

UNIT THREE:

The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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QUICK CONNECT

Constantine (272-337) was the emperor of the Roman Empire who ended the persecution of Christians and made Christianity one of the state-sponsored religions of the empire. During the controversy over how best to describe the relationship between Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) and God, Constantine used his authority as patron of religious life in the Roman Empire to convene an ecumenical council in the town of Nicaea, in present-day Turkey.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Pagan: Describes any number of polytheistic religions in the ancient world. Not to be confused with its modern use to identify contemporary, nature-centered spiritual practices.

Edict of Milan: An imperial declaration that granted religious freedom throughout the Roman Empire in 313. It most directly benefited Christianity.

Pontifex Maximus: In the Roman republic, this person was charged with overseeing the polytheistic religious rites to ensure peace between the gods and the people and fulfillment of all required religious rituals. Later this was a role assigned to the Roman emperor.

NARRATIVE

The Council of Nicaea was called to address a substantial theological controversy. Given the reality of political structures and expectations of the times (especially since Christianity was one of the officially sponsored religions of the Roman Empire), it fell to the Roman emperor, Constantine, to convene and eventually enforce the decisions of the council. This fact has led to conflicting interpretations of Constantine's influence. For some, the fact that Constantine convened this council (thus providing the means for resolving a major dispute) means that he should be held as a saint (even called "equal to the apostles" by some Orthodox Christians). For others, the fact that he stopped enforcing the Nicene Creed and became an Arian leads to a more ambivalent assessment. And for still others, his role in using the apparatus of the state to interfere in religious questions and persecute dissenters established a dangerous precedent in the relationship between the church and the empire. For such critics, this "imperial church" created an "imperial creed," one with a narrow theological vision focused solely on the forgiveness of sin in the afterlife, omitting the ministry and teachings of Jesus while also neglecting to address the systems that perpetuate injustice and oppression. At the same time, there are still others who acknowledge the inherent dangers of an "imperial church" and who also note that the tools to criticize and deconstruct the "imperial church" are embedded in the faith affirmed by the council itself. The fact that the creed asserts "one Lord, Jesus Christ" opposes any absolute claims made by a political ruler. Also, the fact that bishops were made imperial authorities gave them a platform to speak truth to power, even threatening excommunication for emperors who acted immorally (see the cases of St. Basil versus Valens, St. Ambrose versus Theodosius, and the pointed sermons of St. John Chrysostom, who, as bishop of Constantinople, railed against imperial corruption and excess). These can be models for Christian leaders around the world today for speaking out on behalf of the vulnerable. In exploring these complex issues around the formation of the creed and how it was enforced, it is appropriate to examine the role of Constantine, his influence and his relevance for our own context.

UNIT THREE: The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council

Constantine was the son of a Roman general and politician, Constantius Chlorus, and Helena (who would later be declared a saint). Both Helena and Constantius were of humble backgrounds, but Constantius made his career in the Roman army, advancing up the ranks. When Constantine was about 14 years old, his father left his mother to marry the daughter of the Roman emperor. Constantius took his son, Constantine, with him to serve in the army of the Roman provinces in what is today France, Germany, the Netherlands and England. In 293, Constantius was made *caesar* of the western half of the empire by the emperor Diocletian. In a shrewd decision, Constantius sent his son, Constantine, to the eastern half of the empire to serve under Diocletian. When Diocletian resigned as emperor due to poor health in 305, Constantius was elevated to the office of *augustus*/co-emperor. He continued to serve as a military officer, leading a campaign in northern England, and Constantine joined him there. After a year, Constantius became ill. On his deathbed, Constantius encouraged his army to declare their allegiance to Constantine. After a brief civil war, Constantine defeated rival claimants and became *augustus* of the Roman Empire.

A decisive moment in Constantine's pursuit of becoming emperor occurred in 312. His opponent, Maxentius, controlled the only bridge into the city of Rome. According to material written long after the event, Constantine had a dream in which he was told that he would conquer through the sign of the cross. Other sources do not mention such a dream and state only that Constantine attributed his victory to the God of Christianity. Whatever the cause, he and his co-emperor, Licinius, would usher in a profound reversal for Christians. In 313, they issued the Edict of Milan, which not only ended the state-sponsored persecution of Christians but also made Christianity one of the officially supported religions of the empire. Though Christians rightly praise this document, it did not apply only to them. Remarkably the edict grants toleration for all religions practiced in the empire.

It is not clear why Constantine ended the persecution of Christians and other religious traditions. It is entirely possible that he attributed his political success to the influence of the God of Christianity. Even if so, he did not become a Christian at that time, nor did he stop fulfilling his public, polytheistic ritual duties as emperor. It is also possible that his decision was entirely pragmatic. One estimate puts the population of Christians in the Roman Empire during this time at 10%. The effort to systematically find Christians (both as citizens and as those who held political office), put them on trial and execute those who refused to renounce their faith must have been a tremendous imposition on government bureaucracy and finances. Granting Christians the freedom to practice their religion removed a burdensome and unsustainable task from the Roman government.

Soon after the Edict of Milan, a theological controversy erupted among Christians over how best to describe the relationship between Jesus and God. To what extent, if any, could Jesus be described as divine? If we assert that Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) is divine, then how can Christians still claim to be monotheists? One theologian, Arius of Alexandria, suggested that we could say that Jesus/the incarnate Logos was "like" God but not the same as God. Others rejected Arius' ideas, saying that only God (and not a being who was merely *like* God) could offer salvation. This disagreement soon spread through the Christian Church, pitting some bishops and teachers at fierce odds with each other.

Faced with such a sharp internal division within one of the officially sponsored religions of the empire, Constantine invoked an established authority held by Roman emperors: *pontifex maximus*. Broadly speaking, the title of *pontifex maximus* was given to Roman emperors to indicate their responsibility to serve the polytheistic religious piety of the people. Not only was the emperor required to give material support for the temples and priests; he was also required to ensure peace among and within the various religious traditions. Since Christianity was now one of these officially sponsored religions, the emperor's responsibilities for

UNIT THREE:

The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council

religious peace were no different. What was different, in contrast to pagan polytheism, was the forum Christians had used to settle their disputes: a council. In 325, Constantine convened a council to meet in Nicaea, which was near Nicomedia (the capital at that time). He intended the council to resolve the dispute and formulate a conclusion that he could enforce. As emperor, charged with oversight for religious peace, Constantine used imperial resources to pay for the travel, housing, food and resources needed for every available bishop and their entourages to attend the council. As an aside, we can note that in the following centuries, the church began to search for more self-control and autonomy from imperial influence. Many consolidated around the idea that a bishop – either the bishop of Rome or perhaps the bishop of Constantinople – or an autonomous group of bishops should have authority to convene councils during disputes, and not the emperor. But this would be a long and complex history to record here.

The consensus reached at the Council of Nicaea did not hold for very long. Constantine ended up rescinding the official enforcement of the conclusions of Nicaea, and several Arian bishops not only returned to power but gained influence in the imperial court. Not until another council, the Council of Constantinople, was called, in 381, would the Nicene Creed be both affirmed and expanded.

Constantine continued to support both polytheistic religion and Christianity (both Nicene and Arian) within the empire. But his contributions of public support and funding for Christianity were significant. With the support of his mother, Helena (with whom he reconnected after his father's death), many Christian churches were built throughout the empire, especially in Rome (old St. Peter's Basilica) and Jerusalem (the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). At some point, Constantine did become a Christian, but he held off receiving the sacrament of Baptism (waiting until later in life to get baptized was a common practice at the time). In 337, he became very ill. When it was clear that he was dying, Constantine requested baptism from an Arian bishop (and distant relative), Eusebius of Nicomedia. Thus Constantine died an Arian Christian – the very religious heresy rejected by the council he convened at Nicaea. Nonetheless, under the influence of his actions, Christianity had become a vital part of the religious landscape of the Roman Empire and was supported by the imperial government.

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

Roman pagan polytheism assumed that encouraging and maintaining proper worship of the gods was an obligation of the government for its citizens. As the empire expanded, other polytheistic religions were also supported and encouraged. Judaism and Christianity presented problems for this system – polytheistic religions were largely “tolerant” and “fluid.” They did not expect “conversion” in the same way. Though the people (and their gods) were subjugated by the expanding Roman Empire, they were expected to continue worshiping their own gods. That is, as long as you honored the gods of your own people, you could also worship other gods from other cultures. Because Jews and Christians insisted that they could worship only the one, true God (and required all converts to abandon previous polytheistic practices), the Romans and other pagan polytheists considered them atheistic (they did not honor all the gods) and intolerant. Likewise, because polytheistic religion and civil life were intertwined in the Roman Empire, the Christians' refusal to participate in polytheistic civic rituals led them to be called antisocial and unpatriotic. It was for this reason that Christianity was persecuted before 313.

The Edict of Milan marks an important development in religious toleration. Though Christianity grew significantly once the persecutions were ended, the edict did not end the practice of polytheism in the Roman Empire. Though it began to decline in popularity, polytheism endured for many centuries afterward. Though Christianity greatly benefited from the religious toleration declared by the edict, such religious freedom

UNIT THREE: The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council

essentially ended in 380, when the emperor Theodosius declared that Nicene Christianity would be the only official, state-sponsored religion of the Roman Empire. This gave Christianity a privileged position in society, establishing a constitutional framework that would endure throughout most of Europe (and even North America) until the 18th and 19th centuries.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What implications can be drawn from Emperor Constantine's role in convening a council to resolve religious disputes?
2. After enduring persecution, Christianity became a privileged religion, protected by the Roman Empire. What advantages did Christianity gain from being an officially sponsored faith? Additionally, what concerns arose from the close relationship between the church and the imperial state, especially when it came to preaching the gospel's truths to those in power?
3. Do the creed's emphases reflect the recurring themes announced by prophets and preached in the gospels? If so, how? If not, how might the exclusion of these important biblical teachings have served the imperial purposes of the time?
4. How can praying and studying the creed help us recognize the importance of faith in resisting imperial ideologies that impact vulnerable communities today?
5. The history of Christianity is complex, with the church shifting from being marginalized to becoming a dominant force under the Roman Empire. During this time, churches were involved in silencing, proselytizing and even conquering others in the name of the gospel. What can Christianity learn from this past as it seeks to defend the freedom of religion? What does it mean for the church to bear witness to the gospel in diverse religious contexts today?

FOR FURTHER READING

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