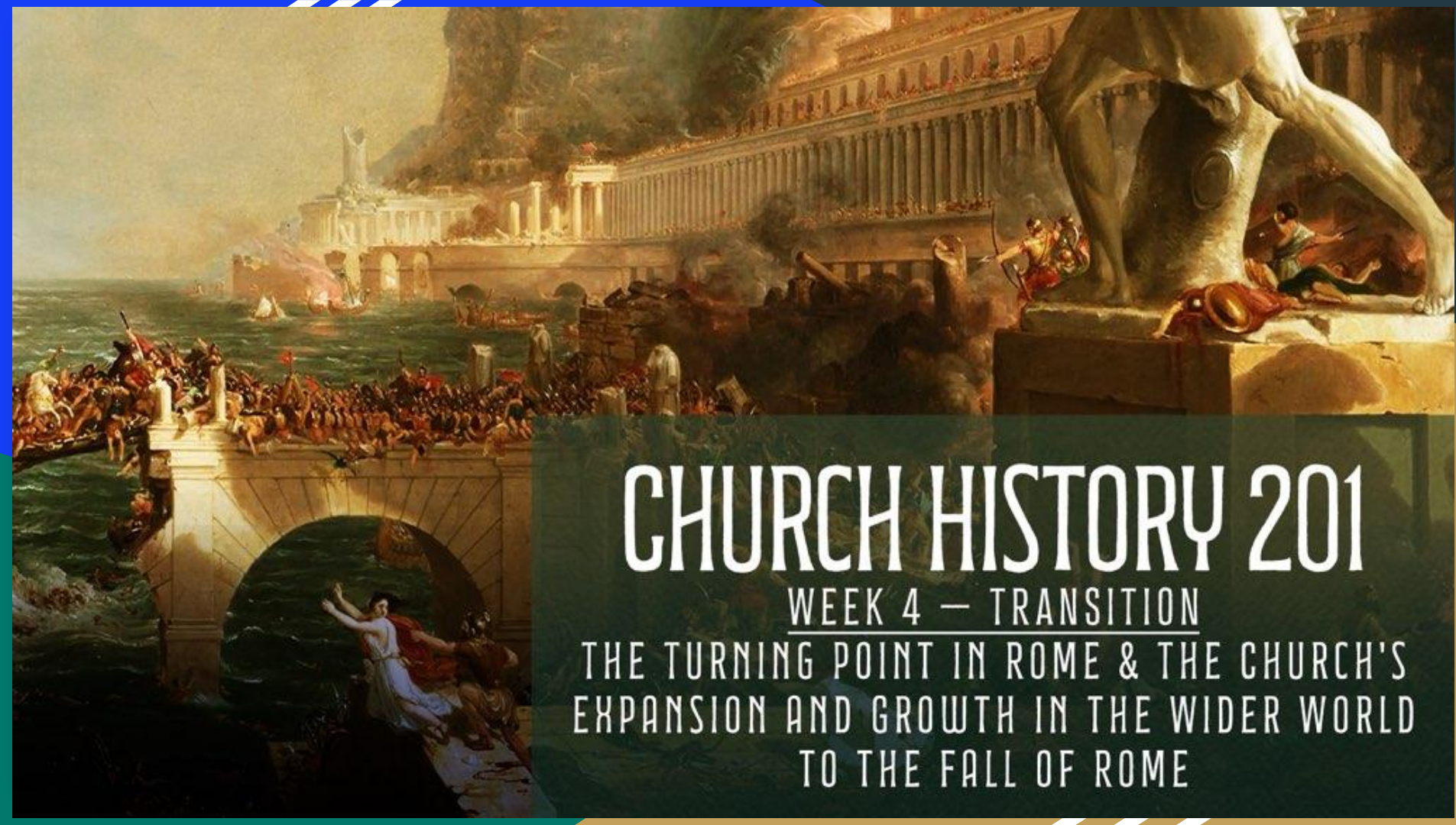




CHURCH HISTORY 201

WEEK 4 — TRANSITION

THE TURNING POINT IN ROME & THE CHURCH'S
EXPANSION AND GROWTH IN THE WIDER WORLD
TO THE FALL OF ROME

Turning Points and Transitions

- To this point of our series, the church existed amidst periods of prolonged opposition and persecution, in Judea, the Roman Empire, and beyond.
- To this point, this church's leadership, care, and control was placed in the hands of individuals and groups appointed and anointed through leadership structures largely laid down by the first generation church fathers, as recorded in the New Testament—including elders, deacons, and teachers who were recognized for holding to the truth and defending orthodoxy.
- Important defenses of Christian orthodoxy in pursuit of the truth—both apologetic and polemic—had occurred individually, amongst churches, and in larger councils.
- Focus of the church had been on maintaining unity in the body based on proper belief led by duly appointed leadership—and not the pursuit of power or control.
- The position of the church in society is about to embark on a road filled with change in which it will become a cornerstone of society—both in the Roman Empire and beyond—for centuries, but in much closer connection to the political state.

Turning Point Emperors: Constantine & Theodosius

- Major change to the status of Christianity comes beginning with the rule of **Constantine**.
- It is recorded that, in 310 A.D., Constantine had his first vision, a sign illuminated by the sun in the sky, calling him to serve a new god.
- Two years later, in 312 A.D., while about to engage in battle at the Milvian Bridge in Rome, Constantine had a vision of a cross, and being told in this sign he would conquer; he then instructed his soldiers to put the mark of the first two letters of Christ's name (the *Chi Rho*) in the Greek alphabet on their shields before the crucial battle and came out victorious.
- A year later, in **313**, Constantine issued the **Edict of Milan** (in collaboration with co-emperor Licinius), granting freedom of worship to Christians and restored their confiscated property.
- For the first time, Christianity was publicly declared to be an openly acceptable religion in the Roman Empire.
- Constantine's founding of his new capital, Constantinople, as a "New Rome" was strongly connected to his devotion to the faith and the church (*with more significance to come!*)



Turning Point Emperors: Constantine & Theodosius

- Under Constantine, Christianity grew in the Roman Empire and (as mentioned) under his leadership, important councils were held and the Nicene Creed was completed.
- While part of this was due to his personal commitment to the faith, part of his desire for unity in the church and orthodox belief was also due to aiming to maintain stability and unity in the Roman Empire.
- Christianity would transition from a suspect and often reviled *superstitio* on the fringe or even, at time, underground, to a cornerstone of Roman society.
- While Constantine allowed Christianity in the Roman Empire, it is Emperor **Theodosius** (in **380 A.D.**) that made it the official religion of Rome, with the **Edict of Thessalonica**.
- Christianity was now the state religion, intertwined with political control. And, thus, the church entered into an era where it would increasingly become an institution, with an established political power structure and hierarchical control. There would be significant evolution in the hierarchy and specific offices during this time, and the centuries to come.

Some Key Specific Events and Shifts in Late Empire Rome

- **321:** Constantine grants the right to the church to hold property, beginning with the Lateran Basilica which will become the seat of the Bishop of Rome. (It is estimated that by the 6th century, the Catholic Church held $\frac{1}{3}$ of all land in Europe.) This will also see a growth in the construction of larger, public church buildings, often imperially sponsored.
- **Between 321 and 323:** Sunday is firmly established as a day of rest and worship within the empire. (While Christians did worship on Sundays before this, Constantine's decree establishes Sunday as a mainstream Christian sabbath and day of corporate worship.)
- **325:** Constantine convenes the First Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed, which is an essential confession of orthodox Christian belief, is written.
- **326:** The original Basilica of St. Peter is dedicated in Rome by Constantine over the proclaimed site of Peter's tomb. (At the heart of the modern Vatican)
- **330:** Constantine proclaims Constantinople the new capital city of the Roman Empire; this causes a reduction in the political influence of the Bishop of Rome, as well as increasing imperial supervision of the Eastern bishops—later known as Patriarchs. This will also contribute to growing tension between East and West that will later see the division of the empire.

Some Key Specific Events and Shifts in Late Empire Rome

- **336:** The first recorded Christmas celebrations in Rome were held on December 25, 336 (coinciding with the pagan festival Saturnalia and the winter solstice; to provide an alternative, Christianity-centred holy day, or “holiday”).
- **345:** A papal proclamation by Julius I affirms December 25 as the annual date for Christmas/the Nativity.
- **382:** The Council of Rome affirms all 39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books as part of the canon of scripture, and also includes the Apocrypha.
- **395:** Split of the Empire into Western Roman & Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire.
- **c. 404-405:** After 23 years of study and translation, Jerome completes the Latin vulgate—the first complete translation of the canon into Latin—the language of the Roman Empire, the language of scholarship, and what will long be the language of the Catholic church.
- **c. 408-412:** Augustine of Hippo writes a powerful defense of infant baptism as an apostolic tradition and routine practice of the church. (The earliest explicit mentions of the practice of infant baptism in some churches come from the early 3rd century, and it appears to have become normative by the 4th century. Now, it was upheld as the orthodox practice.)

Some Key Specific Events and Shifts in Late Empire Rome

- **410:** Destructive sack of Rome by Visigoths under Alaric plunders and loots Rome, and causes destruction of some public buildings and pagan sites, but churches are spared.
- **431:** The Council of Ephesus reaffirms that Jesus was truly God and man simultaneously, and the Nicene Creed is declared a permanent holy text of the church. It also asserted the dogma of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God (which will become of central importance to the Catholic Church going forward).
- **451:** The Council of Chalcedon reaffirms the dogma of Mary, and also rejects monophysitism (which held that Christ's humanity was absorbed by his divinity, and thus he was not truly God and Man at once); this sows the seeds for a significant break...
(More on that in just a moment...)
- **452:** With the civil government in Rome beginning to collapse, the Bishop of Rome's political power and influence in the Western Empire became more prominent. At this time, Bishop Leo of Rome (Pope Leo I) successfully convinced Attila the Hun not to invade Rome.
- **455:** Highly destructive sack of Rome by Vandals under Gaiseric causes heavy destruction and pillaging of wealth out of Rome; massive loss, significant weakening of Rome. The growing weakness of the Western Empire and the threat of invasion by foreign armies will remain serious issues, ultimately culminating in collapse in 476 A.D.

Sowing the Seeds of the East-West Schism

- The rejection of monophysite teachings at Chalcedon in 451 caused dissension in the Eastern realms of Christianity, which placed greater emphasis on spirit and the divine.
- While Rome had emerged as the central city of Christianity since Constantine, and its bishop had long been prominent, there were multiple other important cities that were influential to the faith—including Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople. And over time, disagreements by church leaders in these cities and churches in different regions would heighten divisions—as was the case at this time.
- First churches that broke away were part of what is now known as the Oriental Orthodox churches—including the Coptic Church of Alexandria and Armenian Apostolic churches. (Later, churches in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Antioch, and India would also join this group.)
- Disagreements and divisions over theological differences amongst regions and leaders would continue toward a “great schism” between the East and West in the coming centuries, and maintaining unity in orthodoxy in the church became impossible.
- ***Note that this emerged as increasingly problematic in the era after the church became an increasingly political entity within the Empire at this time. Any thoughts?***

A Word on Worship Practices & Church Buildings

- Noticeable changes occurred to church worship practices and liturgy following transition to the state religion. Among these were such features as:
 - **Standardization of language in services**—Latin in the Western Empire; Greek in the East
 - **Increasingly elaborate ceremonial practices and public rituals**—such as burning incense, wearing clerical vestments, and formal processions resembling Roman court practices.
 - **The creation of standardized written liturgical texts**—approved by bishops or synods, leading to increasing conformity and standardization.
 - **Increasing separation between the laity (common people) and the clergy**, including both elevation of status and privileges of the clergy and the design of places of worship—i.e. clergy ministering in the apse at the altar, and laity observing in the nave. This also leads to far less participation by the congregation, and more mere observance.
 - **Increasing doctrinal formalization—particularly creeds—to defend against non-conformity**
 - **Development of the Christian liturgical year**—with many new feast and holy days (“holidays”) in addition to those already observed (Easter, Pentecost), including Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Christmas, and a variety of days observing martyrs and saints.
 - **More rigorous, complex processes for entering and advancing deeper into the Christian faith**—making baptism and other rituals more complicated—and later seeing new ones added.

A Word on Worship Practices & Church Buildings

- After the legalization of Christianity in the empire in 313 and its declaration as the state religion in 380, a significant transition occurred as to where Christians gathered to worship, moving from underground gatherings, particularly in secret house churches (*domus ecclesiae*), to larger, often state-sponsored church buildings.
- In the imperial era up to 476, most of these buildings were of simpler appearance externally, but more ornate in decoration on the inside. (*NOTE—In the Middle Ages, both the external and internal appearance of churches and larger cathedrals would become more ornate and designed to overwhelm worshippers, both from outside and inside.*)
- **Some Notable examples of Pre-476 Places of Worship:**
 - Rotunda of St. George (Sofia, Bulgaria—early 4th century)
 - Trier Cathedral (Germany—early 4th century)
 - Old St. Peter's Basilica (Rome/The Vatican—c. 333)
 - Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Jerusalem—c. 335)
 - Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion (Aksum, Ethiopia—mid-4th century)
 - Santa Sabina (Rome—422)
 - Church of St. Peter (Antioch/Antakya, Turkey—4th to 5th centuries)

A Word on Worship Practices & Church Buildings



So, Where Had Christianity Reached by 476 A.D.?

- **Roman Empire** (original and now divided empire, far and wide)
- **Assyria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Georgia, Persia**
- **India**—claims that Thomas had gone there as early as 52; not certain, but certainly was a grown church there before 223 in the northwest (modern day Pakistan); as well as Afghanistan and Baluchistan
- **Ethiopia**—While the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion is detailed in Acts, the church at Ethiopia (at Axum) is dated c. 325
- Throughout **North Africa**—i.e. **Egypt–Alexandria**, Augustine of Hippo, in **Carthage**
- Various Germanic peoples in the European heartland in the 4th century—i.e. in **Gaul** and **Germania** .
- **British Isles**—claim that Joseph of Arimathea brought it there as early as 50 A.D., but evidence is lacking. Was “one cult of many” in first century; from 313 more tolerated and gets more established 4th century. (Much more organized under Augustine in late 6th c.); **Scotland** (Ninian, 397) **Ireland** (c. 431-432—Patrick)

476 AD

GospelMap.com

■ Christianity
■ Byzantine Empire



A Closer Look at Christianity's Spread Post-Constantine

- The growth and spread of Christianity after the policies of Constantine and Theodosius allowed for missionaries to travel more freely, bringing the gospel into areas of the Empire (and beyond) that it had either not reached at all, or had only limited reach.
- Among the notable expansion that occurred between 313 and 476 was:
- **North Africa, c. 313-430:** Led by missionary bishops such as Augustine of Hippo (*notable church father in this era*), Possidius of Calama, and Aurelius of Carthage—preaching among Berber tribes, founding monasteries, and striving to unify African Christianity.
- **Iberia (modern Georgia), c. 320-340:** By Nino of Cappadocia, who ministered to the conversion of the royal family, leading Christianity to become the state religion c. 337, and who also ministered widely in surrounding areas.
- **Goths north of the Danube River (Bulgaria), c.341-343:** Led by Ulfilas (Wulfila), who preached to the Goths, translated most of the Bible into Gothic, and made many converts. (Meaning some Goths who later invaded Rome were already Christianized)
- **Rural Gaul (modern France), c. 360-397:** Martin of Tours traveled to the countryside, preaching to peasants, and establishing multiple Christian communities.

A Closer Look at Christianity's Spread Post-Constantine

- **Syria & Asia Minor, c. 380-407:** John Chrysostom preached extensively, sent missionaries to the Goths and other frontier peoples, and encouraged wealthy Christians to support evangelism.
- **Armenia & The Caucasus, c. 395-440:** Mesrop Mashtots evangelized and discipled widely in the region, invented the Armenian alphabet and used it to translate scripture, and contributed greatly to the growth of Christianity in the area.
- **Scotland, c. 397-432:** Ninian evangelized among the southern Pict peoples, founded a monastery at Whithorn, and established a base that trained later Celtic missionaries.
- **Ireland, c. 432-461:** Patrick—who had been converted to Christianity in Ireland after being kidnapped from Britain and enslaved by Irish raiders, and then escaped back to Britain—returned after feeling called to serve in spreading the Gospel in Ireland. He is recognized as the most prominent figure in the growth and spread of Christianity in Ireland. While he is popularly recognized by the world due to his link to St. Patrick's Day on March 17, he is far more important to history as a committed Christian evangelist (though many believe the story of using the shamrock to teach the trinity is legend rather than fact.)

The Fall of Rome & The Western Roman Empire–476 A.D.

- Rome had been subject to destructive invasions earlier in the 5th century—by the Visigoths in 410 and the Vandals in 455. While the former was bad enough, churches had been spared from attack. The latter was even more destructive and included the looting of churches (though they were mostly spared outright destruction) and weakened Rome's power and wealth greatly. *(Note—the origin of terms “vandal” and “vandalism”)*
- In 476 A.D., forces led by the Germanic King Odoacer invaded Rome. They deposed the final Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, and took control. However, this was more a “final nail in the coffin” to a gravely declined Rome, and not as destructive.
- Odoacer declared himself King of Italy, rather than another Roman Emperor. While he mostly ruled independently, interestingly he was nominally under authority of the Byzantine Emperor—and the church at the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, was thriving.
- Also interestingly, Odoacer did not attack or destroy the Catholic Church in Rome, and would actually rely on it as a stabilizing force, recognize papal authority, and respect the hierarchy in place. He also allowed the church to keep its property and privileges.
- As a result, the Catholic Church in the former Western Roman Empire actually saw its power and influence increase, and continued to be a cornerstone not only in former imperial territories in the West, but also the East, anchored in Constantinople, and far beyond as the church continued to grow, spread, and change in the coming centuries.

Final Takeaways for Lesson 4 & Series Wrap-Up

- The period from 313-476 A.D. that saw Christianity become not only legal in the Roman Empire, but also the official state religion, brought significant change in many ways to the church.
- The Gospel had been proclaimed widely, countless new converts made, and churches established across vast areas of Europe, Asia, and Africa. As Gamaliel had foretold, as the Christian faith was of God, it could not be stopped.
- While growth and advancement of the church was undoubtedly good, and efforts had been made to maintain unity in true, right (orthodox) belief and combat false teachings and dissension, this could not be perfectly maintained, particularly once the church became an institution of the political state in the Roman and Byzantine Empires and beyond.
- The church changed in many ways from its advent to 476—some for good and in line with the teachings of Jesus, the disciples and apostles, and early church fathers in building up the church as a united body of faithful believers, and others that would lead to a multitude of problems—such as the substitution of man-made dogmas and traditions for scripture and correct teaching; dissension, corruption, and further division in the church in the centuries to come.

Final Takeaways for Lesson 4 & Series Wrap-Up

- In our 4 weeks together, we have considered 4 “T’s”:
 - **TESTAMENT:** What is recorded in the New Testament about the early church, how the church was intended to function, and the importance of right authority and belief
 - **TRUTH:** The efforts of subsequent generations of church fathers to pass down and defend the truth in the face of heresy and further define orthodox Christian theology
 - **TRIAL:** The persecution, even unto death, faced by the church at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities and others, and the enduring testimony of their perseverance
 - **TRANSITION:** The many changes (for better or worse) that occurred as the church moved from a reviled faith on the imperial fringe to a cornerstone of the political state
- This series was designed to provide a good working overview of key events in the church’s history and development from the time of the disciples to the fall of Rome in 476, and I hope and pray that you have been blessed through this time of learning together.
- **Any final questions, comments, or thoughts as we wrap up?**
- **NEXT UP: Church History 202: The Church in the Middle Ages, 476-1517 A.D. (Fall 2026)**
- **Some final words as we close and commit our day to Christ**—from the *Lorica of St. Patrick*