

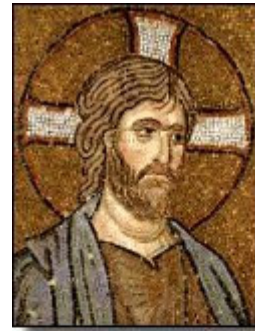
UCC Histories Short Course: The First Centuries

In every culture where the gospel has been planted, artists have painted Christ with the face of their own people. Here, a Greek Orthodox mosaic from the ninth century, an icon showing Jesus as an Arab from the 20th century, and a 17th-century Mexican portrait of Mary and the child Jesus.

All Christians are related in faith to Judaism and are the spiritual descendants of the first followers of Jesus who spread through the world with the Gospel (the "Good News") of a loving God. After four centuries, Christianity was no longer a small persecuted sect but the state religion of the Roman Empire. Originally, the church was an undivided, universal (or "catholic") church. But partly because Christianity identified with the different cultures in which it took root, the "Latin" Christianity of the western Empire, centered in Rome, gradually grew apart from the "Greek" Christianity of the eastern Empire, centered in Constantinople. By the year 1054, the Latin and Greek churches separated into two rival communities.

Our history continues as part of the western—or Roman Catholic—church. The church continued to grow during these years. These were the so-called "Dark Ages"—actually a time of spiritual and intellectual growth. But by the 15th century, the bonds that held the Roman church together were beginning to unravel. Dissidents denounced corruption in the church's hierarchy; some began to call for a return to a simpler form of Christianity. These were the Reformers, or "Protestants" because they protested against authority. At first, their intention was to reform the Roman Catholic Church. But as the struggle intensified the result was another split—between the Roman church and a number of new communities that called themselves Protestant, Lutheran, Reformed or "Evangelical" (from the Greek evangelion, meaning "Gospel").

Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin believed that the Bible had precedence over the Pope as the source of church teaching. And it was in the Bible, especially in the writings of the Apostle Paul, that Luther rediscovered a simple idea that would change the history of world religion: that salvation is not earned, but is a free gift from God who loves us and whose power will save us from spiritual death.



Spreads through Europe

This message spread throughout Europe. Some Catholics found in Luther's doctrine of God's generous love an experience of liberation from fear. The churches that later were named in his honor ("Lutheran") replaced the Roman church as the dominant expression of Christianity in much of Northern Europe—including Scandinavia and the northern, eastern and central regions of Germany. Another branch, the "Reformed" churches inspired by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, put down roots in Switzerland, Germany, France, Hungary, Transylvania, the Netherlands, England and Scotland.

The United Church of Christ traces its history back to both the Lutheran and Reformed movements. It presently binds in covenant about 6,000 congregations with 1.4 million members. One of the youngest of American churches, its background also makes it one of the oldest in Protestantism.

The United Church of Christ, a united and uniting church, was born on June 25, 1957, as the result of a union of four traditions. Two of these were the Congregational Churches with roots in the New England colonies founded by the English Pilgrims and the Puritans, and the Christian Church with origins on the American frontier. These two denominations had a shared tradition of religious freedom and the right of local churches to govern their own life. They united on June 17, 1931 to become the Congregational Christian Churches.

The other two traditions were the Reformed Church in the United States, founded by 18th-century German and Swiss immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania and the mid-Atlantic region, and the Evangelical Synod of North America, a 19th-century church planted by German settlers along the Mississippi Valley. In these churches the "Lutheran" and "Reformed" traditions came together, and they were united on June 26, 1934, to

form the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches shared a strong commitment to freedom of religious expression under the authority of Jesus Christ. They combined strong European ties, early colonial roots and the vitality of the American frontier church. Both denominations revered the Bible and were more interested in what unites Christians than with what divides them. They were united in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 25, 1957.

Source: <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/intro.htm>
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