

THE ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH:

SAINT CONSTANTINE

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OUTLINE

Thesis: The conversion of Constantine and his devotion and impact upon the Christian Church brought the status of sainthood to Constantine.

- I. The history of Constantine in brief
 - A. Crowned August of the West
 - B. Crowned Roman Emperor

- II. The faith that Constantine proclaimed
 - A. Exhibits mercy upon an enemy
 - B. Promotion of Christian welfare
 - C. Love for truth and unity

- III. The presuppositions Constantine exhibited
 - A. Emperor as man's representative to God
 - B. Unity requires the interference of the Emperor and state in church affairs

The events of the fourth century of Christianity were monumental in the development of Christianity. Of all the events and activities¹ of the fourth century, the one of most lasting impact was the conversion and influence of the first Christian Emperor, Constantine. Within Orthodox circles, he is regarded as a saint. Saint Constantine's impact has brought love and adoration from Orthodox Christians, and the opposite extreme of objection, disgrace, and unfounded resentment of many Protestant Christians. The feelings for this emperor seem to bring out extremes, for there are some that view the life of Saint Constantine as the behavior of a pseudo Christian². Is history, and the availability of evidence, able to confirm one way or the other the sainthood of Constantine?

¹ Such events included the Reign of Terror by the Emperor Diocletian upon Christians, the worst persecutions in both severity and locality. Other events included the development of monasticism, monumental collection of the writings of the church fathers, Ecumenical Councils, and large schisms within the church.

² For instance, "Constantine was also a consummate politician. (Some cynics even say that his whole "vision" was a ploy to hitch his political wagon to the rising religious movement of the empire.)" This next statement occurs one paragraph later in reference to Christianity and paganism. "Constantine himself, before his conversion, had been an ardent worshipper of the sun god, and some say he never really let go of that. Change the names a little, and you can keep your holidays." . Christian History Institute and Gateway Films/Vision Video, 1990, From Christ to Constantine: The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church 2030 Wentz Church Road, Worcester, PA. Program 6: Transition, page 30.

It is very common to find this, or a similar expression among evangelical Christians, "By the fourth century, the original vim and vigour of the church had waned. One reason for this was that the church in Rome grew supreme through its close contact with the emperor. It began to cater to the pagan people of Europe. Coveting new land and wealth, it began to entice these people by building huge cathedrals, clothing its bishops in magnificence, and instituting pompous ceremonies. The 'world' crowded into the Church and decadence was the result." 1-1, Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada, 1995 New Member Handbook.

Space does not allow us to counteract these claims suffice to say that the Church often declares Christ as the "Sun" and as the "light giver." As to the charge of paganism within the church, Father Schmemmann's counter point can be viewed, Alexander Schmemmann, The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy, trans. Lydia W. Kesich, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977; reprint, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 2003), 98-99 (page references are to reprint edition).

Constantine was born to Constantius and Helena around 274AD, in Naissus, which is currently Nish, Serbia.³ His father Constantius, was one of the two Augusti⁴. As the emperor had divided the empire into two main territories, Constantius represented the western regions. It was the practice for the current Augusti to choose their successor, and Constantius had selected his son, Constantine to reign.⁵ Constantine was crowned as the western Augustus at York, Britain, in 306AD⁶. However, the Augustus of the East took it upon himself to select successors for both territories of the empire, which in effect caused a civil war involving six competitors.⁷ Constantine was also not a stranger to intrigue. He made a pact with Licinius, who was one of his competitors for the western Augustus, by having his half sister Constantia marry Licinius at the end of 311AD.⁸ With one less competitor, Constantine was able to proclaim himself the victor of the west by the defeat of Maxentius of Rome, at Milvian Bridge, on October 28, 312AD. The night prior to the battle proved instrumental in the development of Christianity as Constantine had a vision, or a dream about the Christ of the Christians, and he was to conquer in that name.⁹ As the winner of the western territories, Constantine would

³ Ted Byfield, ed. The Christians: Their First 2000 Years (Edmonton, AB: Christian History Project, 2003), vol. 3, By This Sign: From the Decian Persecution to the Constantine Era. Vol. 3, 137.

⁴ This would be similar to a vice regal.

⁵ Byfield, 136.

⁶ Schmemmann, 65.

⁷ Byfield, 139.

⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁹ Ibid, 142-43. Even if that initial event was later modified and greatly Christianized, Constantine knew that his success was due to Divine intervention, as Rome was too well guarded and Maxentius' armies were much larger. Father Alexander Schmemmann suggests that even if the "sign of the cross," or "in this sign conquer" were not found in the earliest accounts, Constantine still had a dream to install on his weaponry a Christian symbol, Schmemmann, 65. Further proof of divine intervention of the Christian God can be interpreted by the display, in Rome, of a statue of Constantine holding a spear with a cross on it, and this within a year of his victory over Maxentius. Secondly, Constantine authors the Edict of Milan which brought equality of all religions to the west and eventually to the east. This edict brought Christianity from illegality to legality, from illegitimacy to legitimacy. It was tactfully done to keep the peace within the empire which was still largely pagan, and in the eastern provinces,

eventually become the Emperor, with the defeat of his last rival, Licinius, and almost immediately proclaim the empire as Christian.¹⁰ The newly crowned emperor would go on to organize the first Ecumenical Council in May, 325AD at Nicea, or what is currently Iznik, Turkey,¹¹ over issues of heresy and unity of the church.¹² Constantine would eventually repose in the year 337AD, ironically on Pentecost.¹³

It has been previously mentioned that there is a condescending attitude expressed toward Saint Constantine because of the syncretism of paganism, its “ideas and images”¹⁴ with Christianity. It is postulated that somehow this syncretism is a display and expression of limited devotion towards Christianity on the part of the Emperor. The historical records however, leave a different impression, and an overwhelming one at that. For instance, Constantine showed mercy upon his enemies, particularly his arch rival Licinius.

... they became enemies, the pretended treaty of friendship between them having been violated.... Licinius was at last utterly defeated...and surrendered himself to Constantine. Accordingly he having taken him alive, treated him with the utmost humanity, and would by no means put him to death, but ordered him to take up his abode and live in tranquility at Thessalonica.¹⁵

was still persecuting Christians. Thirdly, on the victory arch that led into Rome which was established in 315AD, it is written, “...through the **prompting of divinity** and the greatness of his mind, together with his army, avenged the republic with just arms from both the tyrant and all his faction.” Byfield, 146.

¹⁰ Byfield, 151.

¹¹ Ibid, 231.

¹² This was interference on the part of the Emperor toward church issues and would have a pivotal role in Christendom.

¹³ Schmemann, 80, and Tim Dowley, ed., Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity (Lion Publishing: Tring, Hertfordshire, England; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 135 (page reference is to reprint edition).

It would seem to be more than ironic that, of all days, Saint Constantine reposes on Pentecost. Pentecost is the birthday of the church, and Constantine was the one who brought the church from out of persecution to an acceptable religion. He that saved the church reposes on that important feast of the church. Is this not a sign of which we should take note of?

¹⁴ Dowley, 131. Such ideas are mentioned as: Christmas, gods on currency, candles, incense, garland, veneration of the saints and Mary. (130-132)

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, ed., Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 19, chapter 4. Accessed from www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.html

Constantine was keen on promoting “the welfare of Christians,”¹⁶ having defeated Maxentius near Milvian Bridge,

...the emperor Constantine, in view of the great blessing he had received, offered grateful thanksgiving to God as his benefactor, these consisted in his relieving the Christians from persecution, recalling those who were in exile, liberating such as were imprisoned, and causing the confiscated property of the proscribed to be restored to them; he moreover rebuilt the churches, and performed all these things with the greatest ardour.¹⁷

Constantine’s acts do not end there, but time limits the discussion of his acts, other than to mention laws passed for the sanctity of marriage¹⁸, using state funds and his own monies towards church usage¹⁹, the manufacture of 50 ornate bibles for liturgical usage²⁰ and the building of churches.

It is true that the acts of a person do not necessarily prove the genuine motives of the heart, but do the writings of the emperor support his faith and love for the church?

In Constantine’s love for the truth and the desire for his people not to be deceived with heresy, after the Nicene Council he decreed that all works of Arius be burned, and that anyone who hid or saved Arius’ works be punished.²¹ There are too many epistles of Saint Constantine to list in great detail. However, they indicate credence of faith. For example, in the emperor’s letter²² that he wrote to the churches in Alexandria, immediately following the Nicene Council, he mentions the devil as the cause of dissent, schisms and discord. The Nicene Ecumenical Council

¹⁶ Ibid., 20, chapter 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 18-19, chapter 2.

¹⁸ Byfield, 166.

¹⁹ Schaff, 39, chapter 8.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 362, chap 21, (Book 1 of Sozomenus’ Ecclesiastical Histories). To modernity it is uncouth to burn books. The act may be debatable but the motive was correct.

²² Ibid., 35, chapter 9.

was convened in love of the truth, and the outcome of the council was the “doctrine of God.”

With this all in mind he urges the Alexandrians to accept the decision.

Wherefore let no one vacillate or linger, but let all with alacrity return to the undoubted path of duty; that when I arrive among you, which will be as soon as possible. I may with you return due thanks to God, the inspector of all things, for having revealed the pure faith, and restored to you that love for which ye have prayed. May God protect you, beloved brethren.

In another epistle, sometime soon after the developments at Nicea, the Emperor states,

...I judged this to be an object above all things claiming my care, that one faith, with sincere love, and uniform piety toward almighty God should be maintained amongst the most blessed assemblies of the Catholic Church....he also wished his Catholic Church to be one; the members of which, however much they may be scattered in various places, are not cherished by one Spirit, that is by the will of God.²³

These letters suggest a love and faith for the church, in unity of practice and belief. The Historian Socrates declares most genuinely,

So great indeed was the emperor’s devotion to Christianity, that when he was about to enter on a war with Persia, he prepared a tabernacle formed of embroidered linen on the model of a church, just as Moses had done in the wilderness, and this so constructed as to be adapted to conveyance from place to place, in order that he might have a house of prayer even in the most desert regions.²⁴

It is wrong and improper to place judgement upon the motives of people. It should not be in doubt that Saint Constantine loved the church. Were his motives somewhat blemished? Good intentions were meant, though sometimes the presuppositions one holds creates consequences that were completely unintended and even overlooked. It is true that Constantine adopted the idea of the emperor as an “universal bishop,”²⁵ an idea the church accepted. As such, the emperor was regarded as an icon of the monarchy of God in heaven and

²³Schaff, 37-38, chapter 9.

²⁴ Ibid., 48, chapter 18.

²⁵ Byfield, 169.

Byzantium was considered an icon of the New Jerusalem.²⁶ In other words, if the emperor was the link between God and man, then the state becomes the reflection on earth of the laws of God,²⁷ and as such, the emperor is responsible to create a unified Christian empire.²⁸ This view was reinforced by at least two major events within the conversion of Saint Constantine. The first was the vision prior to the Milvian bridge battle. Divine intervention came outside of the church. The church was responsible for educating its new emperor, but initially Christ came to the Emperor apart from any contact with the church. Among many things, this event reinforced to the emperor his special calling and responsibility to Christ as the one to place the church as the head of all things.²⁹ Secondly, Constantine had won the civil war with Divine help. This Divine intervention was unlike any previously known by the Roman Empire. This was not the gods of pagan faith; the pagan gods of antiquity were unable to stop Constantine. To Constantine these gods became nothing more than foolish inventions of the devil.³⁰ The Emperor could declare with good reason why the Christians were supreme, their God had enabled him to defeat paganism.³¹ Thus, Constantine could declare confidently,

²⁶ Ibid., 135-142.

²⁷ Schmemmann, 63.

²⁸ Byfield, 158.

²⁹ Schmemmann, 76. The conversion of the emperor occurred prior to a battle, thus it was interpreted as the fulfillment of imperial responsibility. As such the conversion was of the emperor as title and role and not per se of the person holding that title. As Schmemmann stated earlier, "Here lies the explanation of the striking fact that the conversion of Constantine was not followed by any review or re-evaluation of the theocratic conception of the empire, but on the contrary convinced Christians and the Church itself of the Emperor's divine election and obliged them to regard the empire itself as a consecrated kingdom, chosen by God." Schmemmann, 66.

³⁰ Socrates, Chapter XVIII, 48, provides an example of the former heathen superstitions and how Constantine was determined to show the follies of such beliefs.

³¹ Byfield, 150. The war against Licinius was viewed similarly as a holy war. Licinius was persecuting Christians, being a staunch defender of the "Roman way." However, after 3 major skirmishes, Licinius lost. His best measures of surrounding himself with the soothsayers, pagan priests, and the traditional sacrifices, were to no avail. Constantine was led with Christian bishops, the procession of the cross, and a portable chapel.

I am going to make plain to them what kind of worship is to be offered to God...what higher duty have I as emperor than to destroy error and repress rash indiscretions, and so cause all to offer to Almighty God true religion, honest concord and due worship?³²

The motives of Constantine were good. However, what if the emperor acted too hastily? What if the material presented to the Emperor were biased, untruthful and even deliberately presented to mislead him? One of the consequences of the Emperor's interest in church affairs was interference on his part in church decision making.

Within six months after the Emperor's victory over Maxentius, the Emperor became entangled with the affairs of the Donatists.³³ The Donatists were a group of Christians who refused to accept the ordination of their new bishop, Caecilian, because of the disputed status of one of the bishops at Caecilian's ordination. After two church councils had dealt with the problem and found nothing wrong, the Donatists still refused to accept the decisions made against their favour. They appealed to the Emperor, who requested the Great Synod of Arles to revisit the topic. Again the Donatists were actually the ones in error and further, were declared as heretical. The Donatists were consistent in their nature, and again refused to accept the outcome of the council decision. This led the Emperor to persecute those who would not submit, which also included the confiscation of land and churches.³⁴ This only turned the "schismatics into martyrs."³⁵

Another major intervention would occur about 10 years after the Donatist affair. This issue would develop through the an Alexandrian Priest, Arius, and his beliefs and teachings about Christ. What at first was a small, isolated dispute became a huge festering sore within

³²Dowley, 133.

³³Ibid, 133.

³⁴Byfield, 168.

³⁵Schmemmann, 68.

the church. The church finally had the Emperor intervene³⁶, with the calling of the first Ecumenical Council at Nicea³⁷, in 325AD. Arius refused the decisions of that great council and was sent into exile by the Emperor. However, Arius had many followers and an inner circle of believers who were actually advisors and leaders within Constantine's government. Thus through intrigues and deceit they were able to disguise the anti-Arian factions as treasonous to the Emperor and strike out in revenge.³⁸ Through deceit, lies, false accusation, and exiles, the Arian faction was able to convince the Emperor that Arius was not a heretic but had only been misunderstood³⁹. This affair would rage on within the church⁴⁰ and the empire for the next 60 years. During the life of Constantine, Christians went from being persecuted by the state to imploring the state's help, "appealing to the Emperor, then protest against state interference if his decision went against them."⁴¹ It has already been stated why the Church accepted the interference,⁴² but other minor suggestions could include the submission of Christians to the teaching of St Paul to the Romans, chapter 13, about civic duties and obedience. Also there was not the dichotomy between faith and practice. That is the creed of modernity.

³⁶ Byfield, 225. Similar to the Donatist affair, Arius had been deemed as in the wrong in previous councils. Arius would not recant and accept that his beliefs were heretical. Thus Arius was not reinstated as a priest in Alexandria. His pride, ambition, cunning, and insincerity eventually led him to behavior unbecoming of a clergyman and a Christian. Vol 3, 213

³⁷ Or what is presently Iznik, Turkey.

³⁸ Schmemmann, 79.

³⁹ It would appear that there are several points of commonality within schismatic groups. The first is an agenda or set of beliefs that is deemed of such importance it has to be spread. Thus in their guise as being concerned for the church, they separate themselves from the church, under the belief that they are the true believers. Secondly, they exalt their own personal opinions, as though their beliefs are the only ones that matter. Thirdly, in their drive to be right they lack love even to the extent of sinning (the Donatists would declare, "no mercy for sinners."). Fourth, the schismatics would not recognize church authority, rejecting criticism and often not accepting the consequences of their actions, and even showing indifference to authority. How many church councils does it take to find the will of the God in the church? For schismatics the answer is as many as it takes to get a favourable decision.

⁴⁰ Schaff, 54 Chapter 22, describes the error of the Emperor's trust in his advisors that were duplicitous and in actuality anti church.

⁴¹ Byfield, 169.

⁴² Compare footnotes, 29, 31.

The faith and conversion of Constantine brought victory to the church. Constantine's faith in Christ was viewed as genuine. His deeds were done with love, even if they brought disastrous consequences.

However many mistakes and perhaps even crimes there may have been in his life...it is hard to doubt that this man had striven unwaveringly toward God, had lived with a thirst for the absolute, and had wished to establish a semblance of heavenly truth and beauty on earth....The love and gratitude of the Church is stronger than the pitiless but fickle and frequently superficial judgement of historians.

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