

# a brief history of the Church

## In the beginning: The Day of Pentecost

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when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Jerusalem and enabled them to start preaching - is kept as the Church's Birthday. All mainstream Christian Churches trace their roots back to this moment, and therefore to Jesus and his disciples. And through them we link back to the faith of Israel.

However the earliest Christians were not sure whether new converts should accept Jewish rules and practices, since Christianity was the fulfilment of the Jewish faith not a departure from it. So at first the 'Jesus movement' worshipped alongside their fellow Jews, but St Paul argued the case for Christianity being a new thing and for non-Jewish converts joining the Church by baptism alone, and convinced the church leaders. This helped Christianity to grow, but it also meant that Christians began to move away from their roots. We see this beginning to happen in the New Testament, and the process speeded up after the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in the year 70.

The Roman Empire extended to most Mediterranean countries, and there were good roads and sea-routes, so Paul and the other early missionaries were able to take the Church all over Europe and into parts of Africa and Asia very early on. The Church was also illegal in the Roman Empire, since Christians wouldn't offer sacrifices for the Emperor, and because the Romans thought this strange new group would cause trouble. A lot of early Christians were martyred - many of them we still remember as saints.

## early days

Once it became obvious that Jesus' Second Coming was not going to happen soon the 'movement' turned into an organisation with priests and bishops. Centres of authority gradually developed at the centres of the Empire, which meant Rome and Constantinople (present day Istanbul). A big change happened in 312 when the Emperor Constantine became a Christian and Christianity became the legal and official religion of the Empire. This meant that you would no longer be thrown to the lions for being a Christian, but it also meant lots of people joining the Church who were lukewarm about Christianity, and also the people in charge, from Constantine down, involving themselves in the life of the Church. The roads, messenger services, and so on within the Empire meant that good communications could develop, and so it was possible for Councils of the whole Church to meet to sort out problems, such as defining the nature of Christ and drawing up the Creeds.

## later early days

The Church based in Rome looked after most of Europe, and the Church in Constantinople, Eastern Europe and Asia, and the two gradually became different in style and culture. In the West people were more precise about how they thought and did things. In the East the Church emphasised the mysterious and the awesome beauty of God. Eventually having drifted apart for years and years, in 1054 each part of the Church threw the other part out! The result was that

there were now two churches, the western Catholic Church and the eastern Orthodox Church, which were both under pressure from other faiths (especially Islam, from the sixth century, and the religions native to the countries into which Christianity spread).

From now on we'll concentrate on the western Church, which eventually spread to all of Europe.  
**in Britain :**

Christianity soon came to Britain and Ireland. Since it was part of the Roman Empire, there is every chance that converts to Christianity, maybe even soldiers stationed here, came to Britain quite soon after the time of Jesus, and there are records of bishops in 314, which means things must have been pretty organised by then.

After the Romans left in the 5th century, 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.

In 597 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 under the leadership of the Pope. This was a long business because of the various different kingdoms and their traditions. In 664 at a meeting in Whitby those still following Celtic ways agreed to change over to the Roman tradition. But the Church in England still went on feeling a bit separate and independent.

## the western [catholic] church in the middle ages

As the Catholic Church became even more organised the Bishop of Rome became the official head of the Church, and in many ways was like a prince or a king, with his own territories and even his own army. What you were supposed to believe was defined by Rome, although there continued to be local variations in the liturgy.

Most ordinary people, however, did not concern themselves with the bigger picture. Almost everyone at the time lived in villages, and the parish church was the centre of life – not just your spiritual life, but socially too, and if you fell on hard times it was often the church which would help you out. As well as churches, there were cathedrals, and many monasteries and convents, some of which were huge centres of learning (the universities developed from the monasteries) or agriculture, and hospitality. Some churches had lavish shrines which attracted many pilgrims. People felt that all Christians, alive and dead, were all one family, and this was the impression you would have when you walked into your church. However small and hard up it was, it would be brightly painted with bible scenes, and have numbers of statues in front of which people burned candles.

If we were able to travel in time there would be much that would seem unfamiliar to us. The services were all in Latin, which most people could not understand, and they would spend the time saying their prayers or, if they could read, reading spiritual books. But the shape of the mass was the same then as now, they celebrated the same sacraments as we do, and the priest would be dressed in a similar way when he officiated.

## reformation

Not everyone was happy, however. Some people felt too much like spectators and too little involved in worship. Others wanted to be able to read the Bible in their own language (once printing had been invented more people learned to read and were able to afford books) and think things through for themselves. Others again were very unhappy about the way in which some parts of the Church seemed too keen on getting money off people, whether at the shrines, or by selling special prayers which the church leaders said would help people to get to heaven quickly after death. And many rulers and other leaders wanted more independence.

There were various attempts to reform things from within, but they were clamped down on, but in the early 16th century all these areas of unhappiness came together and became impossible to resist. So the Church split again, and there came into existence new churches which wanted very plain buildings (paintings, glass, shrines and statues were destroyed), and books and services in the ordinary language of the country, and which believed that the ordinary Christian could relate to God directly without the same need for priests and sacraments and so on. What had been THE Church now became one church, one denomination, among others (the Roman Catholic Church). However, do not imagine that ordinary people were consulted about this, and many suffered an enormous sense of loss.

## meanwhile – back in Britain

. . . Henry VIII wanted a divorce but the Pope wouldn't agree. So he joined the Reformation bandwagon of rulers taking direct charge of the church in their countries, and replaced the Pope in 1533 as Supreme Governor of the Church in England. Henry did not probably want to go much further than this, at first, but others at court and in the Church, and later Henry's son Edward VI, pushed for more of the reforms which were already spreading through Europe. Also the money raised from sacking the churches, monasteries and shrines came in handy.

Pretty soon the Church IN England became the Church OF England, the official state church which everyone had to attend – if you didn't you were suspected of being a traitor. Under Henry's Roman Catholic daughter Mary there was a brief change back to Roman Catholicism, but with Elizabeth forces of reform tipped the balance again. However Elizabeth was not attracted to the more extreme beliefs of the European Protestant Churches, and the Church of England saw itself as part of the history and tradition of the undivided Church going back to those earliest Christians, and took, both then and ever since, the best from the old Western Church and from the new reformed Churches. The Church of England was Catholic in its Creeds, liturgies and ministry, and Reformed in comparison to the things which had been going wrong. As it is a state church (or Established Church) the monarch continues to be its head, although over the last three hundred years or so his or her actual power to decide on the Church of England's organisation and worship has been replaced by legislation in Parliament.

The Church of England became sleepy and dull during the eighteenth century, but in the nineteenth century evangelicals and catholics revived the two wings of the Church. Meantime growing tolerance and the removal of legislation which made the Church of England the only legal

church meant that by the end of the nineteenth century there was much the same mix of Christian churches and non-Christian faiths which we have today.

## other churches

Back in the sixteenth century when the Reformation kicked off, the Roman Catholic Church realised that things were wrong, and called a Council in 1545 to reform itself (though this was of course too late to stop the splitting of the Church into denominations). From this time until the twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church tended to keep itself apart from the other churches, and to imply that only it was right and the other churches were not proper churches. In Britain people continued to be wary of the Roman Catholic Church until the nineteenth century at least, partly because it was so mysterious to outsiders. Since the second Vatican Council which started in 1962 these attitudes have been a thing of the past, and the Roman Catholic Church has been talking to other churches and finding common areas of belief and practice.

Churches which had emerged from the Reformation (such as Lutherans and Presbyterians) were over the years joined by other churches (such as Baptists and Methodists). Collectively these are often called 'Nonconformist Churches' and most of these churches are well regarded Christian churches today. However 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 selective 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.

## mission

Christianity was carried from Europe to countries all over the world, to begin with mostly by people seeking to colonise or conquer other countries, but increasingly by missionaries. The main church in these countries was the one brought by the Europeans, and to some extent this is still the case today. However the churches which are growing fastest now are very often in countries to which Europeans brought Christianity in the first place – maybe we need missionaries to come to Europe and revive the Church here . . .

## the Church today

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), and the same baptism. All this is vital. Now the churches are trying to move back together for this is what Jesus commands. 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 apart for now.

As for our own church, today the Church of England knows where it came from: the Apostles and Jesus Christ in a sometimes bumpy history! There are many problems which confront it and which need to be sorted out. But 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 the 2000's 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.