

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 17

Constantine – Part One

Lord John Norwich, in his first volume on Byzantium, asserts that, “No ruler in all history – not Alexander nor Alfred, not Charles nor Catherine, not Frederick nor even Gregory – has ever more fully merited his title of ‘the Great’ than Constantine.¹ He then goes so far as to assert that aside from Jesus Christ, the Buddha and Mohammed, Constantine stakes claim to being the most influential man in human history.

Norwich reasons that two decisions of Constantine merit him such accolades. First, Constantine decided to adopt Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Second, Constantine chose to move the Empire’s capital from Rome to Byzantium, which was renamed in his honor, Constantinople. For 1600 years the city carried that name. Today, we call it Istanbul.

Certainly, those two epic decisions have altered human history greatly, but within those decisions are many facets and multiple smaller decisions that have also considerably changed the world.

In our study on church history, we will examine Constantine individually as well as the effects his choices had upon the church. This will take multiple classes, but it is very formative to much of church history as well as secular history! Our first lesson will consider the necessary background of the Roman Empire that puts the reign of Constantine into context. We will then consider his own spiritual experiences and the edicts and results of many of his general rulings that affected the church. We will save the Council of Nicea and a few other matters for later classes.

BACKGROUND

To put Constantine and Rome into perspective, it might be useful to back up to Julius Caesar and get a good running start!

In 49 B.C., Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great began a civil war fighting for control of the Roman Empire. Julius was not able to finish winning this fight because of a run in with Brutus, and his departure from this world left his adopted

¹ Norwich, *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*, (Knopf 2005, p. 32).

son (who was in reality Caesar's nephew) Octavius to finish the job. Octavius is better known by his ruling name, Caesar Augustus.²

Caesar Augustus reigned for 44 years including the year when Jesus was born. Caesar's household continued to reign as Emperors of the Empire through Tiberius (14–37 A.D.), Caligula (37–41), Claudius (41–54), and Nero (54–68). Once Nero died, however, the Empire began a shift. In 69, four different men held the title of Caesar. This was the time when the Jewish uprising was in fever pitch in Judea and Jerusalem. The General who was stomping out the rebellion was Vespasian. In 69, Vespasian left Judea to return to Rome and assume the mantle as Emperor. Vespasian left his son Titus to finish up the re-conquest of Jerusalem and defeat of the Jews at Masada.

Vespasian ruled from 69 to 79 when he then handed over the reins of the Empire to Titus (79–81) who was then followed by his brother Domitian (81–96). This is termed the "Flavian Dynasty" of Roman history.

After the assassination of Domitian, who by all accounts was a wretched ruler, the Roman Senate attempted to re-assert its power by appointing Rome's ruler. Since Julius Caesar, the ruler was always the one who held the command of the powerful army. The Senate, however, appointed an old fellow without an army named Nerva. Nerva ruled, but without army support, his rule would not have lasted much of a month! So, Nerva smartly adopted as his son and designated successor General Trajan!

Nerva's reign was brief (96–98) before he died, but to Romans, he started what was considered the "Golden Age" (so named because of the peace and prosperity of the times). This was also when the Roman Empire reached its peak in occupation of land. By picking a qualified man to succeed him and grooming that man for the job, Nerva made quality the preeminent characteristic of Roman rulers rather than genetics! To solve the need for familial continuity on the Roman throne, Nerva used the system of adopting the adult man set to succeed him. This process was followed by Trajan (98–117), Hadrian (117–135), and Antoninus Pius (135–161) who selected and adopted Marcus Aurelius (161–180). Marcus Aurelius, however, set up his real son Commodus (180–192) as the next emperor. With Commodus came the end of the Golden Age!

A civil war ensued after the assassination of Commodus, a rather unpopular ruler. The successors are called the "Severian Emperors" after Septimus Severus, who won the civil war and ruled from 193-211. The Severian Emperors ruled from 193

² Augustus will become henceforth a common title for the Roman Emperors as will the name "Caesar." "Augustus" means "Revered One."

to 235. But theirs was not a golden age! There were some rather significant problems that the Empire faced.

The problems were rooted in some events that occurred toward the end of the 100's and early 200's. A plague in the days of Marcus Aurelius is estimated to have killed over 1 million people (the population of the time was about 60 million). In today's population of 7 billion, that works out to roughly 115 million dieing from a disease or illness. Tied together with the deaths, the tribes and nations that bordered the Empire were causing problems in this same time period.

The net effect of these problems was a strain on the military, fewer people to meet military ranks, higher taxes to maintain order and peace, yet fewer people to pay those taxes. The tax burden was increasingly assessed against the poorer folks to the benefit of the wealthy. Because of these problems, the ruler Geta (211–217) authorized full citizenship of the male population, opening up many more to taxation and required duty in 212.

Things went from bad to worse during the reign of the “Barrack Emperors” (235 – 284). During these 49 years, Rome saw 25 different men claim the throne as Emperor. The Empire was slipping to collapse when Diocletian assumed the throne in 284.

Diocletian was a principal persecutor of the church, but more on that in a moment. First, we need to note that in an effort to keep secure borders and also maintain a tight grip on the public, Diocletian had his dear friend Maximian appointed as a “Co-Emperor.” Maximian was to rule the Western half of the Empire and keep those borders secure while Diocletian did the same in the Eastern half.

To further assist in state affairs, Diocletian appointed two “Junior Caesars” to be the successors to both Diocletian and Maximian. These Junior Caesars were given their own portion of the kingdom to govern, making four rulers (a “tetrarch”). Diocletian then set out to address some major problems in the Empire:

1. Economic problems were huge. Inflation was out of control. The military had doubled in size because it was over extended. Those costs alone were great. Added to that was the government itself. The bureaucracy was ten times what it had been during the start of the Golden Age.
2. These economic issues had caused deep rifts and divisions among the “haves and have-nots” in society.
3. The Church stood out in this like a sore thumb. Scholars estimate that Christians made up about ten percent of the population at this time. Christianity was well organized. Bishops ran the local churches and

they would periodically convene in regional councils (called “synods”) to unite in their positions and plans. What is more, even though the church went through periods of persecution, it was still very wealthy at this point. Many Christians would give their belongings in life or at death to the church.

The church problem was particularly vexing to Diocletian. For the church had the hearts of many citizens who saw it using its wealth to aid the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and take care of the widows and orphans. These were all things the Roman government did not do. What is more, the church thought and readily proclaimed that Rome was immoral. The Romans, on the other hand, thought that Christian’s failure to honor the gods and worship appropriately could well have been the reason that the 200’s had been so troublesome. It seems a common concern was that the gods were punishing Rome for these irreverent Christians.

As part of his solution to what ailed the empire, Diocletian made fixing the church issue a priority and a great persecution began in 303. Stage One of Diocletian’s plan was to take the head off the church. So, Diocletian declared that the other three rulers were to follow his lead in: (A) arresting the Bishops, (B) destroying the places of worship, and (C) burning all copies of scripture. It is estimated that 2,000 to 5,000 died as martyrs during this persecution.

We know that not all three other Tetrarchs followed Diocletian’s instructions fully. In Britain, the Junior Caesar Constantius destroyed buildings and books, but did not arrest Bishops.

ENTER CONSTANTINE

In a most shocking moment, Diocletian and Maximian retired in 305! Never before had a Roman ruler stepped down before death! Diocletian took an estate and became a gentleman farmer! This allowed the Junior Caesars to take the title “Augustus” and become the top two rulers. The plan was for these two to then pick Junior Caesars to take their place. Before things could get set in stone, however, Constantius died in Britain. Rather than let the system take its course, Constantius’s army designated Constantius’s son, Constantine as Augustus Caesar, the successor to Constantius.

Galerius (the other Augustus Caesar who had been the other Junior Caesar before the retirement of Diocletian and Maximian) did not approve! For that matter, neither did the retired Maximian! Maximian and his son, who was appointed by the system to be a real Caesar, protested that Constantine had no business with the title.

Constantine did not back down. Instead, he took his army and went to fight it out with Maximian and his son in 312. The battle was on Maximian's turf, Italy. Outside Rome and the Tiber River, Constantine prepared for the big battle, the show down. 24 hours before the battle something significant happened. The accounts differ a bit,³ but Constantine claimed to have received a vision/dream. In the vision and dream, he was told that he was to do battle and win under the sign of the cross. So, Constantine had his soldiers mark their shields with a painted cross and the letters that abbreviated the name of Christ.

The next day, Constantine and his men decisively won the battle. At this point was Constantine a Christian? Scholars debate the point. Before he left Rome, Constantine accepted the Roman Senate's accolades and honors, but refused to participate in the Senate's pagan ceremony in a pagan temple. Also before leaving, Constantine gave the palace of Fausta to the Roman Bishop/Pope as a meeting place and residence. Constantine also instructed the construction of a church next to that palace.⁴

One thing was certain: Constantine was now the uncontested Caesar of the West! Before Constantine left Rome, he accepted that his only concern now was the Caesar of the East, Licinius.⁵

³ We have two differing versions of what happened. The version written first (by Lactantius) just 6 years or so after the battle records that Constantine saw Christ in a dream and was told to paint on the shields of his soldiers an inverted X with the top line curved to form the Greek abbreviation Chi Rho, the first two letters in Christ. Eusebius (yes, the same Eusebius who wrote the Church History we have referenced many times in this class) was a biographer of Constantine. In his book, appropriately named *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius writes that at noon before the battle, Constantine was praying to the pagan God of his father when he and his men saw a cross over the sun with an inscription telling them to conquer in that sign. Later in the night, Christ appeared to Constantine telling him to paint the cross on the shields of his army. Eusebius wrote in 335-338, some 20-25 years later, but did claim Constantine himself as the source of the story.

⁴ This certainly makes a compelling case that Constantine believed solidly in the Christian faith, but there is another side to the coin. For example, in 328 Constantine renames Byzantium Constantinople, founding it as a new city in his own name. The new city was dedicated in 330 in honor of Christian martyrs. Yet as rebuilt, there were many indicia of paganism both in the form of Temples and statues.

⁵ If you're keeping track, Licinius was the new Augustus who took over for Galarius after Galerius died the year earlier!

Constantine met with Licinius in Milan in 313 in an effort to begin a joint rule with harmony. At Constantine's prompting, the rulers issued an edict, appropriately called "The Edict of Milan," reversing the anti-Christian edict of Diocletian. This was followed by a second edict in 314. These two edicts not only made it legal to worship as a Christian, but also required that all church property be returned to the churches.

Let's consider some of the more notable actions of Constantine in his early years as ruler and the resulting effect on the church. First, the edict on freedom to worship presented a theological and practical problem for the church. During Diocletian's persecutions, a number of church clergy and laity (read that "normal members") recanted their faith. When faced with persecution or death, there were many who opted instead to sacrifice to Caesar and, in effect, renounce their faith. Now that Christianity was legal, many of these came back into the church explaining that they still believed, but had disguised their beliefs to live! Much like a Jew might have hidden Jewish heritage during the Nazi regime in an effort to be spared concentration camps, this stirred up mercy and understanding in the hearts and minds of many. Yet, others saw this as wholesale apostasy that could never be rewarded by return into church, especially for church leaders. Ultimately, most churches welcomed these people back, with the caveat that clergy who had denied faith could no longer serve in a clergy role.

Constantine had incredible support from the church and Christian community, so much so that Licinius started persecuting Christians in spite of the edict in an effort to quell some of the burgeoning support for Constantine in Lucinius's half of the Empire. It was just a matter of time (10 years in fact) before Constantine invaded and put Lucinius to death.

Constantine had the Roman treasury open up for churches. All money that had gone to pagan temples and worship was stopped. Pagan assets were seized and law restricted pagan worship.

Christian faith was quickly seen as a better way to advance in the ranks of government. And for not the last time in history, politicians saw claiming a Christian faith and devotion a stepping-stone to political success.

Constantine enacted the first “Blue Law.” He decreed that Sunday⁶ was to be a day of rest and worship. Commerce in the Empire was only for the other six days of the week (in this, Constantine did exempt farmers who needed to plant and harvest on Sundays for a proper crop).

Ultimately, shameful things begin occurring, as the church and government expressed hatred toward those who are labeled pagans, heretics, Jews, or merely rival factions in Christianity. The hatred includes persecutions and violence in ways that are shameful for the church that had once been subject to persecution itself. But those are matters for another class!⁷

⁶ We do not have full knowledge about the originations of our calendar. There is no doubt that “seven” days in a week in the Jewish calendar comes from the seven days of creation. The Romans had a seven day week prior to Christianity, although no one can trace its origins. The Jews had no names for the days of the week excepting the Sabbath. Otherwise, the days were merely numbered (“First Day,” “Second Day,” etc.). The names of the days come from the 7 solar system features known to the Romans. Sunday comes from the sun. Monday comes from the moon. Tuesday was named originally from the planet Mars (the planet being named after the Roman god of war, “Mars”). French, Spanish, and other languages with Latin as their root (called “Romance” languages after Rome) call Tuesday something close to “Mars.” For example, in French “Tuesday” is “Mardi.” Our English “Tuesday” comes from the Anglo Saxon/Nordic god Tiw. Wednesday is named after the Anglo Saxon/Nordic god “Woden.” In French it keeps the Roman root of the planet Mercury, “Mercredi.” “Thursday” in English is named after the Norse god “Thor.” In French and other Romance languages, it keeps its Roman affiliation with Jupiter (French = “Jeudi”). Friday (“Vendredi” in French after “Venus”) is named after the Anglo Saxon/Norse god “Freya.” Saturday has retained its reference to its origin of “Saturn.”

⁷ We hope to cover in later classes the founding of Constantinople, the many church buildings of Constantine and the impact on religious architecture, the interference (or guidance) of Constantine in affairs of the church, etc.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Emperors, dynasties, and kingdoms come and go, but Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God are eternal. “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” (Is. 40:8)
2. God’s plan never relied upon kings or kingdoms of man. God works through and in spite of such. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Rom. 13:1-2)
3. Watch out for the convenient Christian! “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21)
4. An interesting point: Scholars look at the life of Constantine and wonder and debate: Was he a Christian? If so, when was the conversion? Constantine’s life reflects some actions that indicate, “Yes!” But by the same token, there are many actions that indicate he was just politically astute. He chose the path that brought him victory and power. He certainly was ruthless and killed many in his path. He was eventually baptized at the end of his life, and most scholars believe that he was genuinely a man of faith at that point. Still others question when that conversion really took place. The point for home here? Will people look back at our life after we die and question the sincerity of our faith? Do people do that now? God forbid it be so.