

FOURTH EDITION

# TURNING POINTS



*Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*

MARK A. NOLL, DAVID KOMLINE,  
AND HAN-LUEN KANTZER KOMLINE

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# Preface to the Fourth Edition

At Christmas 2001, a college sophomore home on break unwound after the semester's rigors with a good book: Mark Noll's *Turning Points*. Though an economics major at the time, he wanted to learn more about the history of Christianity and had heard of this helpful new introduction. Eventually he would go on to change his major and study with Mark Noll. The rest is history, as they say. But he never suspected as he first read *Turning Points* that one day, almost exactly two decades later, he would help produce a new edition of the book that first sparked his curiosity as an unsuspecting undergrad.

The preparation of this volume involved collaboration among three people. Mark Noll provided the raw material from the previous edition, while David Komline (the curious college student turned church history professor) and Han-luen Kantzer Komline undertook the work of editing, updating, and supplementing. In this process, we each operated out of our main areas of research specialization, Mark and David in the history of Christianity in the United States and Han-luen in the theology of the early church. But all of us wrote out of our experience teaching more widely in the history of Christianity.

In this new version we have endeavored to preserve the features of this book that have continued to draw so many readers in—from students, to scholars, to pastors, to thoughtful everyday Christians—year after year since its first publication in 1997. We have sought to keep the momentum of the stories told in each chapter, and of the larger story of the whole. We have sought to keep the stirring style; the masterful interweaving of massive tracts of material and large-scale traditions; and the bold evaluative claims, which are so helpful in aiding the reader to see the larger significance of events, even as complications of these claims are explicitly discussed and acknowledged. The aim continues to be to convey a historical interpretation that is accessible

and clear without being shallow or misleading. At the same time, we have also sought to keep to the spirit of historical humility characterizing previous versions, acknowledging the limited and imperfect grasp any finite and sinful human being can have on the truth.

Most of the changes in this version were as straightforward as they were essential for a new edition: minor adjustments have been made throughout the main text; references, statistics, and suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter have been updated.

Some changes involved new content. We have integrated more women (from Macrina to Phillis Wheatley) into the book's narrative, replaced some of the hymns and prayers with which the chapters open and close with contributions by women, and inserted additional text boxes highlighting important women in Christian history. Since existing text boxes provided excerpts from core texts by key movers and shakers, integrating more women in this format underscores their significance in the history of Christianity. While acknowledging the work of a few more women cannot undo the social and cultural forces that have led to male dominance, alter what has been documented over the centuries, or change how this documentation has occurred, we hope to have continued the effort begun in previous editions to recover and remember the historical information about women in the history of Christianity that is available to us. The book's narrative has also been lightly revised to highlight further the geographic and cultural diversity of Christianity in its earlier centuries and to underline the implications of the material treated for understanding the global reach of Christianity.

Continued progress in the discipline of the history of Christianity along the lines described in the previous paragraph is an important, ongoing, and collective endeavor. The authors are grateful for the ever-increasing ranks of scholars who attend to these issues, many of whom are cited in the pages that follow.

The concluding lines of Mark Noll's preface to the previous edition hold as true as ever: "I am grateful that the book has proven useful as an orientation to the broad sweep of Christian history, but I am even more pleased when it has prompted readers to go on to the advanced reading and study that every one of the topics, people, and eras mentioned in this book so much deserves. My prayer is that this new edition of *Turning Points* may continue to provide useful instruction about the past, but even more a growing sense of gratitude to the One who lovingly presides over the present and the future as well."

Han-luen Kantzer Koline and David Koline

August 2021

Holland, Michigan, USA

# Introduction

## *The Idea of Turning Points and Reasons for Studying the History of Christianity*

Among the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples were statements recorded in Matthew 28 and Acts 1. These words, though they are important for many other reasons, also outline a framework for the history of Christianity.

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* Nothing could now happen to the followers of Christ that lay outside the reach of his sovereignty; no experiences that the church underwent, no matter how glorious or how mundane, were irrelevant to the living Word of God.

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”* The history of Christianity would always involve at least two related actions: a movement outward to reach places where Christ’s name was hitherto unknown and a movement inward to train hearts in learning more of Christ.

*“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* However the church might wander, whatever individual or corporate sins Christians may commit, the people of God would be sustained not by their own wisdom but by the presence of Christ.

*“You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.”* The Christian faith would take root in particular cultures, and it would profoundly shape individual peoples, regions, and nations. But Christianity itself would belong to none of them. Rather, the church would exist to bear witness to God’s love revealed in Christ and to bear that witness throughout the whole world.

These parting words of Jesus do not, of course, provide details about the later history of Christianity, but they do provide orientation for that history.

The history of Christianity has wound its way through vast regions across vast stretches of time and in a vast variety of forms. But it remains the history of those who worship the Lord of Life, who seek to serve him, and who act as his witnesses.

One of the most interesting ways to grasp a general sense of Christian history (though there are many others) is to examine critical turning points in that story. Identifying such critical turning points is a subjective exercise, for an observer's decisions about what those most important turning points are inevitably depend on what the observer considers to be most important. Yet however subjective it is to select a limited number of turning points as *the* critical moments in Christian history, such an exercise has a number of advantages.

- It provides an opportunity to select, to extract from the immense quantity of resources available for studying the history of Christianity a few striking incidents and so to bring some order to a massively complicated subject.
- It provides an opportunity to highlight, to linger over specific moments so as to display the humanity, the complexity, and the uncertainties that constitute the actual history of the church but that are often obscured in trying to recount the sweep of centuries.
- It provides an opportunity to interpret, to state more specifically why certain events, actions, or incidents may have marked an important fork in the road or signaled a new stage in the outworking of Christian history.

The diverse contexts from which the selection of turning points in this book eventually emerged attest to the advantages that such an organization can bring. Long before publication, some of these turning points formed the framework for organizing an adult education course in a local church. They were then tested in short courses that introduced the sweep of church history to Romanian pastors and lay workers. Finally, they formed the backbone of a one-semester survey of the history of Christianity for college students. For each of these audiences, concentrating on critical turning points turned out to allow both greater focus on specific episodes and more opportunity for interpretive reflection than teaching such material in other ways had enabled.

This book comes directly out of those varied teaching experiences. In each case, concentrating on a few major turning points required sacrificing some breadth of analysis. But attempting to maintain a sharper focus than a survey usually allows, while still attending to large-scale movements of institutions, people, and doctrines in the history of the church, also brought significant advantages.

The book that has grown out of these teaching assignments is intentionally shorter rather than longer. It is written for laypeople and introductory students rather than for scholars. It comes from authors with Christian presuppositions (specifically of the Protestant evangelical variety), but it is designed to be as fair and as nonpartisan as such presuppositions allow. It is also written with an intent to present Christianity as a worldwide religion rather than a faith for just Europeans and North Americans.

The turning points singled out for special attention, as well as the potential turning points for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries discussed in the afterword, are by no means the only ones that could have been selected. A good case could be made for including many other events, for example (as only a partial list):

- the Christianization of Ethiopia under Frumentius in the fourth century;
- the mission of Patrick to Ireland in the early fifth century;
- the introduction of Christianity to China by Bishop Alopen of Syria in 635;
- the foundation of the reforming monastery at Cluny in France in 909;
- the arrival of Eastern Orthodoxy in Kyivan Rus in 988;
- the start of the Crusades in 1095;
- the revival of monasticism through the friars (especially Dominicans and Franciscans) at the start of the thirteenth century;
- the fall of the Byzantine Roman Empire to Islam in 1453;
- any number of significant moments in the missionary proclamation of Christianity beyond the West;
- the production of important translations of the Bible (for example, Jerome into Latin ca. 400, the English translation inspired by Wycliffe at the end of the fourteenth century, Luther's translation into German in 1522, the King James Bible of 1611, or some of the many new translations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries);
- the beginning of independent churches in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century; and
- the emergence of significant protest and humanitarian movements that decisively influenced the shape of later history (for example, the Waldensians in 1173, Conrad Grebel and the Anabaptists in 1525, John Smyth and the Baptists in 1609, George Fox and the Quakers in 1652, William and Catherine Booth and the Salvation Army in 1878, or Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and '60s).

Attempting to select the most important turning points in the history of Christianity is a good exercise in itself. The turning points treated in this book open up vistas onto vitally important matters about church history, but other events could yield different views of the same significant themes. If the book inspires others to think about why the turning points found here are not as important as other possibilities and about how a different turning point might change the overall analysis, it will have been a successful book.

Each chapter begins with a relatively detailed account of the turning point itself, since historical details remind us that “church history” is never just the grand sweep through great eons of magisterial doctrines, clashing principles, or inevitable consequences but is rather the cumulative result of the often blurred thoughts, hesitant actions, and unforeseen consequences experienced by people more or less like ourselves.

Only after attempting to flesh out history in this kind of concrete way do we go on to larger, more general questions of why, how, and so what. Why was this event crucial? How did it relate to what went before and lead on to what followed? And what might we learn from this event today? Answers to these questions must, of necessity, be more general, but they are intended to connect, rather than disconnect, grand historical consequences with sharply focused critical events.

To provide even more context for the turning points, each chapter begins with a hymn and ends with a prayer that was written close to the time of the turning point under discussion. Each chapter also contains several longer quotations from people who took part in the turning point or who were affected by it. These materials, along with maps, charts, and illustrations, are intended in part to provide a more readable book. But they are also meant to put some flesh on the bare bones of history. The great decisions of the Christian past were made by people who sang and prayed with their fellow believers, who experienced the priceless nurture of regular worship and the disillusioning sorrows of church conflict, and who often expounded at great length on the page or in public speech. Their voices do not simply offer window dressing but rather show that the great events of church history always involved real people, for whom regular worship, study of Scripture, participation in the sacraments, and attention to preaching and teaching provided a foundation for what gets written up in books.

But why, one might ask, be concerned about church history at all? Why think that any sort of knowledge about the Christian past—which can so easily seem obscure, petty, confusing, or complex—should interest or assist Christian believers in the present?

Obviously, some people are more naturally inclined to historical study than others. But for believers in the twenty-first century, there are several reasons why at least some attention to the history of Christianity is valuable.

1. Studying the history of Christianity demonstrates repeatedly and concretely the irreducibly historical character of the Christian faith. The Bible itself is rife with explicit statements of this great truth. For instance, in giving the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel, God also reminded them of his action in history on their behalf: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2–3). The vision of the New Testament abounds just as fully with historical realities. The narrative heart of Christian faith, as well as its central dogma, is the truth that the Word became flesh (John 1:14). The apostle John spoke of the Christian faith in the tangible terms of that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (1 John 1:1). Luke wrote at the beginning of his Gospel that the Christian message depends on “the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:1–2). The apostle Paul spoke of events in Jewish history that provided “examples” for believers in the first century (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

The message of these and many other biblical passages is summarized in the key affirmations of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 concerning the historical character of the work of Christ, who for the sake of humanity and our salvation “came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again.”

In a word, Christianity is not captured simply in a set of dogmas, a moral code, or a picture of the universe—though Christianity certainly involves dogmas, morality, and a worldview. Christianity is ultimately rooted in the acts of God in time and space, centrally the acts of God in Christ. As a result, to study the history of Christianity is continually to remember the historical character of Christian faith.

To be sure, there are dangers in taking history seriously. Throughout the history of Christianity, problems have arisen when believers have equated the human acts of the church with the acts of God, when Christians have assumed that using the name of God to justify actions in space and time is the same as God himself acting. But that danger grows from a positive reality: to be a Christian is to have an infinite stake in the events of God-in-Christ, with all that led up to the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and with all that now flows from those realities in the shape of the church’s history.

2. Church history provides perspective on the interpretation of Scripture. In varied forms, all Christians testify to their dependence on the Bible, yet as even the briefest reflection indicates, Christians differ in how they understand and use the Bible. Studying the history of Christianity provides guidance in several ways for discovering the meaning of Scripture.

We may view the Christian past like a gigantic seminar where trusted friends, who have labored long to understand the Scriptures, hold forth in various corners of the room. There is Augustine discoursing on the Trinity; here Patrick and Count von Zinzendorf comparing notes on the power of Light over Darkness; over there Catherine of Siena and Phoebe Palmer discussing the power of holiness; across the room Pope Gregory the Great describing the duties of a pastor; there the Orthodox monk Herman of Alaska and the first African Anglican bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther reflecting on what it means to carry Christianity across cultural boundaries; here Francis hymning the God-ordained goodness of the earth; in a huddle Thomas Aquinas, Simeon the New Theologian, and Blaise Pascal talking about the relation of reason to revelation; there Hildegard of Bingen and Johann Sebastian Bach comparing notes on how to sing the praises of the Lord; here Martin Luther teaching about justification by faith; there John Calvin praising Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King; there Charles Wesley meditating on the love of God; there his mother, Susanna, teaching about the communication of faith to children, and on and on.

If a contemporary believer wants to know the will of God as revealed in Scripture on any of these matters, or on thousands more, it is certainly prudent to study the Bible carefully for oneself. But it is just as prudent to look for help, to realize that the question I am bringing to Scripture has doubtless been asked before and will have been addressed by others who were at least as saintly as I am, at least as patient in pondering the written Word, and at least as knowledgeable about the human heart.

Teachers of foreign languages say that you don't really know your own language unless you have tried to learn a second or a third language. In the same way, students of the Scriptures usually cannot claim to have understood its riches unless they have consulted others about its meaning. In fact, Christians are always consulting one another about the meaning of the Bible, whether by listening to sermons, by reading commentaries, or by meeting for Bible studies of one kind or another. The dimension added by the history of Christianity is the realization that in books of the past may be found a wondrously rich reservoir of engagement with the Scriptures by those who, though dead, still speak of what they found in the sacred texts.

As much as church history offers this kind of direct help in understanding the Scriptures, it also offers a great caution. From the distance supplied by

time, it is often quite easy to see that some biblical interpretations that once seemed utterly persuasive were in fact distortions of Scripture. When we find out, for example, that some believers once thought the Bible clearly taught that the Roman Empire was to usher in the millennium or that Christ would return in 1538 or that Africans were an inherently inferior form of humanity, then we can see the role that specific thought patterns or intellectual conventions of an age have played in interpretations of the Bible.

Recognizing such mistaken interpretations from the past raises for us the possibility that some of our treasured interpretations of Scripture today may similarly depend on conventions of our own era, and also be as irrelevant to the actual message of the Bible as were clearly deviant interpretations of former epochs. For this problem it is difficult to provide examples from the present since the biblical interpretations we hold most dear are likely to be precisely those that we consider to be least influenced by passing fashions. (It is much easier to see where biblical interpretations we reject are dominated by the thought forms of today!) Still, to see in the past that very godly people were able to maintain bizarre interpretations of Scripture should be a caution for us all.

3. The study of church history is also useful as a laboratory for examining Christian interactions with surrounding culture. To take one pressing, if not all-important, example, many Western churches in the twenty-first century have struggled with questions about what kind of music to use in church. Should all the old hymns be dropped in favor of new songs of praise? Should congregations worship with a blend of the two? Should music be provided by an organ? Should it be performed a capella? With electricity? With drums? Study of the past cannot provide easy answers on how best to use music for Christ today. But examining periods like the first half of the sixteenth century—when, in response to the tumults of the Reformation, at least five or six different decisions were made with respect to the use of music in church—would certainly be a help. Roman Catholics took the path of complex music and professional performance, Calvinists of congregational psalm-singing with straightforward tunes, the Orthodox of preserving ancient liturgies, Anabaptists of rejecting all “worldly” forms of music in favor of unaccompanied congregational song, Lutherans of combining professional music with congregational singing, and Anglicans wobbled (typically) among Lutheran, Catholic, and Calvinist styles. These choices helped shape each of these Christian traditions. Seeing what flowed from the decision for traditional, trendy, populist, professional, elaborate, or simple forms of music provides substantial context for trying to think through the issue of church music today.

On a question that can have life-or-death consequences, modern Christians face weighty choices in how to live as believers in various political situations.

Again, the history of Christianity cannot provide definitive answers, but it can provide a welter of contrasting scenarios. Sometimes the church has thrived under tyranny; sometimes tyranny has decimated it. In different eras the church has supported (or attacked) monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy. Churches have both upheld and resisted ruling regimes. Modern believers in California, Iraq, Germany, China, and Kenya are probably going to be looking for direction of different kinds from church history, but all will be able to find some fellow believers who have gone down a road something like theirs before.

And so it is with many other circumstances: Christian engagement with science, Christian attitudes toward people of other ethnic groups, Christian promotion of peace or war, Christian contributions to different forms of economic organization, Christian discussion about what to eat or drink, Christian strategies for organizing the work of God, and so on.

Even a little bit of historical understanding may benefit modern believers attempting to act responsibly in any of these cultural spheres. The first reassurance is that Christians have faced almost all such issues before, at least in some form. The second is that believers—guided by Scripture, church authorities, sage employment of worldly wisdom, and the inner prompting of the Spirit—have often acted wisely and well on such cultural matters. The third is that, even where in retrospect it is clear that Christians have blundered badly in their decisions, the Lord of the church has not abandoned them to their folly but, despite their misbegotten efforts, has remained to sustain his own.

4. Study of the past can be useful, too, in shaping proper Christian attitudes. It is often easier in reviewing the past than in looking at the present to judge between matters that are absolutely essential to genuine Christianity and those that are either of relative importance or not important at all. If we are able to isolate from past generations what was of crucial significance in the church's mission, then we have a chance in the present to order our emotional and spiritual energies with discernment—preserving our deepest commitment only for those aspects of Christian faith that deserve such commitment and acting with ever greater toleration as we move from the center of the faith to its periphery.

Even more important, study of church history should increase our humility about who we are and what we believe. There is nothing the modern church enjoys that is not a gift from previous generations of God's people. To be sure, we modify, adjust, adapt, and expand these gifts from the past, but we do not make them up. If the church is always only one generation from extinction, it also enjoys a peerless inheritance. The more we know about how those gifts have come down to us, the more we may humbly thank God for his faithfulness to past generations, as well as to our own.

Even more than engendering humility, a study of the Christian past can also inspire profound gratitude. Despite a dazzling array of God-honoring triumphs and a wide and deep record of godliness among believers of high estate and low, the sad fact is that the church's history is often a sordid, disgusting tale. Once students push beyond sanitized versions of Christian history to realistic study, it is clear that self-seeking, rebellion, despotism, pettiness, indolence, cowardice, murder (though dignified with God-talk), and the lust for power along with all other lusts have flourished in the church almost as ignobly as in the world at large. A study of church history can be an eye-opener. The heroes of the faith usually have feet of clay—sometimes thighs, hearts, and heads as well. The golden ages of the past usually turn out to be tarnished if they are examined closely enough. Crowding around the heroes of the faith are a lot of villains, and some of them look an awful lot like the heroes.

And so along with all the positive direction and ennobling examples in church history stands also a full record of human wrongdoing. Our response? It could be to despair at the persistent human inability to act toward others and toward God as God has acted toward humanity. It would be better, however, to consider the hidden reality that the long record of Christian weakness and failure reveals, for what it shows is a divine patience broader than any human impatience, a divine forgiveness more powerful than any human offense, and a divine grace deeper than our human sin.

Despite a tangled history, the promise of the Savior concerning the church has been fulfilled: “The gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18). But precisely that tangled history points to the reason why Christianity has endured: “I will build *my* church.”

By way of final introduction, it may be helpful to say a few last words about what follows.

The Christian church of today is wide and, at its best, deep. The authors find themselves within evangelical Protestant streams of the Christian tradition and therefore write from this perspective. At the same time, they have tried to write with as much respect as possible for the widely diverse forms of Christianity that have been practiced with integrity, and continue to be practiced with integrity, in all parts of the Christian church.

Finally, it may be worth observing that the abbreviation “ca.” is from the Latin *circa*, “about,” and is used to designate a date concerning which there is uncertainty.



Each of the chapters ends with a prayer taken from a figure related in some way to the turning point of the chapter. It is therefore appropriate that this introduction do the same by enlisting from the Psalms two parts of a great biblical prayer of Moses concerning the rule of God over human history:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
 throughout all generations.  
 Before the mountains were born  
 or you brought forth the whole world,  
 from everlasting to everlasting you are God.  
 You turn people back to dust,  
 saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."  
 A thousand years in your sight  
 are like a day that has just gone by,  
 or like a watch in the night.  
 Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—  
 they are like the new grass of the morning:  
 In the morning it springs up new,  
 but by evening it is dry and withered. . . .

Teach us to number our days,  
 that we may gain a heart of wisdom.  
 Relent, O LORD! How long will it be?  
 Have compassion on your servants.  
 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,  
 that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.  
 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
 for as many years as we have seen trouble.  
 May your deeds be shown to your servants,  
 your splendor to their children.  
 May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;  
 establish the work of our hands for us—  
 yes, establish the work of our hands. (Ps. 90:1–6, 12–17)

## Further Reading

A short list of further reading concerning the turning point or its broader context follows each chapter. At the end of this introduction, it is appropriate to list a few of the many outstanding general studies and reference works that are now available.

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# 1

## The Church Pushed Out on Its Own

### *The Fall of Jerusalem (70)*

The apostle Paul encouraged the church at Ephesus to “sing and make music from your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Several of Paul’s letters indicate that the singing of “psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit” formed part of the earliest Christian expression of worship, an outpouring of thanksgiving and gratitude to God for Jesus’s saving action on the cross (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16; also 1 Cor. 14:26). Although scant evidence remains concerning the content of hymns during the first century of the church, some scholars have identified “hymnic” passages in the New Testament based on their “elevated prose or poetic style,” as well as their unique vocabulary and doctrinal content.<sup>1</sup> Drawing initially on Jewish expressions of praise, the first Christians quickly began to develop uniquely Christian hymns and their own, separate forms of liturgy.

One of the earliest accounts of the church from an outsider happens to mention hymn singing. Pliny, the Roman governor of the province of Pontus and Bithynia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), describing Christian practice to the emperor Trajan around AD 112, notes that “on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as a god.”<sup>2</sup> Later accounts testify that hymn singing was well established in Christian worship by the second century. As Christian

1. Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 9–10.

2. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

hymnody developed, believers used models from the New Testament like the following lyric passage from Colossians. In it the early Christian community declares the centrality of Jesus in creation and in the church, looking back to Christ's death and resurrection and forward to the restoration of all things in him.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.  
 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth,  
 visible and invisible,  
 whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;  
 all things have been created through him and for him.  
 He is before all things,  
 and in him all things hold together.  
 And he is the head of the body, the church;  
 he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,  
 so that in everything he might have the supremacy.  
 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,  
 and through him to reconcile to himself all things,  
 whether things on earth or things in heaven,  
 by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15–20)



In AD 66 Jewish exasperation with the insensitive rule of Rome at last came to a boil. A long history of strife lay in the background between Jews and the Roman occupiers of Judea. Jewish relations with Greek-speaking settlers, merchants, and imperial officials, who were sheltered by the Roman umbrella, were no better. Rome had frequently raided the temple treasury to make up for what it called unpaid taxes. It had sent as rulers to Palestine Greek-speaking procurators who had neither interest in nor sympathy for Judea or Judaism. It had monopolized positions of wealth and influence. It had pushed the Jewish farmers of the countryside deeper and deeper into debt.

The Jewish revolt began in Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast about fifty miles northwest of Jerusalem. Greek-speakers celebrated a local legal victory by launching an attack on the Jewish quarters. The Roman army stood by passively as Jews were cut down. In Jerusalem, news of these events sparked an immediate reaction. Although the Jews were divided into many factions, radical voices carried the day. Jews attacked the local garrison, slaughtered its defenders, and appealed for an end of the hated subjugation to Rome. When priests and other more moderate Jewish leaders stopped the mandated ritual sacrifices to the Roman emperor, all-out war became inevitable.

Seven years of bloody strife followed. At first the Jewish rebels gained the upper hand. Then, under the tested veteran general Vespasian, Rome sent four legions to discipline its wayward Judean colony. Vespasian advanced cautiously, first securing the Mediterranean ports and then moving slowly against Jerusalem. The noose he was constructing for the Jewish capital relaxed in the summer of 68, when the emperor Nero died, for Vespasian himself was a candidate to succeed him. Events in Rome moved slowly, but eventually Vespasian was handed the palm, and so he left Judea. But this provided only a temporary respite. To carry on the job, Vespasian left his son, Titus, who proved just as forceful as his father.

Once again the Roman legions moved toward Jerusalem. Once again the noose tightened. This time there was no relief. In April of the year 70, the siege began. The suffering of those trapped in Jerusalem became horrific. In September the most zealous Jewish rebels made their last stand in the temple. Fragmentary sources describing the revolt leave conflicting accounts as to Titus's intentions. Josephus (ca. 37–ca. 100), a former Jewish general who had come over to the Romans in the early days of the revolt, wrote that Titus hoped to save the temple as a gesture of Roman moderation. The Christian scholar Sulpicius Severus (ca. 360–ca. 430), who produced a chronicle of the world's history including a brief history of the church up to his time, called attention to an account from the great Roman historian Tacitus (born ca. 55) that told a different story. According to Severus, Titus was eager to destroy the temple “in order that the Jewish and Christian religions might more completely be abolished; for although these religions were mutually hostile, they had nevertheless sprung from the same founders; the Christians were an offshoot of the Jews, and if the root were taken away the stock would easily perish.”<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not Sulpicius Severus got the story right, his comments illuminate a crucial reality about the early history of the Christian church. Titus would go on to wipe out the last remnants of Jewish resistance, including the determined band that held the mountain fortress Masada for nearly three years after the fall of Jerusalem. Later Jewish resistance to Rome would elicit even harsher repression, especially from Emperor Hadrian in response to a revolt in 135. But even before Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed in AD 70, Titus's presumption that Christianity's survival required the Jewish temple had become ancient history. While Christianity in its very earliest years may, in fact, have functioned like an appendage of Judaism, by the year 70 it was moving out on its own. That move to independence from Judaism

3. Quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from Its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 156.

was greatly accelerated by Roman destruction of the Jewish temple and the cessation of the sacrifices that had played such a large role in Jewish worship.

The blows that Vespasian, Titus, Hadrian, and other Roman generals rained upon Jerusalem did not destroy the Christian church. Rather, they liberated the church for its destiny as a universal religion offered to the whole world. Yet from the perspective of the very earliest Christians, Roman decimation of Jerusalem probably seemed like an unspeakable tragedy. Christianity was born in the cradle of Judaism. As indicated by the great meeting reported in Acts 15, the early center of Christianity’s communications, organization, and authority was Jerusalem. The first leaders of the church, like James the half brother of Jesus, who presided over the council in Acts 15, functioned like presidents of a synagogue. The Gospels were written, in large part, as a demonstration of the way Jesus brought Israel’s earlier history to its culmination—Matthew to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophetic promises for the Messiah, Luke to show that Jesus fulfilled the essence of Jewish law, and John to show that the divine revelation to Abraham had culminated in Jesus Christ (John 8:58: “Before Abraham was born, I am”). Several of the early Christian writings were directed to the Jewish diaspora, such as the Epistle



Gunnar Bach Pederson / Wikimedia Commons

This frieze, taken from an archway in Rome, depicts the conquering general Titus and his troops carrying away spoil from the sack of Jerusalem in AD 70.

of James, which begins, “To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” Other early Christian writings that would also become part of the New Testament were preoccupied with negotiating the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. The apostle Paul, especially, argued frequently against those who wanted to maintain the Jewish rite of circumcision as a requirement for salvation. And his interpretations of the Old Testament returned repeatedly to the way in which Jesus’s work brought to a climax God’s consistent offer of grace to the Jews. In sum, as historian W. H. C. Frend has written, “All Christianity at this stage [in the apostolic period] was ‘Jewish Christianity.’ But it was Israel with a difference.”<sup>4</sup>

The great turning point represented by the destruction of Jerusalem was to move Christianity outward, to transform it from a religion shaped in nearly every particular by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance in the broader reaches of the Mediterranean world, and then beyond. The apostles Peter and Paul were probably martyred in Rome under the emperor Nero about the time that Titus and Vespasian were advancing on Jerusalem. Just a few decades later, Rome would replace Jerusalem as the center of Christian communications and authority. Theological discussion likewise turned rapidly away from problems posed by the system of Jewish morality to issues framed by Hellenistic philosophy or Roman conceptions of order. Already by AD 70, Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the Mediterranean, rather than temple worship in Jerusalem, provided the main vehicles for Christian outreach.

When the Romans conquered Jerusalem, most Christians had already left. A tradition, reported in the fourth century by the early church historian Eusebius, says that the Christians had taken refuge in Pella, a substantial town northeast of Jerusalem across the Jordan. Archaeological and later evidence has not verified Eusebius’s report, but regardless of the physical fate of Jewish Christianity, the smashing of Jerusalem accelerated a change in perception. To Christians, to Jews, and soon to many others, it was increasingly clear that Rome’s disruption of Judaism had pushed the Christian church out on its own. As the historian and biblical scholar F. F. Bruce once put it, “In the lands outside Palestine, the decade which ended with the year 70 marked the close of the period when Christianity could be regarded as simply a variety of Judaism. . . . From AD 70 onward the divergence of the paths of Jewish Christianity and orthodox Judaism was decisive. . . . Henceforth the main stream of Christianity must make its independent way in the Gentile world.”<sup>5</sup>

4. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 123.

5. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 157–58.

Now, however, many questions loomed. How would the church define itself? Organize its worship? Find secure authority? Evangelize? Ward off dangerous teaching? In other words, once the “given” framework of Judaism passed away, what would take its place? The three centuries after the fall of Jerusalem provided answers to these questions. We turn now to the means the church employed to find stability and to sustain its growth in the period after the apostles (that is, the “subapostolic” period). But as we do, it is well to be reminded of how symbolically important the Roman destruction of Jerusalem was. By radically disrupting Judaism, the Romans also forced great changes upon the Christian church. The turning point of Christian history at Jerusalem in AD 70 was the church’s emergence on its own.

### **Judaism’s Ongoing Importance for the Church**

Christianity has maintained a special relationship with Judaism. That relationship would later lead to tragic consequences, especially in circumstances where Christians dominated a local culture or nation and where Jews were regarded as second-class citizens. In those circumstances the near kinship of the two religions raised Christian ire, which all too often flamed into violence when Jewish communities went about the practice of their ancestral faith.

Viewed from another perspective, however, the links between Judaism and Christianity can be seen in a more positive light. Although the church would go on to break from Judaism, it is a remarkable fact that the main problems of the church’s early centuries were problems shaped by Judaism. First, Christians asked, What is truth? If the church went beyond Judaism in finding ultimate truth in a personal revelation from God—that is, in the life and work of Jesus Christ—still, the church drew upon its Jewish heritage in believing that divine revelation held the key to life’s most important realities.

Second, Christians asked, How do we know the truth? Again, if in answering this question the church went beyond Judaism to rely on the writings of the New Testament and the testimony of the apostles to Christ, still that trust in a written revelation from God and reliance on leaders who provided authoritative interpretations of that written revelation followed the Jewish pattern of honoring sacred books and studying them diligently.

Third, Christians asked, How do we put the truth into action? If the church went beyond the organization of life around the ritual year of the temple and the activities of local synagogues, still the church’s own development of bishops and the planting of new churches under the leadership of local elders,

priests, or ministers expanded on what had been a Jewish way of nurturing the faithful and organizing to engage the world.

The early church benefited from its ties to Judaism in one other important way. For several decades after AD 70, the church continued to enjoy the legal status that the Jews had won through hard and difficult trial. Normally in the Mediterranean world of that time, nations conquered by Rome were forced to adapt local religions to Roman religion; they had to recognize Rome's gods along with their own. The fierce monotheism of the Jews had therefore been a source of ceaseless conflict from the first century BC, when Rome reached out to enfold Judea. Eventually, Rome came to recognize Judaism as a legal religion, despite Jewish refusal to acknowledge the Roman gods. This status as a *religio licita* protected the Christian church through its association with Judaism, even after the destruction of Jerusalem had in fact driven the two religions apart.

As the Christian church moved out into the Roman world, its Judaic roots would be obscured, but even beneath the surface those roots remained a critical part of what Christianity had been and what it would become.

## Outward from Jerusalem

The stabilization of the church on its own is an involved story. The general conditions of the time certainly influenced the church's movement from self-definition dictated by a Jewish agenda to self-definition appropriate for a missionary religion expanding throughout the Mediterranean world. The Roman peace (*pax Romana*) that had been established by Caesar Augustus, who ruled from 27 BC to AD 14, provided political and social stability, making possible the easy movement of ideas and people. The pervasive Hellenistic culture that accompanied the expansion of Roman political power made a common (*koinē*) form of the Greek language available to all relatively learned people living under Roman rule. The dispersion of Jews from Judea, which had begun several centuries before the time of Christ, meant that communities of God-fearers who studied the Hebrew Scriptures were sprinkled widely throughout the Roman world. By the first century AD there was also a widespread dissatisfaction with the inherited religions of the Mediterranean, which were sinking all too rapidly into either stale philosophical argument or nominal political observance. Women, who were underrepresented in positions of power and authority in the broader culture, also seem to have played an important part in Christianity's precipitous rise. As Christianity spread outward from Judea with increasing speed after the year 70, it took advantage of each of these existing conditions.

Yet in order to expand in this Roman world, the new religion of Christianity needed much more than generally favorable political, social, and religious conditions. The dispersion of Jewish synagogues throughout the Mediterranean might provide a base of operations for Christian missionaries, as the book of Acts describes for Paul and his colleagues. Yet Christian claims about a “crucified Messiah” or about the existence of non-Jews who became “children of Abraham” by faith (Gal. 3:7) offended Jews deeply and drew determined opposition down on the church. In a similar fashion, Rome might provide peaceful conditions for travel and the spread of new ideas, but the empire was also jealous and would not stand by patiently when upstarts insisted that only Jesus the Christ, and not Caesar, should be called Lord. Roman persecution—which flared under Emperor Nero in AD 64, claimed the lives of the famous martyrs Perpetua and Felicity around 203, and was executed systematically under the emperors Decius and Valerian in the mid-third century and Diocletian at the start of the fourth century—took deadly aim at the new faith.

Even more serious than religious opposition from Judaism and persecution from Rome, the early church faced a welter of internal uncertainties. Could clear lines be drawn between true worship of Jesus Christ and the era’s multitude of Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern religions that also featured revelations from a high God and appeals for dedicated moral life on

## Perpetua on Christian Identity

*The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* describes the martyrdom of Christians in the North African city of Carthage in 203. The final text, possibly edited by Tertullian, includes a lengthy section in Perpetua’s own words, the earliest writing we have by a Christian woman. In this short excerpt from that longer section, she refuses to deny her Christian identity, despite her father’s pleadings.

“While,” she said, “we were still with the prosecutors, my father, because of his love for me, wanted to change my mind and shake my resolve. ‘Father,’ I said, ‘do you see this vessel lying here, for example, is it a pitcher or something else?’ ‘I see it,’ he said. And I said to him: ‘Can it be called by another name other than what it is?’ And he said: ‘No.’ ‘In the same way, I am unable to call myself other than what I am, a Christian.’ Then my father, angered by this name, threw himself at me, in order to gouge out my eyes. But he only alarmed me and he left me defeated, along with the arguments of the devil. Then for a few days, freed from my father, I gave thanks to the Lord and was refreshed by my father’s absence. In the space of a few days we were baptized.”<sup>a</sup>

a. Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126. This translation has been slightly adjusted after consulting the Latin text (Heffernan, 105).

earth? Could the intense spiritual life of Christianity be distinguished from the colorful spirituality of groups that modern historians call Gnostic for their reliance on various forms of secret wisdom (*gnōsis*)? Toward the end of the second century, the Christian apologist Irenaeus (ca. 130–ca. 200) listed 217 forms of such religions, some of which borrowed liberally from Christian doctrines or practices. Could the church, moreover, succeed in promoting the kind of moral purity that Jesus and the apostles described as appropriate for servants of God? The moral world into which the church was moving was one in which leaders, especially Roman emperors, often indulged in the most degenerate and oppressive practices, and ordinary people were often more than eager to follow the leader.

So it was that, beset by external foes and menaced by ideas and practices threatening its internal character, the church moved out into the wider world. Once stripped of a Jewish framework by the events involved in the destruction of Jerusalem, how would the church make its way? Answers to these life-threatening challenges could be perceived, at least in outline, within one or two generations after the deaths of the apostles Peter and Paul, which probably occurred under Nero in the years 64–67.

By the early second century, Ignatius (ca. 35–ca. 107 or perhaps later), leader of the Christian church in Antioch of Syria, could urge fellow believers to “follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the father.”<sup>6</sup> His injunction revealed the emergence of a system of church organization constructed around locally powerful bishops who were assuming the tasks of guiding the faithful in their localities while deliberating with fellow bishops in other places about the general direction of the church.

At least by the time Ignatius made this reference to bishops, there were also circulating among the expanding Christian congregations two collections of Christian documents—one, the fourfold Gospel account of the life of Christ recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the other a collection containing copies of ten to thirteen letters from the apostle Paul. It was not long until these two collections were permanently joined by the Acts of the Apostles to constitute a “new testament” of sacred writings to set alongside the “old testament” of the Hebrew Scriptures and so provide authoritative written guidance for the church.

In roughly the same period that witnessed the evolution of an episcopal system of church organization and a scriptural record of Christ and the meaning of his life, concise summaries of what it meant to be a Christian or to join a local congregation also began to appear. These creeds (from the

6. Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 67.



## The Spread of Early Christianity

- Extent of Christian communities by first century AD
- Extent of Christian communities by AD 185 (the time of Irenaeus)
- Early centers of Christianity
- Boundary of the Roman Empire for most of the first and second centuries AD
- Boundary of the Roman Empire AD 114–17



Latin *credo*, “I believe,” or *credimus*, “we believe”) would prove immensely useful both as boundary markers of Christian faith and as introductions to its character for inquirers or the children of believers.

Along with the episcopate and the canon of Scripture, the early creeds became the anchors that stabilized the church in its earliest subapostolic history. The means by which the church came into its own—after the climactic events in Jerusalem of AD 70 and in the face of external and internal pressure—can thus be summarized simply as *creed*, *canon*, and *episcopacy*. But in each case a simple word conceals historical development that was as complex as it was important.

### Alternative Perspectives on Earliest Christian History

Two large difficulties stand in the way of interpreting the nature of this early history. First is the fact that hard evidence for the years immediately following the New Testament era is scarce. Historians and theologians are thus required to fill in with imagination, speculation, or informed hunches what went on between the era illuminated by the New Testament and the period from about 110, when the flow of evidence, though at first only a trickle, begins again.

The second difficulty is that the hard evidence that does exist for early subapostolic history is simply not definite or full enough to answer many of the legitimate questions we are eager to ask about this early Christian era. The result is that historical accounts of this period are even more dependent on the framework of meaning—the stance of the interpreter—brought to bear on these questions than is usually the case for historical inquiry. The most obvious difficulties created by alternative frameworks of meaning divide Christian from non-Christian accounts. The most interesting differences divide the various branches of Christianity from each other.

Responsible historians, Christian or not, try to base their accounts of the early church as securely as possible on the best available evidence. Yet precisely because that evidence is so sparse, the standpoint of the historians—that is, the systems of belief and assumption that historians bring to their tasks—becomes a most important factor for interpretations of early Christian history. Take as an example the relatively scant information that exists for how the various writings that now make up the New Testament were pulled together into one authoritative collection. Christians who believe that God was using those documents to draw men and women to faith in his Son are likely to interpret the evidence that does exist at least in part as human responses to the authentic power of God. Non-Christian historians, who may be secularists or followers of another religion, might have great respect for

the integrity of the early Christians but will probably regard the construction of the New Testament as a process determined entirely by actions, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and decisions arising from human circumstances. Historians of whatever sort should be able to cooperate in research on issues related to individual questions of fact—for example, it is now generally agreed that we have seven authentic letters by Ignatius, that he wrote these letters at some point in the first half of the second century, and that some of them quote the Gospel of Matthew as if it were sacred Scripture. But historians are likely to diverge when it comes to broader interpretations of what was going on—in this instance, a Christian conclusion that Ignatius was responding to the work of the Holy Spirit in promoting the revelation of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, as opposed to a non-Christian conclusion that factors limited to the character of the written Gospel and to Ignatius’s situation provide all the explanation necessary for his use of the book of Matthew.

Differences among Christians are more interesting (at least to Christians) because they occur among people who agree that early church practices, writings, and activities can be expressions of divine, as well as human, purposes. Such differences grow out of alternative understandings of the Christian faith. In turn, these differences of broad theological perspective shape the understanding of the evidence available from the early church.

To oversimplify, it is possible to describe a Roman Catholic, an Orthodox, and a Protestant interpretation of early Christian history, each of which depends on basic assumptions concerning the way God guides the church. Catholic belief in the apostolic origin of church tradition and the apostolic character of the bishop’s office means that Catholic interpretations of the early church are likely to see a more central, more positive role for the actions of the early bishops in constructing the institutions, organizing the sacred writings, and guiding the worship of believers. By contrast, Orthodox belief in God’s guidance of the church through organic processes of worship, liturgy, and corporate action means that Orthodox interpretations of the early church are likely to see common patterns of prayer, gradually evolving habits in using the New Testament, and consensus growing up around creedal statements as the crucial shapers of early Christian history. Again by contrast, Protestant belief in the normative power of Scripture along with Protestant suspicion of human institutions means that Protestant interpretations of the early church are likely to stress the foundational role of the New Testament writings and that Protestants are likely to be more willing than either Catholics or the Orthodox to find flaws in early church practices or decisions.

It is important to remember that these alternative perspectives represent shades of difference. Christians are almost universally united in believing

that the early church was built on an *apostolic* foundation—that is, on the work that God began in the apostles through the presence of Christ and then carried on through the testimony of those apostles to Christ as recorded in the New Testament and as worked out in the institutions of the early church. For Roman Catholics, apostolicity continues as a living authority in Scripture and among the bishops, and so guides the creation and use of creeds. For the Orthodox, apostolicity marks the organic development of the whole church in Scripture, episcopacy, and creeds. For Protestants, apostolicity is visible most directly in the New Testament and then as a reflection from the New Testament in the work of the bishops and the creeds of the church.

The practical difference among these views lies in attitudes toward the three stabilizing elements of canon, episcopacy, and creed. Each tradition honors all three, but Protestants lay greatest stress on the apostolicity of the New Testament, Roman Catholics on the outworking of apostolicity through the agency of the bishops, and the Orthodox on the general apostolic guidance of the church that became most visible in the promulgation of the ecumenical creeds of the fourth and later centuries.

These differences in perspective may seem abstruse, but especially given the relative scarcity of hard evidence for the history of the church in the period roughly 70/80 through 130/140, they mean a great deal for interpreting the story of the church during the subapostolic period.

## Canon

The word “canon” is derived from a Greek term, perhaps borrowed from the Phoenicians; it probably originally meant a rod or ruler for measuring objects. Its application to the books of the Bible can thus be traced to the series of gradations found on measuring rods (hence multiple individual items gathered for one purpose) and, even more importantly, to the function of such measures as rules or norms (hence the sense of “canon” as a standard). The first recorded use of the word for the authoritative list of books in the Bible came in the year 367 from Athanasius (ca. 296–373), bishop of Alexandria in North Africa. Well before that time, however, the church had been using writings concerning the life and work of Christ. It had also been moving toward consensus as to which of those writings should be regarded as the authoritative norm for Christian beliefs and practices. As the church did so, it both reaffirmed its connection to Judaism (by imitating the Jews in holding to a select list of sacred books) and broke decisively with the Jewish past (by claiming that the Hebrew Scriptures were incomplete in themselves without the addition of the New Testament).

The circumstances that led to the definition of a New Testament canon grew out of the realities of the church's life. Such a definition provided a number of practical benefits. The emergence of a canon provided standards for worship and models for prayers, liturgies, and sermons. It indicated appropriate reading material for public and private devotion. It established a theological standard for responding to non-Christian critics and for adjudicating doctrinal disputes within the church's ranks, and it designated a set text to

## Athanasius on the Canon (AD 367)

Inasmuch as certain people have attempted to set in order for themselves the so-called apocryphal books and to mix these with the divinely inspired Scripture, about which we are convinced it is just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and assistants of the Word handed down to our ancestors, it seemed good to me, because I have been urged by genuine brothers and sisters and instructed from the beginning, to set forth in order the books that are canonized, transmitted, and believed to be divine, so that those who have been deceived might condemn the persons who led them astray, and those who have remained pure might rejoice to be reminded (of these things). There are, then, belonging to the Old Testament in number a total of twenty-two, for, as I have heard, it has been handed down that this is the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In order and by name they are as follows. . . .

Again, one should not hesitate to name the books of the New Testament. For these are the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; then after these, Acts of the Apostles and seven letters, called catholic, by the apostles, namely: one by James; two by Peter; then three by John; and after these, one by Jude. After these there are fourteen letters by the apostle Paul, written in this order: first to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; and after these, to the Galatians; and next to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians and to the Colossians; and after these, two to the Thessalonians; and that to the Hebrews; and additionally, two to Timothy, one to Titus, and finally that to Philemon, one. And again, the Revelation of John.

These are the springs of salvation, so that someone who thirsts may be satisfied by the words they contain. In these books alone the teaching of piety is proclaimed. Let no one add or subtract anything from them. . . .

But for the sake of greater accuracy, I add this, writing from necessity. There are other books, outside of the preceding, which have not been canonized, but have been prescribed by the ancestors to be read to those who newly join us and want to be instructed in the word of piety: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, the book called Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd.

Nevertheless, beloved, the former books are canonized; the latter are (only) read.<sup>a</sup>

a. From Athanasius's thirty-ninth Festal Letter, circulated in 367, as quoted in Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 121–26.

translate as the gospel message moved out of the Hellenistic Mediterranean into the Latin West and then farther east into Asia and north into Europe. In all of these ways, an established list of authoritative writings about Christ and the meaning of his work promised to facilitate the life of the church.

The beginnings of the process by which a select list of writings was treated as an authoritative New Testament can be glimpsed in the New Testament itself, where the Second Epistle of Peter speaks of Paul's writings as subject to the same distortions that "ignorant and unstable people" visit upon "the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16). Very early in the subapostolic period, collections of Paul's writings were circulating among the churches, soon to be joined (certainly not much later than AD 100) by the four Gospels, which were also circulating as a unit. Toward the end of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons offered an interesting and, to believers of his day, plausible account of why four Gospels existed to tell of the life of Christ: "Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, and since the church has spread throughout the whole world, and since the 'pillar and bulwark' [1 Tim. 3:15] of the Church is the gospel and the Spirit of life; it is fitting that she has four pillars, breathing out immortality in all directions and giving new life to humankind. From this it is evident that the Word, . . . who was manifested to humanity, has given us the gospel under four viewpoints, which are nonetheless bound together by one Spirit."<sup>7</sup>

As comfortable as it would make Protestants to think that the New Testament always existed with firm, crisp boundaries marking it off from all other kinds of literature, the existing historical evidence shows that, though the Pauline collection and the fourfold Gospel collection were used as authoritative documents from a very early period, it took a process of several centuries to define the precise shape of the New Testament.

In that process, as so often in Christian history, the challenge of heresy demonstrated the importance of later ecclesial developments. The first known assertion of a definite canon of Christian writings appeared in Rome in about the year 144. The author was Marcion (d. ca. 160), who had traveled to Rome from Asia Minor with a message about the God of love. Marcion's teaching appeared to be Christian because he held that Jesus Christ revealed divine love to its fullest extent. But when leaders of the church in Rome found out the details of Marcion's message, they were appalled, for it turned out that Marcion's God of love was a violent opponent of the evil deity of law who dominated the Old Testament. As part of his message, Marcion claimed to define the limits of an authoritative Scripture concerning Christ. For Marcion,

7. James R. Payton Jr., *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of "Against Heresies"* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 65.

that Scripture contained an edited version of the Gospel of Luke (which cut out all of Jesus’s references to the Old Testament) and ten letters of Paul (who supposedly showed that grace triumphs over law). Later commentators have noted that Marcion was the first biblical critic, though sadly not the last, to do his most important work with a penknife.

Marcion’s attack on the Gospels and some of the epistles that the church, through an intuitive process, had already been treating as Scripture preceded several efforts to define the sacred writings more carefully. Within a generation of Marcion’s death, in about 160, several notable developments occurred. Irenaeus was joined by the apologists Justin (ca. 100–ca. 165) and Justin’s pupil Tatian (second century) in defending the fourfold Gospel of Matthew, Mark, John, and a full text of Luke. Other Christian leaders paid Marcion the sincerest form of flattery by imitating his publication of lists setting out the contents of a New Testament. The earliest of these lists that has yet been discovered likely stems from Rome toward the end of the second century. It was published in 1740 by Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750), an Italian priest and archaeologist, and is therefore known as the Muratorian Canon.

This document helps to confirm that by the year 200 there existed a set of authoritative Christian writings substantially, but not exactly, like what we now recognize as the New Testament. Although the language of the Muratorian Canon is not always entirely clear, the standard interpretations of it highlight a series of categories revealing continuity and discontinuities with the later New Testament. More specifically, the Muratorian Canon mentions all of the writings of our contemporary New Testament save four and includes two other books that ultimately dropped out. During this period, there was a consensus on a crucial core of biblical texts even as discernment regarding a number of other texts that would eventually be included in the canon was ongoing. The current ordering of the New Testament roughly reflects this gradual discernment process, with books that were recognized as authoritative early on coming first in the canonical ordering and those that required the most extended period of testing and evaluation coming toward the end.

*Books in the Muratorian Canon also in the later New Testament*—the four Gospels; Acts; letters of Paul to seven churches (in this order: Corinthians [two], Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, Thessalonians [two], and Romans); letters of Paul to Philemon, Titus, and Timothy [two]; Jude; 1, 2, and 3 John; and the Apocalypse of John.

*Books in the Muratorian Canon not in the later New Testament*—the Wisdom of Solomon, the Apocalypse of Peter (although acknowledging that “some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church”).

*Books in the fixed New Testament not mentioned in the Muratorian Canon*—1 and 2 Peter, James, Hebrews.

*Writings otherwise discussed in the Muratorian Canon*—The canon says that the Shepherd of Hermas “ought indeed to be read” privately but does not deserve to be listed with the writings of the “prophets” and “apostles” or read publicly in church. The document is cut off as it begins to list writings that are rejected, such as a new book of psalms written by followers of Marcion.<sup>8</sup>

From the end of the second century, movement to what became the fixed New Testament canon picked up speed. Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254), the learned theologian from Alexandria, used all twenty-seven of the canonical New Testament books but noted lingering disputes over Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation, as well as over books that never secured a full canonical status, like the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache (or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), and the Gospel to the Hebrews (a different book from the Epistle to the Hebrews in our New Testament). In the early fourth century, the pioneering church historian Eusebius (ca. 260–ca. 340) commented specifically on the book of Revelation. He noted that, since its authorship was sometimes questioned (was it really written by John, the beloved disciple?), it remained with James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude as books widely used in the church but still not fully classed with the Gospels, Acts, Paul’s writings, 1 Peter, and 1 John as universally accepted. By the end of that same century, lists of New Testament writings with the final twenty-seven books had become standard, as in the Easter letter from Bishop Athanasius in 367 and a document from a synod held in 397 at Carthage in North Africa.

What the lengthy process of fine-tuning the New Testament canon shows is that the main writings about Christ and the early life of the church under the apostles were being used everywhere as Scripture, but also that definitive decisions about every last book were not nearly as important to those who actually lived through these centuries as they would become to later historians and theologians. The key throughout was apostolicity. Where a writing was held to come directly from a disciple of Christ, to arise from the circle or direct influence of one chosen personally by Jesus (for example, the Gospel of Mark was widely held to derive from Peter’s eyewitness reports), or to express in a pure form the message of the apostles about Christ, that writing was accepted as canonical. For those Christian writings where the apostolicity of either author or content was in doubt, recognition as a canonical book could

8. See Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity*, 178–82.

take much longer. Thus, the fact that the book of Hebrews does not begin by announcing the name of its author delayed its full acceptance as Scripture, though the apostolic content of the book and the growing conviction that Paul was the author eventually won the day. (Most modern scholars do not think that Paul was the author.) Where the church concluded that a writing was not apostolic, that work could continue to be recommended for private use, but not as a writing included in the canonical standard.

The fixing of the New Testament canon was an extraordinarily important step in stabilizing the early church. Even a brief examination of that process, however, shows that the foundation provided by writings testifying authentically to the power at work in Christ and communicated by Christ to the church through the testimony of the apostles was critically important to the early Christians as they moved out into the Mediterranean world.

## Episcopacy

Something of the same reasoning, though with different results, also surrounded the rise of the bishops as the key agents for organizing the sub-apostolic church. The interpretive difficulty with respect to the early history of the episcopate is that the forms of church order in the New Testament are quite flexible, while only a half century later, when evidence once again becomes available, a fairly well-defined rule of the church by bishops is firmly in place. Again, in the absence of a detailed consecutive chain of fact, broader frameworks of belief must be relied on to fill in the gaps.

The New Testament reveals a relatively fluid situation with respect to church order. Especially in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), which probably reflect a situation from the mid-60s or slightly later, we see the church organized under bishops (*episkopoi*), deacons (*diakonoi*), presiding officers (*hēgoumenoi*), and elders (*presbyteroi*). The apostle Paul commissions elders in some of his visits to local churches and provides guidelines for how “bishops” or “elders” and “deacons” are to do their work of guiding worship and caring for the poor. But the clear assignment of duties that is found by the end of the second century—especially of bishops presiding over a church or churches of a given region—is unknown as such in the New Testament.

The emergence of a hierarchical administration centered on the bishops can be observed in the words of three prominent early church fathers. We have already seen that Ignatius, as early as 112, could urge believers to “follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father.” In the same letter, Ignatius intentionally differentiated among church offices when he went on to say,