

The Church in the Fourth Century

This is lesson nine, entitled “In this sign conquer: the church of the fourth century.” To begin our lesson I want to use a prayer from Eusebius of Caesarea. He was one of the church fathers of this period and a very important man because he was the father of church history. He wrote the first important book about the history of the church. The prayer I am using from Eusebius is a very personal prayer. It deals with attitudes and conduct toward other Christians. I think this is important for us to keep in mind as we study today. We will see big things that are happening, the conversion of Constantine and the movement of the Roman Empire from a persecuting state to a state that first favored and then promoted Christianity. As we look at these events today we need to also remember that people were trying to live as Christians in their communities, in their relationships with other people. This prayer very much reminds us of that. Let us pray.

“May I be no man's enemy, and may I be the friend of He who 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.”

As we think of the church of the fourth century, we of course need to spend some time talking about events that took place in the Roman Empire. But we do not want to lose sight of the fact that the church was not only in the Roman Empire, but also in Asia and Africa. We will also briefly look at the church in Asia and the church in Africa.

First, let us talk about the Roman Empire. As we come to the beginning of the fourth century the Roman Empire was in some chaos. At one time there were six emperors all competing with one another to see who would be the supreme emperor in the Roman Empire. Finally it was Constantine who became the emperor. He became the emperor in a very interesting and significant way. As Constantine was moving back with his army toward Rome he was facing a very important battle, a battle that would determine whether he would become one of the main emperors in the West or not. The accounts differ somewhat, but probably on the eve of that battle he is reported to have had a vision or a dream in which he saw a symbol. That symbol was a Christian symbol. It had been used before Constantine; it was not new with him. It was the Greek letters *chi* (Ϸ) and *rho* (ρ) superimposed upon one another. These are the first two letters of the Greek name for Christ, *Christos*. As Constantine saw this symbol he is supposed to have also heard the words spoken by God in Latin to him: “In this sign you will conquer.” Constantine took that as an omen that he would be successful in his battle. He placed the *Christos* on the shields or banners of his army and went forth to defeat Maxentius' much larger army at Milvian Bridge near Rome in the year 312 AD. That meant that Constantine was now the primary emperor in the West.

The next year, 313, he met with Licinius, who had succeeded Emperor Galerius in the East. These two emperors, Constantine the emperor in the West and Licinius the emperor in the East, agreed to end the persecution of Christians. Thus we come to the Edict of Milan in the year 313 AD. It is hard to think of a more important date in church history than that. The Edict of Milan was when the two Roman emperors said, “Christians and all others should have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favor.” It was an

amazing statement because it meant that now Christians were free to practice their faith in the Roman Empire, and everyone else could follow whatever faith they preferred. This did not last too long, but at least for that brief time in history there was religious liberty offered in a modern state, or a state we could consider a modern state. At that time this was a state where Christianity and all other religions were to be tolerated. Eventually Constantine won control of the entire empire. The Roman Empire then, by 324 AD, had one emperor again. Constantine moved the capital from Rome to a city he renamed for himself, Constantinople. We will look at the impact of that later on. Constantine changed everything by his attitude toward the Christians.

Was Constantine a Christian himself? People have debated this at some length. Before 312 AD Constantine seems to have been a worshiper of the sun god. There was a vague, monotheistic religion in Rome in the third and fourth centuries focusing on the worship of Sol, the sun god. That religion was particularly prominent in the army. Constantine was in the army, as his father was. Many of the soldiers in the Roman army worshiped the sun. It is interesting to read that Constantine had a sister whose name was Anastasia. That may say something, because that is the Greek word for “resurrection.” It could be that Constantine’s father had at least Christian sympathies to be able to name his daughter for the resurrection, which is such an important part of Christian theology. We do know, however, that Constantine became emperor in the West, after 312 AD when he minted coins—thousands of them, which people have since collected and studied. The coins depicted the Roman sun god. This continued the trend from before Constantine’s time, when the coins of the Roman Empire most commonly had images of pagan deities on them. He did not right away change his allegiance, apparently. He may have come into Christianity more gradually than a quick conversion as a result of his vision. Eventually, during Constantine’s later reign, the coins mixed both pagan and Christian symbols. But the pagan symbols, the symbol of the sun god in particular, continued to be used by Constantine for some time.

We do have Constantine telling us in various ways that he had become a Christian. In his testimonies he sounds like a man who has definitely moved into the Christian faith. In one he said, “Almighty God, have mercy upon me,” and he said that God had brought him out of sin into salvation. That is Constantine’s own way of setting forth his conversion. People have pointed to Constantine’s conduct, however, and said that he really did not live much like a Christian. We can find some problems there. He was a man who really did not ever adequately understand the Christian faith. He later attempted to negotiate with different parties in the Arian dispute and even tried to impose his understanding on the Christian church—and generally it was a wrong understanding of Christian doctrine. But there were many other people at that time who also did not have a very adequate understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore I think we should not judge Constantine too harshly, though his conduct left much to be desired. He did not live as we would have wished a Christian emperor to live. He continued to be very harsh against enemies, and his standards of conduct were often sub-Christian. But again, many other people were acting the same way. Here is a man who testified to his conversion, but who fell far short in many ways in living like a Christian. Some people point to the fact that he was not baptized until the year he died, but that does not mean he had only become a Christian then. The piety of the period as we saw earlier often delayed baptism because people felt that it washed away sin and so it was better to wait and not be baptized too soon. I think with Constantine we have a sincere man, as Gonzales says, who had a rather meager understanding of Christian doctrine. But, coming out of paganism into Christianity he was trying to both understand the doctrine of the church and live for God, even though often he fell short of that. One thing that is certainly clear is that Constantine not only tolerated Christianity—the edict said Christians could now again exist without persecution along with all others—but also, in his own personal practice Constantine promoted Christianity as one faith among many. For him Christianity was the faith to be promoted in the Roman Empire. He exempted the Christian clergy from civil obligations so they could devote themselves full time to religious duties. He claimed that he

thereby conferred great benefit on public affairs. The first day, which had become the Christian Sabbath, became more and more a holiday under Constantine so that everyone would be free to worship God on Sunday. He gave many gifts to churches. He also began to build great churches. The beginnings of the great basilicas of the Roman Empire came during Constantine's reign. Thus we have here a great ruler, an important figure—one of the most important in history, and very important in church history, too.

About the same time that Constantine lived there was a great scholar whose prayer we used at the beginning of this lesson, Eusebius of Caesarea. In fact, he was such a great scholar that it was said that he was suspected of knowing everything there was to know. I am not sure that is true, but people seemed to think it was. It was this man who became the father of church history. His *Ecclesiastical History* is the single most important resource for the study of church history. That is the ecclesiastical history by Eusebius of Caesarea. So much of what you may be reading in Gonzales' textbook and so much of what I have talked about in these lessons depends on what we learn from Eusebius' *History*. He was also a theologian.

We have a chapter in our text by Gonzales called "Official theology: Eusebius of Caesarea." I hope you are able to read that. It tells us that as Eusebius looked at what was happening in the past he saw this tremendous change in his time. The emperor was now a Christian. I have qualified my statement somewhat as to whether or not Constantine was a Christian, but Eusebius calls him a great Christian. And he says that this is a great thing that has happened because the Roman Empire had now become Christian. Eusebius saw God's providence in all of this. He said, "Constantine is elevated by God to be God's vice-regent on earth. [Constantine] is God's representative: as in heaven, so on earth." That is why Gonzales calls this "official theology." This is something like what we would call "civil religion." Now suddenly the Roman Empire and Christianity were coming together in the writings and the thought of Eusebius. Before this the predominant view had been "Christ against culture," but now we have, in Niebuhr's understanding of Christ in culture, "Christ of culture." (See lesson four.) This means that in Eusebius' view, the Roman Empire and Christianity came very close together. Christianity was the culmination of the Roman Empire as the Roman Empire now became the expression of Christianity on earth. It is unbelievable, is it not, that we could go so quickly from a persecuting empire, "Christ against culture" as it is often expressed, to a kind of Christian state where Constantine is viewed as the great Christian and Rome is something of the expression of God's kingdom on earth. Saint Augustine would question all that later on in *The City of God*, which we will talk about when we come to it.

Let me stop for a moment, though, and reflect on what has happened. We have entered a new era in church history. This is what we could call the Constantinian Era. It lasted 1,000 years, and even more. How do we view what has taken place? I think we have to look at this both positively and negatively. It was very good in some ways, and it caused some problems in other ways. There were certainly positive features in the conversion of Constantine and the promotion of Christianity in the Roman Empire. People were free to worship without fear. Persecution was over. Christians could exist like everyone else. And Christian ideals became more and more a part of society.

One example is the observance of the Sabbath on Sunday, which Christians had to do against the culture until now. As the culture was "Christianized" Sunday suddenly became the official day of worship in the Roman Empire. Also, laws were passed that promoted Christian standards. Infanticide was outlawed—and that had been a longstanding practice in the Roman Empire. The abortion laws apparently were not changed, but ecclesiastical discipline and public opinion moved against the practice of abortion so that abortion was much less common in the fourth century than it had been earlier. With all of this happening, avenues opened up for Christians that they could not have dreamed of earlier. Christians became active now in art and architecture. Great churches were built expressing the Christian faith in art

and architecture. This of course contrasts strongly with the period before this when that could not have been done. Thus there were many good results of the changes in the Roman Empire.

But some problems were also introduced by these changes. There were some negative features. Peter Brown talks about the “conversion of Christianity.” Not only did Christianity convert Constantine and, in a sense the Roman Empire, but the Roman Empire converted Christianity. There was a kind of syncretism, a kind of coming together. This was celebrated by Eusebius as a great thing but there were some problems with all of it. I think as we study this next phase of church history we will be impressed and discouraged over and over again by the worldly goals and strategies that were introduced into the church. Wealth, power, and prestige became very important in the church, whereas before that was not the case. One historian has said, “The Roman Catholic Church is the ghost of the Roman Empire.” So much of what was in the Roman Empire was brought into the Roman Catholic Church, which we will see taking shape now before our eyes.

There is another fact to think about. In one way we can really celebrate it: mass conversions. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, became Christians during this time. When Constantine became a Christian, probably ten percent of the people in the Roman Empire were Christians. By the end of the century, that percentage was far more than half. Perhaps even two thirds of the people of the Roman Empire had become Christians. The question we have to ask is this: what kind of Christians were they? We have to ask this because before Constantine it was costly to be a Christian; it could mean persecution or death. Therefore people did not convert quickly or without much thought. There was not very much nominal Christianity before Constantine. There were heretics and there were all sorts of problem that we have looked at already, but there was not much nominal Christianity. Persecution took care of that. But after Constantine, when Christianity was not only legal but more and more favored in the courts and in the Empire, then it was easy for people to decide to become Christians because of the advantages they would receive by being Christians. Charles William has written, “It is doubtful whether Christianity has ever quite recovered from the mass conversion of the fashionable classes inside Rome and of the barbaric races outside Rome.” Well, I do not want to stress that too much because God does work through events like this. We have to be patient to see God’s work through a long period of time. As we come to missions in Northern Europe, we will see that it really took generations for people to move into Christianity in any sort of significant way. We will try to be patient, too, as we study that. But there is undoubtedly some truth in William’s statement. Nominal Christianity was a problem, and we will face that problem again and again.

I think as we live in our time, those of us in the West are a kind of mirror image of the early church. You see, the early church was a movement before Constantine, quietly challenging the established order. It was a kind of counter cultural movement, facing the possibility of persecution, and it certainly was not fashionable or accepted. In the fourth century there was a transition as paganism slowly gave way to Christianity and the beginning of a Christian era. But people are calling our time now a post-Christian era. In some ways our transition seems to be going the other way as Christians seem to be in a time of declining power. It is possible that we may eventually find ourselves more in the position of Christians in the Roman Empire before Constantine rather than sitting in the seats of power as Christians in the West have done for so long. We may have to discover again what the early church knew so well. That is, how to be resident aliens.

While all of that was happening in the West, we need to take a look at what was happening in Asia, in the church outside of the Roman Empire. The center of Christianity in Asia was now Persia. Christians had come from Syria and had moved east into the Mesopotamian provinces of Persia. Persia had its own state religion, which was Zoroastrianism. But in certain parts of Persia the state religion was not very

strong. It was in those areas that the Christian church was able to flourish in Persia. It may be amazing for us to think of Persia as the center of Christianity, because Iran and the surrounding countries are certainly not the center of Christianity today. But at this time Persia was an important Christian center. By the fourth century there was a nationwide community with a graded church structure. The structure was perhaps more Episcopal than Presbyterian, but it was a national church across Persia. And it was a very active church, reaching out even beyond Asia into other lands further east, even all the way to China as we will see later. The leaders of Christianity in Asia are names that those of us in the West are not as familiar with as we ought to be. I would like to mention three of these leaders: Jacob of Nisibis, Aphrahat the Persian, and Ephrem the Syrian.

Jacob of Nisibis was an ascetic, a kind of monk. Monasticism was very popular in the East. We will come to a lesson on that soon. But like many other eastern monks, Jacob “returned to the world.” This means that he left his cell in the wilderness and went back into the world, which meant the church. So he returned to the church rather than staying out in a monastery or living by himself. He went back into the world to become the first bishop of Nisibis. We think that Jacob was perhaps present at the important Council of Nicea, a council we will study soon, in 325 AD.

Aphrahat the Persian was the greatest eastern theologian of the fourth century. He carried on a kind of continual dialogue with Jews. Judaism had become very strong in this area as well, and there was debate between the Jews and the Christians. Aphrahat’s dialogue with the Jews is very thoughtful and very fair. Samuel Moffat in his *History of the Church in Asia* says that Aphrahat is the most admirable of the Christian thinkers of his time, in the East and West. Moffat places Aphrahat very high as a great theologian and Christian thinker. His major book is called *The Demonstrations*. According to Moffat this is “a remarkable blend of straightforward biblical teachings and deep and disciplined personal piety.”

Ephraim the Syrian is the best-known eastern or Asian theologian and Bible expositor and hymn writer. So many of the Asian theologians were hymn writers. Some of the western theologians were as well, such as Clement of Alexandria. But in the Asia context there was hymnology, monasticism, and theology. All of that was often mixed together in the same person. Ephraim said, “Scripture brought me to the gate of paradise, and the mind stood in wonder as it entered.” Keep that sentence in mind because that epitomizes so much of eastern thought.

We come in the fourth century to the Great Persecution. That is the great persecution of Christians in Persia. That is really very interesting and remarkable because when persecution stopped in the Roman Empire it started in Persia. There may have been a political reason for this. When Rome became Christian its old enemy, Persia, became more avowedly anti-Christian. Moffat talks about this fourth century persecution as the most massive persecution of Christians in history, unequaled for its duration, veracity, and the number of martyrs. One estimate is that 190,000 Persian Christians died in the fourth century in the Great Persecution. That may be far more than all the people who died in all the two-and-a-half centuries of persecution in the Roman Empire. And yet, as we look at the history of those suffering Christians in Persia, there appears to have been far more faithfulness. Far fewer numbers of people apostatized in Persia under persecution than those who apostatized under persecution in the West. We will keep looking at developments in the church in Asia, but this gives us a brief glimpse into the situation in Asia in the fourth century.

Now we move to Africa, south of the Roman Empire. Egypt and North Africa, of course, were part of the Roman Empire. But Ethiopia and Nubia were not part of the Roman Empire. Christianity developed early in both of these areas. We will talk first about Ethiopia, or Axum as it was called in those days.

Christianity became the court religion of the empire or of the land of Ethiopia in the fourth century. In fact, the king of Axum was converted to Christianity in the year 330 AD. That was just a few years after Constantine was converted to Christianity. The first coin to have an explicitly Christian symbol did not come from the Roman Empire. It came from Ethiopia. When the king was converted in 330 AD he began to mint coins with explicitly Christian symbols. One Ethiopian coin from this time had a little cross on it. It was a small, silver coin, but the cross was inlaid with gold. It was a very precious coin and very important because it was the first coin minted with a Christian theme. This is in stark contrast to what happened in the Roman Empire where Constantine mixed Christian and pagan symbols for some time after he became emperor.

Christianity spread to the countryside in Ethiopia during the fifth century, largely through the witness of Syrian missionary monks. They are called the Nine Saints. It is very interesting how international Christianity was at this period. Some of the heroes of the Ethiopian church were Syrian missionaries, the Nine Saints who came to preach in the villages of Ethiopia. Linked with Egyptian Coptic Christianity—which we will talk about later—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." But we will not forget these Ethiopian Christians. Several times as we move through medieval Christianity we will stop to see what was happening in the land of Ethiopia where the strongest early pre-Muslim Christian church was established in Africa.

The other country where Christianity found root south of the Roman Empire in black Africa was in Nubia. That is present-day Sudan. In contrast to Ethiopia, Christianity in Nubia spread first among the poor. It did not spread from the palace to the countryside as in Ethiopia, but among the poor, and then eventually, in the sixth century, to the rulers. In the sixth century the traditional pagan religion was swept away, and Christianity took deep root in Nubia. It was not really imposed as it was by the emperor in Rome. Rather, it spread because common people and poor people had responded to it. It met the deepest longings of the Nubian heart, and these people became Christians. Then from a kind of people movement Christianity then moved upward into the palace and to the leaders of Nubia. The Nubian church had a closer connection with the Byzantine or Eastern church than with the Coptic Church of Egypt. Thus the Nubian church in its Christology was orthodox, aligned with the Council of Chalcedon rather than being a church that would favor the Monophysite views of Christology as the Coptic Church in Egypt did. I realize that last sentence introduced all kinds of words and themes that may be unfamiliar, but that is all coming in later lessons. We will spend some time talking about the Egyptian Coptic Church and the Council of Chalcedon and who the Monophysites were and why the Eastern church tends to go one way and the Western church another way.

It has been asked, where was Nisibis? Nisibis, as you may remember, is the area over which Jacob became the first bishop. Nisibis was right along the Tigris River. The three important areas I mentioned in Asia were Nisibis, Syria, and Persia. The Gospel tended to move from Syria to Persia, and then later it moved from Persia further east. Another question is did the Great Persecution kill off the church in Persia? No, it did not kill off the church. The church survived with great difficulty. It survived into the Muslim period, which produced additional problems. But the Persian church did continue and still does to the present. There are Christians in Iraq who trace their Christian roots back to this church. There are not many, and they suffer some disadvantages, although Saddam Hussein's foreign minister was a Christian—not a Muslim—and he is part of this ancient history.

It has also been asked, what about the churches in Ethiopia and Sudan? The church in Sudan was almost entirely wiped out. There is a church in Sudan today, but they do not trace their history back to this

ancient church in Sudan. Islam did a thorough job of destroying the church in Sudan. The church there now is from the modern missionary movement. But the church in Ethiopia continued. The church in Ethiopia is the strongest example of a Christian church with African roots prior to Islam. I think that is very important, because I think sometimes people get the idea that Islam is more the indigenous, African religion. It really is not. There were traditional African religions prior to both Christianity and Islam. But before Islam won great areas of Africa there was a strong Christian church in Ethiopia, which continues right down to the present.

It has also been asked whether the Ethiopian church came out of Judaism. The tradition is that it goes back to the Queen of Sheba, who visited Solomon in the Temple in Jerusalem, which gives it some Old Testament links almost like an Old Testament church, if you could call it such. There continued to be Ethiopian Jews even as there are down to the present. There are communities of black Ethiopian Jews. But I think all that is back in the area of tradition more than history. I do not know that we can really say how the church first started in Ethiopia. We can say that it began early and continues to today. It actually has some interesting connections to the early church in Arabia. The closest Christians to the Ethiopian Christians were those in South Arabia. You might say, "Well there are no Christians there." Perhaps not now, but at one time there was quite a considerable Christian community in southern Arabia. There was some movement back and forth across the Red Sea, which was not very far; Ethiopia is only a few miles from South Arabia. The support and fellowship between the Ethiopian and Arabian Christians was pretty significant at one time. This Christian community in Arabia seems to have been wiped out not by the Muslims, who came much later, but by the Jews. There was much antagonism between the Jews and Christians who lived in that area.

Other questions have been asked about Constantine and the bishop of Rome. Constantine was in Rome, and the bishop of Rome, who was quickly becoming the pope, was also there. Their relationship was pretty good, I would say. The Christians did not want to upset Constantine after all the many benefits they had received from him. But Constantine moved his capital to Byzantium, now called Constantinople, 1000 miles east. Part of the strategy there was political and military. He felt that the empire needed a strong center further east where things were in turmoil. When he did that it left a kind of power vacuum in the West. Therefore the Roman bishop began to rise quickly in power because there was no persecution and no emperor nearby. In some ways the pope of Rome began to fill the empty space left by Constantine. But there was not much talk about church discipline. Constantine pretty much did his own thing.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isaiah 40:8).