

LESSON TEN – The Final Victory

The Final Victory

The eternal, holy, and unfathomable goodness of God does not allow us to wander in the darkness, but shows us the way of salvation...This I have seen in others as well as myself. – Constantine.¹

- This lesson will cover how Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. It also marks our transition from early church history to imperial church history.
- Constantine was an astute statesman and challenged his rivals one at a time, always protecting his flank before making the next move.
- Although his campaign against Maxentius seemed sudden, he had been preparing for it, politically and militarily, for years.
- Diplomatically he had to ensure that Licinius, Maxentius's neighbor to the east would not take advantage of Constantine's campaign to invade and lay claim to some of Maxentius's territories.
- The victory at the Milvian Bridge gave Constantine control of the Western half of the empire, while the Eastern was still split between Licinius and Maximinus Daia.
- The meeting with Licinius in Milan seemed to strengthen the alliance between Constantine and Licinius and Constantine encouraged Licinius to direct his efforts against their common rival, Maximinus Daia.
- The empire was now divided between Constantine and Licinius. Constantine ruled the West part of Italy, Western Europe and the Western portion of North Africa. Licinius ruled all the eastern part of the empire.
- Licinius and Constantine desired to rule the entirety of the empire. For a time both rivals devoted themselves to consolidate their own power.
- Hostilities finally broke out when a plot to assassinate Constantine was discovered. The ensuing investigation implicated a relative of Licinius who had fled to his kinsman's territories.
- Licinius refused to hand over the would-be assassin and declared war on Constantine.
- Militarily out-manuevered by Constantine, Licinius had to sue for peace.
- The truce between the two men lasted until 322. The main reason of conflict was still the ambition of both men, which found expression in the question of what titles and honors would be given to their sons.
- Licinius's religious policy needs some clarification. After Constantine's victory some Christian writers, in order to justify his acts against Licinius, painted Licinius in a bad light.
- For many years after the Edict of Milan, Licinius took no measures against the Christians, but Christianity in his territories was divided over multiple issues and this led to public disorder.
- When Licinius used his imperial power to suppress those disorders and assure peace, there were some Christian groups who felt wronged by him and began thinking of Constantine as the true defender of the faith and as the "emperor whom God loved."

Licinius was not a Christian but there are indications that he feared the power of the Christian God; and therefore, when he learned his subjects were praying for his rival, he took this as high treason.

- It was then that he took measures against some Christians, and this gave Constantine the opportunity to present himself as the defender of the Christian faith against Licinius the persecutor.
- In 322, Constantine invaded Licinius's territories, using the pretext that he was in pursuit of a band of barbarians who had crossed the Danube. Licinius interpreted this as intentional provocation.
- After a long and bloody battle, Constantine's smaller army won the day and Licinius fled to Byzantium.
- Shortly after, Licinius was murdered and Constantine was now the sole ruler of the vast Roman Empire.
- Constantine would reign for the next 13 years until his death in 337 AD. This was a period of rebuilding and prosperity.
- Constantine had not sought absolute power for the mere pleasure of it. He also dreamed, like previous emperors, of restoring the ancient glory of the empire.
- The main difference was that instead of doing this through paganism, Constantine believed this could best be achieved on the basis of Christianity.
- Now that he was absolute master of the empire, he set out on a bold course to build a "new Rome," an impregnable and monumental city, which would be called Constantinople, that is the City of Constantine.
- It was likely during his campaign against Licinius that Constantine became aware of the strategic value of Byzantium.
- The city was on the very edge of Europe, where it almost touched Asia Minor. It could serve as a bridge between the European and Asian portions of the empire.
- Also, if properly fortified, Byzantium would control Bosphorus, through which all shipping had to pass on its way from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea.
- The most famous statue brought to Constantinople was the sculpture of Apollos said to be the work of Phidias, one of the greater sculptors of all time.
- This was placed in the middle of the city on top of a huge column brought from Egypt, which was reported to be the largest monolith in the world. To make it even taller, the column was placed on a marble pedestal that was over 20 feet high.
- The entire monument measured approximately 125 feet from top to bottom. But the statue no longer represented Apollos for a new head, that of Constantine, was placed on it.

Constantine's Conversion

- The nature of Constantine's conversion has been the subject of many debates throughout the centuries.
- Constantine's conversion was very different from that of other Christians.
- Constantine never placed himself under the direction of Christian teachers or bishops.

- Hosius, bishop of Cordoba, became his liaison with other ecclesiastical leaders. Even after his conversion, he repeatedly partook in pagan rituals and the bishops raised no voice of condemnation.
- Despite his favorable policies towards Christianity and his repeated confession in the power of Christ, Constantine was technically not part of the church because he had not been baptized. It was only on his deathbed that he was baptized.
- Religious and moral deviations on Constantine's part were seen in the same light, as unfortunate actions by one who, while inclined to become a Christian was not one of the faithful.
- On the other hand, there are several reasons why Constantine should not be seen as a simple opportunist who declared himself in favor of Christianity in order to gain the support of Christians.
- Also, if Constantine was simply an opportunist, he chose a poor time to seek the support of Christians.
- Whatever support the Christians could give Constantine was not very valuable. The number of Christian soldiers in the army was quite small and among the civilian population, Christians were generally among the lower class.
- The truth is that Constantine probably was a sincere believer in the power of Christ. This does not mean that he understood that power in the same way in which it had been experienced by those who had died for their faith.
- For Constantine, the Christian God was a very powerful being who would support him as long as he favored the faithful. When Constantine enacted laws in favor of Christianity, and when he allowed churches to be built, he was not seeking the goodwill of Christians but rather their God.
- This interpretation is supported by Constantine's own statements which reveal a sincere man with a meager understanding of the Christian faith.
- Constantine's sincerity in believing in the power of the Christian God did not prevent him from serving other gods.
- Other gods, although subordinate, were nevertheless real and powerful. On occasion Constantine would consult the oracle of Apollo, accept the title of High Priest that had traditionally been the prerogative of emperors, and partake in all sorts of pagan ceremonies without thinking he was betraying or abandoning the God who gave him victory and power.
- Constantine was a smart politician. He could favor Christians, build churches and even remove pagan gods from their temples to be simple ornaments in his city, but if he attempted to suppress pagan worship, he would have faced serious opposition.
- Constantine's religious policy followed a slow but constant progress. At first, he simply put an end to persecution and ordered property confiscated from the Christians to be returned to them.
- Shortly after he gave new signs of favoring Christianity, such as donating to the church the Lateran palace in Rome, which belonged to his wife, or putting the imperial posts at the service of bishops traveling to attend the Synod of Arles in 314.

- At the same time, he sought to keep good relations with the Roman senate and those who followed the ancient religion.
- The campaign against Licinius gave Constantine occasion to appear as the champion of Christianity.
- In 324 an imperial edict commanded all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on the first day of the week. This was the day Christians gathered to celebrate the resurrection of their Lord. But it was also the day of the Unconquered Sun and therefore pagans saw no reason to oppose the edict.
- In 325, Constantine would call an assembly of bishops that would later be known as the First Ecumenical Council gathered at Nicaea.
- Almost to his dying day Constantine continued functioning as the High Priest of paganism. After his death, the three sons who would succeed him did not oppose the Senate's move to have him declared a god.
- There is no doubt that Constantine was an important turning point in the life of the church, but he did not make Christianity the official religion of the empire.
- Constantine himself remained a pagan High Priest, as befitted his role as emperor and was not baptized until he was on his deathbed.
- His sons, Constantine II, Constantius, and Constans were baptized, and several of their edicts favored Christianity.
- Their rule was marked by dissension as the church was bitterly divided over the issue of Arianism and imperial religious policies focused on that dispute.
- Through the reign of the next few emperors Christianity and Paganism remained on equal footing. Both allowed and supported.
- In 382, Gratian decreed an end to the governmental financial support for paganism.
- In 391, Theodosius outlawed pagan sacrifices and ordered temples be closed or devoted to public use.
- In 392, all pagan worship, private, as well as public was forbidden.
- The greatest threat to the ancient religions was the way overzealous bishops and mobs took these decrees as license to persecute and use force against the pagans.
- There is ample evidence of violence by Christians against pagans and of pagans resistance to the new order.
- The most immediate consequence of Constantine's conversion was the cessation of persecution.
- But the immediate impact of Constantine's conversion on the life of the church went far beyond the obvious ending of persecution. A series of edicts granted the church and its leaders privileges whose echoes may still be seen in some areas in the 21st century.
- One of these was tax exemption for church properties as well as making it legal to bestow property to the church. Over the long run, this would mean that the church would come to own vast lands and other riches.
- The bishops, as well as other clergy, were also granted exemption from taxes, from military conscription, and from the days of labor that others were forced to devote to public works.

- Constantine also sought to legislate on matters of personal conduct, particularly sexual morality, in ways that seemed to be influenced by Christian teaching.
- It would only be a matter of time before the new privileges, prestige and power granted to church leaders led to arrogance and corruption. As bishops gained judicial powers, bribes were often offered and accepted.
- For common people in the church, there is no doubt that the experience of conversion became less dramatic or fateful than it had been in earlier times. There is evidence of increasing syncretism and superstition.
- When people became ill, they often drifted back to ancient magical practices, much to the disappointment of the Christian leadership. Gladiatorial games persisted and some Christians now attended where previously Christians had been martyred in the games. They also attended plays that had earlier been forbidden to them.
- The decree ordering the first day of the week to be devoted to worship, apparently both of Christ and the Unconquered Sun, made it easier for Christians to gather, no longer having to meet in the early hours before work.
- This and the influence of civil ceremonies and pomp had an influence on Christian worship, which in the actual practice of religion was the point at which most common Christians probably felt the most impact of the new order.
- Previously, Christian worship had been quite simple. At first, they gathered in private homes to worship together. Then they gathered in cemeteries. By the 3rd century structures were set aside for worship.
- Incense, which was used as a sign of respect for the emperor began to appear in Christian churches.
- Officiating ministers began dressing in more luxurious garments and were soon called priests in imitation of their pagan counterparts and the communion table became an altar.
- A number of gestures indicating respect now became part of Christian worship.
- Already in the 2nd century, it had become customary to commemorate the anniversary of a martyr's death by celebrating communion where the martyr had been buried. Now churches were built in many of those places.
- Some began thinking worship was particularly valid if it was held in one of those holy places, where the relics of the martyrs were present.
- Consequently, some began to dig up the bodies of martyrs so they could be placed under the altar of one of the many churches that were being built.
- Others began claiming revelations of martyrs who had never been known. Some even said they received visions telling them where certain martyrs were buried. Relics of saints and New Testament times were said to have miraculous powers.
- Many leaders of the church disapproved of this development and tried to prevent superstitious extremes.
- The church began to find itself overwhelmed with the numbers requesting to be baptized and the long-term teaching previously received before baptism was drastically shortened.
- The churches being built now far exceeded previous simple church buildings in elegance and splendor.

- The ancient church continued its traditional customs. Communion was still the central act of worship, celebrated every Sunday, and baptism was still performed mostly by immersion.
- One of the results of the new situation was the development of what may be called an “official theology.”
- Others took the opposite track. For them the fact that the emperors now declared themselves Christian and this was the reason so many were flocking to the church was not a blessing but rather a curse.
- Others with a negative reaction to the new circumstances felt that the best course of action was simply to break communion with the church at large which was to be considered sinful and apostate.
- Among those who remained in the church there was a great deal of intellectual activity. As in every period, there were some who proposed theories and doctrines that the rest of church felt it had to reject.
- Most Christians reacted to the new circumstances with neither total rejection or total acceptance.
- Most church leaders saw the new situation as offering unexpected opportunities, but also great dangers.

¹ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 131