

THE
Church History
HANDBOOK

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The Church History Handbook
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Typesetting and design by Faceout Studio, Sisters, Oregon.

<i>Style</i>	<i>ISBN</i>
Clay Cloth-over-Board	979-8-3845-0850-2
Mocha Cloth-over-Board	979-8-3845-1809-9

DEWEY: 220
SUBHD: CHURCH HISTORY—HANDBOOKS, MANUALS, ETC. \ DOCTRINAL THEOLOGY

Printed in China
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 — 30 29 28 27 26 25 24
AP

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Letter from the Publisher

The Bible has a lot to say about beauty and how beauty might serve as a means leading to the praise and worship of God. In fact, just looking at the Old Testament narratives involving the construction of the tabernacle and the temple, we come to realize that there is a lot of specificity and detail surrounding their craftsmanship. The detail of these designs and the level of craftsmanship involved were not merely meant to create a place that instructs God’s people—those designs and the beautiful creations that resulted were also meant to point the congregation to God’s glory. When the Lord told Moses, “Make holy garments for your brother Aaron,” he said to make these “for glory and beauty” (Exod 28:2). In other words, these craftsmen and artisans of the Old Testament were instructed to complete their tasks for the combined effect of both glory and beauty.

Unfortunately, too often the notion of beauty is overlooked in Christian culture. However, it is good to be reminded that the medium should always be commensurate with the message. Since Christians have the most beautiful message, the one found in the pages of Scripture, it is incumbent upon us to create beautiful mediums that relay that message in hopes that they also point others to the glory of God.

The *Church History Handbook* before you seeks to do just that in a creative and informative way. Intended to be used as a stand-alone reference work and/or companion to other church history books, the *Church History Handbook* focuses on presenting important people, events, and ideas in a visually compelling way. Its presentation through intentional design and infographics helps deepen one’s understanding of the historical and theological development of the Christian Church. Features include the following:

- Historical Overviews of key periods, including key events, figures, and ideas
- Essential Christian doctrines for each period
- Maps
- Timelines
- Charts and tables
- Infographics about key figures and events
- Key quotes from voices of the Church

The *Church History Handbook* is intended to enhance your reading and understanding of the history of the Christian Church and ultimately point you to “God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

Andy McLean
Publisher

“On Whom the Ends of the Ages Have Come”: A Christian View of History

INTRODUCTION

Why is history important? Most people rarely pause to consider this. Perhaps without realizing it, some have been conditioned to esteem the study of history as legitimate for reasons they cannot identify. Maybe it's for the sake of preserving the human legacy for posterity. Maybe it's because of a sense of patriotism and heritage for a given country or culture. Or maybe it's mainly for the sake of meeting societal standards of what it means to be an educated and well-rounded individual. Many, however, will cite the famous George Santayana quote: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

While there is some validity to these reasons, we as Christians should approach the study of the past with an even more reverent mindset. If God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world, then he is also Lord of history, the one who declares “the end from the beginning and from long ago what is not yet done” and who says, “My plan will take place, and I will do all my will” (Isa 46:10). In short, history is coherent and meaningful because of God.

“EVERYTHING FOR HIS PURPOSE”: GOD-CENTERED CHRISTIAN REALISM

If God is sovereign over the natural order and over human affairs, as the Bible indicates, then history is nothing less than *his* story. (Despite the unavoidable hokeyness of the pun, it is memorable and, most importantly, true.) Because God

is the God of everything, he is the Lord of everything, not simply church history, but also world history. And though Christians should regard all of history as sacred and meaningful, we especially should appreciate *church* history, for it is the study of how God has worked through his new-covenant people since the days of Jesus's apostles and earliest disciples to bless and restore the world.

In studying church history, we cannot but help ourselves see what God has done to sustain the bride of Christ and preserve her in grace and truth. Indeed, God will always be shown to be faithful, but we must also acknowledge that his Son's bride has not always been wholeheartedly faithful. The study of church history is thus the study of sinners—albeit a body of redeemed sinners who have yet to be made perfect in Christ (1 John 3:2). So, as those who should be the least shocked when sinners behave sinfully, we must be willing to accept the church's history for all that it is, warts and all (a phrase whose origin itself intersects with church history).

Despite the church's flaws, faults, and *faux pas*, we can remain humbly committed to the truth of whatever took place in the past. There is always meaning in everything that happens—the good, the bad, and the ugly—according to a biblical worldview. “The LORD has prepared everything for his purpose—even the wicked for the day of disaster” (Prov 16:4; see also Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11). Everything doesn't just happen for a reason; it happens for God's reason.

“IN THESE LAST DAYS”: BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY AND CHURCH HISTORY

Not only does a Christian realism about human nature inform how we perceive the facts that the past presents us with, but a Christian theology of the future must also undergird our appreciation for this extended era we label church history. As the apostle Paul stated in the first century, the church consists of those “on whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). Relative to God’s plan to redeem and restore the world through Christ, we have been living within the climax of history ever since Jesus’s death, resurrection, and ascension. Hence, the New Testament (NT) came into existence to explain as much.

As a foundational and authoritative collection of supernaturally God-breathed writings alongside the Old Testament (OT), the NT is meant to govern the people of God during this extended era until the time when Jesus returns. In view of a biblical outlook on history, we can accordingly derive three definitive reasons to study church history from the NT that will frame the remainder of this treatise. (For more about the nature of the NT and the development of its canon, see the essay “Connecting and Completing the Story: The Origin and Canon of the New Testament” in *The New Testament Handbook*.)

First, we should study church history because the last days have been here since Jesus ascended to sit at the Father’s right hand. In the taxonomy of the biblical authors, history consists of two ages: “this age” and “the age to come” (see Mark 10:29–30; Luke 20:34–35; Gal 1:4; 1 Tim 4:8). This is why the author of Hebrews followed this categorization in seeing the incarnation and ascension of Jesus as the climactic moment in the history of God’s special revelation to his people:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the

universe through him. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Heb 1:1–3)

In this passage, we should observe not only the two modes in which God has spoken (e.g., “by the prophets” and “by his Son”) but also the division of history the passage presents. “These last days” refers to the period of history that coincides with Christ’s ascension. While this may seem long ago from our modern standpoint, “these last days” are quite recent according to a biblical timeframe and, in fact, continue today. In short, the church has been in the “end times” since the days of the apostles because of the centrality of Jesus’s first and second comings.

We live in what theologians observe to be the overlap of the ages, or better put, the “already-not yet.” God’s kingdom has arrived *already*, but it is *not yet* present in its fullest form. Jesus, for example, taught that on some level the kingdom had already arrived: “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20; see also Matt 21:31; Mark 1:15; Luke 17:21). However, he also acknowledged that the kingdom of God had a perfected form to come in teaching his disciples to pray “your kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10; see also 13:43; 26:29; Luke 13:29). We could consider this teaching even more broadly across the NT (see Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Eph 1:20–21; Col 1:13; 2 Tim 4:1,18; Heb 6:4–5; Rev 11:15; 12:10), but Jesus’s teaching suffices for our purposes here.

Why, then, does God’s kingdom and the end of history come about in this dynamic, multifaceted manner? Apart from saying that God wanted to do it that way (which is part of the truth), the “already-not yet” correlates with how Christ achieved victory over Satan, sin, and death on our behalf. Indeed, the war was decisively won at the cross and

sealed with an empty tomb, but the enemy's formal surrender has not yet arrived. Drawing from theologian Oscar Cullman, Sinclair Ferguson efficiently summarizes how World War II serves as a fitting analogy for Jesus's already-not victory:

In that war, D-Day (the decisive intervention of the Allied Forces' invasion of Europe in 1944) took place a year before the coming of VE-Day (the end of the war in Europe in 1945). In the interim, the battles remained fierce and bloody, even although the decisive act had taken place. So it is in redemptive history. The D-Day of redemption has taken place in Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and giving of the Spirit. He has acted decisively against the powers of sin, Satan and death which tyrannized his people. Yet the skirmishes with sin (as well as with Satan and death) continue to be severe.¹

We thus live between D-Day (Jesus's first coming) and VE-Day (Jesus's second coming), and the study of this "interim" era helps us better understand our place within God's redemptive purposes.

Second, we should study church history because we can learn from our forebears of faith who also lived during these last days. Looking to the wilderness experience, the apostle Paul exhorted his readers to learn from Israel's history. He went so far as to state that "these things took place as examples for us" (1 Cor 10:6, emphasis added). Because the coming of Jesus split history, the era in which the church exists provides God's people with unique perspective as those "on whom the ends of the ages have come" (v. 11). As already noted, the church lives during the climactic and final stage of God's plan preceding Jesus's return. Therefore, there is a lot of history that precedes this final era, a history that both offers insight concerning the human condition and attests to God's faithfulness to his people across the centuries.

In a real sense, then, the church as the new-covenant community is historically and eschatologically privileged. This is not to say that those who are born-again this side of the cross are inherently superior to the faithful who lived prior to Jesus's first coming, but it is to say that there is significant benefit to living during a time when God's kingdom has come into more vivid focus and vibrant expression. This is why Jesus said the following about John the Baptist, who served as the last prophet of the old-covenant era: "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John, but the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28).

While none of us automatically possess greater character and self-discipline than John the Baptist did simply by living as Christians in this later era, even the least among us has inherited greater eschatological privilege in the wisdom of God's plan. Thanks to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, we possess a greater knowledge of God's kingdom purposes than John did as a prophet of a former era. Further, we also receive a richer experience of the Spirit's work by virtue of being members of the new (and better) covenant (Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:6–13; 13:20–21; see also 2 Cor 3:6–11).

Yet, in addition to the new covenant's spiritual benefits, we also benefit from existing downstream of the church's attempts to understand and apply Scripture's teaching over the past two millennia. As you will discover throughout the pages of the *Church History Handbook*, we can find examples good, bad, and somewhere in between of what it means to live faithfully at various points in the storied history of Christianity that spans across centuries and continents.

If Israel's past could teach the first-century church about what it means to be faithful (or unfaithful), according to Paul (1 Cor 10:6,11),

1 Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 150.

then twenty centuries of church history can no doubt instruct the present and future church in the same way. Israel's past happened for the church's sake, in other words, and there's no reason why the church's sundry experiences should not also serve the church's present ministry in the same manner.

Third, we should study church history because Jesus and the apostles promised that false teaching would mark these last days. As Jesus and the apostles taught, the last days would be marked by an escalation in false teaching.

- “For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” (Matt 24:24)
- “Now the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will depart from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared.” (1 Tim 4:1–2; see also 2 Tim 4:3–4)
- “Children, it is the last hour. And as you have heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. By this we know that it is the last hour.” (1 John 2:18; see also 2 John 7)

The church lives not only at a time of both heightened kingdom power and covenant privilege, as we have observed, but also at a time where there is a continuous abundance of false teaching. With greater power, then, comes greater responsibility, and the increase in false teaching also increases our need to draw from the wisdom of those who came before us. If we may take some liberties with the famous Santayana quote, we might say that those who cannot remember past heresies are condemned to repeat them.

Indeed, the first several centuries of the church are, at least in part, the story of the church discerning what the truth is more precisely as a result of refuting error (i.e., orthodoxy coming into its own). This is perhaps most evident in the debates that surrounded the Trinity and the incarnation, the two central and distinguishing doctrines of

the Christian faith. By encountering error when it came to how we should make sense of Scripture's teaching of the one God identified as three persons and of its presentation of Jesus as both truly God and truly human, the church came to articulate and preserve biblical truth with greater clarity and accuracy. Knowing the spectrum of positions that gave rise to the historic councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon will only serve us better to understand the exegetical disputes and metaphysical deliberations that went into how their respective creeds and formulas were drafted and why the church continues to benefit from them today.

By making ourselves aware of how the church contended for the apostolic faith in the past, we better equip ourselves for contending for the same faith in the present (Jude 3). Often, the false teachings that we encounter in our own day are substantively similar to heresies of the past that are only adorned with different clothing. For example, those who deny the deity of Jesus today by arguing that he is the first and most exalted creature (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses) follow the same line of reasoning as the fourth-century Arians who said, “There was a time when the Son was not.” By looking to the faithful example of fourth-century figures like Alexander and Athanasius, we can glean effective and efficient ways to quip back, “Always God, always the Son.”

Knowing the heresy, doctrinal errors, and bad practices of the past is necessary for avoiding them in the present. To ignore church history is to turn a willfully deaf ear to where God has spoken his wisdom. It is willfully to play the fool.

CONCLUSION

The history of the church is both the history of God's faithfulness and the history of our waywardness, much like the history of Israel that we find in the OT. Though beyond the book of Acts we do not possess a supernaturally inspired record of the

church's "warts and all" experiences and contributions, we nonetheless can learn from the records we have by measuring them according to Scripture. We will make mistakes like those who came before us, but the same God who preserved his people in the past will continue to preserve his people into the future.

Accordingly, the contents of the *Church History Handbook* are intended to serve as a means to the end that is the Great Commission, namely, the preservation and empowerment of God's people

for their God-given mission of proclaiming the truth of the gospel to the world. By equipping the church in the present to learn from her past, we set her up to remain faithful into the future. As we study church history, may God be glorified in the church throughout all generations.

"Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:20–21).



Early Church

AD 100-200

EARLY CHURCH

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

SUMMARY The early church (100–200 AD) saw regular growth but also faced several challenges, most notably persecution. The saints of this era laid a solid foundation for the rise and spread of Christianity, helping to establish churches, send missionaries, and raise up church leaders who provided critical oversight and guidance through their preaching and writings.

With many lessons to learn in the centuries ahead, the church nevertheless experienced sustained growth throughout the Roman Empire during this era. Despite the persecution and internal debates, such as those mentioned above, the Christian church continued to thrive as the message of the gospel was expounded upon and spread throughout the known world.

KEY EVENTS The early Christian church pursued the spreading of the gospel message within the Roman Empire despite facing persecution. Following the commandment given by the Lord Jesus Christ in Acts 1:8, these pioneering missionaries started in Jerusalem, traveled to Judea and Samaria, and eventually to the ends of the earth. But as the gospel spread, the persecution began. Nero and Domitian are two of the more notable emperors who persecuted the Christian church. But history has shown that as persecution continued, the church continued to spread, thus confirming Tertullian’s statement: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

KEY FIGURES Several church leaders arose to provide oversight and guidance for the early church:

- **Polycarp of Smyrna** (69–156) was a disciple of the apostle John and the bishop of Smyrna. He was an opponent of Marcionism and wrote a letter to the Philippians.
- **Ignatius of Antioch** (35–107) wrote six letters to churches while being taken from his home in Antioch to Rome for his execution.
- **Justin Martyr** (100–165) was a philosopher and early Christian apologist. He defended the Christian faith against Jewish and pagan critiques.
- **Tertullian** (ca. 155–ca. 220) was another philosopher and early Christian apologist who defended Christianity against pagan and heretical attacks.

These leaders, along with others, wrote against the various challenges and heretical teachings that came against the church.

KEY IDEAS The second century witnessed the increase of theological debates within the Christian community, which primarily focused on the person of Jesus Christ. Their desire for proper teaching and clarification against those who stood opposed to biblical teaching still endures today in the Apostles’ Creed. Furthermore, various developments led to discussion and debate about issues such as monotheism, the incarnation, the resurrection of Jesus, and eternal life.

KEY WORKS Early Christians developed and explained these concepts through key works, such as the following:

- **Didache**, or “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” Written around the first or second century, *Didache* provides instructions on various aspects of the Christian life.
- **The Shepherd of Hermas**. Written in the first half of the second century, this text recounts five visions of a former slave named Hermas.
- **Epistles of Ignatius**. These letters were penned by Ignatius on the way to his execution and written to church leaders. They contain advice on church unity, obedience to the bishops, and the centrality of the Lord’s Supper within the Christian life.
- **The Apologies of Justin Martyr**. This two-volume defense of the faith provides an early glimpse into Christian beliefs and practices as they intersect with the Roman Empire.

Timeline: The Early Church

(AD 50–200)



ESSENTIAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

The Goodness of Creation

(Genesis 1:31)

In Genesis 1, God repeatedly affirmed that all of his creation was good, even “very good” (1:31). It is good, in God’s judgment, because he created it for a purpose that it fulfilled—to reflect and display the good character of the Creator. Therefore, sin and evil should not be seen as a foundational part of the creation but rather as a corruption of it. While the creation has been marred and distorted as a result of sin, it is still good in the hands of God and serves his purpose of proclaiming his glory in the world. God’s people should affirm and seek to preserve the goodness of God’s creation (2:15).

God Is One

(Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

The Bible affirms that God is One, as seen in Deut 6:4–9, otherwise known as the Shema. In both Old and New Testament times, the advocacy of monotheism (belief in one God) was contrary to the surrounding culture. Where most cultures practiced polytheism (belief in multiple gods) or henotheism (the worship of one god with the belief in multiple gods), the people of God knew, based on God’s self-revelation, that Yahweh, the Lord, was the only One, true God.

Angels

(Psalm 91:11)

Besides the creation of humanity and animals, the Bible also speaks of other beings God created. Among these created beings are angels, who are also referred to in Scripture as “sons of God,” “holy ones,” “spirits,” “principalities,” and “powers.” In the original languages of the Bible, the word “angel” carries the meaning of a messenger, which indicates one of their primary reasons for existence. Angels carry out a number of other functions throughout Scripture: bringing God glory, carrying out God’s plans and purpose, and reminding humanity that the unseen world is real.

Jesus’s Humanity

(Isaiah 7:14)

In addition to being fully divine, the Bible also affirms that Jesus is fully human. Not only does the Old Testament affirm that the Promised One (Messiah) would be a man (Isa 9:6; Mic 5:3), but the New Testament also affirms that Jesus’s earthly life bore all the marks of being a human. He experienced the circumstances common to living as a human being such as hunger (Matt 4), thirst (Matt 4), weariness (Matt 8:24), pain and sorrow (John 11:28–36; and the crucifixion).

Christ’s Exaltation

(Philippians 2:9)

Whereas the death of Christ was the ultimate example of his humiliation, the resurrection of Christ from the dead is the first and glorious example of Christ’s exaltation. Christ was exalted when God raised him from the dead, and Christ was exalted when he ascended to the Father’s right hand. He will be exalted by all creation when he returns. All of these aspects work together to magnify the glory and worth of Christ, resulting in the praise of the glory of his grace in rescuing sinners.

The Spread and Persecution of Early Christianity¹

The church's inception in Jerusalem and growth throughout the Mediterranean world gave form to God's purposes in Christ for the nations. Along with this growth came pain, as the persecuted church's willingness to suffer for the name of Jesus brought glory to God as a public testimony to the gospel's truth and power.

TO THE END OF THE EARTH: EXPANSION DURING THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

Jerusalem: Ground Zero of the Gospel. The opening of the book of Acts sets the trajectory of the gospel's spread and the church's reach, recording these commissioning words from Jesus: "*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). Jerusalem, the city where Jesus was crucified, served as a base (or "ground zero") for this new movement coming out of the margins of the Jewish community that would become known as Christianity. Peter, James, and John became recognized as pillars of the early church, the former two leading primarily from Jerusalem (see Acts 15:6–21; Gal 2:9). This home base of Jewish Christianity experienced a drastic upheaval in AD 70, however, when the Roman military destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, serving as the catalyst for the Diaspora (dispersion) in which Jewish people were forced to flee to other cities across the Mediterranean, an event Jesus had prophesied about (Matt 24:1–2ff; Mark 13:1–2ff; Luke 21:5–6ff).

Judea and Samaria: Beyond Jewish Borders. While Judea was the broader territory Jews primarily occupied during the Roman Empire, Samaria would be considered the edges of the Jewish lands. We see the mission of the church expand to Samaria

with Philip's ministry (Acts 8:4–8). Jews and Gentiles did not mix that much in terms of religious life and practice. The exception to this pattern was "God fearers" (see 10:2–4), Gentiles who were drawn to Jewish religion and even participated in synagogue services. Luke recorded Cornelius, a God fearer and centurion in the Roman army (10:1), as the first Gentile convert to Christianity.

The End of the Earth: Taking Root in the Gentile World. A Pharisee turned Christian missionary, the apostle Paul is the most notable human agent responsible for the early spread of Christianity across the Mediterranean world. Along with Barnabas, Paul left from Antioch as part of the first missionary team to the Gentiles when they set out for Cyprus (13:1–12). By the end of Paul's three missionary journeys, the gospel had spread into the far west of the Roman Empire with churches planted in Macedonia and Greece. After appearing before rulers and officials, Paul himself would take the gospel into Rome as a prisoner (Acts 21–28). Beyond Acts, church tradition holds that after his first imprisonment ended, Paul traveled to Spain (AD 63–67). He was eventually arrested a second time, receiving harsher treatment and being sentenced to death by Nero around AD 67.

After Acts: The Church Finding Its Place. By the middle of the second century, **Antioch, Rome,** and **Alexandria** had become the premier Christian cities in the Roman Empire. On top of geological diversity, Christianity also possessed language diversity with segments of the church speaking Latin (Italy, North Africa, western Europe), Greek (eastern Mediterranean, eastern Europe), and Syriac (Middle East, central Asia, and China). To bring unity and order in belief and practice amid this cultural diversity, the early church looked to

the office of bishop: “Wherever the bishop is, there one finds the fellowship; just as wherever Jesus Christ is there is the catholic Church” (Ignatius). Though whether the office of bishop should have exercised this kind of regional authority is a matter of debate among Christian traditions, the fact that men who represented orthodox teaching held the office during the early centuries of the church is something all Christians can both acknowledge and be thankful for.

MOMENTARY AND LIGHT AFFLICTIONS: THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF PERSECUTION IN THE EARLY CENTURIES

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

–Tertullian (ca. 160–220)

Jewish Persecution. Though the Jewish community would not remain in position to persecute the budding Christian movement beyond AD 70, the book of Acts records instances where religious leaders sought to use their localized influence to stifle the church’s growth (see Acts 4:1–23; 5:17–42). Stephen became the first recorded Christian martyr after being stoned to death for his bold indictment of the Jewish leaders for failing to see Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises, making them comparable to their rebellious ancestors (6:8–15; 7:54–60). Saul, who became better known as Paul the apostle, was a prominent agent of persecution as well (8:1–3; 9:1–4) but would end up on the receiving end of persecution from the religious leaders once he became a Christian (9:20–30).

Roman Persecution. The persecution that came from the hand of the Roman Empire was intense

at times but for the most part isolated to certain sectors of the empire. Broad-based systematic persecution of the Christian church was the exception rather than the rule, in other words. This, however, did not mean government-sanctioned persecution was not a common experience for Christians during the early centuries of the church. Among Roman emperors, these are some of the most prominent figures associated with the targeted persecution of Christians despite their efforts not being equally consistent or persistent with one another:

- Nero (AD 60s)
- Domitian (late first century)
- Trajan (early second century)
- Hadrian (second century)
- Decius (mid-third century)
- Valerian (mid-third century)
- Diocletian (early fourth century)

