History of the Church: SUMMARY, PART I

Christian historians interpret history from their own perspective, no matter their own particular Christian tradition or how objective their approach. The following summary of the first one thousand years of the church presents church history from an Orthodox perspective. It hits the high points, and attempts to give a view of the larger trends and movements. For details on particular persons or events, see the course outline.

The two main backgrounds to the Christian Church are the Jewish and the Greco-Roman. Plenty of modern historical works have examined each of these backgrounds.[1] An appreciation of these cultural traditions is essential to understanding the beginnings of the Church at all levels. When the evangelists Matthew and Luke provided genealogies toward the beginning of their gospels, they were connecting their stories to one that goes all the way back. The Jewish/Hebrew background provided early Christians with a God, a religious devotion, a set of scriptures, and a religious authority structure from which they drew many of their own concepts.

The Christian Church began in the Roman Empire at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The empire was the immediate context, but it was preceded in the eastern Mediterranean by centuries of Hellenistic cultural dominance. After the conquests of Alexander the Great (333-323 B.C.), the Middle East was dominated by rulers of Greek cultural heritage (referred to as "Hellenistic"). One of the cultural capitals of the Hellenistic Age would soon become the greatest city in the region—Alexandria. A huge lighthouse led ships into the harbor of Alexander's city. Alexandria's museum and library provided access to the fruits of Greek civilization (and other civilizations). These institutions were patronized by the kings of the Ptolemaic Dynasty that ruled Egypt after Alexander's death. The heirs of Greek culture also founded Antioch, capital of the Seleucid Dynasty in Syria. Both cities later hosted large Christian populations, and their powerful churches would become rivals during theological controversies.

Alexandria hosted the largest Jewish community anywhere. Greek-speaking Jews provided the basic text that would serve as the Old Testament scriptures of the Church—the Septuagint (LXX). The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures, which began in the 200s and extended into the first century B.C. Along with many other Jewish writings, these translations formed part of the adjustment of non-Greeks to the Greek language. Although it did not replace local languages, Greek became the common language of people in the eastern Mediterranean and would be used by the authors of the New Testament.

The New Testament is the basic document for earliest church history, and it contains a book of history (Acts) that, in addition to the gospels, initiates the historical tradition within Christianity. There is no attempt here to cover the whole New Testament, which has received much scholarly inquiry in the nearly two thousand years since it appeared. Some important foundations for the church should be mentioned, including its organization and leadership. A specific group of leaders was chosen by Christ, according

[1] See Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, Grand Rapids. MI: Eerdmans, 3rd ed. (2003).

to the gospels, to witness to the coming Kingdom of God. The "Twelve" (as they were called) were "ones sent" (*apostolos*) into the world on a mission to make disciples of all nations. The book of Acts continues the gospel account, focusing on the apostles' ministry.

The connection between the apostles and the "bishops" of the church is clear from the language used in Acts and other New Testament books. When Judas leaves the group of apostles through his betrayal of Christ, Peter calls for another to take his "bishoprick" (*episkope*) (Acts 1.20). The Greek words *episkopos* (meaning "overseer") and *episkope* (meaning the position of the overseer) are the origin of the word "bishop" in English. The role of the bishop is described in the New Testament letters to Timothy and Titus. From early in the church's history, the bishop was the leader of the local church assembly, and bishops met in councils to decide church-wide issues. The first council met in Jerusalem as described in Acts 15.

Besides the bishops, other leaders of the church were the "priests" (from *presbyteros*, meaning "elder"). The priests appear in the New Testament alongside the bishops as ministers to the church. "Deacons" (from *diakonos*, meanings "server") assisted bishops and priests in their duties. The earliest church fathers, such as Ignatius of Antioch (d. 115), noted the importance of bishops in maintaining order in the church. Other sources indicated that bishops were the leaders of the main congregations of Christians (in the larger cities), while priests represented bishops in the smaller cities and towns.

Leading figures in the early church also included the "martyrs" (from *martyros*, meaning "witness"). The martyrs were those who died for their faith in Christ. Like the Old Testament figures described in the letter to the Hebrews (12.1), they witnessed to their faith through perseverance, and like the saints under the altar in John's vision of heaven (Rev. 6.9-10), they petitioned God concerning events on earth. Emperor Nero (r.54-68) instigated the persecution in Rome in which Peter and Paul died. Polycarp of Smyrna (c.69-c.155) provides an example of a martyr whose memory was actively cultivated by the early church.

The second and third centuries of the Christian era saw the church growing despite opponents and some official persecutions. Jews and pagans often found themselves in opposition to the new faith. Roman emperors responded to Christianity with everything from indifference to fierce opposition. True empire-wide persecution of Christians did not come until Emperor Decius (r.249-251). One of the most deceptive opponents of the early church was the Gnostic movement. This movement seems to defy definition and it was not well organized. It tried to merge with Orthodox Christianity, portraying Christ as a teacher of *gnosis* (meaning "knowledge") concerning how to free oneself from material existence. The anti-material emphasis of the Gnostics was opposed by church fathers like Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c.200), a disciple of Polycarp, who described the difference between Christianity and Gnosticism and urged conformity to the teachings of the apostles and their successors (the bishops).

One theologian and church father not to be overlooked is Origen (c.185-254). A Christian from Alexandria, Origen suffered under the persecution of Decius but survived for a few years. Origen's theology depended too heavily on certain Greek philosophical ideas, and Origenist doctrines like universal salvation and preexistence of souls would be condemned officially by the church hundreds of years later. Along with Justin Martyr, Origen was one of the church fathers who discussed the "Logos doctrine" (see John 1.1). Christ is the *logos* (often translated as "word") of God, and became incarnate in Jesus (obvious from John's gospel). Before the coming of Christ in the flesh, however, the logos of God was active throughout creation and in certain wise human beings. Some degree of divine knowledge was therefore available to god-fearing people before Christ, even if they were not directly inspired like the Hebrew prophets.

The study of church history changes for the period after Emperor Constantine came to power (r.324-337) and made the empire officially pro-Christian. Historical documents for the church became much more common, making scholarship easier in one sense. But church politics grew more complicated as the church and the state formed an alliance. The process of "Christianization" of the empire was neither short nor smooth, and many pagans held onto power as long as they could. Heresies among powerful Romans caused turmoil in the church, but they also led to ecumenical (meaning "world-wide") councils that defined the faith. Some of Constantine's successors were Arians, who taught Christ was a created being. The first ecumenical council (Nicea I in 325) was called by Constantine, condemned Arius (an Alexandrian priest), and established the first part of the "Nicene Creed," but the theological debate was just getting started. Athanasius of Alexandria (c.300-373) led the Orthodox opposition to Arianism before the second ecumenical council in 381 (Constantinople I). Athanasius authored several important theological treatises, including "On the Incarnation." He also named the 27 books of the New Testament that are in today's Bible, though the debate over the canon of scripture went on for some time. At the council of Constantinople I, the divine essence of all three persons of the Trinity was confirmed and the creed was completed. The council affirmed the trinitarian theology of the three "Cappadocian" church fathers Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

The fourth century saw the development of Christianity in two opposite directions—worldly power and monasticism. Constantine established a new, eastern capital at Byzantion (Constantinople) in 330. This would be the capital of the East Roman Empire for over 1000 years. Anthony of Egypt (c.250-356), considered the "Father of Monasticism," provided the example for ascetic warriors who abandoned Constantine's civilization and struggled with dark forces in the desert. As for church leaders, bishops of large and powerful cities held honorary positions of authority among the bishops, although any bishop's vote in a council was considered equal. John Chrysostom ("golden-mouthed") was an important bishop of Constantinople (398-407). Renowned as a preacher, John's "On the Priesthood" became a classic work for the clergy, and his liturgical compositions established the most commonly used Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

Theological controversies became even more complicated in the fifth century. Controversy mainly troubled the Eastern Empire (called "Byzantium" or the "Byzantine Empire" by modern historians), as the western half increasingly came under barbarian control. The western half of the church did deal with the heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagius (c.354-420), a monk from Britain, denied the effect of Original Sin on the human will. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, developed a strong view of Original Sin in his response to Pelagius, saying the will was incapable of choosing to follow God without the help of divine grace. The moderate view of John Cassian, a monk in southern Gaul, explained the human struggle against sin as a cooperation between the human will and God's grace. On this and many other matters, Augustine's theology achieved lasting fame in western Christianity through his many Latin writings (including "Confessions" and "City of God").

In the East, the church moderated between the different views of Christ's nature expressed by theologians from Antioch and Alexandria. Note that the bishops of Antioch and Alexandria, along with those of Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome, became the five most powerful and influential in the church, later called "patriarchs." Nestorius, from Antioch, became bishop of Constantinople but his Christology separated the two natures of Christ (human and divine). The Council of Ephesus (431) proclaimed Mary to be "Theotokos" (God-bearer) against Nestorius' view that she was mother of only the human "half," therefore merely "Christotokos." Nestorius' followers gained prominence in Persian territory outside the Roman borders. This council also condemned Pelagianism.

Bishop Cyril of Alexandria led the opposition to Nestorius but his own theological emphasis tended toward the opposite extreme. Some of his successors taught a theology often labeled "Monophysite" (one nature), which minimized the human nature of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon (451) condemned Monophysitism, affirming a writing called the "Tome" by bishop Leo I of Rome. Leo had led Rome's Christians when faced by a barbarian attack and was greatly honored as a bishop. The Council of Chalcedon, unfortunately, alienated Alexandria and many Egyptian Christians.

The fifth century saw Orthodox Christianity spreading in western Europe. Patrick evangelized Ireland, but England came under the rule of pagan Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons did not begin adopting Christianity until the late sixth century. The focus of Christianity shifted northward in western Europe as the last Roman Emperor was dethroned in favor of a barbarian in 476. Clovis, king of the Franks who moved into what is now northern France, became a Christian in about 500.

The monastic spiritual tradition was developing during these centuries. In addition to certain spiritual fathers in Egypt, notable monks included Sabas in Palestine and Benedict of Nursia in Italy. Both of these men helped found spiritual traditions that would become mainstream in the Eastern and Western churches. Politically, the sixth-century church in the east was dominated by Emperor Justinian (r.527-565). Justinian built the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and presided over a fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II in 553) that condemned certain Origenist heresies. Pope

Gregory I of Rome (c.590-604) was known for his “Dialogues” (saints’ lives) and for composing the presanctified liturgy used by the Orthodox today.

The Byzantine Empire suffered a decline in the next couple of centuries, while Western Christendom slowly rose to a powerful position. Much Middle Eastern, North African, and Spanish territory was lost to the Muslim Arabs. In the capital, Emperor Constans II promoted the Monothelite heresy, persecuting both Pope Martin I and Maximus the Confessor who defended Orthodoxy. Monothelitism minimized the role of the human will of Christ in an attempt to compromise with the Monophysites. The sixth ecumenical council (Constantinople III in 680-681) condemned Monothelitism. The great spiritual writer John Climacus, abbot of the monastery at Mt. Sinai, wrote “Ladder of Divine Ascent” during the first half of the seventh century.

In the eighth century the Frankish kingdom developed into the main defender of Christian interests in western Europe. The forces of Charles Martel defeated the Muslim incursion into Frankish territory in 732. His grandson Charles the Great (or “Charlemagne”) ruled over a strong and expanding kingdom, and he was crowned “emperor” by Pope Leo III in 800. One reason for naming a western emperor was that the eastern emperors had been promoting heretical doctrines. The iconoclast heresy condemned icons as idolatry, and several Byzantine emperors included monks and monasteries among their targets for persecution. Defenders of icons such as John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite led the Orthodox response. The controversy was not even put to rest by the seventh ecumenical council (Nicea II in 787) because the last iconoclast emperor ruled until 842. The question of what motivated iconoclasm is one of the more difficult problems in church history.

The Byzantine church finally put iconoclasm to rest the same year that the Frankish kingdom broke apart (843). Several serious conflicts developed between the Pope and the Byzantine church in the ninth century. Pope Nicholas II and Patriarch Photius debated issues including the western church’s exclusion of any language but Latin for the liturgy, and the phrase “filioque” (meaning *and the Son*) in the creed. They also quarreled over ecclesiastical jurisdictions of Moravia and Bulgaria in central and southern Europe. Cyril and Methodius, two Byzantine missionaries, sought to bring Moravia into the Byzantine church’s jurisdiction but their efforts, including the development of a written language for the Slavic people, were transferred to Bulgaria. Bulgaria was officially put under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Constantinople in 870. It grew into a very powerful state next to the Byzantine Empire, and its church developed a vibrant Christian culture that passed on a legacy to the other Slavic Orthodox nations.

The tenth and eleventh centuries were a period of great transformation for both the Byzantine and Western churches. These churches are often referred to as if they were two churches, but technically they were in communion most of the time until the event in 1054 called the “Great Schism” (see next paragraph). For most of the tenth century the Pope was dominated by German kings who acted as if they owned the church’s bishops and could appoint them however they saw fit. In the eleventh century, however, the popes

started to reform the church's structure and to challenge the kings. In the east, the Byzantine Empire began to expand its power in the tenth century and took back some territory from the Muslims. In 988 the Grand Prince Vladimir I, ruler of the "Kievian Rus," converted to Christianity under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The powerful Byzantine Emperor Basil II (r.976-1025) gave his sister Anna to Vladimir in marriage. The Monastery of the Kiev Caves was established by monks Anthony and Theodosius in the early eleventh century.

The western church grew remarkably in power and influence during the eleventh century. Largely due to the reforming efforts of certain popes, the church began to extricate itself from secular control. Popes like Leo IX (r.1049-1054) opposed clerical marriage and simony (purchase of church offices). A conflict over church-state relations erupted at the highest level in 1075 when Pope Gregory VII (r.1073-1085) publically condemned "lay investiture" (the appointment of a bishop by a secular ruler). A struggle with the German King Henry IV ended badly for the Pope, but Gregory's stand inspired future church leaders to work out a compromise in which the investiture of bishops was shared between popes and secular rulers. Tensions between the eastern and western halves of the church reached a braking point in 1054. Normans (from northern France) had taken control of much of southern Italy and Sicily, including many churches of the Byzantine rite, and they started to impose the Latin liturgy (with papal approval) on those churches. The offended Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael I Cerularius (r.1043-1059), closed churches of the Latin liturgy in Constantinople. Pope and Patriarch argued over issues including "filioque" in the creed, clerical marriage, and leavened vs. unleavened bread in the eucharist. Finally, legates from Pope Leo arrived in Constantinople in 1054 and excommunicated the Patriarch. The Patriarch in turn excommunicated the legates. Church historians have looked back on this event as causing the formal break between the Orthodox and Roman churches. At the time, most Christians did not attribute this event with much significance since previous schisms had occurred but turned out to be temporary.

The first millennium of church history challenged Christians to adjust to enormous changes. The church went from a small but widespread movement to the official religion of the Roman Empire within the fourth century. Decisions on issues of doctrine, worship, and morality had to be made on a church-wide level, while individual Christians found their place among the different paths available (monasticism, family, public life, etc.). Depending on the geographical placement, different parts of the church faced foreign enemies (Muslim Arabs, for example) and internal enemies (heretics, etc.). By the eleventh century, the Byzantine church enjoyed a strong position in alliance with the East Roman Empire, and the Western church was in a process of throwing off the tyranny of German kings and asserting the power of the bishop of Rome as universal father over all bishops. This papal claim proved unacceptable to the Byzantine church, which followed a conciliar model for church authority, and resulted in the schismatic event of 1054.