

Church History

how we got where we are

In fact this sheet is not so much about Church history, a massive and complicated subject (although fascinating) – its a little about how we came to be Christians here, and a little about the Church around us that we are less familiar with.

To be a mature Christian today you need to know a bit about who other Christians are and where we all came from.

You are coming to faith in a **parish**, a local unit that becomes familiar, even cosy.

But just as the Earth is a little dot in the corner of our galaxy, so our parish is but one of millions around the world. And, some of them look similar to us, others look and behave in a way strange to us.

Where is the centre?

If we aren't the centre – where is it?

Ancient maps of the world used to put Jerusalem at the centre.

However, at different times, different places have been seen as the centre. The Romans had Rome; the British chose Greenwich as the place to start measuring East from West.

Really there is no centre, except the one we create in our minds and agree on.

What do you see?

If we look around we see many “churches” (see the **note* below about how we use the word *church*). Each one is distinct and their services feel different. The Coptic Church worships very differently from a Pentecostal church.

In one way that's good: for different people, especially from different cultures, need different things. But it is a bad thing when one group starts telling others that only they have all the answers, for on the whole that is never true. It is mainly because of all sorts of reasons in history that Christian denominations have become separated and suspicious of each other.

Ecumenism (Greek for *world*)

This is a word you need to know, for most churches today are part of the ecumenical movement, seeking to educate each other about our traditions (we are suspicious of what we don't know or understand), and trying to explore what we have in common (enough hopefully to achieve a sort of unity).

Roots!

All denominations can trace their roots back through history to the first disciples, through Christ himself into the Jewish faith.

Birth pangs

Jesus drew the Jewish faith together and revitalised it: he fulfilled its destiny. When the disciples were formed into the new Church, Christians began to split away from their roots and we see the split happening in the New Testament. At first the “Jesus movement” worships alongside their fellow Jews, but then they are forced out (see John 16:2).



Never all the same

The Church has always been a varied place, made up of different sorts of people. In the Acts of the Apostles we see the Church wrestling with disagreements in its first days between Jews and non-Jews, and having to work these problems through.

Paul and others established churches in different cities that for a long time were only vaguely in touch with each other, naturally making for differences.

Tradition shows the Apostles going off in all directions, so taking the Church into Africa, Asia and Europe very early on. But often the Church developed differently. There has never been a time when all Christians were the same and did exactly the same thing. But they were still formally united.

Branches - and snapping twigs!

Christians have always argued about the faith. On many occasions this has led to groups leaving and setting up new churches.

But, to begin with most of the Church was growing inside the Roman Empire. This meant that good communications could develop, and so it was possible for COUNCILS of the whole Church to meet to sort out problems. We have seen how this happened over the CREED and the nature of Christ.

Christians naturally looked to the places where the Apostles had been for authority, and then to the centres of the Empire, which meant Rome and Constantinople (now Istanbul). From the 7th century on most of the Holy Land and north Africa was cut off from the rest of the Church by the arrival of Muslim rule. Christians there had to fend for themselves.

The Church based in Rome looked after most of Europe. The Church in Constantinople governed Eastern Europe and Asia, and the two gradually became different in style and culture. In the West it's literally cooler! People were more precise about how they did things. In the East religion emphasised the mysterious and the awesome beauty of God.

Eventually at the end of the first Christian millennium, misunderstandings led to a formal split between the Orthodox Church of the East and the Catholic Church in the West. Christians did terrible things to each other in the name of their tradition.

The Catholic West was in the right place at the right time to push out into Africa and the Americas. But at the same time (16th century) the process we know as the Reformation took place. Supposed to be a reform movement inside the Catholic Church, Luther then split away to form the Lutheran Church, and other Protestant denominations followed, often splitting one from another over small matters of doctrine or church discipline. As freedom of thought and ease of communications grew, so did the groups: Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites etc. The Church of England is a special case, as you might expect!

Branches – in touch with the roots . .

We need to hold on to where we have come from and what we share in common. Most groups share the same Bible, the same Creed (except for three words), the same baptism. All this is vital.

Now the churches are trying to move back together for this is what Jesus commands (John 17:20). In 1999 Roman Catholics and Lutherans for example put an end to the disagreement that first split them apart.

But there are still many smaller questions about belief and religious practice which keep those two formally apart for now.

Branches – broken off . .

There are some groups on the fringe of Christianity who cannot be called Christians or a part of the Church. This is because what they believe about Jesus is too “far out” or just plainly untrue. They use the Bible, or bits of it to ‘prove’ their claims, but don’t accept the Creed.

These groups include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists and Spiritualists. They often do great harm to Christ’s cause.

Growing on up

As we said, variation can be a good thing if it expresses the variety of human culture. We should be able to thank God for it - but sometimes we have to pray that He will heal what it causes: Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your Apostles: I leave you peace, my peace I give to you. Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever. Amen.

* Note:

Confusingly the word **Church** is used in different ways:

1 the Creed talks of the *one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church* always in the singular (never churches). It is the **ONE** Church that is split into denominations, sometimes called **The Christian Churches**

2 Church means the **body of Christians** meeting in one place

3 Church means a **building** where *the Church* meets

The Church of England is quite young really! It only came into being in 1533A.D. But of course that doesn’t mean that 1500 years passed by before Christianity ever came to our shores.

What it means is there was a decisive moment in 1533 when the Church in England formally made itself independent of the Church based in Rome (what today we call the Roman Catholic Church). Until this time the Roman Catholic Church had been **the only Church in Western Europe**.

A lot of holy water had already flowed under our national bridge by then!

Footholds

Nobody really knows who brought the Gospel to the British Isles, or when. There are odd hints and some attractive legends (e.g. Glastonbury and all that). But perhaps we can more safely imagine that, since what we today call England was part of the Roman Empire, there is every possibility that converts to Christianity, maybe even soldiers stationed here, came to Britain quite soon after the time of Jesus.

the earliest facts are:

- **St Alban** (a much better candidate to be Patron Saint of England than George) was martyred for his Christian faith at St Albans in 305A.D. (You can visit his shrine still today).
- After the Emperor **Constantine** dramatically turned Christianity into the official religion of the Empire there was a Church Council meeting in France (314A.D.) where three bishops from Britain were present.
- About 400A.D. the Church was troubled by the false Christian teaching of **Pelagius**, who is described as *being from* Britain.
- **Christianity soon came to Britain**. Three bishops in 314A.D. indicates some fully organised Christian communities, certainly in London. Christianity also arrived very early in Ireland. We don’t know if this was a separate process. Certainly Cornish tin was traded with the Middle East at this time and might have been another route for the Gospel.
- After the Romans left in the 5th, England was settled by Anglo-Saxons and was a hotchpotch of tribes, mainly pagan. **Christianity survived on the fringes** and above all in the Celtic Churches of Ireland, Cornwall and Northumbria. But these were cut off from Christians elsewhere.

A new start

In 597A.D. Augustine was sent to England by the Pope. He converted the king of Kent and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. He came here reluctantly and soon found that his job was not just to convert the Anglo-Saxons but also to link up the surviving Celtic Christians in the unity of the Western Church under the leadership of the Pope. This was a long business because of the various different kingdoms and their traditions.

Not that this was a Dark Age completely. Around 700A.D. Bede the Venerable wrote a record of English history and shows us a fine tradition of scholarship and devotion alive in Northern England. Gradually Christianity in Britain came more and more into line with the Church throughout Europe. Yet this process wasn't complete until the time of William I (1066 and all that!)

Rich tradition

Like the rest of Europe, England in the Middle Ages felt the impact of the Church in every aspect of life. Every village and town built its parish church; there were Church courts in addition to civil ones. Everybody was responsible for maintaining the life of the Church – the only holidays were Holy Days (though there were plenty of them!) Education was provided in Church and in the many monasteries (who also provided work and industry).

In his famous *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer shows a whole cross-section of society united in going on pilgrimage. Much of our country's life was influenced by the Church, whose power ultimately lay in Rome.

How did a rift open up?

There are many different ways of answering this question. It all depends on your point of view. From the political angle, by 1500 more and more of the nations of Europe were independent powers, and the power of the Pope was weakening. In 1521 it was Henry VIII who pressed the Pope to give him the title Defender of the Faith still used by the monarch (look at any coin). From the social angle England had become a successful country with its own culture and artistic genius. Even in the life of the Church, music and new translations of the Bible, England was more individual.

From the religious angle there was much about the Church then that was an absolute scandal. The Church was badly in need of reform yet showed no signs of being ready to do anything about it. From about 1520 different factors like these combined to make the Reformation that came in England a unique affair. There were good motives as well as bad.

First it was Henry VIII's wish to have his marriage declared invalid so that he could marry again, and the Pope's refusal to allow this, which seemed to cause the fatal break. Many other factors played a part that made it possible for Henry VIII to replace the Pope as Supreme Governor of the Church in England.

Briefly under Henry's daughter Mary there was reunion with the Pope, but with Elizabeth forces of Reformation tipped the balance again.

Another 'middle' way

The new C of E claimed to be both catholic in its Creed, services and ministry etc., and reformed in doctrine and organisation. It has always been a balance between the new and the traditional. The English Church developed in its own way. In the 17th century, the power of the monarch was replaced by Parliament in the Civil War.

In the 18th century the C of E became lazy and dusty. The Wesley's tried to revive a real spirit, but SPLIT to form the Methodists. In the 19th century evangelicals and catholics revived the two wings of the Church. With the British Empire this Anglican sort of Church spread around the world.

So – where now?

Today the Church of England knows where it came from: the Apostles and Jesus Christ in a sometimes bumpy history!

We can't here discuss the many issues facing the C of E today and the way we might deal with them.

Suffice to say we are committed to seeking reunion with the Church from which we sprang, and with other branches of the Church. Every 500 years something big has happened to the English Church. What will 2003+ bring?

We must just be faithful to doing what Jesus has asked us to do for him. The Church is in God's hands, but he leaves it to us to find out what he wants us to do.

Something for you to do at home:

In the box, write the names of 5 (five) other **Christian** denominations – and try to find out who started them (look in an encyclopaedia for help!)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Who was martyred for his faith in 305 AD?

The Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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