



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 10 – The Roman Emperor Constantine the Great

When Constantine the Great took control of the Roman Empire, the Christian churches in the Roman Empire experienced a sudden change. Before his rule, the Christians were persecuted. Now they were tolerated. Then they became predominant. Then the Christian religion became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Christians even started persecuting non-Christians. In fact, the Roman papacy gradually replaced the Roman empire as the dominating authority in Europe, although the Roman Empire remained the major authority in the East.

Constantine gained his power gradually by defeating all of his rivals in armed combat. The last rival to be defeated was Licinius in 323 AD. Constantine had the same goals as his predecessors Decius and Diocletian. He wanted to restore the ancient glory of the empire. Decius and Diocletian tried to attain this goal by uniting the empire in the worship of the traditional Roman gods. Constantine attempted to use Christianity to unify the Roman Empire. In the interest of unifying his power, he changed the headquarters of the empire from Rome to Byzantium (present-day Istanbul), which he then named Constantinople after himself. Byzantium was situated right between Europe and Asia and proved to be a good choice. Byzantium/Constantinople retained its importance for a thousand years, while Rome was taken over by barbarians and began to sink into decay and lose influence.

Was Constantine converted to Christianity? Even when he began to favor the Christian religion, he did not take a course of instruction as a catechumen. He was not even baptized until shortly before his death in 337 AD. This may have been because of a false belief that baptism only washes away sins that have committed up to the time one is baptized. Constantine also participated in heathen rituals and yet at the same time he took control of the church, and no church leader stood in his way. The historian Gonzales makes the claim that Constantine was a sincere believer in the power of the Christian God since he believed that the Christian God had given him his victories. “For him, the Christian God was a very powerful being who would support him as long as he favored the faithful” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 122). Other historians also believe that the evidence indicates that Constantine was a sincere Christian. But did he believe in Jesus as his Savior from sin? Only God knows the truth of the matter.

Constantine was opposed by the traditional Romans who promoted the old Roman gods, so he had to move slowly. But in 324 AD he ordered all of his soldiers to worship God on Sunday, the holy day of the Christians. In 325 AD he ordered all the Christian bishops to gather at Nicea to iron out their differences on a number of doctrinal and practical issues. He

wanted the Christianity in his empire to be united, even as he wanted his empire to be united. After his death, however, the traditionally minded Roman Senate declared Constantine himself to be a god like many of the emperors who preceded him.

Since Constantine succeeded in bringing the official persecution of Christians to an end, most of the Christian leaders believed him to be God's gift to them. They willingly went along with his decrees, even when he took it upon himself to give orders to the church. Other Christians, however, recognized that, because Christianity was favored by the emperor, many people were becoming Christians without a true inner change and that the church was losing its spiritual and moral integrity. Many of these tried to escape from worldliness by becoming hermits and monks. Satan also began a new method of attack on the church by raising up false teachers who became very influential and disturbed the faith of simple Christians.

The acceptance of Christianity also led to a change from simple worship in Christian homes to a more elaborate style of worship in special buildings called basilicas, led by men who dressed in more expensive vestments. Helena, the mother of Constantine, built the Church of the Nativity in the Holy Land and another structure on the Mount of Olives. The basilicas generally had three parts: the atrium (the entryway), the nave (the main part of the church), and the raised sanctuary where the officiant sat and led the worship. The emphasis was not on Christ crucified, but on Christ in glory as ruler of the universe.

Baptistries were built for the baptisms of the many who were now entering the church. The baptistries had a pool of water with steps descending into the pool. The usual mode of baptism was immersion or pouring, but dabbing water on the head was preferred in certain circumstances, such as sickness or scarcity of water. As the church advanced into colder climates, immersion was replaced by methods using less water.

This was a new age for Christianity. Could the message of Christ be preserved in this new age?

Questions:

1. How did the lives of Christians change when Constantine became the ruler?
2. Why did official persecution of Christians come to an end?
3. What led Constantine to favor Christianity over other religions?
4. What makes it doubtful whether Constantine was himself a Christian?
5. Why did many Christians believe that Constantine was the answer to prayer?
6. Which city became Constantine's headquarters?
7. Why were more people joining the church in Constantine's time?
8. What were the new dangers facing the church under Constantine's rule?
9. How did Christian worship change after persecution ceased?
10. How were the basilicas designed?
11. How were baptisms conducted in the new baptistries that were built?

