

Lecture 9-In This Sign Conquer: The Church in the Fourth Century

Nostalgia “undermines the ability to make intelligent use of the past. Memory, in contrast, does not idealize the past to condemn the present, but draws hope from the past in order to enrich the present and guide the future.”

Christopher Lasch

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.

Matthew 6: 13

Assigned Reading

The Story of Christianity—chapter 13 &14

Key Terms

Constantine, Eusebius of Caesarea

Objectives

- Compare Christianity before and after its “legalization”
- Explain Constantine’s role in “legalizing” Christianity

Class Prayer

“May I be no man’s enemy, and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides. May I never quarrel with those nearest me; and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly. May I wish for all people’s happiness and envy none. May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me. When I have done or said what is wrong, may I never wait for the rebuke of others, but always rebuke myself until I make amends. May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent. May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another. May I, to the extent of my power, give all needful help to my friends and to all who are in want. May I never fail a friend in danger. When visiting those in grief may I be able by gentle and healing words to soften their pain. May I accustom myself to be gentle, and never be angry with people because of circumstances. Amen.”

Eusebius of Caesarea

In This Sign Conquer: The Church in the Fourth Century

I. The Roman Empire

A. Constantine (d. 337)

1. His triumph

- a. “*In Hoc Signo Vincas*”
- b. The battle of Milvian bridge (312)
- c. The Edict of Milan (313)
- d. Control of the entire Roman Empire (324)

2. His conversion

- a. His testimony: “God always opens for the human race a pathway to salvation...At the beginning of my life there was wickedness in me, and I did not believe that anyone, not even a god, could even see it, and the consequences of that could have been nothing but ruin. But the Almighty God, enthroned in heaven, had mercy upon me and gave me, his unworthy servant, countless and endless blessings, which I cannot number here.”
- b. His conduct
- c. His baptism (337)

- 3. His promotion of Christianity
- B. Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340)
 - 1. “Father of church history”
 - 2. Cultural christianity
- C. The Constantinian era

- 1. Positive

- 2. Negative

“We review the history of Christianity up to the year 313 with no sense of shame. But what of the new era which began in 313? Could the distinctive qualities of Christianity triumph over imperial patronage as signally as they had triumphed over imperial hostility? There are some who would go so far as to say that the prince of darkness, having found the earlier weapon so ineffective, changed his tactics in the fourth century and found the second weapon much better adapted to his purpose.”

F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* p. 289

II. The Church Outside the Roman Empire

A. Christianity in Asia

- 1. Persia: the center of the Asian church
- 2. Leaders: Jacob of Nisibis, Aphrahat the Persian, and Ephrem the Syrian

The Conclusion of Aphrahat’s “Homily on Faith”:

“Now this is faith:

When a man believes in God the Lord of all

Who made the heavens and the earth and the seas and all that is in them,

And made Adam in His image,

And gave the law to Moses.

Who sent of His Spirit in the Prophets,

Who sent His Messiah into the world;

And that a man should believe in the resurrection of the dead,

And in the sacrament of baptism,

This is the faith of the Church of God.

And that a man should separate himself from observing hours and Sabbaths and moons and seasons,

And divinations and sorceries and astrology and magic,

From the fornication and revelling and vain doctrines which are instruments of the Evil One,

From the blandishments of honeyed words, from blasphemy and from adultery.

These are the works of faith which is based on the true Rock which is Christ,

On whom the whole building is raised.”

- 3. “The Great Persecution” (340-401)—“the most massive persecution of Christians in history” (Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* p. 138)

B. Christianity in Africa (note: Egypt and North Africa were part of the Roman Empire)

1. The kingdom of Axum (Ethiopia)

- a. Christianity became the court religion in the 4th century

- b. Spread to the rural areas during the 5th century through the witness of Syrian missionary monks (“The Nine Saints”)

- c. Linked with Egyptian Coptic Christianity and armed with vernacular scriptures, Christian kings, and a great number of local churches, the church of Ethiopia entered the Middle Ages where, in Gibbon’s exaggerated phrase, they “slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.” Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*

2. Nubia (Sudan)

- a. Christianity came in the 5th century to the poor
- b. Traditional religion swept away in the 6th century
- c. Closer connection with the Byzantine (Eastern) Church than with the Coptic Church of Egypt (and so orthodox rather than Monophysitic)

Questions for Consideration

1. Where is Nisibus?
2. a) Did persecution completely kill off the church in Persia?
b) What about the churches in Ethiopia and Sudan?
3. Did the Ethiopian church rise out of Judaism?