

What Happened To the Church Established By Christ and His Apostles (1)?

By Victor Beshir

What **happened** to the church that was established by Christ and His apostles in the First Century? Many Christians do not know what happened to that church after the death of the Apostles of Christ.

Did it survive the cruelty of the persecutions of the Roman emperors?

What happened to the church before Martin Luther?

Did it vanish during the dark days of the Middle Ages or it is still around?

And if it still exists, did it keep the same faith and spirituality or did it lose them over the ages?

To answer these questions, and others, I invite you to join me in a wonderful journey back in time to the origins of Christianity, and then from there we will pass quickly through the centuries to discover our Christian roots and follow them to our present time.

First: What Happened to the Christian Church in The First five centuries of Christianity?

As all historians have stated, the Christian Church survived the Roman persecution and continued to exist afterwards. The church lived as one church with one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:5), common dogmas, and very closed rituals throughout the whole world for about five centuries. There were no denominations or sects in the Christian church. Churches at that time were named after a few big cities in the world not because of differences in faith, but merely to make administration of the churches achievable.

The sad division between the churches took place in year 451 AD in the Chalcedon Council. In this council, bishops representing churches from all over the world assembled to discuss matters related to the person of Christ. At the end of the meeting, a sharp division occurred among these churches. The Oriental Orthodox Churches decided on continuing to follow the same faith as it was delivered from Christ and His disciples, and these churches continue to do so until today. These

churches are the Coptic Orthodox Church (Egypt), the Syrian Orthodox Church (Syria), the Indian Orthodox Church (India), The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Ethiopia), and The Armenian Church (Armenia). [The other churches decided to be in the other camp](#), let us refer to them here as the Western Churches.

The Western Churches split again in 1054 AD into the 'Roman Catholic Church' and 'Eastern Orthodox Churches' because of many heresies that crept into the Roman Catholic Church. One heresy says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, which contradicts what Christ says that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father' (John 15:26). Although for some readers this might not mean a lot, however, the church shouldn't change the divine faith. The problem is once a church starts giving its members the permission to change the faith, changes would happen again and over. Then, another heresy called for the universal Roman papal supremacy over the whole world started, followed by other deviations from the original Christian teaching.

The group of the Eastern Orthodox Churches decided at that time to detach itself from the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches today include nineteen churches, among them: The Greek Orthodox Church, The Russian Orthodox Church, and The Romanian Orthodox Church.

After this schism, [the Roman Catholic Church in Europe adopted other heresies and suffered from corruptions](#). The Roman Catholic Church appeared to forget their Christian mission and started to have political ambitions. The church wanted authority over the state in Europe. [All these changes happened while the Oriental Orthodox Churches were isolated from all these events and kept preserving the faith and dogma as were delivered from the Apostles of our Lord and recorded by the early fathers of the church.](#)

Second: Why Did The Reformation Take Place?

In the few centuries preceding the Reformation, the historians said that [the Roman Church in Europe suffered a severe deviation from the truth in both the ecclesiastical life and in the dogma](#). Corruption crept into the church and the clergy forgot their pastoral responsibilities. Instead, they looked after their own personal pleasures.

[Starting from the eleventh century, the history of the Church of Rome is full of persecution, inquisitions, and heresies. Burning heretics at the stake and using torture were common methods to deal with the](#)

heretics. Here, the word heresy at that time was used to refer to a false teaching related to the principle of Christian faith or it could refer to an act the church did not favor, as in the case of [William Tyndale](#), who was strangled and burned in 1536 because he translated the New Testament into English. Moreover, the word heresy was also used to refer to an opinion of matters related more to science or philosophy than to Christianity, as in the case of [Galileo Galilei \(1564-1642\)](#), who was tried by the Inquisition of Rome and forced to spend the last eight years of his life under house arrest because of his scientific evidences that proved the earth revolves around the sun.¹

Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries revived the value of the classical Greek and Roman writings, which included, among others, the Bible, and **the writings of the early Fathers of the Church.** Intellectual people at that time started reading the Bible and comparing what they read in the Bible and in the writings of Fathers of the Church to the living reality of the Roman Catholic Church and concluded that **'Catholicism differed from the church of the New Testament in doctrine, morals, and administration.'**² Some even called for **'reform in head and member.'**

One example that shows how corrupted the Roman Catholic Church was at that time is the story of [Jan Hus](#), a disciple of John Wyclif. **He considered leaving the Roman Catholic Church as an act of honoring Christ and the gospel. Yes, to that extent some of the educated people started refusing the church and its corruption.** The Intellectual people refused the moral corruption in the life of the clergy and the heresies of the church, such as the indulgences and the purgatory.

Therefore, as soon as [Martin Luther \(1483-1546 AD\)](#) announced **his disputation on indulgences and nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Roman Church in Wittenberg,** the news spread like wildfire throughout Europe. Later on, this wildfire **led to separation from Catholicism into many branches over the years of what is known today as Protestantism.**

People in the Middle Ages in Europe had a very real dread of the period of punishment in purgatory and hell, which were graphically portrayed in the church. Based on the teachings of the indulgence of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church controlled both destinations. Unfortunately, **facing all the fears of both, the Church offered selling indulgences, instead of offering Christ as the Savior. These indulgences were hard to pay by the poor and a source of distress for**

the rich. As a result, when Reformation started, people hurried to join it to get rid of the nightmare of both the purgatory and hell.

Salvation and grace were almost forgotten topics in the Roman Catholic Church at that time. Of course, in the middle of the corruption there were very faithful clergies and laymen who led good Christian lives. But, as usual, most human beings forget the good and remember the bad, even inflate the bad to make it look worse than the reality.

In reaction to the church that forgot its own mission and tried to control the life and destination of everyone using all methods including physical death, the reformation movement completely separated itself from the church and denied most of what belonged to the church. People had had it with the Roman Catholic Church and they were eager to get rid of all that belonged to it. Therefore, they put all their efforts, derived by psychological and social impulses, to refute all what the Roman Catholic Church called for and believed in, especially those things that were done by the clergy. Therefore, they refused priesthood because of the corruption of the clergy and subsequently denied all work that required a priest. Since the priests administered all the mysteries of the church (sacraments,) Protestant denominations refused most, if not all, of the sacraments.

So, Protestants refused the sacraments, the intercession of saints, many rituals, and other parts of the tradition that were delivered from Christ and His apostles, not because of biblical, traditional, or historical reasons, but rather because of inner-psychological, historical, and social reasons. Then, later on they tried to rationalize them by finding biblical verses that supported their beliefs.

In a severe reaction to the forgotten grace of God in the Roman Catholic Church teachings and its full concentration on human work, the Protestants based all their teachings on salvation, grace, and complete refusal of human work.

While these corruptions and conflicts happened in Europe, the Christian Oriental Churches in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East continued to preserve the original teachings and spirituality of the early church. They had no relationship with what happened to the Roman Catholic Church during this period. Moreover, they condemned the heresies of the Roman Catholic Church and its deviations from the original teachings of the early church. These churches, especially the Coptic Orthodox Church, felt that they should act as the guardians of

the faith. Therefore, we find that the Coptic Orthodox Church takes pride in its adherence to the apostolic teachings as were received directly from Christ and handed down over the centuries until it reached us today, without changes or additions. The Coptic Orthodox Church believes that 'the faith was once for all delivered by the saints' (Jude 1: 2,3), and the Lord along with His apostles asked the church to observe, reserve, and guard that faith.[1]