

from CHRIST to CHRISTENDOM

Part 1: The Era of the Apostles

PART 2: THE NEXT GENERATION

PART 3: THE PLOT TWIST OF CONSTANTINE

INTRODUCTION – A Cross Of Gold?

Luke 14:27

Constantine, The Cross, & The Church

- Throughout most of the third century, Rome is in turmoil. The Empire is losing battles on multiple fronts and Emperors are assassinated frequently. The Emperor Diocletian believes it is time to regain the strength and glory that was once Rome's and that must come through a stronger army and unquestioning loyalty of all citizens. Christian values seem at odds with this vision, and so Diocletian unleashes the greatest empire-wide persecution of Christians ever, called "The Great Persecution" (303-312 CE). Christians were killed, not just in games or ceremonies, but on the spot.
- When Diocletian retires(!) in the early fourth century, multiple men desire his position. Constantine, an army general with loyal troupes, rides back to Rome to assert his will to rule. The final battle he must win to enter Rome by crossing the Milvian Bridge, is fought against Maxentius and his army.
- The eve before this deciding battle (October 28, 312), Constantine claims to have a vision of "a cross composed of light" (or Chi-Rho), along with the words "By this sign, conquer." He interprets this as a message of blessing from the Christian God and orders all of his troupes to paint a cross on their shields. He also has a cross fashioned out of gold and precious jewels as their new army standard.
- Against all odds (20,000 VS. 100,000) Constantine wins the battle, rides into Rome, and becomes Emperor, giving credit to the Christian God for his apparently miraculous victory.
- He declares Christianity a *religio licita* (a legal religion) through the Edict of Milan, immediately reversing any ongoing persecution. Instead, he lavishes gifts upon all Church leaders (e.g., increasing their salary, making them exempt from paying taxes, building church buildings, funding Bible copying, etc.). Crucifixion and gladiatorial games are abolished due to the traumatic connection with Christian victimization. Sunday is declared a weekly holiday for all people. Pagan holidays are absorbed into the Christian calendar. The Church is now friends with the State.
- Pagan temples are converted into Church buildings, with statues of Roman gods replaced with statues of the Apostles and other biblical characters.
- Constantine believed that Christianity could become the religion that would unite his empire under one worldview. However, Christianity itself had many schools of thought with differing theologies, which posed a problem. So Constantine does two things to help bring about unity: a) he instructs his army to wipe out fringe versions of Christianity, like the *Donatists*, a strict holiness movement; and b) he sponsors church councils to nail down one "orthodox" version of Christianity that could then be imposed upon all people, hopefully leading to one unified worldview. He oversees and enforces acceptance of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), which focuses on live Christology debates.

- Arius represents the view that Jesus is God's representative to us (*homoiousios* = of similar substance with God) and Athanasius (and others) counter that Jesus is God himself come to us in the flesh (*homoousios* = of the same substance with God). Athanasius' views win the debate, and Arius and the two bishops who do not sign the creed in agreement are excommunicated and exiled as heretics. (That's gotta suck.)

So What? – Some Lessons Learned

1. Visions must be interpreted by Scripture, not Scripture by visions.
Mark 8:34-35; 1 Peter 2:24
2. Christians are most healthy when struggle, not comfort, is our ongoing experience.
 - i. FIGHTING A BATTLE... 2 Corinthians 10:3-6; Ephesians 6:10-20; 1 Timothy 1:18-19
 - ii. RUNNING A RACE... 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Hebrews 12:1
 - iii. ENDURING HARDSHIPS... 2 Corinthians 11:21-33; Galatians 6:17; Philippians 4:11-13; Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 1:8; 2:3-4;
3. Theology is a way of honouring God with our minds, but it is not what makes us a Christian. Responding to God's invitation to follow Christ is what makes us a Christian.

Matthew 5-7; 18:1-3; Luke 14:25-35

CONCLUSION – Becoming A "Fundamentalist"

1 Timothy 2:5; Luke 6:27-33

HOME CHURCH QUESTIONS...

WARMING UP...

1. After reviewing the message, talk about what aspect most challenged, bothered, or encouraged you.

LOOK TO THE BOOK...

2. Read Paul's description of spiritual warfare in **Ephesians 6:10-20**. a) What verse or idea stands out to you the most? Why? b) Some Christians talk about "spiritual warfare" as though it is a thing we should go and do, on top of our normal Christian life. What clues in this passage suggest that spiritual warfare *is* our normal Christian life? c) How would taking just **verse 12** seriously have dramatically changed church history? How would taking it seriously dramatically change *your* life today? d) What might be the significance of **verse 17** saying that the sword of the Spirit is the *rhema* (spoken expression, a message that comes from the inside-out) rather than the *logos* (word, idea, concept) of God?

SO WHAT?...

3. Review the armour Paul describes in **Ephesians 6:14-17**. What piece of armour are you most likely not to wear? How do you think that affects your spiritual life? What practical steps could you take this week to grow in this area? Pray for each other.

Bruxy Cavey @ THE MEETING HOUSE – Sunday, June 25 / July 2, 2006