

## **A Summary of the History of Christianity** **--based on the work of Hans Küng--** (with some annotations and revisions done by Julius-Kei Kato)

We will refer to sub-divisions of this article by the section numbers within square brackets (e.g. [1]).

### **RESOURCES:**

Original Link to this Summary (in the public domain. It has since then been taken down):  
[https://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0b\\_weltethos-und-religionen/0b-01-02-christentum/0b-01-0201-jesus.php](https://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0b_weltethos-und-religionen/0b-01-02-christentum/0b-01-0201-jesus.php)

**A version of the original video clip in the public domain:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayE0zswaVi8>

**Paradigm Shifts in Christianity** (a one-page visual diagram). *When “paradigm #00” is mentioned, please refer to this document.*

<https://jkato.kingsfaculty.ca/jkato/assets/File/Paradigm%20Shifts-Christianity%20Hans%20Kung.pdf>

### **[1] Jesus of Nazareth--who was considered by his disciples as “the Christ” (which means: the Chosen Messiah)**

- **Places of birth-childhood:** According to the gospels, Bethlehem. Nazareth in Galilee has also been proposed. It is more sure that he grew up in Nazareth. (Historically speaking, “grew up in Nazareth” is a more secure piece of data.)
- **Year of birth:** not after 4 BC, if Jesus was born under King Herod (who reigned 27–4 BC).
- **First public appearance:** around the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius (hence, 27/28 or 28/29 AD), when he was baptized by John the Baptist at the Jordan River.
- **Public Life and Ministry:** He became a wandering preacher and teacher in the region between Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee and Jerusalem for a short time (not more than three years) during which time he gathered around himself a circle of disciples, both male and female.
- **Year of Death:** He was crucified when he was perhaps in his early 30s, most probably around 30 AD, under Pontius Pilate (who was Roman procurator in Judaea 26–30). The exact date cannot be determined.

Christianity takes its name from Jesus of Nazareth who was called by his followers “(the) Christ” (Hebrew, *Mashiach* [messiah] / Greek, *Christos* [Christ]) meaning “the anointed one/the chosen one.”

Jesus is not a mythical person. His history is situated in Palestine, a province of the Roman empire at the time. He had a short public ministry and then crucified under Rome for political provocation and alleged blasphemy.

## [2.1] The Historical Life and Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth

**Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew** from the peasant class **who proclaimed** the coming of the **Kingdom of God**.

He lived at a time when many people believed that God was going to let the “kingdom” (or the “reign”) come.

- God’s will—he proclaimed—is for people to love God and their neighbour (indeed even their enemies! Matthew 5:44) as they love themselves.
- Jesus **practiced solidarity** with everyone who cared to listen and come to his gatherings. He prioritized the disadvantaged, e.g., the poor, the rejected, the marginalized.
- The gospels record that he **performed many healing actions on behalf of the sick and those who were considered “possessed” by evil spirits**.
- (From the point of view of more rigorously observant Jewish teachers) Jesus sometimes **relativized** certain Jewish religious **laws** when he thought that some greater value was at stake, emphasizing that the Law was for the sake of the human person and not vice versa.
- He **prophetically provoked** the Temple-establishment (the priests, the Sadducee party) and their business interests in the Temple (seen in the “purging of the Temple” incident)
- He **publicly confronted** the religious leadership (who were Jews) and the political authorities (who were Romans).
- For this he was tried and sentenced to **death on the cross**, the most terrible form of capital punishment at the time that even Romans citizens could not be subjected to.

After his death, his disciples had encounters with him that convinced them that he had been raised by God from the dead. This can be called the “resurrection event.” This Easter faith and proclamation that “Christ has been risen” became the foundation of Christian faith.

## [2.2] Jesus Christ – Human and Divine

One official doctrine (teaching) regarding Jesus in Christianity is that He is both human and divine. This is the result of decisions made in several important early church councils (particularly, those held at Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon [see below]) in which it was decided that, at the official level, Jesus Christ is to be believed by Christians as “one in essence with the Father” (hence, divine), and “one person having two natures—human and divine.”

It is important though to see how the thinking about Jesus, the Christ, *evolved over time as a historical process*. We can identify several stages:

1. **ENCOUNTER** - When Jesus began his public life, people perceived him first and foremost as some sort of charismatic “Rabbi” (teacher) who taught, healed, and shared fellowship with people, especially the disadvantaged.
2. **MESSIAH?** As time went on, some of his followers began to believe that this charismatic rabbi was the MESSIAH who many Jews at the time were waiting for—the one who was going to realize the reign of God in their midst. Jesus also probably thought so about himself. (Note that “Messiah” was NOT EQUAL to “God” in Jesus’ historical context)
3. **POST-RESURRECTION:** After Jesus’ death, the resurrection experience made the disciples identify Jesus more and more closely with YHWH, giving him exalted titles, some of which were also used of YHWH: Lord, Son of God, Saviour, Lamb of God, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, Son of Man, etc.
4. **JESUS’ DIVINITY** - This process of Jesus becoming more exalted in the minds of Christians ultimately led (300+ years later) to the close identification between God (YHWH) and Jesus as expressed in the faith-statement: **Jesus is also divine** (i.e., that Jesus is “God the Son,” “God incarnate,” “the Second Person of the Holy Trinity,” etc.). This identification happened over a period of time and was officially made required (“orthodox”) belief only in the 300s of the Common Era
5. **NEW TESTAMENT ROOTS** - The roots of this belief in Jesus having some sort of divinity are already found in the New Testament – most notably, in the gospel of John.

For more related points on this, see my article “Did Jesus Claim that He Was God?” in: [http://www.catholica.com.au/gc4/jkk/016\\_jkk\\_240419.php](http://www.catholica.com.au/gc4/jkk/016_jkk_240419.php)

## [3] The Earliest Christian Communities

Christianity spread in all directions from its place of origin in Roman-occupied Palestine. Some accounts of earliest Christianity’s growth are more well-documented than others. In the New Testament, the focus is on the westward expansion of the early Christian movements (from

Palestine to Rome). What began as a rural movement in Palestine became predominantly an urban movement. **Paul**, the apostle, was particularly instrumental in making the Jesus movement a more gentile-friendly one. One early crucial problem that arose was the following:

**Controversy among the first Christians:** Must **Non-Jews** (“gentiles” “pagans”), when they become Christians, observe the **Jewish Law** (*Halachah*), i.e., circumcision, holy days, the Sabbath, dietary rules, purity regulations? There even seemed to be conflict about this between the leading apostles, Peter and Paul as documented in the New Testament.

#### **Peter**

“But when Cephas (= Peter) came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate, for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy.” (Gal. 2.11–13)

#### **Paul**

“But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas (= Peter) before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law’.” (Gal. 2.14–16)

#### *Some Other Noteworthy Matters:*

- Paul undertook extensive missionary journeys in the Greek-speaking world and started Christian communities in various places.
- The Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Jerusalem was further destroyed in 135 CE and the Jewish Christians were dispersed.
- **Greek speaking gentile Christianity** came to become the dominant form of Christianity.
- The Christian communities gradually developed a hierarchical structure with bishops, priests, and deacons (from the 100s [the second century] onwards)

## **[4] Christian Scriptures (Writings)**

The early Christians adopted the **Jewish Scriptures in its Greek translation (called *the Septuagint*)**, which contained certain books not included in the Hebrew-language TANAK.

The Christians called it the “Old Testament”, distinguishing it from the “New Testament” which was a collection of writing consisting of:

- four narratives of Jesus’ teaching and ministry (called “Gospels”),
- an account of the apostles’ ministry (*The Acts of the Apostles*)
- 21 letters written by or attributed to Paul and other apostles,
- an apocalyptic book recounting what is claimed to be the end of history (*Revelation*)

All of them were written between 45 and ca. 140 AD. Christians regard these writings as being inspired by God and therefore setting the norm for all subsequent Christian teaching and practice.

Only much later did the notion of a “literal inerrancy” take form.

See also The Christian Bible:

<https://jkato.kingsfaculty.ca/jkato/assets/File/the%20Christian%20Bible%20-Hans%20Kung.pdf>

## **[5] Constantinople – The “Second Rome”**

### **Emperor Constantine (306–337)**

- Christianity became, first, the favoured religion of the empire (under Constantine). Later, it became the state religion under the emperor Theodosius (380 CE).
- Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) became the centre of Christianity (the “Second Rome”).
- Ecumenical councils were convened to lay down rules for orthodoxy (correct teaching) and to formulate dogmas (doctrinal teachings) about God and Christ and other matters. (The following are the places where the councils were held.)
  - Nicaea (325),
  - Constantinople (381),
  - Ephesus (433/449),
  - Chalcedon (451)
- The Eastern Church centred in Constantinople and the Western Church centred in Rome became increasingly alienated from each other: different languages and cultures, different ways of thinking and doing things
- Controversies about questions of faith and discipline and about the primacy (of the pope) led to the separation (“The Great Schism”) between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054 AD. This created two separate great bodies of Christians, the “Roman Catholic Church” under the Pope in Rome and the “Eastern Orthodox Churches” under the Patriarch of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul).

## [6] Moscow – Becomes the “Third Rome”

- 988–1448 | Russia formed an ecclesiastical province under the Patriarchate of Constantinople.
- 15th Century | Moscow emerged as the centre of the growing Russian Empire.
- 1453 | After the fall of Constantinople, the Russian Church claimed autonomy with its own ecclesiastical head.
- 1472 | Grand Duke Ivan III married the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor and laid claim to the legacy of Constantinople.
- 1510 | Moscow was called the “Third Rome” for the first time.
- 1589 | Moscow was made a patriarchate.

## [7] The Orthodox Churches

The Orthodox Churches today can be considered as **heirs to the Early Eastern Church** (Early Church Hellenistic Paradigm-Paradigm 2):

- “Orthodox” identity means fidelity to tradition, especially the tradition of a rich sacramental and liturgical life fostering personal religious experience.
- Impressive artistic traditions in church architecture, icon-painting and liturgical music.
- Devotion to Mary and the saints as symbols of participation in the heavenly Church.
- Mystical spirituality practiced by monks and nuns but also by many laypersons.
- An ethic of personal asceticism, prayer and care for the poor.
- Close association with national identity resulting in a plurality of jurisdictions in communion with each other but without a common voice.

## [8] Rome: Primacy of Honour in the Early Church and the Process of Latinization

- The **Jewish roots of Christianity were forgotten** by a church characterized first by Greek then by Latin culture.
- In Rome, between **360 and 382, Latin replaced Greek** as the language of the liturgy.
- **The basilica**, originally a large hall for secular affairs, became the model of church architecture.
- The thanksgiving meal (Eucharist) was gradually transformed into a **sacrificial offering**: the table became an altar.

## [9] The Pope – Successor of St Peter – “No”, “Yes”, or “It’s Complicated”?

- No evidence in the New Testament that Peter was in Rome.
- No evidence for an immediate “successor” to Peter, not even in Rome.
- No mention of a bishop of Rome in the New Testament or in the earliest Christian sources ...
- not in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and not in the Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians.
  
- Nevertheless, early evidence for the graves of the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome.
- Around the middle of the 3rd Century, Bishop Stephen of Rome viewed himself as the successor of Peter and claimed a primacy over all other bishops.
  
- Historically speaking then, it seems that the idea that <the Pope *as a literal successor* of Peter who holds full authority [over all bishops in the Christian world], received in an unbroken chain of tradition going from the present pope all the way up to Peter himself who, in turn, received his authority as pope from Jesus himself> **has to be re-evaluated very critically**. It is not true in the literal sense. It can be considered an anachronism because the popes increasingly claimed this only later in history. The Eastern Orthodox churches (some of which are even older than Rome itself) have not accepted this. It remains the main block to unity among Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. However, it is true that the pope as bishop of Rome has had a unique place of honor (a “primacy of honour” and *primus inter pares* “first among equals”) in the history of Christianity from ancient times. (jkk)

## [10] Mediaeval Theology and an Absolutistic Church Structure

The Western church fathers (Augustine in particular) developed an extensive **Latin theology** that shaped the whole medieval theological tradition.

In the 11th Century under Pope Gregory VII (“Gregorian Reform”), the papacy took on an absolutistic structure.

The principles of an absolutistic church organization:

### ***Centralization***

The Western Church became, with time, the papal universal church

The Roman Church claimed to be “Mother” and “Teacher” of all the churches and of all the faithful; the pope became the “Holy Father”

The pope claimed to be the Vicar of Peter and thus also the Vicar of Christ, indeed even the “Vicar of God” (Innocent IV)

### ***Juridification***

Collections of ecclesiastical decrees were codified into a papal book of laws (“Canon Law” Lat., *Corpus* or *Codex Iuris Canonici*)

Professional “canonists” (ecclesiastical jurists) became the pillars of the Roman system

The pope emerged as the supreme executive, the supreme lawgiver, and the supreme judge within the church

### ***Politicization***

The Roman Church laid claim to being an autonomous ruling institution alongside and indeed above the state, with its own international status (the Papal State), its own diplomatic service, and a long list of privileges

### ***Clericalization***

A patriarchal hierarchy and a clergy separated from the ordinary faithful dominated the laity

As administrators of the “means of grace” the clergy came to be identified with “the Church”

The prohibition of marriage for the clergy (1139) accentuated the separation from the laity

### ***Militarization***

“Holy Wars” were fought to convert pagans or suppress heretics, crusades (directed against Christians as well as against Muslims and Jews)

Discrimination and persecution of Jews, the burning of heretics and witches

Inquisition and uncompromising pursuit of “deviants”

## **[11] The Roman Catholic Paradigm**

The Roman Catholic Church today can be considered as **heir to the Latin Church of the Middle Ages** (Mediaeval Roman Catholic Paradigm – Paradigm #3):

- “Catholic” elements were preserved (or recovered) not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but also in the Old Catholic, Anglican and even some Protestant Churches.
- Being Catholic is primarily a matter of sharing rituals, symbols, theology and spirituality, i.e., a **sacramental way** of thinking and acting – hierarchical authority and papacy are *not* prime reasons for being a Catholic.
- Devotion to Mary and the saints and concern for the souls of the deceased are part of an “ecclesial” solidarity extending beyond the present life.
- Impressive artistic traditions in religious architecture, painting, sculpture, and music.
- A mentality affirming life including sensual pleasures.
- Impressive engagement in education and charitable work among the sick, the poor and the outcast, especially (though not exclusively) by members of religious orders.
- Global diversity in popular piety combined with the sense of belonging to a single “universal” Church – symbolic role of the pope often more important than his real authority.



## [12] Martin Luther - Life

**1483** Birth in Eisleben.

**1505** Entry into the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

**1512** Professor in Wittenberg.

**1517** Publication of the “Ninety-five Theses” against indulgences.

**1520** Papal bull threatening excommunication if he does not retract. Luther publicly burns the papal bull.

**1521** Luther is excommunicated. He stands up to his writings at the Diet of Worms, he and his followers are put under the ban (Edict of Worms). Luther is hidden till 1522 in Wartburg Castle, where he begins his translation of the Bible.

**1525** The Peasants’ War. Luther got married and broke with Erasmus of Rotterdam.

**1529** Marburg Colloquy with Huldrych Zwingli and Martin Bucer.

**1541** Jean Calvin established a theocratic republic in Geneva.

**1546** Luther dies in Eisleben

## [13] Luther’s Program

Luther’s programme: Return to the Gospel of Jesus Christ

### *Bible*

In place of innumerable ecclesiastic traditions, laws and authorities, the Holy Scriptures alone serve as the criterion of being Christian – translation of the Bible into the language of the people so that everyone could understand it

### *Christ*

In place of innumerable saints and official mediators, Jesus Christ alone serves as the Mediator of humans before God

### *Grace*

In place of ecclesiastically imposed pious deeds to merit salvation, believers find justification before God not through their works, but through grace alone, which cannot be earned, but is received through faith alone. Grace is unconditional.

### *Church*

In place of the medieval clerical hierarchy, the Church is the community of believers, a congregation that prays and sings together.

## **[14] Further Divisions in the Western Church**

### **Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531, Zürich)**

- Broke with Luther over the question of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper: Luther insisted on a real physical presence; Zwingli held for a mere symbolic and memorial presence.
- Called for a radical reform of the Church, abolishing everything that could not be justified by the Bible.

### **Jean Calvin (1509–64, Geneva)**

- Produced the classic “reformed” synthesis, taking a middle position in the Lord's Supper Controversy.
- Inspired and organized an international network that helped Protestantism to become a world power.

## **[15] The Protestant Churches**

The Protestant Churches today can be considered as heirs of the Reformation (Reformation Protestant Paradigm #4):

- A “new” form of church stressing the community of all believers.
- Worship services stressing the primacy of the word (scripture reading, preaching, hymnody) over ritual and other visual symbols, and stressing active participation by the congregation.
- Impressive artistic achievements especially in the field of church music.
- Spirituality emphasizing a personal relationship to Jesus.
- Strict morality stressing personal integrity, sobriety and hard work, but also social responsibility.
- Impressive engagement in education and charitable work among the sick, the poor and outcasts.
- Experience of division into numerous rival denominations gave rise to ecumenism to promote fellowship in faith and worship, and cooperation in practice.

## [16] Anglicanism – a Third Way?

### **John Wycliffe (1328–1384),**

led a biblically motivated protest against the papal church.

### **King Henry VIII (1491–1547),**

broke with Rome in 1532–34 establishing an Anglican state church, which at first held fast for the most part to Catholic faith and practice.

### **Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556),**

Archbishop of Canterbury: pursued a more reformation-oriented course under Henry's successor Edward VI, but retained the office of the bishop. He was executed for heresy under the short-lived Catholic restoration under Queen Mary.

### **Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603),**

restored Protestantism, but did not go far enough for the so-called "Puritans". Thus, in England the Protestant Movement became split. After 1620, many Calvinist-minded Puritans migrated to America, where they established Presbyterian, Congregationalist and later Baptist churches. Such "free churches" arose in England as well.

### **Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658),**

The Puritan general Oliver Cromwell took control of England after 1648/49. Under his rule the Anglican Church was reformed in a Calvinist-Presbyterian direction. With the Restoration of the monarchy (1660) and the episcopate, the Anglican Church returned to the Elizabethan via media ("middle way").

## [17] Revolutions of the Modern Age

### ***René Descartes (1596–1650)***

Was the father of modern rationalist philosophy and marked a "Copernican Revolution" in the way of thinking: the whole of reality is constituted by the human subject ("I think therefore I am" Latin, *Cogito ergo sum*)

### ***Galileo Galilei (1564–1642)***

Was the protagonist of the new empirical-mathematical natural science which was the basis for the technological and industrial revolution that reached its first climax in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

### ***Cardinal Richelieu [Armand Jean du Plessis] (1585–1642)***

Was the mastermind and practitioner of a new understanding of the state and of politics: what counts is not the confessional or religious-moral point of view but rather practical politics in pursuit of national interests. The state is the natural product of a contract between the people and

their rulers and is thus autonomous in relation to the Church.

### ***The French Revolution***

In the wake of runaway inflation and mass misery, the Estates-General convened in May 1789. In June, the Third Estate, representing 98% of the population over against clergy and nobility, proclaimed itself to be the “National Assembly” and challenged the power of the king. On July 14, 1789, the people of Paris took up arms (“Storm the Bastille”). On Aug. 4, the National Assembly abolished feudalism, putting an end to the “*Ancien Régime*”, and on Aug. 26, it proclaimed the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.”

### ***Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)***

The basic principle of the Declaration was that all “men are born and remain free and equal in rights” (Article 1), which were specified as the rights of liberty, private property, the inviolability of the person, and resistance to oppression (Article 2). All citizens were equal before the law and were to have the right to participate in legislation directly or indirectly (Article 6); no one was to be arrested without a judicial order (Article 7). Freedom of religion (Article 10) and freedom of speech (Article 11) were safeguarded within the bounds of public “order” and “law.” The document reflects the interests of the elites who wrote it: property was given the status of an inviolable right, which could be taken by the state only if an indemnity were given (Article 17); offices and position were opened to all citizens (Article 6).

## **[18] Challenges to the Christian Churches in the Future**

- Dialogue with other confessions and, in time, with other religions.
- Demands of the Enlightenment: freedom of religion and of conscience, freedom of assembly, of speech and of the press.
- Leading values: “rationality”, “progress”, “nation”.
- Relativization of Christianity in European guise: instead of a Europe-centered Christian perspective on the world, a multi-centred worldview embracing diverse regions and religions.

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