

CHURCH HISTORY

Resurrection
to Reformation

Keith Crider

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FOREWORD

What is the church? For the purposes of this book, the church is those people “that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2). The key word is *Christ*. The true church is composed, not of those who hold to a particular creed, but of those who know, love, and obey Christ and in turn are known of Him. True Christians are Christians because of a relationship, not because they claim to hold to correct doctrine.

In a broader sense, the church is all people, through all of history, who have submitted or will yet submit their lives to God’s rule. Thus T. J. van Bragt in *Martyrs Mirror* lists Abel as the first martyr for the faith. His view is not as unusual as it may seem to modern Christians who suppose the church did not exist before Jesus’ time. If that were strictly true, how did the disciples know what Jesus meant when He said, “I will build my church”?

They knew the word *church* well, although for them it was the Greek word *ekklesia*, “a called-out assembly.” The word *ekklesia* appeared hundreds of times in the Septuagint, their Greek version of the Old Testament. There it was used of God’s Old Testament people. Stephen used it of them in Acts 7:38 when he spoke of “the church in the wilderness” at Mt. Sinai.

God’s people have always been called out: called to leave Satan’s rule and come under His rule. In Acts 10:34 and 35, Peter said, “God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” Not only is this true of people “in every nation,” but also of people in every era.

For our purposes, we’ll stick to the New Testament church—those who since the time of Christ have submitted to the rule of God by coming into a servant-Master relationship with Jesus. But we shouldn’t forget that the church is only a part of the larger, universal reign of God called the kingdom of God.

What is church history? Church history is the story of God’s people since the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. On that day Jesus’ followers received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and became new creatures in Christ Jesus.

But we must qualify that description. It is the story of God's people, but it must also include the stories of many who claimed to be children of God but whose lives revealed otherwise. While no Christian is sinless, Jesus and the apostles taught that real Christians live in a way that is out of step with the world's motives and policies. They do not live in sin.

Throughout the ages, professing Christians whose lives showed no godly character were not truly converted; they had not truly repented and received the Holy Spirit. Others who had been converted later chose to stop obeying Christ even though they still claimed to follow Him. Church history is full of such people, and we must deal with them because they were in an institution called the church.

The church and the church. This history covers two "churches." One is the church Jesus established: a fellowship of believers, reborn by the Holy Spirit, who sought to follow Christ in lowly everyday obedience. The other consists of the great institutional churches, which over the centuries redefined the Gospel of Christ, contorting it to fit into man's natural and selfish ideas of power and position.

To see church history correctly, we must look beyond the institutions that bore the name *church*. The true church consisted of lesser-known, but faithful, men and women. Some of them were in the great institutional churches. Others lived out their faith on the margins of society. During much of the church's history, we find these sincere followers of Jesus mostly outside the great institutional church, among those whom that church persecuted as heretics.

History is difficult to write accurately. Like every human attempt to record the past, this history is flawed. As historian David Howarth said of his account of the year 1066, "Strictly speaking, every sentence in a story nine centuries old should include the word *perhaps*: nothing is perfectly certain."¹ Once we leave the New Testament, where the word *perhaps* is not necessary, we work from men's imperfect and conflicting records and understandings of history. We try to tell the story as accurately as possible. But we can be certain that if Polycarp or Augustine or Leo the Great were to read what this book says about their times, they would find mistakes. They would also be unhappy with some of its interpretations of history.

Historian Henry Steele Commager said this: "History is a jangle of accidents, blunders, surprises, and absurdities, and so is our knowledge of

it, but if we are to report it at all we must impose some order upon it.” So, as you read, recognize that the dividing of history into chapters, dealing with usually cohesive subjects, is purely arbitrary. Looking back on the events and using the available records, this book tries to impose some order onto what would otherwise be a jumble of recollections, legends, traditions, and (hopefully) facts.

Along with that, this brief history cannot begin to do justice to the events. For any event described in one paragraph in this book, you could often find entire books giving that event in-depth coverage.

To complicate church history even more, we are dealing with spiritual matters. It is difficult to know men’s motives as we look at them centuries later. Jesus said, “By their fruits ye shall know them”; so we know we can judge men’s actions as right or wrong. But from this distance in time and culture, how can we know what motives drove them to those actions?

The church marches forward toward the great goal and desire of the Lord Jesus, expressed in John 17:24: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.” Once it has reached that goal, the church will no longer face the suffering that is such a large part in its journey here. Instead, “in the ages to come [God will] show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

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The Fullness of Time

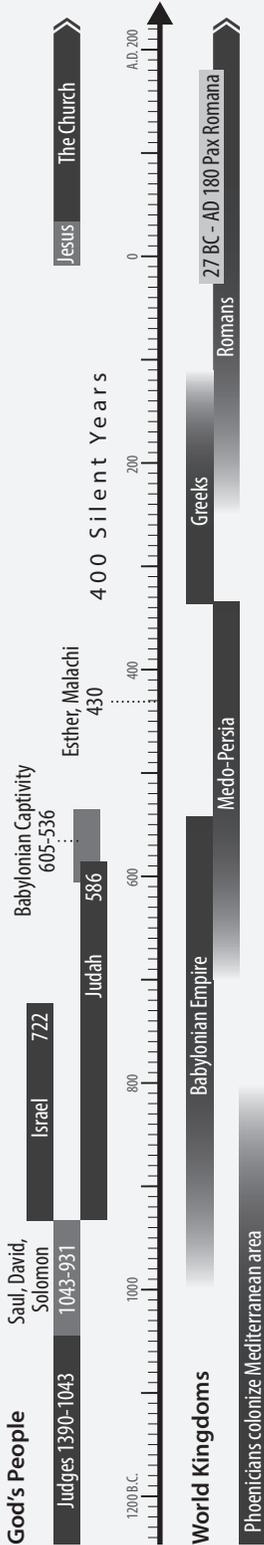
— A.D. 30 —

Luke, the church's first historian, described the birth of the church: "When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they [the followers of Jesus] were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4).

This happened in A.D. 30, or possibly a year before or after. Those events were momentous for over three thousand people in Jerusalem that day, but they were felt only in one small corner of the world. This, however, would soon change. The risen Lord Jesus began the church by sending His Spirit into a small group of waiting disciples. This church would eventually change the world.

God prepared the world for His Son to come. God is perfect, all-knowing, and sovereign. When He planned to send His Son into the world to bring it salvation, He did nothing haphazardly. He sent Jesus at the best possible time. The world was ready for Him in a way in which it had never been ready before.

Paul wrote, "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son" (Galatians 4:4). What does "the fullness of time" mean? What conditions made the Roman province of Judea during the seventh century of Rome's existence an ideal place and time for Jesus to begin His church? God had been working for centuries with many peoples and events to make conditions just right for the church of Jesus Christ to take root and grow.



At Jesus' crucifixion, "a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Luke 23:38). Pilate's use of these three languages on the superscription indicates their importance in Jesus' time. The people who spoke these languages contributed much to preparing the world for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God used the Jews to foretell and bring the Messiah to the world.

The Jews were God's chosen but disobedient people. The Jews were an ancient people who traced their beginnings to Abraham. Some 2,100 years before Christ, God called Abraham to leave prosperous and worldly Ur of the Chaldeans. God led him to Canaan and promised to give the land to his descendants. God repeated His promises to Isaac and to Jacob, and their descendants eventually came to be called *Israel*, after the name God gave to Jacob.

The Jews were not only ancient; they were also proud. They had been God's special people for nearly 2,000 years, but they had forgotten that God had called them to walk humbly with Him (Micah 6:8). Their nation had repeatedly suffered because of idolatry and disobedience, but God in mercy always called them back to Himself.

The Jews looked for the promised Redeemer. God had promised His people a deliverer: the Messiah. In the years leading up to Jesus' birth, the Jews became more and more ready for a deliverer. Their nation now was only one of fifty-plus

provinces making up the Roman Empire. The Jews hated Roman rule, and Rome's legions had to put down numerous rebellions in Judea.

Four hundred years had passed since Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, wrote. Many Jews felt the time was right for the long-awaited Messiah to come and deliver them from Roman rule. Then, in the late A.D. 20s, an outstanding prophet, John the Baptist, began preaching that they should repent and prepare for the kingdom of God. He spoke of One greater than he who would come. Excitement ran high.

Many Jews lived in other parts of the Roman Empire. The Jews' land was a small area on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. But the Jews themselves were scattered over much of the Roman Empire. They had synagogues in many cities across the empire. In cities without synagogues, the few Jews would meet on the Sabbath at some other spot. Philippi, a city in Macedonia, was one of these. When Paul and Barnabas arrived there in the A.D. 50s, they met with the Jews outside the city "by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made" (Acts 16:13).

Because of this widespread Jewish influence, many of the heathen across the empire knew something of the Jewish religion, the one supreme God, and the holiness He required. In many cities, non-Jewish "God-fearers" believed in and worshiped the God of the Jews, not converting to Judaism but attending worship services in their synagogues. The church Jesus began was at first Jewish, and these scattered communities of Jews played an important role in spreading the Gospel beyond Judea.

God used the Greeks to provide a common language and culture.

Alexander spread Greek language and culture. More than three hundred years before Christ's birth, God raised up a strong military leader in Greece. History knows him as Alexander the Great. As is true of many whom history calls great, he was an ungodly man and did many things that were far from great in the eyes of God. After defeating the former empire of the Medes and Persians, Alexander led his armies to victories over much of the area around the eastern Mediterranean Sea from Greece to Egypt. He and his army even forged eastward as far as India, conquering as they went. Alexander established many cities named *Alexandria* in places he conquered; only the one in Egypt became a major city. But he, like all men great or small, eventually died. Others divided his kingdom. And as all earthly kingdoms eventually do, Greece's kingdom ended. In time, the Roman Empire replaced it.

But Alexander and Greece left an important legacy: Greek language and culture. Alexander imported the Greek language, way of thinking, and way of life to every place he conquered. Since the Greeks called their land *Hellas* and themselves *Hellenes*, we often say he *Hellenized* the lands

he conquered. In fact, historians call the years following Alexander the *Hellenistic Age*. In just thirteen

years, Alexander conquered and Hellenized the area around the Mediterranean from Greece to Egypt, and eastward to Persia and nearly to India.

No matter where a traveler went in the Mideast in the decades before Jesus' birth, he found people who knew Greek. In Judea, for example, many people spoke both Greek and Aramaic, a language closely related to the ancient Hebrew.



Alexander the Great as depicted on a modern Greek 100-drachma coin.

History Before It Happened

In the Book of Daniel, God revealed that four great empires would rule between Daniel's day and the time Christ would set up His church.

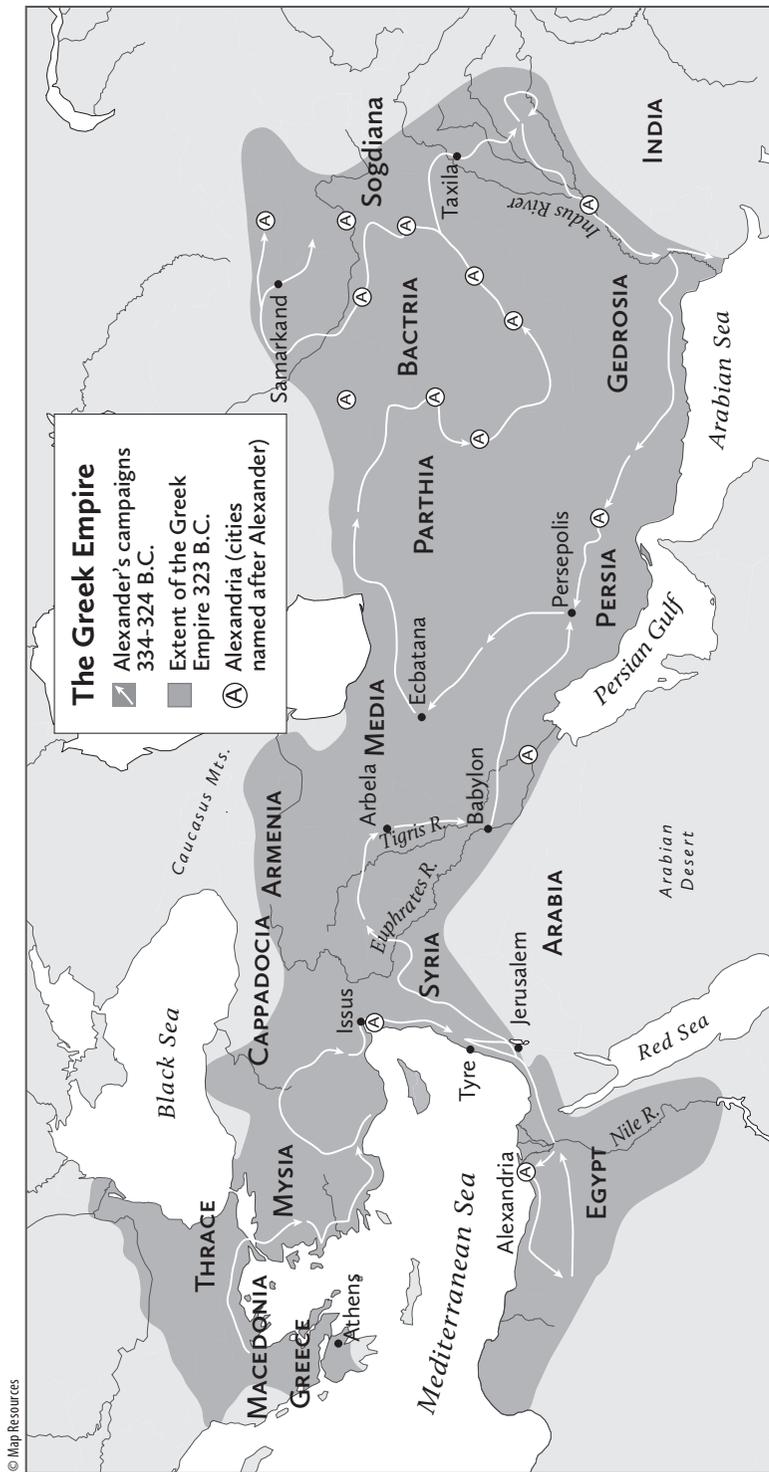
In Daniel 2, God gave King Nebuchadnezzar a dream. The king saw a giant image. The head and shoulders were made of gold and represented Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom.

The breast of the image, made of silver, represented the Medes and Persians who conquered Babylon.

Next were the bronze thighs, representing Greece.

And last were the iron legs, representing the Roman Empire. But the iron was mixed with clay at the feet, symbolizing that Rome would become weak and corrupt.

Then God hewed a rock out of the mountain. This rock smashed all the kingdoms of the image and grew until it filled the world; this represented the church of Jesus Christ.



The Greeks imposed their language and culture on the areas they conquered, but in the areas farthest east Greek disappeared soon after the demise of the empire. Greek language and culture continued mainly in the area that became part of the next world empire: the Roman Empire. Compare this map to the one on page 9 to see which parts overlapped.