The founder of Christianity was a Jewish man, Jesus, called the Christ (a term derived from the Greek word for Messiah). Jesus was born in the first decade B.C.E. in Bethlehem. He grew up in Nazareth, and died in approximately 29-30 C.E. after being arrested by Roman rulers and put to death by crucifixion, a common means of execution.

The birth of Jesus is recorded in two of the Gospels: Matthew and Luke. According to the Gospels, Jesus was born to a Jewish couple, Joseph and Mary, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus and before the death of Herod the Great (approximately 4 B.C.E.). According to biblical accounts, after Jesus's birth the governor of Palestine, attempted to kill him by ordering a massacre of all Hebrew children under the age of two. Jesus's family escaped by fleeing to Egypt until the threat had passed. The slaughtered children, called the Holy Innocents, are remembered on a special day in the Christian calendar.

Very little is known about Jesus's childhood. His public ministry began when he was an adult. His work was preceded by a prophet known as John the Baptist. In approximately 28 C.E., John began proclaiming a message concerning the coming of the kingdom of God. He exhorted people to turn back to God and undergo a ritual of baptism, signifying repentance. According to Christian tradition, Jesus underwent baptism by John and afterward endured a time of temptation and testing in the wilderness. Shortly after these events John the Baptist was arrested, and Jesus himself began to carry the message proclaiming God's coming kingdom.

The precise duration of Jesus's ministry is unknown, but many estimates suggest that his public work lasted between one and three years. During his time, Jesus was a wandering teacher in the Palestine area. He taught in parables and spoke out against some practices of the Jewish authorities. Several different kinds of miraculous events were attributed to him including command over nature, physical healing, and the casting out of demons. Many people followed him, but twelve specially selected disciples were closest to him. These twelve were called apostles.

Jesus's earthly life ended when he was executed by Roman officials. The events surrounding Jesus's death occurred during the time of the Jewish celebration of Passover. The last meal he shared with his disciples was a Passover meal. The celebration and remembrance of this meal, in which Jesus identified his body and blood with the bread and wine, forms a focal point for most Christian worship.

According to Christian teaching, after Jesus's execution and death, his dead body was placed in a tomb. Three days later, or more precisely on the third day (Romans counted days inclusively), he rose from the dead. Following his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples during a 40-day period after which he ascended into heaven.

According to the book of Acts, after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Shavuot (also called the Feast of Weeks because it occurred seven weeks after Passover). Among Greek-speaking Jews the feast was called Pentecost because it fell 50 days
after Passover. While they were gathered together, the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many Christian denominations view the events at Pentecost as the birth of the Christian Church.

Following the giving of the Spirit, Jesus's disciples, who had been disheartened after his death, were revitalized. They began to proclaim Jesus's resurrection and to boldly preach his message despite being persecuted and even martyred.

Early practices of the first century Christians included fellowship, prayers, and the sharing of bread and wine. These three basic elements have remained a central part of practicing the Christian faith.

The first Christians were Jews who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah. They continued to follow the precepts of Judaism, read Jewish scriptures, follow Jewish laws, and meet at Jewish synagogues. In addition, however, they also met together to share bread and wine and celebrate Jesus's resurrection. These additional meetings were held on Sunday, the first day of the week, to coincide with the day of the resurrection.

One prominent Jew who converted to Christianity following the death of Jesus was the apostle Paul. According to Christian teaching, Paul (previously known as Saul of Tarsus) originally persecuted believers. He was confronted by a vision of Jesus in which he was blinded. Three days later he was healed and given instruction in the Christian faith. Following a period of discipleship, Paul was sent out as a missionary, and under his ministry churches were founded in Asia Minor and Greece. One of the main themes in Paul's teachings was that a person did not have to become a Jew to be a Christian.

The Christian movement initially spread in urban centers throughout the Roman empire. It was introduced to areas outside the region of Palestine as Jews moved to avoid oppression. Jewish synagogues were often the first focal points of missionary efforts. Missionary activities were also made among non-Jewish people (called Gentiles). As a result the Christian community began to grow, first as a sect within Judaism and then as a separate religion.

Under Roman law, Jews held an exemption from the requirement of worshiping the Roman Emperor, but Christians, as followers of a new religion, did not enjoy this privilege. Because they refused to worship the Roman Emperor or recognize his divinity, they faced persecution. The apostles Peter and Paul were executed under orders from Emperor Nero between 54 and 68 C.E.

In 70 C.E. the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. After the temple's destruction, Judaism became more focused on Rabbinic traditions and Christianity continued to evolve as an increasingly independent religion.

By the end of the first century, many Christian groups had grown from small gatherings to large assemblies. New forms of leadership structures emerged to give guidance to new converts and serve the needs of the rapidly expanding community. These positions included teachers, deacons, and bishops.

The persecution of Christians continued during the second century C.E. and intensified during the third as the Roman Empire faced ever-growing threats from invaders. Worship of traditional Roman gods was mandated and strictly enforced by Roman Emperors Decius (in the mid-third century C.E.), Diocletian (during the late third century C.E.), and Galerius (in the early forth century C.E.). Christians who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods were imprisoned and often executed.

Many who suffered martyrdom are remembered on saint days in the calendars of several orthodox,

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catholic, and protestant sects. The basis of saint day remembrances is found in ancient Roman tradition. On the anniversary of a death, families would share a ritual meal at the grave site of an ancestor. This practice was adopted by Christians who began observing a ritual meal on the death anniversary of ancestors in the faith, especially martyrs. As a result, most Christian saint days are associated with the death of the saint. There are three important exceptions. John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus are honored on their nativities (birthdays).

Despite persecution, new converts continued to join the Christian ranks. By the end of the third century C.E., four cities had become important centers of Christianity: Rome, Antioch (in Syria), Alexandria (in Egypt), and Jerusalem. Bishops of these cities were charged with the responsibility of caring for the needs of the churches in the surrounding areas.

As the Roman Empire continued to decline, economic and social conditions deteriorated. Churches became more firmly established and provided necessary support to the poor, widows, orphans, and the sick. Some historians theorize that the attraction of social stability contributed to the spread of Christianity during an unstable time in history.

Following the death of the Roman Emperor Galerius in 311 C.E. a new Emperor, Constantine, came to power. Constantine won a decisive military victory and attributed his success in battle to a god he called the “Unconquerable Son.” Christian apologists convinced Constantine that the god responsible for his victory was the Christian God.

Although Constantine was not baptized until the end of his life, he became an advocate for Christianity. His Edict of Milan, issued in 313 C.E., ended the age of persecution by mandating tolerance of Christianity. As a consequence of Constantine's advocacy, Christianity became the predominant religion of those in political power.

Constantine also presided over the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. The council was a meeting of Christian leaders who defined Christianity and attempted to separate it from heresies. The Council of Nicaea produced a creed, known as the Nicene Creed, which is recognized by all major branches of Christianity as a foundational statement of doctrine.

Under continued pressure from invaders, Constantine moved the political capital of the empire from Rome to Byzantium (which was later renamed Constantinople). The church in each of these two major cities was presided over by a bishop. Because the political seat had been moved to Byzantium, the bishop in Rome (called the pope) became more powerful in both church and secular affairs. This shift aided the process by which the Papacy amassed its vast power.

The move ultimately led to the creation of a geographic division between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity. The western branch of Christianity focused its efforts on attracting new converts in northern Europe and sought to establish political alliances to aid in guarding security. The first Frankish lord, Clovis, converted to Christianity in the fifth century. (The Franks ruled over an area currently occupied by Germany, France, and Italy.) A later Frankish ruler, Charlemagne was made Emperor in 800 C.E. by the Roman Pope Leo III.

The Eastern practice of combining ecclesiastical and political power ultimately led to conflict. Nobles affiliated with the church in Rome had authority over unaffiliated nobles and the influence wielded by religious leaders brought more power to the pope in Rome.

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Differences in the expression of Christianity also arose between the East and West. Western Christianity focused on the awesome holiness of God and developed precise rituals and a priestly class. In the east, practices focused on Christianity as a mystical experience and lay people retained more power. The mystical focus of the Eastern Church found its expression in a form of worship that used icons (images to be venerated as representations of the divine nature).

The Great Schism
As differences between Eastern and Western Christianity increased, tension also increased. Political power structures were challenged. Pope Leo IX (1048-54 C.E.) insisted that the Eastern people, who claimed to be representatives of Orthodox (correct) Christianity, shift their allegiance to him and the Catholic (Universal) Church. The Patriarch in Constantinople, Michael Cerularius (Greek spelling is Keroularios), refused. In 1054 C.E., the Pope and Patriarch mutually excommunicated each other, an event called The Great Schism.

During the next century, Muslims rose in power in the East and Western Churches sent military aid. The campaigns were called the Crusades. The Crusaders of 1204 C.E. attacked Constantinople itself, ending efforts aimed at achieving reconciliation between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity.

The Crusades, however, caused a renewed interest in religious expression in the West. As universities were developed and discussion of spiritual matters escalated, church officials became zealous in attacking heresy. The Inquisition was established and the power of the pope reached its zenith. Many important doctrines unique to Roman Catholicism arose during the thirteenth century. These included the concept of transubstantiation (a doctrine meaning that the bread and wine used during the Eucharist actually became the body and blood of Christ) and the veneration of the Virgin Mary (Jesus’s mother).

By the fourteenth century, however, authoritarian abuses and divisions within the Church hierarchy diminished the power of the pope. Between 1309 to 1377 the Roman popes moved from Rome to Avignon. At one time as many as three different men laid claim to the title Pope. The papacy was not reunified until the early fifteenth century.

The Reformation
Abuse of power and disunity within the Church helped plant the seeds for the coming reformation as some people sought a more personal, mystical experience. In the fourteenth century John Wycliffe, an English writer, advocated reforms including the translation of the Bible from Latin into the common languages of the people.

By the fifteenth century, the reunified Papacy had amassed tremendous political power. All priests in Europe received their authority from the Roman Pope. Only authorized priests were able to administer Church sacraments (which were baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, holy orders, matrimony, and extreme unction). A person cut off from sacraments could not be assured of salvation and life after death. If a national ruler disobeyed the pope, an entire country would be placed under papal ban meaning that none of its priests could administer the sacraments. An individual who denied the authority of the Church could be excommunicated and refused the sacraments. These types of pressures over people led to protests which culminated in the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther (1483-1545 C.E.), a German priest and professor at the University of Wittenberg, is often credited with beginning the Reformation. Luther opposed the Roman practice of selling indulgences.
He believed that people received salvation as a result of their faith. Luther denied the authority of the Pope and church tradition, believing instead that the Bible was the only source of true doctrine and that it alone served as a guide for proper Christian conduct. Luther also asserted that priests did not have the power to save or condemn people but that such power belonged exclusively to God and that each person was individually responsible to God.

Other protestant leaders followed and the movement swept through Europe. The main thrust of Protestantism was the belief that Christianity needed to return to its original, Biblical state. The protestant legacy, however, endowed the Church with an heritage of questioning authority and protesting abuses perpetrated by leaders. This willingness created conditions ripe for further splintering and the subsequent creation of progressively smaller and more numerous groups. As a result, by the late twentieth century there were more than 25,000 different Christian denominations.
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