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Backgrounds

It seems impossible to understand Martin Luther's (1483–1546) doctrine of justification by faith—a central aspect of his theology and a hallmark of the Protestant Reformation—without first understanding something of his personal background. His father Hans, who worked in the mining industry, was known for being a harsh disciplinarian and also for his ambition to see his son receive a quality education that would lead to a successful career.[1] Naturally, he was happy when Luther began studies in law at the University of Erfurt in 1501; but he had quite the opposite reaction when his son abandoned law and entered an Augustinian monastery a few years later. As a monk, Luther nearly destroyed his digestive system through rigorous fasting, he trembled with fear at the task of presiding over the Eucharist, and he became obsessed with confession—doubting his sincerity in confession and worrying about committing more sin. Eventually, his monastic mentor Johannes Staupitz encouraged him to "sin boldly" and only come to confession when Luther had *really* sinned. Having disappointed an abrasive father and struggling as a monk, Luther began to despise the God he was attempting to serve. Then, in the course of study, he happened upon Paul's words in Romans 1:17, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"[2] Discovering God's grace and salvation through faith,

1. Marty, *Martin Luther*, 3.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture reference are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Luther related, "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."[3] While Luther's family life and early monastic experience would not facilitate him grasping the beauty of God's grace, certainly he savored it that much more because of this background. Indeed, it seems impossible to understand Luther's doctrine of justification without having an understanding of his personal background.

Any decent commentary on a book of Scripture will first include a section on background questions. Who was the author? The audience? From where was the book written? Where did the audience live? What was their history and what were their issues? What was the author's purpose in writing? A thrilling investigation for some students, others quickly rush through the background matter to get on to the weightier matters of exegesis. Yet, hopefully, the latter group will eventually learn that some of the most exciting exegetical discoveries come through a useful background study of the context.

If this book is a commentary on mission in the early church, then the present chapter serves as that necessary background check that will surely unlock some mysteries and shine light on the practice and thought of early Christian mission. We will begin by asking, briefly so, where were they Christians in the world in the first eight and a half centuries?[4] This first question will largely address the origins and initial development of Christianity in each region. Second, what were the political and social contexts in which missionaries labored? Finally, what were the currents of thought—religions, philosophies, and worldview—that the church encountered in its missionary expansion?

Where Were They Christians?

From the New Testament evidence—especially from Luke but also through Paul's letters—the gospel spread significantly through the missionary work of the Apostle Paul. While the promised areas of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria had been touched,[5] Antioch of Syria was also evangelized and

3. Dillenger, *Martin Luther: Selections*, 11.

4. For a more thorough presentation of the geographic expansion of Christianity, see Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vols. 1–2; and Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement.*

5. Acts 1:8.

became an important sending church for Paul and his companions.[6] From there, they carried out mission work on the islands of Cyprus, Malta, and Crete; in Asia Minor and Asia between Tarsus and Macedonia; to Greece, Italy, and Rome; and probably Spain.[7] In general, Paul's first-century ministry progressed in a westward direction from Antioch toward Spain.

Expansion West

In the centuries that followed, Christian mission continued to flow westward from Jerusalem and Antioch primarily within the Roman Empire. Ironically, the region of Palestine remained largely non-Christian until the reign of Constantine in the fourth century and most ministry efforts were focused on the Jews. In neighboring Phoenicia, there was a strong church in the city of Tyre; however, Christian communities were largely Greek-speaking and confined to the cities.[8]

Prior to becoming Paul and Barnabas' sending church, Antioch of Syria was evangelized in the first century amid suffering and it is remembered for being the first place where followers of Jesus were called Christians—a pejorative name given by the pagan majority.[9] Antioch was a cosmopolitan center characterized by Jewish, Hellenistic, and Roman influences,[10] which would contribute to it being an important locale for biblical interpretation and for sending intercultural missionaries toward the West and the East. By the fourth century, the population probably included close to a half million residents and there was a significant Christian population.[11]

Within Asia Minor, Governor Pliny's letter of 112 testified to the growing communities of Christians in Bithynia while Pontus and much of Cappadocia were reached through the efforts of Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 213–270) by the end of the third century. In Asia, the cities of Smyrna and Ephesus, both within the province of Phrygia, continued to have a growing Christian presence. The martyred bishop Polycarp (d. 156) was

6. Acts 11:19–27; 13:1–3.

7. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:68–86.

8. Neill, *History of Christian Missions,* 28–29; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:86–87.

9. Acts 11:26.

10. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement,* 28–29.

11. Neill, *History of Christian Missions,* 29; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:87.

a key missionary to Smyrna in the first half of the second century, while his mentor John the Evangelist apparently ministered in Ephesus in the latter half of the first century.[12] Of course, Justin Martyr's (ca. 100–165) famous public debate with the Jewish thinker Trypho took place in Ephesus around 135.[13]

Despite becoming the largest community of Christians in the western Roman Empire by the third century, the origins of the church at Rome are unclear. While claims that Peter and Paul founded the church lack support, the first indication of Christianity in the city probably comes through the historian Suetonius who recorded that Emperor Claudius had dealt with an uprising of the followers of *Chrestus* (perhaps a misspelling of *Christos* or "Christ") around the year 50.[14] The church was a Greek-speaking community for most of the second century, an indication that the movement had largely taken hold among the lower classes, until Bishop Victor (d. 199) introduced Latin as the language of worship in 189. Some have estimated that by the middle of the third century, there were as many as 30,000 Christians in Rome—a figure extrapolated from the large number of clergy serving the church.[15]

Similarly, the beginnings of the church in Gaul are difficult to detect. Though some traditions claim that Paul's disciple Crescens was an early evangelist to the region,[16] the gospel probably came from Syria, Asia, and Asia Minor via Christian merchants. Indeed, Irenaeus (ca. 115–200), bishop of Lyon until 200, was initially set apart to minister to a congregation of Greek-speaking immigrants in the city. Further, many of the Christians who suffered in the persecutions of 177 were not of Gallic origin.[17] As the church expanded, bishops were probably appointed in Cologne and Mainz by 185, and churches were established in Arles, Rouen, Bordeaux, and Paris by the fourth century.[18]

Though we are unable to confirm if Paul actually ministered in Spain, both Tertullian and Cyprian (195–258) make mention of Spanish churches

12. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 66.

13. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:87–90.

14. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 74–75.

15. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.43.6; Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 29–31; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:94–95.

16. Crescens is mentioned in 2 Tim 4:10.

17. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 2.

18. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:97–100.

in their third-century writings.[19] Also, in the acts of the Council of Elvira in the early fourth century, some thirty-six Spanish churches are listed.[20]

Though some legends claim that Paul and even Joseph of Arimathea were early catalysts in evangelizing Britain, and Tertullian alludes to Christians in the region by the early third century,[21] the first indisputable evidence for a British church comes from the acts of the Council of Arles in 314 in which bishops from London and York were present.[22] By 400, the Briton people of Roman Britain appear to have been evangelized; however, the Anglo-Saxons were largely neglected until the late sixth century and the ministry of Augustine of Canterbury (d. 604).[23] In the eighth century, English monks were catalysts for reaching the Saxons of Germany.

Despite its geographical proximity to Roman Britain, Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire. Christianity came to the Celts in the fifth century primarily through the work of the famous missionary-bishop Patrick (ca. 387–ca. 461). As a result of his nearly thirty years of ministry, much of Ireland was evangelized, which will be discussed more in the next chapter.[24] In the sixth century, Celtic missionary monks left Ireland to evangelize Scotland, and what is now Switzerland and France.

Prior to the lives and ministries of Clement (ca. 150–ca. 215) and Origen (ca. 185–254) of Alexandria, little is known about the origins of Egyptian Christianity. Eusebius, citing Clement, presented the traditional claim that the church had been planted by Mark the Evangelist.[25] As Alexandrian Christians were challenged to articulate their faith in a Gnostic milieu, the church opened a catechetical school, led by Pantaenus (d. 200), Clement, and later Origen, to offer doctrinal training to new believers. While the

19. Tertullian, *Against the Jews* 7; Cyprian, *Letter* 67.

20. Neill, *History of Christian Missions,* 31; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:96–97.

21. Tertullian, *Against the Jews* 7; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 42–43.

22. The most thorough ancient source for a window into British Christian history is Venerable Bede's eighth-century work *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.* For a survey of the extent of Christianity in Roman Britain, see Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 267–74.

23. Neill, *History of Christian Missions,* 31–32; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:100.

24. Neill, *History of Christian Missions,* 49–50; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:216–22.

25. Eusebius, *Church History* 2.16. This position, traditionally held by Egyptian Coptic Christians, has been affirmed by Thomas Oden in his recent work *The African Memory of Mark.*

churches in Alexandria were Greek-speaking, other Egyptian Christians were Coptic in language and culture, including Pachomius (ca. 290–ca. 346) and other pioneers of Egyptian monasticism.[26]

In assessing the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, Neill asserts that "it was . . . in the parts . . . today called Tunis and Algeria that the gospel most rapidly took hold."[27] The great irony is that, like Rome, the North African church had anonymous origins. Archaeological evidence suggests that there were communities of Christians in Cyrene (near modern Benghazi) by the end of the first century and in Hadrumetum (Sousse) by the mid-second century. The first actual written account of North African Christianity came from a court case in Carthage in 180 in which twelve believers were executed. As the North African church developed, it would be shaped by capable theologians such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine of Hippo (354–430).[28]

Expansion East

In recent years, scholars such as Irvin and Sunquist (*History of the World Christian Movement*), Moffett (*A History of Christianity in Asia*), Cragg (*The Arab Christian*), and Jenkins (*The Lost History of Christianity*) have helpfully reminded western Christians of the rich and colorful history of early Christian communities in the East, especially in those regions outside of the Roman Empire.[29] As the gospel expanded West from Antioch, it also ventured eastward to the Kingdom of Osrhoene and its capital Edessa. Though Osrhoene would come under Roman control by the early third century, this Syriac-speaking church had been nurtured by the Antioch church in the second century until a bishop was set apart around 200. Though Eusebius' claim that King Abgar of Edessa corresponded with Jesus during the Lord's lifetime has not found general acceptance, this account does show that the Syrians were surely exposed to the gospel well before the end of the second

26. Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 32–33; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:91.

27. Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 34.

28. A helpful introduction to early African Christianity is Decret's, *Early Christianity in North Africa*.

29. On the other hand, Neill does not help matters when he titles chapter two of *History of Christian Missions* as merely "The Conquest of the Roman World, A.D. 100–500," as if Christian expansion were only limited to the Roman Empire in this period.

century.[30] In the fourth century, the Syrian church was strengthened by the work of its greatest theologian Ephraem (306–373), who theologized in the Syrian context through preaching and writing hymns.[31]

The Christian movement in Persia and Mesopotamia probably spread from Edessa in the second and third centuries through merchants and even through Christians who had been captured by the Persians. By 225, some twenty churches had been established in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley bordering Persia. One of these communities converted a house into a small church building around 232 at Dura-Europos on the Tigris River—one of the earliest excavated church structures from the early Christian period.[32] By 285, the first Persian bishop had been set apart and by the beginning of the fifth century, there was a recognizable network of churches and bishops in the region.[33]

Christianity probably penetrated Armenia through the ministry of Christians from neighboring Cappadocia and Syria.[34] The most celebrated missionary in the third century was Gregory the Enlightener (ca. 240–332). What makes Armenia unique in early Christian history is that following the conversion of King Tiridates, who was reportedly healed and later baptized by Gregory, Christianity was declared the national religion of Armenia.[35] This move represents the initial steps toward a Christendom paradigm, which will be discussed in more detail shortly.

The initial evangelization of India has been the subject of much speculation, especially regarding the alleged mission of Thomas. Though the specific details of mission cannot be confirmed, there is no doubt that there was a Christian presence in India by the third century.[36] In terms of church expansion, it is likely that the Indian churches were an extension of the church in Persia and were overseen by its leadership. One of the signers of

30. Eusebius, *Church History* 1.13; also Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:44–50; Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 42–44; Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 57–61.

31. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 197–98.

32. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:103–105.

33. Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:117–38.

34. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 230.

35. Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:118–19; Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 47–48; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:106–106; Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 229–30.

36. Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:24–39; cf. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 244–45.

the Nicene Creed of 325 was Bishop John of Persia who apparently signed on behalf of the churches of Persia and India.[37]

In one sense, the gospel penetrated Arabia very early because this was where Paul first preached following his conversion.[38] Despite this, we know very little about Christianity in Arabia before the fourth century. It seems that Arabs were most exposed to the gospel through the witness of Roman and Persian believers. The first known churches were established in what is now Qatar, while another bishop who ministered to Bedouin Arabs was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Finally, a number of fourth-century Arab monarchs embraced Christianity and invited missionaries to come and teach their people.[39]

Though Luke records Phillip baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch who served in the court of Queen Candace, scholars struggle to make a historical connection between that encounter and the origins of the church in Ethiopia.[40] The most reliable account for the beginnings of the Ethiopian church date to the early fourth century as two youths from Tyre named Frumentius and Aedesius were traveling with their teacher down the Red Sea when their ship was attacked and they were sold into slavery. After gaining favor with the authorities and being allowed to go free, Frumentius (d. ca. 383) chose to return to Ethiopia and is remembered for leading the royal family to faith in Christ, with starting new churches, and ordaining priests among other ministries. Finally, in 347, Frumentius was set apart as bishop for Ethiopia by Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 300–373).[41]

While Chinese silk was available for purchase in Mediterranean markets before the third century, meaning Chinese merchants were probably interacting with Christians, there is no evidence for a Christian presence in China until the seventh century when the Chinese emperor favorably received Nestorian monks. As we will see, it was Nestorian Christians that spread Christianity along the Silk Road between Persia and China in the seventh and eighth centuries.[42]

37. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 113–14.

38. Gal 1:15–17.

39. Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:273–75; Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 31–48.

40. Acts 8:27.

41. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 216–18; Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 215–16.

42. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement,* 257; Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:287–314.

Finally, though located to the North and West of Antioch, the Gothic peoples certainly resided outside of the Roman Empire. In fact, it was these warring Germanic peoples from north of the Danube that overthrew Rome in the fifth century. Christianity first came to the Goths in the third and fourth centuries through the testimony of slaves—Cappadocian Christians captured by the Goths. The most famous missionary to the Goths, Ulfilas (ca. 311–ca. 383) was born to Cappadocian and Gothic parents. A moderate Arian, Ulfilas was set apart in 340 as bishop to the Goths by another Arian bishop, Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341).[43]

Ulfilas, an Arian Missionary

In his letter commemorating the life and ministry of his mentor Ulfilas, Auxentius describes Ulfilas' theology: "In both his sermons and his tractates he showed that a difference does exist between the divinity of the Father and of the Son, of God unbegotten and God only-begotten, and that the Father is for his part the creator of the creator, while the Son is the creator of all creation; and that the Father is God of the Lord while the Son is God of the created universe . . . The Holy Spirit he furthermore declared to be neither Father nor Son, but made by the Father through the Son before all things . . . Now since there exists only one unbegotten God and there stands under him only one only-begotten God, the Holy Spirit our advocate can be called neither God nor Lord."[44]

Given that Ulfilas denied the eternality and equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—clearly articulated in the Creeds of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381)—what effect did that have on the gospel he proclaimed? Did his gospel result in true conversions and transformation among the Goths? As we contemplate mission today, how important is our theology to our mission practice?

Political and Social Contexts

Given this survey of Christianity's spread, let us also briefly describe the political and social contexts in which the church expanded and missionaries labored. For simplicity's sake, we will consider three major periods: from the end of the first century to the emergence of Constantine (100–312); from Constantine's reign to the rise of Islam (312–610); and finally through

43. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement,* 179–80.

44. Auxentius of Durostorum, *Letter on the Life and Work of Ulfila, Apostle of the Goths* 27, 30–31, cited in Coakley and Sterk, eds., *Readings in World Christianity,* 103.

the Islamic period until the middle of the eight century (610–750). In each period, we will inquire about the status of Christians and the political and social regard for them—background that will frame discussions in the forthcoming chapters.

The Pre-Constantinian Period

The story of early Christianity was characterized by sporadic periods of discrimination and suffering from its beginnings until well into the fourth century. Of course, the movement's founder, Jesus of Nazareth, and its earliest missionaries—most of the Twelve and Paul—died as martyrs. Irvin and Sunquist helpfully observe, "the earliest Christian missionaries from Jerusalem went out as refugees and victims of persecution . . . these first Christians had expansionist tendencies without worldly power."[45] In 64–65, the Emperor Nero (15–68) persecuted Christians in Rome, while Domitian (51–96) probably did the same toward the end of the first century.[46]

From the second to early fourth century, followers of Jesus were met with discrimination and, at times, even violence. While it would be inaccurate to assert that persecution was constant or that the government—especially within the Roman Empire—was largely responsible, most actions against Christians were carried out on a local level.[47] In many cases, persecution was initiated by pagan mobs—angry at the Christian impiety that was dividing families and threatening society—that dragged Christians before local governors who ruled against the accused.[48] As many governors were charged with administrating vast territories, their judgments were often made hastily and in the interest of maintaining order.[49] It seems that Polycarp (156) and Christians in Lyon (177) and Alexandria (248) were victimized within this scenario. This also provides a context for understanding Pliny's appeal to Emperor Trajan in 112 for advice in dealing with accused Christians as he posed such questions as: Should people be

45. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 26.

46. Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 50–51.

47. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 65; also Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 12; and Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 25.

48. Paul Parvis, "Justin Martyr," 5–6; also Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 423; and Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 11.

49. Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 51–52; cf. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 12.

treated differently according to age? Does recanting constitute a pardon? Is merely professing to be a Christian a crime? Trajan famously responded: "You have adopted the proper course . . . in your examination of the cases of those who were accused to you as Christians, for indeed nothing can be laid down as a general ruling involving something like a set form of procedure. They are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished."[50] So if Christians were not to be sought out, how could they eventually be convicted and punished? Certainly, Trajan's ambiguous response—the official imperial policy from the early second century until the mid-third—contributed to further mob-instigated discrimination and violence.

Though persecution against Christians was largely carried out on a local level, there were some Roman emperors that initiated campaigns against the movement. In 202, Septimius Severus (145–211), the first Roman emperor from Africa, enacted a law forbidding conversion to Judaism and Christianity.[51] While this measure may have been taken to suppress the influence of Judaism, Christianity, or Montanism within the empire, it may have also been due to Severus' annoyance at the rapid spread of Christianity in Africa.

The first imperial persecution was carried out by Decius (ca. 201–251) beginning in 249.[52] Ironically, during the fifteen years prior, particularly during the reign of Emperor Phillip the Arab (244–49), Christians had enjoyed peace and some freedom to worship in parts of the empire. As Decius wanted to reform Rome and renew traditional pagan piety, it was necessary to root out what he perceived to be an atheistic sect.[53] In 249, an initial decree was given ordering all church leaders to offer sacrifices to the Roman deities and to lead their congregations to do the same. Though some leaders complied, others who resisted the order—including Bishops Fabian of Rome, Babylas of Antioch, and Alexander of Jerusalem—were put to death. In 250, the initial decree was followed by a universal order to sacrifice and administrators were brought into every province to oversee the process. Those who obeyed were dubbed "sacrificers" (*sacrificati*) and received a certificate (*libellus*), while other Christians managed to avoid

50. Pliny, *Letter* 10.97, cited in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius,* 16.

51. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution,* 238–42.

52. For a thorough discussion of Decius' campaign, see Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution,* 285–323; also Wilken, *First Thousand Years,* 67–71.

53. Cf. Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb,* 149.

the pagan ritual through bribing officials; however, they also received a certificate.[54] When Decius was killed in battle against the Goths in 251, this effectively ended the empire-wide suppression of Christianity. However, these circumstances raised some critical soteriological and ecclesiological questions for the church on the nature and consequences of apostasy. Cyprian's two treatises, *On the Lapsed* and *On the Unity of the Church*, were developed in this context.

Though Valerian (ca. 193–ca. 260) came to power in 253, he did not renew the imperial persecution until 257. In the first edict, he attempted to enforce a universal sacrifice by first ordering church leaders to honor the Roman cult. At the same time, worship assemblies and Christian funerals were banned. As the first order was largely ineffective, a second was given in 258 that ordered the execution of clergy, the confiscation of church members' property, the execution of resistant laymen, and a purging of the Roman Senate of all Christians. In 259 or 260, Valerian was killed in battle against the Persians and his son and successor Gallienus (ca. 218–268) issued an act of toleration in 261, which began a period of about forty years of peace for Christians in the empire.

Nearly twenty years into his reign, Diocletian (244–311) also wanted to return Rome to its traditional religion. Initially resistant to suppressing the church because his wife, daughter, and some key advisors were apparently Christians, Diocletian was eventually convinced by his subemperor Galerius (ca. 260–311) that this was the best course of action.[55] The first of four edicts was given in 303 in which churches were closed, worship assemblies banned, Scriptures were seized, and influential Christians in society were deprived of their civil rights. In the second edict, all clergy were forced to sacrifice or face imprisonment. In the third, clergy were again ordered to sacrifice or undergo torture or even execution. Finally, in the fourth edict, all citizens in the empire were commanded to sacrifice or face death. In the last instance, Diocletian's own family and counselors became victims of the order. In 305, Diocletian and Maximian (ca. 250–ca. 310), Diocletian's co-emperor in the West, abdicated their thrones. Constantius (250–306), Maximian's successor in the West and also the father of Constantine (ca. 274/288–337), put an end to Christian persecution in his domain when he came to power. However, Galerius continued to carry out the official policy in the eastern part of the empire until 311. The Great Persecution came to

54. Ibid.

55. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution,* 351–92.

an end in 311 when Galerius issued the Edict of Nicomedia from his deathbed. Despite his ongoing feelings of irritation toward the sect, the emperor effectively restored to the church the rights given in Gallenius' act of toleration of 261, and even requested that Christians pray for the welfare of the empire: "Therefore, in view of this our clemency, they [Christians] are in duty bound to beseech their own god for our security, and that of the state and of themselves, in order that in every way the state may be preserved in health and they may be able to live free from anxiety in their own homes."[56]

As we have established the narrative and pattern of discrimination against Christians in the Roman Empire until the rise of Constantine, let us pose one further question: from a Roman perspective what were the specific charges against Christians that merited these actions? First, the Christians were accused of a general impiety. By failing to honor the many deities of the Roman pantheon, which often included the emperor himself, Christians were accused of atheism—worshipping a god that they could not see.[57] It was believed that such impiety would ultimately anger the gods who would then remove their protection from Rome. Tertullian remarked: "They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lion!'"[58] Though sarcastic, Tertullian's remarks do seem to capture the motivations of the pagan mobs as well as some emperors whose religion was certainly influenced by economic and military uncertainties. In short, in the mindset of the Romans, to be Roman was to be pagan.[59] In the midst of the Vandal conquest of Rome in the early fifth century, when the empire was officially Christian, many pagans blamed Christian impiety for the collapse of the empire, which was the occasion for Augustine to write his magnum opus, *The City of God.*

Within this pagan religious framework, the Roman government legally condemned Christianity in the pre-Constantine period for being an illegal sect (*religio illicita*). This status was due to the movement's exclusive

56. Cited in Eusebius, *Church History* 8.17.9 (all translations of Eusebius are from NPNF 2:1).

57. Fox, *Pagans and Christians,* 425–26.

58. Tertullian, *Apology,* 40.

59. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.2.4.

religious claims and rejection of the Roman pantheon's plurality of gods. Because they worshipped a god they could not see, Christians were considered atheists. Because of Roman misunderstandings regarding the Eucharist and agape feasts, the Christians were accused of cannibalism and sexual immorality—charges that Justin Martyr answered in his *First Apology.*[60] Finally, Christians were an illegal sect because they were considered a new religion. Though Jews were discriminated against by some emperors, they were never reduced to this illegal status because of their antiquity.

Constantine and Imperial Christianity

The direction of global Christianity took a drastic turn on the eve of Constantine's battle with Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312. According to conflicting reports from Eusebius and Lactantius, Constantine saw a sign in the sky—either the chi-rho labarum symbol or a cross—and was promised victory in battle.[61] He did emerge victorious and through this encounter was apparently converted to Christianity, though he put off baptism until the final year of his life in 337. While the sincerity of Constantine's conversion continues to be debated[62]—a question beyond the scope of the present study—how did Constantine's conversion affect Christianity in the Roman Empire both in the short-term and the long-term?

After tolerating Christianity in 312, Constantine gave the movement favored status in 324 upon defeating Licenius in battle and taking complete control of the empire. Some of the benefits extended to the church included clergy gaining tax exempt status, churches receiving funding, and government-sponsored construction of new church buildings. Though Christians had already been meeting for worship on Sunday, Constantine facilitated this practice by closing the markets officially making it a day of worship.[63] Christians began to occupy important roles in government and society and bishops were also given prominent status. Finally, the emperor was clearly concerned about unity within the church and got involved in the Donatist and Arian controversies, gathering the bishops involved and

60. Justin, *First Apology* 5–6, 65–67.

61. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.28–31; *Church History* 9.9; Lactantius, *On the Manner* 44.

62. Cf. Thompson, "From Sinner to Saint? Seeking a Consistent Constantine."

63. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.18.1.

sponsoring theological reflection toward the issues being resolved.[64] While the Council of Arles met in 314 to address the Donatist schism, the most famous gathering of bishops initiated by the emperor was the Council of Nicaea of 325. Interpreting Constantine's rise to power and the favor given to the church as a sign of divine triumph, Eusebius celebrated "one God, one Word and Savior, one emperor."[65]

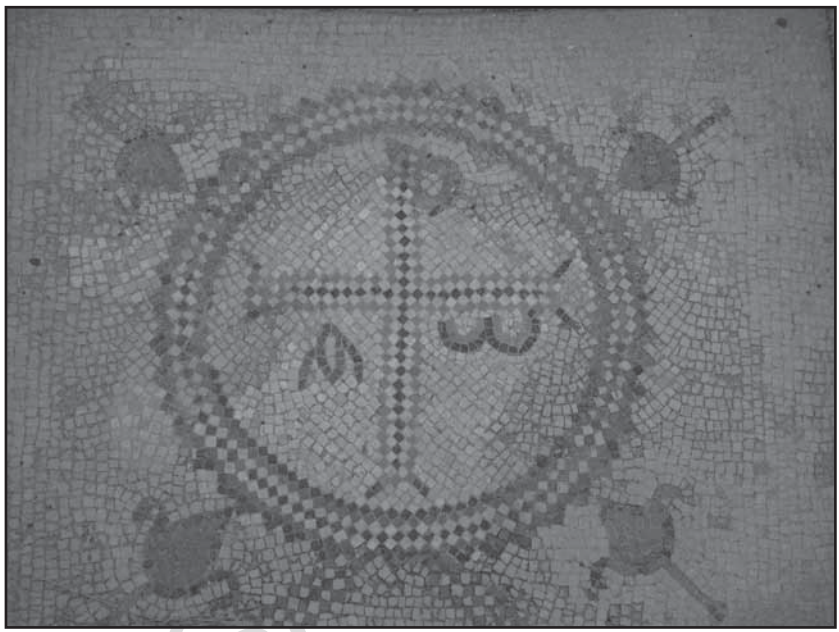

Figure 1: Mosaic floor of Sufetula (Sbeitla, Tunisia) baptistery showing the post-Consantinian *chi-rho* symbol (copyright © Marcus Brooks; used with permission).

Irvin and Sunquist helpfully assert that "in a few short years, Christianity in the Mediterranean world went from being an illegal religion to the official creed of the Roman emperor."[66] They add, "Constantine's embrace of Christianity in the fourth century was the first step toward a great synthesis of religion, state, and culture in the Roman world."[67] Though Constantine's name is most often attached to the national religion or later state church paradigm—the "Constantinian church"—the emperor was surely not the

64. Hastings, *World History of Christianity*, 40.
65. Cited in ibid., 38,
66. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement,* 155.
67. Ibid.

sole player in this broader development. As noted, outside of Rome, King Tiridates of Armenia had already declared his country a Christian nation following his conversion and baptism in 301. It should also be remembered that Christianity was not made the official religion of the empire until the Emperor Theodosius' legislation in 380.[68] Yet, Constantine's alleged conversion certainly set into motion a pattern in which kings converted and then directed or at least influenced their subjects to do the same.[69]

The Constantinian paradigm not only shaped church and state relations for centuries to come but it also influenced how the church began to understand and practice Christian mission. As gospel expansion became synonymous with Christendom, it followed that compulsion and even violence were at times regarded as acceptable "missionary" methods. This development can be closely observed in Charlemagne's campaign against the Saxons in which he declared these personal enemies to be the church's enemies and they were given the opportunity to convert or face violence.[70] Robert comments, "The dark side of the growing power of Christendom was the increasing willingness of popes and kings to use force against groups that refused to accept the Catholic faith."[71] Newbigin adds, "It is easy to see with hindsight how quickly the church fell into the temptation of worldly power. It is easy to point . . . to the glaring contradiction between the Jesus of the Gospels and his followers occupying seats of power and wealth."[72]

The Constantinian phenomenon should not be simplistically regarded as a triumph of the church toward an automatic Christianization of the Roman Empire and other regions that accepted Christianity. Indeed, in the decades and centuries following Constantine's conversion, the narrative of the church and Christian mission remains complicated; however, in no way did it signal the end of Christian mission.[73] While Clovis and Charlemagne certainly forced Christianity on their subjects, missionaries such as Patrick, Augustine of Canterbury, and the Celtic monks seemingly worked within this paradigm and preached the gospel to a region or nation after first evangelizing its monarchs. Though Boniface's (680–754) eighth-century

68. Ibid., 113, 182–83.
69. Ibid., 238.
70. Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 221.
71. Robert, *Christian Mission,* 24.
72. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks,* 100.
73. Cf. Ibid.; and Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 237.

mission to the Frisians was certainly dependent on the political protection of the Frankish King Charles Martel, this arrangement was still not enough to save Boniface and his companions from martyrdom. Finally, it is quite ironic that monastic movements, which were clearly fueled in the fourth century by an anti-Constantinian spirit, also produced the greatest number of transcultural missionaries from the sixth century onward. In short, Christian mission continued in varying forms in the post-Constantine period, including during the Vandal conquest of Rome (ca. 409–493) and through the Byzantine resurgence (ca. 527–565).[74]

The Rise of Islam

Irvin and Sunquist write, "Within a century of the death of Muhammad, as many as half of the world's Christians were under Muslim political rule."[75] Just two years after Muhammad's death in 634, Khalid ibn Walid defeated a Byzantine army in battle in Damascus resulting in Syria coming under Arab-Muslim control a few years later. The Arabs gained control of Egypt by 640 and had conquered all of Persia by 642. By 670, the Arab conquest extended from Constantinople in the East to the Atlantic shores of Morocco in the West and by 700, after having defeated the last Byzantine armies, the Arabs controlled all of North Africa. An expanding empire with a religion at its center, the Arabs seemed quite adept at organizing and assimilating its conquered peoples and territories. The Muslim armies generally offered three possibilities to its conquered foes—conversion to Islam, *dhimmi* status, or jihad.

While many Christians did convert to Islam under the leadership rightly guided caliphs of Medina (632–661) and during the Ummayad Dynasty (661–750) that was based in Damascus, others accepted this *dhimmi* status. That is, in exchange for paying a tax, they were given protection and freedom to continue worshipping as Christians. Though Christian missions diminished greatly in Muslim lands during this period, there will still be some accounts of Christian–Muslim engagement that will be worth noting.

74. For further discussion, see Smither, "Did the Rise of Constantine Mean the End of Christian Mission?"

75. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement,* 271.

Egyptian Christians, Modern *Dhimmis*

Though the Muslim caliphate (an official ruling dynasty) ceased to exist with the demise of the Ottoman Empire nearly a century ago, the countries of the Arab world remain predominantly Muslim and their societies and governments are, of course, influenced by an Islamic worldview. As a result, it is not unusual for Christian minorities in the Middle East (modern *dhimmis*) to face discrimination and even encounter violence at times. Though Christians may number as high as 10 percent of Egypt's population of 80 million, the Pew Research Center indicated in 2011 that those numbers were actually difficult to confirm because of the oppressed status of Christians: "Egypt has very high government restrictions on religion as well as high social hostilities involving religion. (Most recently, a bombing outside a church in Alexandria during a New Year's Eve Mass killed 23 people and wounded more than 90.) These factors may lead some Christians, particularly converts from Islam, to be cautious about revealing their identity."[76]

Under these circumstances, how do Egyptian Christians worship and live out their faith? How do they approach Christian mission?

Frontiers of Thought

The gospel not only spread across geographical and cultural boundaries in varied social and political contexts in the first eight centuries, but the movement also encountered a worldview matrix that included a variety of philosophies and religions. Though space does not allow for a thorough discussion, let us briefly describe the major worldview systems that the church encountered.

Within the second and third centuries in particular, Gnosticism posed many challenges to Christian thought. Though scholars today struggle to formulate a comprehensive definition for the philosophy,[77] generally, Gnosticism viewed creation and matter in a negative light and taught that redemption came through a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) that liberated the spirit from the body. Irenaeus and Tertullian regarded the movement as a threat to the purity of the gospel and both men spilled much ink in articulating apologetics against Gnosticism. On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria forged his theology to some extent by appropriating Gnostic vocabulary.

As noted, the key reason that Christians were persecuted in the pre-Constantine period was on account of their impiety—the rejection

76. "Pew Research Center: Publications," February 16, 2011.

77. See Carl Smith, "Post-Bauer Scholarship on Gnosticism(s)."

of Roman paganism. As Roman religion was syncretistic and included Persian, Egyptian, and Phoenician deities in its pantheon, while also venerating the Roman emperor, the exclusive claims of Christianity were certainly repulsive to the imperial cult.[78] While the testimonies of the Scillitan martyrs, Perpetua and Felicitas, and Cyprian reveal a Christian rejection of paganism, Augustine's work *The City of God* serves as the most thorough Christian apologetic against it.

Outside of the Roman Empire, Persian Christians were also embracing the gospel in the context of another national religion, Zoroastrianism. A dualistic cult that emphasized a cosmic battle between light and darkness, Zoroastrian leaders also persecuted Christians for rejecting the national faith.[79]

Manicheanism, traditionally regarded as mix of Gnostic, Zoroastrianism, and neo-Platonic thought, and greatly concerned with the problem of evil, had followers from North Africa to China.[80] As many of its leaders were ascetic-type intellectuals, Manicheanism appealed to young thinkers such as Augustine who were disillusioned with the church. On the other hand, once Augustine came to faith, his first apologetic efforts—both in the form of public debates and treatises—were directed toward this sect that he had frequented for about a decade.

Finally, the Christian movement also interacted with adherents of the other monotheistic traditions—Judaism and Islam—in the period of our study. Though the church's posture toward the Jews was hardly missional in the patristic period, there were some exceptions such as Justin's dialogue with Trypho in Ephesus in the second century. While the expanding Arab-Muslim Empire quickly took control of Christian areas in the seventh and eighth centuries and there were many Christians that converted, there were still some *dhimmis* that engaged Muslims with the gospel.

As early Christian missionaries communicated the gospel to those with different worldviews outside of the church, there was also a type of mission field within the church as church leaders battled to preserve orthodoxy. One of the great points of contention was over correctly articulating the doctrine of Christ. In the first three centuries, the church responded to the heresy of Docetism—that Jesus was a mere phantom and only appeared

78. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 48–67; cf. Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 16–18.

79. Moffet, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1:106–12.

80. Coyle, "Mani, Manicheism," 520–25.

(*dokeo*) to have a human body.[81] Later controversies included adoptionism (Jesus being adopted as the Son of God and taking on divinity at his baptism)[82] and subordinationism (that Jesus was less than the Father). In the fourth century, Apollinarius (ca. 310–ca. 390) emphasized Jesus' divinity to such an extent that he essentially denied the Lord's human will and nature.[83] Finally, in the midst of a confusing theological battle with Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444), Nestorius (ca. 386–ca. 451) seemed to teach that there were two Jesuses—a divine Jesus and a human one. Nestorius' Christology was largely responded to at the Council of Chalcedon of 451—a meeting that did much to alienate Greek speaking Christianity from the churches of Syria, Ethiopia, and the greater East. Most scholars today are reluctant to conclude that all Nestorian Christians—a term that became synonymous with eastern Christians—were heretical in their doctrine.[84]

Adoptionist and subordinationist thinking continued as the fourth-century fathers sought to understand and articulate how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—particularly the Father and the Son—related together in essence and action. The Alexandrian Presbyter Arius (ca. 250–336), of course, taught that as the Father was eternal and uncreated and that the Son was created by the Father, then Jesus was necessarily subordinate to the Father. Though the issue was addressed at Nicaea in 325 and Arius was initially deposed, the Arian controversy raged on for most of the fourth century between three parties: the homoousions, who believed that the Father and the Son share the same essence; the homoeans, who asserted that the two have similar essence; and, to a lesser extent the anomeans, who saw the Father and Son as entirely different.[85] While this controversy was largely an issue within the church, there were Arian missionaries such as the homoean Ulfilas, who was set apart as a missionary-bishop to the Goths.

Also in the fourth and fifth centuries, the church wrestled with the doctrines of grace—including free will, the effects of the fall, and original sin—through the Pelagian controversy. Pelagius' (ca. 354–ca. 420/440) assertions that man did not have a sinful nature and that perfection was possible and even obligatory were answered quite thoroughly by Augustine in

81. Sweet, "Docetism," 24–31.

82. Muers, "Adoptionism," 50–58.

83. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 289–301.

84. Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement,* 281; also Ward, "Africa," 194–96.

85. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 223–79.

a number of books and letters as well as through the Councils of Carthage (412), Milevus (416), and Carthage (418).[86] Finally, Augustine engaged another group—the Donatists—for instigating schism to the church in Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries. Though most commentators today would not regard them as a heretical group, Augustine considered the Donatists to be heretics for bringing disunity to the church and they became, in a sense, his mission field.[87]

Conclusion

It is difficult to understanding any movement in history without some consideration of the context. The aim of this chapter has been to paint a picture of the backgrounds of mission in the early church. In broad strokes, the geographical expansion of the gospel has been considered as well as the political, social, and ideological contexts in which it spread. Building from this background and foundation, in the following chapters we will explore the personalities, strategies, and missiology of early Christian mission.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Acts 2:5–12:

   > Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

2. Can a connection be made between these Jewish pilgrims who heard the gospel at Pentecost and the subsequent spread of Christianity to their homelands in the decades and centuries that followed?

86. Ibid., 357–74.

87. Cf. Smither, "Augustine, a Missionary to Heretics?"

3. In light of the gospel's spread across geographical and cultural boundaries in the first four centuries, how do we summarize the identity of early Christianity (i.e., was it a "western" faith)?
4. In light of the Arian Ulfilas' mission to the Goths, how important is theology to mission?
5. What are the dangers of the Constantinian paradigm for Christian mission? How might modern evangelicals be in danger of inappropriately using money and power in the practice of mission?