



Second Edition

# CHURCH HISTORY

VOLUME ONE

**From Christ to the Pre-Reformation**

*The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural,  
Intellectual, and Political Context*



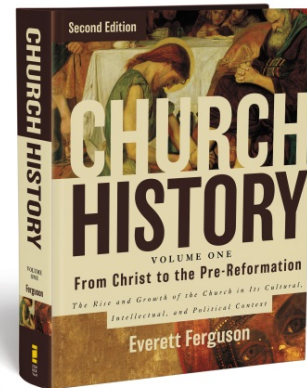
Everett Ferguson

# [Church History, Volume 1: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation \(2nd edition\)](#)

By Everett Ferguson

**The Christian church spread and developed, not in a vacuum, but in a setting of times, cultures, and events that both influenced and were influenced by the church.**

In *Church History*, Everett Ferguson explores the development of the church from the days of Jesus to the years prior to the Reformation. Filled with maps, charts, and illustrations, it offers overviews of the Roman, Greek, and Jewish worlds; insights into the church's relationship to the Roman Empire, with glimpses into pagan attitudes toward Christians; the place of art and architecture, literature and philosophy, both sacred and secular; and much more, spanning the time from the first through the thirteenth centuries.



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## The Setting for the Story's Beginning

Three concentric circles of influence circumscribed the world in which early Christianity began. From the outside moving in, these influences were the Roman, the Greek, and the Jewish. The pattern of growth in the early church was the reverse, from the Jewish, to the Greek, to the Roman worlds. Unlike the mathematical image, however, these worlds were not sharply differentiated from each other, and the boundaries were quite porous.

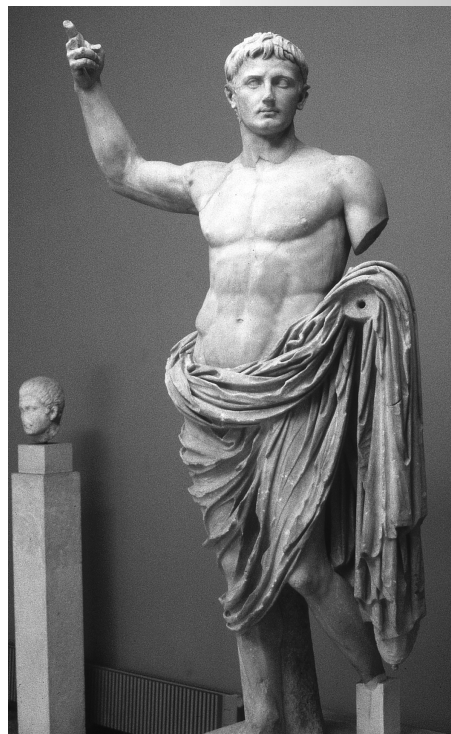
Nevertheless, the classification of influences is helpful in grasping the environment in which the early church began. Moreover, these influences remained formative for much of subsequent Christian history.

### I. THE ROMAN WORLD

Luke sets the story of Jesus and the early church firmly within Roman history, noting Jesus' birth under the emperor Augustus, his ministry under Tiberius, and mentioning the Roman governors and other officials with whom Jesus and later Paul had encounters (Luke 2:1–2; 3:1; Acts 13:7; 18:12; 24:27). Rome provided the larger governmental, military, and legal context of early Christianity.

At the birth of Jesus, Rome had recently completed the transition from the Republic to the imperial Principate under Augustus (27 BC–AD 14). Not long before that, the Roman general Pompey had conquered Palestine in 63 BC, and thereafter Rome ruled the Jewish homeland, alternating various administrative arrangements through which it exercised its will: legates based in Syria; client kings like Herod the Great, during whose rule Jesus was born; and governors like Pontius Pilate, under whom Jesus was crucified.

“When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law” (Galatians 4:4).



Emperor Augustus, portrayed as a god (Archaeological Museum, Thessalonica, Greece).

**CHURCH HISTORY***Chapter 1*

Emperor Tiberius,  
from Paestum  
(Archaeological  
Museum, Madrid).

The organization of the empire seems to have provided a pattern for the eventual development of the church's hierarchy, and procedures in the senate at Rome and at city councils influenced the conduct of church synods.

The army—the legions made up of Roman citizens and the auxiliaries composed of native peoples—was a constant presence on the frontiers and in provinces where disturbances were frequent. Among the peacetime duties of soldiers were the building of roads and securing safety of travel; Christian travelers, whether for business or religious purposes, used these roads and carried the Christian message with them.

Roman law is one of Rome's enduring legacies to the Western world. When charges were brought against Christians, Roman magistrates and Roman law decided their cases. The imperial cult (the giving of divine honors to the emperor and his family), often allied with the local civic cults, provided an overarching religious cement to political unity and loyalty. The imperial court ceremonies, themselves borrowed from earlier eastern monarchs, continued under later Christian emperors.

Latin not only was the official language of government, but also became the common language in the western provinces; from the second century and after, Christianity in those regions expressed its message in Latin.

## **II. THE GREEK WORLD**

Greek influences were predominant in language, education, literature, and philosophy at the beginning of Christianity. For the early disciples, the Greek language and culture were more significant than the Latin, and they remained so for the eastern Mediterranean area under the Byzantine empire (even though Latin remained its official language of government for centuries). Since the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, the Greek language, coinage, culture, philosophy, and religion had permeated the regions from Greece around the eastern coast of the Mediterranean to Libya. Education was based on Homer and the Greek classics.

The Greek cultural influences were felt in Rome and regions to the west, even among those who did not speak Greek. Greek was the language of the church in Rome, it seems, until the middle of the third century. Christian writers employed the Greek language exclusively,

it appears, until the late second century, when some works in Latin and Syriac are known. Greek (and then Latin) rhetoric provided the standards for how letters were written, speeches constructed, and arguments conducted.

The great philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle had been largely replaced in the Hellenistic age by philosophies more directed to practical and moral interests, principally Stoicism and Epicureanism, but interest in Aristotle and especially Plato revived in the early Christian centuries. As Christian theology developed from the affirmations of the gospel and the early moral and doctrinal instruction, Greek philosophy provided the vocabulary, ethical assumptions, thought world, and intellectual options with which Christian thinkers worked.

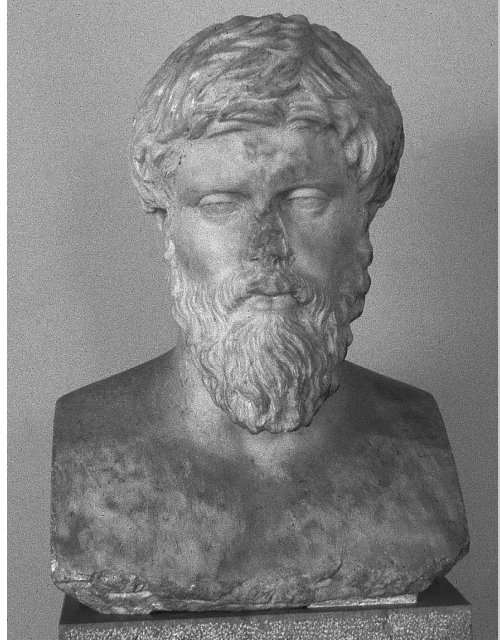
The traditional civic cults continued to be important centers of local pride, and traditional religious attitudes and practices continued to be nourished by the educational curriculum that centered on Homer. Initiations into mystery religions, visits to oracles and healing shrines, acceptance of fate, belief in astrology, and the practice of magic gained new strength during the first two centuries of the Christian era.

The social lives of people were guided by a combination of Roman legal and Greek societal norms. Thus in matters as varied as customs at dinner parties, at weddings, and at funerals, Christians lived within the framework of existing ways of doing things. Laws of marriage and of inheritance and established distinctions of social classes provided the framework for family life and social relations.

Pre-existing mentalities shaped religious attitudes. Funerary customs continued to be observed by Christians, although now within a new frame of reference. Many of the features of Greco-Roman religion became incorporated into Christianity as the gospel spread into the pagan population.

### **III. THE JEWISH WORLD**

Jesus was born of Jewish parents, “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1), and all his first disciples were Jewish. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth; most of his ministry was in Galilee, and he was crucified in Jerusalem—all places in modern Israel and the adjoining Palestinian territories.



Unidentified Greek philosopher of the second century AD (Delphi Museum, Greece).

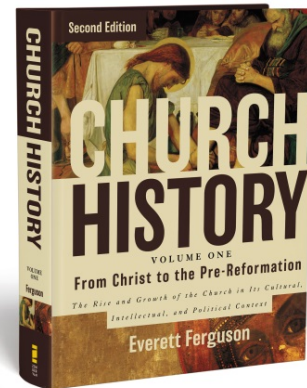


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