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Top Ten Events in Christian History
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Approaching the year 2000, it is useful to recall that our calendar was designed to divide the years following the birth of Jesus from those that preceded it. Looking back over the last two millennia since the birth of Jesus, here are 10 events that define the course of Christian history.

1.) The life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Although biblical scholars emphasize that very little direct historical evidence exists about the life of Jesus, there is little doubt that he lived as a Jew and died by crucifixion. Belief in his resurrection from the dead, and in his identity as the messianic Christ, led to Christianity's development of as a major world religion. These beliefs also led to a division with 1st-century Judaism and to the long history of antisemitism in western culture.

2.) The canonization of the New Testament. Although not fixed until the 4th century, most of the 27 books of the New Testament were accepted as definitive of Christianity during the 2nd century. The canonization process bestowed special authority on Paul and excluded gnostic gospels, some of which predated canonized texts, that viewed Christ as the hidden, spiritual essence within each believer.

3.) Constantine's conversion. The emperor's acceptance of Christianity in 321 paved the way for Christianity to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. The establishment of Christianity as a state religion contributed an important element of unity to medieval European culture and lent political authority to the Roman Catholic Church.

4.) The City of God. Written in the early 5th century by Augustine of Hippo, this multi-volume text played an influential role in stabilizing Christian thought. Defining access to the Kingdom of God in terms of the sacraments of the Church, through which believers participated directly in the resurrection and eternal presence of Christ, Augustine emphasized the authority of the Church as the sole mediator of salvation.

5.) The schism of 1054. When the pope of the Roman Church and the patriarch of Constantinople mutually excommunicated each other after centuries of controversy, western, Latin-speaking Christianity was officially separated from eastern, Greek Orthodoxy. This separation was healed 900 years later in 1965, when Pope Paul VI

and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagorus I officially recognized each other.

6.) The rise of Islam and its impact on Christianity. Founded in the 7th century by Mohammed, Islam claimed the Qur'an as God's final revelation, superseding Christian revelation. Islamic art and philosophy flourished for centuries during the Middle Ages and fed into western culture during the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, even as Islamic civilization was attacked during the Crusades by Christian armies seeking to conquer Jerusalem and destroy Islam.

7.) The Protestant Reformation. Protesting what they viewed as priestly corruptions within the Roman Catholic Church, 16th-century reformers focused on the believer's relationship to God. Coinciding with the development of capitalism, nationalism and the printing press, the Reformation reignited millennial expectations of the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

8.) Colonization of the New World. Among Anglo Protestants especially, millennial expectations of building a holy commonwealth in America contributed to the idealism of the American Revolution and to belief in America's exceptionalism as a nation chosen by God for historical greatness.

9.) The Protestant missionary movement. During the 19th century, Protestant missionaries sponsored the development of Christianity in every corner of the globe. As both an accompaniment and challenge to western colonization, the missionary movement facilitated democratic movements in the non-western world well as economic dependence on the west.

10.) The second Vatican Council. In 1960, Pope John XXIII convened meetings of the Roman Catholic hierarchy that opened the doors of the Church to the modern world. Although disputes continue about its true meaning and implications, the Council turned the Church toward more strategic efforts to help the poor and toward leadership in ecumenical dialogues with Hindus and Buddhists as well as Jews and Protestants.