



THE FIRST 500—OVERTURE

September 10/11, 2025

- I. **Introduction — *The First 500 Years***
 - a. Christianity transforms from a persecuted sect to the religion of the Empire.
 - b. Era of martyrs, bishops, philosophers, monks, heresies, councils.
 - c. Foundations: Scripture, orthodoxy, and doctrine.
- II. **Fools and Heretics: Christianity in Its Cultural Context**
 - a. **Judaism** → Christianity defines itself as fulfillment (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*).
 - b. **Greco-Roman culture** → Apologists present Christianity as the “true philosophy.”
 - c. **Justin Martyr:**
 - i. “We, who have been brought near to God through this crucified Christ, are the true Israelite race.” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 11)
 - ii. “Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. For next to God, we worship and love the Logos who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.” (*First Apology*, 46)
- III. **The Blood of the Martyrs (100–313 AD)**
 - a. Roman suspicion: refusal to worship emperor/gods = treason.
 - b. **Trajan’s advice to Pliny (c. 112 AD):**
 - i. Don’t hunt Christians down.
 - ii. Punish only if accused & proven guilty.
 - iii. Offer pardon if they recant.
 - iv. Ignore anonymous accusations.
 - c. **Martyr Testimonies:** Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp.
 - d. Martyrdom = participation in Christ.

- e. Ignatius of Antioch, (c. 107 AD): *“Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whom it is possible to attain to God. I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ.”* (Letter to the Romans, 4)
- f. Polycarp, 155 AD: *“Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”* (Martyrdom of Polycarp, 9)

IV. Getting It Right: Heresies & Orthodoxy

- a. **Gnosticism:** secret knowledge, creation = evil. Opposed by Irenaeus.
- b. **Docetism:** Jesus only “seemed” human. Countered by Ignatius.
- c. **Marcionism:** OT God rejected. Answered by Tertullian.
- d. **Irenaeus of Lyons:** *“Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress... in order that, by its outward form, it may seem to the inexperienced to be truer than the truth itself.”* (Against Heresies, 1.2)

V. Christianity & Empire

- a. Constantine: Christianity favored by state.
- b. **John Chrysostom:** “Golden-mouthed” preacher, liturgy, moral courage.
- c. **Ambrose vs. Theodosius:** church over emperor in moral authority.
- d. **Ambrose (390 AD):** *“You, O Emperor, though ruling over all, are also subject to the laws of God. Enter not into the holy place with defiled hands, but go rather to repent for the blood you have shed.”* (Ambrose, Letter 51)

VI. Mystics, Monks & Desert Fathers

- a. Post-persecution: radical discipleship in the desert.
- b. Antony of Egypt: life > words.
- c. Monasticism → new model of holiness, lasting influence.
- d. **Athanasius’ Life of Antony:** *“Antony was not known for his words, but for his life. For he would not speak about virtue to others unless he himself had first practiced it.”* (Life of Antony, 91)

VII. The Beginnings of the Bible: Formation of the Canon

- a. Core canon by 200 AD (Gospels, Paul).
- b. **Irenaeus:** 4 Gospels = 4 pillars of the church.
- c. **Athanasius (Festal Letter, 367 AD):** first list of 27 NT books.
- d. **Jerome:** Latin Vulgate — Scripture central to Western church.
- e. Irenaeus: *“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For since there are four zones of the world... it is fitting that she should have four pillars breathing out immortality on every side.”* (Against Heresies, 3.11.8)

VIII. Trinitarian Controversies

- a. **Arianism:** “There was when the Son was not.”
- b. **Council of Nicaea (325 AD):** Son is *homousios* (“same essence”) with Father.

- c. Nicene Creed anchors Trinitarian faith.
- d. Athanasius: *“He became man that we might become god. And he manifested himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.” (On the Incarnation, 54)*

IX. Christological Controversies

- a. How divine & human natures relate.
- b. **Council of Chalcedon (451 AD):** “One Christ, two natures... without confusion, change, division, separation.”

X. Augustine & the Struggle for Grace

- a. **Conversion & Confessions:** *“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” (Confessions, I.1)*
- b. **Against Pelagius:** grace necessary, sin pervasive.
- c. **City of God:** two loves, two cities (earthly vs. heavenly).
- d. Augustine = towering influence on theology of grace & history.

XI. Over the Horizon: Celtic Christianity & Beyond

- a. Fall of Western Rome; Gospel spreads beyond empire.
- b. **Patrick:** missionary to Ireland.
- c. Celtic Christianity = monastic, prayerful, creation-centered.
- d. Missionary expansion prepares way for medieval church.

XII. Conclusion

- a. Christianity: from margins → empire’s heart.
- b. Defined Scriptures, Trinity, Christology, monasticism.
- c. From Polycarp to Augustine, the foundations of faith were laid.
- d. **Hebrews 13:8** — “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”