

Sunday, December 19, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 14 Age of Christian Empire: The Impact of Constantine

The Church on the Eve of Constantine

- There can be little doubt that the trajectory of Christian history was altered greatly by the so-called conversion of Constantine in 312.
- In the years between 67 and 312 AD the Roman political state which also claimed religious authority as a divine government under the headship of Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Macrianus, Decius, Aurelian, Diocletian, and Galerius conducted 10 imperial persecutions against Christians.
- Constantine's rise to political prominence immediately followed what is perhaps the worst persecution of Christians inflicted by the dual emperorship of Diocletian and his junior partner Galerius. (Price and Collins, 54)
- In 300 AD an imperial edict commanded all soldiers to offer sacrifices on penalty of death, an order that at once compromised the numerous Christians in the army. Three years later, further edicts were issued demanding the destruction of places of worship, confiscation of Scriptures, and the arrest of ecclesiastics. (Price and Collins, 54)
- "Finally in 304, with Diocletian ill, Galerius extended the edit to all citizens of the empire, who were ordered to offer sacrifices to the gods on pain of death. Throughout the empire executions took place, and several Christian communities were wiped out in Africa, Egypt, and Palestine." (Prince and Collins, 54)
- Public outrage was such that Diocletian was forced to step down thereby making Constantius and Maxentius the new emperors. The new emperors revoked the edicts and granted toleration to the Christians. (Prince and Collins, 54)
- Therefore, for the first 250 years of its history the Church had vacillated between periods of persecution and toleration. Many Christians meet in secret and underground to avoid detection from the Roman authorities.
- E.H. Broadbent author of *The Pilgrim Church* states, "When the Church came into contact with the Roman Empire, a conflict ensued in which all the resources of that mighty power were exhausted in a vain endeavor to vanquish those who never resisted or retaliated, but bore all for love of the Lord in whose footsteps they were following. However much the churches were divided in view and practice, they were united in suffering and victory." (Broadbent, 40)
- We have chronicled at length the early entrance of the Church into apostasy and the emergence of the Catholic structure. There can be little doubt that as long as the state was working against the Church the pace of apostasy pails in comparison to what occurred after the church and state began working together.
- After having studied the teachings of the Church Fathers in our 4 week survey of The Patristic Period we must recognize that by 300 AD, on the eve of Constantine, all that was lacking in the evolution of the Catholic Church was for a politician to absorb the

church into the state thereby creating an anti-scriptural state church that possessed unrestrained power to kill Bible believing Christians.

The Conversion of Constantine and the Edit of Milan

- Much of what we know about *The Life of Constantine* comes from the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, a Christian writer and historian who lived in the first half of the 4th century. (Hill, 72)
- According to Eusebius, in 312 Constantine was in the midst of a military campaign against his rival Maxentius for control of the empire. Constantine was moving his forces south from France into Italy preparing to lay siege to his rival around the city of Rome. (Miller, 219)
- The impending battle would either result in his ruin or catapult him to the highest pinnacle of power. Constantine knew that Maxentius was preparing for his advance by enlarging his army as well as covering his basis with the pagan gods by meticulously following pagan religious rites. (Miller, 219)
- While contemplating his options just before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Eusebius reports that Constantine saw the appearance of a glittering cross in the heavens above the following inscription, “Conquer by This.” (Hill, 72)
- Heading the advice of this premonition, Constantine marched his troops into battle under the sign of the cross and won a resounding victory thereby becoming emperor of Rome. “This marked the first time in history, that the cross was smeared with the blood of a battle for human power.” (Jones, 37)
- After his military victory at Rome on October 27, 312, Constantine, in conjunction with his eastern colleague Licinius, published in January, 313, from Milan, an edict of religious toleration. (Schaff, 29) The Edit of Milan stated, “Our purpose is to allow Christians and all others to worship as they desire, so that whatever Divinity lives in the heavens will be kind to us.” (Jones, 38)
- Famous Church historian Philip Schaff offers the following summation of the Edict. He states, “The edict of 313 not only recognized Christianity within existing limits, but allowed every subject of the Roman Empire to choose whatever religion he preferred. At the same time the church buildings and property confiscated in the Diocletian’s persecution were ordered to be restored, and private property-owners to be indemnified from the imperial treasury.” (Schaff, 30)
- While Christianity was not made the official religion of the Empire, Constantine publically promoted the faith which brought the church out of hiding. (Hill, 72)

Did Constantine Really Convert?

- The legitimacy of Constantine’s conversion is still hotly debated by modern historians and theologians. Did his faith in the Christian God go beyond an opportunistic belief that here was a source of military, political, and perhaps metaphysical power?

- Bruce Shelley, author of *Church History in Plain Language* typifies the standard view of Constantine. Consider the following excerpt:
 - “From the year 312, he favored Christianity openly. He allowed Christian ministers to enjoy the same exemption from taxes as the pagan priests; he abolished execution by crucifixion; he called a halt to the battles of gladiators as a punishment for crimes; and in 321 he made Sunday a public holiday. Thanks to his generosity buildings arose as evidence of his support of Christianity. . . This public Christianity was matched by changes in Constantine’s private life. Making no secret of his Christian convictions, he and his sons and daughters brought up as Christians and led a Christian family life. Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia baptized him shortly before he died in 337. After his baptism, Constantine refused to wear again the imperial purple and thus left this life dressed in his white baptismal robes.” (Shelley, 95-95)
- Others view Constantine as a great military general, leader of men, and consummate politician but not a Christian. “It has been observed by one cynic that to the superstitious all religion are equally true, to the skeptic all religions are equally false; but to the politician, all religions are equally useful. Such was the case with Constantine.” (Barlow, 148)
- Andrew Miller reports that, “all we know of the religion of Constantine up to the period of his conversion, so-called, would imply that he was outwardly, if not zealously, a pagan.” (Miller, 222)
- Timothy Paul Jones believes that while Constantine in his own mind sincerely believed he was a Christian, he seems to have worshiped Jesus as the Sun-God. (Jones, 38) Jonathan Hill informs his readers that pagan gods remained on all Roman coinage until 320 and that Constantine retained the old pagan title of *pontifex maxius*. (Hill, 73) Miller explains how the emperor maintained his status as high priest of the heathen while simultaneously claiming to be head of the church until his death. (Miller, 225)
- Did Constantine believe in justification by grace though faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ? The short answer is no. Constantine never mentions the name of Jesus Christ in all his correspondence with bishops or his death. Moreover, he does not profess to have obtained salvation until on his death bed he was baptized a week before his death. (Luibheld, 211)
- In my view Constantine was a pragmatist not a Bible believing Christian. He saw in Christians a strong moral fiber that the thought would strengthen the empire he had built. “This simply means that Constantine concluded that the ethics and social effects of the Christian religion would be good for the ordinary citizen of the Roman Empire. It would be a kind of moral check and balance system to keep the masses in line. . . He only perceived that Christianity was useful as a means to an end. (Barlow, 156)
- Miller sums up the situation regarding the true nature of Constantine’s conversion when he writes, “A crucified Savior, true conversion, justification by faith alone, separation from the world, were subjects never known by Constantine, and probably never introduced in his presence.” (Miller, 228)

Constantine's Impact on the Church

- After the Edict of Milan in 313, the size and status of the church and its character were transformed. Christians began to take advantage of their new found wealth and power to build churches and basilicas. Pagan temples such as the Pantheon and Parthenon were converted into churches. Freed from the constraints of persecution the Catholic liturgy continued to grow and develop. Judging from the external appearances the Church was growing and things were improving. (Prince and Collins, 64-65)
- “We now come to the consideration of that which has been the great historical problem to men of all creeds, nations and passions, namely, whether the State which seeks to advance Christians by the worldly means at its command, or the earthly power which opposes it by legal violence, does the great injury to the church and people of God on the earth? . . . Court favor has always been ruinous to the true prosperity of the church of God.” (Miller, 226)
- “However agreeable to mere nature the sunshine of imperial favor might be, it was destructive of the true character of the individual Christian and of the church corporately.” (Miller, 228)
- Timothy Paul Jones reports that the cross which had once been a symbol of Christ's death functioned as a charm confirming Constantine's power. Furthermore, Constantine medaled in church affairs by granting widespread favors to bishops thereby increasing their power and influence as well as securing their allegiance to the emperor. (Jones, 38)
- Around 312, the Donatists (who we will talk about in a latter lesson) in North Africa appealed to Constantine to settle a dispute about who could ordain bishops. The fact that Constantine ruled against the Donatists is not the most curial outcome of this event. “For nearly 300 years the empire and the churches had remained separate. Now, a church had asked the emperor to sponsor its beliefs. Twelve hundred years would pass before a church completely severed its ties with the state again.” (Jones, 38)
- Never before the Edict of Milan had the Christian church seen such phenomenal growth. However, this growth should not be viewed as a step forward because it brought a host of pagan traditions and heathen practices into the church. With churches full of baptized heathen, becoming a Christian ceased to be a matter of believing the gospel of the grace God, and evolved into a wise political move for seeking cultural or political advancement. (Barlow, 152)
- It was during this period that scores of anti-Biblical doctrines and practices were introduced into Christendom: prayers for the dead, veneration of angles and dead believers, and the cult of the saints. Historically the introduction icons and graven images began to appear during this time period. (Barlow, 153)
- One of the consequences of imperial favor was that the believers lost the site of the immediacy of Christ return.
 - “As the aspect of outward affairs changed under Constantine, these views (concerning the Lord's coming) lost their hold on men's minds. The church now prepared for a long continued period of temporal prosperity and the state church

of that time forgot the millennial glory of the future.” (Kurt, *Church History*, 47 quoted in Barlow, 153)

- “When Christianity became a world power by Constantine, the hope of the future was weakened by the joy over the present success.” (Benzel quoted in Barlow, 154)
- “Under Constantine, Christianity, being established, Christians began looking at its existing temporal prosperity as fulfilling the OT prophecies, and (they) ceased to look for Christ’s promised reign on earth.” (Jamieson, *Introduction to Apostasy*, 70 quoted in Barlow, 154)
- Over time this led to the emergence of postmillennial theology. Sir Robert Anderson points this out in his book *The Church or the Bible*, where he writes,
 - “As the apostasy advanced, the new theory arose that the millennium was a present fact, or a state to be brought about by the continued conquest of the church to say nothing about the sword! The prophecies of the Second Advent began to be interpreted as the First Advent! The Old Testament began to be appropriated by the empire of the fourth century and the New Jerusalem became the Church.” (quoted in Barlow, 154)
- As time went on the power structure of the church began to mimic the organization of imperial Rome.
 - The *Emperor*—whose counterpart became the *Pope*
 - The *Senate*—whose counterpart became the *College of Cardinals*
 - The *Imperial Governor*—who became the *Patriarch* or *Archbishop*
 - The *Provincial Governor*—who became the *Metropolitan* or *Bishop*
 - The *Civitas*—which became the *parish priests*
 - And then beneath all, on the bottom of the pile was the rest of humanity (Qualben, 65)
- In the end, Constantine produced the unholy union of the world system to the professing church of Jesus Christ (body of Christ) which is not of this world and commanded not be conformed to it. As a result, the persecuted became the persecutors! “Instead of being separate from the world system, the visible ‘church’ (i.e., Christendom) became the crushing force which ultimately sought to extinguish those remnants of believers who would not submit to the new (paganized) ‘Christian’ Roman authority.” (Barlow, 154)
- “The shameful persecutions and slaughters of those believers who assiduously held to the Bible as the sole authority (as opposed to the authority of the ‘church’) reveal the true nature of this monstrosity called ‘Christendom.’ Earlier in this study, it was stated that during the middle ages it is calculated that the ‘church’ of Western culture slaughtered over 50,000,000 non-conforming Christians for not submitting to the authority of Christendom.” (Barlow, 155)

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