

Lesson 7
The Early Church To
Early Reformation

John Rakestraw

Class Schedule

- **The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)**
- 1. Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church
- 2. The Church in Jerusalem and the Mission to the Gentiles
- 3. 1st & 2nd Century Conflicts with the State
- 4. Early Apologists
- 5. Defining the Faith
- 6. Christian Life

Class Outline

- **The Imperial Church (313 to 476 A.D.)**
- **7. The End of Persecution and Beginnings of the Imperial Church**
- 8. The New Order
- 9. Reactions to the New Order
- 10. The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea

The End of Persecution & Beginnings of the Imperial Church

Lesson 7

“The eternal, holy and unfathomable goodness of God does not allow us to wander in darkness, but shows us the way of salvation....This is seen in others as well as in myself.”

- Constantine

The End of Persecution

The Great Persecution of the 4th Century

- After Decius the church enjoyed a long period of relative peace. Early in the 4th century the last and worse persecution broke out.
- Military service was a question Christians addressed in divergent ways. A general named Galerius (ruled over part of the Empire) viewed the attitude of some Christians to be a serious danger.
- Galerius convinced Emperor Diocletian that all Christians should be expelled from the army. Due to expulsion some local army officials punished some of these Christians. By this time large parts of the Empire was ruled by various officials with various titles, but all report up to Diocletian.
- This led to an order that Christians be dismissed from all government positions, and that all Christian buildings & books be destroyed.
- As this met resistant, throughout the Empire some houses that Christians met in were destroyed and the sacred writings were burned. There were regions where Christians were being killed.

The Great Persecution of the 4th Century

- As matters escalated Diocletian became convinced that Christians were conspiring against him. First he declared that all the leaders of the churches be arrested. Later he decided all Christians must offer sacrifice to the gods.
- This unleashed the most cruel of all the persecution that the ancient church had to endure. Using the example of Decius, efforts were made to encourage Christians to abandoned their faith.
- Accustomed to the relative ease of a few decades, many Christians succumbed. The rest were tortured with refined cruelty, and eventually killed in many ways.
- A number went into hiding, taking their books with them. Some crossed the boarder into Persia; thus appearing to confirm the authorities' worst suspicions as to their loyalty.

The Great Persecution of the 4th Century

- Diocletian became ill in 304. Within a year Galerius had removed his enemies.
- In 305 Galerius & Constantius Chlorus (father of Constantine) took the title of Augustus. This made some in the legions very unhappy.
- When Constantius died, many troops refused to obey Galerius & proclaimed Constantine as their Augustus. Again civil war broke out among the factions across the Empire.
- Constantine avoided combat, but carried on a self promoting diplomacy behind the scenes.
- During this political chaos persecution continued, except in the western territories (Gaul & Great Britain) held by Constantine.

The End of Persecution

- Unexpectedly, Emperor Galerius became ill with a painful disease and, perhaps convinced by those Christians who said that this was a punishment from God, grudgingly decided to change his policy.

- Proclamation of Galerius – April 30, 311
- “With all the laws which we have decreed for the good of the state, we have sought to restore the ancient rules & 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, & 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 serve 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, & allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order. (continued on next slide)

- (continued from previous slide)
- In an another edict we shall instruct our magistrates regarding this matter.
- 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 & they may live in peace.”

This ended the most cruel persecution that the church had suffered from the Roman Empire.

Five days later Galerius died

Constantine

Constantine's Vision

- Following the death of Galerius the empire was divided among Licinius, Maximinus Dais, Constantine, & Maxentius. The first 3 recognized one another, but declared Maxentius a usurper.
- Constantine, who up to this time had not engaged in combat, quickly moved his army from Gaul to the doorsteps of Maxentius capital in Rome.
- Rome was a well defended city, but for some reason Maxentius came from inside the walls to meet Constantine in open battle.

Constantine's Vision

- Two Christian chroniclers who knew Constantine, reported that on the eve of battle he had a revelation.
- The chronicler Lactantius, wrote that it was in a dream that Constantine received the command to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers.
- Eusebius, said that the vision appeared in the sky, with the words “in this you shall conquer.”

Constantine's Vision

- The fact remains that Constantine ordered that his soldiers should use on their shields & on their standards a symbol that looked like the superimposition of the Greek letters chi & rho. These are the 1st two letters of the name Christ.
- Christians saw this the great moment of Constantine's conversion, historians point out that even after this event Constantine continued worshiping the Unconquered Sun.
- In truth Constantine's conversion was a long process.

Constantine's Vision

- Maxentius was defeated on Milvian bridge where he fell into the water & drowned.
- Constantine became the master of the entire Western half of the empire.
- He met with Licinius in Milan and concluded an alliance with him. Part of this agreement was that Christian persecution would stop.
- This agreement was called "The Edict of Milan." 313 is generally accepted as the year that persecutions ceased. Though persecution continued in areas held by Maximinus Daia.

New Questions for the Church

- The conversion of Constantine had enormous consequences for Christianity.
- What would happen when those who called themselves servants of a carpenter, and whose great heroes were fisherman, slaves & criminals condemned to death by the state, suddenly saw themselves surrounded by imperial pomp & power?
- Would they stand firm in their faith? Or would they give way to the temptations of an easy life and of social prestige?

The Imperial Church

Constantine

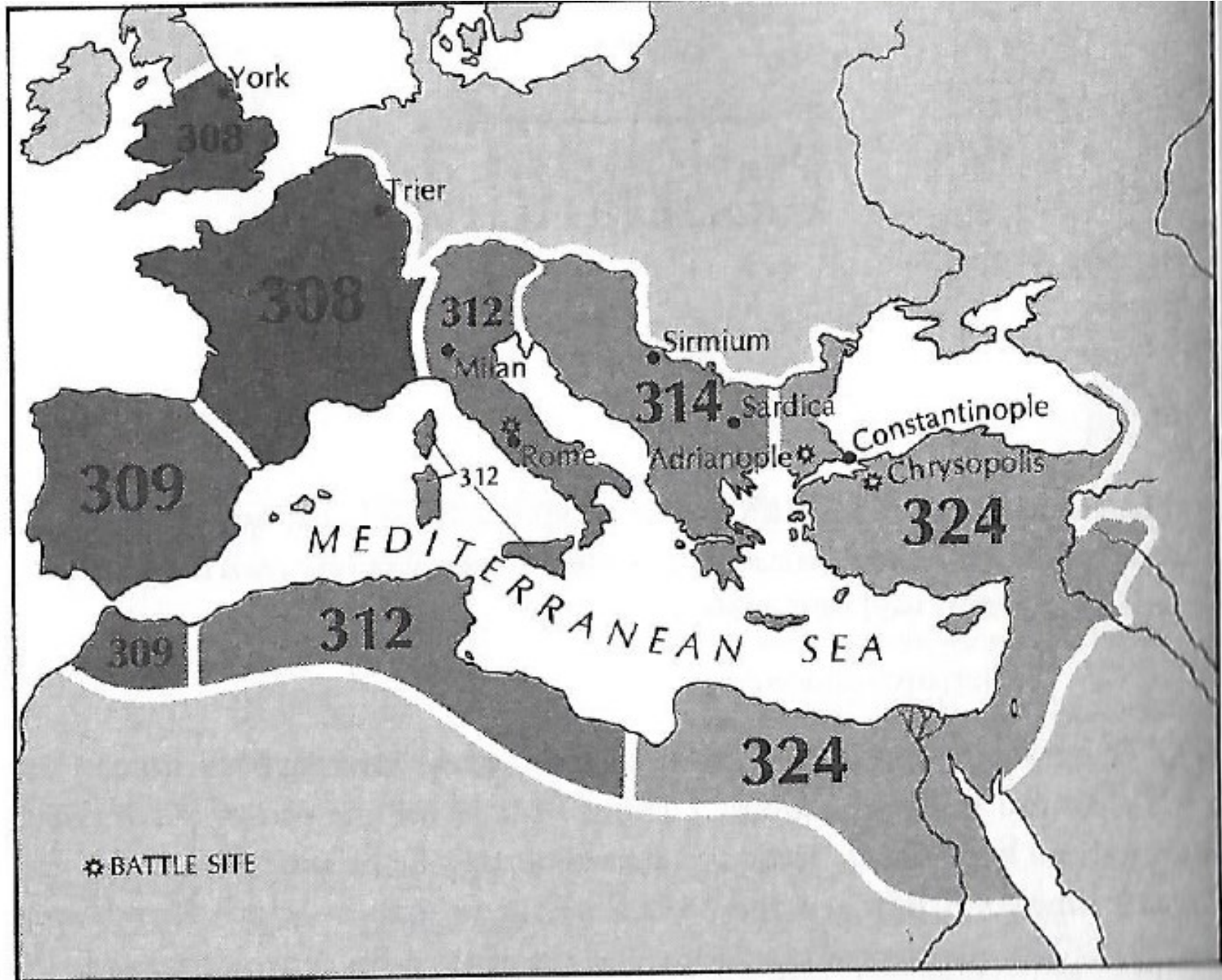
- The important question regarding the story of Christianity is not so much Constantine's sincerity, or how much he understood the faith.
- The key question is what impact did his conversion & his rule, both during his lifetime & after, have on the church?

Consolidating the Empire

- The victory at Milvian bridge gave Constantine control of the western half of the Empire. The eastern half was split between Licinius & Maximinus Daia.
- Constantine gave his half sister in marriage to Licinius.
- Licinius quickly defeated Maximinus and took control over the Empire east of Italy, including Egypt.
- Licinius & Constantine devoted themselves to consolidating their power and preparing for the inevitable conflict.

Consolidating the Empire

- By the time war broke out in 322 the question of religious policy had also become bone of contention.
- Christianity in the territories of Licinius were divided over a number of issues. When Licinius stepped in to assure peace half of the Christians felt they had been wronged and began thinking of Constantine as the defender of their faith.
- Licinius was not a Christian, but there are indications that he feared the power of the Christian God.
- When he heard his subjects were praying for his rival he felt this was high treason.



Constantine's path to absolute power.

Consolidating the Empire

- In 322 Constantine defeated Licinius and the latter fled to Byzantium. Constance plead for Licinius' life in exchange for abdication. Shortly afterward Licinius was murdered. Constantine became sole master of the entire empire.
- Constantine would reign for the next 13 years until his death in 337.
- Constantine had not sought absolute power of the mere pleasure of it. Like some emperors before him Constantine sought to restore the ancient glory of the Empire. The difference is his predecessors attempted to do it with the restoration of paganism, and Constantine thought it could be best achieved on the basis of Christianity.

The Move to Constantinople

- Some of the strongest opponents to Constantine's Christian policy was in Rome, particularly in the Senate. The old aristocracy bemoaned the eclipse of their ancient gods & privileges.
- He set out to build “a new Rome,” an impregnable & monumental city called “The City of Constantine.” Setting ideally in the center of the Empire.
- The only problem was there was nothing in Byzantium that would impress anyone.
- Constantine's decision to found a new capital had enormous consequences, for shortly afterward the western portion of the empire including the city of Rome was overrun by the barbarians.
- For 1,000 years Constantinople kept alive the political & cultural inheritance of the old empire. Since its capital was in ancient Byzantium the Eastern Roman Empire is called the Byzantine Empire.

Constantine's Conversion

- At this time people who were converted generally were put through a long process of discipline & instruction, in order to make sure they understood their new faith, before they were baptized.
- Their bishops became their guide as they sought to discover the implication of their faith in various situations in life.
- Constantine never placed himself under the direction of a Christian teacher or bishop.
- He reserved the right to determine his own religious practices, and even to intervene in the life of the church.

Constantine's Conversion

- After his conversion he took part in pagan rites in which no Christian would participate. The bishops never raised a voice of condemnation.
- It was only on his death bed that he was baptized.
- Inclined to become a Christian but not one of the faithful, he could receive advice and even support the church, but he did not take direction from it.

What Was In It For Him

- Whatever tangible support Christians could give Constantine was of doubtful value.
 - By in large Christians were ambivalent toward military service
 - Christians generally belonged to the lower classes, so their resources were scarce
 - After 3 centuries of tension with the government their long-term loyalty might be questioned
- Constantine was probably a sincere believer in the power of Christ. That does not mean that he understood that power in the same way in which it was experienced by Christians who had died for it.
- For him, the Christian god was a very powerful being who would support him as long as he favored the faithful.
- Constantine enacted laws in favor of Christianity, he built churches.
- What he most likely sought was not the favor of Christians, but the goodwill of their god.
- For most of his political career, he seems to have thought that the Unconquered Sun & the Christian God were two views of the same Supreme Deity. The other gods were subordinate, but nevertheless, real & relatively powerful.

What He Did for the Church

- At first, he simply ended persecution and ordered confiscated property to be returned.
- He donated a palace to the church in Rome.
- He opened his Imperial Posts to the service of traveling bishops.
- He appointed a number of Christians to high position in the government.
- In 324 he ordered all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on the first day of the week.
- In 325 he called the First Ecumenical Council to Nicea.
- He did not make Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Christianity & paganism were generally on an equal footing before the State.

