

## Church History 101

### Lesson 10

### Constantine and Legalization

**Key Concepts:** Constantine (c. 272 – c. 337) was one of the great leaders of the Roman Empire. The changes he made in the Empire not only solidified the place of Christianity but also stabilized the Empire for almost a thousand years.

**The Story:** Constantine's early years were spent in virtual house arrest in Rome. His father, Constantius, was a renowned Roman General and deputy-emperor of the Western Roman Empire. The reigning Emperor Diocletian saw Constantius as a possible threat and so kept Constantine either at court or campaigning far from his father in order to insure Constantius' loyalty. While at court, Constantine mixed with both pagans and Christians. In 303 he witnessed Diocletian's proclamations against Christians and the church. There are no records of Constantine either participating in or opposing this persecution. During this time Constantine proved to be an able general and beloved leader. In 305 Galerius became Emperor and after a long night of drinking agreed to send Constantine to serve with his father. A year later, when his father died, the Army in Britannia (where Constantine was headquartered) declared Constantine not only to be their leader, but to be deputy-Emperor of Rome, his father's old title. This "promotion" was only grudgingly approved by Galerius.

Soon after this there began a struggle within the Roman Empire for power and dominance. At one point there were no less than six men who laid claim to leadership of the Empire. Constantine, as ruler of Britannia, Spain and Gaul, controlled one of the largest armies in the Empire and thus was in a strong position to claim the title. One of the interesting facts of his rule, which foreshadowed some of his future decisions, was that Christians were not persecuted in the areas under his control. People suspected that this may have been due to the fact that his mother, Helena, was a Christian. This lack of persecution spreads further when, in 311, Galerius, issued a death bed edict ending all religious persecutions and resuming religious toleration.

In 312 Constantine moved toward Rome to confront one of his major opponents. The night before the decisive battle Constantine had his troops emblazon their shields with a new sign, the X (Chi) and rho (rho), which were the first two letters of Christ in Greek. Constantine later said that he did so because he had a vision where he saw the words, "In this sign you will conquer." The battle, in which his troops were outnumbered 2 to 1, ended with a sudden and overwhelming victory for Constantine. Following his victory he did not go to the Temple of Jupiter to offer sacrifices; the first new Emperor not to do so. The next year he met his closest remaining rival, Licinius, and they agreed to the Edict of Milan, which fully legalized Christianity and gave the church back all of its property.

By 320 however, Licinius began to once again persecute the church. This led to a series of battles in which Constantine and his troops seeing themselves representing the Christian future of Rome defeated Licinius and his forces which saw themselves as representing Rome's pagan past. With Licinius' defeat, Christianity was safe in the Empire.

No one is quite sure whether Constantine had always been a Christian or became one later in life. It was not until he was over 40 that he made a public profession of his faith. The remainder of his life was spent building basilicas, exempting clergy from certain taxes and promoting Christians to important positions. He was finally baptized days before his death. His legacy is that of a Christianized Empire, the vestiges of which are still with us today.

#### Questions

1. Where do you see the vestiges of a Christian Empire in the world around us?
2. What do you make of Constantine's vision?
3. What legacy of faith do you think that you will leave to those who come after you?