

# ***Constantine and His Impact***

## ***Sources***

Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*

Michael Grant, *The Emperor Constantine* (2011)

Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (2010)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3

## **I. The Emperor Constantine**

### **A. Christian Views**

1. Deliverer of the church
2. Pragmatic solver of problems
3. Author of corrupting union of church and state

### **B. Background**

1. Father: Constantius Chlorus
  - a. A Caesar & Augustus under Diocletian
  - b. Power base: Britain & Gaul
2. Mother: Helena
  - a. Put aside by Constantius but elevated by her son
  - b. Christian saint known for “discoveries” in Palestine
3. Emperor (306-37)

### **C. Assumption of Power**

1. Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312)
  - a. Defeated opponent for imperial throne
  - b. Alleged vision: “In this sign conquer!” (flaming cross)
  - c. Led to recognition of Christianity
2. United empire under one ruler (323)

### **D. “New Rome”**

1. Built new capital: Constantinople
2. Became center of Byzantine Empire
  - a. Strategic location → A trade crossroads
  - b. More secure than Rome
  - c. Capital of *Eastern* Roman Empire
  - d. A culturally *Greek* empire
  - e. Lasted until 1453

### **E. Debate Over His Conversion**

1. Rational pragmatism?
  - a. A way to unite empire
  - b. Saw Christians as obedient, upright, non-rebellious
  - c. “Christianity to him was a means, not an end” (Will Durant)
2. Superstition?
3. Yet evidence of continuing paganism
4. Baptized only on death bed

## **II. Constantine and the Church**

### **A. Legal Recognition**

1. “Edict of Milan”

- a. Religious toleration
- b. Perhaps status as a legal religion
- c. Return of confiscated property
- 2. Financed building churches, etc.
- 3. Promoted Sunday worship
- 4. *Not* establishing a state church
- B. Eusebius
  - 1. “Father of Church History”: Constantine’s historian
    - a. First complete church history
    - b. Biography of Constantine
  - 2. Viewpoint
    - a. Christianity the goal of human history
    - b. Constantine → triumph of the church
    - c. Tied story of the church to eternal Rome
  - 3. Promoted amillennialism

### C. Council of Nicea

- 1. The Council (325)
  - a. Controversy over teaching of Arius: Christ is not God
  - b. Issued first version of Nicene Creed
- 2. Constantine’s role
  - a. Called & paid for by emperor
  - b. Alleged roots of Caesaropapism
    - 1) “Caesar as Pope” → imperial control of church
    - 2) However not exercising doctrinal authority
    - 3) Emperor as a “guardian” (Hooper)

## III. Aftermath of Constantine

### A. Church and State

- 1. Risk: Religion follows emperor
  - a. Constantius II: backed Arians
  - b. Julian the Apostate: backed paganism
- 2. Emperor Theodosius (379-95)
  - a. Divided empire for the final time
  - b. Made Christianity state religion (but no coercion against non-Christians)
  - c. Symbolic Conflicts w/ Ambrose
    - 1) Ambrose opposed reparations/prosecution over destroyed synagogue
    - 2) Ambrose required imperial penance for repression of Thessalonica
    - 3) Contested Significance
      - a) All are subject to divine law
      - b) Dominance of church over state
- 3. Church Adopting Roman Patterns
  - a. Architecture: Basilica
  - b. Title of pontifex maximus
  - c. Pattern of imperial govt.: provinces, dioceses (territory of a bishop)
  - d. Blending of Roman paganism?
    - 1) Pagan masses brought into the church
    - 2) Syncretistic synthesis? (virgin Mary, saints)

4. Major Significance: Launched idea of church-state union
    - a. Coercion replaced persuasion
    - b. Gave a role in the church to political leaders
    - c. Made the church a center of worldly power
- B. Monasticism
1. Roots are pre-Constantine
  2. Underlying concepts
    - a. “Alternative martyrdom”
    - b. False asceticism → stress on celibacy
    - c. Protested worldliness of the church
    - d. Misapplying Matt. 19:21
    - e. Desire for holiness
  3. Forms
    - a. Eremitic: hermit or “solo” (e.g., “pillar saints”)
    - b. Cenobitic: community of monks living together
  4. Notable figures
    - a. Anthony
      - 1) Pioneer in Egypt
      - 2) Memorialized in biography by Athanasius
    - b. Basil
      - 1) Rules for East
      - 2) Emphasis on contemplation
    - c. Benedict
      - 1) Rules for West (“Benedictine”)
      - 2) Emphasis on service
  5. Became major influence in church life
- C. Addressing Dissent: Donatism
1. Leading schism in North Africa (300s-600s)
  2. Cause: Controversy over “lapsed”
    - a. Those who gave way under persecution
    - b. Specific charge: A bishop who allegedly surrendered the Scriptures
    - c. Named for “counter-bishop” Donatus
  3. Not a “heresy” → Question of nature of the church
  4. Clash w/ State
    - a. Sought Constantine’s support at first
    - b. Constantine sought to quash as dissent
    - c. Circumcellions: terrorists who sided w/ Donatists
    - d. Importance: Constantine didn’t persecute paganism but did persecute dissenters