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BIBLE BASICS

Christian History Made Easy



A quick and colorful guide to understanding the key events and people that every Christian should know

by Timothy Paul Jones, PhD

"Here you have a beautifully simple, beginner-friendly telling of Christian history, a precious heritage."

—J.I. Packer



CHRISTIAN
HISTORY MADE **Easy**

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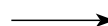


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Introduction

Why does church history matter?

In a classic *Peanuts* comic strip, Sally carefully labels her paper, “Church History.” As Charlie Brown glances over her shoulder, Sally considers her subject.

“When writing about church history,” Sally scrawls, “we have to go back to the very beginning. Our pastor was born in 1930.”

Charles Schulz’s comic strip may be amusing, but it isn’t too far from the truth. In sermons and devotional books, Christians encounter names like Augustine and Calvin, Spurgeon and Moody. Their stories are interesting. Truth be told, though, most church members have a tough time fitting these stories together. The typical individual’s knowledge of church history ends with the apostles and doesn’t find its footings again until sometime in the twentieth century.

Still, the story of Christianity deeply affects every believer in Jesus Christ. The history of the Christian faith affects how we read the Bible. It affects how we view our government. It affects how we worship. Simply put, the church’s history is our family history. Past Christians are our mothers and fathers in the faith, our aunts and uncles, our in-laws and—in a few cases—our outlaws!

When a child in Sunday School asks, “How could Jesus be God and still be like me?” she’s not asking a new question. She is grappling with an issue that, in AD 325, three hundred church leaders discussed in a little village named Nicaea [ni-SEE-ah], now the city of Iznik in the nation of Turkey. Even if you’ve never heard of Iznik or Nicaea, what those leaders decided will influence the way that you frame your response to the child’s question.

If you’ve ever wondered, “Why are there so many different churches?” the answer is woven somewhere within two millennia of political struggles and personal skirmishes. When you read words like “predestined” or “justified” in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, it isn’t only Paul and your pastor who affect how you respond. Even if you don’t realize it, Christian thinkers such as Augustine and John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards also influence how you understand these words.

So, if the history of Christianity affects so much of what we do, what’s the problem? Why isn’t everyone excited about this story? Simply this: A few pages into many history books, and the story of Christianity can suddenly seem like a vast and dreary landscape, littered with a few interesting anecdotes and a lot of dull dates.

Despite history’s profound effect on our daily lives, most church members will never read Justo González’s thousand-page *The Story of Christianity*. Only the most committed students will wade through all 1,552 pages of Ken Latourette’s *A History of Christianity*. Fewer still will learn to apply church history to their lives. And so, when trendy novels and over-hyped television documentaries attempt to reconstruct the history of Christianity, thousands of believers find themselves unable to offer intelligent answers to friends and family members.

What we don't seem to recognize is that church history is a *story*. It's an exciting story about ordinary people that God has used in extraordinary ways. What's more, it's a story that every Christian ought to know.

That's why I wrote this book.

Christian History Made Easy is a summary of the church's story, written in words that anyone can understand. I haven't cluttered the text with abstract facts and figures and footnotes. *Christian History Made Easy* is a collection of stories. Together, these stories are intended to sketch one small portion of what God has been up to for the past 2,000 years.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I was not a professional scholar. I was a young pastor in a small town in rural Missouri. A decade later, I have pastored a much larger congregation, and I do now bear the titles of "professor" and "Ph.D." Yet this book still bears the marks of that original context.

In the months that formed the first edition of this book, I spent my days among small-town farmers and school-teachers, in hayfields and hospitals, with lonely widows and life-loving youth. As I wrote, I thought not only about Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, but also about a tiny congregation that graciously referred to me as their pastor, though they probably knew more about pastoral ministry than I did. I loved those people—Thelma's pure and simple heart that could express Christ's love through the larded crust of a gooseberry cobbler, Harold and Kathrine's gentle reprimands that prodded me toward pastoral maturity, the transformation that I witnessed in the home of John and Laura. Today, I cherish those people even more than I did then, because I see more clearly what God was doing in my life through them. It was for those ordinary people that I wrote *Christian History Made Easy*, because I longed for them to grasp what it means to be surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses," the saints not only of the present but also of the past (Hebrews 12:1).

I remain indebted to Carol Witte and Gretchen Goldsmith for taking a chance on a then-unknown author and publishing this manuscript; to Jeff Cochran for providing many of the books that undergirded the original research; to Robin Sandbothe, Connie Edwards, Daniel Schwartz, Barbara Harrell Brown, Lianna Johns, and Larry Sullivan for proofreading the first draft of the manuscript; Kenny McCune, Brent McCune, and Amy Ezell for their help on the learning activities; to W. T. Stancil for proof-reading above and beyond the call of duty; Stephanie, Heather, Diane, and Christy at the McDonald's on Highway 50 in Sedalia, Missouri, who fueled the original project with copious amounts of cholesterol and Diet Coke; to the Starbucks baristas at Frankfort Avenue in Louisville, Kentucky, who fueled this updated edition; to my wife and to our daughter Hannah—ten years ago, who could have dreamed what God would do in our lives?

This book is dedicated to my parents, Darrell and Patricia. By chance, you gave me life. By choice, you gave me love. By wisdom, you let me forge my own path. By grace, you gave me wings to fly. This first book will always be for you.

—Timothy Paul Jones

what you should know about Christian history AD 64 — AD 177

5 EVENTS you should know

1. **Jerusalem Council (AD 49 or 50):** Church recognized that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to follow Jesus Christ (Acts 15).
2. **Fire in Rome (AD 64):** Flames destroyed nearly three-fourths of capital city. Emperor Nero blamed and persecuted the Christians.
3. **Destruction of Jerusalem Temple (AD 70):** After a Jewish revolt, Emperor Vespasian ordered his son, Titus, to regain Jerusalem. Titus torched the city and leveled the temple.
4. **Pliny's Letter to Emperor Trajan (around AD 112):** Pliny, governor of Pontus, asked Trajan how to handle Christians. Trajan ordered Pliny not to pursue Christians. Only when people were accused of being Christians were they to be hunted down.
5. **Martyrdom of Polycarp (AD 155):** Polycarp of Smyrna—modern Izmir, Turkey—was burned alive because he would not offer incense to the emperor.

10 NAMES you should know

1. **Peter (martyred between AD 65 and 68):** Leading apostle of the early church.
2. **Paul (martyred between AD 65 and 68):** Early Christian missionary and apostle.
3. **Nero (AD 37-68):** Roman emperor, persecuted Christians after fire in Rome.
4. **Clement of Rome (died, AD 96):** Leading pastor of Rome in the late first century. The fourth pope, according to Roman Catholics. Perhaps mentioned in Philippians 4:3.
5. **Josephus (AD 37-100):** Jewish writer. His historical works tell about early Christianity and the destruction of the Jewish temple.
6. **Ignatius (AD 35-117):** Apostolic church father and leading pastor in Syrian Antioch. Wrote seven important letters while traveling to Rome to face martyrdom.
7. **Papias (AD 60-130):** Apostolic church father. Wrote about the origins of the Gospels.
8. **Polycarp (AD 69-155):** Apostolic church father. Preserved Ignatius' writings.
9. **Justin Martyr (AD 100-165):** Christian philosopher and apologist. Martyred in Rome.
10. **Blandina (died, AD 177):** Slave-girl. Martyred in Lyon alongside the city's leading pastor.

4 TERMS you should know

1. **Anno Domini:** Latin for "the Lord's Year," usually abbreviated AD. Refers to the number of years since Christ's birth. Dionysius Exiguus, a sixth-century monk, was the first to date history by the life of Christ. His calculations were off by between one and five years. So, Jesus may have been four or five years old in AD 1!
2. **Century:** One hundred years. The first century extended from AD 1 to 100; the second century, from AD 101 to 200; the third, from AD 201 to 300, and so on.
3. **Yahweh:** Hebrew name for God. The name means "I AM" (see Exodus 3:13-14).
4. **Apostolic Fathers:** Influential first-century Christians, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias. A few later theologians—such as Augustine—are known as *church fathers*.

Who were the Christians, anyway?

What is a “Christian”? If someone asked you that question, you could probably come up with a response without much thought. Chances are, you would say something like, “It’s someone who has trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord.” But what if you lived in a world in which only a small percentage of the population had even heard about Jesus?

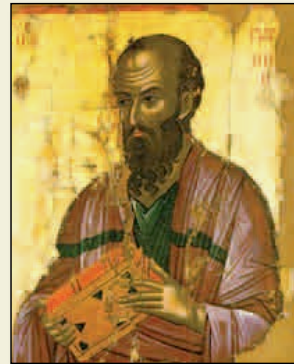
In the first few decades of Christian faith, followers of Jesus struggled to help people around them understand what it really meant to be Christian. From the Roman perspective, Christians were simply one more Jewish sect (Acts 16:20). The Jewish faith was recognized throughout the Roman Empire, so this association protected Christians in many areas. Yet, according to some Jewish leaders, Christians were renegades who had abandoned the ancient and venerable Jewish faith. Christians claimed that their faith fulfilled the Jewish Law, even calling themselves “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). At the same time, as Christianity expanded among non-Jews, Christians’ practices increasingly separated them from the Jewish faith that Jesus and his first apostles had practiced.

By AD 100, the Christian and Jewish faiths were recognized as two separate groups. Jewish synagogues had excluded Christians, and the Roman Empire had engaged in widespread persecution of Christians. How did those who claimed Jesus as their Messiah come to constitute a distinct group? The answer can’t be confined to any one event. Yet two fires—one in Jerusalem, one in Rome—contributed to this separation in a critical way.

Rome burns, but Nero doesn’t fiddle

In midsummer, AD 64, Rome burned. Flames ravaged the city for six days. When the smoke cleared, ten of Rome’s fourteen districts had been reduced to charred rubbish.

Nero, the Roman emperor, was several miles away when the fire began. When he heard the news, Nero rushed back to Rome. During the fire, he organized fire-fighting efforts. After the fire, thousands of refugees stayed in his gardens. Yet, as the rebuilding



Paul's missionary journeys spread Christianity through Asia Minor and the western Roman Empire. Believers were first called Christians in Antioch, in modern Turkey. (The Chora Monastery, Istanbul)



Nero

AD 64 – AD 177

the web

To take a virtual tour of ancient Rome:

www.dalton.org/groups/rome/

Check out the dates and historical contexts of New Testament events:

www.beliefnet.com/gallery/TheFinalInquiry.html

rumors even insisted that Nero had played his harp while Rome burned. In fact, the fire probably began by accident in an oil warehouse—but this probable fact was quickly lost amid raging gossip and rumors.

Nero responded to the rumors by lavishing gifts on the citizens of Rome. Nothing helped. In desperation, Nero blamed the fire on an unpopular minority group—the Christians. Nero became the first emperor to recognize publicly that Christianity was a different religion, and he began immediately to persecute this faith. One Roman historian described the persecution in this way, “Some were dressed in furs and killed by dogs. Others were crucified, or burned alive, to light the night.”

The apostle Peter was martyred in Rome during Nero’s persecution. According to ancient tradition, Peter didn’t believe he was worthy to die like his Savior, so the big fisherman asked to be crucified upside down. Roman authorities also arrested the apostle Paul. Since it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen, Paul probably died by the sword.

In some ways, Nero’s false accusation made sense. Christians *did* claim that a great inferno would accompany the end of the world (Revelation 20:9). Some overly eager Christians may have seen a certain sign of Christ’s return in Rome’s reduction to rubble. Yet Christians were—according to a pagan writer—“hated for their abominations” *before* the fire. What made Christian faith so unpopular?

Christians rejected all other gods

Christians believed in only one God—the God of Israel, revealed in Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Timothy 2:5). This belief seemed arrogant to the Romans. Most Romans covered all their spiritual bases by sacrificing to many gods, known and

of Rome began, many citizens blamed Nero for the tragedy.

According to one rumor, Nero had ordered his servants to start the fire. Nero torched Rome—the rumor claimed—so he could rebuild the city according to his own whims. Later



Roman imperial coin of Claudius
AD 41 to 54

WORDS from the ones who were there

Anonymous pagan writer who misunderstood the Lord's Supper: "An infant is covered with dough, to deceive the innocent. The infant is placed before the person who is to be stained with their rites. The young pupil slays the infant. Thirstily, they lick up its blood! Eagerly, they tear apart its limbs. After much feasting, they extinguish [the lights]. Then, the connections of depraved lust involve them in an uncertain fate."
Quoted by Minucius Felix, Octavius 9

THINK about it...

Early Christians refused to share in cultural customs that devalued human life, such as abandoning unwanted infants. What cultural customs should Christians avoid today?

unknown (Acts 17:23). They even offered incense to dead emperors. (As one emperor died, he joked, “I think I’m becoming a god now!”) Yet Romans didn’t sacrifice simply for their own sakes. They sacrificed for the sake of their empire. Numerous sacrifices, they believed, secured divine assistance for their government. To deny the existence of any divinity was, at best, unpatriotic and, at worst, perilous to the security of their empire.

Christian customs were widely misunderstood

When they described their worship, Christians talked about consuming the “body” and “blood” of Christ at their “love-feasts” (John 6:53-56; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-27; Jude 1:12).

Believers called one another “brothers and sisters”—terms used in Egypt to refer to sexual partners.

Alone, either of these practices might have struck the Romans as odd. Combined with the Christian conviction that Christians followed the only true God, such practices convinced many citizens that

Christianity was a dangerous cult. Romans couldn’t quell their concerns by attending a church service. When early Christians shared the Lord’s Supper, they wouldn’t even let nonbelievers watch. Without firsthand information, Romans began to accuse Christians falsely of cannibalism and incest.



Christians challenged the social order

Paul had declared, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). In other words, every person matters, whatever his or her social status.

Early Christians lived out Paul’s words. The results offended the Romans.

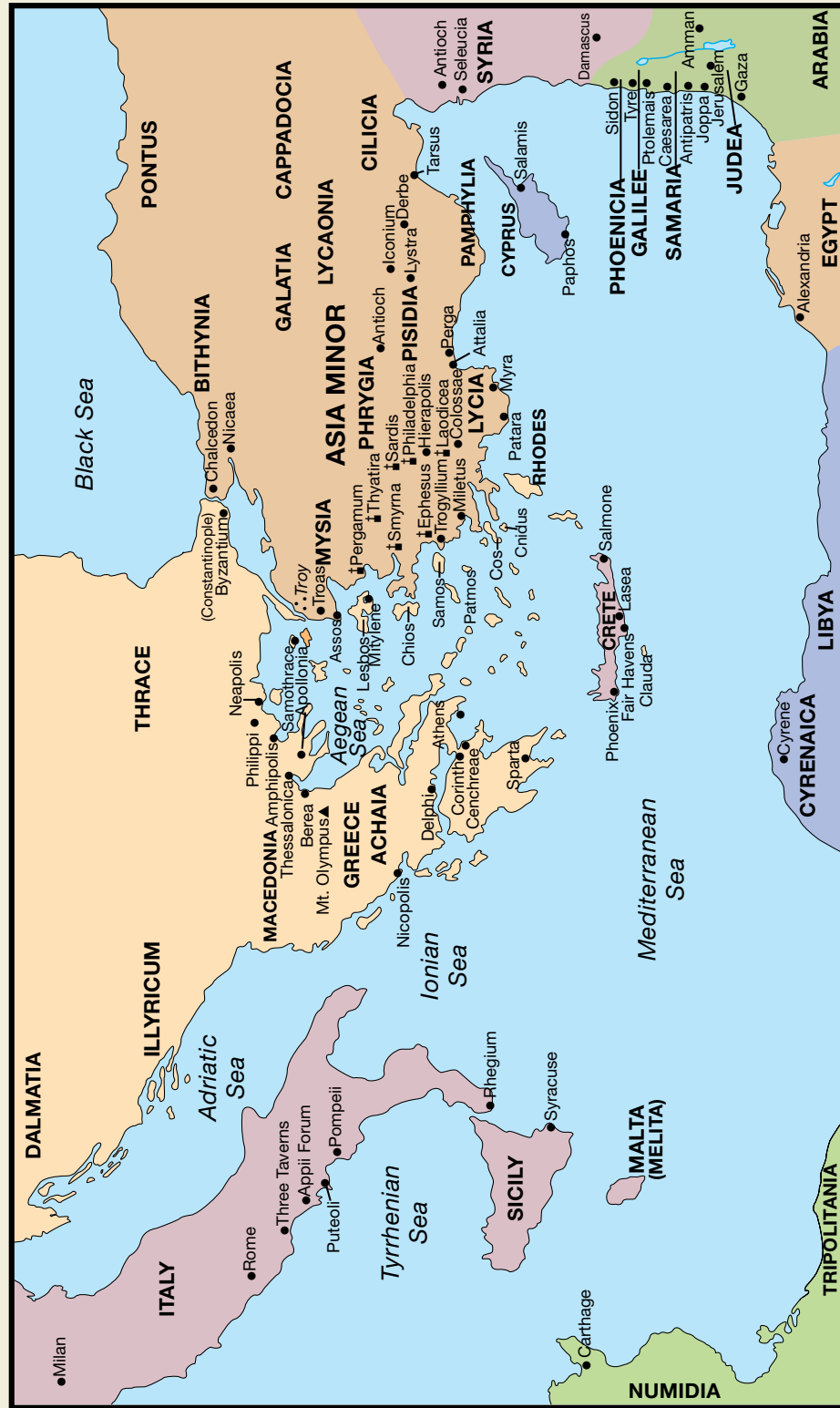
The church challenged the entire structure of Roman society by welcoming the lower classes and by valuing every human life. The laws of Rome prevented slaves from inheriting property; the customs of the empire treated women as lesser beings. If a Roman father didn’t want his child, he left the infant alone in a field, to die. Christians defied such social structures by adopting unwanted infants and by welcoming slaves and women as equal inheritors of God’s grace.



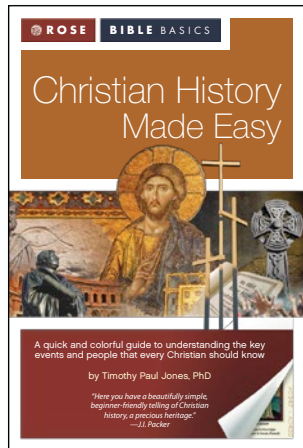
Many scholars believe that a group of Jews hid their sacred scrolls in these caves near the Dead Sea. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the late 1940s, they confirmed the reliability of the Hebrew Bible.

AD 64 – AD 177

The World of the First Christians



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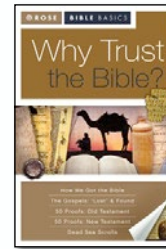


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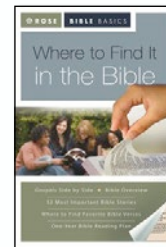
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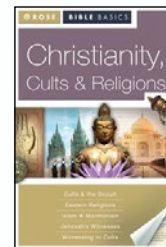
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