

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Christianity

in a Hurry

From apostles to today

Max Brocklesby

BOOKSINAHURRY.COM

Contents

The Whole Thing in One Page 4

Why You Should Care 6

The Core Ideas 8

How It Actually Works 21

What People Get Wrong 31

Use It 37

Terms 42

Go Deeper 47

Notes and Sources 49

Bibliography 59

The Whole Thing in One Page

Christianity is often pictured as a European institution that began with a finished Bible, acquired a pope, split in the Reformation and now retreats before modern life. Almost every part of that picture is too late or too small. It began as a Jewish movement in Roman-ruled Judaea, organised around the conviction that a crucified teacher had been raised by God and made Lord. Its earliest surviving author wrote in Greek to small assemblies around the eastern Mediterranean. Europe was one destination among several; Latin Europe did not yet define the faith.

The movement faced a problem that never went away. Jesus was no longer ordinarily present, yet Christians claimed that he remained alive and authoritative. How could people who had never met him know what he taught, share in what he had done and recognise a faithful community? The answers became Christianity: testimony, scripture, baptism, the Eucharist, prayer, bishops, creeds, councils, monasteries, households and schools able to replace their members. It survived through a package of texts, rites, offices and repeated practices, not one chain of command.

The decisive early turn was the admission of Gentiles without circumcision and full conversion to Judaism. That choice carried a Jewish messianic claim across ethnic boundaries, but it also opened Christianity's long and often destructive separation from Jewish communities. Translation widened the movement. Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Armenian, Ge'ez, Slavonic and many later languages let Christians pray and argue without one sacred imperial tongue. Vernacular words could expand local authority, though missionaries and rulers still controlled ordination, property, schools and printing. Translation made possession possible, not automatic.

Christians argued fiercely because the stakes were unlimited. If Jesus disclosed God and saved humanity, then words about him mattered. Nicaea and Chalcedon did not invent those questions, and Nicaea did not choose the biblical canon. Councils stated enforceable boundaries around disputes already dividing churches. Constantine's patronage gave bishops buildings,

money and imperial access. Later rulers joined Christianity to law and coercion. The same capacity could organise worship, education and poor relief, then suppress pagans, Jews, alleged heretics and rival Christians. Scale enlarged care and harm together.

No single institution has contained every community organised around Christ. Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Church of the East, Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal and independent traditions arose from different settlements of scripture, tradition, ministry, sacrament and power. The religion was carried by missionaries, but also by households, enslaved people, migrants, translators, teachers and children whose names rarely reached the archive. Mission could resist empire or bless it, defend slavery or attack it, learn a language or help erase a culture. Adaptability gave local believers room to build churches their first messengers could not fully govern.

The modern map completes the reversal. Pew Research Center's latest comparable global report appeared in 2025 but measures 2020. It estimated about 2.3 billion Christians, 28.8 per cent of humanity, with sub-Saharan Africa containing a larger share of the global Christian population than Europe. Christianity is shrinking in parts of the West, growing through population change elsewhere and being altered by migration, Pentecostal worship, independent churches and local theologies. The religion reached the world because its carriers could be repeated under new conditions. It became impossible to keep singular for the same reason.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

In 325, bishops travelled to Nicaea because Christians could not agree how to speak about Jesus and God. Seventeen centuries later, forms of the Nicene Creed, shaped by the fourth-century settlement begun there and continued at Constantinople in 381, are still recited regularly in churches from Addis Ababa to Athens, Manila to Manchester. The words have crossed empires, alphabets and political systems that no longer exist. They have also carried quarrels lasting longer than most states. The practice places the vocabulary of a fourth-century dispute in the mouths of worshippers across continents.

That endurance is the first reason to care. Christianity is a case study in how a movement survives the people who heard its first testimony. The original witnesses died. None of the first written copies of Christian scripture survives. Governments that patronised or persecuted Christians collapsed. Languages changed and populations moved. Yet communities kept reproducing a recognisable pattern through stories, texts, meals, water, calendars, offices, buildings and habits. You do not need to accept Christian claims to find the transmission problem extraordinary. Any movement that hopes to last beyond its charismatic founder faces a smaller version of it.

The second reason is that Christian institutions have shaped public and private life across societies in which billions still live. Churches and monasteries organised worship, poor relief, schooling, land, archives, hospitals, marriage rules, burial and public time. Christian concepts entered art, music, philosophy, law and political argument. Reformers, monarchs, enslavers, abolitionists, colonisers, anti-colonial leaders, pacifists and soldiers all drew on overlapping Christian scriptures. That does not make every modern good Christian in origin, or Christianity the sole source of any value. It means that many arguments about dignity, conscience, authority, sex, wealth, violence and obligation carry Christian history even when the speakers have left Christian belief behind.

The third reason is that the usual map is wrong. Christianity arose in West

Asia and formed early centres across North Africa and the wider Mediterranean. Ancient Christian communities spoke Syriac, Coptic, Armenian and Ge'ez. The 781 Xi'an monument says a Christian mission had reached the Tang capital in 635. European empires later projected western churches across the world, often with force and hierarchy, but converts were not blank paper. They translated, selected, resisted, combined and led. Pew's estimates for 2020 placed a larger share of the world's Christians in sub-Saharan Africa than in Europe. Treating Christianity as a fading European possession now misses where much of it is lived.

That shift changes the questions. A Christian in Lagos, Kerala or Seoul is not a late copy of a European original. A local church may inherit older eastern traditions, colonial institutions, modern migration and its own political bargains at once.

Then there is the moral ledger. Christian institutions have fed people, educated children, nursed the sick, preserved texts, built communities and supplied languages of repentance and resistance. They have also accumulated wealth, disciplined bodies, justified conquest, persecuted dissent, deepened antisemitism, protected abusers and helped construct racial orders. A fair history cannot average these into a respectable middle. The same mechanisms that coordinated care could coordinate coercion. The same confidence that every culture could receive the gospel could make missionaries listen closely to a language or treat its speakers as people awaiting replacement.

This book will not decide whether God raised Jesus, whether the creeds are true or which church has the best claim to continuity. Historical method can examine testimony, practice, institutions and effects. It cannot rerun Easter morning. The reward is different: you will be able to see Christianity as neither one doctrine nor one empire, but as a long contest over how Jesus is made present, who may speak for him, and what happens when an answer acquires property, law and descendants.

The apostles did not leave a finished religion. They left testimony, arguments and communities. The next two thousand years are what those

communities built to carry them.

The Core Ideas

The Movement Began with a Resurrection Claim

Christianity did not begin when somebody wrote a creed or opened a church. It began when followers of Jesus came to believe that the man Rome had crucified was alive again and had been vindicated by God.

Jesus was a Jew speaking within Jewish arguments about Israel, Torah, the kingdom of God, judgement, mercy and the repair of the world. Crucifixion was public state violence designed to degrade as well as kill. It discredited royal and messianic claims by displaying Rome's power over the claimant's body. Jewish traditions could honour martyrs and expect divine vindication, so execution did not make continuation unimaginable. It did leave a scattered band of disciples with no army, territory or obvious programme for succession, and with a dead leader whom Rome had marked as defeated.

The first communities had no empty institution waiting to be occupied. Authority rested on remembered words, reported appearances, shared scripture and people able to say that they had been sent. Yet within years, communities were proclaiming that God had raised Jesus, calling him Messiah and Lord, baptising in his name and gathering for a meal interpreted through his death. The earliest surviving Christian writings are Paul's letters from the 50s CE. In one of them he passes on a formula about Jesus dying, being buried, being raised and appearing to named witnesses. The formula is older than the letter. It does not let a historian prove a miracle, but it establishes that resurrection belief was present near the beginning rather than added centuries later.

That distinction matters. History can ask what people testified, how soon they testified, what sources survive and what the belief caused. It cannot put a supernatural act under laboratory conditions. A Christian may say God raised Jesus. A historian can say that Jesus' followers became convinced he had been raised and reorganised their lives around that conviction. This

book keeps those propositions separate because confusing them either smuggles theology into history or pretends historical method can rule on God.

The resurrection claim did several jobs at once. It turned defeat into vindication. It made Jesus' death a saving event rather than a failed revolt. It created an expectation that history was moving towards judgement and renewal. It also made a dead teacher present to people who had never met him. Paul could address communities as belonging to Christ, speak of Christ's Spirit among them and treat a shared meal as participation in Christ. Absence became a new form of presence.

That solution created the governing problem. Who counted as an apostle or reliable witness? Which memories carried authority? How could later Christians distinguish the risen Christ from their own wishes? All four Gospels place women, especially Mary Magdalene, at the discovery of the empty tomb, and several make women the first recipients of appearance traditions. Paul's earlier list names a different sequence and no women. The variation is evidence of several streams of memory, not an invitation to flatten them into one police report.

Christianity's later machinery grows from this beginning. Scripture preserves testimony. Sacraments make the story bodily. Bishops claim continuity with apostles. Creeds limit what may be said about the one believed to be alive. Reformers appeal past institutions to Christ and the earliest witnesses. The movement began before any of these answers were settled, with a claim powerful enough to require them all.

Crossing the Gentile Boundary Made It Portable

The first followers did not understand themselves as founders of a separate world religion. They were Jews arguing that Israel's Messiah had come. The Jerusalem movement remained within Jewish worship and scripture; Acts depicts believers continuing to pray at the Temple. Communities disagreed over what fidelity to the God of Israel now required.

The crisis arrived when non-Jews joined. Must a male Gentile be

circumcised? Must Gentile households keep Jewish food rules? Were they guests attached to Israel, converts to Judaism, or full members on another basis? These sound like technical questions until their consequence is visible. A movement that required Gentiles to enter Israel's covenant through circumcision and full adoption of Jewish communal obligations could spread as a Jewish renewal movement. A movement that admitted them through allegiance to Christ, baptism and the Spirit could cross ethnic boundaries on another basis.

Paul fought for the second answer. He was not a solitary inventor imposing a private religion. His letters preserve earlier traditions, name other apostles and report arguments with Peter and James. They also show how fierce the conflict was. In Galatians, Paul treats compulsory circumcision for Gentile believers as a betrayal of the gospel. Acts offers a later, more orderly memory of leaders in Jerusalem agreeing on limited requirements. The accounts are not identical, but they converge on the decisive result: Gentiles were admitted as full members without circumcision and full conversion to Judaism.

This made Christianity portable. Greek already connected cities across the eastern Mediterranean. Urban assemblies met in homes and workshops, received travelling teachers, copied letters and sent money. Paul's closing greetings show a network made of households, enslaved and free people, migrants, patrons and workers. Paul calls Phoebe a *diakonos*, often translated deacon or minister, and a benefactor; Prisca and Aquila host communities and teach. The surviving evidence does not produce a modern equality story, and Paul's letters also contain restrictions later used to narrow women's authority. It does show that transmission depended on people below the level of famous apostles.

Portability had a cost. As Gentile communities expanded, the destruction of the Temple in 70 and later revolts reshaped Jewish life, while Christians and Jews defined identities under different pressures. Separation was gradual, varied by place and never clean. Yet Christian claims to inherit Israel's promises hardened in many churches into supersessionism, the belief that

the church had displaced Jews in God's covenantal story. Polemic born within first-century Jewish conflict was later read in predominantly Gentile churches as a judgement on Judaism itself. Imperial restrictions, preaching and popular violence gave that reading consequences. Christian antisemitism was not an automatic result of one text, but it drew on Christian texts and institutions.

The universal claim also changed whenever it crossed a boundary. Calling Jesus Christos in Greek carried the Hebrew idea of an anointed one into a language where many hearers did not know the original argument. New questions followed. How did Christ relate to God? What did salvation rescue people from? Which customs could converts keep? Translation widened the audience by creating fresh interpretation.

That pattern never stopped. Christianity rarely spread by carrying one sealed culture intact. It entered a language, used local concepts, rejected some practices, absorbed others and produced Christians who no longer needed the first messengers. Gentile inclusion was the first great instance. The apostles solved an admission problem and opened a religion to the world, including a world that would often forget the Jewish people and scriptures without which its central claims made no sense.

Scripture, Ritual and Ministry Made It Repeatable

A conviction can ignite a movement. It cannot reproduce one for twenty centuries without forms that strangers can learn and successors can repeat.

Christians carried several forms at once. Stories about Jesus circulated orally and were written as Gospels. Letters answered disputes and travelled beyond their first recipients. Israel's scriptures, often read in Greek by early Gentile communities, supplied the language of creation, covenant, prophecy and Messiah. Over time, churches distinguished a set of apostolic writings to read alongside them. The boundaries of the New Testament emerged through use, argument and regional convergence over centuries. No meeting produced a complete Bible in one afternoon.

Text alone was never the system. Books were costly and literacy was

uneven, so many Christians encountered scripture by hearing it read in an assembly, explained by teachers, sung in psalms and embodied in rites. Baptism used water to mark entry, cleansing, death and new life. The Eucharist took bread and wine and connected an ordinary meal to Jesus' last meal, death, presence and promised return. Sunday gathering, fasting, prayer and care for the poor gave the week a Christian shape before most theology had technical vocabulary.

These practices compressed the religion. A convert did not need to master every argument before being washed, taught a confession, welcomed to a table and placed inside a calendar. The pattern made recognition possible: a traveller might enter an unfamiliar church and encounter readings, prayers, water and a shared meal despite changes in accent, architecture and local rank. This is an illustration, not a reported journey. Repetition trained memory. Children learned gestures and stories before abstract propositions. Funerals, marriages, feasts and fasts joined doctrine to bodies and seasons. The faith became something people did together, which is why changes in wording or worship could feel like alterations to reality rather than administrative tidying.

Ministry supplied continuity and control. Early sources show apostles, prophets, teachers, overseers, elders and deacons in arrangements that were not uniform. During the second century, many cities developed a single bishop surrounded by presbyters and deacons. Bishops coordinated teaching, discipline, money, charity and relations with other churches. Lists linking bishops back to apostles turned succession into an argument: this community taught what it had received through identifiable public custodians, rather than through a secret revelation newly produced by a persuasive stranger.

The arrangement excluded as well as preserved. Office became increasingly male even though women had hosted churches, prophesied, served as patrons, practised ascetic authority and died as celebrated martyrs. Public teaching classified some writings and groups as outside the church. Material support could become surveillance. A system strong

enough to care for widows, redeem captives and sustain people during crisis could also expel members and make belonging conditional on obedience.

Its power lay in redundancy. If a manuscript disappeared, a creed could be remembered. If a teacher died, another could baptise. If imperial borders closed, merchants or monks could carry prayers. If a local church went astray, neighbours could challenge it. Story, text, rite, office and network could reinforce, compete with and sometimes correct one another without ever agreeing on a final chain of command.

Christianity therefore endured less like a message copied once and more like a pattern repeatedly performed. Every performance claimed continuity and introduced variation. The words were translated, the bread changed, the calendar filled, the office acquired local rank, and the assembly met under new laws. Repeatability kept the movement recognisable. It also supplied the raw material for every later dispute over who was repeating it faithfully.

Orthodoxy Was Built Through Argument

Early Christianity was diverse, but diversity is not the same as an unbounded field in which every version carried equal weight. Communities shared scriptures, prayers, rites and convictions, then fought over their meaning. Orthodoxy was the historical process by which some answers became standards and others became errors with names.

The disputes were not decorative metaphysics added to Jesus' moral teaching. Christians worshipped Jesus while insisting there was one God. They said the eternal God had acted through a human life, death and resurrection. They baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Those practices forced questions. Was the Son divine in the same sense as the Father? Had God taken a complete human nature? Could suffering belong to the one Christians called God? A vague answer worked in a hymn until rival teachers drew different consequences from it.

Before emperors entered the process, churches used what they had:

scripture, inherited summaries of faith, bishops, synods and public argument. Irenaeus in the second century appealed to a rule of faith and the teaching of churches linked to apostles. Marcion's rejection of Israel's scriptures and his reduced collection of Christian writings sharpened arguments about continuity with Judaism and which books belonged. Movements grouped under later labels such as Gnostic varied greatly, but many offered accounts of hidden knowledge, creation and salvation that other Christians judged incompatible with the God proclaimed in public worship.

Nicaea in 325 brought the new imperial scale. Constantine summoned bishops to settle a dispute associated with Arius and his opponents over the Son's relation to the Father. The council described the Son as of the same substance as the Father. That sentence became central, but it did not end the fight. Emperors, bishops and councils backed changing formulas for decades. The creed used in many churches today reflects the further settlement associated with Constantinople in 381.

Chalcedon in 451 stated that Christ was one person in two natures, divine and human, without mixture or separation. Many churches in Egypt, Syria, Armenia and elsewhere rejected the council's formulation or the politics and language surrounding it. Calling the result a simple victory over one obvious heresy erases genuine theological differences, translation problems and imperial pressure. The churches now called Oriental Orthodox are ancient continuities, not fossils waiting to become Greek Orthodox or Catholic.

Councils gave a transregional faith a public mechanism for stating, across languages, that certain claims belonged to its common identity. A creed is compressed memory of an argument. It lets a worshipper inherit a settlement without reopening every premise. The short formula therefore carried hidden labour: rival readings compared, unfamiliar philosophical words recruited, translations tested and political compromises refused or accepted.

The price was enforcement. Once orthodoxy carried imperial law, losing could mean deposition, exile, confiscation or violence. Victorious parties

controlled many institutions that copied books, while defeated positions often survive through hostile quotation. Later readers therefore encounter a debate through an archive shaped by its result. Doctrine cannot be reduced to politics, since people accepted suffering rather than use words they believed false. Politics cannot be removed from doctrine, since emperors convened councils and controlled roads, posts, buildings and punishment.

Orthodoxy supplied standards that could cross centuries, then left several churches claiming to embody the faithful settlement. The arguments drew boundaries around the mystery. They did not produce one uncontested institution to guard them.

Power Enlarged the Church and Its Moral Debt

Before Constantine, Roman authorities sometimes punished Christians because they refused sacrifice, disrupted civic expectations or attracted suspicion. Persecution was real, but it was not one continuous empire-wide hunt. Pressure varied by governor, city and decade. The empire-wide measures under Decius, Valerian and Diocletian were exceptional escalations, which is one reason martyr stories carried such force.

The story of Perpetua, executed at Carthage in 203, survives in a text presenting her prison experience and death. She was young, educated and the mother of an infant. Whatever editorial hands shaped the account, its power comes from a conflict no doctrinal summary can supply: family duty, bodily fear and loyalty to a new community colliding under state punishment. Martyrs became evidence that Christ's authority exceeded the emperor's. Their tombs, anniversaries and stories created sacred geography.

The Great Persecution ended in stages. Galerius issued toleration in 311. After Constantine's western victory in 312, Constantine and Licinius agreed in 313 to extend toleration and restore Christian property; conflict with Maximin Daia still had to end in the east. Constantine then favoured Christianity, funded churches, intervened in disputes and summoned Nicaea. He did not make Christianity the empire's official religion in 313, and much of the population remained non-Christian. Theodosius I's law of 380

backed Nicene Christianity as imperial orthodoxy. Conversion was a long, uneven process, not one emperor flipping a switch.

Patronage gave churches resources that underground networks could not command. It also changed the social meaning of conversion. Joining a suspect minority had once risked status; under Christian rulers, baptism could become a route into patronage, office or ordinary conformity. Bishops acquired legal standing, buildings, endowments and access to rulers. Christian institutions organised alms, care, hospitality and burial at greater scale. Basil of Caesarea's fourth-century charitable complex joined worship to relief for travellers, the poor and the sick. Monastic communities preserved another source of authority. By withdrawing to deserts or living under rules, monks and nuns could criticise wealthy bishops, advise rulers, farm land, copy books and accumulate property of their own.

The same enlargement produced coercion. Christian emperors restricted sacrifice and closed or repurposed some temples. Bishops and rulers punished Christians classified as heretics. Anti-Jewish restrictions entered imperial law, while preaching and popular violence deepened danger, though Jewish communities persisted under varied conditions and Christian rulers sometimes protected them for reasons of theology, revenue or order. In later societies, churches could run courts, own vast estates, compel conformity and make exclusion appear as pastoral care.

Power also outlived particular states. When western Roman government fractured, bishops, monasteries and local churches retained land, literacy, ritual and links across kingdoms. In eastern Rome, church and empire remained closely joined for centuries. Armenian, Ethiopian, Nubian, Georgian, Slavic and other rulers adopted Christianity through distinct alliances and local struggles. Conversion from above could bring books and administration while placing political loyalty inside religious belonging.

There is no clean ledger in which charity cancels coercion or coercion makes charity unreal. Scale joined them. Property could feed strangers and enrich officeholders. Law could protect a minority church and later suppress minorities. Education could preserve learning and narrow acceptable

thought. Christianity gained the capacity to act beyond a household, and every gain in capacity enlarged what it could damage.

That is the moral debt attached to Christian public power. Churches did not fall from one innocent original at the moment they first touched rule.

Through many settlements with power, they became institutions capable of durable public good and durable public harm. The history has to keep both capacities in the same frame.

Reform Reopened the Question of Authority

Christianity possessed many courts of appeal: scripture, apostolic tradition, bishops, councils, saints, monasteries, scholars, rulers, prophets, conscience and reported movements of the Spirit. They could reinforce one another. They could also produce several defensible answers to the question of who speaks for Christ.

The separation between Greek-speaking eastern and Latin western churches grew through language, politics, rival jurisdictions and doctrinal disputes. The mutual excommunications of 1054 later became a convenient date, but ordinary communion did not stop everywhere at once. The western sack of Christian Constantinople in 1204 cut deeper than the exchange of documents. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches came to embody different patterns of papal authority, theology, law, worship and political memory.

Western reform repeatedly strengthened the institution it attacked. Monastic reform, new orders, university theology and canon law sought to recover fidelity by creating rules, schools and offices. The medieval papacy claimed wider jurisdiction. Parishes placed baptism, Mass, confession, marriage, feast days and burial around ordinary life. Laypeople funded chapels, joined confraternities, went on pilgrimage and pursued forms of devotion that clerical programmes never fully controlled.

The sixteenth-century Reformation reopened the system at scale. Luther's attack on indulgence preaching became an argument about grace, justification and whether papal or conciliar authority could bind conscience

against scripture. Zwingli, Calvin, radical reformers and political rulers supplied rival programmes. Protestants agreed that inherited western authority could be judged and then disagreed over baptism, Eucharist, church government, free will, predestination and the relation between church and state. Printing accelerated the fight, while protection by cities and princes allowed selected reforms to survive.

Catholic reform was not a wounded institution refusing to move. The Council of Trent clarified doctrine and discipline, seminaries reshaped clerical training, and new orders expanded education and mission. Catholicism grew through Latin liturgy, vernacular preaching, confraternities, devotional images, schools and religious orders in different regional combinations. Orthodox churches continued along other paths, while ancient eastern churches lived under Muslim and later imperial governments. A western rupture was momentous without being the whole Christian world.

The resulting families still distribute authority differently. Catholics join scripture and tradition within a worldwide episcopal communion centred on the pope. Eastern Orthodox churches emphasise councils, liturgy and self-governing episcopal churches. Oriental Orthodox churches preserve another ancient conciliar inheritance. Protestants give scripture governing authority while disagreeing over sacraments, ministry and church government. None of those families is internally uniform, and none can be reduced to one institution, nation or style of worship.

Reform built fresh machinery. Confessions, catechisms, schools, church courts, translated Bibles and trained clergy made a contested answer reproducible. A reform that remained one preacher's protest would die with the preacher; ministers, classrooms, property and law could make it an inherited church. Rulers often enforced it. Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed churches and radicals persecuted opponents when able, even as multiplication made complete uniformity harder to restore. Especially in Britain, North America and societies shaped by them, denominations later turned division into a managed social form: separate institutions could recognise one another as Christian, compete and coexist under a state that

no longer settled every doctrine.

Pietism, Methodism, evangelical revival and later holiness movements moved authority towards conversion, disciplined small groups, Bible reading, preaching and personal experience. They renewed churches and created more. Pentecostal and charismatic Christians later placed gifts of the Spirit, healing, prophecy and intense worship beside text and office. The original problem returned in modern clothing: how do you test a claimed work of Christ or the Spirit when established authorities disagree?

Reform therefore does not sit outside tradition. It is one of Christianity's traditions. Each reform appeals to an earlier purity, selects an authority and builds institutions to keep the recovery from vanishing with its founders. The attempt to escape history becomes another layer of history, ready for the next reformer to challenge.

Translation Moved the Centre and Multiplied Christianities

Christianity crossed continents before most of Europe became Christian. Greek was only one of its early languages. Syriac churches stretched east of the Roman frontier. Coptic and Ge'ez traditions took root in Africa. Armenia adopted Christianity in the early fourth century, and Aksum did so under King Ezana later in that century. A monument erected in China in 781 records the arrival of a Christian mission in 635. These communities did not form an exotic edge around one Roman centre. They were centres to themselves.

Translation widened access but did not automatically transfer power. Scripture and worship entered Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ge'ez, Slavonic and many later languages, letting believers pray and argue without mastering Greek or Latin. Translators decided which local words carried God, spirit, sacrifice, ancestor or sin. Mission authorities could still reserve ordination, printing, schooling or finance for outsiders, privilege one dialect or destroy practices classified as pagan. Vernacular words could expand interpretive capacity while institutional control remained foreign.

European overseas expansion joined mission to conquest with unprecedented reach. Iberian crowns claimed Christian authority over invaded lands. Baptism could be coerced, church property could follow dispossession, and theological categories could rank peoples. Missionaries learned languages, defended some indigenous communities and protested abuses, while remaining inside systems that sought conversion and imperial rule. Later Protestant missions were entwined with commerce, education, medicine, abolitionism and empire in different proportions. The missionary and the coloniser were neither identical nor safely separate.

Local Christians were participants, not passive recipients. The kingdom of Kongo adopted Christianity through its own diplomacy from the late fifteenth century, and Kongo rulers used Christian literacy and titles for local purposes. In the early eighteenth century, Kimpa Vita claimed that Saint Anthony spoke through her and located sacred history in Kongo. Political and church authorities executed her for heresy. Her movement shows the mechanism clearly: once translated, Christianity supplied language with which converts could challenge the people who had brought it.

The Atlantic slave system exposed the religion's opposing uses. Christian slaveholders and theologians defended bondage, restricted baptism and built racial hierarchies. Enslaved Christians read Exodus, crucifixion and deliverance against masters who cited obedience. Abolitionists drew on evangelical conversion, natural rights and organised churches, while other Christians resisted them. No honest history may claim Christianity abolished a system Christian societies had helped construct and defend.

The twentieth century accelerated local ownership. The Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles from 1906 became one source of modern Pentecostalism, with interracial worship under the leadership of William Seymour before American segregation reasserted itself within much of the movement. Pentecostal and charismatic forms travelled through local preachers, healing networks, radio, migration and new churches. Decolonisation accelerated the transfer from many foreign-led missions to autonomous churches. Ecumenical bodies sought cooperation, while independent

movements multiplied faster than old maps could classify them.

The latest comparable global estimates describe the result. Pew's 2025 report, using a 2020 reference year, estimated about 2.3 billion Christians, or 28.8 per cent of humanity. The number grew from 2010, but more slowly than the world population. Both Europe and North America recorded absolute and proportional declines, driven largely by disaffiliation. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 30.7 per cent of Christians worldwide, while Europe accounted for 22.3 per cent. These categories measure identification, not belief, practice or one agreed definition of membership.

Across most large traditions, a family resemblance remains: Jesus, scripture, baptism, prayer, communal worship, the Spirit, church and hope. Yet no city, ethnicity or institution can stand for all of it. The first disciples made Jesus present through testimony. As communities translated, worshipped and trained successors, people far from those witnesses acquired authority to interpret and transmit the claim. Christianity reached the world through local Christianities. Its recurrent unity and durable plurality grew from the same transmission system.

How It Actually Works

From execution to assemblies

Around 30 CE, Roman authorities crucified Jesus under Pontius Pilate. His followers regrouped in Jerusalem and proclaimed that God had raised him. Acts describes an explosive beginning at Pentecost; Paul's earlier letters show the less tidy result, scattered assemblies disputing food, sex, status, worship, money and the timing of Christ's return.

The movement travelled along existing roads and sea routes. Diaspora Jewish communities supplied scriptures, Greek-speaking networks and places where claims about Israel's Messiah could first be argued, although relations differed by city. Antioch became an early base for a mixed Jewish and Gentile community. Paul moved through cities in Asia Minor and Greece, usually working with partners and leaving local assemblies rather

than buildings. His letters were management at a distance. They corrected factions, arranged collections, answered questions and tried to make people who had never met Jesus live as one body.

Jerusalem remained important. Paul collected money from Gentile communities for believers there, a practical attempt to bind a widening movement to its Jewish source. The bond did not hold in one form. Rome destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 70 after the first Jewish revolt, and crushed another revolt under Bar Kokhba in the 130s. Christians and Jews continued to overlap, argue and separate at different speeds. By the second century, many Gentile Christians described Judaism as a superseded past even while regularly reading Jewish scripture in worship.

The Gospels gave communities extended narratives of Jesus. Mark is usually dated near the destruction of the Temple, Matthew and Luke later in the first century, and John near its end, though exact dates remain debated. They share a central sequence and differ in wording, order and emphasis. Their differences show that memory was being interpreted inside communities, not downloaded as one transcript. By about 100, there was still no worldwide headquarters, fixed New Testament or single administrative plan. There were connected assemblies with letters, rites, travelling teachers and a growing conviction that they belonged to one church.

Daily belonging could be demanding. Many converts withdrew from sacrifices that accompanied civic festivals, guild meals and family duties, so religious choice could disturb employment and kinship. Assemblies also had to cross social ranks they did not erase. Enslaved people and masters, patrons and dependants, women who hosted meetings and men who claimed public authority shared worship inside Roman households. The language of one body did not abolish hierarchy, but it made hierarchy an argument within the community rather than an unquestioned fact outside it.

A church before Christendom

During the second and third centuries, Christians became easier to recognise. They met on Sundays, read scripture, prayed, baptised converts and shared the Eucharist. They collected money for members in need and sometimes for prisoners or distant churches. A house at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates was adapted for Christian worship in the third century, with a baptistery and painted biblical scenes. It looks less like a cathedral than a domestic building modified for repeated communal use.

Leadership became more defined. In many cities a bishop presided with presbyters and deacons, oversaw admission and discipline, represented the church to outsiders and exchanged letters with other bishops. Writers such as Irenaeus defended public teaching linked to apostolic churches against rival accounts claiming secret knowledge or a different scriptural inheritance. A four-Gospel collection gained authority. Paul's letters circulated together. Other texts were valued in some churches and rejected in others. The edges of the canon remained unsettled long after its centre became familiar.

Roman pressure was irregular. Pliny the Younger, governing Bithynia around 112, asked Emperor Trajan how to handle accused Christians because there was no comprehensive policy at hand. Around 250, Decius ordered widespread public sacrifice. Certificates surviving chiefly from Egypt record compliance, while Christian sources describe believers who sacrificed, refused, fled or obtained papers without performing the rite. Diocletian's persecution from 303 attacked churches, scriptures and clergy across much of the empire. Martyr stories honoured endurance, but many Christians complied, hid or argued later about readmission. The church learned that persecution could divide survivors as sharply as it sanctified the dead.

Growth was uneven and usually unrecorded. The archive rarely names ordinary carriers, so the likely routes must be reconstructed: merchants moving stories between ports, enslaved people entering households, soldiers changing garrison, widows supporting assemblies, parents teaching

prayers. These are inferred social channels, not documented biographies. By the third century, Christians were numerous enough in some cities to own property and run organised charity, while elsewhere they remained marginal. No single command centre directed expansion. Letters, travellers, marriage and migration did much of the work later histories assign to famous missionaries.

The imperial turn and the Christian worlds

The Great Persecution was already being dismantled when Galerius issued toleration in 311. Constantine's victory in 312 and a 313 settlement linked to Constantine and Licinius broadened toleration and restored Christian property; the eastern conflict ended after Maximin Daia's defeat. Money, imperial favour and public buildings followed. Bishops travelled on state roads to councils, petitioned emperors and competed for patronage. The church did not swallow the empire at once. Constantine used religious language broad enough for several constituencies and was baptised near death. His intervention nevertheless changed what victory in a theological dispute could deliver.

Nicaea in 325 condemned Arius' teaching and described the Son as of one substance with the Father. Conflict continued under Constantine's successors. Theodosius I backed Nicene Christianity in 380, and Constantinople followed in 381. Chalcedon in 451 tried to settle how Christ's divinity and humanity related. Its formula became authoritative in Rome and Constantinople. Churches now called Oriental Orthodox continued through non-Chalcedonian inheritances, while the Church of the East, organised beyond Roman control, followed a different path after Ephesus in 431. Imperial Christianity created common formulas, but no council gathered all later Christian families into one body.

The map was already wider than the empire. Armenian Christianity developed around a kingdom between Rome and Persia. Ezana's Aksum adopted Christianity in the fourth century and marked the change on coins. Christians in the Sasanian Empire built their own hierarchy, sometimes suffering when Roman emperors made Christianity look like the religion of

an enemy state. Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ge'ez communities produced liturgies, biblical translations and saints whose worlds cannot be arranged as stages on a Roman road.

Monasticism supplied another network. Ascetics withdrew from ordinary households, first in varied forms and then in communities shaped by rules. Egyptian monks associated with Antony and Pachomius became models far beyond Egypt. In the Latin west, Benedict's sixth-century Rule balanced prayer, reading, work and obedience. Monasteries and convents could shelter travellers, organise land, preserve books and give women forms of religious authority unavailable through ordination. They could also become wealthy landlords. Withdrawal from the world created one of its most durable institutions.

Christianisation beyond imperial courts often took generations. Rulers could sponsor baptism, churches and clergy, but in many places households kept older rites, saints acquired local landscapes and sacred calendars absorbed agricultural time. In the former western empire, bishops negotiated with new kings while rural communities became Christian through parish building, burial practice, preaching, law and custom. The result was neither a clean replacement of paganism nor an unchanged old religion with Christian names. It was a long reconstruction of public and domestic life.

Several Christendoms

The Arab conquests of the seventh and early eighth centuries removed Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa from Roman Christian rule. Christianity did not disappear. Large Christian populations lived for centuries under Muslim governments, often paying taxes associated with protected non-Muslim status, while law and pressure changed by dynasty and place. Christians used communal institutions and worked as physicians, officials, translators and scholars under varied conditions. Arabic became a Christian language. The assumption that Christian history moved west because the faith belonged there mistakes political loss for religious transfer.

Eastward networks continued. The Church of the East crossed Central Asia,

and the Xi'an monument records missionaries reaching the Tang court in 635. Their Chinese text translated Christian claims through terms intelligible in a Buddhist and Daoist environment. The community later contracted under political pressure, and later Christian expansions in China came through other routes. Global presence was never a smooth upward line.

In Constantinople, conflict over icons exposed how material Christian presence could become. Emperors prohibited sacred images during parts of the eighth and ninth centuries; defenders argued that because God had taken visible flesh in Christ, depiction need not be idolatry. The restoration of icons in 843 became a feast of Orthodoxy. In the Latin west, popes allied with Frankish rulers, missionaries entered Germanic and Slavic societies, and monasteries linked courts to local conversion. The ninth-century mission of Cyril and Methodius, continued by their disciples, established Slavonic as a liturgical and literary language and challenged the assumption that Greek and Latin alone could carry Christian worship.

Relations between Rome and Constantinople deteriorated through jurisdiction, ritual, political rivalry and arguments over the creed. The events of 1054 were one episode, not a trapdoor closing under a united church. The Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204 made estrangement bodily and material. Christians looted a Christian capital, installed Latin rule and carried relics west. Memory did what paperwork had not: it made division hard to treat as a misunderstanding.

Other Christian worlds followed their own clocks. Nubian kingdoms south of Egypt were Christian for centuries, leaving churches, wall paintings and documents before Islamic political expansion and internal change altered the region. Ethiopia retained a royal and monastic tradition linked to Alexandria and other eastern Christian worlds, without owing its origins to European mission. Armenian churches lived between competing empires. These histories matter because endurance did not require control of Rome, Constantinople or a western state. A liturgy, clergy, manuscripts, monasteries and local patronage could sustain a Christian society through repeated changes of ruler.

Reform and oceanic expansion

Medieval western Christianity entered life through the parish. The church baptised infants, marked marriages, heard confessions, celebrated feast days, buried the dead and collected tithes. Pilgrimage, saints, relics, guilds and confraternities created channels beyond Sunday Mass. Rome's association with Peter and Paul, its status as a former imperial capital and its western networks helped the bishop of Rome's claims grow; eastern churches never accepted those claims on the same terms. Universities organised theology and canon law, and mendicant friars preached in growing towns. The same institutional reach coordinated poor relief and crusading, learning and inquisition.

Reformers attacked failures using Christian standards. Francis of Assisi made poverty an indictment of wealth while seeking papal approval. Many mystics claimed direct experience while relying on confessors and communities to judge it. Late medieval calls for reform targeted clerical education, money, papal government and sacramental practice before Luther's challenge escaped containment.

In 1517 Luther challenged indulgence preaching. Debate moved towards scripture, grace, faith, sacraments and authority. German rulers protected reform; Swiss cities built other settlements; radical groups rejected infant baptism; Henry VIII detached the English church from Rome for dynastic and jurisdictional reasons before doctrine moved further. Protestants fragmented as they built churches. The Council of Trent, meeting from 1545 to 1563, defended Catholic doctrine while reforming discipline. Jesuits and other orders joined education, spiritual practice and mission. The western church did not divide into freedom on one side and obedience on the other. Rival confessions trained clergy, examined households and punished dissent.

At the same time, Iberian conquest carried Christianity across the Atlantic and around Africa into Asia. In the Americas, expansion operated inside societies devastated by warfare, forced labour and epidemic disease. Some colonial authorities and missionaries destroyed temples, suppressed rites

and sometimes coerced baptism. Missionaries also opposed particular abuses while accepting imperial sovereignty and religious replacement. In Kongo, rulers adopted Christianity through diplomacy and made it part of their own court. In China, Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci learned classical culture and presented Christianity through elite scholarship, provoking disputes over accommodation. Expansion kept reopening whether translation meant receiving a culture or remaking it.

Revival, empire and local ownership

From the late seventeenth century, Pietists, Methodists and evangelical revivals stressed conversion, disciplined fellowship, preaching and Bible reading. John Wesley's small groups turned spiritual examination into an organisational method. Revivals crossed the Atlantic, moved through enslaved and free populations and generated churches that established authorities did not plan.

European and North American missionary societies expanded during the nineteenth century alongside commercial and imperial power. They founded schools, clinics and printing presses, translated texts and collected knowledge. They also carried racial assumptions, attacked local religions and sometimes relied on colonial protection. Indigenous catechists, teachers, translators and clergy did much of the work, then often found authority retained by foreigners. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, liberated from a slave ship intercepted by a Royal Navy anti-slavery patrol and consecrated the first African Anglican bishop in 1864, led a Niger mission before racist intervention by younger European missionaries weakened his authority. The episode compresses a century: emancipation, education and African leadership constrained inside imperial Christianity.

Slavery divided churches. Enslavers used Christian teaching to demand obedience and helped split or build some denominations around their interests. Enslaved and free Black Christians created independent congregations, spirituals, preaching traditions and readings of Exodus that turned scripture against bondage. Quakers, evangelicals and other abolitionists organised sustained opposition, while fellow Christians

defended slavery from the same Bible. The conflict was not Christianity against slavery. It was a struggle within Christian societies over which authorities and whose humanity counted.

Orthodox churches also lived through imperial expansion, nationalism and reform, from Russia and the Balkans to the Middle East. Catholic orders and lay movements spread through migration and mission. By 1900 there was no adequate map with one European centre and mission stations around it. Foreign funding and colonial power remained unequal, but local churches had languages, leaders and interests of their own. Their decisions would shape the next century more than mission boards expected.

A century of movement

The Azusa Street revival began in Los Angeles in 1906 under William Seymour, a Black holiness preacher. Worship crossed some racial and gender boundaries, featured tongues, healing and testimony, and sent visitors away with practices and expectations they could reproduce without one central office. Segregation soon damaged its interracial promise, but Pentecostal and later charismatic Christianity spread through networks able to form churches quickly and place experience in the hands of ordinary worshippers.

The twentieth century exposed many relations between church and state. Christians supported nationalism, fascism, colonialism and apartheid; others resisted them, sometimes from within compromised institutions. Nazi racial antisemitism cannot be reduced to Christian theology, but it operated in societies shaped by centuries of Christian anti-Judaism. Christians and churches included collaborators, accommodators, bystanders, resisters and rescuers. Post-war theology and official statements confronted part of that inheritance, but repentance did not erase causes or victims.

Decolonisation shifted leadership. Autonomous churches expanded in Africa and Asia. Latin American liberation theology read salvation beside poverty and political violence. The World Council of Churches was constituted in 1948 as a fellowship seeking cooperation among separated churches. The

Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965 reformed worship, strengthened engagement with scripture, supported ecumenism, repudiated collective Jewish guilt for Christ's death, condemned antisemitism and affirmed religious freedom. None of these movements ended division. They made division something Christians could address together.

Meanwhile, secularisation reduced Christian identification and practice in much of Europe and North America. Communist governments restricted churches in several countries; some communities survived through households and informal networks. Migration carried Orthodox, Catholic, evangelical, African independent and Pentecostal churches into new cities. Korean churches sent missionaries abroad; African congregations planted churches in former colonial capitals; Latin American Pentecostalism expanded through neighbourhood networks and media. Direction no longer ran reliably from a western centre to a receiving periphery, though money and publishing remained unequal. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales documented how clerical authority, secrecy and deference could protect offenders in the religious organisations it examined. Its findings cannot establish one global prevalence rate, but churches claiming moral oversight faced demands for external law and survivor-centred accountability.

Christianity today is both contracting and expanding, often in different senses at once. Identification has fallen across much of the West. The global number of Christians still rose between 2010 and 2020, driven largely by population growth outside Europe. Large historic churches coexist with house churches, megachurches, monasteries, online congregations and movements whose boundaries are disputed. The apostles would recognise baptism, prayer, bread, wine, scripture and arguments over authority. They would not recognise the map, which is the result of those practices travelling further than any founder could govern.

How we know

The earliest Christian sources are Paul's letters, written for disputes rather than as a history. The Gospels are later theological narratives using earlier traditions; Acts supplies a connected story but often smooths conflicts visible in the letters. None of the original copies of a New Testament writing survives. Textual criticism compares later copies, while inscriptions, buildings, coins, papyri, liturgies and burial evidence test what elite authors chose to record.

Church archives preserve bishops, councils, property and controversy better than children, labourers or routine worship. Texts labelled heretical often survive through opponents, so defeat altered the evidence. Martyr accounts, saints' lives and conversion stories can contain historical information while shaping exemplary memory. Mission archives preserve unequal encounters and frequently give foreigners more voice than local Christians.

For the modern world, censuses and surveys ask different affiliation questions, so results require harmonisation and do not turn identity into belief or practice. Pew's latest comparable global report was published in 2025 and covers change from 2010 to a 2020 reference year. Some estimates used data released in 2024; population totals came from the 2024 revision of United Nations World Population Prospects. This book therefore treats global totals as measured categories, not a 2026 headcount of conviction.

What People Get Wrong

“Paul invented Christianity”

Paul is the earliest surviving Christian author, and his letters shaped later doctrine, so the story is tempting: Jesus preached a Jewish ethic, then Paul manufactured a Gentile religion about Jesus. The evidence will not carry that weight.

Paul joined a movement he had opposed. He knew leaders in Jerusalem,

argued with Peter and James, collected money for their community and quoted traditions older than his letters. His account of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and appearances was something he said he had received. Worship of Jesus, baptism, communal meals and Gentile converts did not begin when Paul took up a pen.

His importance remains immense. Paul fought harder than anyone we can see for Gentile membership without circumcision, built networks across cities and supplied language about grace, faith, church and life in Christ. Calling him the inventor turns influence into solitary creation and hides the partners, opponents, women patrons, Jewish scriptures and earlier witnesses on whom his work depended. Christianity emerged from a contested network. Paul changed its direction because he belonged to that network, not because he stood outside it and designed a religion alone.

“The earliest church was pure and united”

The imagined sequence runs from apostolic harmony to later corruption. It survives because every reform movement benefits from placing its preferred answer at the beginning.

The earliest sources show conflict almost at once. Communities disputed food offered to idols, circumcision, table fellowship, spiritual gifts, sexual conduct, status, money and the resurrection. Paul's letters rebuke factions. Acts presents agreements while revealing repeated crises. The Gospels share a central story but arrange and interpret it differently. Second-century Christians argued over scripture, creation, prophecy, authority and who Jesus was.

That does not mean there was no recognisable Christianity. Communities baptised, gathered around Jesus, read Israel's scriptures, prayed, shared meals and expected God's action through Christ. Networks exchanged letters and money. Some boundaries became firmer because churches judged rival teachings incompatible with those practices.

The correction matters in both directions. A pure beginning cannot be used as a weapon against every later institution, because the beginning already

required argument and organisation. Diversity cannot be inflated into the claim that Christianity was an empty label until emperors imposed unity. The early church possessed common inheritances and serious disagreements together. Its history begins with the work of deciding how much difference those inheritances could bear.

“Christians were hunted continuously by Rome”

Roman persecution was real. It produced imprisonment, torture, execution and memories that shaped Christian identity for centuries. It was not a permanent, uniform empire-wide policy from Jesus to Constantine.

Local officials often acted after accusation or public disturbance. Pliny's uncertainty around 112 shows that governors did not always possess a standing procedure. Some emperors launched wider measures, especially Decius, Valerian and Diocletian. Even then enforcement varied by place and time. Long stretches allowed churches to grow, acquire property, organise charity and argue among themselves. Others sacrificed, obtained certificates, fled or returned later, creating disputes about repentance.

The myth became persuasive because martyr stories were designed for remembrance, while ordinary decades produce fewer gripping texts. Christians also interpreted the martyrs as witnesses to a continuing conflict between Christ and worldly power. That theology should not be mistaken for an administrative timetable.

Getting the pattern right makes the courage of martyrs more intelligible, not less. They faced acute danger under particular conditions rather than living inside one unbroken police operation. It also explains how a vulnerable movement could become numerous and organised before Constantine. Persecution shaped the church, but intervals of tolerated life built much of the institution that survived it.

“Constantine converted the empire overnight”

Constantine did not make Christianity Rome's official religion in 313, and the empire did not wake Christian after his victory.

Galerius had issued toleration in 311. The 313 settlement between Constantine and Licinius extended protection and restored confiscated property; eastern persecution ended after Maximin Daia's defeat. Constantine favoured Christians, funded churches, granted clerical privileges, intervened in disputes and summoned Nicaea. Those acts changed the balance of power. They did not abolish traditional cults, compel every subject to convert or settle doctrine permanently. Constantine was baptised near death, and his public language remained broader than later legend suggests.

Imperial policy moved in stages. Theodosius I backed Nicene Christianity in 380. Later laws restricted sacrifice and temples, while bishops, monks, local officials and crowds helped determine what enforcement meant. Conversion took generations and differed between court, city and countryside. Older practices persisted, combined with Christian forms or were suppressed unevenly.

The overnight story mistakes a decisive turn for a completed transformation. Constantine matters because he gave Christian arguments buildings, money, law and imperial transport. He also made political victory a prize inside theology. The church's alliance with power was neither one fraudulent invention nor one clean conversion. It was a settlement whose consequences accumulated long after the emperor who began it was dead.

“Nicaea chose the books of the Bible”

No surviving evidence shows the Council of Nicaea debating and selecting the New Testament. The council met in 325 chiefly because of conflict over the Son's relation to the Father and other church disputes. The famous story of bishops voting books in or out belongs to modern fiction, not the council's record.

Christian communities had been reading Gospels and apostolic letters for generations. By the late second century, four Gospels and a collection of Paul's letters held wide authority, while disagreement continued around texts such as Hebrews, Revelation, the Shepherd of Hermas and several

shorter letters. Usage differed by region. Bishops and scholars produced lists, readers copied some books together, and churches tested texts against public worship and inherited teaching.

Athanasius' Easter letter of 367 gives the first surviving list that matches the twenty-seven-book New Testament used by most Christians today. That date marks evidence of convergence, not a moment when one man created the canon. Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Bibles still differ in parts of the Old Testament.

The myth is attractive because a meeting offers a clean origin. The real process is less cinematic and more instructive. Canon arose through repeated reading, copying, dispute and institutional judgement. Authority accumulated before it was listed, and listing did not erase every difference.

“Christianity is a western religion”

Christianity became central to European history. It did not begin in Europe, and Europe never contained all its major traditions.

Jesus, the apostles and the first churches belonged to the eastern Mediterranean and West Asia. Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Edessa were early centres. Christianity took root in Armenia and Aksum in the fourth century. Syriac-speaking churches moved through Persia and Central Asia; the Xi'an monument, erected in 781, records a mission at the Tang capital in 635. Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Indian and Church of the East traditions do not begin with European missionaries.

The western image became powerful for real reasons. Latin Christianity shaped medieval and early modern Europe, European states carried Catholic and Protestant missions overseas, and colonial institutions often presented Christianity as part of civilisation. Western wealth later dominated universities, publishing and mission finance. The archive makes European expansion look like the religion's natural centre rather than one phase in a wider history.

Today the mistake is numerically untenable as well as historically weak. In

Pew's 2020 estimates, sub-Saharan Africa contained a larger share of the world's Christians than Europe. Correcting the map does not erase colonial coercion or western institutional power. It restores older Christian worlds and recognises that converts became translators, leaders and founders whose churches were not European copies with local decoration.

“Christianity is either dying or conquering the world”

Both claims can be made to look true by selecting a place, a measure and a date.

Pew estimated that the number identifying as Christian reached about 2.3 billion by 2020, although Christianity's global share dropped to 28.8 per cent. Europe and North America lost Christians in absolute numbers as many people disaffiliated. Sub-Saharan Africa's Christian population grew rapidly, mainly through natural increase, and the region held the largest share of the global Christian population. Parts of Asia and Latin America followed different patterns again.

Even these figures do not measure one thing called faith. Censuses and surveys ask about identity, not private conviction. Baptised membership, weekly attendance, self-description and agreement with doctrine produce different maps. A person may leave an institution while retaining Christian practices, or identify as Christian while rarely worshipping. Governments and churches also count differently.

The slogans survive because institutions prefer clear direction. Decline can support a story of secular progress or cultural siege. Growth can support a story of providence or organisational success. The evidence describes redistribution, demographic change, disaffiliation, conversion, migration and institutional competition occurring together. Christianity is shrinking in some of its former centres, expanding in others and changing category as it moves. Its future will not be a single line on one western graph.

Use It

Ask how an absent founder is made present

The Christian tradition preserves no book written by Jesus, no dynasty he founded and no territory he governed. Christianity must solve an authority problem each generation: how can people who never met him know what he requires?

Churches answer through combinations of scripture, sacrament, succession, councils, preaching, saints, reason, conscience and the Spirit. Every church inherits and selects. The useful question is what carries the founder's authority here, who interprets that carrier and what can correct the interpreter.

Apply the lens beyond religion. Once a founder is absent, a movement mediates access through records, rituals, offices, authorised successors or remembered practices. Conflict begins when one group treats a carrier as transparent and another notices its managers. Christian churches have spent two thousand years arguing whether a text, table, bishop, council or converted heart is the most faithful form of presence.

Look for the whole transmission package

Ideas rarely travel alone. Christianity moved with translators, households, roads, money, schools, calendars, songs, buildings, legal privileges, family habits and repeated rites. A doctrine heard once fades. A doctrine attached to baptism, weekly worship, marriage, burial, childhood teaching and a community able to replace its leaders can survive political collapse.

To judge why a belief endured, inspect the package. Who teaches children? Which words are memorised? What marks entry? Which gathering repeats the story? Who owns the building or pays the minister? What happens when a member dies or a leader fails? A movement with answers to those questions has a reproduction system. One without them depends on enthusiasm.

This prevents two errors. It stops the believer from treating endurance as proof of truth, since institutions can preserve falsehood. It stops the sceptic from treating ritual as decorative wrapping around doctrine. Ritual is storage, training and coordination conducted through bodies. Churches survived in part because people could perform the religion before they could explain every proposition it carried.

Treat translation as a transfer of ownership

Translation can transfer interpretive capacity. It does not automatically transfer institutional ownership. Once scripture, hymns or prayers enter a local language, people can remember, teach and dispute them without the first messenger present. They may still lack control of clergy, property, education, publication or money.

Watch what happens after a scripture, hymn or name for God enters a local language. New hearers connect it to inherited categories. Some older practices are rejected, some are reclassified and some return under Christian names. Translators choose among dialects and decide which words will carry contested ideas. Local leaders may find implications foreign missionaries did not intend, while mission institutions can continue to police the interpretation.

This corrects the picture of active missionaries and passive converts without romanticising the encounter. Power was often grossly unequal, especially under empire. Mission boards might control ordination, pay, schools, printing and travel after scripture entered a local language. Yet reception still required work: catechists explained, families selected, congregations organised and converts used Christian language to support rulers, resist them, condemn slavery or defend it. Transmission can reduce the sender's monopoly when hearers gain texts, teachers and institutions. Vernacular words alone do not create autonomy.

Inspect the bargain with power

A persecuted church and an established church face different moral tests. Weakness reveals what people will endure. Power reveals what they will impose.

Christian institutions gained land, law, patronage and reach that could protect worship, support clergy, feed the poor, teach children and preserve memory. The same resources could suppress rivals, discipline sexuality, accumulate wealth, exclude minorities and protect leaders from scrutiny. Capacity has no built-in moral direction. It makes chosen purposes easier to carry out and failures harder to escape.

So ask four questions whenever religion and government meet. What does the church receive? What does the ruler receive? Who gains protection? Who becomes easier to coerce? Constantine, medieval kings, colonial governments, nationalist regimes and modern political parties offer different answers, but the exchange persists. A church may influence power without controlling it, resist one policy while benefiting from the system, or speak prophetically after helping construct the abuse. Moral independence is not secured by assertion. It depends on whether institutions can survive refusing the bargain they condemn.

Treat reform as construction, not protest

A reformer can expose corruption in an afternoon. A reformed community requires years of teaching, finance, discipline and succession.

Christian history is full of movements that appealed past current authorities to an earlier source: apostles, scripture, poverty, grace, conscience or the Spirit. Their lasting effects depended on what came next. Monastic reforms wrote rules and founded houses. Protestant reformers produced catechisms, ministers, schools and church orders. Methodists organised classes and circuits. Pentecostals trained pastors, planted congregations and built networks. The anti-institutional impulse repeatedly became an institution because memory and leadership otherwise dissolved.

Use that distinction when a movement claims to be returning to purity. Ask what it will build, who will guard the recovery and how dissent will be handled once the reformers hold office. The new structure may be leaner or more accountable. It will still distribute authority and create insiders. Reform does not escape the problem of tradition. It creates another tradition whose founding protest may later be invoked against it.

Recover the people beneath the official history

Church history naturally fills with apostles, emperors, bishops, popes, theologians and reformers because institutions preserved their names. The religion also depended on hosts, widows, enslaved people, scribes, translators, singers, mothers, teachers, catechists, donors and migrants whose records are thinner.

The correction is not a token list of forgotten people. It is to ask what labour made the visible institution possible. Who prepared the meal, copied the page, taught the prayer, kept the building, raised the child, carried the letter, funded the journey or interpreted the sermon? Who held responsibility without office, and which offices depended on unacknowledged work?

This changes causal explanation. Paul matters, and so do the households that received his letters. Councils matter, and so do the congregations that recited their formulas. Missionaries matter, and so do local translators who turned imported teaching into a community. Once that labour is visible, expansion looks less like lines drawn by leaders across a map and more like repeated decisions made inside homes, schools and congregations.

The limits

Christianity does not provide one clean lesson about religion. Its sources are confessional and uneven. The earliest texts proclaim the event they describe. Imperial and church archives preserve institutions better than private doubt. Victorious churches kept their books more successfully than defeated ones. Colonial records often allow the missionary to speak at length and reduce converts to numbers. Modern censuses measure labels that mean different things in different societies.

Nor does historical explanation decide theology. Showing how resurrection belief arose and spread does not prove or disprove the resurrection. Explaining how councils produced creeds does not make the creeds arbitrary, and showing political pressure does not make doctrinal conviction unreal. Institutions may carry truth, error or both. Longevity, growth, persecution and social benefit are not tests capable of settling a claim about God.

The subject also defeats one moral total. Christianity has supported care and cruelty, domination and resistance, sometimes through the same text and institution. A ledger that subtracts hospitals from persecutions would be nonsense. The responsible judgement is narrower: identify actors, powers, victims, choices and consequences. Do not make two billion people inherit equal responsibility for every act performed under a Christian name, and do not let a tradition's internal ideals erase what its institutions enabled.

The one thing to keep

Keep asking what makes Christ present.

Christianity began with people saying that Jesus, though executed and absent from ordinary sight, was alive and authoritative. Everything that followed tried to carry that claim beyond the witnesses. Christianity answered with a package rather than one object. Gospels carried testimony; baptism marked belonging; the Eucharist joined memory to action; bishops, councils and creeds organised continuity; monasteries, households and schools trained successors; translation let distant communities speak and argue. None of these carriers was neutral. Each preserved something, interpreted it and distributed access.

Once that is visible, Christianity stops looking like a single object passed intact from Jerusalem to the present. It becomes a history of mediated presence. The package gives the religion resilience because text, ritual, office, household practice and claimed experience can reinforce or outlast one another. It also creates division because they can point in different directions and no living founder walks into the room to rank them.

When you encounter a church, claim or conflict, ask what makes Christ present there, who maintains it, what can correct it, and whom it authorises or excludes. The answer reveals more than a label. Two thousand years of Christianity are the consequences of solving that problem under new languages and powers. The solutions carried the movement across the world. They also made every claim to a final, uncontested Christianity another Christian argument.

Terms

Messiah and Christ

Messiah is Hebrew for an anointed figure; Christ is the Greek equivalent. Christians use Christ as a title for Jesus, though repeated use has made it sound like a surname.

Resurrection

The claim that God raised Jesus bodily from death, not merely that his teaching survived. It formed the first proclamation, transformed crucifixion into vindication and grounded Christian hope for wider renewal.

Apostle

A person sent with authority as a witness or missionary. The Twelve hold a special place, but early sources also apply the term more widely, which made its boundaries contested.

Gospel

The term means good news. It can mean the Christian proclamation about Jesus or one of the written narratives attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The two senses developed together.

Church and ekklesia

Ekklesia means an assembly and is the word early Christians used for local gatherings and the whole people of God. Church later named the community, institution and building, ambiguously.

Gentile

A non-Jew. The decision to admit Gentiles without requiring full conversion to Judaism allowed Christianity to cross ethnic boundaries while creating lasting disputes about its debt to Jewish scripture and people.

Canon

The set of writings recognised as scripture. The New Testament canon emerged through reading, copying, argument and regional convergence, while Christian traditions still differ over parts of the Old Testament.

Creed

A compact statement of belief used in teaching, baptism and worship. Creeds preserve the result of long arguments, especially about the Trinity and Christ, without reproducing every disputed premise.

Trinity

The doctrine that the one God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct without being three gods. Its technical language developed because Christian worship created questions that simpler formulas could not settle.

Incarnation

The claim that the eternal Son or Word became fully human in Jesus. It made matter, history and a human body central to Christian teaching about God rather than obstacles to divinity.

Sin and salvation

Sin names damaged relation to God, neighbour, self and creation; salvation names God's rescue and renewal. Traditions disagree over inherited guilt, freedom, healing, justification and how salvation is received.

Grace

God's unearned favour and transforming action. Arguments over whether grace precedes, enables or cooperates with human response shaped Augustine, medieval theology, the Reformation and later Christian accounts of conversion.

Orthodoxy

Right teaching, and by extension the communities that claim to preserve it. Historically, orthodoxy emerged through worship, argument, councils, institutions and power rather than appearing as one uncontested first-century manual.

Heresy

A teaching judged incompatible with authorised Christian belief. The label identifies a boundary drawn by a community; it does not by itself explain what the rejected group taught or why it lost.

Bishop

An overseer of a church and, later, a territorial diocese. Bishops linked worship, teaching, discipline, property and relations with other churches, giving Christianity durable regional leadership.

Apostolic succession

The claim that authorised ministry continues from the apostles through public episcopal ordination. Catholic, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Church of the East and some Anglican churches give it particular weight.

Baptism

The water rite of Christian initiation, associated with cleansing, death and new life in Christ, forgiveness, the Spirit and entry into the church. Traditions dispute candidates, timing and theological effect.

Eucharist

The rite using bread and wine in memory of Jesus' last meal and death. Also called Communion or the Lord's Supper, it became one of Christianity's central repeated acts and sharpest dividing lines.

Liturgy

The ordered public worship of a church: readings, prayers, responses, song and sacrament. Liturgy stores theology in repeated words and gestures, often preserving older forms beneath later doctrinal explanation.

Sacrament

A rite understood as a means or sign of divine grace. Catholic and Orthodox traditions describe sacramental life broadly; many Protestants give special status to baptism and the Lord's Supper, calling them sacraments or ordinances.

Monasticism

Religious life organised around disciplined prayer, celibacy, community or solitude. Monks and nuns withdrew from ordinary households yet became landholders, teachers, scribes, missionaries, critics and providers of care.

Papacy

The office of the bishop of Rome as pope. Catholic teaching gives it universal authority; Orthodox and Protestant traditions reject or limit that jurisdiction while interpreting early evidence differently.

Schism

A rupture of communion between churches, often involving authority, worship, doctrine, language and political memory. The east-west separation cannot be reduced to 1054, though that date remains a conventional marker.

Catholic

Meaning universal. With a capital C it usually denotes churches in communion with the pope. The Catholic Church contains many rites and local traditions rather than being identical with Latin worship.

Eastern Orthodox

The communion of churches shaped by Byzantine conciliar tradition and organised through local episcopal churches, many autocephalous. It rejects universal papal jurisdiction while preserving episcopal and sacramental continuity.

Oriental Orthodox

Ancient Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Malankara churches that did not receive Chalcedon in 451. They are distinct from Eastern Orthodoxy; modern dialogue has narrowed some inherited Christological disputes.

Protestant

The broad family descending from sixteenth-century western reforms that rejected papal authority and reordered doctrine and worship around scripture. Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Anabaptist and later churches differ substantially.

Evangelical

A cross-denominational emphasis on the gospel, personal conversion, biblical authority and active mission. The term has different histories in Britain, the United States and the wider world, especially in politics.

Pentecostal and charismatic

Christian movements emphasising present gifts of the Holy Spirit, often including tongues, healing and prophecy. Pentecostal denominations emerged in the twentieth century; charismatic renewal also spread inside older churches.

Ecumenism

Efforts towards cooperation or restored unity among separated Christian churches. Modern ecumenism built councils, dialogues and shared action while leaving unresolved questions about doctrine, sacraments, ministry and authority.

Go Deeper

The whole sweep

Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Allen Lane, 2009). The large modern synthesis to choose when this book has made one hour feel inadequate. MacCulloch begins before Jesus, with the Jewish and Greek worlds that supplied Christianity's language, then follows eastern and western churches across theology, politics, worship and geography. His eye for institutional irony is excellent, and he refuses to make Latin Europe the whole faith. The warning is physical: more than a thousand pages, dense with names, arguments and changes of direction. Read it by period rather than treating completion as a moral duty.

The first sources in context

Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 2017). This is the New Testament presented with introductions, notes, maps and essays by Jewish scholars. It restores the Jewish settings of Jesus, Paul and the earliest churches, explains where later Christian readings departed from those settings, and identifies passages with difficult histories in Jewish-Christian relations. It is a strong next step because the primary texts remain visible while expert commentary prevents familiarity from pretending to be understanding. The notes are concise, though the volume is better sampled book by book than read from cover to cover.

The first millennium

Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (Yale University Press, 2012). The most inviting bridge from this book into serious church history. Wilken writes clearly, gives doctrine its intellectual weight and follows Christianity through Armenia, Ethiopia, Persia, Central Asia and China as well as Rome and Constantinople. He is especially good on how worship, translation and institutions made Christianity at home in different cultures. The account is sympathetic to the tradition, which gives its believers' reasoning full force; readers wanting a more suspicious treatment of power should place MacCulloch beside it.

The modern transformation

Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton University Press, 2018). Stanley organises the century by problems rather than marching country by country: nationalism, war, genocide, race, migration, ecumenism, gender, sexuality, Pentecostalism and the changing Christian map. That structure shows why western secularisation and global Christian expansion can occur together. It is the best of these four for understanding the world described in the final pages of this book. The thematic method sometimes interrupts chronology, but it prevents Europe and North America from claiming the century as their private story. Its range makes it a useful corrective to single-country church histories.

Notes and Sources

Scope, title and central model

What Christianity means here. The book treats Christianity as the changing family of communities that organise identity, worship and authority around Jesus Christ. That definition is historical rather than a judgement about which community is faithful. Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic and independent churches overlap, and some groups dispute one another's Christian status. Diarmaid MacCulloch's *A History of Christianity* supplies the broad chronology, while Robert Louis Wilken and Brian Stanley prevent the account from treating western Europe and North America as the whole subject.

The carrier model. The argument that Christianity endured through a partly redundant package of testimony, text, rite, ministry, institution and translation is a synthesis. Harry Gamble supports the relation between oral performance, reading and material texts. Michael Peppard shows scripture, art and initiation joined in the Dura-Europos church. Wilken, Dana Robert and Lamin Sanneh support the emphasis on worship, institutions and

translation across cultures. No source proposes a universal law in which these carriers guarantee survival, and the book does not claim that every church possessed them in the same form.

Jesus, resurrection testimony and the apostles

Historical limits. The New Testament is the indispensable primary collection, read here in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* and the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Historical method can establish the early proclamation that God raised Jesus, the existence of named traditions and the effects of that conviction. It cannot verify or falsify divine action as divine action. Paula Fredriksen locates the first Jerusalem community inside Jewish apocalyptic expectation. Larry Hurtado supports the early date and intensity of devotion to Jesus. The book's distinction between a Christian theological claim and a historical claim is methodological, not a covert ruling on the miracle.

Paul's received tradition. First Corinthians 15 contains Paul's statement that he delivered what he had received concerning Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and appearances. The formula predates the letter, though scholars differ over its exact age and shape. Paul's letters also attest contact and conflict with Peter, James and the Jerusalem church, preventing the claim that Paul created the movement alone. His importance for Gentile admission, urban networks and later theology remains central.

Women and early networks. Paul's greetings in Romans 16 name Phoebe, Prisca and other women within mission and patronage networks. Paul calls Phoebe a *diakonos* and *prostatis*; translations vary among deacon, minister or servant and patron or benefactor. The Gospels give women, especially Mary Magdalene, major roles in the resurrection narratives, while First Corinthians 15 preserves a different appearance sequence. The manuscript treats this as evidence of several traditions and refuses both a modern equality story and the erasure of women's labour. Later office became more consistently male, while women continued as patrons, ascetics, martyrs, teachers and organisers in forms that differed by place.

Gentile inclusion and separation from Judaism

The Gentile question. Galatians, Romans and Acts preserve different presentations of conflict over circumcision, food and table fellowship. They converge on the result that Gentiles could enter through Christ without first becoming Jews. The book does not describe Paul as leaving Judaism for a finished separate religion. Fredriksen and Judith Lieu support a gradual and regionally varied construction of Christian and Jewish identities rather than one universal date for a parting of the ways.

Anti-Judaism and later antisemitism. Polemic in early Christian texts often arose from disputes among Jews and between neighbouring communities. Once Gentile Christians became dominant and Christian institutions gained power, those texts could be read as a judgement on Jews as a people. The *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, MacCulloch and Stanley support the distinction between first-century settings, Christian supersessionism, legal discrimination, popular violence and the racial antisemitism of modern Europe. The manuscript does not make Christian teaching the sole cause of the Holocaust. It states that centuries of Christian anti-Judaism formed part of the societies in which European Jews were persecuted and murdered.

Scripture, worship and ministry

Canon formation. Gamble and Bruce Metzger support the sequence used here: Israel's scriptures were inherited first; Gospels and apostolic letters circulated and were read across communities; a four-Gospel collection and Pauline corpus gained wide authority by the late second century; disputed edges remained; and regional lists converged over time. Athanasius' Easter letter of 367 is the first surviving list matching the twenty-seven-book New Testament now standard in most churches. Nicaea did not select those books. Christian traditions continue to differ over parts of the Old Testament.

Ritual and repetition. The New Testament, the *Didache* and other texts collected in Michael Holmes's *Apostolic Fathers* attest baptism, gathering, prayer, scripture reading, charity and Eucharistic practice in early

communities. Forms and explanations varied. The book therefore uses baptism and Eucharist as durable families of practice, not as proof that one later sacramental theology existed complete in the first century.

Dura-Europos. The adapted third-century house church and its baptistery are treated through Peppard's archaeological and ritual analysis. The building is setting-specific evidence from Roman Syria. It is not presented as a standard plan for all early churches.

Bishops and succession. The New Testament and early Christian writings display apostles, prophets, teachers, overseers, elders and deacons without one uniform chart. Ignatius of Antioch supplies strong early evidence for a single bishop with presbyters and deacons in some cities. Irenaeus used public teaching and succession against rival claims. The manuscript describes a second-century trend, not an instantaneous worldwide settlement.

Orthodoxy, creeds and councils

Diversity and boundaries. Early Christianity included substantial variety, but shared scriptures, worship and claims make an unlimited-plurality model equally misleading. MacCulloch, Hurtado, Wilken and Lewis Ayres support the account of arguments growing from Christian worship of Jesus within monotheism. Labels such as Gnostic cover different movements and should not imply one rival church.

Nicaea and Constantinople. Norman Tanner's collection of conciliar decrees and Ayres's study of fourth-century theology support the claim that Nicaea in 325 addressed the Son's relation to the Father and used the language translated as of one substance. The Nicene settlement required decades of dispute and reception. The creed normally used in worship reflects the expanded form associated with Constantinople in 381. Constantine's summons and support mattered, but the theology cannot be reduced to imperial convenience.

Ephesus, Chalcedon and eastern churches. The Church of the East developed within the Sasanian sphere and followed a different conciliar

trajectory after Ephesus in 431. Chalcedon in 451 confessed one Christ in two natures. Churches now called Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Malankara Orthodox followed non-Chalcedonian inheritances. Modern dialogues show that old labels could exaggerate disagreement, but ecclesial division and different theological vocabularies remain real. The book avoids calling the Oriental Orthodox churches Monophysite or treating them as incomplete Eastern Orthodox communities.

Archive after victory. Conciliar acts, imperial laws and hostile quotation preserve winners more fully than many defeated groups. The observation does not imply that every lost teaching was equally plausible. It limits confidence about how ordinary adherents understood the disputes and why particular communities disappeared.

Persecution, Constantine and Christian power

Roman persecution. Pliny's correspondence with Trajan shows local accusation and administrative uncertainty around 112. Musurillo's martyr texts and Eusebius preserve further evidence through sources with literary and theological aims. The account of Perpetua and Felicity supplies a powerful Carthaginian case but has an edited form. Wider measures under Decius, Valerian and Diocletian differed in target, duration and enforcement. Surviving sacrifice certificates come chiefly from Egypt and cannot stand for a complete empire-wide administrative record. The manuscript follows the mainstream conclusion that persecution was episodic and at times severe, rather than permanent across the empire.

Constantine and official religion. H. A. Drake, Wilken and MacCulloch support the staged sequence: Galerius' toleration in 311; the agreement associated with Constantine and Licinius in 313, extending toleration and restoring property; the defeat of Maximin Daia; Constantine's patronage and intervention; and the later imperial backing of Nicene Christianity under Theodosius I in 380. Conversion remained uneven. The book avoids both the devotional picture of a completed Christian empire in one reign and the claim that Constantine invented Christian doctrine.

Charity, wealth and coercion. Peter Brown and Wilken support the growth of episcopal welfare, patronage, property and monastic institutions. Basil of Caesarea's charitable complex is a specific late antique example, not the origin of hospitals everywhere. Imperial and ecclesiastical power also enabled restrictions on sacrifice, action against heresy and anti-Jewish law. The book's moral argument is causal and institutional: greater capacity enlarged possible care and possible coercion. It is not an attempt to balance unlike harms and benefits numerically.

Christian worlds beyond the Latin west

Armenia, Aksum and Persia. Wilken and MacCulloch support the early royal adoption of Christianity in Armenia and Aksum, while coins and inscriptions associated with Ezana supply direct evidence for Aksum's change. Dating and motives are reconstructed from uneven sources. Christians in the Sasanian Empire developed institutions under conditions shaped by periodic Roman-Persian conflict; they were not a permanent Roman fifth column.

Christians under Muslim rule. Sidney Griffith supports the account of Arabic-speaking Christian intellectual and communal life under Islamic governments. Legal status, taxation, opportunity and pressure changed by dynasty and place. The book therefore rejects both disappearance at the Arab conquests and a timeless model of harmonious coexistence.

Asia and China. Samuel Hugh Moffett and Wilken support the eastward movement of the Church of the East and the mission recorded at the Tang capital in 635. The Xi'an monument was erected in 781 and uses Chinese categories to present Christian teaching. One monument cannot measure the size or uniformity of the community, and the manuscript treats contraction and later arrivals through other routes as evidence against a smooth expansion story.

Nubia, Ethiopia and other centres. Wilken and Brown support the inclusion of Christian Nubian kingdoms, Ethiopian continuity, Armenian Christianity and Slavic missions. These cases are selected to correct a

Roman-to-western sequence, not to imply that their institutions or later fortunes were alike.

Icons and east-west division. Byzantine iconoclasm involved theology, imperial policy and material practice across the eighth and ninth centuries.

A. Edward Siecienski supports the long history of papal and Orthodox dispute. The exchanges of 1054 were consequential but did not end communion everywhere, while the Latin sack of Constantinople in 1204 deepened estrangement through conquest and memory.

Medieval life and reform

Parish Christianity. Brown and MacCulloch support the account of baptism, Mass, confession, saints, relics, pilgrimage, burial, tithes, guilds and confraternities shaping western Christian life. Practice varied by region and period, and formal prescription does not establish compliance. The Middle Ages and Crusades titles own fuller institutional and military histories.

Reformation and Catholic reform. Carlos Eire and MacCulloch support the progression from indulgence controversy to arguments about scripture, grace, justification, sacraments and authority, as well as the plurality of Lutheran, Reformed, radical and English settlements. The Council of Trent combined doctrinal definition with disciplinary reform. Confessional states on several sides coerced dissent. *The Reformation in a Hurry* retains the full sixteenth and seventeenth-century account; this manuscript includes only the rupture needed for Christianity's whole chronology.

Church families. Catholic communion is organised around bishops in communion with the pope; Eastern Orthodox churches combine episcopal and sacramental continuity with self-governing churches and councils; Oriental Orthodox churches follow a distinct ancient conciliar inheritance; Protestant churches give scripture governing authority but differ over ministry, sacraments and polity. These are broad maps. None describes every internal movement or present jurisdiction.

Mission, empire, slavery and local ownership

Translation and mission. Dana Robert and Lamin Sanneh support the claim that vernacular translation can affirm local linguistic capacity and widen interpretive participation. The manuscript bounds that thesis: translation did not automatically transfer control of ordination, finance, schooling, print or property, and mission authorities could privilege one dialect or suppress cultural practices. Mission also travelled through conquest, medicine, commerce, education and empire. The book does not make missionary and coloniser interchangeable, or pretend they were safely separable wherever political force protected Christian expansion.

Kongo and Kimpa Vita. John Thornton is the principal source for the Kongo court's adoption and adaptation of Christianity and for Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita's Antonian movement. Her claimed possession by Saint Anthony, relocation of sacred history and execution in 1706 are documented within a conflict recorded through missionary and political sources. Her case is not offered as a model for every African Christianity.

Crowther and African leadership. Adrian Hastings supports the account of Samuel Ajayi Crowther's enslavement, liberation, education, consecration in 1864 and later displacement by racist missionary intervention. The phrase first African Anglican bishop refers to episcopal consecration within Anglican structures, not to the first African bishop in Christian history.

Slavery and abolition. Katharine Gerbner shows how Protestant Atlantic societies negotiated conversion, race and bondage. Albert Raboteau supports the history of enslaved and free Black Christian worship and interpretation in the United States. MacCulloch and Robert supply the wider missionary and abolitionist context. The book rejects a single verdict in which Christianity either caused or abolished slavery. It identifies Christians and institutions on opposing sides and preserves the asymmetry between people defending ownership of humans and people resisting it.

The twentieth century and today

Pentecostalism. Cecil Robeck supplies the Azusa Street setting and William Seymour's leadership. Allan Heaton Anderson supports the wider development of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianities and the danger of tracing a global family to one American origin. Azusa was one influential node among several revivals and holiness networks. Its early interracial practice and later accommodation to segregation are both retained.

War, nationalism, genocide and decolonisation. Stanley is the principal modern synthesis. Jehu Hanciles supports the role of migration and locally led mission in altering the direction of modern Christian expansion. The manuscript distinguishes Christian anti-Judaism and church complicity from a claim that Nazi racial antisemitism can be reduced to Christian theology. It also distinguishes institutional resistance, rescue and repentance from a comforting story in which exceptional dissenters represented all churches. Decolonisation shifted leadership without instantly removing foreign finance, inherited boundaries or unequal institutions.

Ecumenism and Vatican II. The World Council of Churches was formally inaugurated at Amsterdam in 1948 and defined itself as a fellowship rather than a world church. The Second Vatican Council met from 1962 to 1965. Its official documents support the account of liturgical reform, renewed scriptural emphasis, ecumenism, religious freedom, repudiation of collective Jewish guilt for Christ's death and condemnation of antisemitism. The book does not claim that these documents settled implementation.

Institutional abuse. Official inquiries in several jurisdictions document patterns in which deference, internal handling, concern for reputation and inadequate external accountability enabled abuse or failed victims. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse report cited here concerns religious organisations and settings in England and Wales. It is used as setting-specific evidence, not as a global prevalence estimate or a proxy for every denomination.

Current demography. Pew Research Center's report *How the Global*

Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020 was published on 9 June 2025. It analysed more than 2,700 censuses, surveys and registers and describes the world in a 2020 reference year. Some estimates used data released as late as 2024, and population totals came from the 2024 revision of United Nations World Population Prospects. The report estimated 2.3 billion Christians, 28.8 per cent of world population, and found that 30.7 per cent of Christians lived in sub-Saharan Africa and 22.3 per cent in Europe. Its harmonised categories measure self-identification under varying questions, not belief, attendance, baptismal status or doctrinal agreement, and they are not a current 2026 headcount.

Misconceptions and evidence control

Paul, persecution, Constantine and Nicaea. The corrections in *What People Get Wrong* rest on the sources above: pre-Pauline tradition and Jerusalem relationships make solitary invention untenable; Roman persecution was episodic; toleration developed through 311 and 313 rather than instant official religion; and Nicaea addressed doctrine rather than selecting the New Testament. These are corrections of scale and chronology, not claims that Paul, martyrdom, Constantine or councils were unimportant.

West and decline. Early African and Asian Christianities make a purely western genealogy false. European imperial power later made western churches unusually influential, so the correction should not become a denial of colonial history. Current data support simultaneous western decline, global numerical growth and a falling global share. No single verb describes all three.

Dates and names. Dates before the second century are approximate where source chronology remains debated. Jesus' crucifixion is placed around 30 CE without selecting between leading proposals. Gospel dates are conventional ranges rather than signatures preserved in the manuscripts. The terms Church of the East, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox are used as practical historical labels while recognising that communities named themselves differently across time.

Anecdotes and memorable claims. Perpetua, Dura-Europos, Ezana's coins, the Xi'an monument, Constantinople in 1204, Kimpa Vita, Crowther and Azusa Street are documented examples. None is composite. The traveller used to explain ritual recognition is explicitly illustrative. The list of likely merchants, enslaved people, soldiers, widows and parents carrying the faith is explicitly identified as a reconstruction of social channels, not a set of documented biographies. No invented dialogue, gesture, weather, private thought or scene has been added. Where a source is literary, confessional, hostile or institutionally selective, that limitation is visible either in the body or these notes.

Bibliography

Primary, scriptural and institutional sources

Coogan, Michael D., Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Eusebius. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated by G. A. Williamson. Revised with an introduction by Andrew Louth. London: Penguin Classics, 1989.

Holmes, Michael W., ed. and trans. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.

Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Musurillo, Herbert, ed. and trans. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

Pliny. *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*. Translated by Betty Radice. Loeb Classical Library 59. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969.

Second Vatican Council. *Dignitatis Humanae, Nostra Aetate, Sacrosanctum Concilium, Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Dei Verbum*. Vatican City, 1963-1965.

Tanner, Norman P., ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. 2 vols. London: Sheed and Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990.

World Council of Churches. *The Basis of the WCC and Frequently Asked Questions*. Geneva. Accessed 4 September 2026.

Modern works and reports

Anderson, Allan Heaton. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Brown, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. 3rd ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Drake, H. A. *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Eire, Carlos M. N. *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

Fredriksen, Paula. *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Gamble, Harry Y. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Gerbner, Katharine. *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

Griffith, Sidney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Hanciles, Jehu J. *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021.

Hastings, Adrian. *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Hurtado, Larry W. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. *Child Protection in Religious Organisations and Settings*. London: IICSA, 2021.

Lieu, Judith M. *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. London: Allen Lane, 2009.

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

Moffett, Samuel Hugh. *A History of Christianity in Asia. Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*. 2nd rev. ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

Peppard, Michael. *The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

Hackett, Conrad, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi, and Dalia Fahmy. *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2025.

Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Updated ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Robert, Dana L. *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Robeck, Cecil M., Jr. *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006.

Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. 2nd ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.

Siecienski, A. Edward. *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Stanley, Brian. *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Thornton, John K. *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Wilken, Robert Louis. *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.