

30 Key Moments *in the* History of Christianity

*Inspiring True Stories
from the
Early Church
Around the World*

Mark W. Graham

Foreword by Carl R. Trueman



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BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
BakerBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2025020243
ISBN 9781540905017 (paper)
ISBN 9781540905352 (casebound)
ISBN 9781493452866 (ebook)

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Cover design by Studio Gearbox

The author is represented by the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Wilson.

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Foreword

When I arrived at Grove City College, I asked Mark Graham what student rebellion looked like at the institution. Perhaps the question seems a little loaded, but Mark's answer was fascinating. He told me that it looked like students coming to GCC from broad evangelical churches but then attending Grace Anglican, the Anglican Church in North America's local congregation. In the years since then, I have asked students who have followed this pattern to explain why. The answer usually has three parts: They love the priest's preaching, they love the liturgy, and they love the sense of history that shapes both.

That answer indicates that a small but encouraging development is taking place among some young Christian people: a growing desire to understand and to practice the Christian faith with a consciousness of its rich historical background and development. And these students are not only interested in the typical and somewhat fantastical history so often used to buttress modern evangelical identity—the one that usually starts with a mythical Luther single-handedly dealing a deathblow to the papacy after a thousand years when nobody apparently understood anything of the gospel. Instead, these young people increasingly want to know what happened in the early church and the Middle Ages and how

this provides a positive background for understanding their own Christian faith today.

This welcome historical interest nonetheless raises a challenge. There are many books on church history out there, but they tend to fall into one of two categories: the scholarly and the popular. In this, church history is perhaps no different from other types of history. Many of us love reading history but do not have time to wade through the heavily footnoted specialist tomes that are the stock-in-trade of the scholar. That is what makes popular history books so useful. One does not need to be an expert in the field to read, enjoy, and learn from Andrew Roberts on Napoleon or Simon Sebag-Montefiore on Stalin. So should it be with popular church history books too.

But there is a difference with church history, a difference that has shaped the scholarly–popular divide in a distinct way. For Christians, the history of the church is also the history of their personal faith, at least as expressed in the life, contribution, and conflicts of its fundamental institution. That means the stakes are very high indeed. Professional scholars of church history are often concerned with important questions that yet hold little interest to the Christian amateur historian. The former want to know about broader cultural context and themes. They want to engage with a variety of interdisciplinary approaches that shed light on how the church developed. And even when touching on doctrine, they typically avoid the issue of whether a particular dogma or creed is true. In contrast, the Christian who wants to learn something about church history often wants to be informed mainly to be inspired and finds the question of truth to be of paramount importance. The result is that popular church history often tilts toward the sensational and the hagiographic, avoiding all those pesky contextual questions for the sake of a good, straightforward story. When one recalls the intuitive Protestant antipathy to the Middle Ages and even to many elements of the early church, the picture is made more discouraging: Books

written for the nonspecialist Protestant on these periods tend to reinforce precisely that prejudice.

This is where Mark Graham's book is so useful. Not only does it introduce the reader to an era of history that is often neglected in evangelical circles—the first millennium—but it does so in a way that connects the careful and sober approach of a professional historian to the kinds of questions that interest Christian believers. Here is judicious use of broader context helping the reader understand, for example, what the second-century Roman governor Pliny meant when he described Christianity as a *superstitio*. And here is also care to help us understand the qualitative difference between a heresy like Arianism and what one might characterize as an egregious but not soul-damning error like Nestorianism.

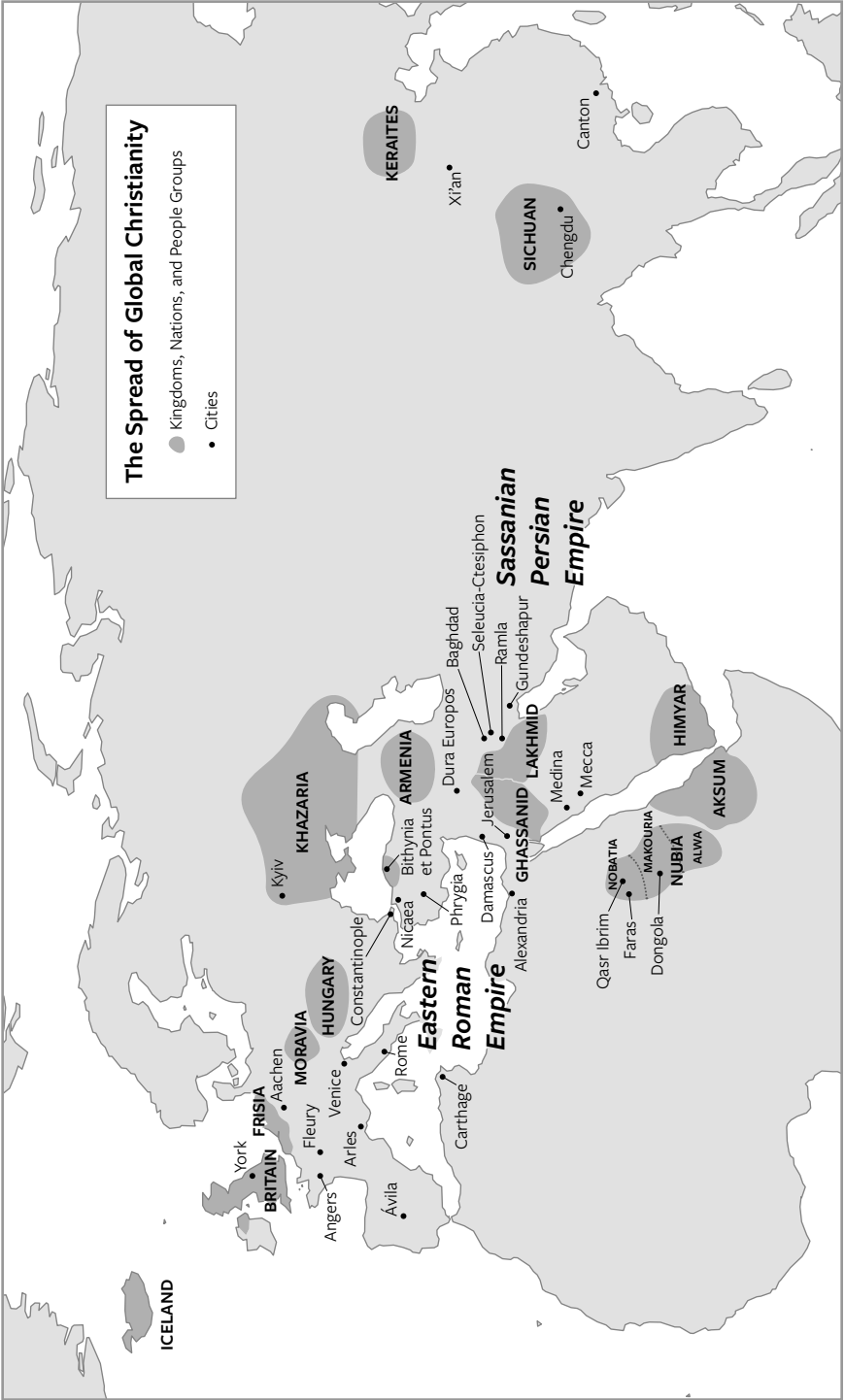
Graham takes the reader not merely outside the usual chronological boundaries of the Protestant world but also beyond the geographical boundaries of the Western world. There are discussions of Ethiopia, China, and the Umayyad Islamic Empire. There's a cast of characters that includes John of Damascus, the great defender of icons, and Cyril of Thessaloniki, whose linguistic prowess and missionary adventures would be remarkable even today in our era of computers and easy travel. That he was a ninth-century churchman verges on incredible. In short, in an era when the question of the global status of Christianity is uppermost in many minds, Graham helps us see how the faith has always been worldwide in its scope.

Yet Graham does more. Each chapter ends with recommendations for further reading, forging that difficult connection between popular presentation and further scholarly depth. The interested reader's appetite will be whetted by each chapter and then pointed to further intellectual and theological feasts.

This is a remarkable book. The only parallel I can think of is Robert Louis Wilken's *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*. Graham, like me, is an admirer of Wilken's work—another true scholar who can also speak movingly of

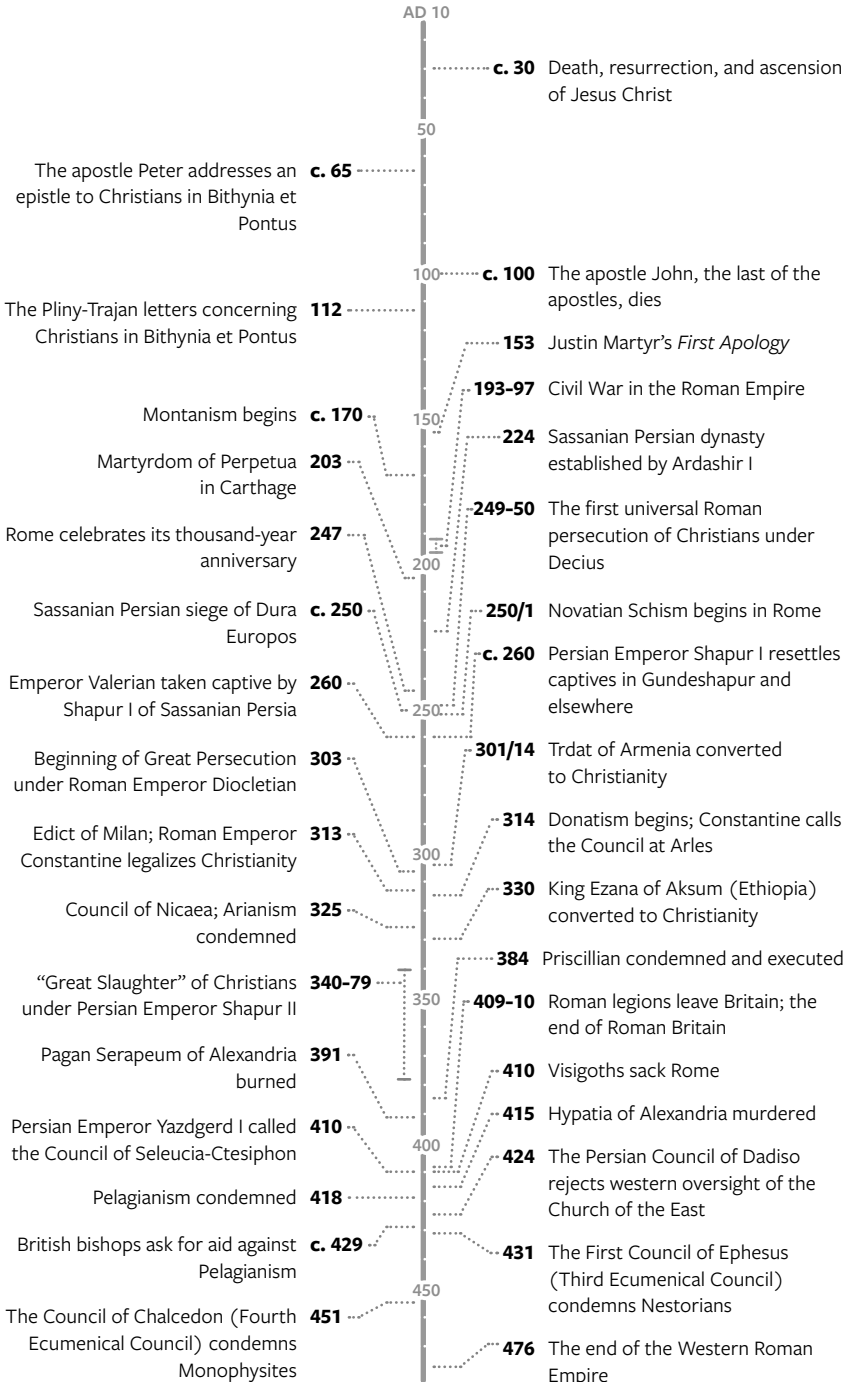
church history to a broader audience. I can think of no higher praise than to draw such a comparison. For this is that rarest of books—a popular presentation of church history that could only have been written by a scholar. Take up and read. You will be informed, entertained, and edified.

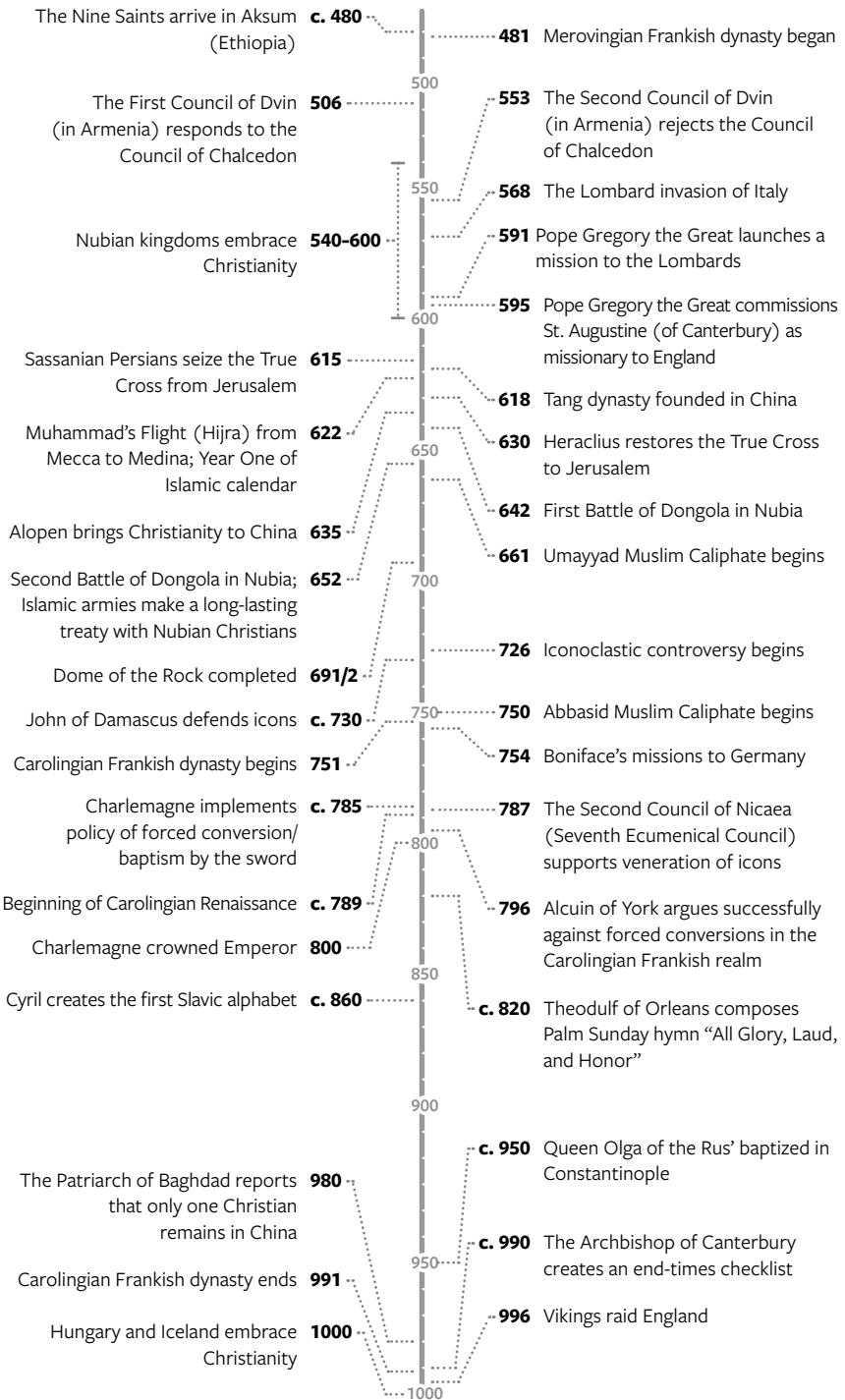
Carl R. Trueman, professor of biblical and religious studies, Grove City College; author, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*



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Timeline of the Early Church





Introduction

Our People

In the 1930s, archaeologists digging in Syria discovered the earliest known Christian building to date. Inside they found a baptistry and frescoes of New Testament scenes, precious glimpses of the vibrant worship and liturgical life of a community of what I refer to as “Our People” from a little over two centuries after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The building was in use for barely two decades before this early Christian community disappeared entirely and their church was completely buried and forgotten for almost seventeen hundred years, a sort of “Christian Pompeii.”

This site, the Roman frontier city of Dura Europos, was caught in a clash between two superpower rivals during the mid-250s. The Sassanian Persian Empire had declared war on the Roman Empire and was sacking Roman cities along their mutual frontier. The inhabitants of Dura Europos took desperate measures to defend against a Persian siege. In an attempt to thwart the Persian enemy’s famous tunneling attacks, defenders piled rubble and dirt deep over the structures built along the inside of the city walls, completely burying several of them, including this Christian building. Their efforts to save the city failed. The Persians



Dura Europos baptistry and frescoes

Public domain

tunneled in anyway, seized the city, and deported its inhabitants, leaving Dura Europos abandoned and desolate. Its buried buildings were forgotten and thus remained remarkably intact over the centuries.

We have a good idea of what happened to the captured people of Dura Europos, including its vibrant Christian community. The victorious Sassanian Persians resettled them deep in Persian territory where many of the Christians would flourish and spread the gospel in that land, as we will see in chapter 6. This story might well call to mind lines from Scripture such as “God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20) or perhaps address the age-old question “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps. 137:4). In the pages that follow, you will encounter many such stories from the first millennium of the church along with the messages they still hold for us today.

In the first millennium, Our People could be found among empires and kingdoms from Britain to Sudan to China. You will meet

some of these Christian brothers and sisters—including martyrs and tyrants, saints and schismatics, exiles and avengers, poets and administrators. Recalling and recounting their stories can inspire, challenge, encourage, convict, and at times even rebuke God’s people today.

Some of these stories will be familiar to many readers, such as some accounts of early Roman martyrs, the emperor Constantine’s conversion, and the reforms of medieval Frankish emperor Charlemagne. I hope, though, that all readers will learn something new even within familiar stories. Most of the stories will likely not be so familiar—for example, a Sassanian Persian “king of kings” calling and hosting a church council, the massacre of Christians by an Arabic-speaking convert to Judaism in a southern Arabian kingdom, and skilled archers saving the Nubian church from takeover by Muslim invaders. It is no secret that the historical memory of many modern Western Christians, especially Protestants, is rather hazy for most of this first millennium (and usually the next half millennium too).

We also do not know many of these stories because we tend to tether historic Christianity to a narrative of Western civilization. When we do remember that first millennium of the church, we tend to focus exclusively on a narrative that moves directly from the ancient Roman Mediterranean world into medieval western Europe. The way we sometimes speak of the church “becoming global” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries results in part from this tendency to equate church history with the Christian history of Western civilization. If we have not encountered stories of vibrant Christianity from many other areas across time, then it certainly would appear as if a global church emerged only recently. But Christianity was, in fact, global from its earliest years, even if its roots were deepest in the Mediterranean region.

This emphasis on Our People across space and time might prompt us to question the extent to which our own national, political, and cultural identities compete with or even overshadow

our most foundational (and eternal) identity as Christians. In some important ways, modern American Christians have more in common with Christians from seventh-century Nubia, Persia, and southern Arabia than with agnostic neighbors who share our national flag.

Moments

Contrary to popular belief, real history can never simply be about names, dates, and facts. It can, however, recapture moments. Each chapter of this book pursues a particular moment (or several related moments) in the history of Christianity. The moments generally do not flow from one to another or build upon each other, so the chapters need not be read in order. Where topics and themes overlap with other chapters (e.g., the Aksumite/Ethiopian kingdom or the apocalypse), the text will refer readers to those places (e.g., “see chap. 5”). This allows for the book to be read one chapter per day (or perhaps one per week) for a book group.

Each moment begins with an introduction titled “The Background” that aims to set it within its historical context.¹ This section explains and explores the bigger picture surrounding the chosen moment, giving some necessary or helpful background details and narrative information. Some moments happen to be turning points in Christian history (if not history in general), but as you will see, that is not why I selected them. The second section of each chapter, simply titled “The Moment” (or in a few instances “The Moments”), explores crucial persons and events.

The final section of each chapter suggests what it is that Christians today can learn from Our People then. I have titled these sections “The Mathēma,” employing an ancient Greek word meaning “that which is learned; a lesson.” Here I aim to integrate my professional background as a historian of ancient and early medieval empires with my many years serving

as a Sunday school teacher and elder in my church. The idea of history “lessons” was fundamental to all ancient storytelling. Balancing historical analysis with history lessons from and for Our People does not come particularly easily or naturally to this modern historian, though. At the same time, emphasizing lessons at the expense of solid historical understanding comes almost instinctively to some popular versions of Christian history. In some circles, Christian history can be full of simple moralisms, hagiography (i.e., embellished or idealized biographies and self-affirming narratives), and romanticism. While this may be simply comforting or chiding, it is inadequate as history and is sometimes even dishonest or naive. This third section seeks to strike a balance between historical analysis and drawing out the message(s) that each moment can still hold for us today within the family of God.

A Global House Subdivided

Two particular groups, Nestorians and Monophysites, have a vital place in global Christianity’s first thousand years. Due to their roles in so many of the thirty key moments included here, they need special introduction and description up front. Expect to see cross-references to this introduction when either term appears in a chapter.

At the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 (see chap. 10), also known as the First Ecumenical Council, the church definitively affirmed that Jesus Christ is “very God of very God . . . of one substance with the Father.” The council condemned the teachings of Arius and his followers, known as Arians, who denied the full divinity of Christ. Recognizing Jesus Christ as fully God is a foundational and nonnegotiable marker of orthodox Christian belief. Though it was essential, the subsequent question of exactly how Christ’s divinity is related to his humanity proved to be an extremely difficult one for the church. How did Christ’s person

(or was it persons) interact with his nature (or was it natures)? In the fifth century, two councils—the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451—were called to address these and other related questions. Many Christians, both inside and outside the Byzantine Empire (where the councils were hosted), did not affirm the decisions they reached. The theological issues are extremely complex, and even today theologians continue to debate the specifics.

One group, whom scholars usually call Nestorians (or, less commonly, Dyophysites), proposed that the incarnate Christ has essentially two persons to go along with his two natures. The Council of Ephesus condemned this view. Twenty years later, the Council of Chalcedon condemned another group, the Monophysites (also called Miaphysites), for holding that the incarnate Christ had essentially one unified nature, combining human and divine. Variations of these two groups have made up a significant number of the world's Christians over time, as we will see. The opponents of both groups are sometimes collectively known as Chalcedonians (i.e., affirming the decisions of both the Chalcedon and Ephesus Councils), and they maintained that the divine Jesus Christ is one person with two natures. To use the technical term, they affirmed the hypostatic union. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and most Protestants to this day would be considered Chalcedonians.

Both Nestorians and Monophysites affirmed the Council of Nicaea, and for this and other reasons this study unambiguously numbers them among Our People. Outside the Roman and Byzantine Empires, Nestorians and Monophysites represent a majority report. Within the Roman and Byzantine Empires, treatment of the two groups could range from grudging coexistence to harassment to outright persecution, driving many of these Christians to seek refuge and opportunities elsewhere. They were arguably the greatest of premodern missionaries.

This study, then, rejects the often unacknowledged assumption that all heresies are created equal. There is a fundamental divide between Arians, for example, and Nestorians. The former are not included among Our People any more than Jehovah’s Witnesses should be today. This is not to assert that the doctrinal differences between Nestorians and Chalcedonians are unimportant. (I refer readers to the excellent study *The Cruelty of Heresy* by Anglican bishop C. FitzSimons Allison for an explanation of the very real pastoral consequences to getting the hypostatic union wrong.²) Rather, it is a simple claim that one should be extremely hesitant to dismiss groups that affirmed the Council of Nicaea in those early Christian centuries, especially rank-and-file Christians. One might instead wonder what those early Nestorians and Monophysites would think of the significant percentage of regularly surveyed American evangelicals who respond “true” to the statement “Jesus Christ is the first and greatest being created by God.”³

The Big Picture

Focusing only on specific moments in global church history has clear limitations and downsides. Readers might well find themselves wishing for the larger historical picture and searching to fill in the gaps between and among the moments covered here. I am indebted to several great works on global Christianity. I have compiled a brief list of such works in an appendix for you to explore further and connect the dots between the flashes and moments here.

You are about to embark on a journey where, in any given chapter, you may find yourself on the shores of the Black Sea, the Red Sea, or the Mediterranean Sea, or deep in the Middle East, Britain, or China. The selections here give glimpses into much larger worlds. Amidst world empires and kingdoms, you will meet brothers and sisters whose lives—victories, tragedies, and sorrows—still hold meaning for us today.

Notes

1. For an excellent study of the historical significance of key moments in the history of the church, see Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2001).

2. C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Morehouse, 1994).

3. Stephen Nichols, “The State of Theology: The Questions That Matter Most,” Ligonier, October 16, 2018, <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/state-theology-questions-matter-most>.

1

A Christian “Contagion” and a “Good Sense” Governor

(Black Sea, 112)

The Background

The Roman province of Bithynia et Pontus was in trouble. Nestled on the south shores of the Black Sea in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), it was a very wealthy province. Though it had been a site of much political and military drama during the second and first centuries BC, things had been quiet now for more than a hundred years. But as the second century AD dawned, financial mismanagement and political turmoil threatened the stability of the cities and towns throughout the province. The emperor Trajan took control of the province away from the Roman Senate in order to deal with the problems more directly himself. Such crises were particularly rare during the Pax Romana, the period of Roman peace that had been launched by the emperor Augustus over a century earlier. Trajan, one of the empire’s legendary five “good emperors,” needed a top-notch and trustworthy administrator

to get things back into shape. By all Roman measures, he made a perfect choice in his longtime friend Pliny the Younger.

There were few who could match the intellectual and administrative background and pedigree of Pliny the Younger, who had been adopted, raised, and educated by his famous uncle and namesake, Pliny the Elder.¹ The elder Pliny was renowned for his *Natural History*, one of the most extensive encyclopedias of human knowledge from the premodern world. The younger Pliny continued his studies in Rome under Quintilian, author of one of history's most influential works on rhetoric. A noted orator in his own right, Pliny began his career in the law courts, where he distinguished himself with some high-profile cases against corrupt officials. He climbed the ranks of the Roman political scene, from one increasingly important office to another, before getting the call from the emperor to take on the delicate assignment in Bithynia et Pontus. It would be the final achievement of an illustrious career. Trajan's confidence in him was clear: "I chose you for your good sense, so that you could guide that province in changing their ways and establish institutions that would lead to permanent peace there."²

We can follow Pliny's efforts throughout the province in unusual and almost unique detail, thanks to about sixty letters that he wrote to the emperor. Each letter zeroes in on a particular matter of administration—for example, inquiring about funding for and reporting on maintenance of public works such as baths, aqueducts, theaters, temples, a firefighting force, and much more. Many of Trajan's succinct replies also survive, revealing the mind of the good emperor at work. One specific emergency seems to have taken Pliny by surprise: A very dangerous religious movement was overrunning the province.

The Moment

The Christian movement had arrived in the province at least two generations before Pliny. The apostle Peter had addressed his first

epistle to Christians of Bithynia et Pontus (among others), and the movement apparently had been growing rapidly. Pliny’s letters are the earliest account of Christian life and worship written by an outsider. Dating to the year 112, they reveal the lives of Our People in the generation just following the close of the apostolic age. Some of those examined by Pliny had become Christians while the apostle John was still alive.

Pliny’s careful Roman administrative eye helped him compile a profile of the movement. Christians came from “every age, social class, and men and women alike.”³ Some of them were even Roman citizens and so had to be dealt with specially. The movement had spread not just to cities and towns but even to villages and rural districts. Their witness had threatened attendance and sacrifices at the local temples, though dutiful Pliny assured Trajan that the numbers at those Roman religious ceremonies were rebounding under his watch. The major practices of the movement consisted of meeting on a given day before dawn and “singing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.”⁴ They swore a sacred oath to abstain from all wrongdoing: They vowed not to steal, rob, commit adultery, break promises, or fail to return money entrusted to them. Later in the day, they would eat a meal together.⁵

This all might seem innocuous enough. Yet throughout his letter, Pliny’s obvious mistrust of and disgust for Christians are on full display. Alarmed that their movement has “spread like a contagion,” he categorizes the Christians as obstinate and unyielding in ways he describes as “lunacy.”⁶ When he tortured two “slave women who were called deaconesses” to extract a confession, he concluded that he was dealing with “an extreme and misguided *superstitio*.”⁷ A trained and seasoned criminal lawyer and public official, Pliny was following standard Roman practice here, and we can be sure that he knew danger when he saw it. The qualifier “extreme” in particular signals a very serious threat.

Defining *superstitio* is not simple.⁸ Often it is helpful that Latin words look a lot like English ones—cognates, as linguists

call them. But sometimes cognates complicate or confuse matters, as is the case with the word *superstitio*. The English translation “superstition” is not quite right. To a sound, reasonable, and highly educated Roman like Pliny, the term *superstitio* had specific legal connotations. *Superstitio* was recognized as a crime not simply because it was considered a silly or untenable set of beliefs (think black cats, umbrellas opened indoors, crossed fingers, and the like) but because it was seen as illegitimate and dangerous. It had its counterpart in *religio*, legitimate religious rites and practices. Religious rites and rituals not sanctioned by antiquity or supporting the public order could be classified as *superstitio* by tradition-minded Romans. Practices intended to coerce deities or humans through magic or spells were *superstitio*. It was a serious charge, and because it was widely seen as a threat to public order, it was punishable by death. The issue was not that the rites or incantations were mere “superstitions” and unreasonable but rather that they could get divine favor in an illicit way. The charge was one that Christians would frequently face in years to come.

It is clear enough from the exchange between Pliny and Trajan that the Romans did not have a specific policy at that time for dealing with the Christians. The methods that Pliny and Trajan worked out would shape treatment of Christians in the Roman Empire for roughly the next century and a half. After considering Pliny’s analysis and questions, Trajan specifically cautioned Pliny not to rely on anonymous accusations or seeking Christians out. He also noted a straightforward way for an accused Christian to avoid punishment: If the accused would simply pray to the gods—that is, images of the emperor and other major Roman deities—in the presence of an official, they were to be released. Failure to do so would result in punishment, most often execution. Persecution of Christians was neither constant nor empire-wide in the first two centuries of the church age (see chap. 5), but this moment shows it was an ever-present possibility.

The Mathēma

This earliest glimpse into Christian communities from the outside reveals a variety of commitment levels. Some Christians remained faithful, even firm under torture and until death. Others drifted away over time. Still others denied the faith under pressure. The study of history often affirms that some things never change. Would modern Christians be any different? This moment should challenge any notion that the early church was some sort of golden age we should aspire to return to, as some Christians today believe.

Our People in Bithynia et Pontus had a broad cultural impact for a time. Faithfully gathering together was a crucial part of their lives. They sang together. They dined together. They came from all social classes. Their ranks included both citizens and slaves, men and women. Women were even given titles like deaconess. Their communities were multigenerational, both urban and rural. Faithful Christians could not bow the knee to other gods and maintain their identity. Pliny himself recognized as much.

Pliny (and Trajan) were neither unhinged nor hysterical in their evaluation and treatment of Christians. They were veritable paragons of Roman education, reason, law, and order. Pliny was, by the standards of the day, the epitome of a competent, excellent, and rational administrator. Trajan let it be known that the “enlightened” spirit of the age was incompatible with people bringing anonymous accusations against others.⁹ Such seems a universal good and sound principle. Yet note that the very name “Christian” was seen as a defensible reason to persecute and execute the accused if they were unwilling to deny Christ. In the next chapter, we will explore how one early Christian strove to mount a reasonable defense of Christianity using the very standards of the Greco-Roman world.

The episode at Bithynia et Pontus raises a vital question for Christians of all times: What could these faithful Christians have done to be more acceptable, maybe even winsome, to their

superiors and contemporaries? While we can speculate about other factors at play in this moment of persecution, the initial evidence suggests there was little or nothing they could have done. The words of the apostle Peter to a previous generation of Christians in Bithynia et Pontus ring true to their experience, as to the experiences of many others throughout time: They will “suffer for righteousness’ sake” (see 1 Pet. 3:14–17). Peter encouraged the saints there to be ready to respond to anyone who asked about the hope that was in them. And he urged them to do so with gentleness and reverence, a good reminder to Christians of all eras. These early Christians who sang hymns to Christ in their early morning gatherings could rest upon the words of Christ himself: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:11–12). We too can rest upon those words.

Further Reading

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- González, Justo L. and Catherine Gunsalus González. *Worship in the Early Church*. Westminster John Knox, 2022.
- Kruger, Michael. *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church*. IVP Academic, 2018.
- Wilken, Robert Louis. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 2003.

Notes

1. For a thorough description of Pliny himself, see chap. 1 of Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2003), and the references in his notes.
2. Pliny the Younger, *Letters to Trajan* 10.117, as quoted in R. Scott Smith and Christopher Francese, *Ancient Rome: An Anthology of Sources* (Hackett Publishing, 2014), 299–331.

3. Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.96.
4. Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.96.
5. Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.96.
6. Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.96.
7. Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.96.
8. See John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 23, 173; and James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).
9. Pliny, *Letters to Trajan* 10.97.