

## Session Two: The Ni-Scene

### Introduction

**Acts 17:6–7** (@ Thessalonica) And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “*These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.*”

*How did Christianity come to have such influence in the Roman Empire at the time of Nicaea?*

**Rodney Stark**, *The Rise of Christianity*, New York: HarperOne, 1996.

Acts 1:14-15    120 Christians  
Acts 4:4        5,000 Christians  
Acts 21:20     “many thousands of Jews” in Jerusalem (of 10-20,000 total pop.)

**Christian Growth Projected at 40 Percent per Decade<sup>7</sup>** (3.42% per year)

Year	Number of Christians	Percent of Population
40	1,000	0.0017
50	1,400	0.0023
100	7,530	0.0126 (~7,000 in Rome, out of 700,000, or 1%)
150	40,496	0.07
200	217,795	0.36
250	1,171,356	1.9
300	6,299,832	10.5
350	33,882,008	56.5

Christian growth was concentrated especially in cities

Thus, “countryman” (*paganus* in Latin) became synonymous with unbelievers (pagans)

There was also a mix of classes, and any assertion of poor/oppressed *only* is unproven

They were persecuted, not ruthlessly destroyed, which fits with having upper class believers

The Jewish diaspora was the primarily category of Christian converts, and Jewish Christians remained prominent until well into the 5<sup>th</sup> century

Women were disproportionately represented in Christianity, and femininity was prized and celebrated (forbade abortion and infanticide; condemned adultery, incest, polygamy, and divorce; cared for and protected widows)<sup>8</sup>. High status women were especially prevalent.

Christian fertility rates were much higher than pagans

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<sup>7</sup> Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Stark, 95ff.

## First - Third Centuries Notes

- AD 62 James, Jesus' brother, martyred
- 64 Temple completed
- 66 Great Jewish Revolt begins in Caesarea—results in 1,000,000 Jewish deaths
- 70 Emperor Vespasian sacks Jerusalem, burning and destroying the temple  
Christian diaspora
- 165 Epidemic (smallpox?) during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, 25-33% of total pop. dies
- 251 Another epidemic (measles?), equally devastating to 165  
Christian care shone through—higher survival rate, and witness  
Christians answers were far more satisfying—sin and grace, God over all  
Christianity spread through ordinary piety more than 'pure' evangelism

## **Two Ancient Enemies**

### *The Pantheon*

Rome had many gods. They were fine with adding local religions from conquered lands, so long as you added Emperor worship to your practice.

Two classes: *licitas* vs. *illicitas*

Jews were the exception, with their radical monotheism

Christians were protected as a subset of Judaism . . . until they weren't

Admired for: care for the poor and the dead, treatment of women and slaves, sexual virtue, martyrdom (truth worth dying for; Tertullian of Carthage)

Attacked for: atheism, cannibalism, sexual license (*agape* feast), incest, 'aloofness'

An inevitable conflict: Jesus is Lord vs. Caesar is lord

Not primarily political, but profound political application

Cf. Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, Charlotte, NC: Good Book Company, 2022.

### *Gnosticism*

Many varieties, with famous teachers, esp. Marcion and Valentius

Vegetarian (no meat) and Abstinant (body and sex were bad)

NT Proto-gnosticism—Col 2 and 1 John (arose as a movement ~ AD 130)

Dualism—good vs evil; **matter = bad; spirit = good**

Emanations—each less powerful, until you arrive at the creator

The Demiurge—"architect," God of the OT

Salvation—the "true way," came through following Gnostic teachings

Escape from the body, and from space/time

Problem ≠ sin, but = ignorance (of our true spiritual condition)

We must uncover the spark of the divine within us

The voyage after death through the hostile, demonic planets/stars to heaven

Applied to Christ, therefore, he must not be a man

He was the greatest of the spiritual beings, the *aeons*

Docetism—(*dokeo*, to seem) only appeared to be a man

Adoptionism—descended upon the man, from baptism to arrest, then returned

Timeless appeal: secret, superior knowledge (*gnosis*)

cf. *The Da Vinci Code*

Passed down from Jesus to Apostles, then to Gnostic gurus, then to their disciples

The elite know these things, setting themselves apart from the common man

The elite 'see through' the lies that average people believe

The elite have the path to immortality

Christianity is superior, and it is revealed truth and publicly-accessible

Key Difference: is it a better understanding of revealed truth, or a vanity-appealing secret path?

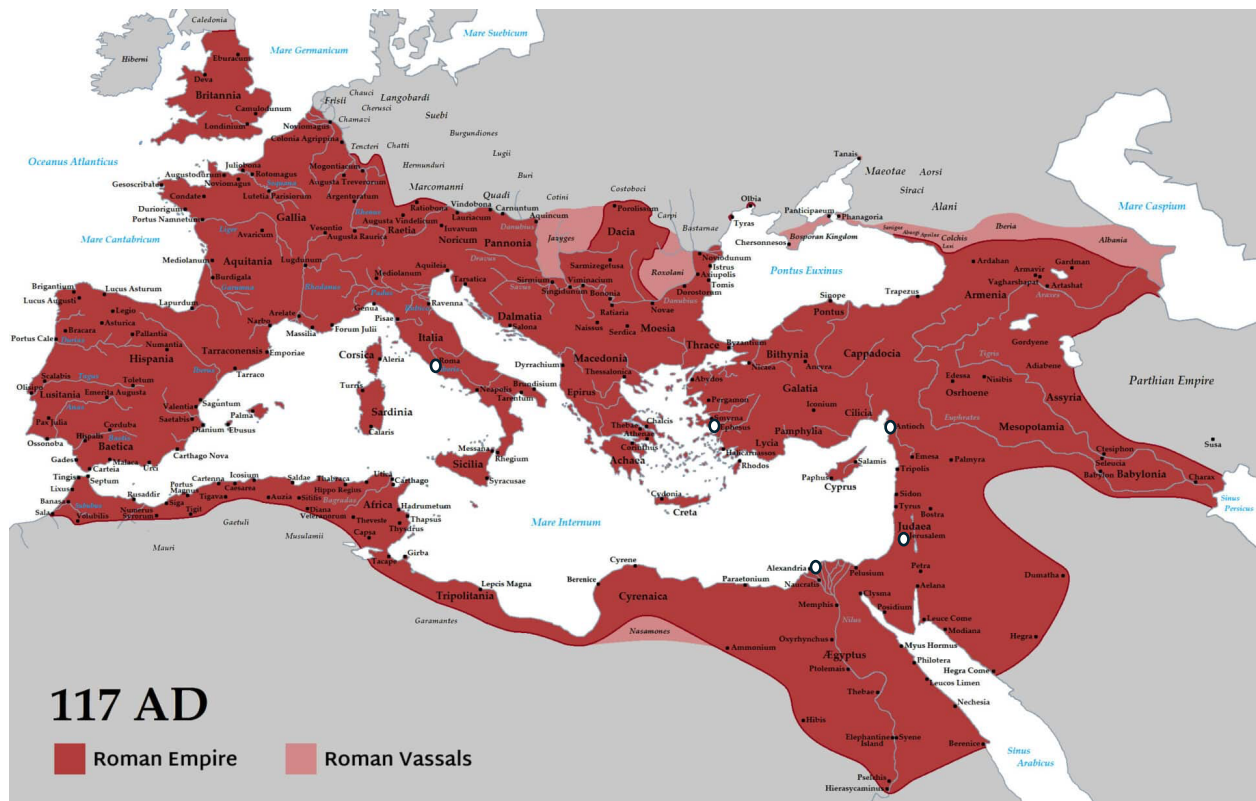
Are we in continuity with what Christians have always believed, or are we novel?

Reformation—*ad fontes*, calling the church to fidelity and humility

Quoted extensively from Augustine and other early church fathers

Critiqued Rome for novelty and innovation

## Rome



### Estimated World Population<sup>9</sup>

AD 1	170,000,000	(Roman Empire ~ 60,000,000 <sup>10</sup> )
300	200,000,000	
325		Council of Nicaea
381		Council of Chalcedon
1000	255,000,000	
1500	430,000,000	
1800	1,000,000,000	
1900	1,700,000,000	
2000	6,000,000,000	
2026	8,200,000,000	
2060	10,600,000,000	estimated peak population, then declining

USA Current Population: ~ 345,000,000<sup>11</sup>

Rome provided many keys for the spread of Christianity:

- Security and safety (*Pax Romana*)
- Sophisticated road system for travel
- Shared culture to some extent
- Shared language (along with Greek through Alexander the Great)

### **Persecution**

Most persecution was not from Emperors, but from regional governors. But there were some Empire-wide efforts to attack Christianity:

Decius (249-251)

- Persecution began in 250
- Christians had weakened the Empire
- Commanded all citizens to sacrifice to the traditional Roman gods
  - Obey—received certificate (*libelli*) as evidence
  - Disobey—death
    - Faithful Christians became confessors → saints and special merit
    - Those who complied were the fallen, lapsed (*lapsi*)
    - Could the lapsed be readmitted?
    - Yes—with graded systems of restoration → penance

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<sup>9</sup> Estimates differ significantly. These numbers are from the American Museum of Natural History, <https://www.amnh.org/explore/videos/humans/human-population-timeline>. For an alternative, see: [https://gropedia.com/page/World\\_population\\_estimates\\_in\\_1\\_AD](https://gropedia.com/page/World_population_estimates_in_1_AD).

<sup>10</sup> Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>

Diocletian (284-305)

Restored Roman greatness

Divided his Empire under 2 Augusti and 2 Caesars (young rivals)

To prevent assassinations

Fiercely persecuted Christians his final 2 years

Purged his army of Christians, destroyed churches, burned Scriptures, prohibited Christian worship. Bishops were tortured and martyred. Many ordinary Christians were as well.

In 305, he abdicated as planned, and forced Maximian to as well.

Galerius (East) and Constantine (West) ascended to Augusti

Constantine (**d. AD 337**)

**AD 312** Milvian Bridge—battle for control of Rome

Vision of the Cross or the Chi-Rho

*ἐν τούτῳ νίκα* (Greek)

*in hoc signo vinces* (Latin)

**AD 313** Edict of Milan—granted legal status and toleration to Christianity

**Isaiah 49:23** Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers.

With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet.

Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."

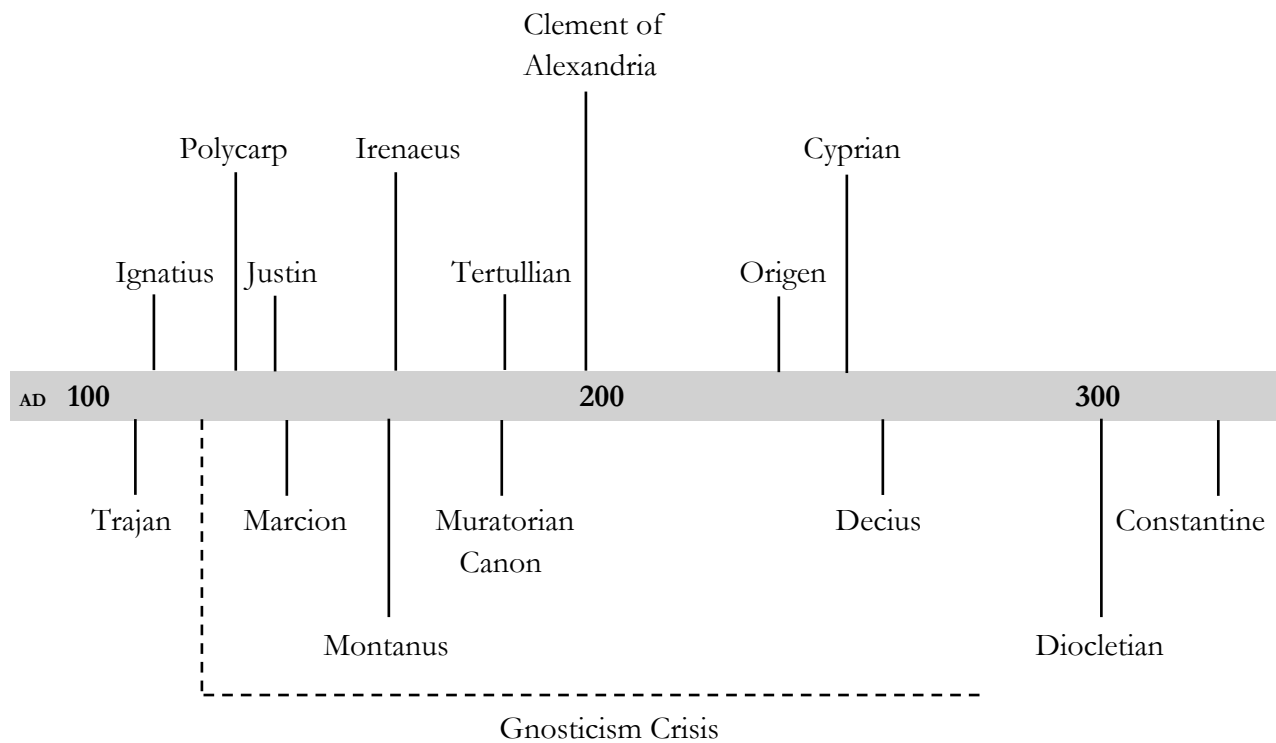
**AD 361-63** Julian the Apostate

Persecuted Christians

**AD 379-395** Theodosius I

**AD 380** Edict of Thessalonica—made Christianity the official religion of the Empire

## The Age of Catholic Christianity<sup>12</sup>

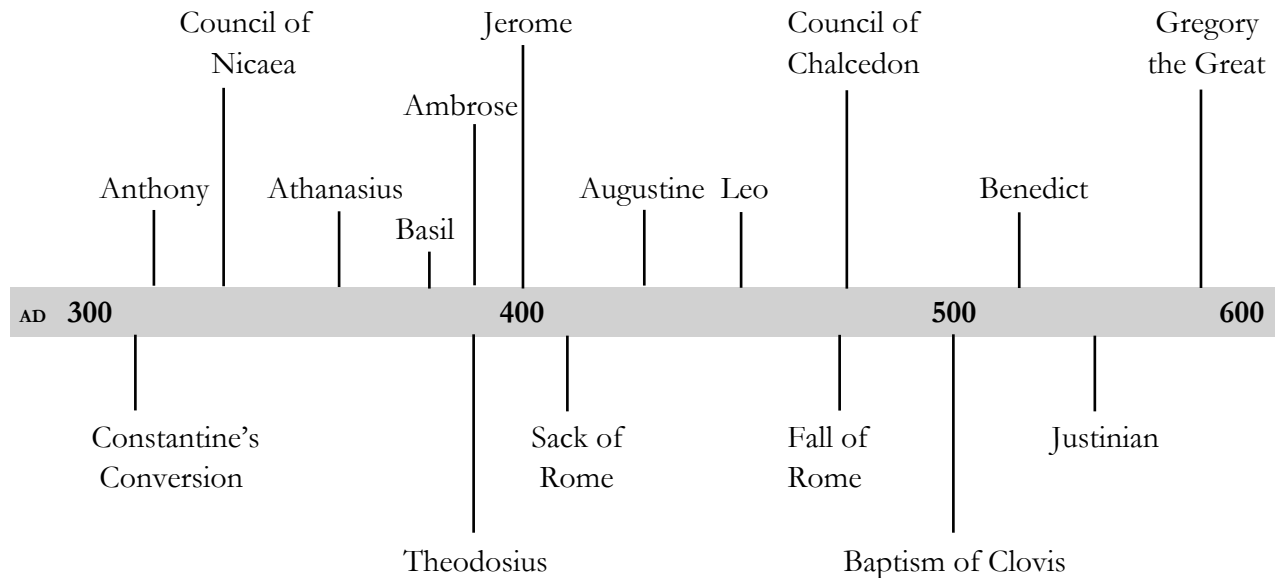


### *Other Notable Persons and Events*

249-51	Decian persecution
284-305	Diocletian Persecution
293-373	Athanasius
312	Battle of Milvian Bridge
313	Edict of Milan
324-37	Reign of Constantine
330	Establishment of Constantinople

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 5th ed, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 34.

## The Age of the Christian Roman Empire<sup>13</sup>



### *Other Notable Persons and Events*

x-y	Reign of Julian the Apostate
354-430	Augustine
380	Establishment of Christianity in Roman Empire
431	Council of Ephesus
451	Council of Chalcedon

### Church Councils

**Acts 15:1–35** But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

<sup>13</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 116.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

“After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
and I will restore it,  
that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,  
says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.”

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.