

# The Conversion of Constantine

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – a discussion of the conversion of Constantine and its effects upon the church
2. aim – to cause us to begin to consider the relationship between the church and the state

### b. outline

1. The Precursors to Constantine's Conversion
2. The Events in Constantine's Conversion
3. The Effects of Constantine's Conversion

### c. overview

1. the **timeline** of our location
  - a. the ending of the *early church* gives way to a new era in Christianity: the *Imperial Church*
    1. **i.e.** a new era in which the church and the state would be *deeply intertwined*
  - b. and, the beginning of this period coincides with one of its most *interesting* emperors

## I. The Precursors to Constantine's Conversion

### Content

#### a. the events leading to Constantine's conversion

1. the relative peace lasting from the reign of Valerian (c. 259)
2. the dual-emperor strategy under Diocletian (c. 284; a **tetrarchy**)
  - a. two supreme rulers (**i.e.** *augustus*): Diocletian in the E, Maximian in the W
  - b. two subordinate rulers (**i.e.** *caesar*): Galerius under Diocletian, Constantius under Maximian
3. apparently, only Galerius seems to have had any enmity with Christians
  - a. the beginning of a new persecution broke out in the eastern armed forces
  - b. Galerius wanted all Christians expelled from the armed forces
    1. **note:** military service was *generally* condemned by the early church
  - c. in 303, Galerius convinced Diocletian to issue an edict expelling Christians from *all* public service
  - d. and, when a fire broke out in the imperial palace, Galerius blamed the Christians (**i.e.** a revenge)
    1. a massive (and final) persecution then broke out against Christians everywhere
4. in 304, Diocletian abdicated (due to illness) and Galerius rose to *augustus*
  - a. Maximian also abdicated under threat, and Constantius rose to *augustus*
  - b. Constantine was the son of Constantius; a very popular member of the legions
5. a period of difficult civil war ensued, with a new *augustus*, Licinius, established in the W
  - a. Galerius (and his henchmen) continued to persecute Christians in E
6. but, after an illness (311), Galerius issued an edict tolerating Christianity in the empire:

"With all the laws which we have decreed for the good of the state, we have sought to restore the ancient rules and traditional discipline of the Romans. We have particularly sought to have Christians, who had abandoned the faith of their ancestors, return to the truth ... After the promulgation of our edict ordering all to return to the ancient customs, many obeyed for fear of danger, and we were forced to punish others. But there are still many who persist on their opinions, and we are aware that they neither worship nor served the gods, nor even their own god. Therefore, moved by our mercy to be benevolent toward all, it has seemed just to us to extend to them our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order ... In return for our tolerance, Christians will be required to pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace."

  - a. Galerius died 5 days after his edict
  - b. the empire was divided amongst: Licinius, Maximinus Daia, Constantine, and Maxentius

## II. The Events in Constantine's Conversion

### Content

#### a. the events of Constantine's conversion

1. Constantine was born to Constantius and Helena (a Greek of low birth, c. 272)
2. Constantine waited patiently for this time to arrive
  - a. he had stayed in the shadows, using diplomacy to keep his position
  - b. he knew that internal strife would preoccupy the others enough for him to strike
  - c. so, (when the time was right) he gathered his armies in Gaul and marched on Rome

3. Constantine (apparently) had some sort of “vision from the Christian God”
    - a. one Christian chronicler said he saw a vision in the sky
      1. Eusebius (who we will encounter later) said he saw the words “in this you shall conquer”
      2. and that it was a vision of a cross with these words
    - b. one Christian chronicler said he was to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers
      1. it was called a **labarum** – the Greek letters *chi* (X) and *rho* (P), the first two letters of the name “Christ” (*crastos*) – like a capital P overlaid with an X (and is still used in that way today)
    - c. it is *here* that Christians speak of Constantine’s conversion (**to be discussed below**)
    - d. Constantine defeated Maxentius at the **Milvian Bridge** (he fell from the bridge and drown)
      1. gaining control over the western half of the empire
  4. Constantine then met with Licinius at Milan and produced an alliance
    - a. the **Edict of Milan** (313) agreed that: 1) all Christian persecution would stop, and 2) all physical properties belonging to Christians would be returned
    - b. however, the **Edict of Galerius** (**see above**) was really the *starting point* for this peace-accord
  5. Constantine then moved to complete his rule over the entire empire (**i.e.** to the E)
    - a. Licinius continued to rule over the E, but *both men* desired to be a lone emperor
    - b. however, there was much disagreement *amongst Christians* in this territory
    - c. the skirmishes between *them* were (often) blamed on Licinius, and
    - d. Constantine was (often) called “the emperor whom God loved”
    - e. when Constantine chased a band of “barbarians” into Licinius’ territory
      1. Licinius saw it as a provocation, and prepared for war
      2. he instructed his soldiers not to “look at” the *labarum* (with the *chi-rho*)
      3. however, Constantine’s forces overwhelmed Licinius’
      4. some Christians considered this a “confirmation” of Constantine’s trust in God
    - f. Licinius was murdered in 324, and Constantine took sole control of the empire
      1. he ruled for 13 more years, until 337
- b. the reality of Constantine’s conversion**
1. was Constantine *really* a Christian? – two diverging views:
    - a. that he was *not* a genuine believer, but used Christianity for his own ends
      1. he was not baptized until his deathbed (but that was common)
      2. he would not submit himself to a bishop (as emperor, considered himself “Bishop of bishops”)
      3. he continued to participate in pagan rituals, and he was declared a “god” after his death
      4. he *never* made Christianity the “official” religion of Rome (**always a disconnect**)
      5. many held that he was simply “sympathetic” to Christianity, but not a true believer
    - b. that he *was* a genuine believer, but the role of emperor made him somewhat unique
      1. his building of Constantinople was a *direct* slap against the pagan aristocracy
      2. the idea that Christians could provide any political power to him was anachronistic
      3. in 324, he ordered all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on the first day of the week
      4. in 325, he called the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea (**to be discussed later**)
      5. many held that he was a believer, but did not fully understand the power of faith in Christ

### III. The Effects of Constantine’s Conversion

#### Content

##### a. the immediate effect of Constantine’s conversion

1. Constantine dreamed of a “renewed empire” (like Decius before him)
  - a. but, he sought it through Christianity, believing in a “Christian empire” with him as its ruler
2. Constantine sought out a new “center” for this “Christian empire” (a New Rome)
  - a. he settled on Byzantium, the city on the edge of Europe and Asia Minor
  - b. it would be a “bridge” between the E and the W
  - c. it would control the Bosphorus and the link of the Mediterranean to the Black Sea
  - d. it would be settled close to the Persian empire where he could fortify against them
  - e. it would be named Constantinople – the City of Constantine (**today: Istanbul**)
  - f. when the W was overrun by the barbarians, Constantinople kept the inheritance of W culture for 1000 years in **the Byzantine Empire**

## **b. the lasting effects of Constantine's conversion**

1. the rise of *theological squabbles* (e.g. Arianism, etc.)
2. the increase in counter-violence (against pagans and their temples; i.e. headless statues)
3. a new church-state relationship (e.g. tax exemption, military service, days of labor, *morality*)
4. a *boom* in the number of people joining the church claiming to be Christian
5. a reduction in the *significance* of conversion (a new form of *syncretism*) and *baptism* (catechesis)
6. an increase in the *complexity* of worship (e.g. imperial protocols: incense, priestly garments, etc.)
7. a penchant for more ornate Christian buildings (i.e. as modeled after the palaces)
8. the appearance of an "official theology" (church + empire, i.e. the forerunner of Rome)

## **c. the reactions to the effects of Constantine's conversion**

1. those who believed that this was *bad*, for it represented a "watered-down" faith
  - a. this group looked for *new* ways to demonstrate allegiance to Jesus
  - b. with martyrdom now removed, many left places to continue their Christian training
  - c. thus began the *monastic movement*, and the exodus from the church to the desert (see below)
2. those who believed that this was *good*, for it represented God's favor upon the church
  - a. this group now turned to a great *intellectual* pursuit of Christian truth (e.g. Arianism)
  - b. thus began a period of *Ecumenical Council*, and the *retention* of genuine biblical doctrine