Christianity: The Religion of the Empire

Constantine took seriously his visions of the cross on the face of the sun and the night vision of the Chi-Rho (Christ-King) and the voice, "In this sign conquer!" He felt he had been divinely called to be the champion of the Christians. God had called him to be the shepherd of the earth. He attributed his victories to the favor of Christ.

His religious fervor was combined with a political realism. Paganism was dead and disintegrating. Only Christianity had the life and vitality to unite the empire and to be the cement of the empire. To Constantine's political mind Christianity was the completion of the process of the unification of the empire: one emperor, one law, one citizenship, one religion.

Constantine moved slowly in elevating Christianity. He did not always distinguish Christ and the Unconquerable Sun. Sunday was the day of the resurrection but also the day of the sun. He kept pagan titles and pagan symbols for a long time, even though a catechumen of the church. Following ancient custom he put off baptism until he was through with wars and capital punishment. He intended to make a pilgrimage to the Jordan to be baptized just before the end of life. His edict of Milan made Christianity the equal of the other religions but all religions were to be recognized and respected. His favors to Christianity made plain his preference and commitment. Once it was clear that the church enjoyed his emperial favor and those who were Christians were favored for advancement in office the church grew by leaps and bounds.

Favors Constantine Showed the Church

A.D. 313 shortly after the Edict of Milan he sent large gifts to the bishops of the churches to make up for what they had suffered in the persecutions. The Edict of Milan had ordered all Christian property restored to the church at public expense so that no one would lose.

A.D. 316 No man—not even criminals nor run-away slaves should be branded on the face. Man was made in the image of God and the image should not be defaced.

A.D. 319 The clergy exempt from public obligations, such as tax collecting, jury duty, army service, obligations which weighted heavily on well-to-do people. So many availed themselves of this immunity that later a new law was passed granting limited access to the ministry to those of humbler social position.

A.D. 319 Private heathen sacrifice prohibited—only the public pagan temples allowed.

A.D. 321 The church granted the right to receive legacies. This amounted to the incorporation of the church—the acknowledgement of its privileges as a corporation.

A.D. 321 Sunday recognized as a legal holiday. Work forbidden in the cities. Farmers to hold market on Sunday, recognizing a seven day week in place of the old eight day week with seven days of work and rest and market on the eighth day. Only necessary work in cities and on farms allowed. Law courts open only for the freeing of slaves.
A.D. 321 Celibacy recognized. Celibacy had been forbidden by Roman Law and a tax levied on childless marriages and old maids and old bachelors. These laws abolished.

A.D. 321 Soldiers permitted to resign from the army to become monks. Pachomius resigned and went to the desert to study with Anthony. Pachomius was the founder of Cenobitic or community monasticism.

After the defeat of Licinius, Constantine joins with his mother in building under imperial auspices great churches and chapels in Rome, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other places. Helena, interested in locating the sites of Jesus, Mary, and the apostles and in gathering their relics. Churches of Peter and Paul in Rome. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

A.D. 330 Constantine moves his capital to his new city, Constantinople. He wanted a completely new city with no pagan past or associations. It was to be a city that was Christian from its beginning. It would be the New Rome. There were also political and defense motives, but the religious consequences were far reaching. The new capital was in the midst of the strongest portion of the Christianized world. Christians were fewer and more scattered in the West. He donated the palace of his second wife, Fausta of the Lateran family, to the bishop of Rome—the Lateran palace. The emperor's moving the the East opened the way for the Bishop of Rome to become the most conspicuous man in the West. The Latin West would look to Rome with great reverence for leadership. The fact that it was unintentional on the part of Constantine made it all the more influential and important. The spiritual influence of Rome would surpass its political.

In Constantinople Constantine would build the Church of the Apostles and the Church of Irene (Peace).

THE CHANGED SITUATION: FROM A PERSECUTED TO AN IMPERIAL CHURCH

With the emperor so strongly favoring the church the number of the Christians increased rapidly. Being a Christian greatly enhanced one's chances of promotion.

The clergy became the nobility of the church.

Increased emphasis on beautiful buildings and pleasing services.

Opposition to army and civil service almost vanished. Since the emperor was a Christian, Christians could fill government offices and serve in the army. Refusal of army service could bring excommunication.

Problems in the church and doctrinal discussions that earlier would have been kept private and would have run their course, became political questions of first magnitude. Heresy and schism became crimes against the State. All problems were brought to the Emperor. The emperor assumed enormous powers in ecclesiastical affairs. Dirty linen that in times of persecution would have been laundered in private was now washed in public.

Constantine's favors were limited to the strong, closely-knit hierarchically organized a portion of the church called "Catholic." Heretical sects and schismatics would receive nothing from Constantine. Constantine used force against the Donatists, producing the unlovely
result of Christians persecuting Christians. Constantine called synods or councils to deal with threats to unity—the unity of the church was necessary to the empire.

From the imperial councils and their enforced unity would come an official creed.

To break with emperor was to break with the church; to break with the church was to break with the emperor. People like the Donatists wanted complete separation of Church and State and wanted no fellowship with emperor, Rome or Constantinople.