

Church History I

(Early Church to Scholasticism)

Week 3 – Constantine and Nicaea (Christendom)

Introduction: In America, we make a big deal about the separation of church and state. This really comes down the line from what seemingly began in the Christian religion with Constantine. Constantine and the subsequent emperors established a standard that endured for more than a millennium. This time is often recognized as the beginning of Christendom.

I. The Need within the Roman Empire

A. The Roman Empire had suffered through the 200s and was on the brink of collapse.

1. Incompetence **PTQ**

- i. Many of the emperors during the third century were not overly effective at running the empire.
- ii. Doing so requires approximate knowledge of the areas, of the people, of the problems, and of the dangers to you as the emperor. (Life is dangerous at the top)
- iii. “The seat of political power moved to Milan in 286, and Rome became a kind of ornamental capital, although the Senate still took up their duty there. Some provinces formed their own mini-empires (although they were later restored).”¹

2. Infighting **PTQ**

- i. Emperors were being challenged for power and killed.
- ii. “Thirty emperors had claimed the throne in the third century, and many others tried. The Roman Senate scarcely pretended any longer to go through the motions of electing the Caesars. Kinship to a reigning emperor counted for nothing in determining the succession. On the contrary, the sons or near relatives of one Caesar usually found themselves in danger of a speedy execution when the next emperor assumed the crown.”²
- iii. For one example, “Diocletian was born in modern-day Croatia... He was a military man who was chosen by his army as co-emperor after the death of Numerian and later defeated Carinus, his rival for the throne, in battle.”³

3. Invasion **PTQ**

- i. “Groups like the Goths (initially from Sweden via the Black Sea) and Vandals (southern Poland) were now assaulting the empire with greater frequency.
- ii. In addition to stretching the military thin, these invasions had an adverse economic impact, as longstanding commercial and transportation networks disintegrated.”⁴

B. There was an immense need for someone to step in and steer the ship. (In comes Diocletian)

¹ William J. Bennett, [*Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 81.

² Bruce L. Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 118.

³ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), 81.

⁴ Ibid.

1. Although we briefly addressed Diocletian's immense persecution of Christians in his reign, he was actually a very effective emperor.
 - i. He stabilized the empire militarily.
 - ii. He helped get the finances under control, but he had a significant level of inflation.
 - iii. He revolutionized the leadership system again.
 2. To better manage the Empire, Diocletian decided to use a tetrarchy. **PTQ**
 - i. This would incorporate one major emperor (Augustus) and one Junior emperor (Caesar) on both sides.⁵ **PTQ**
 - ii. Also, as an insurance policy to stop other emperors from getting out of line, the children of the other emperors grew up in the court of their political opponent. **PTQ**
- C. The connection to Constantine
1. During the reign of Diocletian, one of the junior emperors of the western part of the empire, was a man named Constantius Chlorus.
 2. He became the Augustus in the west after Diocletian, at the end of his reign, forced his counterpart Augustus to step down at the same time.
 3. In the east rose a man named Galerius. He was a vicious persecutor to the church in the east and only relented right before he left office.
 4. Now Constantine grew up in the court of Diocletian and even lived under Galerius. **PTQ**
 5. He was kept from his father for a time, However, when Constantine's father was sick, he was finally allowed to go back to visit.
 6. "But Constantine somehow discovered that Galerius intended to have him arrested and detained on a false charge while on the road there. Constantine sneaked out in the middle of the night, taking with him all the horses of the imperial stables. The next morning Galerius, who had waited in his bedchamber until noon anticipating the news of Constantine's arrest, discovered what had happened and demanded Constantine be hunted down and brought back. When his attendants announced that all the horses were missing, and thus nobody could chase him down, "he [Galerius] could hardly refrain from tears."⁶ **PTQ**
- D. Constantine's Rise to Power
1. Constantine, who had tried to assist his father in battles just before his dad died, had been deemed Caesar in the Western empire.
 2. Constantine teamed up with Licinius in the East, who also held a tolerant position toward Christians, at least for a time.
 3. Almost out of nowhere, in 312, Constantine decided to march on Rome. In order to do so, a decisive Battle was necessarily fought, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. **PTQ**
 4. It is in this place that Constantine informed his soldiers to add the Chi Rho symbol to their shields. This was encouraged by a Christian priest named Hosius of Cordoba, and at noon time, Constantine claimed to have seen a cross of light in the sky. At night a dream further explained the sign in the sky with the inscription "In this sign conquer."⁷ **PTQ**

⁵ Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), 119.

⁶ Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 94-95.

⁷ Joseph Early, *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015) 69-70.

5. Constantine, after winning the battle of the Milvian Bridge, in which the opposing leader, Maxentius, was knocked off the bridge, was removed from the Tiber, decapitated, and his head was brandished around as they went into the city of Rome. This made Constantine the only ruler in the West.
6. Constantine went from ruling the West to ruling the whole of the empire in about 324.
 - i. This happened with Defeating Maximinus Daia in 313 and Licinius in 324.
 - ii. Licinius had a shaky peace for several years after he was caught in an assassination plot.
 - iii. Ultimately, what brought the peace to an end was that Licinius apparently had begun mistreating Christians again.

II. The Age of Imperial Favor

- A. Although Constantine had already repealed the Edicts of Diocletian in the West in 313, Constantine and Licinius made the Edict of Milan, granting religious toleration of Christians.
 1. More specifically, this edict ended Christian persecution and restored Christian rights to property and assembly. **PTQ**
 2. The Edict caused Maximinus Daia (The eastern Augustus) to realize he must act quickly, to which he responded by trying to attack the two but was crushed promptly at Byzantium.
 3. Byzantium ends up being the place where Constantine makes his new center of the empire. He renames the city Constantinople and works tirelessly on beautifying it.
- B. Christianity not only received different levels of attention. **PTQ**
 1. Constantine built churches (As did his mother)
 2. Constantine paid to have 50 copies of the bible copied. (Some believe Codex Sinaiticus to be one of those copies potentially (it dates from about that time)
 3. Church leaders were not forced to pay taxes (As pagan priests had been previously exempted)
 4. Christian advisors helped lead and direct the emperor regarding different things in the empire.
 5. The first day of the week focuses on worship of the Son in the empire.
- C. The age of Imperial overreach **PTQ**
 1. "The idea for the council (Nicaea) did not come from the bishops. Rather, they had been summoned by the great Roman emperor himself, Constantine." ⁸
 2. Enforcement of the decisions of the Council was not only from the churches but from the state.
 3. The emperors kept exiling Athanasius. (The Alexandrian Bishop from 328-373)
 - i. Athanasius found himself exiled more than five times and falsely accused on bogus charges by four different emperors. **PTQ**
 - ii. Athanasius, who gave magnificent refutations and defense on the deity of Christ, eventually stated Athanasius contra mundum. (Athanasius against the World)
 4. Later The empire attempted to force Arius and arians back into the church.
 - i. "Arius himself eventually returned from exile and was in time allowed to preach again, after making a profession of faith that the bishop Alexander and others thought suspicious. Arius death in 336 was a most gruesome sight:" ⁹

⁸ Mark A. Noll, [*Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*](#), Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 40.

⁹ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#),

- His death occurred the day before the church was going to be forced to partake of the Lord's supper with him. (The timing was convenient.)
- ii. Constantine II used the Seleucian Council (a local council to force Arianism back into the churches.)

III. Controversy in the Church

A. Donatism

1. (Think Novationist controversy part 2)
2. The church again had just overcome a great tribulation under Diocletian with his four edicts. **PTQ**
 - i. Requiring Christian Scriptures
 - ii. Destroying Christian buildings and prohibiting worship.
 - iii. Against Christian bishops
 - iv. Requiring sacrifice to the emperor
3. Once the intense persecution was passed (although it continued to some degree in the east until 313), the church had to decide how it would address those who had given up the scriptures, renounced Christ, or sacrificed to the emperor. However, the question was not just about random people who recanted but about bishops and church leaders.
4. The Donatist name arose from Donatus, bishop of Carthage (313–55), who led the protest against Catholic practices. Donatist charges centered on the fact that certain Catholic bishops had handed over the Scriptures to be burned during the persecution under Diocletian.¹⁰
5. The Donatists were voted down and were even further addressed later by the writings of Augustine.
6. This topic brings up the question what gives the sacraments(Baptism and the Lord's supper) their significance? The person who administers them or the sacraments themselves? **PTQ**

B. Arianism

1. Arius, a local presbyter in Alexandria, began promoting a heretical view of Christ. Namely, that Christ had a beginning and was less than the Father.
2. After being questioned and excommunicated by the bishop of Alexandria, it created immense controversy that spanned several years until the calling of the council.
3. Arius, after being stripped of his title, found a backer in the bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia.
4. Arius, being a fantastic orator, spoke eloquently and, in his wisdom of this world, thought to put his beliefs into songs (whose meter was often reserved for erotic style poetry), spreading his ideas to the masses. **PTQ**
5. Arianism was quickly deemed to be false in the council, while many of the best arguments seemingly came from Athanasius (who was a representative of the Bishop of Alexandria and not a Bishop himself).
6. The more tedious portion of the council was making a creed that everyone could agree on. For example, the difference between the terms homoousias and homoiusias. (whether Jesus was of the same substance or of a similar substance to the Father.) **PTQ**
7. Arianism, although outlawed, and those bishops who refused to sign the creedal statement were exiled and lost their bishopric. It persisted until around the 8th century.

¹⁰ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 163.

8. Also, just a side note: Saint Nicholas, who is the person Santa Claus is based on, is held in some traditions to have punched Arius in the face at the council. **PTQ**
- C. Quartodeciman controversy
 1. If you thought this controversy was over, I wish.
 2. It was decided that the churches should be allowed to pick the right days to celebrate the easter services themselves, but it should be picked based upon a Christian calendar and not a Jewish one. **PTQ**
- D. Times of relative peace created a softness in the Christians.¹¹
 1. This caused some members of the church to want to separate and live more separate lives.
 2. The Emperor's inclusion into the church and the politically ambitious caused a greater reason to separate in their minds. (thus, beginning the monastic movements).
- E. Interaction between Emperors and the church.
 1. This brings about the question of whether the emperor is over the church or separate from it? **PTQ**
 2. Especially with the difficulties caused by Constantine's Arian children. Some tried to Lord over it or make decisions for the church, while others sought God through the church.
- F. Legitimacy of the Emperor's Faith. **PTQ**
 1. Constantine did many things that seemed to point to legitimate faith.
 2. However, he also did a lot of really questionable things.
 - i. He seemed to allow a lot of religious pluralism.
 - ii. He had his wife and son killed (whether for a good reason or not is unclear, but also unlikely)
 - iii. He kept the title of Pontifex maximus (one who is in charge of imperially and religiously)
 - iv. He was not baptized until just before his death and was baptized by an Arian sympathizer.

IV. Councils

- A. Although there is only one major ecumenical council in this time frame, this sparked the use of large and ecumenical councils in the future. (many of which will be addressed next week)
- B. At the Council of Nicaea, the main topic was the legitimacy of Arianism.
 1. The council was attended by 230 or so bishops and around 318 different church representatives. (Presbyter, Deacons, etc.)
 2. The council almost unanimously denied Arianism. Only two bishops refused to sign the final creedal statement, along with Arius. (Even Eusebius of Nicomedia signed it.) Below is the creed itself. **PTQ**
 3. *"I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will*

¹¹Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2018), 42.

come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one [Baptism](#) for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.”¹²

- C. Another thing addressed in the council included the quarto-deciman controversy.
- D. There were also 20 canons (or ruling pronouncements) that were brought forth from this as well. Many of them had to do with bishops, the lapsed, and general church function.
 - 1. If you would like a basic understanding of these canons, check out this web page. [First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea: 20 Canons in Summary](#)
- E. The one thing that always gets attributed to the Council of Nicaea but was not a part of it was the decision of the canon. **PTQ**

V. General Historical Overview

- A. From Constantine, On the Landscape of Being a Roman Emperor was very different.
 - 1. Constantine the Great (February 27, 272–May 22, 337): emperor of the Roman Empire (306–337); converted to Christianity; he convened and attended the First Council of Nicaea to resolve the Arian controversy.
 - 2. Constantius II (August 7, 317–November 3, 361): emperor of the Roman Empire (337–361); adhered to Semiarianism; convened the Council of Seleucia to establish a compromise between the Arian and Nicene bishops. **PTQ**
 - 3. Constans I (c. 320–350): emperor of the Roman Empire (337–350); son of Constantine the Great; supporter of Nicene orthodoxy and opponent of Arianism.
 - 4. Julian the Apostate (332–June 26, 363): emperor of the Roman Empire (361–363); nephew of Constantine the Great; originally an adherent of Arianism and tutored by Eusebius of Nicomedia, he later converted to paganism; he was the last non-Christian emperor of the Roman Empire.
 - 5. Theodosius I (January 11, 347–January 17, 395): emperor of the Roman Empire (379–395); established orthodox Christianity as the sole religion of the Roman Empire (383); convened the First Council of Constantinople; opponent of Arianism, which he officially condemned as heresy in 388.¹³ **PTQ**
- B. The first truly ecumenical council occurred in 325; several more were coming for the hot topics of the day, the divinity and person of each member of the Godhead.
- C. Constantine represents the passing of the Age of Catholic Christianity and the beginning of the Age of the Christian Roman Empire (312–590)¹⁴
- D. The canon is complete.
 - Athanasius recognizes what today we know as the settled canon in 367. This is also voted on later at a council meeting.
- E. Churches now used large ornate buildings and enjoyed great freedom in their worship.

¹² Melissa Petruzzello, ed., “Nicene Creed,” Encyclopædia Britannica, September 18, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nicene-Creed>.

¹³ Jessica Parks, [“Trinitarian Controversies Are Settled.”](#) in *Church History Themes*, ed. Zachariah Carter (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2022).

¹⁴ Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), 118.

- F. Christianity became a mixed bag of saved and unsaved, causing significant pollution to the church, which was already 6 million strong by 300 A.D. thus beginning nominal Christianity.

Ambrose of Milan (C. 339-397) Saviour of the Nations, Come

Savior of the nations, come;
Virgin's Son, here make Thy home!
Marvel now, O heaven and earth,
That the Lord chose such a birth.

Not by human flesh and blood;
By the Spirit of our God
Was the Word of God made flesh,
Woman's offspring, pure and fresh.

Wondrous birth! O wondrous Child
Of the virgin undefiled!
Though by all the world disowned,
Still to be in heaven enthroned.

From the Father forth He came
And returneth to the same,
Captive leading death and hell
High the song of triumph swell!

Thou, the Father's only Son,
Hast over sin the victory won.
Boundless shall Thy kingdom be;
When shall we its glories see?

Brightly doth Thy manger shine,
Glorious is its light divine.
Let not sin overcloud this light;
Ever be our faith thus bright.

Praise to God the Father sing,
Praise to God the Son, our King,
Praise to God the Spirit be
Ever and eternally.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord*, 47

Women in the Ancient Church

NAME	DATES	LOCATION	CONTRIBUTIONS
CECILIA	d.c.177	Rome	About to be married to pagan nobleman, converted him on eve of marriage; both beheaded shortly after.
MAXIMILLA	d.179	Phrygia	Two noblewomen who left their husbands and gave away their wealth to accompany Montanus, prophesying about the establishment of the millennium at Pepuza.
PRISCILLA	2nd century		
PERPETUA	d.203	Carthage	Young Montanist noblewoman martyred in the arena after extensive tortures.
FELICITAS	d.203	Carthage	Servant of Perpetua; martyred with her mistress shortly after she gave birth to a child in prison.
HELENA	c.250–c.330	Bithynia	Mother of Constantine. Visited Palestine around 325, supposedly discovered tomb and cross of Christ; built Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Church of the Nativity. Advanced veneration of relics.
MARCELLA	325–410	Rome	Wealthy widow who gave away her goods and vowed celibacy. Jerome used her home for monastic activities. Died after torture by Goths during sack of Rome by Alaric.
MACRINA	c.327–380	Cappadocia	Sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. Founded monastic community for women at Annesi.
MONICA	c.331–387	Tagaste	Mother of Augustine of Hippo. Her prayers and example of piety influenced her son's eventual conversion.
BRIGID	c.455–523	Ireland	Founded first convent in Ireland. Helped spread Christianity on the island. ¹⁶

¹⁶ Robert C. Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 30.

Ancient Church Trinitarian Heresies		
HERESY	MAJOR PROPONENTS	SUMMARY
MONARCHIANISM (Adoptionism)	Theodotus of Byzantium Paul of Samosata	Jesus became Christ at his baptism, was adopted by the Father after his death.
SABELLIANISM (Modalism, Patripassionism)	Sabellius Praxeus	One God reveals himself in three ways, or modes, at different times.
ARIANISM	Arius Eusebius of Nicomedia Eudoxius Eunomius	Christ is the first created being.
SEMI-ARIANISM (Eusebianism)	Basil of Ancyra Gregory of Laodicea	Christ is “of similar essence” with the Father, but is subordinate to him.
MACEDONIANISM (Pneumatomachism)	Macedonius	The Holy Spirit is a created being. ¹⁷

¹⁷ Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), 25.

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