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[Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire in The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization](#)

Summary Article: **church**

from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

In architecture, a building designed as a place of worship for the Christian church community. Churches were first built in the 3rd century, when persecution of Christians ceased under the Roman emperor Constantine. The term also refers to the community of people who attend the church.

The original church design was based on the Roman basilica, with a central nave, aisles on either side, and an apse at one end. Many Western churches are built on an east–west axis with an altar at the east end, facing towards Jerusalem.

Early church architecture In the first years of Christianity, when persecution prevailed in the Roman Empire, the small congregations met secretly in private houses or in the catacombs outside Rome. The earliest surviving churches were erected in Rome just before or soon after Constantine's Edict of 313, which permitted freedom of worship throughout the Empire. These are now known as 'basilican churches' or 'Christian basilicas', because their general form resembles that of the secular basilicas used in Rome, Pompeii, and elsewhere in the Roman world, as covered places of assembly for the transaction of legal and commercial business.

The early basilican church usually had an aisled nave, separated from its flanking aisles by a range of columns; round-headed windows in the wall above them to light the nave; an apse at the east end; and a narthex or vestibule at the west end. While this type of plan, often with added transepts forming a 'Latin cross' or cruciform plan, was adopted throughout most of Western Europe during the Romanesque period, the Byzantine or Orthodox Greek Church in Eastern Europe favoured a 'Greek cross' plan, with a central dome and four short arms of equal length, in contrast to the long nave and choir and the short transepts of the Roman Catholic West.

The chancel derives its name from Latin *cancelli*, the barriers provided in secular basilicas to protect the judge in the apse from the public in the nave. In early Christian basilicas there was a range of seats around the apse for the bishop (in the middle) and officiating clergy, who thus had their backs to the east and faced the congregation. As the elaboration of services increased, space was needed for a choir as well as for the clergy; and the 'chancel' or 'presbytery' was therefore lengthened, and divided from the congregation by a screen, at first low and often of marble; later, of Gothic traceried woodwork, allowing a view of the altar but maintaining a sharp distinction between the nave and the chancel.

The development of English church architecture Eventually, England discarded the Romanesque apse, and most English churches after about 1200 have a square east end. Pulpits and benches were seldom provided before the 17th century, while closed pews are an innovation of the 17th–18th centuries. Although the largest English churches were cruciform, few of the smaller ones were. They often consisted of a nave and chancel only, without porches, aisles, or transepts. As the local population increased, most churches were enlarged gradually. The usual procedure was to add one or two aisles, one or two porches, a west tower, and occasionally one or two transepts; also to lengthen

the chancel, possibly substituting a square east end for a Norman apse. Chantry chapels were frequently added at the expense of keenly religious parishioners or those who wished to make amends for their sins; and such chapels often filled up the angle between chancel and transept, so that the whole plan of the church was changed between Norman and Tudor times. Fixed fonts of stone or lead were usually installed in medieval churches; but organs were almost unknown, and were rare even in London in 1700.

Besides the normal types of church just described, a few circular churches were erected in Western European countries, including England, mainly by the Knights Templar, and based on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. A few 'hall churches' were also erected by the friars for preaching purposes. Such churches had no chancel or transepts.

The effects of the English Reformation The evolution of church architecture in England was completely interrupted by the Reformation, which occurred in 1534 when Henry VIII proclaimed himself head of the Church of England, which thenceforth was divorced from Rome. For the next century and a quarter, very little church-building took place, and much damage was done to the interior of churches. Thomas Cromwell, on behalf of the newly reformed Church of England, led the official 'Protestant' campaign to remove from all churches, and then destroy, objects that in the opinion of the ecclesiastical authorities were 'idolatrous'. The list included representations of God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the saints, the cross, and even religious texts and inscriptions, whether painted on glass or plaster, carved in stone or wood, or engraved on metal. This iconoclasm continued through the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I, but under Mary there was a brief Catholic reaction during which carvers worked to reinstate the destroyed images.

Archbishop William Laud, in the next century, took various steps to restore order in the churches; but his bigotry in other directions led to the final wave of iconoclasm during the Commonwealth. Oliver Cromwell's personal share in this is uncertain.

Wren's churches When church-building on a large scale was resumed by Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London in 1666, he introduced entirely fresh ideas into religious architecture, abandoning the 'Roman' type of ritual arrangement together with the Gothic style which had been used up to the Reformation. He accepted the Protestant outlook, and frankly planned his new London churches as preaching-houses, though enriching them with brilliant design and excellent craft. In many of those on cramped sites, he was constrained to install galleries (although he disliked them) in order to bring the congregation within range of the preacher's voice. The type of church designed by Wren between 1666 and about 1710 was imitated by other architects throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, though from around 1720 to about 1820 comparatively few churches were built.

Nonconformist churches in England Before the Toleration Act of 1689, hardly any Nonconformist 'meeting houses' had been erected, but during the next 11 years over 2,400 buildings were registered for worship by Congregationalists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, who had become very numerous since their beginnings under Elizabeth I. Most of these buildings, of which a few remain, were in Wren's style, although simpler owing to lack of funds. No new Roman Catholic churches were permitted until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.

19th and 20th centuries There was a great boom in church-building in 1818, when Parliament voted a million pounds for new Anglican churches, most of which were in the newly revived Gothic style. For another century, Gothic held the field for churches of all denominations, but in the 20th century more

original ideas of design appeared, in England as elsewhere.

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