ALISTER E. McGRATH

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

AN INTRODUCTION

WILEY-BLACKWELL

"This is a wonderful introduction to the history of Christianity. It pays the most attention to the rise and spread of the Christian faith in the ancient near east and the medieval and modern west. But it also tells the story of this faith's rapid shift to the global south and far east during the past 100 years – and does so with the kind of clear and compelling English prose that will be recognized as vintage McGrath by experts in the field. I strongly recommend it, and look forward to using it frequently with students and other readers."

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"As Christianity expands around the globe, this intelligent introduction introduces key figures, ideas, and developments in Christian history, balancing illuminating generalizations with engaging detailed examples. The mutual interactions of churches and cultures are highlighted, and theological developments are clearly articulated. McGrath succeeds in whetting the reader's appetite for further study."

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"It is difficult to write a comprehensive text on Christian history in this day and age. There are deeply rutted roads in scholarship that lead the conventional historian to focus on the twilight of Christianity in the west and the inevitability of secularization. These developments, while all too true, distort both the present vitality of Christian faith and its future. McGrath avoids these pitfalls. While firmly rooted in the essentials of the Christian story, he also has a clear sense of the new paths Christian faith is taking in global evangelical outreach."

—Walter Sundberg, Luther Seminary

Also by Alister E. McGrath from Wiley-Blackwell

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ALISTER E. MCGRATH

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How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be an accessible, interesting, and reliable introduction to two thousand years of Christian history. It has been written on the assumption that you know little about the history of Christianity, and aims to make studying it as easy as possible. Every technical term and key theological debate is introduced and explained. You should be able to use this book on your own, without needing any help, although it will work best when used as part of a taught course.

It's not easy to provide a survey of two thousand years of Christian history in such a short book. A lot of thought has been given about how to pack as much useful information as possible into so small a space, and break it down into manageable sections. You will get the most out of this book by bearing five key points in mind:

1. This book is about Christian history, not just church history.
2. The material has been broken down into historical periods which link up with many college and university courses.
3. The principle of "selective attention" has been used to manage the amount of historical material presented.
4. The text is grounded in the best recent scholarly literature, which often corrects older literature on points of detail, and occasionally forces us to see things in quite different ways.
5. This book is deliberately designed as an introduction, and does not aim to be comprehensive or detailed.

Each of these points needs a little more explanation.

First, this book is about *Christian* history. It's not another history of the *church*, which tend to be preoccupied with the institutional history of denominations. This book is about the development of Christianity, and its impact on culture. We'll make sure that we cover all the key themes in church history, but will go beyond these, considering such matters as the interaction of Christianity with the arts, literature, and science. We will consider both

the importance of the Second Vatican Council for the shaping of Catholicism in the late twentieth century, and the importance of C. S. Lewis for more personal approaches to Christianity in the same period.

Second, we need to remember that all division of history into "ages" or "eras" is a little arbitrary. The great Cambridge historian George Macauley Trevelyan (1876–1962) made this point well two generations ago.

> Unlike dates, periods are not facts. They are retrospective conceptions that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion, but very often leading historical thought astray.

Trevelyan's point is well taken. Furthermore, there is a healthy debate over the points of detail of any attempt to divide history into periods. For example, just when did the Middle Ages begin? Or end? Does it really matter?

Nevertheless, we still need to try and organize the material into workable blocks or sections, rather than rambling aimlessly through the centuries. In practice, there is widespread agreement over the broad division of the history of Christianity for teaching purposes. If you're using this book alongside a taught course, you ought to be able to work out how to get the most from it very easily. This work divides the history of Christianity into five broad sections, corresponding to courses taught at many colleges, seminaries, and universities.

1. The period of the early church, sometimes still referred to as the "patristic period," during which the Christian faith began to gain a significant following throughout the Mediterranean world.
2. The "Middle Ages," a period of Christian history in western Europe which witnessed significant cultural and intellectual development. The movement generally known as the "Renaissance" is included in this period.
3. The age of Reformation in western Europe, which witnessed the birth of Protestantism, and the consolidation of Catholicism, eventually leading to the Wars of Religion.
4. The Modern Age. This chapter looks at the development of Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the scope of our discussion is global, we focus particularly on developments in western Europe and North America, culminating in the outbreak of the Great War of 1914–18.
5. The Twentieth Century. This final chapter looks at the dramatic changes in the shape of global Christianity in the century following the end of the Great War, including discussion of important developments in Africa, South America, and Asia.

Third, you need to appreciate that this work is based on the principle of *selective attention*. It recognizes that it is impossible to do justice to everything that happened in two thousand years of history. It sets out to try and see beyond a mass of historical detail, and identify broader historical patterns. As a result, this work tries to help you track some of the sig-

nificant changes in Christian history, illustrating these wherever possible with interesting examples or important episodes.

The work thus aims to be *representative* in its coverage, rather than *comprehensive*, allowing you to build on the basic structure it provides. Each of its 160 sections is roughly the same length (about 1000 words), designed to be read in ten minutes, and assimilated in twenty.

The object is to help you work out what is really going on, rather than bombarding you with facts. This means that you will get to hear about all the landmarks of Christian history – the major figures and events that everyone (rightly) talks about. And while we'll explore a few interesting byways off the main tourist routes, the main object of this textbook is to hit the high points and make sure you've seen what everyone expects you to have seen. Once you've got a good idea of what's on the map, you can explore things further in your own time.

Fourth, this book is based on the best recent literature, most of it published within the last two decades. This research often forces correction of material found in older textbooks – sometimes over points of detail, and sometimes over larger issues. Some of the global assertions that were common in older works – such as the "decline of late medieval religion" – have been discarded or radically modified by recent research. This book brings you up to speed, aiming to give you a reliable overview of the present state of scholarship.

Fifth, and finally: this book is an *introduction*. It's a sketch map of a fascinating landscape. It's like a tourist guide to a strange country or a new city. It can't tell you everything about the place – but it will help you find your way around, make sense of what you see and hear, and (hopefully) make you want to explore more on your own. There are lots of excellent more advanced studies that will be well within your reach, once you've worked your way through this textbook.

You will get the most out of this book by reading it right the way through in the order in which it is written. Yet each chapter has been designed to stand on its own. This means that you will be able to start your reading anywhere. Each chapter opens by setting the context for the material it contains. It gives you the background material you need to make sense of what follows. Sometimes, you'll need to go back to an earlier chapter, to refresh your memory over exactly who someone like Augustine of Hippo was (as you'll discover, he's an early church writer who is important for the religious history of the Middle Ages and the Reformation period). And we'll explain terms that you need to know and use – like "patristic."

That's all you need to know to get the most out of this book. We're ready to start.

Alister E. McGrath
King's College London
July 2012

Source of Quotation

p. xvi: G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries from Chaucer to Queen Victoria*. London: Longman, 1944, 92.

For Further Reading

The following are recommended as excellent overall accounts of the development of Christian history. Those with marked with one asterisk (*) are especially recommended as interesting and up-to-date accounts of Christian history. Those marked with two asterisks (**) focus particularly on the development of Christian thought.

Chidester, David. *Christianity: A Global History*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000.

Ferguson, Everett. *Church History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

*González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. 2 vols. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010.

Hastings, Adrian. *A World History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.

Hill, Jonathan. *Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009.

*MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. New York: Viking, 2010.

**McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

McManners, John, ed. *The Oxford History of Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.

Nystrom, Bradley P., and David P. Nystrom. *The History of Christianity: An Introduction*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

**Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. 5 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Shelley, Bruce L. *Church History in Plain Language*. Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 2008.

Vidmar, John. *The Catholic Church through the Ages: A History*. New York: Paulist Press, 2005.

1

The Early Church, 100–500

At some point around the year 60, the Roman authorities began to realize there was some kind of new secret society in the heart of their city, which was rapidly gaining recruits. The reports that filtered back spoke of a sect based on some mysterious and dark figure called "Chrestus" or "Christus," whose origins lay in one of the more obscure and backward parts of the Roman Empire. But who was he? And what was this new religion all about? Was it something they should be worried about, or could they safely ignore it?

It soon became clear that this new religious movement might have the potential to cause real trouble. The great fire which swept through Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero in 64 was conveniently blamed on this new religious group. Nobody liked them much, and they were an obvious scapegoat for the failings of the Roman authorities to deal with the fire and its aftermath. The Roman historian Tacitus (56–117) gave a full account of this event just over fifty years later. He identified this new religious group as "the Christians," a group who took their name from someone called "Christus," who had been executed by Pontius Pilate back in the reign of Tiberius. This "pernicious superstition" had found its way to Rome, where it was gaining a large following.

> As a result, Nero pinned the guilt (and inflicted highly refined tortures) on a class hated for their abominations, called "Christians" by the people. Christus, from whom they derived their name, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. Yet this pernicious superstition, though checked for the moment, broke out again not only in Judaea, the primary source of the evil, but even in Rome, where everything that is repulsive and shameful from every part of the world converges and becomes popular. Accordingly, all who pleaded guilty were arrested. Their information led to the conviction of an immense multitude, not so much for the crime of setting the city on fire, as for hating humanity.

Christian History: An Introduction, First Edition. Alister E. McGrath.

Yet, muddled and confused though the official Roman accounts of this movement may be, they were clear that they centered on the shadowy figure of "Christus." It was not regarded as being of any permanent significance, being seen as little more than a passing minor irritation. At worst, it posed a threat to the cult of emperor worship. Yet less than three hundred years later, this new religious movement had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. So how did this happen? In this chapter, we shall tell the story of the emergence of this new religion during its first five hundred years, and track its growth from a fringe movement on the margins of imperial society to the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

1.1. Setting the Context: The Origins of Christianity

Christianity began as a reform movement within the context of Judaism (1.1.7), which gradually clarified its identity as it grew, and began to take definite shape in the world of the first-century Roman Empire. There are no historical grounds for believing that the term "Christian" originated from Jesus of Nazareth himself. Early Christians tended to refer to each other as "disciples" or "saints," as the letters of the New Testament make clear. Yet others used alternative names to refer to this new movement. The New Testament suggests that the term "Christians" (Greek: *Christianoi*) was first used by outsiders to refer to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. "It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'" (Acts 17:26). It was a term imposed upon them, not chosen by them. Yet it seems to have caught on.

However, we must be careful not to assume that the use of the single term "Christian" implies that this new religious movement was uniform and well-organized. As we shall see, the early history of Christianity suggests that it was quite diverse, without well-defined authority structures or carefully formulated sets of beliefs (1.1.4). These began to crystallize during the first few centuries of Christian history. This first chapter sets out to explain how this process took place, and explore some of its results. It focuses on the highly significant period between the death of the last apostle (c. 100) and the Council of Chalcedon (451).

The first major era of Christian history (c. 100–451), during which Christianity began to expand rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, is sometimes called the "patristic period." The unusual term "patristic" comes from the Greek word *patēr* ("father"), referring to the "fathers of the church," such as Athanasius of Alexandria or Augustine of Hippo.

It is difficult to make sense of the historical development of Christianity without a good grasp of this formative period, particularly its great theological debates. Yet it is also impossible to understand the development of Christianity without knowing something about its historical origins. We shall therefore begin our discussion of early Christianity by reflecting on its emergence within Judaism, and its rapid transformation into a faith which refused to recognize ethnic or social boundaries.

1.1.1. The Crucible: The History of Israel

From its outset, Christianity saw itself as continuous with Judaism. Christians were clear that the God that they followed and worshipped was the same God worshipped by the

Israelite patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament sees the great hope of the coming of a "messiah" to the people of Israel as having been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (1.1.3). Indeed, the New Testament use of the title "Christ" is an explicit reference to this belief. (The Hebrew term "Messiah" literally means "the anointed One," an idea translated by the Greek term *Christos*.) Although most western readers assume that "Jesus Christ" is a name similar to "John Smith," it is really a statement of identity: "Jesus who is the Christ."

The continuity between Judaism and Christianity is obvious at many points. Judaism placed particular emphasis on the Law (Hebrew: *Torah*), through which the will of God was made known in the form of commands, and the Prophets, who made known the will of God in certain definite historical situations. The New Testament gospels report that Jesus of Nazareth emphasized that he had "not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them" (Matthew 5:17). The same point is made by Paul in his New Testament letters. Jesus is "the goal of the Law" (Romans 10:4, using the Greek word *telos*, which means "end" or "objective"). Paul also stresses the continuity between the faith of Abraham and that of Christians (Romans 4:1–25). The Letter to the Hebrews points out both the continuity of the relationship between Moses and Jesus (Hebrews 3:1–6), and between Christians and the great figures of faith of ancient Israel (Hebrews 11:1–12:2).

Throughout the New Testament, the same theme recurs: Christianity is continuous with Judaism, and brings to completion what Judaism was pointing towards. This has several major consequences, of which the following are the most important. First, both Christians and Jews regard more or less the same collection of writings – known by Jews as "Law, Prophets, and Writings" and by Christians as "the Old Testament" – as having religious authority. Although there have always been more radical thinkers within Christianity – such as the second-century writer Marcion of Sinope (1.2.3) – who argued for the removal of any historical or theological link with Judaism, the majority opinion has always been that it is important to affirm and value the link between the Christian church and Israel. A body of writings which Jews regard as complete in itself is seen by Christians as pointing forward to something which will bring it to completion. Although Christians and Jews both regard the same set of texts as important, they use different names to refer to them, and interpret them in different ways.

Second, New Testament writers often laid emphasis on the manner in which Old Testament prophecies were understood to be fulfilled or realized in the life and death of Jesus Christ. By doing this, they drew attention to two important beliefs – that Christianity is continuous with Judaism, and that Christianity brings Judaism to its true fulfillment. This is particularly important for some early Christian writings – such as Paul's letters and the gospel of Matthew – which often seem to have a particular concern to explore the importance of Christianity for Jews. For example, at twelve points the gospel of Matthew notes how events in the life of Jesus can be seen as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

Yet the continuity between Christianity and Judaism also helps us understand some of the conflicts in early Christian history, especially in the region of Palestine. The New Testament suggests that at least some Christians initially continued to worship in Jewish synagogues, before controversy made this problematic. The letters of Paul help us understand at least some of those controversies. Two questions were of particular importance, and were keenly debated in the first century.

First, should Christian converts be required to be circumcised? Those who emphasized the continuity between Christianity and Judaism believed they should be. Yet the view which ultimately prevailed was that Christians were no longer subject to the cultic laws of Judaism – such as the requirement to be circumcised, or observe strict food laws.

Second, were non-Jewish converts to Christianity to be treated as Jews? (The Jewish term "Gentile," meaning "someone who is not a Jew," was widely used in this discussion, and is often encountered in the New Testament references to this issue.) Again, those who emphasized the continuity between Judaism and Christianity argued that Gentile believers should be treated as Jews. For this reason, they demanded the circumcision of male Gentile converts. Yet the majority view was quite different: to be a Christian was not about reinforcing a Jewish ethnic or cultural identity, but about entering a new way of living and thinking that was open to everyone. By the late first century, Christians largely saw themselves as a new religious movement, originating within Judaism, but not limited by its cultic and ethnic traditions. We shall consider this point in more detail later (1.1.7).

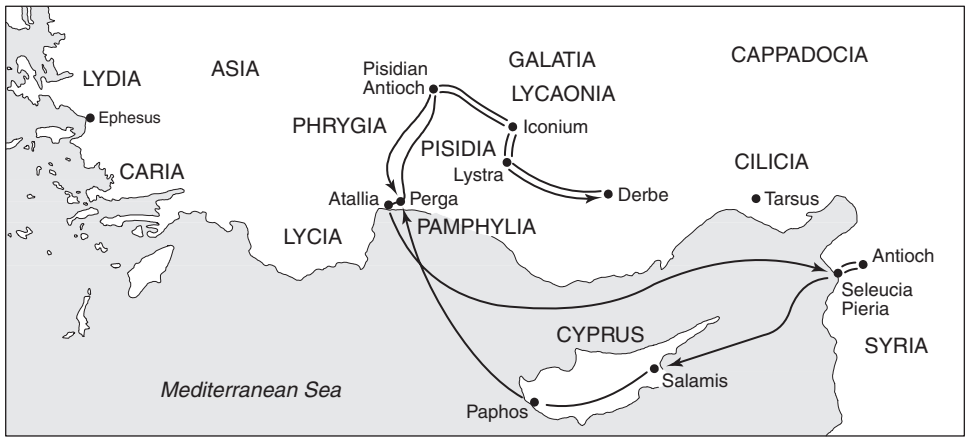
Yet despite Christianity having its origins within Judaism, which was viewed as a "legal religion" (Latin: *religio licita*) by the Roman authorities, early Christian communities were not considered to be entitled to imperial legal protection. These communities thus lived under the shadow of possible persecution, forcing them to maintain a low public profile. They had no access to power or social influence, and were often the object of oppression by the secular authorities.

One of the factors that helped crystallize a growing sense of religious identity within the churches was the rapid growth of Christianity outside Palestine, as it gained a growing following within the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. We shall explore this further in the following section.

1.1.2. A Wider Context: The Pagan Quest for Wisdom

Although its historical origins lay within Palestine, Christianity rapidly gained a following in the Greek-speaking world, especially within the cities of the Roman Empire. The missionary journeys of Paul of Tarsus, described in the New Testament, are of importance here. Paul was a Jewish religious leader who converted to Christianity, changing his name from "Saul" to "Paul." His missionary expeditions took him to many cities and regions throughout the northeastern Mediterranean area – including Europe. As Christianity began to gain a foothold on the European mainland, the question of how it was to be preached in a non-Jewish context began to become of increasing importance.

Early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences, especially in Palestine, tended to focus on demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth represented the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. Peter's sermon to Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2) follows this pattern. Peter here argues that Jesus represents the culmination of Israel's destiny. God has declared him to be both "Lord and Christ" – highly significant terms, which Peter's Jewish audience would have understood and appreciated. But what were Christians to do when preaching to Greek audiences, who knew nothing of the Old Testament, and had no connection with the history of Israel?



Map 1.1 Paul's first missionary journey

An approach that came to be particularly significant in the early Christian world can be found in Paul's sermon, preached at the Areopagus in the Greek city of Athens at an unknown date, possibly around 55. Paul here makes no reference to the ideas and hopes of Judaism. Instead, he presents Jesus of Nazareth as someone who revealed a god who the Athenians knew about, but had yet to encounter definitively. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Paul declared that the god who was made known through Jesus of Nazareth was the same god who had created the world and humanity – the god in whom, as the Athenian poet Aratus declared, "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Where early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, Paul presented the Christian faith as the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the human heart and the most profound intuitions of human reason. This was easily adapted to make use of some of the core themes of classic Greek philosophy, such as the idea of the "word" (Greek: *logos*) – the fundamental rational principle of the universe, according to popular Platonic philosophy of the first century (1.3.3). This theme is developed in the opening chapter of the gospel of John, which presents Jesus of Nazareth as the "word" by which the universe was originally created, and which entered into the world to illuminate and redeem it. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14).

This was not necessarily seen as displacing Christianity's historical and theological roots in Judaism. Rather, it was seen as a way of setting out the universal appeal of the Christian faith, which was held to transcend all ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers. The universal validity of the Christian gospel was held to imply that it could be proclaimed in ways that would resonate with every human culture. As we shall see, this approach to the appeal of Christianity would be of immense significance throughout its history, especially in missionary contexts.

Yet we have already assumed too much knowledge about the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. We need to consider this central figure of the Christian faith in more detail.

1.1.3. The Turning Point: Jesus of Nazareth

Christianity is an historical religion, which came into being in response to a specific set of events – above all, the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Although a full treatment of Jesus of Nazareth lies beyond the scope of this short work, it is nevertheless important to appreciate something of its fundamental themes, especially as they are taken up and developed within Christian history.

Traditionally, the life of Jesus of Nazareth is dated to the opening of the Christian era, with his death being located at some point around 30–3. Yet virtually nothing is known of Jesus of Nazareth from sources outside the New Testament. The New Testament itself provides two groups of quite distinct sources of information about Jesus: the four gospels, and the letters. Although the parallels are not exact, there are clear similarities between the gospels and the classical "lives" written by leading Roman historians of the age – such as Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, or Lucian's *Life of Demorax*.

The gospels mingle historical recollection with theological reflection, reflecting both on the identity and the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The four gospels have their own distinct identities and concerns. For example, the gospel of Matthew seems especially concerned with establishing the significance of Jesus for a Jewish readership, where the gospel of Luke seems more concerned with explaining his importance to a Greek-speaking community. Establishing the identity of Jesus is just as important as recording what he said and did. The gospel writers can be thought of as trying to locate Jesus of Nazareth on a map, so that his relationship with humanity, history, and God can be understood and appreciated. This leads them to focus on three particular themes.

1. What Jesus taught, particularly the celebrated "parables of the Kingdom." The teaching of Jesus was seen as important in helping believers to live out an authentic Christian life, which was a central theme of Christian discipleship – most notably, in relation to cultivating attitudes of humility towards others and obedience towards God.
2. What Jesus did – especially his ministry of healing, which was seen as important in establishing his identity, but also in shaping the values of the Christian community itself. For example, most medieval monasteries established hospitals, as a means of continuing Christ's ministry in this respect.
3. What was said about Jesus by those who witnessed his teaching and actions. The gospel of Luke, for example, records Simeon's declaration that the infant Jesus was the "consolation of Israel," as well as the Roman centurion's assertion that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. These can be seen as constituting public recognition of the identity of Jesus.

The letters of the New Testament – sometimes still referred to as "epistles" (Greek: *epistolē*, "a letter") – are addressed to individuals and churches, and often focus on issues of conduct

and belief. These letters are important in helping us make sense of the emerging understandings of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth within the Christian community. The example of Jesus is regularly invoked to emphasize the importance of imitating his attitudes – for example, treating others better than yourself (Philippians 2). Although the letters make virtually no direct reference to the teachings of Jesus, certain patterns of behavior are clearly regarded as being grounded in those teachings – such as humility, or a willingness to accept suffering.

The letters also emphasize the importance of certain patterns of behavior – such as repeating the actions of the Last Supper, using bread and wine as a way of recalling and celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ. The sacraments of both baptism and the eucharist are clearly anticipated in the New Testament, and are traced back to the ministry of Jesus himself.

Yet perhaps more importantly, the letters also reveal the understandings of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth which were becoming characteristic of Christian communities. The most important of these themes are:

1. Jesus of Nazareth is understood to be the means by which the invisible God can be known and seen. Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Greek: *eikōn;* Colossians 1:15), or the "exact representation" (Greek: *charaktēr*) of God (Hebrews 1:3).
2. Jesus is the one who makes salvation possible, and whose life reflects the themes characteristic of redeemed human existence. The use of the term "savior" (Greek: *sōtēr*) is highly significant in this respect.
3. The core Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is seen as a vindication of his innocence, a confirmation of his divine identity, and the grounds of hope for believers. Through faith, believers are understood to be united with Christ, sharing in his sufferings at present, while also sharing in the hope of his resurrection.

Each of these themes would be further developed as the Christian community reflected on their significance, and relevance for the life and thought of believers. The letters of Paul were of particular importance in setting out both the beliefs of Christianity and shaping its early social and cultural attitudes. We shall consider how early Christian thinkers developed these ideas later in this chapter.

1.1.4. The Early Spread of Christianity

The historical evidence suggests that Christianity spread very rapidly during the first and early second centuries. This naturally raises two questions. First, what were the mechanisms by which the movement spread? And second, what was it about the movement that proved attractive to people at the time? Unlike early Islam, Christianity was not spread by force; if anything, force was used against it by the imperial authorities. Since Christianity was not recognized as a legal religious movement until the fourth century, converts clearly believed there was something about the new religion that made it worth risking penalization or persecution. But what?

Figure 1.1 Rome was seen as especially important by early Christians, as it was believed that both the apostles Peter and Paul were martyred there. *The Martyrdom of St. Peter*, by P. Brancacci and F. Lippi. Church of St. Mary of Carmine, Florence. Photo: akg-images/De Agostini Picture Library

Earlier historians suggested that one of the primary mechanisms for the spread of Christianity was public preaching, noting the importance of Paul's missionary journeys, described in the Acts of the Apostles. Yet there are relatively few historical accounts of the public preaching of the Christian faith, probably reflecting the fact that these would have been suppressed by the imperial authorities. Paul's speech at Athens is a rare example of such public preaching; his preferred method was preaching in synagogues to Jewish audiences.

More recently, historians have noted the importance of networks in spreading the Christian faith. These loose organizations, often based around professions or specific localities, avoided meeting in public. Interested outsiders would be invited along to what were essentially secret meetings, often by Christians whose social or professional connections brought them into contact with such people. Early Christian gatherings or assemblies (Greek: *ekklēsia*) usually took place in private households, creating a strong sense of belonging and identity, given further weight by "sacred oaths" (Latin: *sacramenta*) of loyalty.

There is considerable evidence for the importance of commerce and trade in spreading Christianity, with itinerant preachers and teachers attending house churches in cities in which they had business. At this early stage, there was no centralized religious authority, no standard model of community organization at the local level, and no dedicated church

buildings or cathedrals. It was only after the conversion of the emperor Constantine that bishops from throughout the Christian movement would be able to meet together, and begin to resolve debates over Christian beliefs and provide official statements of faith.

So what was the appeal of Christianity? Why did so many convert to Christianity, despite the dangers this entailed? It is clear that this appeal was multi-layered, and not easy to characterize. At the social level, Christianity offered a new sense of identity and status. The growing realization of the importance of networks in spreading Christianity throughout the Roman Empire clearly points to the importance of a sense of belonging – of achieving significance and meaning. Roman society was strongly hierarchical; Christianity, in contrast, minimized the importance of socially constructed values. The Pauline letters, for example, declare that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free" (Galatians 3:28). Christian communities developed a value system that enabled those who would otherwise be at the base of the social hierarchy to develop an elevated sense of personal worth and value. The appeal of early Christianity to women (1.3.6), slaves, and other socially marginalized groups clearly reflects this perception.

Yet this emphasis on the importance of all members of the community of faith was supplemented by practical support. Early Christian communities seem to have regarded social outreach and support as being integral to their identity, raising funds to allow them to care for the poor, sick, and needy. A good example of this was the church's care for widows, a social group which tended to be treated as insignificant in Roman society. Contemporary documents suggest that the Roman churches supported large numbers of widows, many of whom otherwise would have been without any perceived social value or personal means of survival.

Contemporary accounts suggest that many were drawn to consider the ideas of Christianity through the impact that it had upon their lives. It is no accident that the early church used medical models and imagery when referring both to Christian bishops and rites. The first-century bishop Ignatius of Antioch, for example, famously described the eucharistic bread and wine as the "medicine of immortality." This vision of Christianity as a religion and community of healing resonated strongly with many, particularly at times of uncertainty and instability.

The theme of resurrection played an important role in early Christian outreach, not least in encouraging an attitude of contempt towards death. Accounts of the martyrdoms of early Christian leaders frequently emphasize their lack of fear of death, and the impact this had on pagan audiences. This remarkable absence of fear in the face of death – widely noted by cultural commentators of the age – was not due to any Stoic notion of indifference, but to the firm belief in immortality that was characteristic of Christianity.

Finally, we must give due weight to the powerful ideology that was implicit within the early Christian proclamation. Early Christian apologists emphasized the ability of their faith to make sense of the deep moral structure of the universe. It enabled them to cope with the enigmas of evil and suffering, by offering a fundamental reassurance that justice would ultimately triumph over deceit and oppression. Christianity proclaimed a wise and righteous governor of the universe, to be contrasted with the moral decadence of secular imperial institutions of power. Christianity offered an alternative vision of reality, which seemed to many to be preferable to what they experienced around them.

The appeal of Christianity to the world of late antiquity was thus complex and multileveled, capable of connecting with multiple aspects of the culture of this age.

1.1.5. The Apostolic Age

The first major period in Christian history is generally known as the "apostolic age." The term "apostle" derives from the Greek verb *apostelein*, "to send," and is often used to designate those commissioned by Jesus of Nazareth to continue and extend his ministry. Traditionally, this is defined in terms of the period during which the apostles were still alive, thus ensuring historical continuity between the church and the original community of faith which gathered around Jesus of Nazareth. We know frustratingly little about this period, even though it is clearly of immense historical importance. However, we can begin to sketch some of its aspects, providing an important transition to the better-understood history of the early church.

As we noted earlier, at the heart of the Christian movement lay a series of reports and interpretations of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. His significance was presented in terms of both his identity and his function, using a rich range of Christological titles and images of salvation, often drawn from the Jewish roots of Christianity. Initially, Christian groups appear to have been established in leading urban centers, such as Jerusalem, by individuals who had personally known Jesus of Nazareth, or who were familiar with his immediate circle.

Other Christian communities were established by others with more complex associations with the Jerusalem church, most notably Paul of Tarsus. According to the New Testament itself, Paul was responsible for establishing Christian churches in many parts of the Mediterranean world. At first Christianity would almost certainly have been seen simply as one more sect or group within a Judaism that was already accustomed to considerable diversity in religious expression. As recent historical studies of this period have made clear, Judaism was far from being monolithic at this time.

These Christian communities were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, each facing its own distinctive local challenges and opportunities. This raises two significant historical questions, neither of which can be answered with any degree of certainty. First, how did these individual Christian communities maintain their identity with regard to their local cultural context? It is clear, for example, that early Christian worship served to emphasize the distinctiveness of Christian communities, helping to forge a sense of shared identity over and against society in general.

Second, how did these individual communities understand themselves as relating to a larger universal community, increasingly referred to as "the church" in the later writings of the New Testament? There is evidence that these communities maintained contact with each other through correspondence and traveling teachers who visited clusters of churches, and especially through the sharing of foundational documents, some (but not all) of which were later incorporated into the canon of the New Testament.

It is widely thought that these concerns underlie some of the themes explored in the Pastoral Epistles – three later New Testament letters (1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Titus), possibly dating from the final decades of the first century, which show a particular concern for the