattered, dismayed at such an unexpected outcome. But three days later, according to believers, Jesus rose to life, having conquered death, to give hope to a hopeless world. The disciples reported that Jesus appeared to them on several occasions and then ascended into heaven before their eyes.

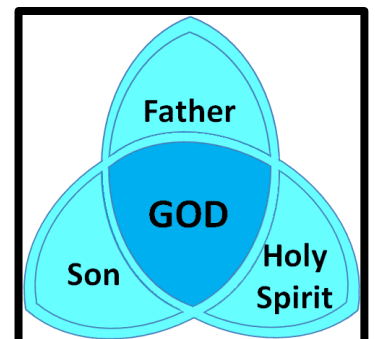
The Early Church

The remainder of the first century AD saw the number of Jesus' followers, who were soon called "Christians," grow rapidly. Instrumental in the spread of Christianity was a man named Paul, a zealous Jew who had persecuted Christians, then converted to the faith after experiencing his own vision of the risen Jesus. Taking advantage of the extensive system of Roman roads and the time of peace, Paul went on numerous missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire. He started churches, then wrote letters back to them to offer further counsel and encouragement. Many of these letters would become part of the Christian scriptures, the "New Testament."

In the second and third centuries AD, Christians struggled with persecution from outside the church and with debates about doctrine between themselves.

A major turning point in Christian history came in the early 4th century AD, when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. The Christian religion became legal, persecution ceased, and thousands of pagans now found it convenient to convert to the Christianity. Allied with the Roman Empire, Christianity gradually rose in power and hierarchy until it became the "Christendom" that would encompass the entire western world in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

In 325 AD, Constantine called the Council of Nicaea so that the bishops could work out their differences over doctrine. They declared the Son (Christ) to be of "one substance" with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is represented by the trinity.



But over time, the considerable religious, cultural, and political differences between the Eastern "Orthodox" church centered in the new capital city of imperial Rome, Constantinople (modern day Istanbul), and the Western "Catholic" church centered in the old capital, Rome, became increasingly apparent. Religiously, the two parts of Christendom had different views on topics such as the use of icons (religious statues), the nature of the Holy Spirit, and the date on which Easter should be celebrated. Culturally, the Eastern church became more Greek in language and philosophy, while the West was more Latin. As the old saying goes: "the Greeks built metaphysical systems; the Romans built roads."

1054 AD: The Great Schism

These various factors finally came to a head in 1054 AD, when Pope Leo IX excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople, the leader of the Eastern church. The Patriarch condemned the Pope in return, and the Christian church has been officially divided into West ("Roman Catholic") and East ("Greek Orthodox") ever since.

Eastern Orthodoxy came to play a prominent role in Eastern European (Greek, Russian, Serbian, etc.), Near Eastern and some African cultures (the Ethiopian church is more Orthodox than Catholic in its practices) while Roman Catholicism became more influential in Western Europe.



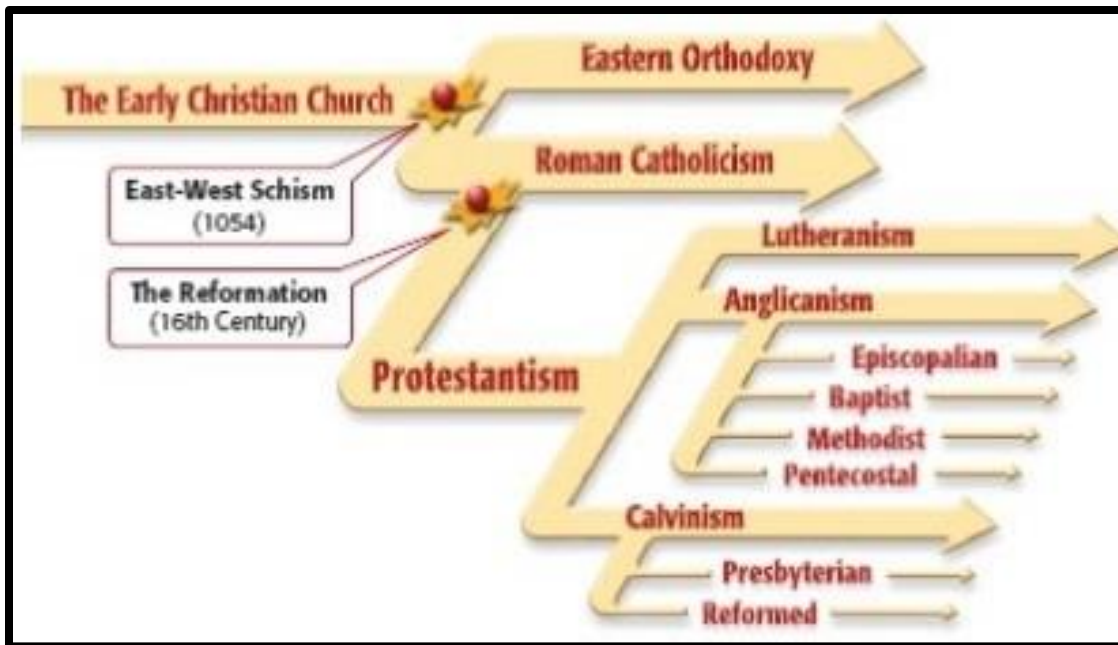
The Protestant Reformation

In the 1400s, some western Christians began to publicly challenge aspects of the Roman Catholic church. They spoke against the abuse of authority and corruption in Christian leadership. They called for a return to the word of God and a stripping of traditions and customs like purgatory, the veneration of and the cult of the saints and relics, the elimination of several sacraments and many other practices not literally found in the Bible. They criticized the corruption of church leaders who lived opulent lives surrounded by Renaissance art and the stylings befitting monarchs rather than men of God. They began to translate the Bible - then available only in Latin - into the vernacular languages of the people. However, these early reformers did not have widespread success, and most were executed for their teachings.

In 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther posted 97 theses (complaints) against the practice of selling indulgences on a church door. He believed in the justification by faith alone, and also shared many of the ideas of those early reformers. Growing German nationalism and the invention of the printing press ensured that Luther would have greater protection than his predecessors and his teachings would be spread quickly. He was excommunicated and barely escaped with his life on more than one occasion, but Luther lived out his life spreading the Reformation, and died a natural death. His ideas had already spread throughout Germany, and similar reforming movements sprung up in England and Switzerland.

Another branch of Christianity had been born known as Protestantism. Since one of their major complaints was the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic church, Protestantism splintered into many various factions. Soon much of Europe was embroiled in religious wars, with various Protestant factions fighting each other and the Catholics for religious and political freedom.





In the 16th and 17th centuries, Christians of many ideologies embarked on the hazardous journey across the Atlantic pulled by colonialism and the missionary impulse to convert natives to the faith. Much of the New World therefore reflects the branch of Christianity which predominated in the original colonial mother country. Where Spain, Portugal and France colonized most people came to practice Roman Catholicism while in places where the English and Dutch and other northern Europeans colonized people came to practice various forms of Protestantism.

Today, Christianity is the largest world religion, with about 2 billion adherents. It is the majority religion of Europe and the Americas, and there are churches in almost every nation in the world. There are perhaps thousands of Christian denominations, all of whom believe in the basic ideas established at the Council of Nicaea but differ in other matters of doctrine and practice which can be seen in their impact on the cultural landscape.