

Church History: The Sixth and Seventh Century (AD 500–700)

“Thus says the LORD: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. Jeremiah 6:16, ESV

Historical Context

The sixth and seventh centuries mark a transitional era between the classical Roman world and the early medieval period. Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Christianity continued spreading across Europe through missionary efforts and monastic communities. During this time the church expanded geographically while also facing new political and religious challenges, including the rise of Islam.

Missionary Monks and the Spread of Christianity

- **Patrick of Ireland (385–461)** – Known as the 'Apostle of Ireland.' After being captured by Irish pirates and later escaping, Patrick returned to Ireland as a missionary. His life demonstrated deep obedience to Christ and reliance on God's grace.
- **Benedict of Nursia (480–547)** – Founder of Western monasticism. His *Rule of St. Benedict* emphasized a balanced life of prayer, manual labor, study, and community living. Benedictine monasteries later shaped much of medieval Christian culture.
- **Ninian** – Early missionary to Scotland who developed small Christian communities that functioned like missionary church planting teams. These communities combined gospel proclamation with Christian service and shared life.
- **Columba (521–597)** – Irish monk who founded a monastery on the island of Iona in 563. From this center, missionaries evangelized the Picts of northern Scotland and influenced the spread of Christianity throughout Britain.

Gregory the Great (540–604)

- Served as Pope from 590–604 and helped shape the medieval papacy.
- Promoted missionary expansion throughout Europe.
- Associated with the organization of Gregorian chant used in worship.
- Wrote *The Pastoral Rule*, an influential guide on pastoral character, humility, and spiritual leadership.

The Rise of Islam

- Muhammad (570–632) founded Islam after claiming to receive revelations.
- Islam is built around the Five Pillars: confession of faith, prayer, charity, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Beginning with the Hijra in 622, Islam spread rapidly across the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe.

Key Lessons from the Sixth–Seventh Century

- The gospel often spreads through faithful Christian communities.
- Church planting and multiplication were key strategies for mission.
- God uses sacrificial believers willing to go wherever Christ calls.
- The Christian gospel proclaims salvation through Christ, not through human works.