

Church in the East

Church History and Our Place in It

Timeline

- 52 Saint Thomas travels to India
- 100 Churches were established in Edessa (Syria/Turkey)
- 200 Churches were established in Media and Persia (Iraq/Iran)
- 250 Churches were established in Bactria (Afganastan/Tajikistan)
- 280 Seleucia-Ctesiphon hosts the Patriarch of the Church in the East.
- 428 Nestorius becomes Patriarch of Constantinople
- 431 Council of Ephesus (East/West Split)
- 541 Chalcedonian Definition
- 543 Jacob Baradaeus promotes Nestorianism as Bishop of Edessa
- 631 The first Chinese Nestorian Church is established.
- 1009 A Kerait (Turk/Mongol) prince and 200,000 of his tribesmen adopt Christianity
- 1206 Inauguration of the *Pax Mongolica* (Lasts over 100 years)
- 1300 The Travels of Marco Polo is Published

Historical Survey of the East

Early Christianity in the East

- + The Spread of Christianity to the East
- + Antioch Christology + Nestorianism

Theological + Christological Divide

- + Council of Ephesus: The Worship of Man Condemned
- + Council of Chalcedon: The Establishment of Western Liberty

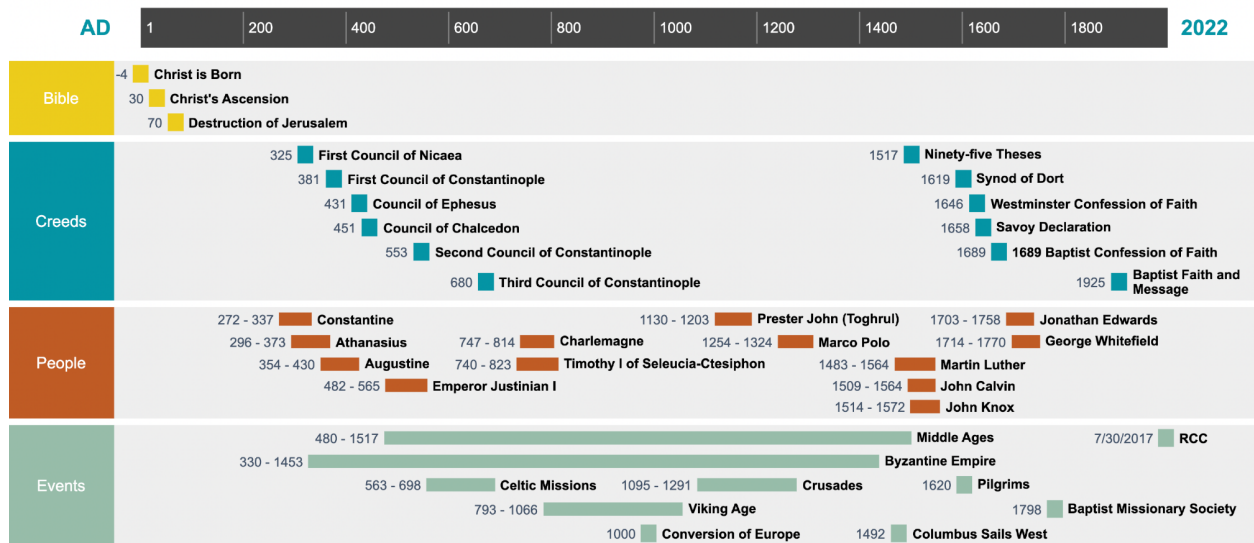
The Growth of the Church in the East

- + Persian Persecution
- + Jacobites + The Missionary Efforts of Christianity in the East
- + The Effects of Christianity on the East
- + The Defect of Christianity in the East

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Timeline



Early Historical Survey

Christianity in the East was known by many names, including Syriac Christianity, Nasrani, Nestorians, and Jacobites. Besides this, there were figurative names given to Christianity, such as the Luminous Way, the Gospel of Truth, the Religion of Light, etc.

The Spread of Christianity East

- ✦ Saint Thomas took the gospel to the southern shores of India in A.D. 52. Saint Thomas is considered the founder of the Church in the East, much like Peter was for the west.
- ✦ Christianity spread east along the silk road through modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and China.
- ✦ Churches and bishoprics were established in Edessa (Syria/Turkey) by A.D. 100, throughout Media and Persia (Iraq/Iran) by A.D. 200, and as far east as Bactria (Afghanistan/Tajikistan) by A.D. 250.
- ✦ The joint city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon hosted the Patriarch of the Church in the East from A.D. 280 until 775 when the seat was transferred to Baghdad.

Theological Divide

We can't understand the church in the east without briefly considering the theological distinctions that brought about the divide between west and east.

Nestorius

- ✦ A late contemporary of Augustine, Nestorius rose as a charismatic preacher in Antioch.
 - Comparatively Saint Patrick begins preaching in Ireland around 433
 - The Pax Romana, or Peace of Rome caused the gospel to rapidly spread west, while it encountered various difficulties in the east.
- ✦ Because of his preaching he is made Bishop of Constantinople in 428
- ✦ Nestorius was not afraid to declare his beliefs and he made waves by saying that Mary only gave birth to a man who was linked to the divine.
- ✦ His beliefs were immediately challenged by the church of Alexandria.

Council of Ephesus – A.D. 431

- ✦ Augustine dies in 430
- ✦ Cyril of Alexandria headed the council and wrote the two epistles and twelve anathemas the council pronounced.
- ✦ Nestorianism
 - The denial of the incarnation
 - The Worship of Jesus as man
 - holding to the real substance in the sacraments, which the council called cannibalism
- ✦ *Theotokos*
 - The heretics claimed that this meant that Mary was the mother of God, and therefore they substituted the term *Christotokos* (Mother of Christ), Jesus was a man who became linked with the divine.
 - The orthodox insisted that the virgin Mary was *Theotokos*, literally, the bringer forth of God and that the incarnation brought forth God.
- ✦ The issue at Ephesus was this: if Jesus Christ was only a remarkable man in moral union with God by means of his moral excellence, then other men can achieve the same status of moral excellence and be worshipped with God.
- ✦ This meant also that any order such as the state which attained the moral excellence of the day could be worshipped, as could the emperor so that the door was opened wide to emperor worship and the deification of the state.

- ✦ The ultimate issue under consideration was whether the approach to God was by man, or through God to man by grace?
 - The Council of Ephesus affirmed that man is saved by grace.
 - It emphasized the reality of the incarnation, the literal meaning of the Nicene Creed, and it issued its twelve anathemas against Nestorius and other heresies which were humanistic attempts to undermine the faith.
 - The council of Ephesus forbade the worship of Christ's humanity.
 - In Contrast Nestorianism asserted the worship of Christ's divine and human unity.
- ✦ Nestorius was exiled and died defending his heretical beliefs.

Council of Chalcedon – A.D. 451

- ✦ We don't have time to consider the totality of Chalcedon and it's impact. There is a School of Theology lecture online that you can listen to a detailed consideration of Chalcedon's impact on western liberty.
- ✦ Fundamentally Chalcedon affirmed that 'Lordship' was particular to Jesus Christ as the God-man. No human authority could lay claim to Lordship, in fact all kingdoms, nations, and people must affirm Jesus Christ as Lord, thereby dismantling the ancient notion of the state or emperor as a god.
- ✦ Just as Nestorianism rejected the Council of Ephesus, they also rejected the Chalcedonian definition.

Syriac Christians

- ✦ Just as Christians were persecuted in the west, the Christian's in the east were met by the persecution of the Persian Kings who saw Christianity as a threat to the dominant belief of Zoroastrianism.
 - Zoroastrianism saw two cosmic powers as rivals, one good, and one evil.
- ✦ Nestorianism would eventually become the dominant expression of Christianity in the east due in large part to the missionary zeal of men like Jacob Baradaeus who was consecrated bishop of Edessa in 543.
- ✦ The primary manifestation of Christianity in the east was not familial or cultural. It was ascetic and monastic. Just like African Christianity, Eastern Christianity was affected by the Manichean heresy and gnostic dualism.
 - They perceived of created things as lesser than uncreated things.
- ✦ About 780 Bishop Timothy I became the Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, or Catholicos of the church of the east. At the time he functioned as the spiritual head to over one quarter of the world's Christians.

- He was the eastern contemporary of Charlemagne.
- Under the oversight of Bishop Timothy the Greek classics and many other foreign religious texts were translated into Syrian. This laid the foundation for the Arabic Golden Age as the Christian cities were later overtaken by the Muslims.
- ✦ The Church in the East was continually beset by compromise and syncretism. Buddhism, Shamanism, Manichaeism, gnosticism all gained status among Christians

Later Historical Survey

This later history of the Church in the east is still being uncovered. Much of Christianity in the east had devolved into traditions and meaningless rituals. Yet the influence of the Christian faith was still felt, albeit in a lesser force than Europe.

- ✦ As Europe bloomed to gospel fruition at the dawn of the first millennium in AD 1000, Asian Christianity reached its apex and began its fall from prominence to irrelevance.

Christian Keraites

- ✦ Hundreds of Christian inscriptions, crosses, frescoes, ruins, manuscripts, and paintings, along with contemporary manuscript evidence, record the presence of Christian communities from Syria in the west, to Japan in the north-east, to the island of Java in the south-east by the middle of the 8th century.
- ✦ AD 1009 – A Kerait prince and 200,000 of his tribesmen undertook Christian baptism from a Jacobite missionary. This brought Christianity to the Mongols for the first time.

Toghrul, or Prester John

- ✦ Born about 1130, Toghrul became the Nestorian Christian King or Khan of the Keraites in 1165 in central Mongolia. He lived to over 70 years of age and established a model of rule where he would form alliances for peace by marrying the daughters of other men to his sons and generals.
- ✦ Toghrul was titled 'Wang Khan' or 'Ung Can' lit. King Khan. He was recognized in the west by the name Prester, or Elder John, because of his advanced age.
- ✦ Toghrul's mark on history is his influence as patron to young Ghengis Khan, who he instructed in military tactics, political policy, and the rule of law in maintaining peace.
- ✦ Toghrul had three nieces. These Nestorian Princesses were married to Ghengis Khan's generals and sons, emulating the diplomacy of Toghrul. These Christian Keraitite women would effectively govern the political affairs of the Mongol empire while their husbands were off at war.

- Sorghaghtani Beki was the most prominent of the sisters, training her sons to be effective statesmen and leaders. Kublai Khan, being the most effective of her efforts.

Pax Mongolica

- ✦ The effect of Christianity in the East is recognized in the Mongol Law code called the *Yassa* ("Great Law"). The first and primary law was "All men are to believe in one God, Creator of Heaven and earth."
- ✦ This law code established a period of peace known as the *Pax Mongolica* that lasted over 100 years (from the ascendancy of Ghengis Khan until after the death of Kublai Khan in the early 1300's). Travel and transportation throughout the Mongol Empire were made safe and expedient for all forms of trade.
- ✦ It was commonly said that "a maiden bearing a nugget of gold on her head could wander safely throughout the realm"
- ✦ The Keraites were the last great Christian realm in Asia. With the rise of the Mongol empire, the Nestorian Keraites were absorbed into a blend of mystic paganism, animism, and Buddhism.
- ✦ Aside from the Arminian Christian's in northern Turkey, Persian Christianity was completely overrun by the Muslim hoards.

What Happened?

How did the Church of the East which spread so quickly so early, fail to gain a lasting foothold on the Asian continent? What was the defect in the church of the east?

Four Reasons The Church in the East Declined

- ✦ First the rejection of the term *Theotokos* (Bringer forth of God) resulted in the idea that man can become God. This was essentially the same claim as every other pagan religion of the day. Christianity was only set apart by its rituals.
- ✦ Second, the rejection of the Chalcedonian definition meant that man could share in the Lordship of Christ. This meant that the emperor or state could govern as equals to God. Therefore the laws and structure of a society did not need to conform to the law of Christ. The Christians would only function as a minority force in the society, never calling their rulers to kiss the son per Psalm 2.
- ✦ Third, because the Church of the east failed to affirm two crucial elements of Christian doctrine, it was compromised from the outset. Fraught with the potential to adopt further compromising errors, which it did with Manichaeism, Gnosticism, and the

influence of Zoroastrian on their perspective on the devil being an equal force with God.

- ✦ Fourth, the primary expression of Nestorian Christianity never moved beyond the cloister or monastery. The rejection of worldly goods for metaphysical pursuits meant that the Christians did not take dominion in the east. Converts were encouraged to shirk their old lives and live as monastic monks. This resulted in the stunted growth of Christianity instead of the generational fruit we see throughout Europe.