

Church History

Timeline By Century

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4th Century

The fourth century, like the sixteenth, and perhaps our own twentieth, is one of those periods in Church History when momentous changes take place that stand out as pivotal turning points in the history of God's people.

The century witnessed major changes and transitions in church relations with state and society. Here are six:

- Empire Persecutes Church -- At the beginning of the century the church went through the "Great Persecution"--the last and the worst. Instituted by emperor Diocletian in 305, it was intended to wipe out the church. It failed.
- Empire Tolerates Church -- Emperor Constantine professed Christianity and the church was given legal status. Often you will hear that Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire. He didn't. But he did restore its losses and gave it favored treatment as one among many tolerated religions.
- Empire Challenges Church -- Paganism didn't give up without a battle. Emperor Julian (361-363) attempted unsuccessfully to reestablish paganism.
- Empire Adopts Church --Christianity was officially made the state religion under emperor Theodosius IX in the year 381.

- Church Challenges Empire -- In a dramatic confrontation that foreshadowed centuries of church-state jockeying for position, Bishop Ambrose of Milan defied the emperor.
- Church Persecutes Opponents -- It started off the century as a persecuted minority. By the end of the century the persecuted church had turned into a persecuting church. Its motives made sense. It saw itself as combating heresy, false religion and evil forces. In many ways it was a different church and a different world at the end of this century.
- Canon of New Testament confirmed. In the 367 AD Easter letter of Athanasius, and at Councils in 382 and 397, final recognition was given. These do not create the Christian scriptures but confirm what was already generally recognized and accepted.
- Millions of new members pour in. Becoming a Christian is no longer a risk, but can even be politically and socially opportune, so the church has to deal with a new laxity in standards of belief and behavior.
- Persecuted Church turns into persecuting church. By the end of the century the church that had for so long endured persecution as a minority faith, now becomes a persecutor.
- Major Councils - Church now needs to clarify and define what it believes. Long time required to understand and explain person and nature of Christ. Under emperor Constantine the first major council of church held in Nicea (modern Turkey) in 325. Second major Council held at Constantinople in AD 381.
- Donatists Arise in 311 - No sooner does the church achieve toleration than a severe rupture occurs within the North African church that would continue for three hundred years. What had been one of the strongest early centers of the church is so weakened it was eventually lost to Christianity.

- Major Missionary Advance as Ufilias takes Gospel to the Barbarian Goths in mid-century.
- Church Buildings Flourish -- After legalization the church gets big into real estate. Often its great basilicas are built on the sites of what were formerly pagan temples.
- Capital of Empire moves to Constantinople -- In 324 city founded. City dedicated on May 11, 330. Rome no longer the center of power for the empire and church begins to fill in the gap at Rome.
- Eusebius' Church History -- Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea becomes the first significant church historian and gives us invaluable documentation on the early church.
- Augustine converted in AD 386. He would become one of the most important theologians in all of church history.