

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

LECTURE 7 – PERSECUTION OF EARLY CHURCH; CONVERSION OF EMPEROR CONSTANTINE; CHRISTIANS AND SOCIETY TO 313

We'll start with a prayer from the period to be studied.

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, increase faith and truth and gentleness in us. O Saviour Christ, in your love for us you were prepared to suffer death of the cross: let us not be cold or even lukewarm in our love for you. Help us to face the truth about ourselves. Help us to hear our words as others hear them. Let us be honest enough to recognise our faults; give us the humility to accept our weakness for what they are. Give us the grace to overcome them. Amen.

Another part of the prayer of Polycarp, Bishop of the church at Smyrna, before he was martyred on 23 February 156, aged 86.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Persecution was initially by Jews

From the earliest days of the Church, Christians were harassed, imprisoned and even killed, initially by Jews. This started as early as Acts 4.3, when the Temple priests threatened the new believers, then beat them, then threw Peter and John into prison and by Acts 7, murdered Stephen, the first Christian martyr, (Acts 7:58-60). Jewish leaders, like Saul of Tarsus, believed that Christianity was a perversion of Judaism and must be stamped out.

Protection of Roman law while Christians thought to be part of Judaism

Initially the Roman State didn't persecute Christians, because they thought the believers were a branch of Judaism, and the Jews had a special religious status in the Roman Empire – mentioned in Lecture 1, and we'll come back to it in a moment at 2.2. For as long as long as Christianity was not distinguished from Judaism, it enjoyed the protection of Roman law. There's an example in Acts 18:12-17; the Jews brought Paul to the Roman judge Gallio, who thought the disturbance was a dispute among Jews and therefore he said 'settle the matter yourselves, I will not be a judge of such things'. So the Jews beat up the synagogue ruler, and Luke records: 'But Gallio showed no concern whatever'.

Roman persecution of Christians divides into two distinct periods. We'll look first, under heading 2, at why until 250, it was (a) local, and (b) by local officials, and then, at heading 3, how from 250, it was (a) Empire-wide, and (b) ordered by the Emperor.

2. LOCAL PERSECUTION

2.1 Christians were persecuted locally for two reasons:

(a) Refusal to worship community gods

Christians refused to worship the gods of the community. What insurance companies now call Acts of God were ever present - flood, fire, famine, disease, earthquake - so pagans considered it was essential to placate the local gods. Roman society said that you were free to worship the traditional Roman national gods and Christ and Moses and any others that you wished – or none – but you had to keep in with the local gods by pouring a glass of wine onto their altars, or throwing a pinch of incense onto a flame at their altars; failure to honour the gods of the community threatened the security of local people. Romans couldn't understand Christians; 'think whatever you like', they said, 'believe in your heart whatever you like', but you must do what the locals do to placate their local gods. Christians had made the gods angry, so scapegoats were needed. A quote from Tertullian, whom we looked in Lecture 5:

If the Tiber rises to the walls (i.e., floods), if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields (i.e., no irrigation), if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, the cry at once arises, 'The Christians to the lion', *Apology* 40:1-2.

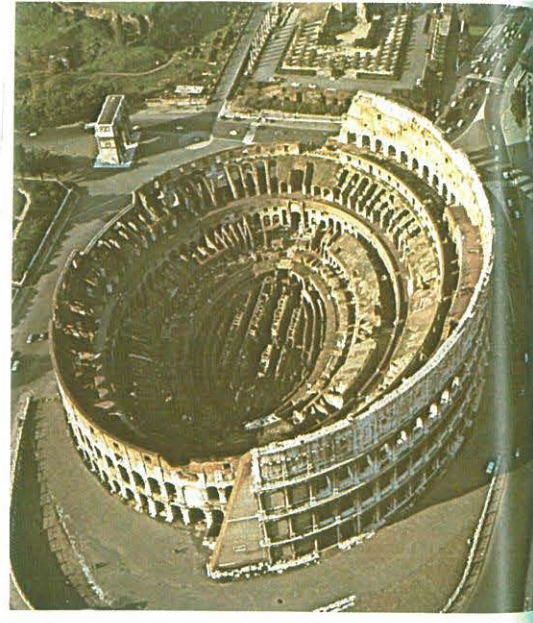
First picture: *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer*, by Jean-Leon Gerome(1883).

Second picture: Christian Martyrdom could be witnessed by thousands of pagans. This is the present-day remains of the Coliseum amphitheatre in Rome, which seated 50,000.



(b) Christians refused to worship the Emperor as divine.

This was important to the Roman authorities, because to bring a sense of cohesion to the huge and sprawling Roman Empire, they wanted a figurehead and so required anyone brought before them to say that the Emperor, Caesar, was divine, and that he should be worshipped as a god. They therefore required people to throw a pinch of incense, or pour a glass of wine, onto the Emperor's statue and to say 'Caesar is Lord.' Not to do so was treason. All over the Empire, Christians refused, because only Christ was Lord. 'We will pray for the Emperor' they said. 'but not pray to him.' Magistrates could not understand why Christians would not say 'Caesar is Lord' but 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor. 12.3) was the basic and fundamental confession of the Christian faith – there could be no other Lord. Not to acknowledge Caesar as Lord was seen as treason, and led to occasional persecution.



An example of this is the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of the church at Smyrna, (Rev. 2:8-11; modern Izmir), aged 86, on 23 February 156.

(Hanks, *70 Great Christians*, 14-17.)

Polycarp had been Bishop for about sixty years, and he was well liked by his fellow-citizens. Nevertheless, when an enraged mob – we do not know what had enraged them – publicly accused Polycarp, the Proconsul had to act. An eyewitness recorded:

'The police captain, who had been sent to arrest Polycarp, tried to persuade him, saying, "What harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and offering incense and thereby saving yourself?", but he refused.

So he was taken to the proconsul, who tried to persuade him to recant, saying, "Swear by the lordship of Caesar; Swear the oath, and I will release you." Polycarp replied, "For 86 years I have been the servant of Christ the Lord, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme him now?"

But the proconsul continued to say, "Swear by the lordship of Caesar." Polycarp answered: "If you suppose that I will swear by the lordship of Caesar, listen carefully: I am a Christian."

The crowd, Gentiles as well as Jews, cried out with uncontrollable anger: "This is the teacher of the Christians, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship."

They shouted that Polycarp should be burned alive - which he was.'

This the earliest surviving account of martyrdom after the New Testament.



2.2 Result of persecution

Paradoxically, martyrdom was the best publicity the Church received. The word 'martyr' originally meant 'witness' and so to be 'persecuted to death' was the ultimate witness.

The Roman public was hard and cruel, but not without compassion and the attitude of martyrs, and particularly of young women, made a deep impression. Persecution was meant to stamp out Christianity, but the courage, courtesy toward enemies, and acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord, led to the conversion of many pagans who had come to watch the death of Christians. Tertullian, whose own conversion was (in part) through observing the bravery of martyrs, wrote: 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

2.3 Why Jews were not persecuted by Rome

We touched on this in Lecture 1; Jews were/are monotheists, they worship Yahweh and no other god. However, for three reasons, they enjoyed a 'special relationship' with the Roman State, allowing them to practice monotheism without persecution.

It began in 161 BC, when Rome was looking for a base in the Eastern Mediterranean from which to attack Persia. A Jewish leader, Judas Maccabaeus, formed an alliance with Rome to combat their mutual enemy, the reviving power of the Seleucids; in return for the Jewish people in Palestine giving Rome a secure base there, they were given freedom to practice only their own religion - not to convert others, but to practice their own.

The special relationship was confirmed and extended in 49 BC, when Julius Caesar was marching his legions from Gaul toward Rome, hoping to capture the City of Rome and to defeat Pompey and to become the sole emperor of the Roman Empire. The allegiance of the Mediterranean world was split between him and his rival Pompey, but but huge numbers of Jews, scattered across the Roman world, supported Caesar. When he won, he rewarded them in 46 BC with a formal treaty, giving them (among other benefits) complete freedom of worship and exemption from military service, which would have been incompatible with Sabbath observance.

The third reason was that when Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC, his successors realized the benefit of having the worldwide Jewish community on their side, so they renewed and extended the privilege of Jews everywhere to practice their distinctive religion, monotheism, without State interference.

That's why early Christians weren't persecuted by the State – for as long as Rome didn't distinguish Christians from Judaism. When Rome realized they were not a branch of Judaism, they became an unauthorised religion.

2.4 Some examples of Roman persecution of Christians:

LOCAL PERSECUTION

DATES	EMPEROR	NATURE AND EXTENT OF PERSECUTION	NOTABLE MARTYRS
64	Nero	Took place in Rome and vicinity only. Christians were made scapegoats for burning Rome. Sadistic measures included burning Christians alive to illuminate Nero's gardens.	Paul Peter
c.80-96	Domitian	Was capricious, sporadic, centered in Rome and Asia Minor. Christians were persecuted for refusal to offer incense to the genius of the emperor.	Clement of Rome John (exiled to Patmos)
98-117	Trajan	Was sporadically enforced. Christians were lumped with other groups whose patriotism was considered suspect. Christians were to be executed when found, but not sought out.	Ignatius Symeon Zozimus Rufus
117-138	Hadrian	Was sporadically enforced. Policies of Trajan were continued. Any who brought false witness against Christians were to be punished.	Telesphorus
161-180	Marcus Aurelius	Emperor was a Stoic who opposed Christianity on philosophical grounds. Christians were blamed for natural disasters.	Justin Martyr Pothinus Blandina
202-211	Septimus Severus	Conversion to Christianity was forbidden.	Leonidas Irenaeus Perpetua
235-236	Maximinus the Thracian	Christian clergy were ordered executed. Christians were opposed because they had supported emperor's predecessor, whom he had assassinated.	Ursula Hippolytus

GENERAL PERSECUTION (Cairns, 91-94)

249-251	Decius	Was first empire-wide persecution. Offering of incense to genius of emperor was demanded. Enthusiastic return to paganism required utter extermination of Christianity.	Fabianus Alexander of Jerusalem
257-260	Valerian	Christians' property was confiscated Christians were prohibited right of assembly	Origen Cyprian Sixtus II
303-311	Diocletian Galerius	This was worst persecution of all. Churches were destroyed, Bibles burned. All civil rights of Christians were suspended. Sacrifice to gods was required.	Mauritius Alban

Comments on the boxes in that chart about 'Local persecution' follow over the next two pages, and then there are comments on 'General persecution' on page 7.

64: NERO

(Lion, 85; Hanks, 70 *Great Christians*, 6-9.)

The first known State persecution. A great fire at Rome in July 64 devastated the city; although nothing implicated the Christian community, the Emperor Nero made them scapegoats and cruelly murdered many Christians in Rome.

Among those killed, then or shortly afterward, were the Apostles Peter and Paul. Peter was probably crucified (John 21:18-19) but Paul, because he was Roman citizen, was beheaded by sword (not crucified).

Although Nero's persecution was severe, horrible, it was a single event, not a policy of repression. It was confined to Rome and it didn't last for long. In any event, it was for alleged arson, not for their beliefs. However, precedent was set and if provincial governors took a scunner (Scots word) (dislike) to Christians, they could follow what Nero had done at Rome.

c90 - 96: DOMITIAN

The Emperor Domitian had grandiose ideas about his own importance, and demanded in 95 that his subjects worship him as 'Lord and God', Christians flatly refused, so he began persecuting them, in Rome and also in Asia Minor, where the Apostle John was banished to the Island of Patmos – where he received the Revelation that closes our New Testament. Domitian also banished his own cousin and family, because of their Christian faith – so by 96, some Roman nobles and senators had become Christians.

Domitian's successors looked for no such loyalty and the crisis passed. One of his successors was Trajan:

98 - 117: TRAJAN

We have correspondence between the Emperor Trajan and Pliny, who was Roman Governor of Bythinia, on the south shore of the Black Sea. c112 Pliny was given a list of local Christians. He knew that Christianity was an illegal religion, but he wasn't sure what to do with them, so he wrote to the Emperor for advice. He explained that he had questioned 'two maid-servants who were called deaconesses'. He had found that Christians met to take oaths to behave well, sang hymns to Christ, and took 'ordinary and harmless food'. So, Pliny had concluded there was nothing subversive in Christianity, but it was an illegal religion. He had therefore asked those brought before him if they were Christians; if they said they were, he had given them the opportunity to deny their faith and to sacrifice to the pagan gods. If they still maintained they were Christians, he ordered them to be executed, not for anything they had done before the trial, but because their refusal to do what the Court demanded showed disrespect for Rome and the government's right to rule.

Emperor Trajan replied that Pliny was right to deal with Christians in this way, His reply is important for three reasons. First, he set out what had evidently been the practice of Rome for some time. Secondly, his 'guidance' became the official Roman policy toward Christians throughout the Empire. Thirdly, it explains why Rome found Christians threatening – Rome saw them as disrespectful of its tradition and civilisation.

So, the legal position c112 was that to be a Christian was a capital offence, but action was taken only if there was a local disaster or an official complaint. Until 250, imperial policy was not to waste State resources in seeking out Christians, That accounts for the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch c112 (Lecture 2, scapegoat for a huge earthquake) and of Polycarp in 155 (refusal to worship Caesar). Polycarp, as we saw moment ago, had been a Christian for 86 years and had never before been challenged to say that 'Caesar is Lord'. It was only when an official complaint was made to the police or the governor that action was taken.

117 - 138: HADRIAN, who built the wall from Newcastle to Carlisle, Hadrian's Wall.

Hadrian succeeded Trajan and followed the same general policy - only if an accusation was made would action be taken. If someone brought a malicious charge and it was proved to be false, the accuser would be punished instead, so people would think twice about bringing accusations against Christians.

161 - 180: MARCUS AURELIUS

See the second note on the chart. In 166, there were severe plagues, floods and famines. Marcus Aurelius disliked Christians, so he encouraged mob violence against them - local violence.

202 - 211: SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

Syncretism in vogue - what we call pluralism - 'pick and mix' and put them all together in the local temple. The corollary was a decree in 202 that Christians must not proselytise - the first such imperial edict on Christians - so leave them alone unless they evangelise. If they did, they were liable to local persecution. Apart from that, the Church had nearly fifty years of peace throughout world and grew rapidly until 249 - section 3 below.

235 - 236: MAXIMINIUS.

He conducted a personal vendetta, as on the second part of the note, and targeted leaders of the Church, including the Bishop of Rome, who was Hippolytus - remember, the man in the statue in Lecture 2 - and also the Bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem.

3. GENERAL PERSECUTION

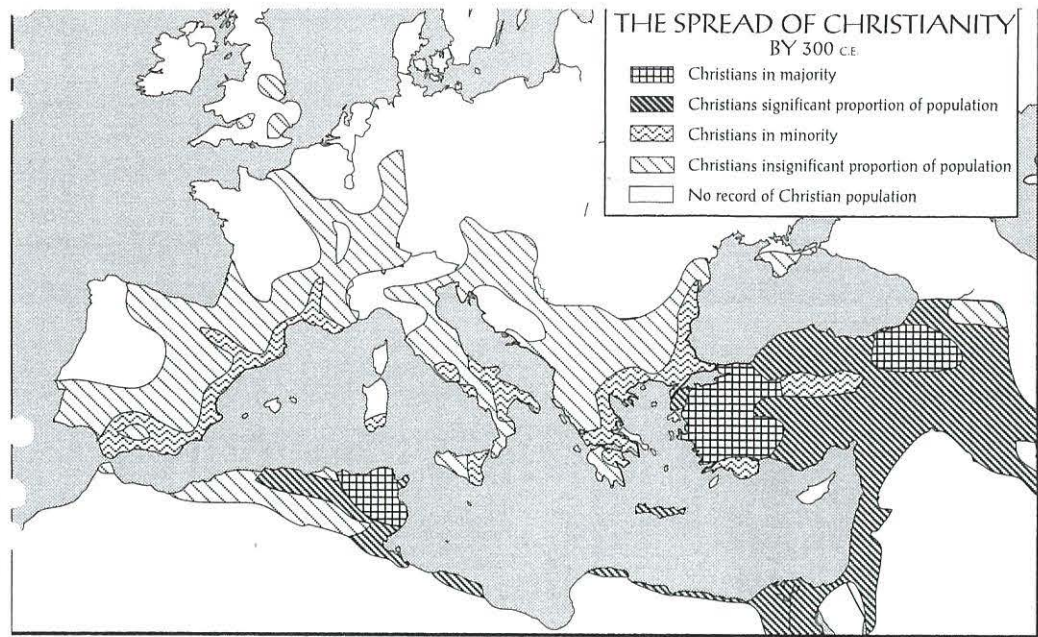
3.1 249 - 251: DECIUS

The second part of the chart on page 5 brings us to a new policy, empire-wide persecution. In 249, the emperor Decius looked at the deteriorating situation throughout empire (inflation, plague, epidemic, barbarian invasions) and decided that the Roman gods were displeased, because there were so many who were now Christians and who would not acknowledge them. Accordingly, he ordered everyone (Christian, pagan, everyone) to sacrifice to the gods of the empire and to obtain a certificate that they had complied. Commissions were set up in every city to supervise the sacrifice and to give certificates of compliance.

This was the first universal persecution of Church and the Church was ill-prepared for it. We saw last time, when we looked at the life of Cyprian, what happened at Carthage - in some congregations, up to three-quarters of the Christians sacrificed to the Roman gods or obtained a false certificate that they had done so. Decius was killed two years later, and how to deal with those who had 'lapsed', and who now wanted back into church, gave rise problems, as we explored last time.

3.2 257 - 260: VALERIAN

Valerian did what Decius had done - said the Christians had angered the gods, so persecution resumed in 257. Cyprian (at Carthage) and Origen (at Alexandria). It ended two years later on the emperor's death - many emperors not last long.



After the death of Valerian, there was no imperial-ordered persecution for 43 years, from 260 to 303. The Church expanded rapidly - see the two maps.



303 – 311: DIOCLETIAN

The last box on the chart on page 5. (Hanks, Great Events, 61-65.)

Suddenly, the Church throughout the Roman Empire was subjected to the greatest ever Persecution and the last ever imperial Persecution. First, in February 303, Diocletian ordered all Scriptures to be handed over to the authorities and church buildings to be destroyed throughout the Empire. Christians lost all legal rights and could not bring civil or criminal charges against anyone. A second edict ordered the arrest of Christian leaders, and a third edict, in December 303, compelled them to sacrifice to the Roman gods or face horrendous torture

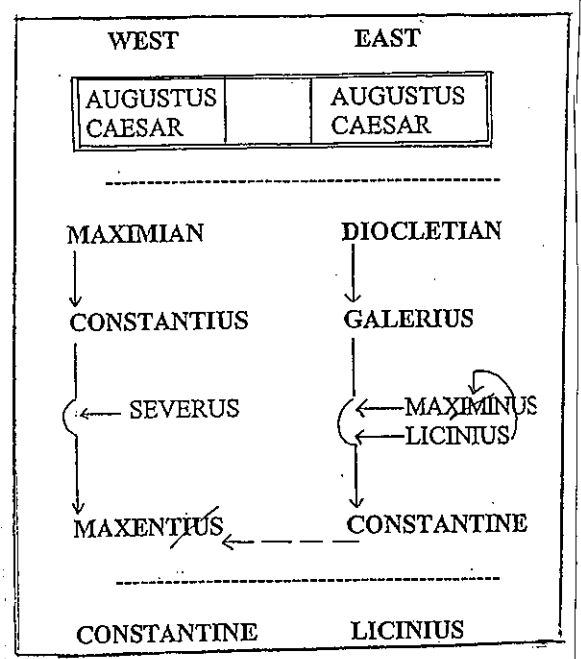
Then, in the final edict, like Decius half a century before, every citizen was required to sacrifice under pain of death. At first it was severe, but persecution petered out. Once again, the greatest effect on the Church was what to do with lapsed Christians, people who had handed over Scriptures or sacrificed.

So what happened next? The stage was set for a dramatic change in the fortunes of the Church.

3.3 The College of Four

We need to go back twenty years. When Diocletian gained control of the Roman Empire in 285, he realised that it was too big for any one man, and so he divided the Empire into West and East and then subdivided the two halves, creating what he called the 'tetrarchy', which means a college of four' people. The chart illustrates this.

The senior two were given title 'Augustus' and each was to have a deputy, known as his 'Caesar'. Diocletian (top right) appointed his friend Maximian as Augustus for West (top left), with Constantius (Constantine's father) as his Caesar; Diocletian kept the East, with Galerius as his Caesar. Each Caesar was to succeed to the higher post of Augustus when his 'boss' retired. Looking to future, two young men, Maxentius (left) and Constantine (right), were being trained to become the next Augusti (Maxentius for the West, Constantine for the East)



The Caesar in East, Galerius, was a nasty man, ruthless and fanatically anti-Christian. He persuaded Diocletian to pass over the chosen heirs for Caesars, and instead of Maxentius and Constantine, who had been groomed for the jobs in West and East respectively, Galerius introduced his henchman Severus as Caesar in the West and his young nephew Maximinus as Caesar in the East. The 'College of Four' was now unstable, not least because two discontented Caesars-elect, Maxentius and Constantine, were determined to assume the role for which they had been trained. Maxentius rented a villa outside Rome, while Constantine joined his father in Britain – see 'York' on the map.

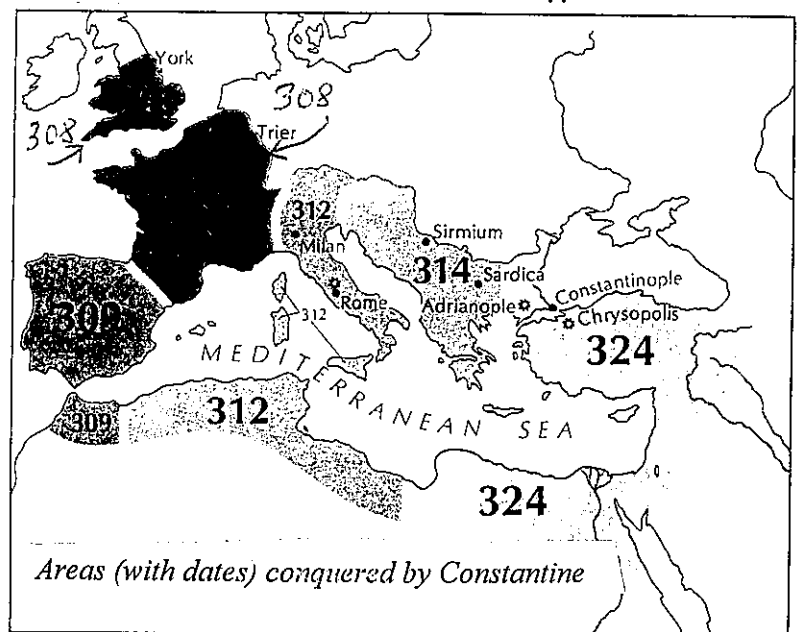
4. CONVERSION OF THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE

(Cairns, 92, 119; Lion, 95, 139-144; Hanks, 70 *Great Christians*, 32-35.)

4.1 Constantine captures Rome

When Constantine's father died at York in 306, troops proclaimed Constantine as new Augustus of the West. He had been groomed for the East, but soldiers in the West supported him. The people of Rome still preferred Maxentius, who was on spot, living in suburbs, and determined to be next Augustus in West.

Constantine, took things slowly – see the map. By 312, Constantine controlled Britain, Gaul (France) and Spain, while Maxentius cont-



rolled Italy and North Africa. Maxentius was ambitious, so (as we say now) Constantine got his retaliation in first, coming down through Italy to confront Maxentius. If Constantine could conquer Rome, he would become sole ruler of Western world. If he lost, Maxentius would become sole ruler of it.

On 27th October 312, Constantine, aged about 40, was preparing to attack the city of Rome with 40,000 soldiers. Maxentius' army was three times larger. What happened on the night before the battle is much debated. In one version of events, Constantine had a vision as the sun was setting in the West – that's the one in the picture below. In another version, Constantine had the vision in a dream during the night before the battle.

Whatever it was, Constantine saw a cross, not the Cross as we know it, but as described on the next page, and the words 'In this sign conquer'.

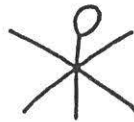
Emperor Constantine



THE CHI-RHO SIGN



The sign Constantine saw



Another way of depicting the Chi-Rho

Constantine saw the first two letters of the Greek name for Christ, *Chi* and *Rho* = X and P, one on top of other, in the shape of a cross; called a 'Christogram'



The 'labarum' or 'chi-rho' symbol: it was either this or a simple cross that Constantine claimed he had seen in the sky and had been instructed in a dream to paint upon his soldiers' shields before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

Constantine painted his helmet, and ordered his soldiers to mark their shields. with this 'Christogram'. On the morning of 28th October 312, battle was joined. Maxentius' soldiers fought like lions to stop Constantine reaching Rome, but gradually they were forced back. Maxentius decided to take refuge in the city of Rome, but in the stampede to get across the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber and into Rome, the bridge collapsed and Maxentius was drowned. Constantine believed that the Christian God had won the battle for him, and so it was the Christian God whom he would revere. The fortunes of the Church changed dramatically and forever. Constantine began to favour the Church openly, restoring property, building new churches, exempting the Church from taxation and clergy from military service, and forbidding work on Sunday, because Sunday was an important day for Christians.

Pause to take stock. On the first Easter Sunday, 12 disciples locked themselves in a room, fearful for their lives, and now, less than 300 years later, the Emperor of Rome is showering favours on them. He had personal reasons for doing this, because he saw the Church as the new way to cement his vast Empire together, one Church, one Empire, working together. Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing we'll consider in a moment, but first, what happened next?

4.2 Constantine and the new era

By 313, Constantine had won all the West and he met the emperor of the East at Milan (see the map on page 9), where they reached agreement, known as the Edict of Milan, 313 - all religions were given equal rights under the law. (Hanks, *Great Events*, 69-75). This did not establish Christianity as the national religion, but put it on par with other religions, and so free from persecution. Whatever experience Constantine had had, his 'conversion' changed relationship between Church and State, and he made Christianity his own preference.

He went on to conquer the rest of the Roman Empire - see the map on page 9 - and made Constantinople (his name) the capital city.

TOPIC - 'WAS CONSTANTINE REALLY A CHRISTIAN?' - was taken at this point in the Lecture; here, it is printed at the end of the Notes for this Lecture.

Weighing the evidence 'for' and 'against', do you consider Constantine really was a Christian? There is no simple answer - see Constantine's own letters and actions and come to your own view - some-one else will have a different one.



Schoenfeld Collection from Three Lions

The Baptism of Constantine by Pope Sylvester I
After a painting by Raphael in the Vatican

Constantine, although professing the Christian faith in 312, put off baptism for as long as possible for various reasons. As commander-in-chief of the Roman army, he had to order his troops into battle, yet a baptized Christian would have been excommunicated for ordering the shedding of blood. Also, in keeping with many others, he wanted to be absolved from as much of his sin as possible, and so postponed baptism – which was believed to cover all sins up to that point in time – for as long as possible. When, in 337 (25 years after his ‘conversion’) he was tasken seriously ill, he asked the bishop for baptism, promising to live a more Christian life should he live through his illness. He died very shortly after his baptism.

4.3 Did the Church conquer the Empire, or did the Empire conquer the Church?

This is a serious question, still debated today – was Constantine’s favouring of the Church good or bad for the Church in the long term? The advantages for the church were real, but there was a price to pay. What the Church gained in quantity it lost in quality. The passport to imperial favour and promotion was now to say that you were a Christian, so people flocked to join the Church, which couldn’t cope with instructing all of them properly in Christianity, so many took their heathen ideas along with them into the Church. Heathen gods were, as Paul found at Athens, innumerable, and their images were to be seen everywhere. Some have suggested that the cult of Christian martyrs and saints arose to take the place of the old heathen gods, and images of them soon appeared in churches. Heathendom was full of superstition, and that superstition was transferred to Christian relics, pieces of the cross, bones and hair and fragments of clothing of saints and martyrs and the ascription of magical powers to these relics;

As we saw under Cyprian last time, the Church had established an excellent network of bishops, an invaluable way of binding a diverse society together. As Constantine favoured the Church, he began to treat the bishops as he treated his civil servants and demanded unconditional obedience, even in purely church matters. As someone put it rather neatly, the Church’s victory over heathenism became the Church’s greatest danger from heathenism. Cairns thinks the latter ,at pages 120 and 152-5.

4.4 The Empire becomes (nominally) ‘Christian’

Constantine had put Christianity on par with other religions, and personally he favoured it, but 67 years later, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. In 380, the Emperor Theodosius I (the Great) made the Christian faith the official and only religion of Empire. He issued an edict:

It is Our Will that all the peoples we rule shall practise that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans. We shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians.

This made heresies legal offences. The next step, in 391, was to prohibit all sacrifices and to destroy all pagan temples or convert them into churches. But, although pagan *worship* was prohibited, pagan *belief* could not be eliminated, and as laws against paganism were not rigidly enforced, pagan worship continued openly for many years and secretly for much longer. In much of the Roman Empire, the countryside was pagan for several more centuries.

Nevertheless, consider how far the Church had come in only 67 years. In 313, Christians numbered one third of the population in limited areas – see the map on page 8 - but in 380, Christianity was established as the religion of the Empire, and the Church was made morally responsible for the whole of society.

4.5 Eusebius of Caesarea, c260 - 339

Cairns, 136; Lion, 22; Lane, 26-27; Hanks, 70 *Great Christians*, 38-42

Be aware of this man for two reasons:

1. His '*History of the Church*', commonly called '*Ecclesiastical History*'

He is called 'the father of church history' because his books are the only account we have of many incidents in the Early Church, its persecutions, its martyrdoms and its heresies. *The Acts of the Apostles* covers about thirty years, from Pentecost through to Paul's two-year imprisonment in Rome, c62. For next C3 we are largely dependent on Eusebius, who painstakingly gathered information from many sources, for his monumental work in ten volumes.

Most of documents referred to in Eusebius' history are no longer extant, so they are known to us only through his work. Through it, we can trace the progress of the Church from c62 to 324, when Constantine became sole emperor of the East as well as of the West. Writing history of the Early Church without Eusebius has been compared with attempting to write the history of the apostolic church without *The Acts of the Apostles*.

He also wrote *The Martyrs of Palestine* (history of ten traumatic years of Great Persecution (303 – 313)).

2. He was an admirer of the Emperor Constantine, and almost all that we know about Constantine's conversion comes from the biography written by Eusebius, *A Life of Constantine*. He was what we now call his 'spin doctor' - at times he came near to blind adulation and ignored the emperor's personal faults.

Biography

Little is known of Eusebius' early life. Born in early 260s, probably in Caesarea, where he received Christian instruction and baptism, and which remained his home throughout his life. Eusebius first forty years were a time of peace for church.

In 296 Eusebius saw – and may have met – the youthful Constantine, who was touring the Eastern empire with the Emperor Diocletian (Emperor 284-305). Then there were the persecutions described earlier in this lecture, then, after Constantine's accession, years of peace.

Constantine, as the first Christian emperor, fascinated Eusebius for the last thirty years of his life. In return for Constantine's support, Eusebius composed a flattering oration, *In Praise of Constantine*, for the Emperor's thirtieth anniversary, calling him 'the living image of Christ' - no less. When Constantine died, Eusebius wrote *A Life of Constantine*; it was not so much biography as an extended obituary. Eusebius died two years later.

5. CHRISTIANS AND SOCIETY TO 313

5.1 The society into which the Church was born

'In a world where licentiousness was rife (though, of course, not universal), where public opinion did not frown on vice, but at best regarded it as perfectly natural and quite inevitable, and at worst treated it as a joke, Christians were characterised by a singular purity of life; they committed neither adultery nor fornication, and could justly boast that though they lived in the flesh they did not live after the flesh.

In contrast to their pagan neighbours, it was not their practice to expose children to death, for they never regarded any child born to them as 'unwanted', and, furthermore, they deemed child-life a sacred thing.

They scorned lying and slander, rapacity and greed; they bore no false witness, coveted no man's property, endeavoured to do by others as they wished others to do by them, and valued their spiritual goods more than their material possessions. ... They showed special consideration for widows and orphans, and, if they came across a homeless stranger in desperate need – for there were no 'social services' in those days – they took him under their roof and befriended him.

Distinctions between the learned and the unlettered, between high and lowly, rich and poor, no longer counted anything. The common slave in Roman Society was usually regarded as a being of inferior clay, to be ranked with his owner's goods and chattels; ... but Christians cared for the slave, and, when he came into their assemblies, he was treated as a brother; in the Church he enjoyed the same rights as other members, and all offices were open to him, ... while if his owner happened to be a Christian, at the Lord's Table master and slave were often found sitting side by side.

Woman, in the ancient world, was usually regarded as man's plaything or his drudge and always deemed inferior to her husband, her lord and master, but Christians did not exalt man above woman or woman above man, and insisted that both sexes had equal rights. Brotherly love amongst Christians was a reality. They took to heart all the teaching of Jesus about mercy, compassion, and service.

The well-to-do in the Church contributed to the support of widows and orphans and the poor and the sick and the unemployed and unemployable. When Christian brethren had been imprisoned or sent to work in the mines for their faith's sake, efforts were made to establish contact with them, to supply them with the food and other comforts which would lighten their lot, and to secure their release. Decent burial was provided for deceased Christians whose relatives were too poor to pay for it. 'We will not tolerate it,' writes Lactantius, 'that the image and creation of God shall be thrown as prey to wild beasts and birds.' In times of plague, Christians ... chose rather to succumb to the pest than to abandon their sick brethren – in marked contrast to their pagan neighbours who fled even from their nearest and dearest when they began to sicken, threw the dying into the streets and left the dead unburied. The pagan Emperor Julian wrote: 'The godless Galileans nourish our poor in addition to their own: while ours get no care from us.'

Whatever else Christianity brought into the world it certainly brought a sublime ethic with a great driving force at the back of it; not only a lofty ideal, but the power to realise it. What was the secret? It cannot be better expressed than in the words of Aristides in his Apology: 'Now the Christians trace their origin from the Lord Jesus Christ...They have the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself graven upon their hearts.'¹

However, until Constantine permitted religious toleration by the Edict of Milan in 313, Christian values brought Christians into sharp conflict with the pagan society in which they lived, for several reasons. They were seen as (a) anti-social, (b) secretive and (c) censorious, and these are explored in the next heading.

¹ L. H. Marshall, , *The Challenge Of New Testament Ethics*, 1956, London, Macmillan, 1.

5.2 Christians were seen as:

(a) Anti-social. Most Christians would not buy meat in the market, because it had been offered to idols; they would not attend public celebrations, because that meant worshipping the local gods; they would not attend the theatre, because plays portrayed sexual immorality. They wouldn't go to watch gladiators fighting each other to death, and they even had scruples about going to the local hospital, because priests of the god of healing prayed over patients. Many Christians would not send their children to Roman schools, where pagan religion was taught, and they wouldn't teach in Roman schools, because teaching meant telling pupils about the gods of Greece and Rome.

(b) Secretive. The pagan world was suspicious about early Christians; they met in secret. The more they were suspected, more secretive they became, and more secretive they became, more they were suspected.

(c) Censorious.

Christians opposed much of what was commonly accepted in Roman society, such as abortion, infanticide and easy divorce. Not surprisingly, this made Christians unpopular with their pagan neighbours. Only when the Constantine became a Christian, and used his authority to promote Christian teaching, did the position change.

5.4 Case study on Tertullian's book *On Idolatry*, written in 211.

Tertullian wrote about living as a Christian in a world where paganism was embedded in every trade and every social occasion. How did a Christian live differently from unbelievers, who are steeped in idol-worship? A précis of his book is:

Christians should steer clear of occupations that support idol-worship. For example, Christians in building/decorating/engraving trades must avoid making, decorating or depicting idols. They won't be out of work - there will always be general building work on private houses, official residences, blocks of flats, baths, etc, and taste for luxurious living will keep them more than fully employed.

Swearing oaths by pagan gods is prohibited, spoken or written into a contract.

What about those in a position of power? In principle, there is no reason why not, so long as there is no sacrificing, presiding at games, taking oaths, trying capital cases, sentencing of any kind. However, as society is currently constituted, public offices reek of paganism, so a Christians cannot enter public life.

Obedience to government is right, but as book of Daniel makes clear, not to the point of idolatry.

What about public holidays? Special celebrations? Christians may attend ceremonies such as betrothals, marriages and naming ceremonies, but must not accept invitations to sacrifices. But if they happen for some other reason to be with a friend or relation who is performing a sacrifice, they are mere spectators, not participators in idolatry. Christian slaves may be compelled to attend sacrifices, but as long as they do not actually assist in performing a sacrifice, they can avoid idolatry.

If your neighbour knows you are a Christian, you'd better live as one, or you will cause him to think you are ashamed of Christ. Don't take part in sacrifices, don't blaspheme. On other hand, don't be a killjoy - mix with your fellow man. It's going to be difficult - it is so easy to end up living as a pagan. But you can avoid it, if you genuinely fear to commit idolatry, and this marks out Christians as different from pagans. This needs to be made clear to converts and persisted with by Christians.

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

TOPIC FOR LECTURE 7 - WAS CONSTANTINE REALLY A CHRISTIAN?

Please tell us whether, weighing up evidence 'for' and 'against', you consider whether Constantine really was a Christian.

Before we come to this Topic, the lecture will have covered the life of Constantine up to the morning of 28th October 312, when he won a decisive battle and became undisputed Emperor of the western half of the Roman Empire. Constantine believed that the Christian God had won the battle for him, and so it was the Christian God whom he would revere.

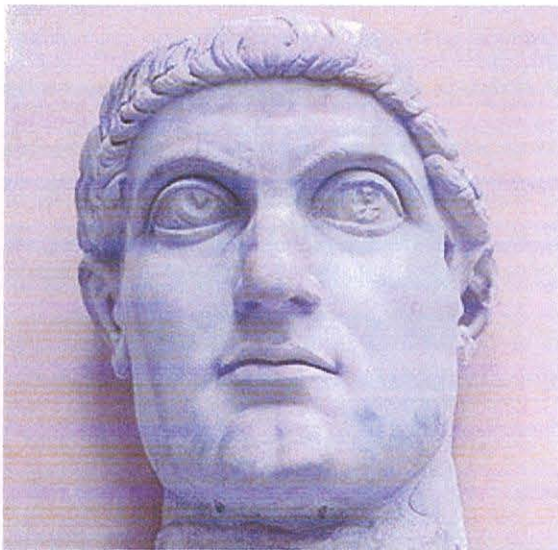
The fortunes of the Church changed dramatically and forever. But was Constantine really a Christian?

Cairns is fairly negative at 119; Lion is more favourable at 139-40.

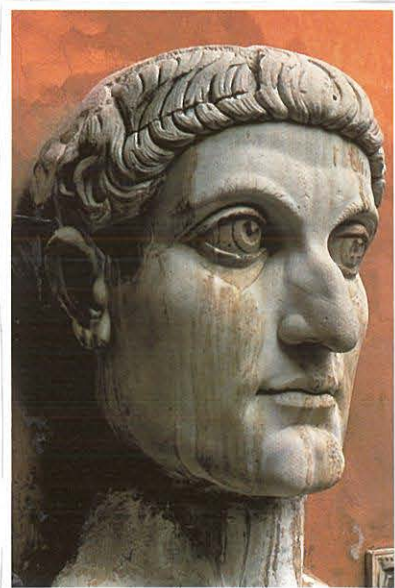
More positive views are taken at:

<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/constantine/f/033111-Constantine-and-Christianity.htm>

There is no simple answer – whatever conclusion you come to, someone else will have a different one.



Emperor Constantine



Above: The head from the colossal statue of Constantine which once stood in his basilica in Rome.

After the Topic, the lecture will go on to consider:

Whether, over the rest of the C4, the Church conquered the Empire, or whether the Empire conquered the Church?

and

How, before the end of the C4, the whole Empire became (nominally) Christian.