

1 Christianity's Early Years

- Module: History
- Lesson 37

2 Some Recommended Sources

- Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity and How the West Won*
- David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*
- Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine*
- Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods*
- Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*
- Tim Barnett (web article at Stand to Reason), *Did the Council of Nicaea Invent the Deity of Christ?:* <http://www.str.org/article/did-council-nicaea-invent-deity-christ#.WTvgthPyv2U>
- Inspiring Philosophy, *The Truth About the Council of Nicaea*, YouTube video (app. 10 min.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSKBGdv07nQ>

3 The Explosion of Christianity

- Pentecost
 - The origin of the corporate church.
 - The coming of the indwelling Spirit.
 - The strategic nature of the timing
 - Pentecost (Jews from every nation visiting in Jerusalem).
 - Within a few months of the death and resurrection of Jesus the news about him was spread throughout the Greco-Roman world and beyond by Spirit-indwelt believers.

4 Impact on the World

- The scope of the early Christian movement:
 - Rapidly spread to all the Greco-Roman world and beyond.
 - A church in the capital city of Rome very possibly by the mid-30s.
 - At least seven congregations in Rome within twenty years. (Romans 16)
 - By the beginning of the 4th century it is estimated that as much as half the city of Rome were confessing Christians.
 - By the conversion of Constantine (312 A.D.) probably 10-15% of the Greco-Roman world were confessing Christians. (This in the face of recent intense persecution.)

5 Impact on the World

- Christianity was not merely a religion of the poor and uneducated, but also spread widely among the privileged and the aristocracy.
- Christianity spread first, as one would expect, to the metropolitan centers of civilization, and later into the more rural areas where paganism tended to persist.
- Penetration into the very house of the Caesars:
 - Paul speaks of converts in Caesar's household.
 - Wife of Emperor Galienus. (260-268 A. D.)
 - Wife and daughter of Diocletian. (284-305 A. D.)

6 Christianity's Shaping of the West

- "Stated in its most elementary and most buoyantly positive form, my argument is, first of all, that among all the many great transitions that have shaped the evolution of Western civilization, whether convulsive or gradual, political or philosophical, social or scientific, material or spiritual, there has been only one—the triumph of Christianity—that can be called in the fullest sense a "revolution": a truly massive and epochal revision of humanity's prevailing vision of reality, so pervasive in its influence and so vast in its consequences as actually to have created a new conception of the world, of history, of human nature, of time, and of the moral good. ...
(continued—)

7 Christianity's Shaping of the West

- "...To my mind, I should add, it was in event immeasurably more impressive in its cultural creativity and more ennobling in its moral power than any other movement of spirit, will, imagination, aspiration, or accomplishment in the history of the West. And I am convinced that, given how radically at variance Christianity was with the culture it slowly and relentlessly displaced, its eventual victory was an event of such improbability as to strain the very limits of our understanding of historical causality."
(–David Bentley Hart, in *Atheist Delusions*–)

8 Persecution of Christianity

- First major persecution of Christianity under Nero, A. D. 64.
- Persecutions in the first three centuries varied from episodic and scattered, to intense and empire-wide.
- There were long periods of relative peace.
- An empire-wide persecution was conducted under Decius in 249 A. D. thru Valerian in 260 A. D.
- The most intense empire-wide persecution began with Diocletian, 303 A. D. and continued under his successor Galerius until 311 A. D.
 - 3000 bishops were martyred.
 - Thousands of Christians were enslaved.

- This persecution was ended by Galerius on his death bed. He was succeeded by Constantine, the first Christian emperor.

9 **Constantine, First Christian Emperor**

- The conversion of Constantine on the eve of the battle at Milvian Bridge (Oct. 28, 312 A. D.) upon seeing a vision of the sign of the cross in the sky (or in a dream), with the words "In this sign conquer."
- The next day he had the sign of the cross placed on the standards of his legions. He subsequently won at Milvian Bridge, and secured his position as the next Emperor.
- 313 A. D., Edict of Milan, Constantine legalized Christianity and allowed its practice.
 - He did not mandate or command the practice of Christianity or require anyone to become Christian.
 - He did not make Christianity the "official religion" of Rome or the Roman Empire.
 - He did outlaw the stoning of Christians by Jews and gladiator shows (though such shows persisted in the Empire of some time).

10 **Constantine's Firsts**

- The first Christian Roman Emperor.
- The first Emperor to support the church.
 - Launched an immense church building program across the Empire.
 - Donated an extraordinary amount of property to the church.
 - Elevated the clergy to high levels of wealth, privilege, and influence.
 - Strongly moved to advance unity in the church.
- The first Emperor to call and participate in a church council.
- Founder of Constantinople, which eventually became the capital of the Byzantine Empire (The Christian "East").

11 **Views of Constantine in History**

- The Enlightenment myth: Voltaire, in his relentless criticism of Christianity and the Catholic church, caricatured Constantine based on reports of a pagan who had opposed Constantine.
- Many have believed that Constantine mandated that everyone in the Roman Empire become Christian, or that he made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. (He did not.)
- Constantine is viewed by many Christians as having caused the "fall" of Christianity by his legalization of Christianity and by the interference of the state in church affairs.
- Many protestants (including the Reformers) have been highly critical of Constantine because of their perception that he was associated with Papalism and the development of Catholicism.
- Constantine himself was a complicated person, and no less so than in his actions as Emperor. Any simplistic, one-sided view of him or his role in church history is certain to be historically flawed.

12 Was Constantine a Christian?

- The accounts of his conversion experience, though varying in details, appear historically authentic.
- He did change the symbols on the standards of the Legions from pagan symbolism to the sign of the cross, a momentous and culturally significant indication of a change of allegiance.
- Upon his victory at Milvian Bridge and his ascension to Emperor, he refused to offer sacrifices, as was customary, to pagan gods.
- He worked, throughout his rule, to end the practice of pagan sacrifices.
- He instituted numerous changes in Roman law to discourage the abuses of paganism and favoring the Church.
- His conduct of the Empire exhibited significant changes from previous emperors in ways that indicated the sincerity of his Christian convictions.

13 Was Constantine a Christian?

- He refused to use titles and symbols associated with the pagan gods.
- He did not engage in a purge after attaining the throne as was typical with new emperors. (Though it appears likely he was indirectly responsible for several deaths or executions).
- He exhibited a strong personal awareness of the Christian God as the judge of the earth and of emperors.
- He exhibited a deep concern for the unity of the Christian church (to the extreme of persecuting dissenting factions).
- He exhibited a marked concern for the spread of Christianity among the pagans.
- He maintained a policy of religious pluralism which tolerated paganism while legislating against its abuses. He appointed many pagans, as well as Christians to high political office.

14 Constantine and the Church

- His support for the church.
 - His actions led to financial dependency of the church on the state.
 - He strengthened the bishops as a counterweight to imperial power.
 - He strengthened the church's status as an alternative society and polity within the empire.
- His involvement in church councils.
 - The Council of Nicaea.
 - He called the council.
 - He participated (as a non-bishop), but did not dominate.
 - He did not formulate the final creed.
 - There is no evidence that he "signed off" on the creed.
 - Other councils

- Constantine met with some of these other councils, but not all.
- Some councils came to conclusions contrary to Constantine's position.

15 **Constantine in an Historical Context**

- Never before had the church faced the question of the relationship of the church and state in such a way. Constantine and the bishops were on heretofore unknown and unanticipated ground. It would not be surprising if the history of that development were not a mixture of good and bad.
 - What role should the emperor play, if any, in matters concerning the church? (Remember, that until Constantine, the Emperor was a god, and had ultimate authority in all matters within the empire.)
- Constantine, if his conversion was real, like all Christians had to mature in both faith and conduct. I would hate for people to judge my overall life only based on things I believed and did early in my Christian life.
- The historical evidence is that the bishops of the church were not intimidated or kowtowed by Constantine, or that they were reluctant to oppose or confront him. (Remember that just a few years prior to Constantine's ascendancy, most of the bishops of the church had stood faithful in the face of persecution, torture, and death.)
- The complex and delicate issue of the relationship of church and state is one we still wrestle with today. After 2000 years, we've learned it is not a simple question to answer.

16 **The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis**

- According to this thesis, there were multiple "christianities" in the early years, none of them with any more legitimate claim to be "authentic" Christianity than any of the others.
- This hypothesis is based on the belief that there were competing and mutually incompatible views of Jesus and his message throughout the church.
- Each of the chief competing views supposedly had a geographical center in the Christian world.
 - Alexandria (Egypt): Gnosticism
 - Ephesus (Asia Minor): Gnosticism and/or Docetism
 - Edessa (modern northeastern Turkey): Marcionism
 - Rome: Historic "orthodoxy"
- Rome, using manipulation, coercion, and its political power, forced its own version of orthodoxy on the rest of the church. Central to this imposition of its will was Emperor Constantine's heavy-handed conduct at the Council of Nicea in the fourth century.

17 **The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis**

- Popularizers of this view in the general public are, among others, Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman, and Dan Brown's best seller The DaVinci Code and the accompanying movie.
- This view of Christianity is now very widely held in the popular culture, and is fostered by skeptics and cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

- Bauer's thesis and postmodernism: According to postmodernism, truth is only subjective and relative, and a function of power. Under postmodernism, the only "heresy" is the idea that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Hence, the Bauer-Ehrman thesis readily appeals to postmodern thinkers.

18 The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis

- In fact, historic orthodoxy (Jesus as Messiah, his deity, his atonement, the Trinity, the resurrection, etc.) has been demonstrated to be the church's earliest and virtually unchallenged view of Jesus and his teachings until the 2nd century.
 - The historic view of Jesus is evidenced in the New Testament itself, particularly in the early creeds quoted in the New Testament. The New Testament has been demonstrated to have been written well within the first century, some of it within twenty years or so of the life of Jesus.
 - The earliest church fathers disclose in their writings an exclusively orthodox position.
 - The canon of the N. T. was largely set and recognized by the church by the late 1st or early 2nd century.
 - There is no credible evidence that anything other than orthodox Christianity was the prevalent belief in Alexandria, Edessa, and Ephesus.
 - As we will see, the Council of Nicaea did not "invent" historic orthodoxy.

19 The Myth About the Council of Nicaea (325 A. D.)

- There was no church-wide orthodox view of Jesus prior to this council.
- Constantine called the Council in order to enforce the Roman version of Christianity on the numerous other competing versions throughout the church.
- There were days of quarreling and bickering between the many factions until finally the Roman version won as a result of Constantine's use of his imperial and political power.
- The Council of Nicaea, under Constantine's control, invented the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus.
- Modern orthodox Christianity is the result of this political manipulation, and has no more claim to be the true Christianity than any of the many various views prevalent then or now.

20 The Facts About the Council of Nicaea (325 A. D.)

- The council was called by Constantine to enable the Christian bishops to resolve a dispute within the church created by the teachings of Arius (Arianism).
- The Council was not a free-for-all of competing Christianities, but met to discuss several issues, of which Arianism was the chief issue of concern, and the refutation of which was its most significant result.

- The chief question considered had to do with the relationship of Jesus with the Father—whether Jesus’ deity was inferior to that of the Father (as per Arius). While Arianism was spreading, it was clearly at odds with what the vast majority of the church had believed since its beginning (that Jesus was co-equal w/the Father). It had already been deemed heretical in various regions of the church.
- While Constantine attended and participated at some level, and his contribution appears to have been influential, he did not dictate the outcome, compose the final creed, or “sign off” on the creed, since he was not a bishop.

21 **The Facts About the Council of Nicaea (325 A. D.)**

- The Council did not “invent” orthodox Christianity or its view of Jesus. These had been long established and are evidenced in the New Testament itself, the writings of the earliest church fathers, and the church’s recognition of a N. T. canon.
- What was particularly new in the Nicæan Creed was the word that was agreed upon to express the relationship of Jesus with the Father, that of homoousios to denominate the nature of both. They are said to be of one nature (homoousios).
- While the deity of Jesus has clear implications regarding the Trinity, the subject of the Trinity was not specifically addressed at the Council of Nicaea. It was addressed years later at the Council of Constantinople (381 A. D.).
- Arianism actually grew in influence after Nicaea until it was again soundly refuted in the Council of Constantinople. It has persisted in various forms throughout history, and can be detected in both Mormon and Jehovah Witness Christology.

22 **Next Week:**

- Christianity and Progress