

The Christian Church Through the Ages

The Church of the Old Testament

God's church stretches from Eden to Eden. Those who have obeyed God have been called by various names, such as "the sons of God," "the seed of Abraham," "the children of Israel," "Christians." They all have the same fundamental beliefs.

The church of the Old Testament accepted the law of God as its rule of life. The Ten-Commandment law is unchangeable because it is an expression of God's character, which is universal, eternal, unchangeable. Long before the commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai the people of God were keeping them. God said, "Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Genesis 26:5).

God has had only one method of salvation, one standard of righteousness, all through the ages. We read in Psalm 105:8-11 that He made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the children of Israel "for an everlasting covenant." God declares that the covenant was made forever, "the word which He commanded to a thousand generations." It is not correct to say that in the Old Testament times people were under law and in New Testament times people were under grace. God has always maintained a harmony of law and grace. We are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and when we have experienced this salvation and have entered into a saving relationship with Him, we delight to do His will.

The members of the Old Testament church showed their faith in the plan of salvation by offering a sacrifice. By faith they accepted God's plan, for the sacrifice was a symbol of the Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world. They became free men and women, new creatures through faith in the coming Messiah. The hope of the ages has always been the coming of the Lord.

God instructed the church members in Old Testament times through prophets. Moses was the *first writer* whom God used to record permanent instructions for His church and to preserve the people's experiences for future generations. These inspired writings were read to the congregations on the seventh-day Sabbath and on other special occasions. These writings are known to us as the Old Testament.

The Church of the New Testament

The church of the New Testament received its fundamental beliefs from the Old Testament church. It accepted the law of God as a rule of life. The Lord Jesus knew that some people would think that He came to replace the teachings of the Old Testament church and the law, so He said, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (**Matthew 5:17**).

Like the Old Testament church, the New Testament church loved and cherished the law of God. Paul declared, “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (**Romans 7:22**).

The Church of the New Testament was privileged to have the Lord of glory come to them in human form. Unfortunately, the members of the church, even though they studied the Scriptures, were so bound by walls of tradition that they missed accepting Jesus as the Saviour of the world. The apostles continued to preach, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (**Acts 4:12**).

The apostolic church was organized after the ascension of Christ, and James became the first general president. The church had a strong evangelistic program. In addition to the twelve, we read of Paul, perhaps the greatest evangelist of all time, and of Barnabas, Silas, John Mark, Apollos, Timothy and Titus. The deacons were also elected as officers of the early church.

It seems that the headquarters of the early church was at Jerusalem, but the apostles and teachers were commissioned to go “into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (**Mark 16:15**).

Officers and members of the early Christian church wrote Gospels and Epistles, not only for the early church, but also for the Christian church in later centuries.

Only a few weeks after their Lord ascended to heaven, the members of the New Testament church suffered persecution. The disciples were put in prison for preaching, and Stephen became the first martyr. As Christianity spread through the Roman Empire, the church came in contact with paganism, and the followers of Jesus were imprisoned, tortured and put to death. The darkest hours of persecution were from about A.D. 100 to 300. When the sword did not end the Christian church, the enemy of souls tried another method of attack. He attempted to make the church popular with the state and bring pagan rites and ceremonies into the Christian religion.

Little by little false teachings filtered into the church. The simple faith was lost as Christians became wealthy and powerful in business and government. In 476 A.D. the barbarian tribes from the north overthrew the Roman Empire, and in the struggle that followed, the head of the church at Rome became known as the bishop.

The Bible was not placed in the hands of the church members, partly because only handwritten copies were available in those times, but mainly because the leaders of the church were afraid to let the people study the Holy Scriptures lest they discover that some church doctrines—such as the immortality of the soul, the worship of the saints, purgatory and the observance of Sunday—were not taught by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Church of Rome states that it changed the day of worship from the seventh to the first day of the week. History and the Bible show that the observance of Sunday as a Christian institution came from paganism.

Despite the compromise and apostasy that crept into the church, there was always a faithful remnant who had the faith of Jesus and kept the commandments of God.

The Church of the Dark Ages

By the sixth century, the bishops of Rome held power over most of the Christian churches. This strong leadership was known as the papacy, with the pope as the head. In 538 the papal power became supreme and ruled for a period of 1260 years, as was predicted by Daniel and John in their prophetic books. This period of papal supremacy ended in 1798, when the pope of Rome was taken prisoner.

By means of secular authority the church forced the followers of Jesus to choose either to accept the false doctrines and pagan ceremonies of Catholicism or to suffer imprisonment and perhaps death by the sword or by burning at the stake. This long period of history has been called the Dark Ages. As one historian stated, “The noon of the papacy was the midnight of the world.” (J. A. Wylie, quoted in GC 60).

“Amid the gloom that settled upon the earth during the long period of papal supremacy, the light of truth could not be wholly extinguished. In every age there were witnesses for God—men who cherished faith in Christ as the only mediator between God and man, who held the Bible as the only rule of life, and who hallowed the true Sabbath. How much the world owes to these men, posterity will never know. They were branded as heretics, their motives impugned, their characters maligned, their writings suppressed, misrepresented or mutilated. Yet they stood firm, and from age to age maintained their faith in its purity, as a sacred heritage for the generations to come” (GC 61).

The Church of the Reformation

“In lands beyond the jurisdiction of Rome there existed for many centuries bodies of Christians who remained almost wholly free from papal corruption... These Christians believed in the perpetuity of the law of God... Churches that held to this faith and practice existed in Central Africa and among the Armenians of Asia.

“But of those who resisted the encroachments of the papal power, the Waldenses stood foremost. In the very land where popery had fixed its seat, there its falsehood and corruption were most steadfastly resisted...

The Waldenses were among the first of the peoples of Europe to obtain a translation of the Holy Scriptures... Behind the lofty bulwarks of the mountains—in all ages the refuge of the persecuted and oppressed—the Waldenses found a hiding place. Here the light of truth was kept burning amid the darkness of the Middle Ages. Here, for a thousand years, witnesses for the truth maintained the ancient faith...

“John Wycliffe was the herald of reform, not for England alone, but for all Christendom. The great protest against Rome which it was permitted him to utter was never to be silenced.... When Wycliffe’s attention was directed to the Scriptures, he entered upon their investigation with the same thoroughness which had enabled him to master the learning of the schools...

“God had appointed to Wycliffe his work. He had put the word of truth in his mouth, and He set a guard about him that this word might come to the people. His life was protected, and his labors were prolonged, until a foundation was laid for the great work of the Reformation...Wycliffe was one the greatest of the reformers” (GC 63-66, 80, 81, 92-94).

John Huss was one of the members of the church of the Reformation who read and believed the writings of John Wycliffe. When he became a priest he exposed unscriptural teachings of the church, and his preaching aroused the interest of the hundreds of students from all parts of Bohemia and Germany. Huss was burned at the stake, as eventually was Jerome, his companion and supporter.

The greatest impetus to the church of the Reformation period came from the courage and faith of Martin Luther. At the age of 21, Luther was already an accomplished scholar. He read the Latin Bible, the first Bible he had ever seen, and memorized portions of Scripture. Dramatically, he came to the realization “The just shall live by faith.”

On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed to the heavy wooden door of the Wittenberg Castle Church a list of ninety-five theses, or statements, of doctrine. These were later printed and sent all over Europe. When asked to retract these statements, he answered, “I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen.”

The church of the Reformation expanded due to the translation of the Bible into German by Martin Luther.

Philip Melancthon was a close friend of Luther and also a teacher at Wittenberg. He helped draft the Augsburg Confession, a high point of the Protestant Reformation.

John Calvin, a Frenchman, strengthened the Huguenots. From Geneva, Switzerland, many of his students went to Spain, England and other countries, where they supported the Reformation. One of his most enthusiastic students was John Knox, whose preaching shook the foundation of apostasy in Scotland.

Ulrich Zwingli was a reformer in Switzerland during the time of Luther. Zwingli was pastor of the Cathedral of Zurich. Switzerland became a model of peace and order as a Protestant nation and center.

In Scandinavia, the Reformation prospered. The *Petri brothers* translated the Bible into Swedish, and Sweden became a Protestant country. John Tausen preached the Reformation in Denmark, and through his work and translation of the Bible into Danish by Pedersen, Denmark became Protestant. The church of the Reformation was helped by further translations of the Bible into other languages.

William Tyndale and the printing press gave the common people of England the Bible in their own language, and the Bible set men in many countries free. Darkness was dispelled by the Word of God; ignorance was replaced by the Scriptures. Later reformers like Wesley would bring the gospel truths into even more prominence.

The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers

On September 16, 1620, approximately one hundred pilgrims, men and women of iron-will religious fervor, set sail on the *Mayflower* for what is now known as the United States of America. Their journey of faith was undertaken because they wanted religious liberty. Their journey led the way for later freedom lovers such as Roger Williams. Williams became the founder of the colony of Rhode Island, the first settlement in America with a republican form of government and full religious freedom.

The Church of the First Missionaries

The father of modern missions was William Carey of England (1761-1834). As a young man he repaired shoes, and above his workbench he had a large map of the world on the wall. The shoemaker was inspired to sail to foreign lands by the reports of Captain Cook's voyages.

A sermon he preached to a group of ministers resulted in the formation of the first missionary society, and Carey sailed as pioneer missionary to India. Despite many reverses, he translated portions of the Scriptures and laid the foundation for modern missions.

As the nineteenth century dawned, the Protestant churches became mission-conscious; societies for the support of missions began to develop in many lands. No less than seven societies were established in England and America during the quarter of a century following the founding of the Church Missionary Society in 1799. The era of modern missions had begun. Among those who suffered privation and loss to extend the gospel boundaries are the following:

<i>William Carey</i>	First missionary to India.
<i>Robert Morrison</i>	Prepared English/Chinese dictionary and published the Bible.
<i>Adoniram Judson</i>	Translated Bible into Burmese; also served in India.
<i>David Livingstone</i>	Opened Africa for Christianity.
<i>Robert Moffat</i>	Pioneer worker in Africa.
<i>John Williams</i>	Pioneered with boat, The Messenger of Peace, in South Pacific.
<i>John G. Paton</i>	Life threatened by cannibals fifty-three times in South Pacific Islands

The Church of the Adventists

The great apostolic doctrine of Christ's second coming, the revival of interest in this event by the reformers and the signs that indicated its nearness formed background for the preaching of the second advent early in the nineteenth century. The work of William Miller was of first importance in this movement. Men in various lands arose preaching the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

His coming to earth a second time, as King of Kings, was foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament church, and this became a recurring theme in the New Testament church. Through centuries of persecution and martyrdom, the hope of Christ's return strengthened the Christians in the church of the Dark Ages. The reformers believed the prophecies of this event and recorded their assurance that time